

THE COVENANTERS OF CHESTER COUNTY, SC

A HISTORY OF
THE ROCKY CREEK REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of those who once worshipped in the Rocky Creek Covenanter Church in Chester County, SC and to the Saviour who sustained them, Jesus Christ - Messiah the Prince.



Rocky Creek Cemetery looking north

Preface

This book is the second in a series on the Reformed Presbyterian congregations which existed in Chester and Fairfield Counties of South Carolina. The sessional records of these churches no longer exist. The information herein has been gleaned from many sources.

Hopefully these little books will serve to bring together those things that are known concerning these churches.

Acknowledgements

The Chester County Genealogical Society has over the last three years been very helpful to me. I especially want to thank Mrs. Jean Agee and Mrs. Jean Nichols for their assistance.

The Chester County Library also was a valuable source of information for these studies.

The photographs were taken by Rev. William R. Roberts of Heath Springs, SC. William is the Historian of the General Synod of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.

As in the first volume of this series, I want to thank Rev. Dr. Reid W. Stewart of Pittsburgh, PA for supplying information, encouragement and a wonderful bibliography to which I will continue to make additions in the future

I want to thank Dr. Bruce Stewart. If Bruce had not directed me to Reid, these little books would probably not have seen the light of day.

Thank you to Dr. Dwight Pearson for taking time from his busy schedule at the Chester ARP Church to help a fellow pastor pursue one of the joys of his life. Dwight led me to the Rocky Creek site after I had a difficult time locating it.

Table of Contents

Title page.....	i
Dedication.....	iii
Preface.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
A History of the Rocky Creek Church.....	2
The Church Session.....	5
The Rocky Creek Cemetery.....	6
A.R. Presbyterians Carry on History.....	9
Footnotes.....	13
Appendix	
How to Get There.....	14
Possible Location of the Old Church Building.....	15
Layout of the Rocky Creek Cemetery.....	16
Select Historical Reformed Presbyterian Bibliography...17	
Southern United States of America	



Introduction

In 1876 Rev. D. S. Faris wrote, "Before the church in SC began to decline there were five meeting houses, besides a number of societies or out stations, where there was occasional preaching. The centre and parent of all was Edgar's meeting house, afterwards called Rocky Creek, and finally the Brick Church. It was Edgar's because Adam Edgar, one of the earliest elders, ceded the land on which it stood. This house was called Rocky Creek from the stream near which it stood; and afterwards the Brick Church when the old log structure was removed and a comfortable brick building erected. Near this meeting house was the tent, a permanent shelter for the ministers to stand in when the great union sacraments were so often held. The spot with the burying ground near it, in which lie the remains of King, McKinney, Riley and Donnelly, may well be viewed with a kind of sacred regard by Covenanters." (1)

May these pages reintroduce us to the Covenanters of Rocky Creek. Even though the church building is gone and all that remains is the cemetery, indeed this is sacred ground.



The grave of Rev. Thomas Donnelly

A History of the Rocky Creek Church

In the introduction it is stated that the center and the parent church of all the Covenanter churches in Chester and Fairfield Counties was the Brick Church. This church began as a society which was formed about 1750 and named Edgar's meeting house. Adam Edgar, who was an elder in this church in 1799, gave the land upon which the congregation would be established. The church was organized as a particular congregation on November 10, 1772. (Adam's son was elected an elder in 1801 and later in 1819 formed the first session of Bethel Congregation, Illinois.) Sometime later the name of the church was changed to Rocky Creek which ran near by. At first it was a log structure then the log building was replaced with a brick building about 1810. Hence it became known as the "Brick Church."

The first pastor of the Rocky Creek congregation was Rev. William Martin. He was pastor from November 10, 1772 until March 12, 1801. He preached here as well as at the "Burnt Church," which the British destroyed, and in other congregations. His was a ministry which strengthened the Covenanter cause in the south. He was a good preacher, yet he had his problems. Intemperance caused him to be dismissed from Old Catholic Presbyterian Church, where he supplied. This same problem along with slave holding led him to be deposed by the Reformed Presbytery of America on March 12, 1801. This event ended his pastorate at Rocky Creek.

Martin still continued to preach at various gatherings of Covenanters, until having been injured in a fall from a horse. He later died on October 25, 1806. Glasgow states, "He was a large, fine-looking man, a proficient scholar, and eloquent preacher, and an able divine." (2) Robert Lathan, in his excursions wrote, "What John Knox was to Scotland, William Martin was to Rocky Creek." (3)

Rocky Creek's second pastor was Rev. James McKinney. Of the Rocky Creek congregation's pastors, McKinney's was the shortest and most tragic pastorate. Being installed on August 11, 1802, he died September 16, 1802, after being pastor only a month. Rev. James McKinney was born in Cookstown, County Tyrone, Ireland on November 16, 1759. He later entered the University of Glasgow, Scotland from which he graduated in 1778. Along the way he studied medicine and theology. The Reformed Presbytery of Ireland licensed him on May 19, 1783. He was installed as pastor of the Kirkhills or Dervock, County Antrim, Ireland on October 4, 1783. Here he pastored for ten years. After falling into disfavor with the British in Ireland because he sympathized with those who were

engaged in the Irish rebellion, he escaped to America in 1793. He traveled as a missionary to the Covenanters from Vermont to Carolina along the way he organized congregations. He and Rev. William Gibson constituted the Reformed Presbytery of America at Philadelphia, PA, May 1798. At this time he was pastoring in New York. Glasgow stated that, "In November, 1800, he with the Rev. S. B. Wylie, constituted a committee of the Reformed Presbytery to visit the churches throughout the south to abolish slavery from the pale of the Covenanter church." (4) This committee is the same one which deposed Rev. William Martin.

At the time of McKinney's death, his family had still not moved to Chester County from the state of New York. He left behind eight children, three sons and five daughters. He is buried in the Brick Church cemetery.

Rev. Thomas Donnelly pastored the Brick Church from October 16, 1802 until August 14, 1816. He was pastor when the log meeting house was removed and the brick structure built. Pastor Donnelly came from Ireland to America in 1791. Upon completing his education at Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA, he studied theology under Rev. William King. He was licensed by the Reformed Presbytery of North America at Coldenham on June 24, 1799. Rev. James McKinney handled the licensure procedure for Mr. Donnelly. (5)

Rev. Gavin McMillan writes of Donnelly, "He was particularly attentive to the interests of his flock, visiting from house to house, and thus making himself acquainted with their spiritual condition, and adapting his instructions and counsels to their various circumstances." (6)

During Donnelly's pastorate there was a division in the congregation. This occurred when Rev. John Riley came to pastor in the Chester area in 1813. Riley advocated "liberal views" concerning civil relations. The difficulty was in their differing views of how the church ought to relate to the state. Donnelly clung to the historic Covenanter position which advocated separation from the state, or government until the government swore allegiance to Christ.

Riley was more of a moderate in his views concerning these issues. This caused a division in the Covenanters of Chester County. The situation eventually led to Rev. Donnelly giving up the work at the Brick Church to form a new congregation called Bethesda, which was made up of his supporters.

Rev. Hugh McMillan was the final pastor of Rocky Creek. Installed on May 18, 1822, he pastored here until October 6, 1828. He was the only pastor of Rocky Creek who was born in

Chester County. His parents were Hugh and Jane McMillan. His date of birth was February 8, 1794.

His early education was under a Mr. John Orr. He later graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1818. Hugh served as Professor of Languages at South Carolina College, Columbia, South Carolina for one year. He took up the study of theology under the tutelage of the Rev. S. B. Wylie, DD in Philadelphia. Licensed by the Presbytery of Philadelphia on April 4, 1820, he served in the west and the south as a missionary. In 1822 he became pastor of Rocky Creek.

When pressures came upon him and his flock because of their opposition to slavery, he proposed that they leave the area and relocate to one of the free states. In 1828 he removed to Xenia, Ohio with much of his congregation. He received a call to the united congregations of Xenia and Massie's Creek, Greene County, Ohio. When the Reformed Church divided in 1833, he went with the New School branch of the Covenanter church.

With the passing of the Covenanters from Chester County the story of the Rocky Creek Church comes to an end. The church was disorganized April 6, 1829. Many years ago the brick building was removed from its site. All that is left is the cemetery which is carefully tended by members of the Chester ARP Church, Chester, South Carolina. The cemetery now lies on property that is owned by a paper company. Pines are grown for harvesting around the graveyard today in 1997 where souls used to be reaped and built up for the Lord.

The Church Session

Twenty one men served on the session of the Rocky Creek Church during its existence. Below is a list of their names and their times of service:

William Anderson	1772-1788	Died 1788
James Stinson	1772-1796	Died 1796
Adam Edgar	1779-1799	Died 1799
Samuel Laughridge	1779-1794	Died 1794
Thomas McClurkin	1779-1816	Certified to form Bethesda Congregation
Hugh McMillan	1789-1826	Died 1826
James McQuiston	1789-1793	Died 1793
Robert Hemphill	1792-1809	Died 1809
John Nisbet	1792-1822	Died 1822
Archibald McMillan	1798-1819	Removed to Sparta, IL
James Monford	1798-1819	Removed to Sparta, IL
James Willson	1798-1830	Removed to Morning Sun, Ohio
John Cooper	1801-1821	Died 1821
William Edgar	1801-1805	Removed to Duck River, TN
John McNinch	1801-1804	Relation dissolved
Hugh McQuiston	1801-1830	Removed to Cedarville, Ohio
David Smith	1801-1816	Certified to form Bethesda Cong.
Daniel McMillan	1810-1830	Removed to Cedarville, Ohio
John Orr	1810-1830	Removed to Princeton, Indiana
Alexander Weir	1822-1829	Removed to Cedarville, Ohio
Dorrence B. Woodburn	1822-1830	Removed to Bloomington, Indiana

The Rocky Creek Cemetery

On March 24, 1957 Dr. and Mrs. James W. Crowder copied the markers. (7) In 1997, the markers are still in very good shape.

MARTHA COOPER/Died 23 January 1813/aged about 91 years

MARTHA COOPER/Died 21 March 1823/aged 25 years

JOHN COOPER/Died 4 August 1828/in his 76th year

Rev. THOMAS DONNELLY/Died 28 November 1847/in his 76th year of his age/and the 46th of his ministry/He was a native of Ireland/And for many years/Pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian Church/In this vicinity/For him to live was Christ/To die gain

AGNESS DONNELLY/Wife of Rev. THOMAS DONNELLY/Died 4 April 1848/in her 67th year

JAMES KELL/Died 19 November 1793/in his 25th year

SARAH KELL/Died 20 December 1795/in her 10th year

Rev. WILLIAM KING/Died 24 August 1798/aged about 50 years/
Within this humble tomb pale death has laid/A King who mortal sceptre never swayed/But he himself did rule by Jesus' laws/In grace and holy life a pattern was/In love to God and man he shone conspicuously/And walked with God in deep humility/In faithfulness and zeal for Jesus' cause/Few of his fellows to him equal was/But zeal so mixed in him with moderation/Made even foes view him with admiration/Tho deeply skilled in human learning, he/Taught truths divine with great simplicity/That perfect God might make his saints thereby/And through his means Christ's body edify/The Pastor's, Husband's, Parent's care he shew'd/While he in earthly house did make abode/His loss by all bewail'd, tho'felt by none/So much as by this people left alone/ His clay here lies, his soul to heaven fled/His people he left on God for to be fed

LUCRETIA KNOX/ Daughter of HUGH and JANET KNOX/ Born 1 January 1811/Died 14 September 1835

Rev. JAMES McKINNEY/Died 16 September 1802/aged about 45 years/Death's hand, tho' cold, strikes a most certain blow/In wafting Zion's sons from toil below/To place them in the Father's house above/To see him in the fullness of his love/Ecclesia wails her noble champion laid/In this low tomb to Death his tribute's paid/A husband kind a tender parent he/To friend and foes a friend he wish'd to be/Tho' few in

letters, human or divine/Or grace or nature's gifts did so
much shine/Yet, hated by unworthy world, he/By God was
thought above its company/Amidst its threats his clay in
quiet lies/While his immortal part has reached the
skies/Truth's foes rejoiced to see her Hero fall/That to
their idols they may join withal/Spare boasts, truth's foes,
tho' whirling winds to heaven/Elijah bore, Elisha soon was
given/By him who in the greatest love can raise/Another
champion in McKinney's place

HUGH McMILLAN/Originally from Ireland/One of the most zealous
and earliest of the members of the Reformed Church in South
Carolina to which he continued firmly attached until
death/Died 5 January 1818/in his 66th year

JANE McMILLAN/Wife of HUGH McMILLAN/Died 5 November 1825/aged
about 75 years

JOHN McMILLAN/Son of JOHN and MARY McMILLAN/Died 1 October
1821/aged 1 year/6 months/28 days

MARGARET McMILLAN/A native of County Antrim in
Ireland/Consort of ALEXANDER McMILLAN/Died 2 August 1832/aged
78 years

HUGH McMILLAN/a dear and hopeful child/Died 14 July 1827/in
his first year

MARTIN MCMILLAN/Died 10 October 1826/aged 72 years

HANNAH NISBET/Wife of JOHN NISBET/Died 13 August 1847/aged 65
years

JOHN NISBET/Died 20 December 1847/aged 70 years

JAMES NISBET/Died 20 October 1793/aged near 50 years

NANCY NISBET/Wife of JAMES NISBET/Died 17 October 1802/aged
50 years

HANNAH NISBET/Daughter of J.T. and J.H. NISBET/Died 24 April
1836/aged 2 months

WILLIAM NISBET/Son of JOHN and HANNAH NISBET/Died 17 August
1847/aged 50 years

JAMES L. RALPH/24th S.C. Infantry/CSA/no dates

Rev. JOHN REILY/Died 25 August 1820/aged 50 years/This tomb
contains his dust; no more/His voice is heard where it was
heard before/His wife, his people, mourn his labor's end/And
friendly neighbors a departed friend/His gain their loss, his

life by death secure/In endless mansions, where joys are
pure/Ye mourners look to Zion's sovereign Lord/Who can to you
another guide afford

Mrs. JANE REILY/Wife of REV. JOHN REILY/Died 25 August
1846/aged near 80 years

JOHN WILSON/Died 6 October 1826/aged 8 years/10 months/27
days

A.R. Presbyterians Carry On History

(This article was published in the News and Reporter, Chester, SC on October 18, 1978. It appears the writer confused the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod with the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, in both the title and also the photo captions which were in the original article.)

There were: 20 cars, with headlights on, moving down the rural Chester County road toward the old cemetery, led by a sheriff's escort and carrying about 75 Reformed Presbyterians, radiantly enthusiastic as they sang the old Psalms.

The people beside the road, in typical Southern fashion, took off their hats in respect for the dead.

What they didn't realize as the caravan passed was that the latest death involved had been in 1847. It was the historical commemoration of Reformed Presbyterianism in South Carolina, observed by the Southeast Presbytery of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, on Friday and Saturday, October 13-14, in Chester County.

Over two centuries before, the first "Covenanters" had moved into the Piedmont along the banks of Rocky Creek, coming from Pennsylvania, but also from the old countries of Scotland and Ireland. John McDonald and his wife had pioneered the town of Chester in about 1750, only to be massacred by the Cherokees in 1761.

Crucial to the development had been the announcement posted by Rev. William Martin, pastor of the R.P. congregation of Kellswater, County of Antrim, N. Ireland, on Jan 3, 1772, "To give notice to his present and former hearers that have a design to embrace this favorable opportunity to go to a country (S. Carolina) where they may enjoy the comforts of life in abundance with the free exercise of their religious sentiments." Five boatloads sailed from Belfast in September of that year. As it turned out, the "abundance" consisted primarily of game to be hunted and trees to be felled, but the "free religion" was very real.

They built their first log house of worship The Rocky Creek Reformed Presbyterian Church building in 1773; and six other congregations were organized one by one. At the merger of many of the Reformed in the north into the new Associated[sic] Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1782, the Carolina societies continued the R.P. name and heritage until the official, national reconstitution of the denomination by

James McKinney and his collaborators in 1798. To a large degree, today's Reformed Presbyterians owe their church to the Scotch-Irish of Chester County and elsewhere in the southern Piedmont.

The observance in Chester began with the communion service of the stated fall meeting of Southeast Presbytery on Friday evening, Oct. 13, Rev. David Alexander, pastor of Second Street Presbyterian Church, Albermarle, N.C., who had been responsible for planning the services, had engraved by hand over 100 polished brass communion tokens, disk-shaped, marked RPCES on one side and TOKEN 1978 on the other. Though distributed in advance, they were not turned in at the actual observance of the sacrament, as in the old days, but retained as souvenirs. The Presbytery had prepared psalm booklets and these were sung, just as in the old days. Dr. Barton Payne, professor at Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., let[sic] the worshippers in reviewing the R.P. distinctive beliefs in respect to the inerrancy of Scripture and the anticipated earthly kingship of Christ, which marked Covenanters, then and now.

Saturday afternoon was caravan time. First stop was the site of what, after 1810, was the "Old Brick Church" of the Rocky Creek congregation. The building is gone, but the cemetery has been well kept by the Chester Scouts, encouraged by Dr. and Mrs. Malcolm Marion of Chester. The iron gate and stone wall stand well preserved, for which the R.P. General Synod so faithfully took offerings in the 1890's and early 1900's.

Rev. Werner Mietling of the Lexington Church, N.C. had prepared xeroxed copies of four of the long poems that mark the graves of the former R.P. pastors Rev. Mr. King, McKinney, Riley, and Donnelly. The concluding lines on Rev. McKinney's gravestone still reads, "Spare boasts, truth's foes: though whirling winds to heaven Elijah bor, Elisha soon was given by Him who, in the greatest love, can raise Another champion in McKinney's place."

The Reformed Presbyterians began to move to Ohio and Illinois so that by 1832 only one congregation remained in South Carolina. But it was these covenanters who built the R.P. churches that have continued to this day in the "Northeast Territory", such as Sparta or Coulterville in southern Illinois.

Rev. Thomas Donnelly served as moderator for the 7th R.P. Synod in 1818; and it is true that next year (1979) will mark the 157th General Synod, R.P.C.E.S. But though he died in 1847 and the last R.P. Church in the area, Bethesda, at Hazelwood, Chester County, was officially dissolved in the following year, the gathering on Oct. 14 still maintained a number of personal links with the past.

Mr. and Mrs. Harold Faris came from Kansas City to represent their distant ancestor Faris, who had served as a ruling elder in the early days of the Rocky Creek congregation.

Mr. Hugh Henry of Aiken, S.C. was present and related tales from the life of his great grandfather Henry who, at his death in 1867 was the last of the older S.C. Covenanters---he would never affiliate with another denomination. If only he could have waited a little longer---well, 75 years longer, because it was not until 1942 that Reformed Presbyterianism returned to the Piedmont, with the Faith RP Church, Charlotte, N.C., and 1945, with the Augusta St. Church, Greenville, S.C.

From the cemetery, located seven miles outeast of Chester (highway 44) the caravan wound its way to old Catholic, whose present building stands three miles west on highway 97. It received its name because it was "Catholic" (universal) for all the Scottish Presbyterian bodies, starting in 1759. The present (U.P.U.S.) structure back on the old site in the 1840's. But in 1773 the R.P.'s who by this time constituted the majority of the congregation, put up their own building, one mile southeast. As an early account describes it, "here in the summer of 1773 these pious Covenanters might be seen from day to day, felling trees and clearing a space of ground upon which they reared a large log meeting house, many of them living in tents at home, till a place was provided for their services." The caravan could only examine the site---no building---it had been burned by the Tories in 1780. The R.P.'s had no love for the English crown!

The last two stopping points were three miles east (highway 901) on the soil of Mr. Martin's own farm. There, by the stones that remained from his home, Mr. William Martin himself spoke to the group---a descendant of the fighting pastor's brother, James Martin. Their family had moved to Illinois, but some later returned to South Carolina.

The group drank the cool water that still flows from the rocks, over which a spring house once stood. The final service was at the Rev. William Martin's grave nearby.

Before Rev. Lawrence Withington, of the Anderson Church, and moderator of the SE Presbytery, R.P.C.E.S., pronounced the final benediction, the tribute written by Adam Loughridge, principal of the Theological Hall, Belfast, of today's Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland, which he had composed for the 200th anniversary of Martin's ordination (1757-he was the first R.P. minister to be ordained in Ireland) was read: "We accept the challenge of his life of courage and fidelity to principle, and we count it an honor to be the heirs and successors of such worthy men in maintaining the same cause, "For Christ's crown and covenant".

So his heirs in America sang the stirring metrical version of Psalm 72, "Christ shall have dominion, over land and sea...", inspired to live more faithfully for our Saviour and King.



Rocky Creek Cemetery looking west
March 21, 1996

Footnotes

1 Rev. D.S. Faris, "Reminiscences of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in South Carolina," The Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter Volume XIV, Feb. 1876, pp.57,58

2 William Melancthon Glasgow, History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America (Baltimore, MD: Hill and Harvey Publishers, 1888) p. 574

3 Robert Lathan, "An Excursion-III," The ARP, Volume XXXV, No. 36, 6 September, 1888

4 Glasgow, p. 602

5 Constitution and Minutes of the Reformed Presbytery of North America, p. 3

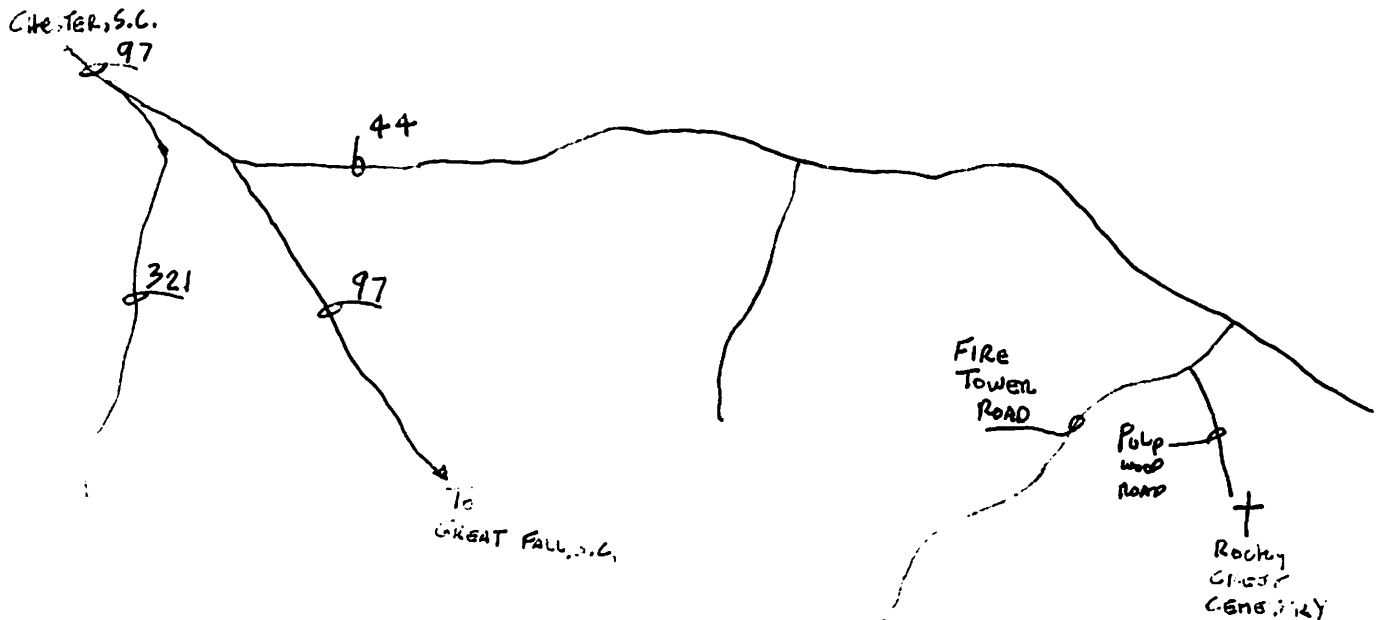
6 William B. Sprague, Annals of the American Associate, Associate Reformed and Reformed Presbyterian Pulpit (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1869) p. 28

7 Louise Kelly Crowder, Tombstone Records of Chester County, SC and Vicinity, Volume I (South Carolina Tricentennial, 1970) pp. 36-37

Appendix

HOW TO GET THERE:

The Rocky Creek Cemetery is approximately 6 miles from Chester, SC. If you get on Highway 97 in Chester and head in the direction of Great Falls, SC, you will not go far until you veer off to the left on county road 44 on which you will travel until you come to a road on your right which is Fire Tower Road. Turn to your right on Fire Tower Road and go about a quarter mile. Look to your left. The pulpwood road on which the cemetery is located is hard to see. Park your vehicle safely on the main road and walk down the pulpwood road. You will pass through pines. Eventually you will come to the clearing where the cemetery is located.



POSSIBLE LOCATION OF THE OLD CHURCH BUILDING
March 21, 1996

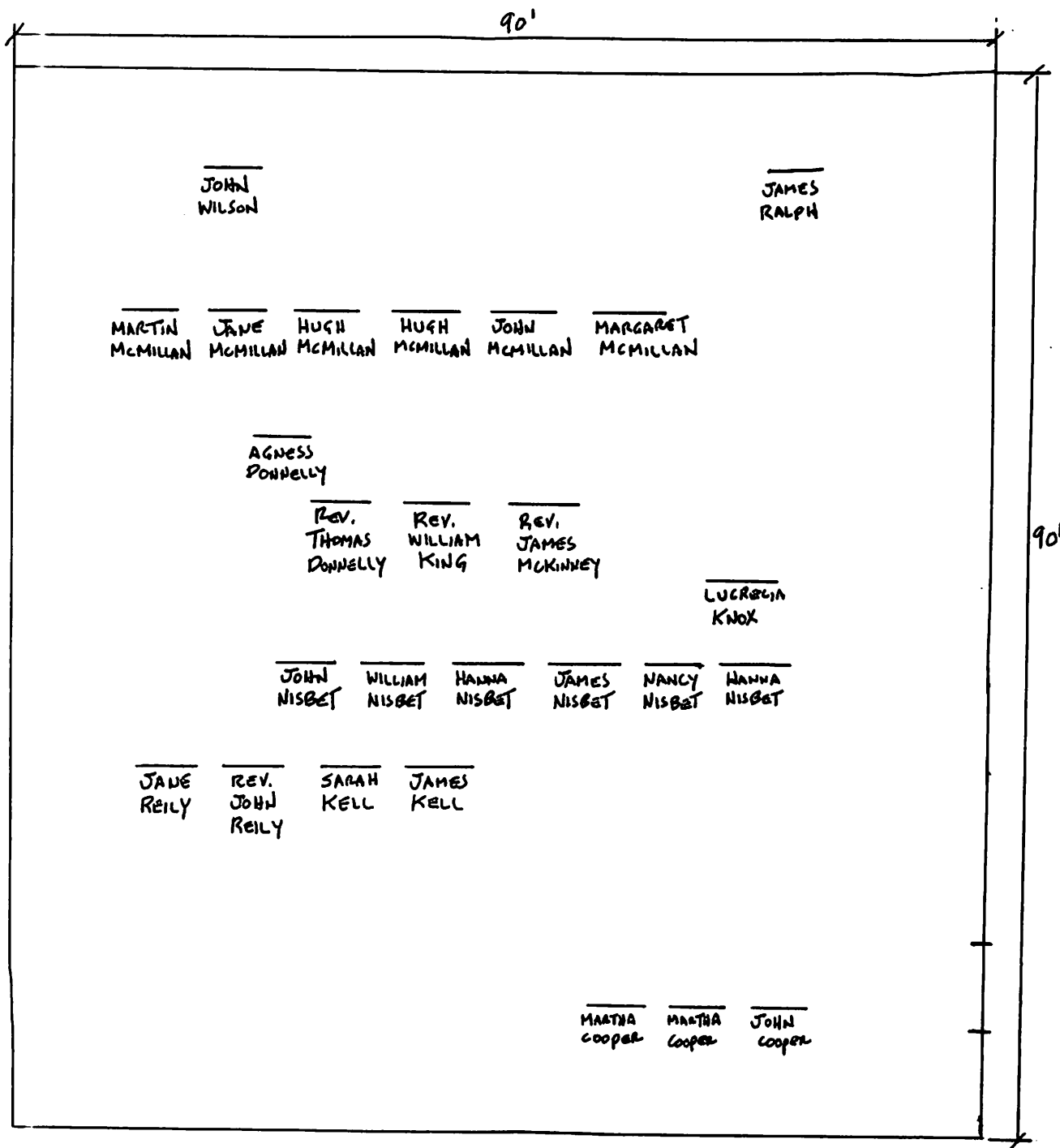
During a recent excursion to the Rocky Creek Cemetery, Rev. William Roberts and I searched the surrounding area for the church site. It seemed to be a fruitless search because the ground outside the cemetery is covered with pine needles and pine trees. As we continued our search, about 200 feet north of the cemetery, we came across brick chips which appeared to be from very old brick. In the midst of the brick chips we found an arrow head which was broken. Could this have been shot at the church building during an attack or had it been lost by hunters of long ago? We don't know.

It is our best guess that the Brick Church was located 200 feet north of the cemetery, perhaps covering part of the old pulpwood road. The terrain around the area of the cemetery also supports our guess. The area around the cemetery drops off, in some areas sharply. The area north of the cemetery has the largest level area for a building site.



Possible site of the Rocky Creek Church

The Rocky Creek Cemetery AS OF MARCH 21, 1996



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Southern United States of America

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