

County Line Baptist Church

Pilot Point, Texas

Historical Narrative researched and written by Valerie L. Scott for Texas Historical Commission (THC)
Subject Marker Application. Denton County. 2007

COUNTY LINE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

1863 – 2006

I. CONTEXT

Soon after emancipation, a group of freed slaves led by Louis Whitlow (born 1843 – died January 1941) founded a small settlement along Wolf Creek near the county line between Cooke and Denton counties. The settlement became known as Oak Dale. The small group of African Americans organized a church in 1863 that became known as the Colored Missionary Baptist Church. The congregation first met in a brush arbor. In 1874, they built a small church on the county line, thus giving the church its name.¹

By the 1880s, most of the church members lived in or near Pilot Point, so the congregation decided to move the church there. In 1882, they bought one and a half acres of land in the White Addition to the Township of Pilot Point and moved their church there. According to a brief church history published as part of the church's 122nd anniversary celebration, they dismantled the church building and moved it by wagon train some three miles to Pilot Point.²

Pilot Point was one of the first settlements in Denton County. It was named for a grove of oak trees with one tall cottonwood in the center that was used as a landmark by Indians, Texas Rangers, scouts and early settlers. Dripping Springs just north of the grove of trees provided water and a convenient camping ground for travelers, attracting settlers as early as 1845, two years before the county was organized.³

II. OVERVIEW

There are no written records of the first years of the County Line First Baptist Church, but much family history has been handed down from Louis Whitlow, one of the church founders, to his great-granddaughter, Josephine Williams. Mrs. Williams has served as church secretary from 1954 to 1963 and as church historian for many years. She continues to be an active member of the church. Other Whitlow descendants also are affiliated with the church. According to the oral history, Louis Whitlow was a slave on the Whitlow Plantation in Chamber County, Alabama. After the slaves were freed, the owner of the plantation helped his former slaves look for land and a place where they could build a new life as free men and women. That search brought them to Texas. Mr. Whitlow came by train to Sherman, Texas, in Grayson County, which adjoins Cooke and Denton counties. From there, he moved onto the land at Oak Dale and the group soon began their church there. The first church was a brush arbor, but the group built a small church building in 1874. As most of the church members migrated to Pilot Point, the church decided to move there.⁴

In December 1882, the Colored Missionary Baptist Church - the original name of the church - bought one and a half acres of land from J.T. and Mary Williams. The site was part of a seven-acre tract owned by Mr. and Mrs. William. The church paid \$75 down and was given four months to pay the remaining \$37.50. Deacon Nelson Ray negotiated the purchase.⁵

The church property is located in the Charles Smith Survey, White Addition to the township of Pilot Point.⁶ The street address is now 512 E. Walcott Street. Church members built a church facing east on Walcott Street and a one-room log parsonage

with a fireplace on the southwest corner of the property. The parsonage no longer stands.⁷ According to Whitlow tradition, Mr. Whitlow recruited a black teacher from Alabama to come to the church and teach the freed slaves, the first school for blacks in that area.⁸

County Line First Baptist Church has been affiliated with the Northwestern Baptist Sunday School Convention since before the turn of the century. The Convention was composed of all counties "in which there are any colored people north of the Texas and Pacific Railroad from El Paso on the west and Forney on the east."⁹ In 1900, the County Line First Baptist Church was host for the fifteenth annual session of the Convention annual convention, which met for two days in Pilot Point.¹⁰ In June 1984, members of the County Line First Baptist Church attended their first out-of-state Convention meeting.¹¹

By the 1930s, erosion was creating problems for the church, causing the building to become unsteady. In 1938, the church was pulled back farther from the street to where it now is situated on the land. Men who were members of the church manually moved the church with mules and logs. They placed logs under the building and pulled it with the mules, rolling it the length of the building and then repositioning the logs for another pull, until it reached the present location. The church was repositioned with the front facing south.¹²

In 1939, Mrs. Pauline Wilkerson Varner, wife of former pastor Rev. Haze Varner, organized an adult school for African Americans in Pilot Point that was held at the County Line First Baptist Church. She had heard that every person 65 years old or over would begin receiving monthly checks from the government. Knowing that many

of the elderly blacks could neither read nor write, she organized the school to teach them to write their names. Rev. Varner was moderator of the Northwestern Association when he died.¹³

In 1947, the church's choir stand and pulpit were enlarged. Church minutes of June 28, 1948, include a report of some lumber donated and bills for additional materials. July 7, 1948, minutes include costs of \$102.44 for paint and other building materials.¹⁴

In August 20, 1953, church members met in a special business meeting to initiate a building program for a new church. Each member was to contribute \$12 a month.¹⁵ The work apparently was going slowly, however, until the church found a "church-building pastor", the Rev. M.R. Lester, Sr. The congregation hired Rev. Lester in December 1953 on a part-time basis, giving him time to finish his work at his existing church before moving full-time to Pilot Point. Brother Larry Trammel was chairman of the deacons at that time, and Brothers Otis London, Zeke Holloway and Aaron Phillips were trustees. Mrs. Tiny Jackson was church secretary.¹⁶

On a cold day in February 5, 1954, when the ground was covered with ice, Rev. Lester met with the congregation and plans were made to build a new church. The church borrowed \$2,500 from Denton Federal Savings and Loan Association and hired L.E. Alfred Construction Company of Fort Worth, Texas, to build a sanctuary with a baptistery.¹⁷ The Pope Masonic Lodge #204 laid the cornerstone which is inscribed with the names of L.D. Varner and W.M. Harris, who were not only members of the Masonic Lodge, but also trustees of the church.

A dining room was added in 1956, the same year the Northwestern Baptist Association meeting again convened at County Line First Baptist Church.¹⁸

After Rev. Lester, Sr. resigned, Rev. J.L. Crane accepted the church pastorate in 1958 and remained for several years. During his leadership, the church paid off the cost of the new dining room. In 1958, a ladies lounge and restrooms were added to the church, the church also bought a water fountain, two air conditioner units and a soft-drink machine. In 1981, under the leadership of Rev. Frank Lawson, the church purchased an organ and a piano.¹⁹

Rev. J.B. Thomas Sr. was called to pastor the County Line First Baptist Church in January 1983. He accepted in April 1983. During his first year, the sanctuary was remodeled. Through nineteen years of service, Rev. Thomas continued to lead the church through grace. Rev. Thomas, his wife, and members of the church have been actively involved in the National Sunday Church School and Baptist Training Union. He also led development of the church choir, which has been invited to participate in musicals at several churches in surrounding cities. The choir recorded an album titled "Showers of Blessings" in March 1986.²⁰ During the next few years, the church replaced the piano and purchased an organ, drum set, tables and chairs for the dining room, ceiling fans, a heating system and air conditioners, a bus and a van. The entire church was remodeled in 1990 to enlarge the sanctuary and add classrooms and with the front facing south.²¹ Rev. Thomas resigned on Oct. 17, 2004, after 21 years of service to the church.

The church called Rev. Reginald T. Brown on February 2, 2005, and he became pastor on Feb. 27, 2005. During Rev. Brown's leadership, the church has purchased

another organ and piano, replacing the used ones bought in the 1990s, and a computer for the administrative offices. The church also has begun to gradually make minor building improvements such as painting the church porch, adding eaves and overhangs around the roof, and changing the ramp to stairs leading into the sanctuary.²² Under the leadership of Pastor Brown the church continues to participate in the Northeastern, formerly known as Northwestern, Baptist Convention. June 18 - 24, 2006 the youth department attended a week long convention located in Baltimore, Maryland.

December 3 – 8, 2006, Rev. Brown attended the Sunday School Publishing Board 2006 National Convention USA, Inc. Conference in Nashville, Tennessee.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

Throughout its history, through one move and several name changes, the County Line First Baptist Church has become center for the entire black population in northeast Denton County. As the first church for African Americans in Pilot Point and northeast Denton County and the only active Baptist church for blacks, the County Line First Baptist Church has played a significant role for the entire black community in that area. It has been a gathering place for its members for worship, for study and for social occasions and an active participant in state and national associations of black Baptist churches. County Line also has been a center for the entire African American community surrounding Pilot Point, the place where many people who are not church members come for ceremonial occasions such as weddings and funerals and for social occasions.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

¹ Josephine Williams. Interview with Valerie Scott, County Line First Baptist Church Member, Beth Stribling and Nita Thurman, Members, Denton County Historical Research and Marker Committee, November 12, 2006. Tape recording and transcript available at County Line First Baptist Church office.

² County Line First Baptist Church 122nd Church Anniversary 1985 Publication, p. 1.

³ *Handbook of Texas* Online, s.v., Pilot Point, Texas.
http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/PP/hgp4_print.html (accessed December 15, 2006).

⁴ Williams, 2006.

⁵ Deed Records of Denton County, Vol. Z, p. 15, Office of Denton County Clerk, Denton County Courts Building, Denton.

⁶ Deed Records, Vol. Z, p. 15.

⁷ Williams, 2006.

⁸ Williams, 2006.

⁹ “Negro Baptists In Session.” *Dallas Morning News*, August 31, 1900, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Dallas Morning News*, August 31, 1900, p. 5

¹¹ *Pilot Point Post Signal*, June 1984. Photo of Church members who had attended their first out-of-state convention. Photo taken after their return to Pilot Point. (no article title, day of month or page number). Clipping in Church file.

¹² Williams, 2006.

¹³ Williams, 2006.

¹⁴ Church Minutes, County Line First Baptist Church of Pilot Point, June 28 and July 7, 1948 (no page numbers).

¹⁵ Church Minutes, August 20, 1953 (no page numbers).

¹⁶ Church Minutes, December 21, 1953 (no page numbers).

¹⁷ Church Minutes, February 5, 1954 (no page numbers).

¹⁸ Williams, 2006.

¹⁹ Billy J. Scott. Interview with Valerie Scott, County Line First Baptist Church Member, Beth Stribling and Nita Thurman, Members, Denton County Historical Research and Marker Committee, November 12, 2006. Tape recording and transcript available at County Line First Baptist Church office.

²⁰ Scott, 2006.

²¹ Scott, 2006.

²² Rev. Reginald T. Brown. Interview with Valerie Scott, County Line First Baptist Church Member, Beth Stribling and Nita Thurman, Members, Denton County Historical Research and Marker Committee, November 12, 2006. Tape recording and transcript available at County Line First Baptist Church office.

V. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Pope Masonic Lodge #204 AF-AM, Ledger Book, Pilot Point, Texas 1911-1963.
Deposited at the Denton County Courthouse-on-the-Square, Denton, Texas.