

A Venerable Old Lighthouse

One of the more remarkable men living in Western York County during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was Reverend John Barnett Swann. "Mr. Swann," as he would later be called, was born in 1846 in the Bethesda community to M. B. and Margaret Swann. During his early childhood the Swann family moved to the North Carolina Steel Creek community where he grew to manhood on his father's farm and took advantage of education offered in the area.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, John was too young to enlist and had to wait for his seventeenth birthday in May 1863. He then enlisted in the F Company of the Forty-Ninth North Carolina Regiment and served his homeland until the end of the war. By those who knew him, it was said that he was all you could ask for in a soldier. In December 1869 amid political turmoil in the South, John Swann married Jennie Grier, the daughter of Associate Presbyterian minister Alexander Grier. Late in life John often joked that he always loved the ARPs because he led one to the altar and lived happily with her ever since.

In 1877 at the age of thirty-one he was chosen as deacon of the Steel Creek Presbyterian Church where he had been a member for most of his life, and had been an active Christian worker. Eight years later, in 1885 he was ordained an elder of that church. Near the age of forty confessed having received a divine call to enter into the ministry. He promptly entered Union Theological Seminary at Hampden-Sidney, Virginia. Mrs. Swann with him and they made their home in a dormitory for married couples. After graduation, his first work took him to Nahalah in eastern North Carolina to spend his ministerial apprenticeship in a mission church, remaining there for three years. Though his work there was difficult, when the presbytery decided to move him, the people he had pastored made serious protest to the presbytery.

In 1892 Reverend Swann was installed as pastor of the historic Bullock's Creek Presbyterian Church. Here, he would remain, serving Salem, Olivet and Mount Pleasant until his retirement in 1919. When installed, the roll of Bullock's Creek contained 150 members and during his pastorate he received 300 members and despite the large numbers that had either died or had been dismissed to other churches, the church had 200 members in 1920.

Swann was a powerful force in Western York County taking part in discussions on local politics and economy. Too, his opinion was greatly appreciated in the Bethel Presbytery and was often called upon to still troubled waters over church policy.

He did not limit himself to his denomination, but worked hand in hand with other local churches. It was said that there was no hypocrisy in Preacher Swann, that he practiced what he preached and lived what he professed.

Swann had the unique ability to make friends in every level of society. He seemed ageless, forever remaining young in his heart, and his company was always appreciated among the younger people as well as those nearer his own age. He loved witty conversation and when the joke was turned on him he took it with the best spirit. The Swanns had no children of their own, but when his sister, Mrs. B. H. Blankenship passed away, the Swanns took in their daughter, Margaret, and raised her as their own. Margaret adopted her mother's maiden name and later married Reginald F. Bankhead of Bullock's Creek.

Before the second decade of the twentieth century ended, and after serving the Bullock's Creek Church for twenty-eight years, Swann was beginning to feel his age and announced to the presbytery he would retire at the end of December 1920. Just a few weeks before his retirement, the Bullock's Creek Church gave the couple a 50th wedding anniversary party. On that occasion the congregation presented a gold ring to Mrs. Swann and a bag of fifty one-dollar gold coins and a gold chain. The Olivet congregation in McConnells gave Mrs. Swann a cameo broach and a gold-headed cane to Mr. Swann.

The Swanns retired to their 128-acre farm in Ebenezer, near Rock Hill. Though Reverend Swann was technically retired, he was not inactive. He continued to visit the sick and the bereaved, and often preached among the various denominations. When Mrs. Swann died in 1930 Margaret and Reginald Bankhead came to live with the aging man and remained with him until his death on 11 January 1933 shortly before 7 o'clock in the evening. He was 87 years old. His death was attributed to his age and complications associated with pneumonia. He was buried beside his wife in the Ebenezer Presbyterian Church Cemetery (now Ebenezer A.R.P.) as many of his friends from Bullock's Creek, McConnellsville, Sharon, York and Rock Hill looked on. Mr. Swann had outlived his six brothers and three sisters. Though few can recall the life of Reverend Swann, many make their home on his farm, known as Swan Acres located on Herlong Avenue in Rock Hill.

Rev. S. J. Hood had the happy pleasure of Mr. Swann's company while he preached at Hood's church. Hood said Swann was "the most unique and loveable man I know...captivating us each one down to the youngest child, with the natural charm of his presence and remarkable personality. This venerable man of God, who is well preserved in health notwithstanding his ninety summers, is one of the

oldest living ministers of the state and most beloved by everybody, especially in York County, South Carolina... He is a finished scholar and theologian of the old school, with a clear logical understand of the tenets of his Calvinistic faith and fine Christian charity for the sincere doctrinal views of all other communions. He is rich in repartee, flashing in humor, charming in conversation, beloved by young and old and his presence is a veritable benediction wherever he goes. Like the fabled candle which never goes out, his life is like a lighthouse casting its gleams far ashore, and its radiant beams seem to grown brighter and brighter in the evening time of life.”

John Converse said of Swann, “If there had been more men like Father Swann in the last ninety years there had been more true happiness and less darkness. The world is immeasurable better by his life...” Perhaps many of us would agree today that if we had more lighthouses like Reverend Swann, we would have more true happiness and less darkness.