

CROATAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

NEW BERN, NORTH CAROLINA

A Congregation of Coastal Carolina Presbytery

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Following the War Between the States, the South went through a long period of recovery. During the Reconstruction, times were hard and money was scarce. Many towns and cities had much to do to recover. The new social setting after slavery ended meant uncertain changes in the ways people made their livings. This included farming as well as business and industry. By the late 1880's, however, a measure of stability had arrived and a measure of growth and financial stability was maintained. During this time, the little communities along the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad that stretched from Goldsboro to Morehead City, saw an increase in population made up mostly of farming families. The Croatan community was one such neighborhood. The Croatan community remained largely a farming community until the advent of World War II. Nearby New Bern provided it both a market and a commercial center for its needs. At the beginning of the War the Cherry Point Marine Air Station was built and the base offered employment to many in the area, a fact that is true to this day. Indeed, the Cherry Point base has enabled

the Croatan area to grow in population through the years with housing developments springing up among the farms. Prior to the war another significant event took place that has impacted the area as well - the growth of the lumber business based on the logging of extensive areas in Craven County in the early 1900's and then the purchase of much land by the US Forest Service which resulted in the creation of Croatan National Forest that bumps right up to the property of Croatan Presbyterian Church. Logging and forestry products have been derived from the forest over the years, contributing to the economy of the area and providing jobs as well. One should not overlook the role that the forest has played in providing game for the large interest in hunting that has been and is still very much alive in the area.

In the early 1880's the people of the Riverdale and Croatan communities recognized the need of a church in the area to serve the growing population. It was decided that the three predominant denominations found in much of eastern North Carolina would be represented in the two communities. Thus came the formation of Riverdale United Methodist Church, Croatan Original Free Will Baptist Church, and Croatan Presbyterian Church. Prior to the building of the sanctuary of Croatan Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterians together with their Free Will Baptist and Methodist neighbors used a small building nearby on County

Line Road as a meeting house. The Croatan Presbyterian sanctuary was built in 1889.

The official organization of Croatan Presbyterian Church took place in June, 1882, under the authority of Wilmington Presbytery of the former Presbyterian Church in the United States (renamed from the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America). Of course, as the decades advanced Croatan Presbyterian Church is now a member of Coastal Carolina Presbytery in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Little is known about the early years of the congregation. The minutes of the Session are very sketchy. What is known will be presented in this paper.

There were eight founding members of Croatan Presbyterian Church:

Henry Clay Wood (1857 - 1947) - *Great-Grandfather* of Judy Hughes Jedry.

Delilah Johnnie Williams Wood (1859-1917)

Robert E. L. ("Lyge") Tolson (1865-1930) - unmarried

Vine Allen Tolson (1851-1913), married to Nancy Eborn Tolson

Robert ("Bob") Tolson - unmarried

Hortense Tolson White Lee - sister to Tolson men, mother of Emma Hughes Swindell and grandmother to Mary Hughes.

Benjamin E. Williams (1850-1915)

Bryant Williams

Other very early members included:

A. L. Heath (1843 - 1894)

His wives: Fenie B. Heath (1842-1883)

Alice W. Heath (1861 - 1887)

Keziah (f.) H. Williams (1833 - 1905)

For many years after its founding, Croatan Presbyterian Church was yoked with the Pollocksville Presbyterian Church across the Croatan National Forest in Pollocksville. Since the Pollocksville Presbyterian Church paid the larger share of the salary of the minister, that congregation received the larger amount of the minister's time. The Croatan congregation remained small and often struggling to stay alive. What is known about the ministers who have served Croatan church is as follows:

L.H. Isler 1884 - 1910 - the church building constructed (1889).

J. R. Phipps 1918 - 1946 - the church had no minister from 1911 to 1918.

G. F. Miller 1946 - 1948

Rev. Berry 1948 (supply pastor for a few months)

W. F. F. Little 1950 - 1960

S. Curtis Patterson 1961 - 1968

Charles Elliott 1971 - 1974

In 1975, Croatan Presbyterian Church was no longer yoked to Pollocksville Presbyterian Church and with a limited membership and little money had to find a way to have a minister work with them. A decision was made by the Session and with the permission of Wilmington Presbytery to begin using ministerial students on a one year basis who would be under supervision as they learned the craft of pastoring a church. Thus from 1975 to 1980, such student pastors were used.

Donald Hardman (1975 - 1976) - Student

Bruce Ford (1976 - 1977) - Student

Jack Wilkers (1977 - 1978) - Student

Edward Thompson (1978 - 1979) - Student

John Stringer (1979 - 1980) - Student

In the Fall of 1980, the congregation had enough funds to call a full time pastor for a time, hoping that with a full time pastor the church could grow and develop to such a place that it could maintain a full time pastor permanently.

Curtis Wright (1980 - 83)

Unfortunately, the growth during this time was not sufficient to maintain a full time pastor and Mr. Wright resigned in 1983. The only possibility remaining was to use supply pastors (either temporary supply (occasional) or stated supply (part time and appointed annually). From 1983 to the present, the church has relied primarily on Stated Supply pastors. The period between 1983 and 1987 before Gary Howell became the Stated Supply pastor, however, was a very difficult time for the congregation. The membership and participation slid because of the difficulty of finding someone to conduct services each Sunday. The problem was worsened because there were so few ordained ministers who would come to preach as well as to administer the sacraments. The Session had to implore mightily to the presbytery for help in this matter. There were some Sundays when church members had to carry on worship in an impromptu manner. During this difficult time, the church was rescued frequently by the Rev. J. Murphy Smith who had retired from the First Presbyterian Church of New Bern. Murphy and his wife, Margaret (who played the piano), gave inestimable service to the church. Finally, in March of 1987, the services of an ordained minister were obtained on

a more permanent basis when The Rev. Gary Howell became the Stated Supply pastor.

Gary E. Howell March, 1987 to Dec., 1995

David A. Shirk April, 1996 - January, 2000 (US Navy Chaplain) (David still

preaches occasionally in the absence of the minister. His wife, Debbie, is a

member of the church.)

J.C. Harvell June, 2000 - July, 2003
(Commissioned Lay Preacher)

Lewis Sanderford Nov., 2000 - July, 2005 (up to July, 2003, shared preaching

responsibility with Mr. Harvell.

Mr. Sanderford was retired.

Richard C. Boyd Assisted Mr. Sanderford
January, 2003 to July, 2005.

Stated Supply, August, 2005 to present. Dr. Boyd is a retired

Minister.

The present membership of Croatan Presbyterian Church is 115. During the years 1985 - 2005, membership

remained in the 40 - 50 range. Until recently, membership has been largely made up of members of the supporting families who have lived in the Croatan area through the years.

Early on in the history of Croatan Presbyterian Church there were five families who contributed much to its life and many descendants, some of whom are still active within the church.

The Tolson family: three Tolsons were charter members of the church. Allen Tolson had two daughters and a son (Betty, Leona, and Bill). At one time there was a two-room school house on the lot immediately north of the church building. The church owns the lot now and during the 70's and 80's had a mobile home on it as manse for its student ministers. But prior to the 70's, there was an active school up through the 7th grade. Some of its former students are still members of the church. Leona and her sister, Betty, were teachers in the school. Miss Leona is said to have lived for her church and for the school. Upon her retirement from the school system, Craven County Schools named the little two-room school "The Leona Tolson School." A large picture of Leona is displayed in the Adult Classroom to the rear of the sanctuary. Betty and Leona never married and the Tolson family died out as members of the church.

The Boyd family (no relation to present pastor): two brothers and four sisters, the children of William Zachariah Boyd, joined the church in the 1940's - Richard ("Dick") and William Zachariah ("Zeke"), Hattie Bell, Johnie, Elizabeth and Gladys. Their many descendants are spread all over, but one, Gladys Wood Boyd Lewis (daughter of William Zachariah Boyd) who is also the granddaughter of charter member Henry Clay Wood, is still an active member. Zeke Boyd married Dora Connor who was the sister of Ernest, Amos, and Thomas Connor, all of whom joined Croatan Presbyterian Church. Dick Boyd married Helen Mercer and they raised their children in the church. Helen and her grandson, Richie Boyd, continue as active members of the church.

The Lee family: Hortense Tolson White Lee was a charter member. In recent times, Emma Hughes (deceased) was the only descendant remaining in the church. This family has died out with regard to the church.

The Williams family: Delilah Johnie Williams Wood and two other Williams who were not kin to her, Bill and Bryant, were charter members of the church. She married Henry Clay Wood. There are no descendants of Bill or Bryant Williams in the church. But descendants of Delilah Williams Wood remain active. Mary Wood, who was the sister of founding member, Henry Clay Wood, married Daniel Williams (another Williams family). His son, Philip, married Bettie Hardison and they became the parents of Benny and

Chris Williams who are active members of the church at this time. Bettie Hardison Williams was most active in the church, playing the piano for worship for many years.

The Wood Family: The descendants of Henry Clay Wood and Delilah Johnie Williams Wood have all married into other families so that no members survive by that surname. Gladys Wood Boyd Lewis is the granddaughter of this couple, and Benny and Chris Williams are their great, grandnephews.

Over the years, some other families moved into the area and their families are still represented in the membership of Croatan Presbyterian Church.

The Eborn/Ebron family has been a part of the community as well as both Croatan Presbyterian Church and Croatan Free Will Baptist Church. Tom and Linda Eborn and their son, Dale and his wife, Regina Ray Eborn, together with their children Alyson and D.J. Eborn still represent this family in the community and the church. This family is the last full time farming family in the church. Regina Ray Eborn's parents, Roy and Kathi Ray are long time members of the church.

Pete and Rennie Killingsworth came into the church in the 1960's and have been a vital part of the life of the church since. Pete's role as Elder has been pivotal in maintaining this church's life over the years. As an Elder and Clerk of the Session, he carried out many duties that

insured the continued life of the congregation. He was active in youth ministry, taught the adult Sunday School class for fifteen years and has continued to sing in the church choir since 1961.

The Potter family came into the Croatan community through Sadie Shute who was a Presbyterian and married Charles Potter. Charles Potter, a County Commissioner, was a strong Elder who helped keep the church running during the 60's, 70's and 80's. He and Sadie had five children, Bob (married to Sylvia who is still an active Elder in the church), Barbara (an Elder in Elkin, NC), Bill, Donna, and Mary Nell (who married one of the student pastors, John Stringer). Bill's son, Metts, and daughter, Sarah Eason, are members of the church.

The Connor family came into Croatan Presbyterian Church through Charlie and Willie Hardison whose daughter, Bessie, married Amos Connor. Amos and Bessie had one daughter and three sons, all of whom joined Croatan Presbyterian Church. They were: Dora, who married William Zachery ("Zeke") Boyd. Of her three brothers, Ernest, Amos, and Thomas. Amos married Sandra Huff and they have been active in the church up to Amos' recent death. Sandra is an Elder and continues her life in Croatan Presbyterian Church.

The Hardison family came into Croatan Presbyterian Church after they moved to the Croatan community from

Pamlico County in 1930's. Charlie Hardison and his wife, Willie were a part of the church, but that line has died out in the church. Cicero Hardison who was married to Alice farmed property on Otter Creek off of Flanners Beach Road. They raised their ten children on the farm. All were active in the church and two are still living, Dorothy Hardison Seals and Curtis Hardison. Ruthie Seals Andersen is the daughter of Dorothy Hardison Seals and with her husband, Bob, and son, Robert are active members of the church. Dorothy Seals' daughter, Helen, now deceased, was married to Greg Golden who is an active Elder in the church. Greg and Helen Seals Golden have two daughters who themselves are active in the church: Brandee Ridgway and Roxanne Parrish. Each of these daughters have children who are part of the church as well. Benny and Chris Williams who are active in the church are the sons of Bettie Hardison Williams, also one of the ten children of Cicero and Alice Hardison. The eight children of Cicero's son, Harvey and wife, Alma, still live in the area and their sons, Mike, Tom, and Jerry are active members of the church. Mike's sons, Robbie, Jay, Jamie, Josh, and Otter are active as well. There's even another generation in the children of Robbie and Jay.

At present, the church has been drawing members from the area primarily. Carolina Pines, Neuse Harbor, Croatan Woods, and other subdivisions in the area have provided new members. While the growth has not yet grown

to support a full time minister, the congregation has grown into a multi-generational church, active in teaching, youth ministry, worship, pastoral care, outreach into the community, support for the needy, and serves as a focal point for the Croatan community.

When the sanctuary was built in 1889, it was built as a typical rural meeting house, a rectangular wooden building with two doors in the front. At the time there was no back room, no portico or porch, and no steeple. It had a wood-burning stove and wooden pews. The room behind the sanctuary was built in 1948-49 as was the portico and steeple. A carpenter, Fleet Williams, began the addition and Charlie Potter and Hardy Swindell finished it. The Fellowship Hall and Sunday School rooms were built in 1965-66. This addition was financed with church suppers, building fund contributions and church members who took turns making monthly payments. Cicero Hardison, Jr. (married to Sallie Merrill Hardison Tatarinowicz, recently deceased), spearheaded this building, giving freely of his time to oversee the details. He died of a heart attack in 1967 at the age of 43. Norman Mills built a wooden replica of the church in the 1960's when Curtis Patterson was pastor, and contributions were given monthly and placed in the replica. Through the years of work on the building, the Women of the church would put on church suppers to raise money, and people would come from long distances to "eat all you want" and to give a donation to the church. There was never a

charge per plate, only whatever one wanted to give. Money was raised to plaster the sanctuary, purchase new pews and pulpit furniture, and build the back porch and handicapped access. At present (2015) a new handicapped bathroom is being built.

The plot of land upon which the church sanctuary sits was deeded to the church by Thomas Haywood, a non-member. Interestingly, he gave the land as he sought the congregation's prayers for his mother who had been very ill. After giving it, his mother died. It is said that he never came to the church again. The lot given the church by Mr. Haywood stretched from the highway to just outside the back door of the church. The lots behind the church belonged to the U.S. Forest Service. Next door was the school property which stretched from the highway to the railroad tracks. In 1973, the church bought the school property. Then, under the leadership of Charlie Potter and Pete Killingsworth, traded the Forest Service the back half of the old school property for the property between the church building and the ditch - allowing for the basketball court and azalea garden behind the church. Upon purchase of the school property, the old school was torn down and replaced for a time with a mobile home which was used as a manse for the student ministers. It has since been removed and the site is used for parking and recreation..

The church has been blessed with a can-do spirit, faithful membership and good neighbors over the years. For

more than a century the only paid staff was the minister. All other duties and services were performed on a volunteer basis. This can-do spirit began with the gift of land, the erection of a building and hand crafted pine wood pews. These unique pews were purchased by church members as mementoes when new pews were installed. The can-do spirit has been tested by times of war, economic depression, destructive weather, highway encroachment, limited space and inadequate facilities. Through past generations the old gave way to the new and the church lives on. Many of the names, faces and deeds of the willing have faded with time, but their witness to Christ continues to bear fruit. They are remembered with thanksgiving for their faithfulness in serving as deacons, elders, trustees, secretaries, maintenance keepers, janitors, music directors, piano players, choir members, Sunday School teachers and those who served on various church committees. Their efforts have enabled the church to continue in its ministry for 133 years. Thanks be to God!

Today, the church operates with a budget of approximately \$70,000 dollars. That's a far cry from what it was in the 1890's. Session minutes show that during the 1890's they paid the supply pastor whatever they collected on a Sunday, rarely more than \$14.00. That would mean an annual budget of less than \$1,000.

Through the years, the church has given time and money for the sake of others. This includes the

Presbyterian Women's Blanket drive each year. Contributions for various church missions have been given. Food and clothing has been given to help the needy, particularly through Religious Community Services of late.

While most of the tasks necessary for the life of a congregation have been carried out by volunteers through the years, in the last ten years several persons have been employed part time to keep up with aspects of the church's life. In addition to the Stated Supply Minister, the church presently hires a Child Care Giver (Jen Gooch and Sandra Chance share the job) for Sunday mornings and special events to provide consistent care for infants and preschool children during church events and worship. A part time Church Cleaner (Sandra Chance) is also engaged to clean the building and keep it in order each week. In order to keep communication lines open and information flowing smoothly, the church has added a part time Administrative Assistant (Cathy Pike) to help the Minister. And since the death of Bettie Williams who played the piano for worship for so long, the church has hired a choir director/pianist on a part time basis. Velma Boswell held the position for several years, followed by Paul Cannon. Presently, Bonny Morden lends her talents on both violin and piano as she leads the choir and congregation in music.

Two recent events have stood out in the life of Croatan Presbyterian Church. In the spring of 2011, a tornado ripped across the Croatan community, missing the

church by 100 yards. While there was no damage to the church, many homes in the neighborhood were damaged. The church became the central rallying point for emergency vehicles and workers as well as a communications center. The church opened its doors and began cooking. The Presbyterian Women oversaw the continuing preparations. Donations of food and money began to come in and the church efforts fed rescue and emergency workers for several days as well as raising over \$17,000. That money was distributed to families in the neighborhood of the church on a need basis, primarily to be used on replacing appliances that had been damaged or destroyed. Elder Mike Hardison oversaw this operation.

The second event occurred a few months later in the fall of 2011. A hurricane ripped through the area and did major damage to the church. The building was rocked on its foundation, much roofing was torn off, the sanctuary ceiling fell in, and the interior got wet. The Presbytery provided \$5,000 in emergency funds and that with the church' insurance paid to repair all the damage. Elder James Chance oversaw the repair.

The Women of the Church (now called Presbyterian Women) organization has been active over the years in a number of activities. One of their more notable achievements has been producing church cookbooks. About every ten or twelve years another book comes out, the most recent being in 2014.

Food plays an important part of the church's life. The congregation at present has six Meal Teams set up who provide a light luncheon for any and all immediately after morning worship. A Fellowship Dinner (pot luck) is held each first Sunday of the month (twelve meals). The six teams provide meals for 30 Sundays. There is a special Fellowship Dinner held during Advent and each fifth Sunday as well as Easter, Mother's Day and the Sunday after Christmas there is no meal. These meals have proved to enrich the life of the congregation greatly.

What of the future? It is hoped that the church will get to the place where it can call a full time pastor. In the meantime, it will keep on being "The Little White Church that can!"