

Harris Spring Primitive Baptist Church

This beautiful church was moved to Gaither in 2000 from its original site on Georgia Highway 11 just north of I-20. Its history is representative of religion in rural southern farming areas in the nineteenth century. Harris Spring was founded in 1822 in a log structure, and is recognized as the first church established in Newton County. Two years later the Yellow River Primitive Baptist Association with 13 churches was established at Harris Spring. Membership later grew to 37 churches and almost 2500 members. The original Harris Spring Church was replaced in 1916 by this building, at a cost of \$916.86. The original site includes a burial ground established in 1830 and a baptizing place, presumably the springs on the property, established in 1833.

In 1822 when the church was formed, life was tough and unforgiving. This part of Georgia was frontier, farming was the only occupation, and the basics of food, clothing, and shelter were often hard to maintain. The founding of Atlanta was still 25 years in the future. People depended on their own families and their neighbors. Life expectancies were short, medical care and knowledge were rudimentary, travel was infrequent and arduous, and communication beyond the immediate neighborhood was virtually nonexistent. Communities depended on the security and discipline of a strict church to keep life in order and help people maintain the strength to survive and endure hardship.

The Primitive Baptist church adhered totally to biblical teachings and doctrine. Members were conservative and fundamental. Those who strayed from accepted behavior and standards were expelled. Church services separated the sexes; men sat on the left, women on the right. Women were not permitted to speak. No musical instruments were allowed in the church, and no pictures or images of any persons or religious figures. Services might last all day, with preachers, called elders, preaching until they got tired. Communion was strictly upheld and was often accompanied by foot-washing, following the example of Jesus in the Bible.

In the early years church conferences consisted mainly of accepting new members and of considering charges brought against current members who came forward and had to make satisfactory acknowledgements to the church - if they were found guilty they were excommunicated. Offences included absence on conference days, repeating falsehoods, disorderly behavior, taking up with another woman, profane swearing, and intoxication. Despite the discipline, church minutes and documents show the affection and fellowship of the congregation and the extreme importance of the church in the members' lives.

Membership over the years included many African-Americans. Before emancipation, they were referenced as servants belonging to a member and only first names were recorded. In 1870 Brother Barry Tuggle was ordained a minister for the black members, and in 1877, African-American members were granted a voice in votes and business conferences.

In later years, a pot-bellied stove helped warm the congregation in winter, but neither electricity nor indoor plumbing were ever installed in the church.

In 1879 Harris Spring church reached the peak of its membership with 79 members. But rural life was beginning to change - by the early 1900's electricity, the telephone, the radio, and the automobile gave farming communities new access to the wider world and exposure to new ideas. At the same time, farming declined, and many families moved away from farms to towns and cities.

By the 1940's, church services at Harris Spring were held only twice a year - by the 1970's, once a year. In 1985 the church was deeded to the Newton County Historical Society by its last surviving member, Carolyn Alston, who died in 1993. In 1994 a portion of the roof of the unused church was destroyed by fire, and it was apparent that the empty structure could not be properly protected.

In 2000 the decision was made by the Newton County Historical Society and the Newton County Board of Commissioners to move the church to Gaither. Funding for the move and the subsequent renovation was provided by the county, the historical society, a state grant, and individual contributions. The church was cut in half and the roof removed for the slow move here, where the church was carefully restored to its original state.

The original location on Highway 11 will be used by the county for Harris Springs Fire Station. The graves and the springs will be preserved and protected, and an appropriate market will be erected to note the history of the site.