

## HOLMES VALLEY IN EARLY SETTLEMENT DAYS

Excerpts from the writings of E.W. Carswell

Holmes valley and environs have long had a compelling attraction both for Indians and for pioneer U.S. settlers. The valley's Eden-like qualities have inspired written descriptive comment from at least two early travelers, thus preserving their impressions of the area, as it was when U.S. settlers began arriving in the early 1800's.

John L. Williams, of Pensacola, explored and mapped the area in the mid-1820s. He was one of two commissioners who picked Tallahassee as the site for the Florida territorial capital in 1824. "Holmes Valley", he wrote, "East of the Choctawhatchee, contains 10 to 12 sections of land. The soil is dark sandy loam. A good millstream runs through it, collected from springs, which issue abundantly from the sides of the valley. Near these springs, the inhabitants usually fix their residences." He noted the level of the valley was about 100 feet below the surrounding pine country. He observed the white oak, black, red and water oak, white ash, black gum, wild cherry, red bay and magnolia, witch hazel, pawpaw, sassafras, haw shrubs, the whole mixed with wild cane of extraordinary growth.

He noted that Holmes Creek flows from Alabama, passing through Northwest Jackson County "and falls into the East side of the Choctawhatchee River about seven miles above Cowford. This creek has a channel deeper than the river, and the enterprise of Messer, Shackleford and Merlet has rendered it navigable as far as Hard Labor Creek, by clearing out the timber, which had obstructed the channel. Warehouses have been erected, about 40 miles from its mouth, to receive products of the Chipola planters. Groves of fine cypress trees clothe the margins of the creek, which merges with the Choctawhatchee at Big Springs, and a few good hammocks skirt its banks."

In 1827, Rt. Rev. Michael Portier came through the valley in route from Mobile to St. Augustine. Bishop Portier approached the valley after having been lost, hungry, ill and exhausted in the Choctawhatchee swamp a day earlier. A benevolent man took him into his humble home and gave him all the assistance that "My pitiable condition required. He was an honorable and well-meaning host a Methodist, who entertained me in a very generous manner," wrote Bishop Portier. After a period of rest and regain of his strength, he was accorded the privilege of "blessing the table and saying a few words of edification." The family listened and appeared deeply moved by the Bishops words, "One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism". Bishop Portier, who in 1830 was instrumental in establishing Spring Hill College in Mobile, asked his host what he owed for the family's hospitality. "All I expect from you, sir, is that when you journey back from St. Augustine you will honor my house with your company," was the man's reply.



Bishop Michael Portier

The Bishop subsequently wrote in glowing terms about the rich valley, a beautiful sight from the ridges, resplendent with evergreen groves, shading farmhouses from the warm sunlight. Portier also

reported in 1827, that his thoughts were drawn to the Indians who had recently tilled the fields and hunted the forests as their own. It may have been the Indians' Old Fields in the rich valley that first attracted the settlers to this area.

### **WHERE WAS HOLMES TOWN?**

The exact site of an Indian town that was reportedly built by Chief Holmes and his followers in Holmes Valley in 1814 remains unidentified. It seems likely that the town would have been somewhere near the head of the navigable portion of what is now known as Holmes Creek. It is known that Indians frequently build their villages near creeks or rivers. The Indians used their canoes to communicate with other villages and for commerce. The Eastern bank of Holmes Creek in the Vernon area consists of several bluffs that are well drained and flood-free. Attractive village sites, they are also conveniently close to the old fields of the valley and to the well-worn trail connecting Pensacola and St. Augustine along the escarpment of the South side of the valley. The trail followed the escarpment from the vicinity of the present New Hope, past Ebenezer and Moss Hill churches, Northeast toward the head of the valley. Rich fields of the valley would have been the granary for the Indian town, and surrounding areas would have provided excellent hunting and fishing grounds. The Holmes and the Choctawhatchee and its other tributaries, along with the ancient trail, were avenues of travel and commerce. There also was a trail on the opposite side of the Holmes leading Northward from today's Vernon area, past today's Bonifay and the present Mt. Zion and Bethel Baptist Church communities in Northern Holmes County. General Jackson's army crossed the trail a few miles West of Holmes Creek while on its historic march from St. Marks to Pensacola in 1818. Jackson and his army of 1200 men apparently crossed Holmes Creek near the future site of Reddick Mill and proceeded to cross the Choctawhatchee a little north of present State Rd. 2 bridge. There is evidence pointing to the Vernon area as the site of the Indian town. Vandals or amateur archeologists violated several small Indian mounds Northwest of Moss Hill Church years ago. Most of the mounds were destroyed later by road construction. Only a few remain, but pottery shards and other evidence of Indian habitation can be found along the shoulders and in the ditches beside the highway.

### **Moss Hill Church**

Methodists and Baptists were represented in the early Holmes Valley. As early as 1821, the year Florida was acquired from Spain; a Methodist preacher was reported in the Econfina area. Sometime before 1825, Holmes Valley Methodist Mission was established and was the predecessor of Moss Hill



Methodist Church. The Mission was already in existence when Washington County was organized, Stanley's History of Jackson County reports Methodist work in Holmes Valley in 1823, when the valley was part of that county. Holmes Valley Methodist Mission has the unusual record of being located in perhaps four counties, within a span of four years. The Baptists were reported to have established a church in Campbellton, in May of 1825.

Some confusion about both Baptist and Methodist churches, being represented in Holmes Valley and on the Econfina Creek probably stems from their using the same building for worship services. Often mentioned in the oral reports was the meeting house, built of logs, which served the Methodists for many years preceding the construction of Moss Hill Church on its present site.

It does seem likely, in the absence of complete records, that both shared the same meetinghouse, each holding services twice a month. The old meeting place was near Baptizing Lake, which earned its name from the presence of the Baptists in the neighborhood. The Baptists later relocated to a nearby new building and called it Ebenezer Church. The Methodists called their new church building Moss Hill. The church was built on its present site in 1857 and remains a simple, unpainted, weathered, wood frame structure. Little has changed from the day it was completed. Representing the architecture of frontier America, its significance is enhanced by its location in Holmes Valley, an area rich in geological interest, archeological promise, flora and fauna and Indian and American history. Bearing a strong pioneer atmosphere, it is often called Florida's "Little Church in the Wildwood." Even until this day and as long as can be remembered, every service is opened with hymn number 121, "The Church in the Wildwood".

The church was built on public land in 1857. In 1861, Igdaliah (Eagle Eye) Wood acquired title to the surrounding 40 acres of land from the U.S. Government and gave it to the church. President Abraham Lincoln signed Wood's application for the tract nearly 11 months after Florida seceded from the Union. President Lincoln did not recognize the succession of any of the states and therefore granted the application near the end of his first year in office. It probably wasn't delivered to Wood until the end of the Civil War. A copy of this document is on display inside the church.

Wood was a farmer, lay minister and land developer. In 1860, the year before secession, tax records credit Wood with owning 13 slaves. Wood later returned home to Gadsden County Florida and is buried there in the Mt. Pleasant Cemetery. Moss Hill Church, erected in 1857, was the areas first all frame structure and the second in Washington County to have glass windows, the first being the home of Robert V. Russ also in Holmes Valley.

Bill Tiller selected the first growth pines from which the planks were sawn at the Davis Mill, later to be known as the Gilbert Mill on Hard Labor Creek. Some of the planks are 18 to 20 inches wide. They are hand planned and fitted together with tongue and groove joinery. The pews, pulpit, chancellery rail and



benches were all handmade using square nails and wooden pegs. Kerosene lamps were used in later years for illumination. There was no chimney and no other provision was made for heating. At one point in time a wood-burning heater with an improvised flue was installed. This was later replaced with a gas heater, which was removed in 1983. Today the church uses two kerosene heaters to take the chill off during the winter months.

Lamp Powell, the carpenter in charge, is credited with planning the structure. Chief Assistant was Green Worthington; senior members of the church, their neighbors and some slaves provided the construction labor. Men and women of the congregation were seated separately, in keeping with frontier custom. One section was reserved for slaves before the Reconstruction Era. During that era, some of the former slaves who attended Moss Hill and their

descendants joined others in establishing Sylvania AME Church about three miles Northeast of Moss Hill. Mt. Calvary Baptist Church was another one founded by former slaves. A cemetery was also established beside Sylvania.

Still preserved on the ceiling, for over 150 years, are the fingerprints, handprints and footprints of the builders of Moss Hill. If you look closely, you can find bear, raccoon and dog prints also. Over the years, there have been many theories as to how these prints were made. In all actuality, the lumber was sawn from freshly cut pine trees, loaded with sap. Most likely the ceiling was completed in the heat of the summer. As the boards were handled the oil in the skin and perspiration of the workers mixed with the sap to leave a lasting print. The human and animal footprints were made in the



same fashion by stepping on the boards as they lay on the ground. In the Church is the plank desk of Duncan L. (Pete) McMillan, who drowned, along with his sister Neta in a Chipley limesink in 1891. They were the children of Confederate Captain Angus McMillan, K Company, 6<sup>th</sup> Florida Infantry. McMillan was the commander of the "Washington County Invincibles", one of the founders of Chipley and frequently attended Moss Hill Church. He presented the desk to the church in memory of his son Pete.

As Vernon developed from an inland port into a sawmill and turpentine town, and a business and political center, some valley residents moved into town. Some of them continued to operate their farms in the valley while others moved to St. Andrews Bay, Chipley, Bonifay and Marianna as the railroad brought new communities into existence. Former residents of Holmes Valley initially populated Chipley, founded in 1882. As a result of this outward migration, membership in the valley churches began to decline. Moss Hill, New Hope, Ebenezer, Live Oak near Millers Ferry and those in Vernon all drew on the general area for membership. The valley churches slowly gained or held their own until the turn of the century.

Records appear incomplete for many of the early years of Moss Hill's existence, especially from 1857 to 1890. A wealth of information is missing, including the names of slaves who were members for nearly a decade after the current building was erected, until slavery was abolished after the War Between the States. Apparently, W.A. Blue, Moss Hill record keeper for the better part of his lifetime, had lost most of them. Mrs. Jahaza B. Blue, a daughter in law, wife of Bernard Blue, recalled seeing the records in 1939. She said that W.A. Blue was the son of Thomas Jefferson and Adaline Augusta Miller Blue, valley settlers well before the Civil War. Moss Hill membership after 1890 never exceeded 75.

### **MOSS HILL CHURCH...HAUNTED?**

Some people say the Moss Hill site is haunted, but others say such whims are the product of overworked imaginations. Jesse Williams, a long-time resident of Noma, in Holmes County, told how one such story got started. A violent rainstorm overtook Williams and some companions, returning in 1908 by mule drawn wagon from a fishing expedition to St Andrew Bay, soon after nightfall. Seeing no houses

nearby, they took refuge in the Church. They soon began hearing organ music, but they were unable to determine its source. The music lasted into the night and so did the rainstorm. The men went their way the next morning puzzled about the music. Williams, in relating the experience 60 years later, said he was still puzzled about the source of that music, He had seen nothing in the neighborhood but moss-draped trees. Finally, the mystery was solved, at least to his satisfaction, when he was told that the Tom Miller home was well hidden in a clump of trees 300 yards to the Northeast of the church. Miller had two daughters, May and Esther who loved to play the organ. It was considered probable that they were playing the organ to while away the time on that stormy night, unaware that their musical notes seemed supernatural to the men in the nearby church.

### **MOSS HILL TODAY**

Moss Hill Church is listed on the National Register of Historic Places; it is part of The Florida History Trail and has been listed as a historic place by the United Methodist Church. Services are held at 2:00 PM on the second and fourth Sundays of every month except December. Our "Christmas at Moss Hill" service is at 2:00PM on the second Sunday and it is the only service for the month. The church usually fills to capacity at Christmas so plan to get here early if you want a seat.

We have a variety of Pastors, retired Pastors and Lay Speakers that bring God's Word to us. We often have guest singers and musicians but we always have piano or guitar accompaniment. All are invited and of course there are refreshments and plenty of fellowship after the service. We have a "Spring Sing" and a "Fall Sing", featuring area soloists, quartets, bluegrass gospel groups and a variety of talented performers, and of course "Dinner on the Grounds".