

COPPER SPRINGS BAPTIST CHURCH

By Joe Whitten

Having been organized in 1873, Copper Springs Baptist Church is the oldest African-American church in the Branchville-Odenville area. The original building was of logs and served as both church and school. The name of the first pastor is not known today; however, the first board of deacons consisted of Richard Turnbaugh, Joe Vandegrift, Hosie Thomas, and Ed Turnbaugh. Ed Turnbaugh was also the first Sunday School superintendent.

Kenneth Hodges in his history of Branchville records that after the Civil War, James H. Vandegrift gave land to his former slave, Joe Vandegrift,

Early workers in the missionary program of the church were Mrs. Cloria Forman, Sister Lettie Jones, Sister Ella Lankson, Sister Laura Moore, Sister Maggie Russell, and Sister Ellen Turnbaugh. The first Mount Pilgrim Missionary Meeting was held at Copper Springs Church in 1879. Mount Pilgrim is a Baptist Missionary Society for the state of Alabama.

The church's first deed was made June 17 1893, and recorded September 11, 1902. Known as "Chepros Springs," this half-acre of land was purchased for a church and school for \$5.00, from Charles Ash and wife, Sara. The second deed for another half-acre bought from Mrs. Dora Green for \$50.00 is dated September 15, 1962. The deacons names on this deed are Pervie Rosebud, Willie Garrett, and William Ragland. This deed was witnessed by Justice of the Peace J. H. Dean.

The cornerstone for a new sanctuary was laid December, 1977, by Council Lodge #778 and Margaret Lodge #432. Bishop John Cottingham, pastor of Clark Temple Holiness Church, Birmingham, brought the message that December Sunday. The present fellowship hall was constructed in August, 1982, by William Ragland, Morris Vandegrift, and Willie Mabry.

Willie Mabry deserves a comment. For forty-four years Willis Mabry was custodian of St. Clair County High School in Odenville where he was affectionately known as "Shorty." He loved the school and "his" students and faculty, and they loved him in return. One of the early yearbooks, 1948, had this under his picture: "He slipped us candy and then hid us. The best janitor in the world." He was more than *janitor* to student and teacher, he was a *philosopher*; and many could add, "He gave us good advice."

The log school was operated by these African-American families in this area: Forman, Turnbaugh, and Vandegrift. Past teachers at the school have been Mrs. Mary Forman, Professor Hawkins, Miss Willie McCrary, Miss Nellie BeKneise, Miss Marie Cook, Mrs. Christeen B. Head, Mrs. Louise Thomas, Miss Catherine Gipson, Miss Jeanette Crim, Miss Eddie L. Turnbaugh, Miss Pinkie M. Byers, and Mrs. Mary Teacher.

For the 1985 anniversary booklet compiled by William Ragland, Rev. Luther Williams wrote of the church: "Copper Springs is like every other church, having its good days and bad days. But thanks be to God, we will press on so we can see God's face. Copper Springs is a strong church that will not sell out. It is not bad to fall down, but to lie there is a disgrace."

So, as it has done for almost a 150 years, this church remains a lighthouse in the communities it serves.