

NON-CHURCH SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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In doing research, never underestimate the value of "hearsay"! Hearsay may become the signpost to documented proof of important historical facts.

Certainly the history of a church can never be written entirely on hearsay. But the researcher will do well to note carefully every rumor he might hear as to the who, when, and where of the organization of a church. These hearsay reports often differ greatly but if they are written down and carefully studied a writer can usually find a tiny thread of similarity and truth running through all of them.

When I began the search for facts about the first Baptist church in Ashville, I was told that there had once been a church on the west side of town another said the church had been located on the southeast side and yet another rumor placed it two miles south of the courthouse. Another citizen who has a most excellent memory told me that she had often heard that the first church building had also served as a school house and had been the home of Ashville Academy. This was my first good lead. I went to the court house and into the probate office and there in the judge's chambers I found one wall lined with acts of the Alabama legislature. Since St. Clair County dates back to the time when Alabama was yet a territory, these "Acts" go back to the very beginning. In *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Alabama*, which is a beautiful old leather bound volume, carefully indexed, I found that Ashville Academy had been chartered in 1831 by three men: James Rogan, a Presbyterian; John Byers, a Methodist; and James Lewis, a Baptist. So a good thing to keep in mind is that, in early days, schools and churches were very closely allied. Where there are no early church records, by looking for schools one will likely find a church nearby, often using the same building.

My next task was to find the exact location of this Academy. I examined the "reverse index" in the record room of our century-old courthouse.¹ There I found a deed recorded which showed that Phillip Coleman transferred one and three-eighth acres to these same three men: Rogan, Byers, and Lewis. The deed was dated March 19, 1832. It spoke of the building which had been erected on this land to be used for an academy and for a church, known as Mount Pleasant Meeting House, which was used by the three denominations: Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist. A look at the original map of Ashville and surrounding acreage placed the exact location of the first church and school.

Now, who was the first Baptist pastor to serve here? This I discovered by accident one day as I searched for family history in St. Clair County's first marriage record book, dated 1819-1849. There I read that James Lewis had been, "by prayer and laying on of hands, set apart to do the work of a gospel minister of the Baptist Church of Christ at Ashville." His license to solemnize the holy rites of matrimony was also recorded in this old book. The date was 1832. His name was found in numerous marriage contracts to show that he had performed the marriage rites for many of Ashville's first citizens. He, without a doubt, was the first pastor of Ashville Baptist Church.

This old marriage record has other early Baptist ministers' names as having officiated in the marriages of St. Clair County pioneers. Some were Sion Blythe,² Jesse Collins, Peyton Montgomery, John Glenn, and J. S. E. Robinson.

If there is a scarcity of early church records, keep in mind that county courthouse records make an excellent source for research. Deeds, Wills, Estates, Birth Certificates, Marriage Records, and Death Certificates are all treasure houses of information. These are public records and whether they are stored in the basement or in the attic of the courthouse, you have the right to use them. The oldest of such records are fragile from age and much use. The ink has faded and often the writing is not too legible. When such records are found, a researcher will be doing posterity a service if he will suggest to the county official who has charge of such records that Xerox copies be made of these and that the valuable originals be placed in a fire-proof cabinet.

Do cemeteries interest you? If you are a historian at heart, they should, for a cemetery is an unlimited source for research. There are many unmarked graves in the oldest part of Ashville's cemetery and the oldest date to be found on a grave marker is 1831. Engraved in small letters at the lower right-hand corner are these words: Gannt, Syllacogga.³ This cemetery is located just across the street from the spot which Ashville Academy and Mount Pleasant Meeting House once occupied. I have spent many profitable hours there among the graves of Ashville's first citizens. There I found graves of four early Baptist preachers who had served respectively as pastors of

Ashville's church. I learned that the Reverend Jesse A. Collins was born in Laurens District, South Carolina, on December 11, 1812, and died in St. Clair County, Alabama on August 15, 1880; that he became a minister of the gospel in 1832 and served the Baptist denomination throughout his life. He was the second pastor of our church.

Today, when there are two and often three, daily newspapers delivered at our door, we treat them in a very careless manner. We read them half-heartedly, often angrily, and the next morning they find their way to the garbage pail. Not so in the early days. The paper was the one and only news media. Its arrival was looked forward to eagerly and, be it a weekly, it was read daily until the arrival of the next issue. Often newspapers were carefully stored away for future reference. Lucky is today's history buff who comes across a set of very old newspapers! The church was the most respected institution and no newspaper failed to print information relative to its activities. Pastors' and church officials' names are found there. In writing church history never overlook the possibilities for information which may be found in old newspapers. Bound copies are found in the record rooms of all courthouses. Many have been microfilmed and can be found at the libraries. Leading dailies will furnish you with Xeroxed copies of news stories and also pictures of early churches if they have ever appeared on their pages.

Those who have a desire to know more of the history of an early Baptist church and those who are willing to give time and thought to the writing of history should begin at once. It is often the amateur who, with wholehearted enthusiasm and ignorance, will dare to use avenues of research that an expert might never employ. Some of the most important research in the field of church history has been done by amateurs. And, since our Baptist ancestors were too busy making history to record it, we are indeed fortunate that there are so many non-church sources which can be depended upon to furnish us with the "lost links."

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¹ This courthouse was built in 1844 and has been enlarged and renovated a number of times. It is still in excellent condition.

² Sion Blythe was the officiating clergyman when James Lewis was married to Harriet Benson on December 9, 1830.

³ There is today a Gaunt Quarry at Sylacauga.