

## History of Round Island Baptist Church

Round Island Baptist began before Limestone County or even Alabama were established. When the small group of believers began meeting in or before 1816, this area was a part of the Mississippi Territory. According to local historian Dr. Thomas Stith Malone, the congregation obtained land from Richard Henderson, Sr. in the fall of 1816, to build its first church house on his plantation. It was probably located just north of the present Ripley Road, less than a mile from Round Island Creek, which apparently got its name from having had a round island at the place where it emptied into the Tennessee River. His purchase of this property was recorded in Huntsville in 1818. He and his descendants seem to have had a residence at this location until late in the 1800s, so this seems to be the most likely place for the church to have been built. Dr. Malone wrote in "Scraps" in 1867, that the church was built near where "Mr. Richard Henderson's house now stands."

The present Ripley Road now follows a very similar route to the old Fort Hampton-Moorseville Road, which had been cut by soldiers stationed at Fort Hampton. The church house, as well as Mr. Henderson's home, may have been on, or very near, the existing road, such as it was.

The 1816 Flint River Association minutes report Jeremiah Tucker at the annual meeting as messenger for Round Island Baptist Church of Christ in Elk County representing 16 members. This associational meeting was at Limestone Baptist Meeting House on Limestone Creek, and was in Madison County at the time. The church was constituted on June 17, 1817, according to church minutes as the Baptist Church of Christ at Round Island.

On March 1, 1817 Congress established the Territory of Alabama out of a part of the Mississippi Territory. On May 9, 1817, the Governor of the Mississippi Territory named this area Elk County.

In the beginning, Thomas Obanion shared the preaching duties with Jeremiah Tucker, who was ordained by Flint River Association and had come here from Tennessee. Services were held one Saturday and Sunday each month. On Saturdays there was singing, preaching and a business meeting, and then on Sunday, a baptismal service if needed, and preaching.

Some months there were services two weekends and some months there were no meetings at all, especially during the winter months. Many preachers ministered to two or more congregations. In fact, we find in later years that Rev. Tucker had four churches for several years.

It seems that Obanion alternated with Jeremiah Tucker in preaching at Round Island for the services during the first year. Preferring Tucker's services over Obanions, the congregation called Jeremiah Tucker as pastor on July 12, 1817. Obanion preached for other groups in the area, one of which met on the Agee Plantation nearer to Browns Ferry. He remained a member of Round Island until 1820, and was a messenger to the association representing Round Island in 1819. We know nothing further about Obanion's church affiliation after 1820.

Round Island was originally a member of the Flint River Association, established by the Flint River Baptist Church, the first Baptist church in Alabama. The Association, first established in 1814, over the years developed into an anti-missionary group. In 1838, several Baptist churches, including Round Island,

Poplar Creek, Elim, Flint River {later known as First Baptist, Huntsville), Wofford Section, and several churches in Tennessee left the Flint River Association.

These churches started the Liberty Association, which strongly stressed missions activity. The emphasis on missions can be strongly felt as one reads the minutes of Round Island over the ensuing years. Recorded are missions offerings and the frequent ministering to other churches and community needs. During one year, the church seems to have given three times more to missions than they paid the pastor.

In August of 1817 the church adopted the Rules of Decorum for the church body, which spelled out the prescribed behavior expected for church members. The church body felt that a members' behavior in the community was a certain reflection on the whole body of believers in the church. It was the duty of all the members to observe the lives of all the other members and report unseemly behavior to the church officials. The church officials then appointed a committee to investigate the charges and discuss them with the accused party. The committee must report to the church in business meeting and decide for or against further action. When the committee reported that the accusations were untrue, the matter was dropped. If the accusations were true, then the church officials decided whether to bear with the offending member and observe for other transgressions or improvement in behavior.

If the offense was serious enough, the church might decide to discontinue fellowship with the person. Drinking and dancing were the most common offenses. There are also records of expulsion for gossiping, horse race judging, adultery, playing cards after being warned, bootlegging, joining another church, failure to attend services, and disrupting services.

These strict prohibitions were probably a necessity of early pioneer life, for these were perilous times and this was rough, wild country. This was Indian territory and was only opened to settlers legally after 1818. In the very early years of the church these people were "squatters" and had to be very close-knit and dependent upon each other. They felt they must be able to completely depend upon their neighbors' honesty and trustworthiness. They measured this by their religious sincerity and compliance with rules made and agreed upon by the body of believers. As the years passed by and times became "easier," rules and regulations relaxed. A person's behavior was more prone to be his private jurisdiction, ruled by his own conscience and God's dealings with him personally, instead of being dealt with by the church body.

On February 6, 1818, Alabama Territory Legislature created Limestone County, Elk County had never really functioned in a legal sense. In 1819, Jeremiah Tucker was selected as a building commissioner for the newly created Limestone County. His job was to secure land and oversee the construction of county administrative buildings. We find his name for several years as a Justice of the Peace in the county. Tucker obviously made an impact on the area in various fields. He was also well thought of by the church officials in the association, for they asked him to preach one of the key messages at the associational meeting in 1817, the introductory sermons in 1822 and 1832, and elected him moderator in 1827 and 1829.

In May of 1818, the church appointed a committee to secure a place to build a meeting house. Nothing more is mentioned in the minutes about a church building until January, 1820, when the church voted to move the meeting house. In February, 1822, they appointed a committee to secure a lot on which to build a church. In April, the committee reported that they had secured the title to the property selected

for a building site. John Favour, Sr. donated the land where Browns Ferry Road crosses Broyles Creek to the church. The creek is named for David Broyles, who settled nearby in 1808. The church has been in this same location since that time.

In June, 1820, the church appointed a committee to go to Athens and see if the brethren there desired to constitute a separate church, This seems to have been their desire, for in August, 1820, Elim Baptist was established as a mission from Round Island and several of the members moved their membership to the new church, Jeremiah Tucker was chosen as pastor, preaching in Athens on the 4th Sabbath and at Round Island on the 2nd Sabbath, In 1827, Elim changed its name to Athens Baptist, later to be changed again to First Baptist, Athens, In August, 1822, six of the original twelve members of Round Island asked for and were granted letters of dismission, In October of that same year, these six members, along with several others who had joined Round Island later, formed Poplar Creek Baptist Church of Christ, Jeremiah Tucker served as pastor. Pastor Tucker was a busy man--he had pastorates at Round Island, Elim, and Poplar Creek, and at the same time served as a Justice of the Peace and the County Building Commissioner, The Poplar Creek church was mother to another church itself in 1827, when almost the same crowd of believers left and formed Independent Poplar Creek Baptist Church of Christ, They chose John Favour, Jr. as their pastor. Reverend Favour had been ordained at Elim on October 21, 1822, by Jeremiah Tucker, William Byrd, William Eddins and Joseph Babb.

There had been problems at Round Island with the Favour family for about two years. According to charges specified in the Round Island church minutes, the father and son had disrupted the services and business meetings and accused the pastor of teaching the "abominable doctrines of the Church at Rome." There had been formal charges made against them, and Round Island demanded judgement and discipline against the Favours by the Poplar Creek church. The case was dropped and a tentative peace made when their home church refused to take action.

In 1826, Flint River Association appointed a committee to investigate this matter and attempt to mediate a peace between the Round Island and Poplar Creek churches. The minutes for 1827 show that the committee reported that the Favour men were adamant and unrepentant so the association broke fellowship with the two. All this from the family who had donated the land upon which the church was built! They seem to have disagreed with the manner in which the church dealt with individuals who were not living up to the standards set by the Rules of Decorum. In 1834, both men came back to Round Island and asked to be forgiven for their past differences and the church was glad to receive them back and restore fellowship.

On May 7, 1825, the church appointed a committee to "superintend the building of a shed to be used as a meeting place for the colored people." Many slaves and free colored people were members of the church from its inception and one or more colored ministers were ordained over the years. They left possibly to begin other congregations of which we have lost track.

In August, 1827, Round Island resolved to become a corporate body. There had been an act passed by the General Assembly of the State of Alabama on December 7, 1817, that allowed churches to incorporate. Poplar Creek had incorporated October 5, 1822, and Independent Poplar Creek had done so September 16, 1826. In the August 8, 1829, Round Island church minutes, there is a note that brethren west of Elk River requested help in constituting a church there, and our church instructed the elders to go. In August, 1829, Holbert Springs Primitive Baptist Church was constituted and they appointed George Tucker as moderator. They requested him to draw up Rules of Decorum to bring

before the next meeting. The May, 1831, minutes state that Jeremiah Tucker and George Tucker made up a presbytery to ordain John Holbert as deacon there at Holbert Springs. In 1830, Jeremiah Tucker resigned and George Tucker, who we believe was his son, accepted the call as pastor. A year later, Jeremiah Tucker returned as pastor. It seems that Jeremiah suffered a protracted period of bad health and resigned from Athens, Round Island and Poplar Creek. He traveled for several months for leisure and recuperation. He soon resumed his pastoral duties and more. The associational minutes in 1835 and 1838 list him as pastor of Round Island, Poplar Creek, Athens and also Limestone Church in Madison county. He remained in Athens until 1838, when he apparently left for Mississippi.

In March, 1846, Round Island elected Richard Henderson, Jr. as treasurer. The Henderson family was intimately associated with the church for many years. There were many Hendersons on the membership rolls (at least 36 Hendersons and their related families). The church minutes mention them often as beneficial members; but sometimes as members who had to be disciplined for horse race judging, drinking, etc. The family seems to have been very "colorful and active."

In 1847, William Crenshaw, ordained a deacon at Round Island in 1839, purchased property along with others for Berea Baptist, also known as Big Creek Baptist, on Elk River Mills Road. There is still a cemetery at that location, where the church purchased the property, but the church no longer exists. We shared a pastor with Mt. Zion and Berea in 1874, but Berea is not mentioned in the Liberty Association minutes in 1890, nor the Limestone Baptist Association minutes in 1916. No one seems to know exactly when Berea ceased to meet.

In 1850, Claiborn Wright, ordained by Round Island as a deacon in 1838 and a minister in 1843, helped start the Piney Grove Baptist Church. Piney Grove has shared pastors with Round Island several times over the years, when churches had services only one or two Sundays per month. According to their church minutes, Piney Grove has been instrumental in starting other churches in the area over the years.

During the years leading up to the Civil War, Round Island continued to grow steadily. The church produced other churches around her, as her members moved and carried on the Good News she had instilled into their hearts and minds. Elder Jesse Seal served as pastor 17 of the 21 years from 1838 to 1859, and Bro. Lucas and Bro. Hale filled in the other years. Brother George w. Pucket was elected pastor in February, 1859, and the last minutes before the War are dated September 10, 1860. At the associational meeting in 1860, Round Island reported they had no pastor. Tandy R. Farrar was appointed to the committee for Sabbath Schools in 1861.

The next information of any sort about the condition of the churches in the area during the war appears in the 1865 Liberty Association minutes. First Baptist, Athens, did not have a building or a pastor, but still had services and sometimes preaching by a visiting minister. Poplar Creek was thankful for a building and relatively regular services, but no mention of a pastor. Rogersville had their building burned down and no pastor. Brother Pucket, the last elected pastor at Round Island before the war, was helping around the area, and had agreed to supply Concord church for the coming year. This Concord Baptist was probably in Tennessee. First Baptist, Huntsville, was without a building or a pastor, but reported sporadic services.

There is no mention of Round Island in this associational report. Church minutes do specify several families that went to Poplar Creek and Athens First during the war. Other area churches probably had Round Island members as visitors during this time. There is a possibility that the Sabbath School was kept alive at Round Island since Tandy Farrar had been on the Sabbath School committee, It was probably dear to his heart and maybe he saw this as an opportunity to keep his church alive.

In 1868, Poplar Creek members Richard Henderson, Jr. and Perrin Farrar, and Berea members James and Mary Stewart met with Elder Thomas B. Espy and formed a church near Round Island. They called Elder Espy as pastor, and named the church Pisgah. Pisgah petitioned Liberty Association for admittance. Elder Espy went as messenger for 11 members. They kept this name less than a year and then merged with the scattered members of the Round Island congregation, and renamed themselves Round Island church.

The church services for Pisgah were at Nebo Presbyterian church a few times and at the Stewart's home other times, The church minutes mention seemingly extensive repairs needed to the church house before it could be used again, This may have been war damage, since there were many claims for war damage in this area, and there is a rumor of a cemetery across the road from Round Island that contains Union and Confederate graves.

This period immediately after the Civil War produced blurred denominational lines. People were proud to hear preaching of any kind and be able to worship God and fellowship with Christians of any denomination. This was a time when many churches appeared with names that included "Union," and many remaining church buildings held union services of several denominations or had different denominational services on different Sundays. First Baptist, Athens, alternated use of a building with the Presbyterians, and the new Pisgah/Round Island congregation held services in the Nebo Presbyterian building several times. The Nebo pastor even preached at Round Island several times.

Round Island called Elder Eugene C. Gordon as pastor on November 27, 1870, He was a war hero, and at age 19, was the youngest major in the Confederate Army. He also pastored First, Athens, and possibly Poplar Creek. He tendered his resignation on July 2, 1871, on account of his failing health. His health must have improved, for he lived an active life for fifty more years. He was very influential in the area, and only left after a yellow fever epidemic broke out, the epidemic took many lives, and the bubble seemed to burst for Athens growth, Gordon left the area and headed west. There seems to have been some Sunday School activity during his pastorate, for the 1871 minutes state that \$4.10 was spent for Sunday School books.

After Elder Gordon's resignation, the church went without a pastor for a time, with several ministers filling the pulpit. Elder Joseph Shackelford, who was probably Primitive Baptist, and Elder R.W. Officer, missionary from Liberty Association, preached. Elder B.F. Pennington was called in April, 1872, and preached until August of that year, when the church asked for and received his resignation. He was probably also a Primitive Baptist. He continued to pastor in the area for several years, including Piney Grove in 1877.

In 1874, the Liberty Association's annual meeting was at Round Island, with a lot of good preaching and fellowship. Elder Carmichael, who has been a stalwart in the area during the war, preached the introductory sermon. Elder J.R. Graves, of Memphis, Tennessee, and editor of the Tennessee Baptist, preached several times and was well received. Elder Graves was a proponent of Landmarkism. This

group taught that the Baptist church was the only true church, and fellowship with other churches was an abomination. He printed many articles in his paper and elsewhere condemning Methodists and other non-Baptist churches. This doctrine fell into disuse, or at least disfavor, after a few years and Landmarkism is very limited in its adherents now. The period of blurred denominational lines had lasted only a few years, with many divisive doctrines such as Landmarkism causing stagnant, intermittent growth within many denominations. Because of the woes of the Reconstruction period and these doctrinal fights within and between churches, many southern churches became isolationist oriented and not at all receptive to new members. Even among Christians, suspicion reigned supreme!

Over the next few years, pastors seemed to stay at Round island for only about a year. Times were hard, and the people had little money to support their families or their church. Many pastors served several churches at the same time to support themselves. In 1879, Bro. Jackson Gunn came and stayed for over three years. During his pastorate, the church started a building fund. The church voted to sell the old building, which may have dated back to 1822 or 1825. The church minutes state that a new building was built in 1882. Brother Gunn had already gone, but he seems to have instilled a desire for growth in the church body. In 1882, the minutes state that a Sabbath School was established. This was apparently a re-establishment of the one started in or before 1871.

In 1883, James s. Stockton came as pastor and stayed until 1888. It was a stormy pastorate, as he resigned and then decided to stay. There seems to have been an undue number of disciplinary actions and dismissions granted during his tenure. There are no reasons given for his resignation, but it may have been just a general lack of interest. The membership seems to have steadily declined during this time, continuing even after the turn of the century.

By the turn of the century, there were probably fifteen Baptist churches in the county, including primitive Baptists. Most of the churches were very small, and some had stopped having regular services. First, Athens, had stopped around 1882 and did not start back until about 1902. The Independent Poplar Creek Church had disappeared, as had Bethel on Limestone Creek, Harmony, Cottonport, Mt. Zion, and some short-lived churches like Beulah, Pleasant Valley, New Shiloh, and Mt. Carmel. Some of these may have been splits that healed, or new churches which later changed names or combined to reform under a new name.

After 1900, there seems to have been a revival of interest in church in the Limestone County area. Between 1900 and 1922, there were at least nine new Baptist congregations started in the county. Some were missions of First, Athens, and others were missions of other existing churches.

Round Island began to grow. In 1904, seventeen additions were added at a revival at Round Island. In 1912, there were 12 conversions at one meeting, and 75 in 1913. In 1914 and 1915, there were 30 and 40, respectively, and then in 1921, 37 new members joined in the annual protracted meeting. The ladies of the church began to take a more visible role also, for in 1906, the women put a new floor in the church house and Effie Mae Reed became the first woman Church Treasurer. In 1915 1 Women's Missionary Union officers were elected in August.

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In 1915, Round Island was influential in forming the Limestone Baptist Association, with the first annual meeting held here in 1916. In June 1917, the church had its centennial celebration, with several speakers present and dinner on the ground served to a large rejoicing crowd. In 1921, the Baptist Sunday School Association of Limestone County was established at the Homecoming services at Round Island. A Layman's Association for the county was started the same day. In 1922, the Baptist Young People's Union (BYPU) was organized.

On February 29, 1928, the church dedicated a new building. The building was totally paid for by the time it was completed. Members' pledges helped buy pews and paint for the building. In September of that same year, the membership totaled 225. The church continued its growth, and in 1937 added new Sunday School rooms and started having Vacation Bible School for the children in the area. The wonder of electricity was added to the facilities in 1938. The year 1950 saw the addition of running water-maybe both hot and cold!

In 1947, Wednesday night services were instituted. In 1951, the church started using electricity to provide heat for the building. A library was then installed so possibly the church family could read by those wonderful lights and in the warmth of the heat. Electricity had made it possible for people to hear the gospel at home on their radio, so the church started a radio program. On June 30, 1957, the first worship service in the new auditorium were held, and remodeling began on the old building to turn it into educational space.

There has been steady growth at Round Island, which continues even today. In 1974, the church added a new educational building that included ten classrooms, office space, and a fellowship hall. In 1988, the church added a new 8,800 square foot educational building. The building included twelve additional classrooms, a full kitchen, and a large fellowship hall. Membership in 1953 numbered 250. This had increased to 375 in 1983, and stands at 620 in June, 1992.

God has and continues to bless His work at Round Island Baptist Church. In 1991, the church had one of its greatest years in its 200-year history. The average Sunday School attendance moved from 165 to 200. The church baptized 84 during that year. The church also added a paved parking lot in 1991.

The church moved to two worship services on Sunday morning and needed more Sunday School classroom space for further growth. The church was buzzing with excitement and expectation of great things to come.

### **“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden” Matt. 5:14**

Round Island Baptist Church has been a shining example of a mission minded church. The light that shines forth from Round Island is a source of hope, encouragement, spiritual nourishment, and evangelism for the surrounding community. But that light also shines around the world, touching lives and hearts through missions and church plants that reach from our own back yard to the mountains of Honduras and the plains of India and Africa.

The first 175 years of our history has been well documented. A handful of dedicated believers meeting, initially, in a borrowed place built the first church house in 1816. Two years later they moved to the current location. A new church house was built and the mission began. The spread of the Gospel has

ever been at the heart of that mission; first, planting churches throughout this county and state, and then reaching to other states and across the waters. We served as a host to the Limestone Baptist Association both at their inception in 1915 and at their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 2015. We've survived a Civil War, the Great Depression, and a Polio outbreak. Ever holding to our faith in God; our roots dug deeper and our branches spread wider.

The last 25 years have certainly been no less remarkable. Our mission has remained focused on reaching souls for Christ through missions. Just as during the first 175 years, the last 25 have seen some difficult times and dark days too. Wars (and rumors of wars), terror attacks, mass shootings, bombings, hurricanes, tornados and floods, oil spills and outbreaks of disease, scandals and political upheaval have all shown us that we live in a fallen world. But God remains on His throne. Many of these tragedies were followed by some glorious victories and awesome periods of revival, hope, healing and redemption. Round Island has continued to grow and thrive through it all.

In 2001, we built our new Sanctuary and Office Complex. In that same year, we installed and dedicated the Prayer Garden. During the time, we were renovating the Children's Wing (2003-2004) Pastor Mike Green and his family arrived and immediately began serving by grabbing a paint brush! In 2005, growth became such that we expanded the parking lot in the back. In 2007, we celebrated our 190<sup>th</sup> anniversary in conjunction with a huge 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration. That same summer we built a new playground for our growing Children's Ministry. In 2010, it was decided that the Old Sanctuary should be renovated to provide a new Choir Room and a Youth Worship Center. It was also decided that the area to the rear of the Education Building / Fellowship Hall should be dedicated for the construction of a new Ministry Activity Center (MAC). Ground was broken on these projects in August 2010 and work was completed on the MAC in April 2011. Sadly, we dedicated our MAC by opening it to the community and providing shelter, clothing and meals following the tornado of April 27, 2011. The storm devastated our community and our beloved Jan McElyea was taken to be with her Lord. It has since been used to host dozens of wedding receptions, showers, church and Sunday school socials, holiday events, family reunions and dinners and now serves as home for weekly meals and our Worship for Life Children's Ministry. In the fall of that same year, we renovated old Fellowship Hall to provide additional classroom space.

The last 25 years has been an amazing time in our church's history. We've witnessed birth and death; plantings and reaping; tearing down and building; weeping and laughing; mourning and dancing; casting away and gathering together; embracing and refraining from embracing; gain and loss; keeping and throwing away; tearing and sewing; silence and speaking; love and hate; war and peace. All these things have their place in this fallen world. Round Island Baptist Church has maintained its place as a light on a hill; shining out to this community and to the world. We've remained on mission: a mission for Jesus. Happy 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary Round Island: The Church where Love Lives with God as its Heart, Christ as its mission and the Spirit as its life.

## **Last 25 Years Summary**

### *Pastors*

Bro. Bill Bailey left Round Island in 1997 after 12 years as pastor. Bro. Paul Clutts served as interim pastor until 1998. Bro. Randy Davis became pastor in 1998 and served until 2003 then Bro. Charles Bagwell served as interim until 2004. In 2004, after the first ever unanimous vote, Bro. Mike Green became pastor and still serves today.

### *Staff*

RIBC has seen a wide range of ministry staff come and go throughout the last 25 years.

We've had six Youth Pastors: Barry Fitts, Michael Chapman, Davey Johnson, Bill Wester, Andy John King, and Shane Reyer

Four Ministers of Education: Larry Remington, 1991-1997; David Brown, 1997-2000; Bill Wester, 2001-2006; Daryl Brooks, 2006-Present

Five Choir Directors: John Tucker, Rick Melton, Jerry Cobb, John Tucker and Butch McMeans