

Historic Rural Churches

GROOVERVILLE METHODIST

STORY BY CLAYTON H. RAMSEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE ROBINSON

The First Great Awakening of the 1730s and '40s was a spiritual fire that swept through the landscape of pre-Revolutionary America, enflaming colonists with the Spirit of God. Facing the uncertainty of life on a new continent, these British subjects were confronted with the impending judgment of the Almighty and turned by the thousands in repentance and faith with the renewed fervor of revival in response to the inspired oratory of men like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield.

Less than a century later, the so-called Second Great Awakening rolled across the young nation. This was no reasoned, cerebral phenomenon; instead, it was roiling emotion and spiritual urgency. Scholars would suggest it was a religious expression of the Romantic Movement that followed the Enlightenment.¹ That conclusion, while technically correct, does not begin to capture the passion, the feeling of intense emotion when the curtain of heaven was furled and eternity was glimpsed, when sin was loathed and virtue craved, when God was an immediate and overwhelming reality. It was a new

millennial age in the early nineteenth century.

Those touched by the sacred vision of this Awakening expected their Christ to return at any moment. After they repented their transgressions, they turned to those of their society and looked to reform their world, to clean house before the return of the Lord. By the end of the century and into the next, a fully formed Social Gospel would emerge. But even in the early decades of the century, there were antebellum reform movements: temperance, abolitionism, penal reform, improvement of care for the mentally ill, and women's rights, among others.²

These social and political changes began on church pews and in brush arbors, with sermons and hymns and crying out to the Lord for mercy and tears that came with forgiveness. These were people who knew what John Wesley meant when he said his heart was "strangely warmed" in an encounter with God. These were people who met a magnificence and a truth, an ugliness that lurked in them and a beauty that lay beyond, a people who were profoundly transformed by God and in turn sought to be agents of change in their world.



By the 1850s, the Second Awakening that had blossomed in hearts and communities since 1790 had moved into another form of social development, but not without leaving traces of significant changes in the culture. The enormous growth of the Baptist and Methodist denominations, the sensitivity to moral issues in the wider society, and the increasing influence of religion in public life were all legacies of this second wave of revivalism. The Third Awakening was yet to come, with its emphasis on international missions and the challenges of linking faith and nation building, but it grew out of this significant chapter in our history.

William H. Ramsey lived a life of faith during the years of the Second Great Awakening, and while he was no ordained minister or denominational leader, the story of his experience illuminates the spirit of the age. Born in 1771 (the same year one of the first two bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Francis Asbury, came to America), William was 13 years old when the Christmas Conference met in 1784 in Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore, Maryland, establishing the Methodist denomination in this country. His family adopted the faith of the Wesleyan movement, and when he moved from his place of residence in Bladen County, North Carolina, to what is now Brooks County, Georgia, in 1832, he brought with him his strong Methodist commitment.

Ramsey was 61 years old and the journey was 500 miles long. It required all the faith he could summon, since his destination was still virgin territory. The first white settlers were introduced into Brooks County in 1823, and while still sparsely populated by the time he and his family moved, the so-called Coffee Road that linked Georgia and Florida opened the area for white settlement. The Census of 1830 for Lowndes County (one of the two parent counties for Brooks) recorded 2,113 whites and 335 slaves. By 1840, the numbers had more than doubled, with 4,394 whites and 1,117 slaves.³ Ramsey was among those who surged into the territory during that decade. By 1850, the rate of growth of new residents was already beginning to slow.

Given the demographic statistics, it is not surprising that the area's religious culture and organization were embryonic. Spanish priests had traveled "The Spanish Trail" from St. Augustine, Florida, to visit mission outposts in north Florida and southwest Georgia for decades. But the Protestant footprint was slight, and the Methodist presence almost non-existent.

The area where Ramsey settled was under the South



Carolina Methodist Conference until 1830, when the Georgia Conference formed. After 1825 it was considered the Tallahassee District, which covered Florida west of the Suwanee River and all of south Georgia from the Okefenokee Swamp and the Suwanee River west to the Alabama line.⁴ There were no meetinghouses or organized churches in the district. The Mount Zion Campground was organized in 1828 as a brush arbor site and was the only established location for Methodist worship for years. Otherwise, it fell upon the missionary work of men like Rev. Josiah Evans to locate Methodist families in the area and try to encourage devotion according to their confession.

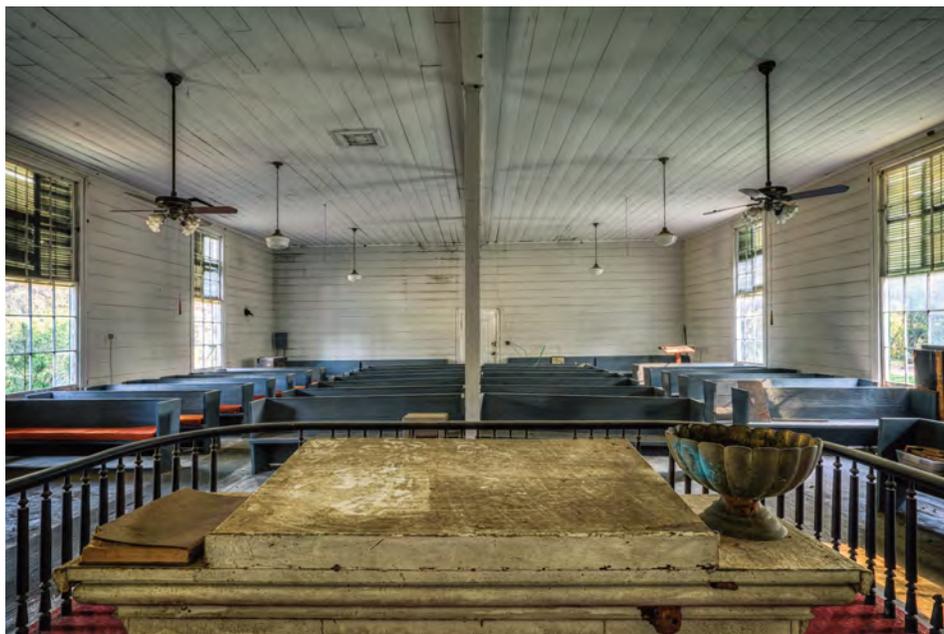
When William Ramsey settled in Thomas (later Brooks) County, adjacent to Lowndes, the tenuous Methodist witness was especially strained. Pastor George W. Davis, the first missionary in the new Lowndes Mission, died in 1832 at the age of 24, succumbing to the harsh conditions, which were hardly alleviated by the \$75 to \$100 per year that circuit riders received in compensation.⁵ The Presiding Elder who had served for four years in the district, Zacheus Dowling, was transferred to the Alabama Conference without explanation in 1833. So Ramsey faced the challenge of attending to the spiritual needs of those in his charge with few professional resources beyond his faith and his pioneer tenacity.

As the first Methodist family in Thomas County,⁶ Ramsey's faced wild animals and the hostility of native tribes, without the support of co-religionists. Even so, as Ramsey struggled to carve out a farm in the wilderness, one of the first tasks he undertook after establishing his home four-and-a-half miles from the crossroads that became incorporated Grooverville in 1859 was to fashion a brush arbor on his prop-



erty for his family and slaves to worship according to his Methodist allegiance.

As other Methodists moved into the district, several families decided to pool their resources and build a log church a half-mile north of the Ramsey house, on the main road to St. Marks, Florida. They named the church Lebanon, in the Hebrew Scriptures a symbol of strength and virtue.⁷ For years there were no regular preaching services at Lebanon, due to



the inadequate supply of clergy. With the increase in population and a growing religious hunger, however, the church became a regular stop on the circuit of itinerant preachers by the 1840s. The church became a focal point for both spiritual inspiration and social cohesion.

By 1856, the area known as Station No. 18, then Key, and finally Grooverville was emerging as a thriving commercial center on the stage road that connected Tallahassee (and Thomasville) to Troupville, the county seat of Lowndes. Malachi Groover held ownership of most of the land in the district. When he marked out the lots and streets of the town site, Lebanon Church moved to Grooverville when he deeded one acre of land to Richard Ramsey (the oldest of twelve children born to William and his third wife, Dorcas Bevan), M.W. Linton, and W.R. Joiner, who served as trustees of the property for the church.⁸ In 1856-7, Mr. Linton sawed lumber from his holdings and his plantation carpenters, composed of both slaves and free labor, built the church building of the new Grooverville Methodist Church. Consistent with the specifications outlined in the Methodist Discipline, the church was built in a modest, unadorned style, with wide, hand-planed heart of pine planks painted white, shuttered windows and a belfry with a bell. It still stands as perhaps the oldest existing church building in the county.

In time the church became the largest on the circuit that included churches in Grooverville, Prospect, and Buelah. A fervor and desire for growth pushed members to explore opportunities to expand the reach of their influence. They identified land in a pine forest across from Elam and built a tabernacle, which hosted camp meetings with preaching, singing, praying and worshipping for days at a stretch, every year until the 1870s. These churches also served as the mother church to the Methodist Church in Boston, Georgia, which became the largest church on the circuit in time.

William Ramsey was a faithful participant in the work and worship of Lebanon Church until he died in 1856. That same year, the congregation moved and the church name changed to Grooverville Methodist. At the church centennial in 1933, Mr. E.R. Whaley, one of Ramsey's grandsons, read a history of the church. Then he recounted the faithfulness of his grandfather, William Ramsey, who never failed to pray before meals or with his family at night, even as his mind deteriorated and he did not recognize his own children. Perhaps most poignantly, Mr. Whaley spoke about a time when the elderly Ramsey slipped away with the intention of returning home to North Carolina and was dis-

To view many more historic rural churches in Georgia, visit www.hrcga.org.



covered trying to cross a creek in the woods, his coat, shoes and hat missing, but his Bible under his arm.⁹

Three of Ramsey's great-grandsons, as well as several other descendants, entered the ministry, and six generations of the family worshiped in the church.

Grooverville Methodist Church was built in 1856 and hosted church meetings until December of 1998. Thereafter, the building fell into disrepair. But in early 2017 an individual with family ties to the area purchased the property. His plan at the time of purchase was to renovate this historic church and make it available to strengthen the religious and social life of the Grooverville community. The hope is that it may be so, a tribute to the faith of the past and a catalyst for the village of the future.

Scholars like Nathan Hatch argue that the Second Great Awakening was a "centrifugal" event in American history, where resistance to authority and religious orthodoxy, driven by class conflict and directed by the strong leadership of local lay preachers, created a "competitive marketplace" in both spiritual and secular spheres.¹⁰ But William Ramsey's experience seems to support another interpretation, articulated by scholars like Donald Mathews in his 1969 essay, "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process." Mathews argues for a "centripetal" movement, a convergence of believers separated by circumstance into small groups, "an organizing process that helped to give meaning and direction to people suffering in various degrees from the social strains of a nation on the move into new political, economic, and geographical areas."¹¹

That was Ramsey's experience. He was not reacting to some impersonal force of secularization. Nor was he caught in some scheme by ecclesiastical elites to return him and those like him to a more established and centralized religious organization.¹² Instead, his life suggests that he wanted a way to express his faith, and to do so in community. Such association

was a stabilizing influence in the wilderness. Whatever form it may have taken elsewhere, the Awakening in rural, isolated south Georgia was expressed as believers of like mind identified each other, gathered for worship as they could, and sought to bring others into the faith that defined them.

William Ramsey was a person of conviction to the end of his life, but his devotion was not an otherworldly escape from the problems of this world. He served as Justice of the Peace in the 754th District of Thomas County from 1833 to 1837. A

planter and man of business, his faith was not an appendage to a full life, but rather an integral source of strength and guidance for him as he lived this life.

That was the faith of the age, not inspiring detachment from society, cloistered in isolated communities of faith, or remaining enraptured in camp meetings. These men and women immersed themselves in the world with renewed vigor, hoping to create a positive change in themselves and their world. ■

Clayton H. Ramsey is a freelance writer and former president of the Atlanta Writers Club. He lives in Decatur.

Endnotes

1. Mabry, Donald J., "Reform and Romanticism, 1830-40," <http://historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?action=read&artid=618>, July 9, 2016.
2. Ibid.
3. Huxford, Folks, *The History of Brooks County Georgia, 1858-1948* (Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, 1978), 29.
4. Ibid, 275.
5. Ibid, 276.
6. Ramsey, Ira Clayton, *William Ramsey and Descendants in America Since 1740s* (2015), 31.
7. Psalm 92:12.
8. Huxford, op. cit., 288.
9. Ramsey, op. cit., 47.
10. Hatch, Nathan O., *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).
11. Mathews, Donald, "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830: An Hypothesis," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring, 1969), 27.
12. See John Bodo, *The Protestant Clergy and Public Issues, 1812-1848* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954) among others.