

REV. WILLIAM CUMMINS DAVIS
by Louise Pettus

In York's Rose Hill Cemetery there is a tombstone that reads: In memory of Rev. William C. Davis Founder of the Independent Presbyterian Church Who was born, 16 Decr. 1760 and died 28 Sept 1831 age 70 years 9 mos and 12 days."¹

The marker gives no hint of the stormy career of William Cummins Davis, who might have been termed the "Great Emancipator," instead of Abraham Lincoln, if Davis had had his way a half century earlier. Davis, surely, was a man who lived before his time.

He was from obscure beginnings, born "somewhere on the inter-Carolina border." Davis' training for the ministry was at Mt. Zion College at Winnsboro, S. C., where he was ordained in 1789. His first pastorates were in the Spartanburg area where he stirred up trouble for himself by insisting upon the singing of Watts' Psalms and hymns. His conservative congregations refused to change from their position of no musical instruments and no singing.

Davis scandalized each of his succeeding congregations--Carmel, the Old Stone Church at Clemson, and Bullock's Creek and Shiloh in York District. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia called him to answer for his transgressions against accepted practices of worship. It would not be the last time he was officially reprimanded.

During the years 1803-1805, Davis was a missionary to the Catawba Indians. In 1804 he reported to the Synod at Bethesda that the school he had established for the Catawba children was taught by Robert Crawford who was owed \$240 for his teaching. In spite of Crawford's capability and efforts, the "prospect of teaching the Indians not at all flattering." In this regard, Davis had no more success than earlier Presbyterian ministers, the Baptists or the Methodists.

In 1805 Davis began his supply of Bullock's Creek. For at least years Davis had been condemning the institution of slavery from the pulpit. He preached that slave-holding was sinful and for masters to fail to give religious instruction was the "unforgivable sin" to Davis. In 1807, while on trial by the church in Philadelphia, charged with preaching against government and holding and preaching erroneous doctrines, Davis responded in ringing tones: "Against government I have never preached...Against slavery I will always preach!"

In 1811 Davis was tried for heresy. He escaped the charge by resigning from the Presbyterian Church and then preceded to found the Independent Presbyterian Church. Five churches split in the process. These were Bullock Creek, Salem, Edmonds, Shiloh and Olney (in Concord, N. C.).

The membership of the Independent Presbyterian Church grew to about 1,000 in 1831, the year of Davis' death. Two of Davis' successors were Robert Y. Russell and Silas J. Feemster. Silas Feemster was Davis' son-in-law. In 1832, Feemster, who was of the Bullock's Creek community, founded Salem Church in Lowndes County, Mississippi, a church that still flourishes.

Like the mother congregations in South Carolina, in Mississippi the Independent Presbyterian Church took in blacks on an equal footing with the whites. After the Civil War the practice was attacked by Ku Klux Klan members and the Salem Church merged with the Congregationalists.

¹ This stone is now broken in pieces and lies on the ground at the entrance of the cemetery.

In South Carolina at the end of the Civil war the issue of slavery was dead, so in 1867 the Independent Presbyterian Church membership merged with its mother denomination the Presbyterian Church.

William Cummins Davis left his mark on this region. As late as 1859 the Yorkville Enquirer could say that Davis was still being debated because of his anti-slavery writings.

In 1852, a Queens College biology professor, Dr. A. L. Pickens, put together a collection of Davis' writings, including the Gospel Plan that condemned all those the "dealers in human flesh and souls." The Gospel Plan was published the year that Abraham Lincoln was born.