

## **History of First Baptist Church – Fairmont, N. C.**

Formerly Ashpole Baptist – Formerly Pitman’s Church

“Remember the Days of Old, Consider the Years of Many Generations” – Deuteronomy 32:7

Today I will consider briefly the highlights of the history of the First Baptist Church of Fairmont, earlier known as Ashpole, and originally known as Pitman’s Church. The earlier history will receive most of our attention due to the time element. A complete history will be available in the near future. It will be in much more detail and contain all the known historical facts that have been found. It will contain statistical tables and delegates compiled from the various associations to which this church has belonged. It will contain all available pictures of the pastors of this church and will include much other interesting data bringing the history up through today’s historical event. We are in need of pictures of our first four pastors – Isham Pitman, John Pitman, Dwight Hayes and William Ayres. These were pastors prior to 1840. Oddly enough, we do not have a suitable picture of Dr. T. H. Plemmons, pastor in the early 1930s. If anyone has any information, suggestions, materials or criticisms please submit it to our church office so we may have the benefit of it prior to the publication.

I am sure you will want a copy of this history. You received a card when you entered the church. Please fill it out and pass it to the aisle, so the ushers may pick them up during the program.

Those of the radio audience desiring information about the published history, send your name and address to the First Baptist Church, South Main Street, Fairmont NC 28340. As soon as the histories are available, you will be notified.

Unfortunately, the records of this church prior to 1924 were accidentally destroyed. This has necessitated the search for historical facts in numerous places with the aid of many. I am grateful to all who aided in gathering this material. Last spring the cornerstone of this building, laid in 1912, was opened with anticipation; but the findings were disappointing. The documents had decayed and were in poor condition; however, a document was found rolled in a Charity and Children paper that proved to be copied minutes of some of the important events of the church conferences from the year 1828 to 1870. They were badly faded, but after much effort, using many techniques, portions of this document were deciphered. It revealed many interesting facts of historical value. Other valuable sources of factual information were the minutes of the Kehukee, the Neuse, the Cape Fear, and the Robeson Baptist Associations. Many other sources such as newspapers, history books, court house records, other church histories, as well as traditional history have contributed immensely. The large amount of historical data has almost outgrown this historian’s ability.

It has been said: “to prepare for the future without the benefit of the past would be pure blind instinct”. This is very true when you stop and consider the chaotic condition that would exist if we were suddenly thrust into a situation void of all past history. If such were the case we would not know that Armstrong and Aldrin were the first humans to walk upon the surface of the moon; we would know nothing about our country, our state, our county, our church – and of greatest concern is the fact that we would know nothing of the most meaningful event in all history – when almost two thousand years ago God sent into the world, his Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Our actions today are history tomorrow, influencing future generations. So it is that we are influenced by our forefathers of yesteryear. In evaluating and reviewing the progress of this church down through the years, it is apparent that our leaders, both men and women, were dedicated servants of God.

In the 1760s the settlement of this immediate area, then part of Bladen County, was initiated by Isham Pitman and wife, Absula. His wife was from the New Bern area. They apparently migrated here from Edgecomb County, the home of his parents, Thomas and Anne Pitman. Isham was born in 1728, but was between forty and fifty years of age when he settled in this area.

To better understand the difficulties these new settlers faced let your thoughts and visions regress about 200 years and visualize this area of forests, swamps and wild animals; necessitating trailblazing to reach their new home. Truly it was a wilderness. Visualize the one and two room huts as their homes and the crude handmade tools they used for building these homes, clearing land, and tilling the soil.

It is said that Isham Pitman and his wife were considered highly educated for their day, and that he possessed many abilities – being a farmer, a surveyor, a miller, a blacksmith and a man of God. Isham Pitman built a house about one block back of this building, probably very crude at first. Tradition tells us a field located near the swamp became known as the Old Field and the swamp as Old Field Swamp.

Neighbors were distant, with the nearest being in the Fair Bluff area. Soon after Isham Pitman's arrival, others began to migrate into the area and obtain land grants. Isham Pitman obtained his first land grant in 1779. It included this and surrounding area of Fairmont.

The nearest Baptist churches, and probably any church, in these early days were the Welch Neck Baptist located near Society Hill, SC; the Bladen County Baptist Church, listed by historians as extinct; and in my opinion is the same as the Bladen County Baptist Church organized in 1756 by Stephen Hollingsworth. I hope, by further research, to prove this fact.

It is probable that in these early days prior to the 1775 Revolutionary War that families would gather and hold religious services. When Isham Pitman left to serve in the Revolution his wife was left alone. She soon turned the livestock out and rode the only horse back to her family near New Bern – traveling alone at night and hiding during the day. After the war Isham Pitman returned to his home here with his wife and newly adopted daughter, Appy Monroe. He began working his farm, operating his mill, surveying land; while also leading his community in moral and spiritual growth.

After the Revolution new settlers arrived. In 1788 Robeson County was formed from Bladen County and in the 1790 Census there were only 5,326 inhabitants in the entire county. We find the establishment of three churches: Saddle Tree prior to 1788; Bear Swamp around 1785; and Antioch in 1789. Settlers of this area then would have had to travel fifteen or twenty miles for Sabbath worship.

Due to poor travel conditions, distance, and a desire for a closer place to worship, a meeting house was built by Isham Pitman. It was known as Pitman's Meeting House and was probably used for other meetings as well as worship on the Sabbath. It is not known when Pitman's Meeting House was constructed, but it was probably several years prior to the official constituting of Pitman's Church.

We learn from several reliable sources that forty members were dismissed from Saddle Tree Baptist Church to constitute Pitman's or Ashpole Church. The big question is what year and who were the forty members?

In your program is listed the tables of the United Baptist Association, formerly called the Kehukee; and the Neuse Baptist Association for the years 1789 to 1805. As you will note, there are some years missing. In 1789 the "Robinson" County Baptist Church, under the pastoral care of Elder Jacob Tarver, petitioned and was received into the Kehukee Baptist Association. Jacob Tarver and Isham Pitman were delegates. This same listing continued until 1796, when Pitman's Church was designated for the first time with William Hawthorne the delegate. In 1798, Saddle Tree Church was listed for the first time. The next two years are missing; and in 1801 "Ash-pole" is listed for the first time.

We learn from the Kehukee minutes that Isham Pitman was licensed to preach between October 1791 and October 1792. We also learn that sometimes a county church listed in the associational minutes could, and often would, represent more than one church. Thus Saddle Tree and Pitman's Church probably were listed as "Robinson" County Church.

Not that I have you thoroughly confused, we move about fifty years later to the 1844 Minutes of the Cape Fear Baptist Association, where many historical facts are given about this church. These minutes state that forty members were dismissed from Saddle Tree Baptist Church to constitute Ashpole Baptist Church between 1788 and 1793. They also state that this church was constituted prior to 1793. Thus, using the year Isham Pitman was licensed to preach; and knowing Jacob Tarver, the first pastor of Saddle Tree Church, aided in the organizing of Ashpole; and that said Jacob Tarver moved to Georgia soon after this date – as well as other facts – I conclude that this church, the First Baptist Church of Fairmont, formerly Ashpole and originally Pitman's Church, was officially constituted in the year 1792. In my opinion, worship services were held here several years prior to its official constitution.

Now to consider: **Who were the forty members dismissed from Saddle Tree Church to constitute this church?** This answer appears lost to oblivion. However, the Robeson County Register of Deeds Office helps in narrowing the list of possibilities: From 1788 to 1794 there were over 150 land deeds executed in this area. By this area, I mean located on or near the Swamps of Turkey Branch, Old Field, Ashpole, Indian, Aaron, Hog, Flowers and Coward. In these transactions we find the surnames of over fifty families, which include many family names on our church roll today. It is likely the original forty members came from some of these families.

### **Early Church Properties**

Now to move into another interesting area of our church history, the early church properties. As has been previously stated it is not known when the first Pitman's Meeting House was constructed. It is generally accepted that it was constructed of ash poles or logs from the ash trees so prevalent here in those days. Pitman's Church worshiped at Pitman's Meeting House. The name, Pitman's Church, appears to have changed to Ashpole Church in 1801; however, the house of worship continued to be known as Pitman's Meeting House as late as 1817, when Ashpole Church was host to the Cape Fear Baptist Association, held at Pitman's Meeting House.

Definite facts about the former church buildings are few, but it is generally accepted that this present sanctuary, constructed in 1912, is the fourth house of worship. The church building just prior to this sanctuary was a one-room building of weatherboard type construction. It was located across Church Street where Fairmont Memorial Park is today. The cemetery has not been used for nearly half century.

As far as can be determined, the first property owned by this church came by way of the Isham Pitman Will probated in 1825. He willed "one acre of ground with all its appurtenances forever". This was located near the old millrace about one hundred yards south of this new building. The second parcel of land was willed by Alfred Barnabas Stephens in 1843, quoting: "I give and bequeath to the Ashpole Church one more acre of ground more than Isham Pitman first gave to the church, including the baptizing ground to said church".

In 1845 a parcel of land adjacent to that bequeathed by A. B. Stephens was donated by Elias Pitman by deed to the Trustees of this Church – Allen Inman, Kinchen Atkinson, and Henry Bullock, Jr.

In 1876, Ashpole Institute was organized and constructed on church property by the members of Ashpole Church under the leadership of Elder A. R. Pitman. It was located on the site of the present Fairmont Hotel. Stock was sold and it was designated "The Cape Fear Baptist Associational High School and Ashpole Institute". It opened its doors for students in January 1877, with Elder Stinceon Ivey the first Professor. The church deeded the property to Ashpole Institute Trustees, but the property reverted back to Ashpole Church when the Institute closed its doors in the early 1900s.

In 1888, James P. and wife, Ann C. Pitman, deeded three acres of land to the Trustees of Ashpole Baptist Church – Stinceon Ivey, Giles P. Floyd, J. A. B. Stephens and S. H. Thompson. It was given to Ashpole Church "for and in consideration of the good will and love we have for the said church". I believe the present sanctuary is located on this property.

In 1889, one-tenth acre of land being a part of the original Ashpole Church lot" was exchanged for one-tenth acre with Dr. J. P. Brown.

In 1898, the church acquired a parcel of land from G. P. and Sarah G. Floyd describes as follows: "In Ashpole Village bounds the lands of Mrs. A. G. Ashley, Dr. A. G. Floyd, a street and L. G. Hursey". This deed has not been recorded in the Register of Deeds office.

In August of 1907, Ashpole Baptist Church purchased a house and lot on the southwest corner of Church and Trinity Streets and was used as the church parsonage until 1924, when the present parsonage was constructed.

In 1925, John I. Hill willed his estate, including a one hundred seventy-five acre farm, a house and lot in Fairmont and cash "to remain as a permanent endowment to the said Ashpole Baptist Church for all time to come or as long as said church will use my said estate as homes for the poor and homeless members of said church, or for foreign missions". To date the Hill Estate has contributed over \$50,000 toward Foreign and Local Missions, with over \$40,000 of this going to Foreign Missions.

In more recent years several other parcels of land have be acquired by the church. To conserve time, they will be postponed for the final history.

### **Early Leadership and Growth**

Our knowledge of the early church leadership is meager. However the minutes of the United, the Neuse, and the Cape Fear Associations give the following delegates from this church through 1825: Isham Pitman, Pastor; Daniel Loe, Samuel Rowland, John Price, Zaban Davis, Noah pitman, James pitman, Stephen Lee, Philip Speirs, William Ward, John Barnes, Joel Bullock, Jessie pitman, John Pitman, William

Thompson, Matthew Jones, and E. Jernigan. I feel sure some of these men were charter members of this church.

Very little is known of the early organizational structure of this church. It appears that regular worship was held monthly and probably more often during the summer. They would assemble, offer prayers of thanks, sing songs of grace, read from the Bible and preach. Often times services lasted all day. During the winter very little heat was available to the congregation and often heated foot and hand stones were used to keep warm. During my research I came across an article where a deacon was writing in his journal one Sunday after worship. He made the comment that even though the ink from which he was writing was freezing, he suffered no cold in church today. The fire must have been furnished by the pulpit.

Early membership grew slowly, building up to 86 members in 1798. Statistics for 1799 and 1800 are missing. In 1801 we find a drop in membership to 39. This is explained by the formation of Big Branch (now Orrum) Baptist Church in 1800. The membership climbed rapidly to 110 in 1806, then began to decline with sporadic gains and losses; recording 61 members in 1825. Isham Pitman continued as pastor until his death in 1825, at the ripe old age of 98 years. He is buried in an unmarked grave about one-half mile west of this church.

In 1823, Bennett Allen was ordained by this church. Nothing else is known about him. The thought just occurred: I haven't inquired of our today's speaker, Dr. Allen, of his ancestors.

In 1825, John Pitman was ordained to the gospel ministry by this church and was its second pastor, remaining until 1830.

In 1828 this church adopted a resolution to establish a fund for the support of the gospel and to defray the expenses of the church in the gospel ministry. This is probably the first attempt to set up a church budget.

The longest period this church has been destitute of a regular pastor was from 1830 to 1833. Even then they had the occasional services of Elders Napier, Ross and Monroe, who were successful in sparking a revival; with 123 converts being baptized into the membership of this church. Ninety-five were baptized in 1833 alone. During the same period, 59 members were dismissed by letter, probably making a large contribution to the original membership of Mt. Elim Church, organized in 1832.

In 1831 Ashpole Church became a charter member of the Robeson Baptist Union, a union of the churches within the Cape Fear Baptist Association, holding meetings on each fifth Sabbath. Dwight Hayes became pastor in 1834 and William Ayres in 1836. William Ayres was pastor here on three different occasions. We find that Allen Inman and Joseph Thompson were deacons in 1844. Church clerks were Haynes Lennon, 1839; A. B. Stephens, 1841; and Griffin Hill in 1843.

The church reached a membership of 200 for the first time in 1848; and 308 in 1868, of which 115 were negroes. In 1869, one hundred years ago, the negro members organized the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church of Fairmont. The membership dropped and did not reach 300 again until 1884. It was not until 1920 that the 400 mark was passed; and in 1928 the membership reached 500; 1936, 600; 1939, 700; 1941, 800; 1944, 900; 1946, 1,000; and 1966, 1,100.

I regret that I cannot give more on the pastoral leadership today, but I assure you of great detail and more interesting stories in the bibliographies of our pastors as they will appear in the final history.

There have been ten ministers ordained or licensed by this church;

Bennett Allen	1823
John Pitman	1825
Alfred B. Stephens	1839
Furney Prevatte	1841
Haynes Lennon	1842
Alfred R. Pitman	1861
A. McA. Pitman	1874
N. Rowland Pitmana	1876
Clifford Mitchell	1951

#### **Organizations of the Church**

Sunday School is one of the older, and of course main organizations of this church. It was active as early as 1834, as we find that Ashpole has a Sunday School in its infantile state. I will not state this is the earliest Sunday School in North Carolina or the Cape Fear Association, but I challenge anyone to come up with an earlier Sunday School than Ashpole.

Bible Societies, Temperance Societies, and prayer Meeting were early church organizations. Woman's Missionary Society was organized soon after 1888. Sunbeams, B.Y.P.U. (later to become Training Union), Girl's Auxiliary, and Royal Ambassadors were organized in the early 1900s. Brotherhood was organized in 1933 by Talmage Teague.

The Choir was organized prior to 1924 and its members were elected by the church.

The Church had library books available for many years, but it was not until 1956 that the Stinceon Ivey Memorial Library was established by the endowment gift of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Thompson. Today, there are over 3,000 volumes.

The church organizations will be dealt with in more detail in the final history, giving leaders, etc.

#### **Brief Comments on Financial Aspects**

Our first recorded contribution for a missionary cause was in 1801 and was designated for the Associational Fund. In the early years of our history regular financial support was given by the church to the Board of Domestic Missions which supported a minister who visited the weaker and pastorless churches of the Association.

In the Cape Fear Associational Minutes for 1833 Ashpole Baptist Church is described as being "interested in the benevolent institutions of the age, and is solicitous for their prosperity." The growing

interest of the church in Foreign Missions is reflected in its increasing financial support since its first recorded gift of \$5.75 in 1834.

The disbursements of our church exceeded \$1,000 for the first time in 1903-04 with 30% of the amount designated for benevolent and missionary caused. It is of more than passing interest to observe that in 1921-22, during the pastorate of J. R. Miller, 56% of our gifts was designated for missions. This strong emphasis upon World-Wide Missions has continued through the years with a total of \$33,430 to be given for missions in 1969.

As of now we have no record of those who served the church as treasurer prior to 1921. Those who have served since then are F. O. Floyd, Lela Floyd, Ray Griffin, Donnie Andrews, P. P. Smith and Paul Thompson for thirty-three years.

The total church budget for this year, the largest in the history of the church, is \$130,000.

### **Existing Buildings**

Now let us deal briefly with the existing buildings: In 1912 this sanctuary was constructed at a cost of approximately \$12,000. The cornerstone was laid on July 15, 1912, with an address by Rev. N. Rowland Pitman. D. P. Bridges was pastor. Its seating capacity was 350.

In 1924 a brick parsonage was built across the way on the corner of Cottage and South Main Streets. It was completely remodeled in 1968 at a cost of \$24,000.

In 1934 an addition on the back of this Sanctuary to better accommodate the Sunday School and educational program of the church was completed at a cost of \$6,000. Much of the labor and materials was furnished by the membership. This was accomplished under the superb leadership of our guest and former pastor, Dr. Clifton Allen. This addition was completed during the era of the great depression. Many of you here remember Dr. Allen standing here on that Sunday, designated as "debt paying Sunday," pleading for badly needed money to meet the church debt. He offered to sell personal items, lawn mower, etc so that the debt obligations could be met. This was beyond his call of duty, but it signifies the devotion he has for God and the success and welfare of this church. I understand that many members contributed sentimental and treasured items that were of monetary value. The debt-paying Sunday was a great success.

In 1942 the balcony was enlarged and the auditorium redecorated at a cost of a little more than \$3,000. The seating capacity was increased from 350 to 500 – or should we say 600, by today's count?

In 1954, the Chapel and Educational Building was completed at a cost of \$132,000 under the leadership of Rev. Carey P. Herring. The Chapel's seating capacity is 200. The church passed a resolution in 1955, officially naming the Carey P. Herring Building in memory of this faithful and devoted pastor who died in 1955.

The latest addition to our church is the Educational Building located just back of this building, and fronting on Church Street. The building is a three-story structure, containing a large Fellowship Hall, kitchen, and eight Sunday School Departments. It was completed in March, 1966 at a cost of \$264,900; and dedicated the "Thomas L. Rich, Jr. Educational Building" in honor of our present beloved Pastor. Today it is debt-free, with the notes to be burned in a ceremony as part of today's celebration.

On this day of commemoration and celebration, we should honor and pay tribute to the leaders and membership of yesteryear. We should thank God for his spiritual guidance and their undaunted devotion to this church.

In Memorial let us stand, with heads bowed, for a few moments of silence, thanking God for their contribution in making this church, the House of the Lord, what it is today. Let us rise: (silence)

**Our heavenly Father we pray that this church will continue to be loving and liberal, and remain in peace and harmony as it has under thou divine guidance throughout its existence. May yesterday's experiences enrich today's endeavors and assist tomorrow's new generations. We pray the products of our labors will be for the glory of thy Kingdom. Amen**

**J. Lloyd Pate, M. D.**

**October 5, 1969**