

The Old Brick Church

By John Bigham

Having withstood for 186 years the ravages of time without appreciable damage, it now seems probable that an ancient church building in Fairfield County, variously known as Ebenezer Meeting House, Little River Church, and more popularly now as the Old Brick Church, will continue to stand sentinel to tradition and heritage.

Although no congregation has regularly worshipped in the venerable brick sanctuary for over 50 years, tremendous significance is attached to it by Associate Reformed Presbyterians every-

where. It was here on May 9, 1803, that a handful of ministers and ruling elders gathered to organize the Synod of the South. A few years later this body made itself independent of Northern ties and eventually evolved into the present denomination.

The story of Ebenezer Meeting House begins with the arrival in the 1770s of Presbyterians from Scotland and Ireland who settled on both sides of Little River. The very first to put in an appearance was William McMorries and his family. Close behind the Mc-

Morries came James Kincaid and others, most of whom had been neighbors in the old country. James Kincaid married Mary McMorries and was destined to be influential as an elder at Ebenezer, an officer in the Revolution, a wealthy planter and a member of the legislature.

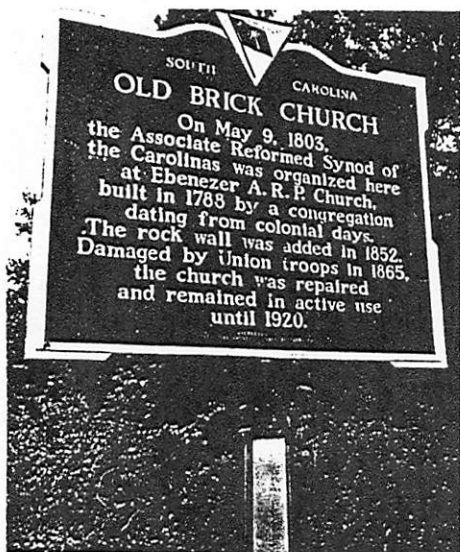
These Irish families had hardly begun work on their own homes when they turned their attention to building a suitable house of worship. The first one or two were temporary affairs, until the desire came to build a more permanent edifice.

They made the bricks themselves. After their crops were laid by, the men would go to the brickyard, tramp the mud into mortar with their bare feet, put it into molds with their hands and carry it out into the sun to dry. They kept the kilns burning night and day,





—All photos by T. A. Waites



Top, Geddeth Smith points out the tracing of the message left by the anonymous Union soldier during Civil War ransacking of the church. Above, the highway marker indicating the location and history of the Old Brick Church.

and it took a long time to get ready to build. They finished in 1788, and they did their work well.

The gently sloping cemetery which surrounds the building on three sides is truly sacred ground for those whose ancestors lie buried within its granite confines. A tour through the graveyard will reveal some of the names of families who once lived and prospered in the community, who loved their house of worship, and who contributed their part as a strong citizenry in the development of Fairfield County and the state.

For several years the congregation of Ebenezer was served by itinerant Associate Reformed ministers. In 1791 the

Rev. James Rogers came from Ireland by way of Scotland to begin a pastorate which lasted for almost 40 years. For 25 years of that tenure he presided over Jefferson Academy at nearby Monticello. One of his students was William Harper, who later became a celebrated jurist and was the first person admitted to what is now the University of South Carolina.

Rev. James Rogers also ministered to the Kings Creek and Cannons Creek Associate Reformed Presbyterian churches across Broad River in Newberry County until 1815, when he dropped these charges and concentrated on the congregation of Ebenezer.

This pastor and educator is buried in the cemetery beside the Old Brick Church, and his tombstone records that he was a native of County Monaghan, Ireland. By his side is his wife Celia. In the strong vein of Calvinistic theology on her tomb appears the statement, "She died, for Adam sinned; she lived, for Jesus died."

Members of the Old Brick Church enjoyed a prosperity based on cotton and slavery until the outbreak of the Civil War. The great conflict spelled doom for both the community and the church. Many in the congregation went off to fight, and more than a few of them never returned. In the cemetery of the old church the graves of four Confederate veterans are located at the foot of the graves of four men who fought in the American Revolution.

Not only were the rolls of the congregation decimated by the war, but before the conflict ended the community was to feel the wrath of Sherman's armies. The left wing of the Union forces traveled north from Columbia on the west bank of the Broad River, crossed that stream at Alston and came eastward. In their path lay Ebenezer Meeting House and the homes of many of its members. A number of homes went up in flames, and even the small house of worship on the banks of Little River fell victim to the Union forces.

In order to rebuild the bridge across the stream at the foot of the hill, destroyed shortly before by retreating Confederates, the invaders tore out the flooring and sleepers of the church. This act of desecration was too much for one Northern soldier. Feeling a need to apologize to the members, he wrote the following on the door facing

on the west side of the building: "Citizens of this community: please excuse us for defacing your house of worship so much. It was absolutely necessary to effect a crossing over the creek, as the Rebs destroyed the bridge. A yankee." Although the inscription was largely obliterated by an inadvertent whitewashing, almost every visitor claims to see the original writing.

Since 1932 it has been the custom of Associate Reformed Presbyterians to gather periodically at the Old Brick Church for special services or celebrations to keep alive the memories of by-gone days and to recall the dedication and faith of those who once worshipped there. These occasional gatherings also provide opportunities for the renewal of friendships and acquaintances, and in many ways the services are both religious and social.

On Sunday afternoon, Sept. 23, 1973, there was standing room only inside the church. Many stood around under the trees or among the tombstones, and others sat on the ancient granite wall which surrounds both building and cemetery. The principal speaker that day was Geddeth Smith, a Columbian now living in New York City. He was well qualified to give the address. Not only is Smith a successful actor on both stage and in television, but he is a lineal descendent of Alexander Kincaid, one of 34 members of the congregation to whom a deed to the property was given in 1793.

Catawba Presbytery, in the bounds of which the church is located, took positive action last fall to insure that the old sanctuary will not be forgotten in either a religious or historic sense. The church was reinstated on the rolls of Presbytery as a house of worship, though not an active congregation. The action taken will also result in the practice of holding a meeting of the Presbytery at the Old Brick Church every fifth year, to be held in addition to special services.

The Old Brick Church was entered on the National Register of Historic Places as of Aug. 19, 1971. That is good news for those everywhere who have a great affection for the ancient meeting house and want to see it preserved, restored and maintained.

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