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## Black-White Relations in an Antebellum Church In the Carolina Upcountry

Allan D. Charles\*

It is well known that independent black churches, a familiar feature of the rural and urban South, were only organized after emancipation. In the antebellum period, slaves were permitted to hold only the most rudimentary and ad hoc religious services on their own, with formal ecclesiastical organization proscribed lest the slaves imbibe messages incompatible with the existence of the peculiar institution. Masters concerned with the immortal souls of their involuntary servants, and hopeful of domesticating rebellious spirits, obliged the blacks to accompany them to the local church which, if a large enough structure, often had a gallery set aside for slaves. The question of the degree of actual black participation in that unseparate and unequal setting requires further investigation, and it is the purpose of this article to present a case study which may assist the effort.

The mid-eighteenth-century pioneer settlers of what would become Union County, South Carolina, were primarily of Scotch-Irish and English background, engaged in subsistence farming, and had very few slaves with them. In the early-nineteenth century, however, cotton culture rapidly became established in the Upcountry, and second and third generation Union Countians busily acquired slaves, using the profits from early cotton crops to purchase more slaves to produce yet more of the staple.

The cultivation of cotton caused a demographic transformation, and by the 1840s the county's black population came to exceed the white. By 1850, there were 10,392 slaves enumerated by the Federal census, while only 9,713 whites were counted.<sup>1</sup>

The free black population was tabulated by the state government probably more accurately than by the Federal government, as the state levied a \$2.00 head tax on "free negroes." Union County (or Union "District," as it was called in the antebellum period) had fifty-three free blacks in 1849,<sup>2</sup> or approximately one-half of one percent of the total black population in 1849-1850. Union was typical of South Carolina's rural areas, as the state as a whole contained fewer than 10,000 free blacks as late as 1860,

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<sup>1</sup>Bureau of Census: *United States Census* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1850), p. 338.

<sup>2</sup>*Reports and Resolutions of the General Assembly, State of South Carolina, 1849* (Columbia: 1849).

**TABLE 8**  
**SLAVEHOLDERS IN GOOSE CREEK, 1745**

Number of Slaves	% of Owners	Cumulative %	% of Slaves Owned	Cumulative %
0	3.39	3.39	-	-
1-10	27.12	30.51	3.46	3.46
11-20	13.56	44.07	4.93	8.39
21-50	28.81	72.88	24.00	32.39
51-100	18.64	91.52	30.43	62.82
101+	23.06	100.00	37.18	100.00

**TABLE 9**  
**SLAVEHOLDERS IN ST. GEORGE'S, 1726**

Number of Slaves	% of Owners	Cumulative %	% of Slaves Owned	Cumulative %
0	22.12	-	-	-
1-10	47.49	69.91	16.41	16.41
11-20	14.16	84.07	17.33	33.74
21-50	9.73	93.80	28.72	62.46
51-100	6.20	100.00	37.54	100.00
101+				

and almost half of those lived in Charleston.<sup>3</sup>

The Lower Fairforest Baptist Church in western Union County has well-kept minutes starting in 1809, the church itself dating from 1762, according to its historian, Vera Smith Spears.<sup>4</sup> Apparently nearly all the blacks referred to in the minutes were slaves. The rolls of the church note the existence of only one free black: a "Free negro Judah" was listed on an undated roll. Many blacks were identified as slaves by the practice of sometimes placing the owner's surname in parentheses after the given name of the individual slave. Slaves though they were, they were considered members of the church; they were protected by it, and they participated in its affairs.

This concern of a white church for the slaves of its members was not limited to Lower Fairforest, as (Upper) Fairforest Baptist Church, located some seven or eight miles away, had a similar system. Loulie Latimer Owens, historian of Upper Fairforest, has quoted that church's minutes of 1825 as noting that "Bro John Palmore laid in a complaint against Bro Abell Ezell for useing barbarity on one of his slaves."<sup>5</sup>

The Lower Fairforest Baptist Church was specific as to its disciplinary authority: It "continued the old plan of discipline (as laid down in the 18th chapter of Matthew),"<sup>6</sup> which states that "if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off and cast them from thee ... and if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee."<sup>7</sup>

This casting out was done by vote of the congregation, and an offender suffered "exclusion" or "excommunication." Nor could the offender simply join another Baptist church, for without a "letter of dismissal" (honorable withdrawal), a departing person usually would not be accepted elsewhere.

Antebellum black church members, slaves though almost all must have been at Lower Fairforest, were sometimes granted letters of dismissal on their own accounts, indicating that they shifted from one church to another not merely because of their masters' movements. Further, they were frequently "excluded" from the church for infractions, as were whites for similar offenses. No double standard of justice seems to have been employed. A slave would be excluded for his or her own offense, not that of

<sup>3</sup>David Duncan Wallace, *South Carolina: A Short History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1951), p. 441.

<sup>4</sup>Vera Smith Spears, *The Fairforest Story: History of the Fairforest (Lower) Baptist Church and Community* (Charlotte, NC: Crabtree Press, 1974), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup>Loulie Latimer Owens, *Taproot of the South Carolina Baptist Back Country: Fairforest Baptist Church* (Greenville, SC: A Press, 1980), p. 65.

<sup>6</sup>Lower Fairforest Baptist Church Minutes (hereinafter referred to as LFBC Minutes), June 23, 1838, photocopy in possession of family of Al Greer, Union, SC.

<sup>7</sup>Mathew 18: 7-8 (King James Version).

the owner.

In 1819, for example, the church "excluded William Davitt's negroe Ben for talking disorderly." Regardless of whether the slave had uttered mere profanity or out-and-out sedition against the peculiar institution, the church was not serving merely as a civilizing vehicle. Membership for either race was considered a privilege, not a duty or a right.<sup>8</sup>

Examples of other offenses include that of Frances Holcomb, a white woman, who, on March 24, 1821, was cited for "entering a suit in law without leave of the church." Two days later the woman was "excluded ... from the fellowship of this church."<sup>9</sup>

The sole double standard was sexual, as only women (black and white) were charged with the crime of "fornication," as the minutes consistently spell it. Black or white men (or couples) were charged with "living disorderly," which may have been an offense that required more than a single sexual encounter, while fornication could result from the sin of either a single night or a six-months' liaison.<sup>10</sup>

Forgiveness was possible, however. In 1832, the church "received a letter from Sharon Baptist Church, Georgia, Henry County, stating their satisfaction with Br. James P. Woodson whom we had excommunicated and requesting a letter of dismissal for him. Upon their statement we restored him and granted him a letter."<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, in 1851, a "charge was brought against Brother Thomas Hart for rolling Ten Pins at Union Court House" with gambling probably involved. When he admitted his guilt and pledged to refrain from such behavior in the future, he "was accordingly forgiven." Recidivism reared its ugly head, however, and six months later Hart was again accused of bowling. He again "desired the church to forgive him," but a second offense was considered excessive, and he was excluded.<sup>12</sup>

Every month the church met "in conference" to handle matters brought before it by deacons and committees. It was then that potential new members were voted on. In 1815, the Lower Fairforest in "conference met ... and received Negroe Hercuby and wife Jane by Letter."<sup>13</sup> They arrived with an honorable "letter of dismissal" from a sister congregation, no reference being made as to whether their owner, if any, joined at the same approximate time. In 1822, the church honorably "dismissed Br. Negroe Hercules to join some other church more convenient."<sup>14</sup> That may have been

<sup>8</sup>LFBC Minutes, July 24, 1819.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., March 24, 1821; March 26, 1821.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., February 24, 1844; August 28, 1864; etc.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., December 23, 1832.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., August 22, 1851; October 25, 1851; May 22, 1852; July 24, 1852.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., July 1815.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., July 22, 1822.

the same man who had been received seven years earlier.

Numerous blacks joined by profession of faith. In 1835, for example, the church "received by experience Negro Caty (Gist)" and in 1848 received "a colored woman, Finder (H.B. Murphy's)."<sup>15</sup>

Some black members seem to have been casual about what later generations would call "blue laws." In February 1815, the church in "conference met and agreed to acquaint the Black Brethren of this body, that it is wrong and contrary to Gospel discipline to trade or traffic on the Sabbath."<sup>16</sup> Apparently slaves had a certain amount of disposable personal income.

Black marriages and morals were looked after as strictly as those of white people. In 1849, "a charge was preferred against Sister Julia (Nolin) for departing from her husband and marrying again." A month later, Julia was excluded after "a fair investigation of her conduct."<sup>17</sup>

In 1859, the church "preferred charges against Tom and Lucy colored persons for living in disorder" and appointed a three-man committee to summon them to the next meeting. Tom would not come, but "Lucy colored appeared and gave the church satisfaction."<sup>18</sup> No owners were mentioned for Tom and Lucy, but the pair may well have been slaves.

One who was certainly a slave was "colored Brother Jessey (Sparks)" who "came forward and acknowledged that he had drunk too much spirits, but desired the church to forgive him, which was accordingly done, he promised never to drink again."<sup>19</sup> The movements of some slaves, it appeared, were less than totally circumscribed.

Some charges against slaves were not detailed in the church records, as when, in 1840, the church became excited at "hearing an unfavorable report of Negro Abram (Palmer)." A white brother was detailed "to cite him at our next meeting to answer to said report." When Abram refused to appear, a committee of five whites was delegated "to wait upon negro Abram tomorrow and report." At the next conference, "the committee ... — finding no proof to sustain the charges against the said Abram — exempted him from said charges."<sup>20</sup>

Simple expulsion was not always immediately resorted to by the congregation, which in 1837 took "under the watch care of this church, a negro man called Wyatt — belonging to (Gist)." Wyatt was apparently placed on some rehabilitation program, but he must have failed to improve,

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., May 27, 1820; September 27, 1835; August 29, 1848; etc.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., February 1815.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., July 21, 1849; August 25, 1849.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., June 25, 1859; July 23, 1859.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., July 21, 1854.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., April 25, 1840; May 25, 1840; June 28, 1840.

for three-and-a-half months later the church "discarded a negro man Whatt (Gist)."<sup>21</sup> Here was a slave, although the clerk could not spell his name consistently, in whose personal welfare the church concerned itself. The role, if any, played by owner Gist, was not specified. The verb "to discard" was seldom employed in the minutes and must have indicated that the person was removed from the "watch care of the church." Whether that also meant exclusion can only be conjectured.

Another offense to Baptist sensibilities was dancing, and many Baptist congregations prohibit it, at least on church property, to the present day. In 1838, the church, in a typical move, "entered a charge against Sister Negro Minna (Rice) for dancing." Whether she engaged in that particular form of entertainment on her master's plantation or at some dance hall was not noted, but she refused to desist and two months later was excluded.<sup>22</sup>

Few blacks were so active in the church as to take on a personality in the church minutes, but "Brother Negro Tom" did so in the period 1811-1823. He was the property of a man named Goodwin,<sup>23</sup> yet he behaved in a very independent manner. When he first appeared in the minutes in April 1811, he was already a substantial member of the black community: "In church conference met and Sister Negro Judith being a church charge, Brother Negro Tom agree [sic] to take her for one month for the sum of three dollars."<sup>24</sup>

The church apparently had taken full custody of a female slave, a situation that could have arisen because her master had abused her or because her master had died intestate and the ownership of the slave was under adjudication. It was necessary to pay another slave to take the female into his household, and Tom was considered trustworthy enough for the task, as the church never would have countenanced sexual misconduct (as evidenced by the many charges of "fornification"). It was not recorded that Tom's master played any role at all in the proceeding.

Tom was, in fact, a leader of the black community and was even given permission to "exercise his gift" in public, i.e., to sing, pray, and preach to his people. This was a privilege apparently extended by the church to only two blacks in the entire antebellum period,<sup>25</sup> as black preachers might have held anti-slavery sentiments, and whites were not always present when one such as Tom was "exercising his gift."

In late 1811, Tom's permission to serve as a preacher was withdrawn, but on March 26, 1812, "Brother Tom gave satisfaction and was forgiven and

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., July 2, 1837; October 21, 1837.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., March 24, 1838; May 26, 1838.

<sup>23</sup>Spears, pp. 78-79.

<sup>24</sup>LFBC Minutes, April 27, 1811.

<sup>25</sup>Spears, pp. 78-79.

the church gave him his gift." Four years later, Tom was permitted to preach anywhere in the county.<sup>26</sup>

As a black leader, Tom served as liaison between the church and its black members. He was a virtual officer of the church. In 1817:

In church conference met and Brother Negroe Prince entered a complaint against Sister Negroe Jane, Herently [sic] his wife for not performing the duty of a wife toward her husband. Agreed that Brother Negroe Tom cite her to attend the first Sunday in next month to answer for herself.<sup>27</sup>

Tom, acting as an agent for the congregation, brought the contentious couple to church, where, "after an admonition," it was agreed "to retain them in the fellowship."<sup>28</sup>

By May 1820, however, Tom had backslid, and again his license to preach was suspended:

...brother Negroe Tom came forward and rendered his reason for non-attendance, also acknowledged a fault of retailing spirits and was forgiven. Agreed that at the next meeting take into consideration the Gift of Brother Negroe Tom.<sup>29</sup>

Tom's infractions obviously were committed by a person who exercised considerable personal freedom and were serious enough to have gotten him cast out of the church even if he had been white. In December 1820, a special committee was appointed "to look into the standing of Brother Negroe Tom," who meanwhile was reminded not to "exercise his public gift."<sup>30</sup>

After a thorough investigation, a contrite Tom was totally restored at the January 27, 1821, conference. So high was his prestige that less than two years later, he was applying to be set apart to administer ordinances, maintaining that "the lack of ordained ministers" justified his actual ordination.<sup>31</sup> The church was still debating Tom's status in March 1823, when the record of his career was terminated by a hiatus in the church minutes. When the record reopened in 1829, Tom was no longer present. It is unknown what became of him, but had he been at Lower Fairforest still, there probably would have been some mention of him.

In the late antebellum period the church seems to have moved from dependence on a few individual blacks for liaison with the black membership to an institutional approach to the black component of the congregation. In June 1847, the church "appointed a meeting on the first Sunday in

<sup>26</sup>LFBC Minutes, November 1811; March 26, 1812; April 27, 1816.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., July 27, 1817.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., August 3, 1817.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., May 27, 1820.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., December 1820.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., October 1822.

July for the benefit of the Black People." Again in 1851 and at later times, it was "agreed to have a first Sunday meeting ... for the black people."<sup>32</sup>

Over the antebellum era the church experienced four periods of exceptional revivalism: 1812-1813, 1818-1820, 1832-1835, and 1846-1849. Revivalistic success has always been measured in terms of new converts, and in the first period, the young church received twenty-six, of whom fourteen (or 54 percent) were black. In the second period, the black percentage declined to 41 percent of the forty-one converts, and in the third revival the black decline continued, being only 20 percent of the seventy new professions of faith. In the fourth and final antebellum revival, blacks accounted for only 16 percent of the fifty-one new converts.

Nevertheless, the black portion of the congregation remained substantial. In 1834, the only year for which a complete roll of black and white members survives, the black percentage was 42 percent, which was the approximate percentage of blacks in the overall county population at the time.<sup>33</sup> As late as the decade of the 1850s, the number of blacks joining the church, either by conversion or by transfer of letter from another congregation, was virtually equal to the number of new white members. Over the entire antebellum period, blacks accounted for 32 percent of the 237 new converts and composed 24 percent of the sixty-six people joining by transfer of letter.

The minority population had about the same difficulty as whites with the strictures of a Calvinistic faith. Blacks were the subjects of 41 percent of the church's eighty-two antebellum disciplinary actions and composed 37 percent of the period's forty-nine expulsions. Blacks made up 24 percent of the 183 members who were granted letters of dismissal by the church. When blacks joined or left the congregation, they did not always do so in conjunction with whites, but sometimes circulated independently.

There was an attempt made at constructing segregated facilities. "Galleries" were built in 1834, but in June 1835 the church "took into consideration the inexpediency of the Black People going into the Galleries and concluded not to suffer them to go therein without a special invitation." Apparently the galleries in the small building were uncomfortable, perhaps because they were too narrow.

Sunday collections were not regularly noted in the minutes and were even more seldom broken down by race, but on September 6, 1835, it was recorded that the church had received \$1.12 1/2 "from the Black people." Apparently the black population's contribution was about equal to its

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., June 26, 1847; May 25, 1851.

<sup>33</sup>Interpolation between figures from *U.S. Census*, 1830 and 1840. In 1830, the Census recorded 7,252 blacks in a county population of 17,906. In 1840, there were 8,451 blacks in a county of 18,936 people.

proportion of the congregation, as total offerings three weeks later were only \$3.25; Christmas collections that year hit \$8.35 3/4. (By comparison, in 1841, the church building was re-roofed at a cost of \$8.00.)

When South Carolina seceded from the Union and the Civil War came, the church took no official notice of such secular matters. Finally, two months into the war, the church did recommend in June 1861 that all denominations in the Confederacy hold a prayer meeting every sabbath "to the God of all battles, for our delivery from our insidious enemies." No further direct reference was ever made to the conflict, but as the war dragged toward its close, the question of the status of slavery must have been in everyone's mind. A resolution in July 1864 called for the next meeting to "give the colored members an opportunity to have worship and for the church to inquire into their standing."<sup>34</sup>

The following month the church had a "conference for the blacks" and "called over and corrected the list of names of the colored members and inquired into their standing."<sup>35</sup> Apparently many of the blacks had withdrawn from the congregation even before Lincoln's emancipation had reached them.

The only mention of Reconstruction was in December 1865, when there was "no conference nor preaching on account of the troublesome condition of our political affairs that now distract our country."<sup>36</sup> Some blacks, who were then freedmen, evidently attended the church until early 1866, but the whites made no formal recognition of the blacks' ultimate disappearance until April 27, 1868. Then, in a desire to clear up the rolls, which still contained many names of blacks, the church resolved:

whereas that in the providence of God or in the results of this war now closed we are virtually and nationally and spiritually separated from the colored race, therefore be it resolved that we the Baptist Church of Christ at Lower Fairforest do this day and forever separate ourselves from the Freedmen in a religious point of view and authorize our deacons to grant all cordially members of our body of Freedmen letters of dismission.... The Freedmen have not been at a meeting in about two years.<sup>37</sup>

The days of "integration" at the church were over. What was surprising was that integration, though including a servile population, had been so thorough.

The departure of blacks from Lower Fairforest was fairly typical of the county's Baptist churches, a denomination outnumbering in adherents all

<sup>34</sup>LFBC Minutes, July 23, 1864.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., August 28, 1864.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., December 23-24, 1865.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., April 27, 1868.

others in the county combined. Though Unionville Baptist Church (later the First Baptist Church of Union) had twenty-four blacks on its roll of sixty-eight members as late as 1869, it was all-white by 1876.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, Padgett's Creek Baptist Church still counted six black members in 1876, the only blacks then remaining at any white Baptist church in the entire county. One freedman continued to attend Padgett's Creek until 1884.<sup>39</sup>

No such anachronistic figure lingered at Lower Fairforest, however. A new era of racial separation had come. Emancipated from slavery, blacks emancipated themselves from white churches as well, churches of all protestant denominations. In those churches, however, the blacks had participated much more fully than might be thought compatible with their status as chattel.

<sup>38</sup>Allan D. Charles, *The Narrative History of the First Baptist Church of Union, South Carolina* (Union, SC: First Baptist Church, 1971), pp. 12-13.

<sup>39</sup>Claude E. Sparks, *History of Padgett's Creek Baptist Church* (Union, SC: n.p., 1967 and 1973), p. 102.