

SOUTHERN ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION

SHOAL CREEK CHURCH

By Joseph M. Jones

AMID THE TALL PINES and hardwoods in the remote Talladega National Forest, there stands a 114-year-old log church that continues to accommodate occasional worshippers, wedding parties, and family reunions, even though its congregation departed ninety-five years ago.

Five miles from the nearest sign of civilization, the Shoal Creek Baptist Church, with covered dinner tables and outdoor toilets of the old-time variety, stands unlocked and welcoming. The church that exists today was probably built around 1895 as the third house of worship located on that site. The first meeting house at that location is thought to have been erected about 1842.

The Shoal Creek Baptist Church disbanded in 1914 as its members gradually left their mountain homes for more attractive, flatter land in Cleburne County and adjoining Calhoun, but descendants of the departed families have managed to keep the structure fit and usable for nearly a century. The church only has one annual scheduled worship service (on Labor Day), when hundreds of attendees flock to participate in an all-day singing from the shaped-note Sacred Harp book.

The building has never been wired for electricity, but sometimes a resourceful host at the singing or a wedding party will provide illumination by connecting lightbulbs to a portable generator outside. The church building is thought to be one of several such log church buildings in Alabama (others include the Claybank Church in Ozark and the Pine Torch Church in Bankhead National Forest) and probably the only one anywhere with its own web-

site, discreetly advertised over the sanctuary's entrance.

Formal, approved settlement of the area by whites started about 1833 with the arrival of the William Edwards party from South Carolina via Georgia. An 1895 Rand-McNally map of Alabama locates Shoal Creek some eight miles from Edwardsville, named for the hardy Billy Edwards who donated the land for the first Cleburne County courthouse. In 1866 the county was formally established, independent of Benton County, from which it was drawn.



Built in 1895, Shoal Creek Church features wooden-shuttered windows. (All Photos by Robin McDonald)

But Shoal Creek did not last long as a map designation. The sparsely settled community began to fade early in the twentieth century. It was just too hard to make a living in the hills and hollows of the mountainous country, which became best known for its whiskey. By the late 1920s, most of the land had been acquired by two large timber companies, and they in turn sold it to the U.S. government to permit the formation of the Talladega National Forest as part of the New Deal. The 2.83 acres on which the primitive church and its small graveyard are situated remain the only privately held property in the region. All else is owned by the U.S. Forest Service, which graciously maintains half-mile gravel roads to

the location from Forest Service Road 553 to accommodate visitors to the popular historic site.

The church's survival for almost a century without ministers, deacons, or members results from the diligence of the settlers' descendants. Volunteer efforts, in the beginning poorly organized but today established and legalized, are responsible for the preservation of the church. Successors of the original congregation have fond expectations that these endeavors will continue and that future generations will be motivated by a deep appreciation for the steep woods and a respect for their



forebears (some of whom are buried in poorly marked or unmarked graves in the church's hillside yard).

Stories about those once associated with the church, men like George O. Jones, bring the building's history to life and connect visitors with the past. Jones (1861–1949)—farmer, school teacher, county surveyor, and justice of the peace—was among those who cut the logs and erected the building in 1895, even though it was not his church. (Jones, an anti-missionary, primitive Baptist who walked or rode a mule-drawn conveyance nine miles to a church of that persuasion between Edwardsville and Heflin, did not attend the missionary Baptist Shoal Creek church.)

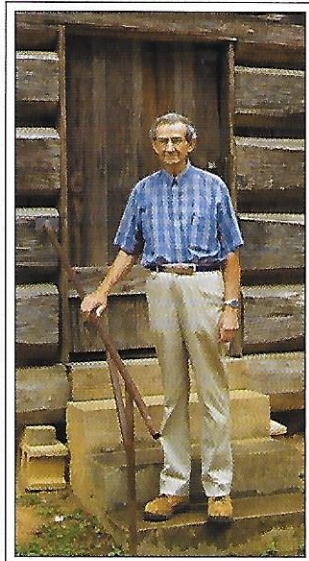
Jones helped erect the building because it was a community endeavor that he and his wife Tabitha, the granddaughter of the pioneer William Edwards, supported. Jones also made sure that the rest of his family participated in the church construction. Leo R. Jones (1886–1967), the oldest of George and Tabitha's ten children, was too young to fell logs and erect a building, but he carried water to the workmen from a spring down the hill. As an adult, Leo was among the dozens of stalwarts who tended the property after the population left. His sons and grandsons

are among the few who have continued that tradition.

Specifically, Leo's son, William Lee Jones (1915–1987)—Georgia educator, family preservationist, and woodsman par excellence—incorporated the Shoal Creek Church Preservation Society in 1987. The present head of that group is another of Leo's sons, Houston B. Jones of Heflin, whereas the writer, another son, has been the secretary-treasurer for the past two decades.

Other present-day caretakers bear the names of Shoal Creek progenitors, including Gene Holley of Anniston who serves as vice president. Another board member of Alpharetta, Georgia, has the same name as the man who deeded the property to the church in the nineteenth century, Robert Cheatwood. The present Robert is the great-great-great grandson of the original benefactor.

The old church is typically used a dozen or more times a year for such events as weddings and family reunions. Neighboring churches occasionally schedule the property for use in an "old fashion" day or similar worship occasion. A Boy Scout troop hiking the nearby Pinhoti Trail pauses there for a Sunday morning worship service. But the major event is the annual Sacred Harp singing, which has been held for much of the last



Above: Houston B. Jones is president of the Shoal Creek Church Preservation Society. Left: Shoal Creek Church is located on 2.83 acres in the Talladega National Forest. Below: The church has never been wired for electricity.

century; hundreds attend, with the number filling the church often equaled by those resting under the shade trees outside. Reservations for use of the facility are made through the website, www.shoalcreekchurch.net, which is operated by George O. Jones's great grandson, Dr. Lee Jones of Roanoke, Virginia.

The caretakers have many chores, apart from normal grass cutting and cleanup. Repairs needed due to natural causes—replacing a deteriorating metal roof or decaying old logs—are to be expected. But a few restorative measures have been taken to correct the mistakes of man. For example, a half century ago, careless hunters camping in the building burned a hole in the floor, necessitating its replacement. On another occasion, vandals shot holes in the metal roof. In spite of these problems, most visitors respect the property and treat it tenderly, knowing it represents a long-gone way of life that is cherished by many.

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