

EBENEZER ACADEMY by Louise Pettus

A century and a half ago, Ebenezer was one of York County's largest settlements. Now, what was once the village of Ebenezer has been absorbed into the city of Rock Hill.

Fortunately for the natives of Ebenezer, the name is still identified by Ebenezer Road, which still has a few old homes left among the medical offices and commercial establishments. There is also Ebenezer Presbyterian Church, which dates back to shortly after the end of the Revolutionary War and is now a part of the Associate Reformed Synod.

The small brick building facing the historic cemetery on Ebenezer Road is the remainder of the Ebenezer Academy, often called "the Athens of York." Here upcountry boys were once prepared for the South Carolina College, Davidson and other strongholds for Presbyterians.

The date of the establishment of the academy is uncertain. Typically, early ministers served the dual roles of pastors and schoolmasters, so there was probably instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic from the beginning of the church.

An academy at the church offered upper grades and a college preparatory course. The academy dates to at least 1819 when Job Nelson became the principal.

A year later, the Rev. Eleazar Harris, a York District native, was principal and minister of the church. Harris was such a scholar that the faculty of Washington College conferred on him the honorary degree of master of arts in 1823.

In 1826, Albert Gallatin, who had been Thomas Jefferson's secretary of the treasury, influenced Congress to pass a measure that would support a national work that would result in the published "Etymology" on the vocabulary of the Catawba Indians. The study was designed to collect and interpret the grammar and structure of the various Catawba languages and dialects.

Both Gallatin and Secretary of War James Barbour asked Harris to assist in the work. He consented only if he had enough hours to spend beyond that required by his duties as principal.

Apparently he did not follow through because there is no record of the project ever being completed.

In 1828 Harris was assigned to preach in Tennessee. In 1854, when he was 65, Harris wrote from Obion, Tenn., to A. Eugene Hutchison begging a favor for an old man who was "in the deepest poverty."

Harris wanted to sell property on Steel Creek (that cost him \$275) for \$100 and offered to sell his 35-volume edition of the Edinburgh Encyclopaedia for which he paid \$4 a volume for \$2 each, saying that the plates in the books alone were worth \$1 a piece.

Ministers of the time were notoriously underpaid, but Harris must have been worse off than most. He concluded his letter to Hutchison with the statement: "I am very much pushed for money for the very necessities of life."¹

The third principal of Ebenezer Academy was Capt. Peter Campbell of Harrisburg, who like his predecessors, was known as a stern disciplinarian.

Not much is known about Peter Campbell, including how he got the rank of captain. He came to Ebenezer from his previous teaching post at Harrisburg, a settlement of a few houses and a grist mill at the confluence of Steel and Sugar creeks, northeast of the present town of Fort Mill.²

Within 10 years, Campbell had married 14-year-old Mariah Pettus, had three sons and ended the stormy marriage by disappearing to the West.

Because divorces were not permitted in South Carolina, Mariah got a divorce from Campbell in Obion County, Tenn. where she had a brother in the same area to which Rev. Eleazer Harris had migrated. Obion County was on the Mississippi River near Memphis and attracted a large number of settlers from upcountry South Carolina during the 1820s and 1830s.

The first three principals at Ebenezer — Job Nelson, Eleazar Harris and Peter Campbell — actually presided over an elementary school, not an academy. Ebenezer Academy's heyday would really come during the two decades preceding the Civil War.

Printed in *The York Observer*, November 14, 1986

¹Letter in the Hutchison Papers, Winthrop University Archives.

²Peter Campbell may have been the son of Samuel Campbell, a blacksmith in the Fort Mill area who died in 1830 and mentions Peter Campbell in his will.