

By Amy Ammons Garza

Cullowhee Baptist Church

“Mother Church” to Many other Community Churches
Celebrates 190 Years • Sunday, November 20, 2011 • 11am

Early pioneers to Western North Carolina traveled by foot, by horse, by wagon, looking for a new home in the wilderness of the mountains. Once the pioneers established homes, the spirit of the Christian yearned for a place of worship. Thus, in 1821, began the foundation of Cullowhee Baptist Church in Jackson County.

The first church meeting was held in a log structure near the confluence of Love’s Branch and the Tuckasegee River at Webster, NC. The church moved in 1830 to a hewn-log building near the mouth of Cullowhee Creek. E. H. Stillwell’s “Historical Sketch of Tuckasegee Baptist Association (1829-1929)” states: “. . .the church was moved to a site near the mouth of Cullowhee Creek where a small log house served as a place of worship. This log structure stood directly in front of where R. V. Brown now has a stock of goods at Cullowhee.” (The store known as Brown’s Store was located where Kindermusik is today.)

The Tuckasegee’s periodic flooding chased the people to higher ground, and in 1856, a church building was constructed on property adjacent to the present church cemetery. Other structures—frame buildings—were constructed on the periphery of the cemetery in 1885 and then again in 1918. The present brick building was completed in 1929.

During the early years, new churches spawned from Cullowhee Baptist Church included Oconaluftee Baptist (circa 1828); Webster Back Baptist (no longer standing); Scotts Creek Baptist (circa 1830); Old Savannah Baptist (circa 1836); Caney Fork Baptist (circa 1836, and eventually became Tuckasegee Baptist); Speedwell Baptist (circa 1902); Little Savannah Baptist (circa 1914); and Black Mountain Baptist (circa 1919).

Since 1830, Cullowhee Baptist Church has grown up almost like a sister to Western Carolina University, its solidarity providing a constant beacon while progress evolved. Many members of the current congregation are descendants of the original founders of the church.

Co-pastors, the Reverend Dr. Jeffrey and the Reverend Tonya Vickery, will soon be celebrating 10 years as pastors for Cullowhee Baptist Church. With a heart for “missions,” these pastors are aware of needs in the community and lead the church to respond to them as best they can.

The church is intergenerational. “On a typical Sunday in worship, we have 90-years-olds worshipping alongside preschoolers and university students,” says Pastor Jeffrey. “The sanctuary choir includes retired adults, working adults, and an entire front row of middle-school and high-school girls. We share meals together on Wednesday nights. And most mission trips have included a wide spectrum of ages. Our children are known to members of this church by name, and the children can tell you the names of our older “living saints” in the church. What a blessing to have such a diverse mix of ages, all helping one another as we worship and serve together and grow in faith with one another.”

On Sunday, November 20, 2011, the church (now a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship congregation) will host a celebration to honor the church’s longevity, its pastors, its music, and its members. Many of the former pastors, missionaries, members, and current dignitaries will be on hand to help in the celebration and join in the Southern tradition of a wonderful pot-luck meal, open to all who attend. A program will follow, with short talks on the historic church and special music by the children, led by Paula Fox. A new 162-page book commemorating the history of Cullowhee Baptist Church, compiled by the History Committee—Barbara Dooley, Etheree Chancellor, John Bell, Amy Ammons Garza, Dianne Yount, Mary Lou Millwood, Pam Hill, and other members of the church, with special assistance from WCU graduate student Nicole Jarosinski—and published by Catch the Spirit of Appalachia, will also be available on this date.

The church invites one and all to join in the celebration on November 20 at 11am. For directions to the church or further information, call 828-293-9024, or go to their website at www.cullowheebaptist.com.

