

A Brief History of Summerville First Baptist Church

The First Baptist Church of Summerville, Georgia lists its year of organization as 1848. According to county legal records, land on which to construct a building was granted by the Inferior Court to the Summerville Baptist Church on August 7 of that year. Identified as deacons of the church on that legal document were William Crook and John P. Henry. For several years prior to this, however, a congregation was functioning without the advantage of a building for worship probably meeting in homes of members. Its original name was Damascus, and it was a part of the Coosa Baptist Association. This association of churches embracing six northwest Georgia counties, was organized in 1836 and became affiliated with the Georgia Baptist Convention in 1842. A short history of the church written in 1935 names Rev. E. Dyer as "the first pastor on record". He was serving the church in 1839, according to this history. The 1842 minutes of the Coosa Baptist Association list a Chattooga County church with 24 members as "Summerville, formerly as Damascus". In 1943 the name of the congregation was changed from Summerville Baptist Church to Summerville First Baptist Church.

Early records indicate that the membership of the church grew to over 100 prior to the War Between the States, but dropped to as low as 20 afterward. Most of the early pastors of the church were itinerate preachers who served several northwest Georgia churches each and were elected on an annual basis. Two of these who are given attention in the 1935 history are John Crawford from the 1840's and Zachariah Gordon from the 1850's.

The original building for the Summerville Baptist Church was constructed on a lot facing Congress Street where New Bethel Baptist Church is now located. The 1935 church history tells that the first meeting house was "a crude building, which was used in turn by all denominations. There was no bell, the people being called to worship scripturally by a blast from a trumpet." Prominent family names that were probably among the charter members of the church, according to this history, included Bryant, Harlow, Lovelace, Rush, Sewell, Weathers, and Withers.

A leading northwest Georgia Baptist minister who served churches in Chattooga County, including Summerville, from 1883 to 1898 was D.T. Espy. In 1892 he led in the organization of Chattooga Baptist Association. Mr. Espy was pastor in Summerville when a new church building was constructed in 1894. He was the father of George D. Espy, a respected political and civic leader in Chattooga County; Oscar Joseph Espy, who was editor of the Summerville News for over a quarter of a century; and T.J. Espy, Sr. who was also a noted Baptist minister.

J.G. Hunt became pastor of the Summerville Church in 1895 and continued to serve through 1908. He returned to the pastorate in 1925, and stayed until 1930, thus serving for a total of twenty years, the longest tenure of any pastor in the church's history. During his first period of ministry the church sold its building to a black congregation (now New Bethel Baptist) for \$400 in 1901 and moved to its present location on Georgia Avenue. Property for the new site was purchased from county Ordinary John Mattox for \$300.

A short history of the church, written when the present sanctuary was dedicated debt-free in 1942, describes the task of constructing and paying for the sanctuary built in 1901 as "Herculean". The building was considered one of the most beautiful and stately frame structures in Georgia. A few years after this sanctuary was completed, however, George W. Sewell, a deacon who envisioned larger outreach and effectiveness for the church, willed a sum of \$4,000 for the addition of a Sunday School annex. C.P. Watson was pastor at the time this addition was completed, and the building committee consisted of Dr. O.A. Selman, Roger Eastman, N.S. Rich, and Homer Wood.

The Summerville Baptist Church had been "part-time" or "half-time", sharing a pastor with one or more other congregations prior to March 11, 1935, when John C. Jackson became its first full-time pastor. During his ministry disaster struck the church early on Sunday morning, July 11, 1937 in the form of a fire that completely destroyed the buildings.

Although the facilities were insured for only \$10,000, less than twenty percent of replacement value, the 1942 church history relates that "before the smoking embers had been quenched, plans were being considered for the erection of an even more compact and serviceable building to be erected upon the same spot of ground where the former building stood". After just over a year of using the public school auditorium for worship the present church sanctuary was completed and entered in September of 1938. Members of the building committee were Dr. O.A. Selman, chairman; R.A. Harlow; J.R. Jackson, Jr.; and N.S. Rich.

Madison D. Short, Sr. became pastor in March on 1940. He faced the task of leading the church to pay off a heavy debt during the economically difficult years between the Great Depression and World War II. Through good organization and sacrifice the indebtedness was paid and the building was dedicated debt-free on January 11, 1942. Finance committee members during this period included H.W. Woods, Chairman; R.A. Harlow; J.R. Jackson, Jr.; O.H. Perry; and T.H. Selman.

During these recent years the church has also continued to make additions and improvements to its building facilities. A pastorium was constructed on Kirby Street in 1957 to replace an older one that was adjacent to the church. A large

educational building was added to the church facilities in 1961. In 1972 a modern residence was built on Maple Drive for the staff associate. A complete renovation of the church sanctuary along with several other improvements to the building facilities at a cost of \$135,000 was accomplished in 1980, and the indebtedness on this project was paid off by 1984. The committee that led the church in this renovation included T.J. Espy, Jr., chairman; Robert Floyd; Ronald Raughton; and David Houston.

Pastors who have served the church since 1945 include Ben C. Scarborough, 1945-1947; Ira C. Frazier, 1948-1949; Tom L. Collins, 1950-1951; Bob Mowery, 1951-1957; Allen Redd, 1957-1958; Roger McDonald, 1958-1963; Robert L. Franklin, 1963-1969; Hilton C. Garrett, 1970-1974; Joe K. Tanner, 1974-1976; Jack V. Colwell, 1977-1991; Charles F. DeVane, 1992-1997; Willie B. Bearden, Interim, 1997-present.

Full-time staff members have been ministers of music and education: Eddie Davis, 1954-1957; Fred Gunter, 1966-1969; and Hugh Canterbury, 1972-1976; ministers of music and youth Dennis Allen, 1977-1979, Patti Durham (interim), 1979; and David A. Williamson, 1979-1984; director of education, music, and youth Jerry M. McGhee, 1985 – XXXX; and Associate Pastor for music and youth, Daniel J. O’Gorman, Jr., 1994-1996. Jason Dukes recently joined our staff as the Minister of Youth and Education. In recent years, part-time staff have included Larry Martin, minister of youth; Don Groce, interim minister of music; Cheryl Allen, organist; Jay McNeal, church musician; and Brett Hollowell, minister of music.

The church approved a position of full-time secretary in 1951, and the ladies who have filled this job continuously since then have contributed greatly to the administration and organization of its programs. These have been Inez Espy, Eloise Johnson, Anne Hudson, Judy Weaver (White), Mary Willingham (Edwards), Marilyn Wood, Jane Petitt, Louise Bryan and Lori Richardson. Those who have served for the longest periods of time have been Anne Hudson, eleven years (1955 to 1966), Louise Bryan, sixteen years (1977 to 1993), and Lori Richardson, five years (1993 to the present).

Although the names of men are mentioned more prominently as church leaders in available records no history of the church would be complete without giving credit to the faithful service and persistent motivation that have come from its devout women. The Women’s Missionary Union of the church has its own distinguished history of mission support and involvement dating back to 1892. Two of the pillars in W.M.U. work, who both served for many years as its leaders, were Mrs. Minnie Harlow and Mrs. Kate Bolling Brown. The church has also been noted for its strong music program. A lady of wide influence in developing a high quality of church music was Miss Annie Pitts (1879-1981), who was associated with the church music ministry for eighty years as a choir member, music director, and soloist, and extended her influence throughout the area as a piano and voice teacher. Also, Miss Alma Zada Ellenburg, a lifelong member of this church, faithfully gave of her time and talents beginning as pianist (1934) and later organist, retiring in 1974. Helen Hudson, our present pianist, has graciously devoted her musical abilities to our church since 1954 until the present. Another lady who made a lasting impact upon the modern era was Miss Elizabeth Jackson, who developed the church library and was an avid promoter of missions.

The Summerville First Baptist Church has been from its beginning a fully cooperating Southern Baptist Church, and has supported the work of its denomination on the associational, state, national, and worldwide levels. It is impossible to include all of the names of great spiritual leaders or to mention all of the significant events in such a short history as this. It may be said, in conclusion, that the church has a noble heritage for its inspiration as it seeks to minister faithfully in the present and to look toward the future with faith and confidence.

This brief history of the church was written by Jack V. Colwell, Pastor from 1977 to 1991.