

## *The Restoration Movement In Warren County Tennessee*

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There is evidence that Warren County had it's own restoration movement. It is also possible that the very first congregation after the primitive order to exist in the state started in Warren County. There is abundant evidence that the restoration movement did exist in the first half of the nineteenth century in Tennessee, but just how early and where it started first is difficult to establish. There is evidence that it did start in Warren County as an indigenous movement and later joined hands with other independent movements that developed in different areas of our country.

A movement is usually connected to some individual, but the movement in Warren County seemed to start with a number of settlers instead. The community along Hickory Creek in the South Western part of Warren County was settled about 1800-1808 and was first known as Philadelphia, but the community was later known as Verville. The church took on the name of Old Philadelphia church of Christ. These first settlers found themselves without any "reverend to guide them and to expound the Scriptures." (Young 1966; 10) So they turned to a study of the Bible themselves. "They learned, contrary to former belief and practice (they were Presbyterians and Episcopalians — JLM), that baptism was a burial and for the remission of sins, and began to practice it in that manner and for that purpose. By 1810, they were worshipping as one body, a church different from any they had known before, subscribing to no creed, and wearing no distinctive name. They called themselves only Christians 'and the church only the church of Christ.'" (Young 1966; 10)

There appears to be no individual for us to remember as the founder of the movement in Warren County, but we soon have a number of men recognized as leaders in the restoration movement connected with the Old Philadelphia congregation. There is a cemetery near the old building, built in about 1832, that is one of the oldest in Warren County with many unmarked graves, but some are identified with names of early leaders and preachers. One stone reads "By the Church of Christ - In memory of her servant - L. Nix Murphree — Born April 25, 1814 - Fell asleep in Christ - October 16, 1857." This man was very much on the scene in 1855 and 1856. It was during this time that real efforts were being made to organize the congregations for the American Christian Missionary Society. Eight congregations in Van Buren, Warren, Cannon and Franklin Counties had organized as the "Christian Churches in the Mountain District of Tennessee." At a meeting in September, 1855 at Woodbury it was reported "that up until June two evangelists had been in the field - Aaron Seitz, and L. N. Murphree." (West 1954; 61) The following year on November 21, 22 the group representing the Mountain District of the Missionary Society met at Philadelphia in Warren County. David Lipscomb was called on to speak out to encourage this work and he did, and J. D. Eichbaum, Isaac Jones and L. D. Mercer backed him, but old John Stroud and a brother Murphy tried to tone down the enthusiasm and arrive at a compromise acceptable to all." (West 1954; 62) No doubt the brother Murphy was L. Nix Murphree notwithstanding the difference in spelling.

The name Stroud is also one that we find early in the history of Old Philadelphia. In a letter to a church that still exists in Alabama a brother George Stroud signed it as one of the bishops. "State of Tennessee, Warren County, October 22, 1818. 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 Jesus Christ. (signed) George Stroud/David Ramsay, Bishops" (Young 1966; 10) The Beans Creek Church of Christ in Coffee County had a committee to write the history of the congregation in 1895. In 1973 it was published in the Coffee County Historical Society Quarterly. From this source we learn that a "Bro. R. J. Price and his first wife, Mary Ellen Martin were married in 1834; obeyed the Gospel, and were baptized on the same day of their marriage and were added to the church at Philadelphia, Warren County, Tennessee. In the year 1835, they moved to Coffee County and settled on the waters of the Beans Creek where they remained until their death, living remote from Philadelphia or any other body of worshipping Christians." (Porter 1973; 5) The record points out that the Prices refused to be identified with any of the sects, but they were later a part of the organized church at Beans Creek. It is my opinion that they stayed in contact with the Philadelphia church and may have had worship in their home for the report further states "Perhaps Bro. Stroud and Bro. David Ramsay had preached at Bro. R. J. Price's before this." (Porter 1973; 5) Notice here you have Stroud and Ramsay again, but it is not clear if we now have George Stroud or John Stroud or if they were the same person. The influence of the church in Warren County in 1858 is clearly seen in the establishment of the Beans Creek Church. The report also says "So the church at Beans Creek is what might properly be termed the out cropping of the church at Philadelphia." (Porter 1973; 6)

Brother William Woodson of Freed-Hardeman College told the writer recently of a congregation in East Tennessee that dates back to 1813 and this pre-dates one of 1816 in Wilson County. "It is not known for certain when the plea for a return to apostolic Christianity first entered the state of Tennessee. The Bethlehem church in Wilson

County took its stand for the truth in 1816, and seems to have been the first in the state to do so." (West 1974; 251) Another source also appears to point to an early beginning, earlier than the one mentioned by brother West. "There seems to have been two centers of activity in the work in Middle Tennessee at an early date, one in Marshall, Maury and Giles Counties, and the other in Warren and the counties joining it." (Grant 1897; 8) Here again we find Warren County mentioned by a very early writer in a work that is unpublished in the rare book room of the library at David Lipscomb College. Brother Grant was also relying on the work of brother Isaac N. Jones who was a son of an early pioneer preacher known as Elder Rees Jones." "He had been a preacher and teacher of note and is spending his sunset years at Manchester, Tennessee" (Grant 1897;26) I. N. Jones was listed as a pioneer merchant in Manchester in 1886. (Ewell 1942; 37) Isaac Jones was at a meeting in behalf of the Mountain District of the American Christian Missionary Society at Philadelphia in 1856. (West 1954; 62) Brother Jones could have known from his father about the complete history of Philadelphia in Warren County. There had been lots of activity for the restoration in Warren County by 1848 from what we learn from several sources. "In Warren County, there were three hundred and fifty members in 1848 divided among the following congregations: Ivy Bluff, Fountain Spring, Philadelphia, Irving College, Rocky River and McMinnville." (West 1974; 253)

It was stated in the Gospel Advocate in December of 1860 that a sister had died in Warren County, who had been a member of the Christian church for 28 years. This would take us back to the year of 1832. That considerable work further observed from the fact that a school was started at a very early date. "An institution by the name of Irving College was established near McMinnville, in Warren County, at a comparatively early date, and flourished for quite a while, under the arrangement of brethren Owen

and Dill and others.”(Grant 1897; 79) Brother Grant in quoting brother Isaac N. Jones and this school was apparently started about 1838. It must have had some difficulties in a few years from what is said by another writer. “Irving College had been rebuilt in 1845, and chartered by the Legislature, and was doing excellent educational work.” (Hale 1930; 38)

It can be established that activity was going on very early in the 1800’s in an adjoining county. “Among the first churches of Cannon County were Brawley Fork Baptist church in what is now the third district; Prospect Methodist church, on Hill Creek in the sixth district; St. John Baptist church in the sixth district, and Curlee’s meeting-house, on Brawley Fork, also in the sixth district, all of which were log houses and built all along between 1815 and 1820.” (Goodspeed 1972; 854) Since Calvin Curlee was not converted to the plea of the restoration until after 1830, it is doubtful if the “Curlee’s meeting-house” was built until later. Brother Curlee gave the land and the meeting place is still in use. However, since William Davis Carnes, “at the age of eighteen years obeyed the Gospel under the preaching of Abner Hill,” (Scobey 1954; 205) it is obvious that the church had been restored in Cannon County by 1823 in fine order. William Davis Carnes was born in 1805 and baptized when he was eighteen or in 1823.

Another name that is connected with the Church at Philadelphia at a later date is that of Jesse L. Sewell. “In 1858 he moved to Warren County, near Viola. In 1859, he preached at Philadelphia in Warren County, and Woodbury, New Hope and Sugar Knob in Cannon County, continuing in the same field in 1860.” (Lipscomb 1954; 103) Brother Sewell continued in this location until his death and is buried along side his

wife and next to her is an infant son, who died in 1861, at the old Philadelphia Cemetery. Jesse L. Sewell was the grandfather of Jesse P. Sewell who became president of Abilene Christian College. He died June 29, 1890. "The day of his death, he attended church at Philadelphia Meeting House in the morning. A young brother preached a little lengthy, he kindly and meekly warned him against the habit, presided at the Lord's Table, making an unusually earnest and impressive exhortation to his brethren, took dinner with his daughter, attended the burial of a little child at three o'clock, where he made another short, but earnest and affecting discourse. He went home some three miles, unharnessed and fed his horse, did a few necessary chores, fixed the stovewood for his wife to get breakfast in the morning, and went and seated himself on the porch to rest. His wife, soon passing by, noticed his head dropped to one side, went to him and found his body still warm, but he was dead." (Lipscomb 1954; 129) It is my opinion that this prominent figure located here because it was a strong center of activity for the restoration movement, which is further evidence that it certainly was among the first congregation to call for a return to the primitive order. From this place brother Sewell's influence was felt in several of the surrounding counties.

A final note in favor of Warren County being the first place for New Testament Christianity to be restored in the State of Tennessee is the fact that it has even today the strongest concentration of churches of Christ and Christians to be found in the world.

The church at Old Philadelphia, later known as Vervilla, became the source of numerous congregations in Warren County. Some of these established others, and from some the gospel has gone into foreign lands. "There is no escaping the conclusion: Had both Campbell and Stone remained in their respective denominations, there would still

be a church of Christ, widely spread, as a result of its indigenous restoration in Warren County, Tennessee." (Young 1966:11)

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