

South Liberty Church of Christ, historical gem of the county

Written by George Browning
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“On Sunday morning Oct. 12, 1941 I was permitted once more after a virtual absence of forty years to sit in on the worship hour of this quaint century old church so precious to us all...”

Thus begins the seventy year old recollections attributed to Charlie Martin, after paying a visit to South Liberty Church of Christ, another one of the hidden, historical gems of Washington County.

The church was started in October 31, 1842 by a group of believers in the South Liberty community who saw a need for sharing the Gospel with their neighbors. It's a mission that Gary Smith, South Liberty's current Treasurer, says they still take very seriously.

Smith is one of the congregates who has access to South Liberty's early records, a fascinating collection that includes an original copy of the church's first Register. Martin's reflective piece, titled “Memories and Appreciations South Liberty Church”, is also among the records.

In the Register, the church's first set of elders, deacons, and the original sixty-three members ascribe their commitment to Christ's Church, stating that “upon the Bible, and the Bible alone, we are willing to unite with all the Believers in Jesus Christ throughout the Whole World”.

“It was called the Church of Christ at the Harrison School House originally,’ according to Smith. ‘ It may have been a school before then or they may have met in the school house.” Wherever the congregation met during those first few years, the records show that a new brick church house was eventually built upon land adjacent to the Harrison School lot. The plot was deeded to the congregation by Leonard and Elizabeth Wyman for the price of one dollar. The deed is dated December 25, 1854.

This building burned down in 1888. “Yes, I attended church in the old brick building,’ Martin confirms in his reflections. “I have always had a vivid recollection of its burning.” He explains that the incident happened one night after church during a week long revival while everyone was fast asleep.

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The church house currently sitting on the site was built on December 16, 1889. The records appointed William Worley, J. L. Shanks, John Durnil, L.D. Sounder and Levi Martin as caretakers for this building.

This third church building hasn't seen too many cosmetic changes since then. A couple classrooms added in the 1950's, some remodeling done during the 70's. The church celebrated its centennial in the fall of 1942 with a day-long church meeting. An event to acknowledge their sesquicentennial, the 150 year anniversary, was also held in 1992.

Like a lot of the older churches in Washington County, the congregation has shrunk in numbers since South Liberty's heyday, but the church on old Harrison School's lot has fared better than others. "We have 40 to 50 active members," Smith says.

The congregation stays active with a scattering of events throughout the year, and they received a shot in the arm when John Denny started preaching at their church full time in 2012. Smith confidently brags on Denny's preaching, stating that he's a pull-no-punches kind of guy who relies solely on Biblical doctrines to guide churchgoers along their Christian walk. "We now have one of the best preachers in Washington County," Smith brags.

South Liberty Church of Christ is located on State Road 135, about three miles north of Palmyra.