

★ SCHOOL: *Revisiting history of BES*

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from the Ellendale-Hickory Highway. It was begun because of a division with Pisgah Lutheran Church. The first church building was opened in 1887. The Christian spirit was evident when the church allowed their building to be used by the Pisgah Lutherans after the Pisgah Church was destroyed by fire. The present building was constructed under the leadership of Cline Harbinson and was opened in 1952. Several other modifications have been made over the years. It originally was affiliated with the Tennessee Synod of the Lutheran Church and is now affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The church has been led over the years by members of families with last names of Richey, Hall, Bowman, Deal, Huffman, Sharpe, and others.

Hopewell Reformed Church

Many of the Germans who settled in the Wittenburg Township were of the German Reformed faith. About 1845, they built a “Meeting House” on land belonging to Mauring Price near the Muster Ground along the present Bowman Cutover Road. The building was constructed of strong timbers but was never finished with windows and doors. Although the church was led by two different pastors named Crawford and Lentz, the church never flourished and ceased to exist. The only mark of the church is small abandoned cemetery some two miles from the spot of the former Daniel Wittenburg Mill along the Middle Little River.

Bethlehem Baptist Church

About 1825, Samuel Austin, Sr. gave a plot of land to the west of the present Bethlehem Church Cemetery. The plot was to be used for a “meeting house” for all denominations to use for worship. Many early residents were buried in a cemetery to the east of the meeting house. The largest contributor to the building was Daniel Wittenburg. His African American servants cut and hewed the logs for the building.

For about 40 years there was no organization of any denomination in the community meeting house. About 1848, Antioch Baptist representatives attempted to start another church, but it did not happen. In December 1871, the church was begun with 19 charter members with names such as Benfield, Smith, Johnson, Teague, Fox, Austin, etc. The church grew steadily with a membership of approximately 100 in 1900 to a high of approximately 800 in mid-1990.

Jonas Perkins White owned the adjoining land to the Bethlehem Meeting House and donated the land. The first building was made of hewed logs and held together with wooden pegs. This build was standing until 1900 and was sold for \$2.60. A wooden frame building was built in 1888 that lasted for 62 years. There was some controversy about who was to use the building, so a keeper of the keys was chosen. An addition was planned by the church in 1907. A bell was purchased in 1914 that was rung on “railroad time” (when the train whistle was heard from Hickory). In 1930, the church bought Aladdin lamps to light the building for revivals. The

church was first floored in 1933 from trees cut from the land of Perry Coonse. A new building was started in 1945 and opened in 1950. A new educational building was constructed and opened in 1984. Fire destroyed all but the education building in July 2015. A new sanctuary and supporting structures are now under construction.

Fellowship Advent Christian Church

Fellowship Church is in the northwestern part of Wittenburg Township on high ground between Little Rock Church and Jumping Run Branch and about one mile west of the Ellendale-Hickory Highway (NC 127). The first services were held in the old Duncan School. Sixteen people joined with two elders from surrounding counties to form the church on January 17, 1895. The church has always had a very strong mission emphasis. Ministers included Rev. L.E. Piercy and J.A. Downs. Other pastors included Hal Vannoy, William Coghlin, Floyd Bostain, Wendell DuBois, and David Ross. The church is well-known for the Christmas Drive-Thru which includes over 25 scenes related to how Bethlehem may have been at the time of the birth of Christ.

Later Churches

Other churches formed in the community included Bethlehem Church of God which was first known as Isaac Creek Church of God. The first location was in the Lail School which was located on property donated by Julius Lail. The Church was first organized with eight members. Grace Baptist Church, Friendly Baptist Church, Mountain Ridge Baptist Church, Promised Land Ministries, and Christian Fellowship were formed in the 20th century and added to the religious worship options for the Bethlehem area. Crosspoint Church has purchased land along Highway 127 near the intersection with Devil Track Road.

Final Thoughts

Houses of worship have been an integral part of the Bethlehem Community. Community residents have given of their time and resources to give birth to facilities that make possible appropriate places for worshipping in their chosen denomination. It is impressive that most of the original houses of worship still exist within the community.

The Second New Bethlehem Elementary School

The 1970’s and 1980’s were decades of rapid growth in the Bethlehem Community. Alexander Central High School opened in 1971 and West Middle School opened in the mid 1970’s. A local school bond referendum in 1980 provided money for construction of the most-needy schools in Alexander County as well as additions to West Middle and the construction of a new East Middle School. In the early 1980’s, increasing population continued to increase the need for a new Bethlehem School. Deteriorating facilities including trailers, temporary structures, and the age of the 1920.s building brought the realization that the school needed to be replaced. The Board of Education held numerous discussions concerning the needs and potential funding. Finally, funding became available through

designated sales taxes and bond money to proceed with the process of construction.

- December 1988 –

After months of study, visitations to other schools, and input from parents, staff and students, the educational specifications for the new Bethlehem Elementary School were presented to the Board of Education. The plan was presented to build a school for 700 students with supporting structures for music, art, physical education, and technology.

- August 1989 -- The school board and county commissioners worked together to find funding for the planned facility. Funding for the new school came from dedicated sales tax funds and a State Construction School Fund. Clemmer, Bush, Sills, and Abernathy, Architects of Hickory were selected to plan the facilities for a 50,000 square foot structure on 13.6 acres of land. Interestingly, Robert Clemmer, a founder of the original architectural firm was the first principal of Bethlehem School. In the early planning stages for the new school discussions were held about moving the school location to another area away from Highway 127 to an area along Bethlehem School Road. The decision was made to keep the present site so that the cafeteria, old gymnasium, and south classroom wing could be salvaged.

- December. 1989 – With assistance from Robert Austin, school superintendent, and the Board of Education led by chairman Gary Lail, the plans drawn by CBSA, Architects were approved by State School Planning officials.

- January 1990 -With approval of the county commissioners, the project was put out for bids in January 1990. The original estimate for construction was 4.8 million dollars. School personnel, parents, and community members waited with much anticipation for the next several months to hear the result of the bidding.

- April-May 1990 Hickory Construction Company was selected to build the new Bethlehem School at a bid of 4.055 million dollars in April 1990 which was considerably less than the expected bid. The Alexander County Commissioners approved the bid at their May meeting and the process began very quickly.

Ground Breaking was held in May 11, 1990 – Faculty, staff, students, county school officials, county commissioners, and community members came together to mark the beginning of construction of the new school. Speakers at the event included Dr. Warren Hollar, principal, Robert Austin, school superintendent; Gary Lail, school board chairman, Norris Keever, county commission chairman; Ruth Ledbetter, teacher; and Mike Burris, parent. Reverend Wendell DuBois gave the closing prayer and construction blessing.

- Construction – May 1990-August 1991 -- For the next 18 months, the landscape of Bethlehem School changed forever. This time was marked by excitement, challenges, discussions, negotiations, and many emotions as the old facilities passed to a new school setting that would hopefully serve a constantly changing school community. Constructing a 50,000 square foot facility was nothing short of miraculous while maintaining a learning environ-



Demolition photos of the first Bethlehem School.



Ground breaking for new school in 1990.

ment for many hundreds of students, faculty, staff, and parents. Much cooperation marked the work of Hickory Construction led by Project Superintendent Tony Hollar and the subcontractors who made safety of the children a priority. Many unique decisions were necessary to bring the construction to a successful conclusion in August 1991. Special memories include the groundbreaking, the chess match of moving whole buildings such as the one recently demolished to provide enough classroom space, the homecoming, the demolition of the old building, and the first day of school in the new building. On May 5, 1991 several hundred former students, faculty, staff, and community residents gather for reminiscing, laughter, some tears, and final building tours before the old school building was demolished. The old school bell used in the 1920’s was on display. The bell was mounted in one of the arches at the front of the new school as a reminder of the old school. Special recognition went to Edith Teague, Maynard Teague, and Katie Moretz Hollar who were students when the 1924 school was opened. The end of the

1990-91 school year signaled the end of an era as the old school building was demolished in June 1991. June was marked by the movement of all school materials out of the old building for storage in the gymnasium of the new

building and a mad rush to complete the remaining areas of the school, the parking lots, and the removal of all temporary structures and construction equipment for the start of the 1991-92 school year.

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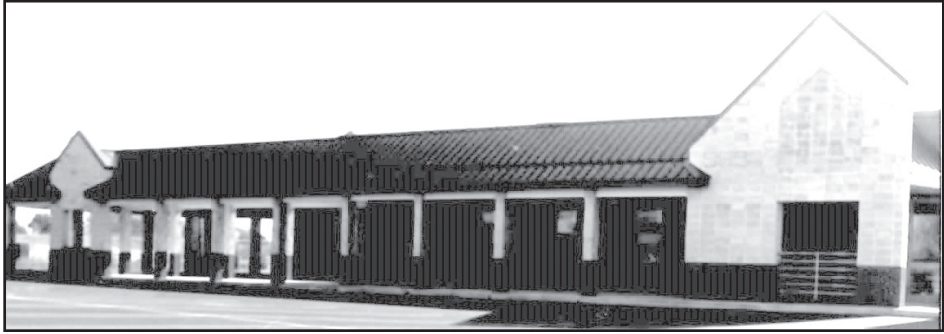
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The finished product in 1991.