

# New Salem Baptist Church

## Historical African American Church Sevierville, Tennessee



This historical church was built in 1886 by Isaac Dockery and local community African American craftsmen. Isaac Dockery made the brick to build the church. Squire Bob Henderson donated the land for the church and the use of the field next to the church land to make the brick and make a brick kiln to fire the brick. Isaac Dockery's sons-in-law, his children, along with Louis Buckner-- a noted craftsman, were the main builders of the church which stands today (2008). This is a legacy which gives the families of Isaac Dockery a great sense of pride and appreciation.

The church is located in a bend of Middle Creek along East Gate Road. The New Salem Church is the oldest church building remaining in the Sevier County. It is the oldest brick church in the county. New Salem Baptist Church is the only remaining historical building of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century documenting the legacy of an African American community's history and culture<sup>1</sup>.

During the early years of the church some of the members joined together as a singing group to raise money. Those members were: Emma Burden Pate, Mary B. McMahan, Stewart Burden Sr., Louis Buckner, Joe Leake McMahan, and Mattie and Fred McMahan. These singers would go around the area singing for groups and gatherings. They raised money for a piano, hymn books, Sunday school booklets, and wire fencing to fence around the family cemetery.

As a child, I attended the New Salem Church with my parents. In addition to regular church services, there were special celebrations and dinners on the church grounds. The simple order of the service did not prepare me for the spectacular church services which I attended when I went away to school. These churches were large with choir members and the pastor marching into the service in a pageantry of robes and stoles. The order of the service at New Salem Baptist Church was very simple. The ringing of the church bell was a call to service--with prayer, congregational singing, and preaching the sermon.

Family oral history states that the first preachers for New Salem Church were White circuit riders. At that time the church was called a Union Church. Our community did not have any black ministers living in or near the neighborhood. Around 1920 Black ministers pastoring churches in other counties, and known by someone in our community, were invited to preach at New Salem Church. Since these ministers had their regular churches, they could only provide service at New Salem Church one Sunday afternoon per month. Reverends Peter Quinn, C. Eppers, and James Harris

came from Martha Davis Church in Jefferson City, Tennessee. They each pastored at New Salem Church for several years. Rev. D.A. Jackson, pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, also preached in the afternoon but came twice a month. Rev. Martin Harris was a Knoxville minister and was our preacher for several years. After he completed his sermons, he would sing a solo each time. Everyone especially enjoyed his singing the song "If I could hear my mother pray again". Rev. Harris had a beautiful strong voice which would stir the emotions of the congregation. Rev. Robert C. Martin moved his family to Sevier County and served as the Pastor of New Salem Baptist Church until his health declined. Rev. Howard McCellas, a young minister from Knoxville, served as the pastor only for a short period of time in the 1950's. Many families were moving away from Sevier County during this time, and this ended the regular and formal use of the church by the entire African American Community.

The church was used as a meeting place by some of the families who remained in Sevier County. The church grounds provided a comfortable place for young families having picnics and cookouts.

The last family members to have their funeral services in the New Salem Church were in 1954 and 1960. Around this time, African Americans were not having funerals in the local mortuaries. The dead were returned home until the time for the funerals.

When someone decided to join the church, their baptism was delayed until others joined. At that time, the baptismal ceremonies took place at the river. In later years, members were baptized at Mount Zion Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee.

The Sunday School was under the leadership of Joe Leake McMahan. Mary B. McMahan was always in charge of music and writing families' obituaries. The Adult Sunday School teachers were Fred McMahan and Stewart Burden Sr. Their classes were held downstairs. The small children's classroom was located up in the balcony. The teenage girls were the secretaries for the Sunday School. They were Violet McKinney and Celestine and Juanita Burden; they kept records until they left for school or moved out of the county.

New Salem Church in its location on the banks of the Middle Creek has survived many storms and flooding. The water surrounded the church for days before subsiding. The hands of our forefathers who built this church must have been truly blessed, because the church has endured so many acts of nature in the past years. It proudly stands today as the beacon of our legacy.

Over the years, other church denominations have occupied the New Salem Church. We felt that keeping the church occupied would help keep the church useful in the community since it was originally built to provide spiritual guidance.

Each time the church was occupied by another group, the Dockery descendents began losing so much of the history that was ours. Each new group chipped away at the history and legacy which we were supposed to preserve for our children and grandchildren. The pulpit furniture made by Louis Buckner was removed without permission.

The original church interior was another part of history that was destroyed. The balcony was boarded up. The window panes were covered with contact paper and plastic curtains. The plastered walls were hammered with nails to hang pictures and plaques. The oil lamps, metal holders, and the protectors between each window were removed. The original steeple and bell were removed from the roof of the church by one group because the bell was not part of their religious faith and practice.

The church was never enlarged, but water and electricity were installed. Also two bathrooms were installed in early 1960's by families who had started returning for reunions.

In 2001 the groundwork had began to place New Salem Baptist Church on the Historical Registry. Courtney Dollar, a graduate student at the University of Tennessee, worked untiringly with the community writing up the plans for the application to be presented to the Historical Committee Board in Nashville, Tennessee.

The Isaac Dockery Reunion group contributed the funds to pay for the Historical Marker. During the 2006 Dockery Family Reunion the marker was in place and dedicated on the church grounds.

The marker represents the historical significance of the New Salem Baptist Church to the Isaac Dockery families, to the local community, to Sevier County, and to the State of Tennessee.

Inside the church, historical plaques now hang with names of the 1886 Trustees of the church. There are plaques listing the names of the children of Isaac and Charlotte Dockery and the names of the 1978 newly- elected Board of Trustees of the New Salem Baptist Church.

Martha Burden Bowden  
Knoxville, Tennessee  
2008

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<sup>1</sup> THE HISTORIC ARCHITECTURE OF SEVIER COUNTY, TENNESSEE by Robbie D. Jones, page 49