

The Old Church Bell

The old church bell, now mounted on a rebuilt platform near the entrance to the former sanctuary, has been around almost since the beginning of the church. First mention of the bell was in the minutes of December 26, 1891 when Willie Brown was hired as Sexton to cut wood, make fires, bring water, sweep floors and *ring the bell*. He was paid 25 cents per month. The bell was mounted on a platform similar to the present one in the church yard.

The tradition was to ring the bell to announce the start of service, so people socializing in the yard would know it was time to come inside. The bell was tolled to announce the death of local resident. To ring the bell a rope was pulled causing the bell to swing back and forth producing a ding-dong two-tone sound. To toll the bell the side of the bell was hit with the clapper to produce a single tone sound - the number of tolls identifying the decedent.

Sometime around 1920 Louie D. Newton, editor of the Christian Index, came to Hiawassee and photographed the Baptist churches of Towns County. The pictures were published in the Index in May, 1923. His picture of the Hiawassee Baptist Church was really a picture of the bell with a wall of the church in the background. Seventy-five years later that picture led to recovery of the bell.



There are no records and no one remembers where the bell was located during the ten years that the church was meeting at the school. It next appeared in pictures on the ground just to the right of the door of the newly built sanctuary about 1940. This picture was made about 1945 showing Fannie Greene next to the bell by the church.



Moving the bell around was no easy task. It is 28 inches in diameter, made of cast iron, and probably weighs near 500 pounds. When the porch and white columns were added to the church in a remodeling project in 1965, the bell had to be moved again. This time, the chairman of deacons, Cline Puett, drug the bell to his home next door just to get it out of the way of the construction. He probably intended to restore it to the church later, but that didn't happen for thirty years. Mr. Puett died, his property next to the church was sold to the county, and a hospital was built there. The bell remained where Mr. Puett had placed it, and it became a forgotten relic.

In 1996, Ann Berg, while visiting a friend in the hospital, noticed the old bell on the ground nearly hidden by the limbs of an evergreen tree. She knew that her husband Walter, while researching church history, had found the Louie D. Newton pictures and was wondering what had happened to the bell. Dr. Lanier Nicholson confirmed that it was indeed the old church bell and got permission from the hospital to reclaim it. A new platform was built to look similar to the one in the old picture, and the bell was brought back home.

If only the old bell could talk, we would have many more stories to tell.