

The Old Philadelphia Church

In the early infancy of the State of Tennessee there were some deeply religious people who immigrated into a newly opened territory which was later organized into Warren County. Out of this group of people a restoration movement was begun in Warren County which led to a strong concentration of those who were determined to follow the New Testament pattern. In Warren County today, there are 44.04% of the population which claim church preference for the churches of Christ.¹

The Old Philadelphia church has escaped to a large degree the notice of many historians of the Restoration Movement.² Perhaps this is due to the fact that much of the history of the Restoration Movement is tied to personalities, papers, and positions. There were in the beginning no personalities of great significance outside of the immediate area, and the group predates many of the outstanding individuals such as Campbell and Stone. There were very few early publications and none in the immediate area, but those which did exist were evidently unaware of the existence of the group. They were content to practice simple New Testament Christianity in their community. For these, and perhaps other reasons, many of the historians have incorrectly attributed the Old Philadelphia church to the work of Stone's followers and dated it much later. It can be demonstrated that this group was in existence by no later than 1810-1811, and perhaps as early as 1805.

Early Beginnings

Some of the first settlers of what would become Warren County came to a parcel of

¹A religious census was conducted in Warren County in the Autumn of 1989 under the oversight of the Church of Christ at Bybee Branch with the help of some 26 sister congregations.

²This writer is truly indebted to the work of several brethren who have spent many hours in original research to bring some of this material to light. Among them are: Warren County Historian, James A. Dillon, Jr.; Richard Bonner, and J. Lynwood Mathis.

land along Hickory Creek in the southwestern part of the county about eight miles south of what is now the city of McMinnville. Among them was the Price family, who played a great role in the early beginnings of the church in the area. Hugh Price signed the petition to form Warren County in 1806, and it seems logical that he was here sometime prior to that. The tax records of 1812 list John, Elisha, and Richard Price. The 1820 record included the names of John and William. Elisha and John Price were also preachers of note. These men were also connected with the Antioch church of Christ (later known as the Rocky Springs church of Christ) near Bridgeport, Alabama.³

The background of this group goes back to North Carolina and Virginia from whence they came. This family had roots in the Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches⁴, but probably had been influenced by the teachings of James O'Kelly, a prominent Methodist minister who had taken exception with Francis Asbury over the government of the church. O'Kelly, along with Rice Haggard and others attempted to reform the Methodists, deeming themselves as "Republican Methodists" at first, but at a meeting in Surry County, Virginia on August 4, 1794 they decided to simply let the Bible be their only guide of faith and practice and call themselves nothing but "Christians."⁵ Considering the completely undenominational character of the group with their reliance upon nothing but the Bible, and considering that they immigrated from the general area of O'Kelly's labors, it makes perfect sense to make the connection between the two.

When these people arrived in Warren County they must have established a church in the community, for in 1811, William J. Price, his wife, and a slave named Moses were

³Ernest Clevenger, Jr., *Alabama's Oldest Church of Christ, Rocky Springs Church of Christ (Originally Antioch Church of Christ)*, (Birmingham, AL: Parchment Press, n.d.), p. 1.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Earl Irvin West, *The Search For The Ancient Order, Vol I*. (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1974), pp. 6-10.

baptized at Old Philadelphia.⁶ And, a letter dated October 22, 1818, on behalf of Elizabeth Brown states “The Church of Christ at Philadelphia commends to the fellowship of the faithful in Christ Jesus our beloved sister, Elizabeth Brown, as a faithful member in the Kingdom of Christ.” Signed George Stroud and David Ramsay, Bishops.⁷ Sometime around 1830, a new church building was erected at a new site and this same building exists to this present day⁸

Later Growth And Progress

In the late 1820’s and early 30’s the Stone movement reached into Warren County. There was congregation established at Mountain Creek by G.W. Banton in 1833, and one in McMinnville in 1836. Meetings were conducted at various places by Sandy E. Jones, Robert G. Spicer, William D. Carnes, Levi Nix Murphee, John Lemmon, John Price, Elisha Price, George Stroud, Rees Jones and Tolbert Fanning. There was a natural blending of the indigenous movement which has already been in place for about a quarter of a century and the movement of Stone and others.

A program of evangelization was a primary concern of Stone, Scott, Campbell and others. They argued strenuously for churches cooperating but faced a growing opposition to organizations separate and apart from the local church. Robert Hooper, author of the biography of David Lipscomb, closely records the role which Warren County, and particularly Old Philadelphia, played in the organization of these cooperatives. He wrote,

“A number of meetings had been held during the 1840’s to discuss the proclamation of the gospel in Middle Tennessee. The most important was assembled in Warren County during November 1847, at which time the plan for a state cooperation was presented. The concept was generally

⁶Clevenger, *Alabama’s Oldest Church of Christ, Rocky Springs Church of Christ (Originally Antioch Church of Christ)*, p. 1.

⁷W. Ralph Wharton, *Restoration Movements Around The World*, (Houston, MO: By the Author, 1980), 105

⁸This building was totally restored in 1986 by several faithful brethren in the Warren County area.

accepted by those present at the Philadelphia meetinghouse.”⁹

Philadelphia continued to be a focal point for the gatherings for the cooperatives, for Hooper continues, “David’s brother, William, was the secretary of the Christian Evangelizing Association of Tennessee for 1855. Calling for a meeting at Philadelphia, Warren County, for the third Lord’s Day of October, he listed topics and speakers for the meeting.”¹⁰ John Eichbaum, one of two men hired by the State Cooperative in 1848, wrote a rather lengthy defense of the cooperation meetings in the *Christian Magazine* in 1850.¹¹ The struggle continued for several years with various meetings being held to determine the scriptural authority for such organizations. Beginning with the October, 1855, issue of the *Gospel Advocate* Tolbert Fanning starting raising questions then fully opposing the societies. Even though some, like David Lipscomb and Tolbert Fanning, continued to attend these meetings, they nevertheless became more vocal against them.¹² Perhaps the meeting that marked the most significant change of direction was the meeting of June 6-13, 1866 in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where several hundred were present. “The assemblage marked the largest number of Christian Church members ever to gather for a general meeting in a Southern state.”¹³ At this meeting there were several items on the agenda, but the second was regarding the cooperation and missionary societies. Norton records,

“After the lengthy discussion, which included much reading from the New Testament, the consensus was reached that the co-operation of churches in religious endeavors was scripturally sound. Lead by Philip Fall, the Nashville pastor, the assembly further agreed that such organizations as missionary societies were unscriptural and therefore had no authority to perform services for the churches. Not only did scripture come to bear in this decision; so did sectionalism!”¹⁴

Thus, Old Philadelphia was instrumental in the organization and encouragement of the

⁹Robert E. Hooper, *Crying In The Wilderness: A Biography of David Lipscomb*, (Nashville: David Lipscomb College, 1979), p. 52.

¹⁰Ibid, pp. 53,54.

¹¹J. Eichbaum, “Cooperation Meetings,” *Christian Magazine*, Vol. III, No. 9, (September, 1850): 277, 278.

¹²Hooper, *Crying In The Wilderness: A Biography of David Lipscomb*, pp. 54,55.

¹³Herman Norton, *Tennessee Christians* (Nashville: Reed and Company, 1971), p. 119.

¹⁴Ibid, p. 120. The historian’s own personal bias shows through here in the last statement.

missionary societies in Tennessee during a period prior to the Civil War.

Leadership And Changes

The church at Old Philadelphia was missionary minded and provided much of the leadership in spreading the gospel in the county. The Civil War had a drastic impact not only on the social and economic climate in the area, but it retarded much of the fervor. However, one of the notable leaders who surfaced was Jesse L. Sewell, who moved to Old Philadelphia from White County in 1858. He was responsible for much of the evangelistic zeal along with other well-known preachers, Elisha G. Sewell, William A. Sewell, W.D. Carnes, David Lipscomb, E.A. Elam, and others. Old Philadelphia was responsible for the Bean's Creek congregation in Coffee County¹⁵, the Antioch church near Viola, the church in Viola, and at Morrison. However, the latter two were responsible for taking the large number of members from the Old Philadelphia church and shortly after 1895 the building was turned over to the black brethren for use in their worship.¹⁶ These black brethren maintained the building and a strong congregation there for many years until they too moved toward the more populated areas. However, a tradition of having a series of gospel meetings and singings continued. On or about the first Sunday in May there continues a meeting in which many brethren, black and white, assemble for the preaching of God's Word and singing of praises.

¹⁵Lynwood Mathis, "*Restoration Movement In Warren County Tennessee*," By the Author, n.d., p. 3.

¹⁶"Morrison's History," Morrison church of Christ, n.d.

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