

SATILLA RIVER SAINTS

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF AN EARLY MORMON STRONGHOLD IN THE WIREGRASS SOUTH

R. ETHAN CRAIGUE

SECOND EDITION
6 AUGUST 2019

© Satilla River Saints Project, 2019



Craigie & Co.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH

DOUGLAS, GEORGIA

The author wishes to express sincere appreciation and deepest gratitude to the following individuals and institutions, each of whom made important contributions to the writing of this paper.

Mr. Orson Adams	Members of the Douglas Georgia Wards, LDS
Mrs. Sandra Bradford	Members of the Pearson Georgia Ward, LDS
Dr. John G. Crowley	Elders and Sisters of the Jacksonville, Macon, and
Mrs. Coline Corbitt	Tallahassee Missions (LDS)
Mrs. Eunie Belle Craigue	The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Mrs. Lisa Craigue	Coffee County Historical Society
Mr. Richard Edward Craigue	First Baptist Church, Douglas, GA
Mrs. Renee Elliott	Huxford Genealogical Society, Inc.
Mr. Joah Fussell	Satilla Regional Library, Douglas, GA
Mrs. Marie Giddens	
Mr. Doug Gilbert	
Dr. Jonathan D. Hepworth	
Mrs. Kay Jordan	
Mrs. Lydia Lott	
Mrs. Carrol Morgan	
Mrs. Rhonda Saeed	
Mrs. Kathy Streat	
Dr. Gerald R. Webster	

*This work is dedicated to the Members of the Douglas and Pearson (GA) Wards
of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

*Their unending kindness, support, and assistance, over the years, has been invaluable.
They are a loving, generous, impossibly kind people, wholly devout to a truly immutable faith.*

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION – Coffee County and Its Peculiar Persuasions	1
 I – CHANGES, CHANCES, AND CHALLENGES	9
<i>A Fruitful Field: Social & Economic Changes circa 1900</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>A Chance Conversation: The Canova Family Connection</i>	<i>11</i>
 II – PIONEER PATRIARCHS AND THE “PECULIAR PEOPLE”	13
Elder Nephi Jensen	13
<i>Faces of the Faith: Not-So-Peculiar People</i>	<i>19</i>
 III – SOUTHERN SAINTS: A Unique Brand of Mormonism.....	24
Advantageous Adaptation: “Little Utah”	26
A Fairly Simple Affair: Cumorah Church	28
Slow, Solitary, Southern Spirituality	30
Salt Lake on the Satilla: The Early Seat of Southeastern Mormondom	31
 CONCLUSION: FRUITS OF THE HARVEST	34
 APPENDICES	36
A: Coffee County, circa 1910	36
B: Little Utah Historical Monument	37
C: The LDS Church in Georgia, 1939	39
D: Cumorah and Little Utah Historical Photographs.....	41
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	44

INTRODUCTION – Coffee County and Its Peculiar Persuasions

To any traveler passing through the fields and forests south of the *Big Bend* in the Ocmulgee River, rural Coffee County looks no different from the rest of southeast Georgia. This section of the state is often called the “Pine Barrens,” or the “Wiregrass” region. Both names are descriptive of the landscape, particularly above the Ocmulgee and Altamaha Rivers, which have been described by many as “Barren, oppressive,” and “Monotonous.”¹ The geography farther south, however, has two faces. One features low-lying creek basins coated in palmettos and live oaks, some of which turn into cypress swamps, commonly referred to as “bays.” The rest of the land is covered in vast stretches of flat, “barren,” pine forests, skirted by the famous *Aristida* – wiregrass.²

Coffee County’s manmade geography is similarly commonplace at first glance. Small clusters of old, hardwood structures occasionally appear out of the woods, likely the remnants of an extinct railroad community, or turpentine still. Every twenty miles or so, a small town rises out of the trees. Scattered throughout the area, in every town and throughout the countryside, atop hills and deep in swamps, one type of building is a constant feature: churches. One is never far from a church in most of the South, and the Pine Barrens are no exception. For the area “south of the river,” however, this was not

¹ Wetherington, *The New South Comes to Wiregrass Georgia*, 1, 3.

² John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South: 1815 to the Present* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 18; Wetherington, *The New South Comes to Wiregrass Georgia*, 3; GeorgiaInfo, “Historical Atlas of Georgia Counties,” Digital Library of Georgia, 2016, <http://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/histcountymaps/index.htm>; Thomas W. Hodler and Howard A. Schretter, *The Atlas of Georgia* (Athens: The Institute of Community and Area Development, University of Georgia, 1986).

always so.³ Early wiregrass settlers were ‘God-fearing,’ but not church-going. Two thirds of the region’s pioneers claimed no denominational affiliation. This was primarily due to the virtual absence of cultural infrastructure south of the Altamaha River. There were “no churches, no schools, and a population of which three-quarters had never heard a sermon.” This was a land speckled with “single-pen log shacks with dirt floors, inhabited by stock drovers living sometimes ten miles apart. Many of the early South Georgians had little opportunity to be churched. As more people moved into the area, however, so too did religious organizations.⁴

Free-Will’ers Among the Fatalists – Coffee’s Conspicuous Counter-Calvinism

The religion of the piney woods was, and is, as dichotomous as the landscape. South Georgians are predominantly either Methodist, or some form of Baptist – most often being associated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). In the early years of its settlement, however, there was even less religious diversity. The backwoods of the southern region of the state was originally an early haven for Primitive, or “Hardshell” Baptists, whose Calvinistic fatalism seems to have suited the severe and isolated lifestyle of South Georgians in the early 1800s. One third of South Georgians attended religious services, and half of them were Primitives. Coffee County was an exception, as it was situated in a “pocket of Methodist dominance” – though, as elsewhere, many of its first settlers did not adhere to any particular religious doctrine.⁵ Methodists’ numerical might in Coffee was conspicuous in the otherwise Hardshell-heavy Wiregrass region. Here, in a

³ Wilford Ray Fussell, Sr., “My Life History” (Douglas, GA: Edited and Printed by Timothy J. Fussell for the Douglas Family History Center, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Douglas Stake), 2.

⁴ Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South*, 18.

⁵ Jonathan D. Hepworth, “Through a Glass, Darkly: The Changing Past of Coffee County, Georgia” (Master’s Thesis, Clemson University, 2012), 74.

land where fate was preordained by a stern, sometimes ambiguous god, most of Coffee's early churchgoers were free to choose how they would spend eternity, the option having been given them by a slightly more forgiving and approachable deity than that of the somber predestinarians.⁶ This early Arminian leaning may have influenced local religion for decades or more after the first Methodist pioneers arrived. Although Baptists eventually caught-up with, and surpassed Methodists in the area, Methodism continued to hold a larger than average percentage of the county's population, and does to this day.⁷

The Methodists' cultural prevalence may even have had some influence upon the Primitive Baptists in Coffee County. There seems to have been a particular shift in views toward salvation at Hebron Church, a congregation of Primitives located southwest of Douglas on the Satilla River. There, around the close of the Civil War, the church's pastor, Rev. John "Jack" Vickers, spoke out against the "fatalists" of the Primitive church, and called on them to renounce the doctrine of "unconditional election" for that of "free will." This sounded like "missionary talk" to the Hardshells, who promptly excommunicated Vickers and his followers for an obvious breach of covenant. They also severed ties with those who opposed the move towards free-will salvation but maintained their membership. For their continued association with the man "who has departed from our faith and advances unscriptural and false doctrine," they, too, were excommunicated.⁸

⁶ John G. Crowley, Interview by the author, Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA, 26 April 2016.

⁷ Coffee County, Georgia, Nonpopulation Census Schedules for Georgia, Social Census, 1860 (National Archives Microfilm Publication T1137 reel 24) Records of the Bureau of the Census, RG 29, National Archives, Southeast Division, Morrow, GA; Christopher H. Owen, *The Sacred Flame of Love: Methodism and Society in Nineteenth-Century Georgia*, 10-56; Webster, "Geographical Patterns of Religious Denomination Affiliation in Georgia," *Southeastern Geographer*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (May 2000), 25-51.

⁸ Alabama River Primitive Baptist Association, Georgia-Florida, Minutes, 1866, 1868, quoted in Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South*, 115.

Hebron's schismatic congregation would have gone by "Vickersites," but instead became known among Hardshells by the more cutting – and easier to pronounce – name, the "Jackites." Over time, Hebron's doctrine became identical with that of the Missionary Baptists. The Jackites, however, continued to proclaim themselves to be the true Primitive church. Today the church associates itself with the Independent Baptists.⁹

"Rare Varmints"

Free-will-preaching Primitive Baptists were not the only anomaly in Coffee County's churches. Other religious irregularities existed in Douglas, the county's seat of government and its largest town. Although, as in rural areas, Methodists dominated the city, Douglas stood out among towns of its size in Wiregrass country for an early presence of Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and, remarkably, Roman Catholics. Adherents of such cosmopolitan churches were "rare varmints," as far as most rural South Georgians were concerned.¹⁰ All had emerged during the 1890s and had solidified a place among the citizens of Douglas by 1900.

It is not surprising that these denominations would be located in more urban areas. According to Jonathan Hepworth (and numerous other historians), the primary inner-denominational differences within both the Baptist and Methodist faiths lay in the distinction between "Town Religion" and "Country Religion." While rural churches were plain in structure and independent-minded, churches in town tended to be more elaborately decorated, with more liturgical services, and were more conscious of a

⁹ Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South*, 115-116; Hepworth, "Through a Glass, Darkly," 76-77; Ward, *History of Coffee County*, 103-104.

¹⁰ Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South*, 19-20.

collective municipal identity, often working together to promote the city's progress. This was ideal for high-church denominations like the Presbyterians and Anglo-Catholics.¹¹

Coffee County began as an enclave of Free Will faith in a forest filled with Calvinists. Not long after the Civil War, even more faith groups entered the already unique religious field. The presence of a variety of different denominations, and a firmly established, deeply rooted Arminian mindset toward salvation, may well have set the scene for the coming of yet another exotic newcomer to this peculiar gathering of spiritual novelties. This new group, in the eyes of the isolated South Georgians, was the strangest yet. Its clergy arrived from Utah, which might as well have been located on another planet, as far as most Southerners were concerned. Its teachings flew in the face of the predestinarian faith which dominated South Georgia. Yet, it would become well established as a predominantly rural denomination, concentrated in the parts of Coffee (and Atkinson) County surrounding the Satilla River, and would achieve continued success in its endeavors among the people of the Pine Barrens. Its major presence in far-away Coffee County was – and *is* – a notable exception to the norms of the Baptist-Methodist 'Bible Belt.'

A Mormon Majority – *in the Middle of Nowhere*

Any visitor to the Orson Adams Farm, about three miles south of Douglas, would be excused for assuming that the old, hardwood-frame chapel overlooking the property was probably once a thriving Missionary Baptist, or perhaps Methodist church. They would have seen plenty of others before arriving there. Besides, the chances that any

¹¹ John Hayes, "Hard, Hard Religion: The Invisible Institution of the New South," in *The Journal of Southern Religion* Vol. 10 (2007), 13-14; Hepworth, "Through a Glass, Darkly," 73-85.

other denomination would build a church on this remote farm down some backcountry road in South Georgia were slim. Members of the surrounding community tend to take some degree of enjoyment in watching the reactions of visitors to the place when they inform them that the rustic structure is the oldest standing Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the state of Georgia, having been built in 1907. Visibly abandoned, and in a semi-dilapidated state, the little church's congregation outgrew it more than fifty years ago and built a new building in Douglas, joining the ranks of the other well-to-do "town churches."¹²

The fun continues when they invite their guests to venture about fifteen miles southeast, across the Satilla, further into the wilderness, to a place called Axson. There they would find the former home of another, *larger* congregation of Saints, established around the same time as their neighbors to the north. They too had long since outgrown their original facility and built a church in nearby Pearson, the seat of Atkinson County, which had once been part of Coffee County. The establishment and consistent growth of not one, but *two* sizeable, vibrant congregations of the LDS Church in the primitive, Protestant wilderness of South Georgia at the turn of the last century could not have been less probable. Elsewhere in the South in the late 1890s – but especially in Georgia – Mormonism had been met with hostile contempt, and often with violence. The Saints would struggle for many years to establish a significant presence in North Georgia, while two LDS churches were flourishing (by comparison) in the remoteness of wiregrass

¹² Hepworth, "Through a Glass, Darkly," 77; Trowell, "Douglas Before Memory, 1854-1905: A Study of Everyday Life in a South Georgia Town" (Douglas, GA: Satilla Regional Library Genealogical Department, 1996), 33.

country. How was it that this came to be? What led to the founding of these churches, and why were they so successful in such an unlikely area? ¹³

Sources of Success on the Upper Satilla

The faith of the Latter-day Saints came to Coffee County quite serendipitously. A casual conversation in another state with a fellow church member, and what seems to have been an ambitious whim, brought the first LDS missionaries to the area. Its early prevalence in such an unlikely environment through such unforeseeable events and circumstances is unusual and interesting. Mormonism's success after arriving in Coffee County, though no less impressive, is more understandable upon closer examination of the factors that combined to attain that success.

Coffee County, along with other wiregrass communities, was undergoing dramatic changes – socially, economically, and politically – in the late 1800s. The advent of modern amenities, particularly of rail transportation, exposed the once isolated region and its vast natural resources, causing a major shift in the local economy. An explosion of industry caused an immense inflow of outsiders who soon came to outnumber Coffee County's "pioneer families," and took control of the social and political scene. Native-born citizens, though respected for their heritage and sense of place, found themselves losing control, and vulnerable. When Mormon missionaries appeared in the pinewoods, they found a bountiful crop of lost souls to be harvested for the Lord. Armed with unyielding determination, and an impossibly magnetic personality, a young Utahan

¹³ Hepworth, "Through a Glass, Darkly," 85-94; Patrick Q. Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Ward, *History of Coffee County*, 106; Frances Vickers Wilkes, "Coffee County's Cumorah Chapel," *Douglas Enterprise*, 13 September 1989; Catherine G. White, "History of LDS Douglas Wards," *Douglas Enterprise*, 2 September 2001.

named Nephi Jensen won first the attention, then the respect, and ultimately the warm affection of many Coffee Countians.¹⁴

The end of the LDS Church's policy of encouraging the faithful to "gather to Zion" – Utah – meant that the Mormons were there to stay. Given that most of them had been born and raised there, this was an acceptable, indeed, *logical* proposition. In an area so cut off from the influence of the General Authorities in Salt Lake City, southern Mormonism accommodated local customs and culture, enabling southern members of the LDS to retain time-honored traditions while obeying Mormon doctrine. Because they were Southerners, they carried out their doctrine in the southern style of worship. Because they were Mormons, their doctrine was that of the Latter-day faith. Thus, this unique community of Joseph Smith's *peculiar people*, were not overly peculiar in South Georgia. The Satilla Saints developed their own distinct brand of Mormonism. Their faith came from the shores of the Great Salt Lake, but their character had developed along the banks of the Satilla River.¹⁵

¹⁴ Hepworth, "Through a Glass, Darkly," 85-94; Trowell, "Douglas Before Memory," 21-24, 28-33, 43-49.

¹⁵ H. Parker Blount, "A Place Called Little Utah," *Sunstone* (March 2004), 12-18.

I – CHANGES, CHANCES, AND CHALLENGES

Events during the 1890s in the Pine Barrens of South Georgia and North Florida had tremendous influence upon the movements of the Latter-day Saints in the region. Technological advancements, economic transitions, and major social changes had left many native South Georgians without a sense of balance or stability – an ideal populace for spiritual conversion. Meanwhile, in Baker County, Florida, the LDS had gained a foothold in the small town of Sanderson. The church’s presence had come at a price, however, and had caused a member to lose his life. During a fateful conversation with the martyr’s widow, a high-spirited young missionary would haphazardly decide to venture north into what was believed to be an even more hostile field for Mormonism in Georgia. The chance decision would result in the establishment of a community of believers that would eventually become the epicenter of Mormonism in the rural Southeast.¹⁶

A Fruitful Field: Social & Economic Changes circa 1900

Nearing the end of the nineteenth century, Coffee County, like the rest of South Georgia, was steaming ahead into a new social, technological, and political era. After half a century of austere isolation from the cotton-growing piedmont behind endless, inaccessible, infertile forests, Coffee County’s pine curtain was opened with the coming of the railroad in 1871. The railroads developed first in the southern third of the county, going through what is today Atkinson County. This stimulated the growth of existing

¹⁶ 20 November 1898, *Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary*, Vol. 2, 1898-1899, Mormon Missionary Diaries, Digital Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, <http://lib.byu.edu/digital/mmd/>, [Hereafter referred to as *Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary*]; Hepworth, “Through a Glass, Darkly,” 85-94; Gaskin Avenue Committee, *From Graveyard Road to Silk Stocking Row* (Douglas, GA: Gaskin Avenue Committee, 2010); Webster, “Geographical Patterns of Religious Denomination Affiliation in Georgia.”

towns such as Pearson, McDonald, and Willacoochee. It also led to the establishment of new rail towns around stations like Kirkland, Pine Bloom, and Leliaton.¹⁷ Railroads exposed the region's abundant pine supply and brought about a boom in the naval stores industry in Coffee County. '*Timber, Turpentine and Tobacco*,' the county's economic standards for over a century, emerged during this period, and brought with them a wave of immigration.

About the same time that South Georgia's "inland island" in the pines was becoming more accessible, North Carolina's timber and turpentine industry was falling into decline. Excessive deforestation had exhausted the state's once bountiful pine forests. Timber companies now sought new areas to cut, and many of them came to Coffee County. Because of the social stigma attached to turpentine work, many whites were unwilling to work at the stills, believing the work to be a black man's job, and therefore beneath their dignity as whites. Unable to find enough laborers for their stills, the newly settled "Tar Heels," as locals often labeled the North Carolinians, began bringing in blacks from their home state to work at the turpentine stills. The influx was such that by 1900, blacks made up almost half of the population. Aside from a shift in local culture, the Tar Heel invasion also caused major changes in Coffee County's politics, its economy, and most importantly, its social status quo. Native-born residents felt increasingly outnumbered, and were losing control of their community. Any sense of stability would have been welcomed. Since many rural citizens were not officially connected to any denomination of faith, their religious life was lacking in substance,

¹⁷ Hepworth, "Through a Glass, Darkly," 46; Trowel, "Douglas Before Memory," 28-33; C.T. Trowell and Lorraine Fussell, "Exploring the Okefenokee: Railroads of the Okefenokee Realm," Occasional Paper from South Georgia No. 8, 1998, 16-19.

making them ripe for conversion. Mormonism had only to show up, and offer its message.¹⁸

A Chance Conversation: The Canova Family Connection

The story of the ‘Satilla Saints’ originated not from the north, like that of most denominations in the Pine Barrens, but from farther south, in Florida. In a settlement called Sanderson, just south of the Saint Mary’s River in Baker County, the Latter-day Saints seem to have made a significant impact. Their status there significantly improved when, in 1885, they baptized George Paul Canova into the church. The Canovas were one of St. Augustine’s old-money, Spanish Catholic families, and wielded great influence in Northern Florida. George Canova’s father had moved the family to Jacksonville for a number of years, and then west, into Baker County, where they acquired a considerable amount of land and engaged in several different enterprises, including timber and turpentine production.¹⁹

Floridians were, on average, more tolerant of Catholics than the people of other states in the Protestant-dominated South, probably due to the wealth and influence of Catholic families – including the Canovas – in Saint Augustine. Mormons, however, received much less cordial treatment. As a Catholic, George Canova had enjoyed an elevated status among the residents of Baker County, Florida. That status seems to have diminished, in the eyes of some residents, upon his joining the Latter-day Saints. After ignoring threats on his life from a group calling themselves a “Committee of Eight,” who

¹⁸ Hepworth, “Through a Glass, Darkly,” 42-66, 67-69; Gaskin Avenue Committee, *From Graveyard Road to Silk Stocking Row*, 23-28, 31-39; Trowell, “Douglas Before Memory,” 18-20, 21-24, 26-40, 43-50, 64-70.

¹⁹ Gaskin Avenue Committee, *From Graveyard Road to Silk Stocking Row*, 207-209; Hepworth, “Through a Glass, Darkly,” 85-94; Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary; La Viece Moore-Fraser Smallwood, *Salt of the South: The LDS Trail Blazers* (Jacksonville, FL: Drummond Press, 1997), 157-164.

demanded that he stop providing aide and shelter to Mormon missionaries, on the night of 5 June 1898, Canova was shot in the back while walking home from a church meeting by an unidentified gunman. His widow, Dianna Greene Canova, moved out of Sanderson following her husband's murder, but continued to play an active role in the church, opening her home for meetings and sheltering missionaries.²⁰

In November 1898, Mrs. Canova received a young elder from Salt Lake City, who would become a close friend and frequent guest, named Nephi Jensen. Upon one of his many stays, Mrs. Canova mentioned that one of her daughters lived up in Georgia, in a town called Douglas. She had married a prominent lawyer from the area named Warren P. Ward. Whether Jensen related this to, and then received direction from his superiors to go into Georgia, or whether he and his companion, J.R. Sellers, went on their own accord, is unclear. What is clear is that Jensen's conversation with Dianna Canova prompted the elders to go north into Georgia.²¹

²⁰ Gaskin Avenue Committee, *From Graveyard Road to Silk Stocking Row*; Hepworth, "Through a Glass, Darkly," 85-94; November 1898, Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary, Vol. 2, 1898-1899, <http://lib.byu.edu/digital/mmd/>; La Viece Moore-Fraser Smallwood, *Salt of the South: The LDS Trail Blazers*, 157-164.

²¹ Gaskin Ave., *Graveyard Road to Silk Stocking Row*, 207-209; Hepworth, "Through a Glass, Darkly," 86-87; November 1898, Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary, Vol. 2, 1898-1899, <http://lib.byu.edu/digital/mmd/>; La Viece Moore-Fraser Smallwood, *Salt of the South: The LDS Trail Blazers*, 157-164.

II – PIONEER PATRIARCHS AND THE “PECULIAR PEOPLE”

Jensen was instrumental in the establishment of Coffee County’s colony of Saints, as the first Mormon missionary to the area. He had a dynamic presence and tirelessly worked to establish a foothold. His mastery of Mormon apologetics, his ability as an orator, and his frank, transparent personality enabled him to win over a host of converts for the LDS church in South Georgia and North Florida. Among those converts were the patriarchs of several important ‘pioneer families’ of Coffee County. Their high standing in the community, and the large families they led to the faith gave the church a firm, homegrown foundation. Jensen would go on to achieve high status both in the worldwide church, and in the secular realm. He was an excellent speaker and theologian, and did much to promote the LDS Church, particularly in the Southern States. His later accolades give credence to the importance of his role in bringing Mormonism to the banks of the Satilla River, and helping to ensure its lasting success in Wiregrass Georgia. His successors in Coffee and, later, Atkinson County reinforced and built upon the foundation laid by Jensen, and were likewise successful in the fruitful fields of rural South Georgia.²²

Elder Nephi Jensen

His full name – just one of his many unique characteristics – was “Nephi United States Centennial Jensen,” having been born on 16 February 1876 to Loren and Christine Jensen. The Jensens had converted to the LDS Church and immigrated to Utah’s Salt

²² Hepworth, “Through a Glass, Darkly,” 85-94; “Nephi United States Centennial Jensen, 1876-1955,” *The Strangest Names in American Political History*, <http://politicalstrangenames.blogspot.com/2012/02/nephi-united-states-centennial-jensen.html>; Jeffery S. Hardy, “Nephi Jensen,” *Mormon Missionary Diaries, Digital Collections*, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, http://lib.byu.edu/digital/mmd/diarists/Jensen_Nephi.php [Hereafter shortened to *Mormon Missionary Diaries*, Lee Library, BYU]; “Nephi Jensen’s Official Record,” *Deseret News*, 27 October 1945.

Lake Valley from the Netherlands in 1861. He grew up in Salt Lake County, attending grade school in Sugar House, until his senior year in high school, when the family moved to Montezuma County, Colorado. Shortly after graduating high school, he began his obligatory mission work, at which he excelled.²³

It seems appropriate that Elder Jensen was responsible for the establishment of an unexpectedly prominent community of Latter-day Saints in South Georgia. He was a dynamic character who would go on to become something of a celebrity in the LDS Church. He was called to serve a mission to the Southern States (SSM) on 9 February 1898, and labored in the Florida Conference, which then included Florida, South Georgia, and parts of Alabama. He also served as clerk for the conference until he was released from his work in July 1900. Upon returning home, Jensen wasted no time in pursuing a family and career. On 9 April 1902, he married Margaret Smith, daughter of the pioneer Latter-day Saint, Jesse Nathaniel Smith, who was a cousin of the prophet Joseph Smith. He enrolled in classes at the Latter-day Saints College (now Brigham Young University), and later at the University of Utah, where he studied law. In February 1906, he was admitted to the state bar of the Supreme Court of Utah. That November, he was elected to the state legislature, where he served one term.²⁴

He left public office in 1907 to serve another mission to the Southern States, where, by that time, he had gained tremendous favor among Mormons and non-Mormons alike. During this time, he served as secretary for the Southern States Mission, received a

²³ Edward H. Anderson, "Mission Leaders: Nephi Jensen," *Improvement Era*, Vol. 22, 8 (June 1919), 707-708; Jeffery S. Hardy, "Nephi Jensen," Mormon Missionary Diaries, Lee Library, BYU; "Nephi Jensen's Official Record," *Deseret News*, 27 October 1945.

²⁴ Edward H. Anderson, "Mission Leaders: Nephi Jensen," *Improvement Era*, Vol. 22, 8 (June 1919), 707-708; Jeffery S. Hardy, "Nephi Jensen," Mormon Missionary Diaries, Lee Library, BYU; "Nephi Jensen's Official Record," *Deseret News*, 27 October 1945

law degree from the University of Chattanooga, and became an increasingly popular orator. He was often asked to speak at LDS events and frequented stages across the South, participating in numerous religious debates. He was widely regarded as an excellent apologist and debater. If anyone was to establish a stronghold for the saints in Coffee County, they would need no less drive and energy than Nephi Jensen.²⁵

“Mormorism”: Negative Encounters – Warren P. Ward & Jim Freeman

Although Jensen never made it clear that his visit to Coffee County was for the purpose of meeting Warren P. Ward, the son-in-law of Dianna Canova, it seems clear that making contact with the “man of law” was of high priority. The missionaries visited Judge Ward on 15 June, and had in mind to stay for the night. They assumed Ward would be sympathetic, if not open to their cause, as his father-in-law, George Canova, had converted and *died* for the Mormon faith. They were disappointed when Ward “soon shewed his colors,” bluntly informing the elders of his disapproval: “I don’t like the ‘Mormon Church.’” Like most people Jensen and Sellers had canvassed, Ward showed them enough hospitality to satisfy his southern honor, allowing them a drink at his well and engaging in a reasonably civil, but deliberately brief religious discussion. When Jensen defended the *Book of Mormon*’s legitimacy as scripture, Ward promptly ended the chat and bid them farewell. Jensen had probably hoped to establish a friendly relationship with Ward, whose standing and influence in the community was immense. Aside from his position as the county Ordinary (a justice of the peace), he was also an avid writer in

²⁵ Anderson, “Mission Leaders: Nephi Jensen,” *Improvement Era*, Vol. 22, No. 8 (June 1919), 707-708; N.U.S.C. Jenson, “Florida Conference,” *Southern Star*, Vol. 2, No. 14 (3 March 1900), 111; “Elder N.U.S.C. Jensen,” *Southern Star*, Vol. 2, No. 82 (7 July 1900), 253; Liahona: *The Elders’ Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 7 (1 August 1908), 533; Hardy, “Nephi Jensen,” Mormon Missionary Diaries, Lee Library, BYU.

local newspapers, and even edited one of the local publications, the *Coffee County Progress*, for many years. His rejection was particularly unfortunate for the Elders.²⁶

Judge Ward's treatment of the elders, however, was overly kind in comparison to another prominent newspaperman in Douglas – James M. Freeman. "Uncle Jim," as he was known locally, owned *The Douglas Breeze*, the most widely read paper in Douglas. Before having even met the elders, Freeman wrote a scathing article on the front page, 8 July 1899, entitled "Mormorism," in which he condemned "The black pestilence in Utah," asserting that Mormonism "is diffusing itself like a consuming cancer through the body social, and the body politic, and sapping the foundations of society."²⁷ Jensen went to the *Breeze* office and confronted Freeman, whom he considered to be "an enemy to God's grace." He asked for space in the next issue "to make a reply to [Freeman's] slimy editorial." Upon realizing who the elders were, Freeman became incensed at first, but eventually promised to recant his attack and grant Jensen space for retort.

Pleasant Acquaintances in Douglas

The elders' first encounter with Douglas was not all negative. They managed to establish friendly connections with many of the townspeople. Fortunately for them, this visit coincided with two major community events: the convening of county court, and Independence Day festivities. "As we neared the town," Jensen wrote, "we could see horses and mules tied to nearly all the trees available ... manifesting the presence in the city of a number of the country people." A born politician, Jensen saw immense opportunity for social connections among the townsfolk, through supportive rural

²⁶ 15 June 1899, Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary, Vol. 3; Jonathan D. Hepworth, Interview by the author, 20 February 2016.

²⁷ James M. Freeman, "Mormorism," *The Douglas Breeze*, 8 July 1899 (Douglas, GA).

acquaintances: “At the court house we shook hands with several friends, who also made us acquainted with others. Many of them manifested a desire to hear us speak.” The elders managed to secure an audience with Benajah Peterson, one of the city’s most respected citizens and the owner of the courthouse. Peterson gave his blessing for their use of the courthouse, but referred them to the board of county commissioners for final consent, which was gladly given. This pleasant first encounter with the City of Douglas set a precedent of amicable relations between LDS leaders and the county administration, who never failed to provide them with accommodations for sermons and speeches.²⁸

Rural Success

LDS missionaries to the Deep South around the turn of the twentieth century won the majority of converts in rural areas. To this day, the areas with the highest percentage of Mormons are predominantly rural. In Georgia, the area with the highest percentage per capita of LDS adherents is the southeastern area of the state, anchored around Atkinson County, formerly part of Coffee County. As geographer Jerry Webster observed, the rurality of the LDS Church in the southeast “is suggestive of a significant presence and successes by Mormon missionaries,” which is notable, given the obstacle of “significant resistance in the region from traditional southern denominations.”²⁹

Other challenges for LDS Elders came in the form of cultural differences. To board a train in Provo or Salt Lake, and step off in Atlanta or Jacksonville – to say nothing of the Deep South’s less developed areas – was equivalent to traveling to a foreign nation. Missionaries to the South Georgia-North Florida area, spiritual optimists,

²⁸ 3 July 1899, Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary, Vol. 3.

²⁹ Gerald R. Webster, “Geographical Patterns of Religious Denomination Affiliation in Georgia,” 25-51.

were faced with a lingering cultural fatalism, the legacy of the area's Primitive Baptist pioneers. Even Methodists, somewhat closer in theology to the starry-eyed, can-do Mormons, were more dour in the Pine Barrens than the most pessimistic of Utah Saints. The last year of the nineteenth century brought Mormonism's "great, grinning goodness" face to face with the sour, squinting suspicion of rural southeastern culture.³⁰ Jensen's appeal with the flatwoods farmers of Coffee County was primarily in his straightforward, no-nonsense approach to proselytizing. He made no illusions about the demands of his faith, and he did not glow with naïve optimism, as did many Mormon missionaries. He exuded calm, collected confidence, and made the case for his church with logic and reason, according to LDS scripture. He spoke in such a way that demonstrated his high intellect, but also avoided giving off any impressions of arrogance, using simple, almost blunt, language.³¹

Jensen, with his mission companion, J.R. Sellers, first arrived in Coffee County in early June 1899. Full of fire, and well versed in Mormon theology, the elders quickly attracted attention – good and bad – from local residents. They encountered the full spectrum of reactions to the "Restored Gospel," ranging from wholesale acceptance (conversion) to hostile resistance. Jensen seems to have been a genuinely amicable and trustworthy man, however, as even the fiercest of LDS critics appear to have generally softened their position upon meeting him in person, at least to a level of civility in which they could converse.³²

³⁰ Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *The Mormon Murders: A True Story of Greed, Forgery, Deceit, and Death* (New York: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1988), 109.

³¹ Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary, Vols. 3-6; Anderson, "Mission Leaders: Nephi Jensen," *Improvement Era*, Vol. 22, No. 8 (June 1919), 707-708; Hepworth, "Through a Glass, Darkly," 85-94.

³² June 1899, Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary, Vol. 3; Hepworth, "Through a Glass, Darkly," 85-94; Warren P. Ward, *Ward's History of Coffee County* (Atlanta: Foote and Davies, 1930. Reprint: Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, 2001), 106.

Faces of the Faith: Not-So-Peculiar People

Had the members of the LDS Church in South Georgia displayed the qualities of the *spiritual carpetbaggers* that many southerners associated with Mormonism, the church's success in the Wiregrass region would have been minimal. In order to sustain a presence, the church had to convert locals, and show that they could be Mormons without having to change their lifestyle. Thus, the first Mormons with whom local residents encountered (other than the missionaries), were not the pale, eerily happy, foolishly optimistic stereotypes associated with the LDS, but long-time members of the community; standard South Georgians.

Joseph Adams & Daniel P. Lott

Two of the earliest and most important converts to the Mormon faith by Elder Jensen were Joseph Adams and Daniel Peterson Lott. Jensen had a knack for ingratiating himself with prominent members of the community, and in the area surrounding the upper Satilla River, the Adams and Lotts were among the most prominent. The two names would soon become synonymous with the LDS Church in Coffee County.

Joseph Adams was a respected farmer in the Fales community, about ten miles northeast of Pearson, and the patriarch of one of the major families in southern Coffee County. He first met Nephi Jensen during a meeting held at the home of Benjamin Irving Spivey, Adams' son-in-law, on a Saturday night in mid-June 1899. Highly impressed, he attended another meeting the next day at Mount Zion Baptist Church, just across the river. Adams regularly attended services at Mount Zion, but was not a member of any particular denomination. From his first encounter with the Elders, Adams was convinced of the validity of the "Restored Gospel." He lent great support to Jensen and Sellers,

whom he considered “the smartest men he had ever heard preach.” On 9 January 1900, in the Satilla River, Elder Jensen baptized Joseph Adams and most of his family into the LDS Church.³³

Daniel Peterson Lott, more often called “Dan” or “D.P.,” was another well-known, and well-liked farmer in the Satilla River area of Coffee County. If Jensen was actively seeking out members of prominent Coffee County families for conversion, he certainly found one in Dan P. Lott. He was a grandson of one of the county’s founding pioneers, Daniel Lott, Sr. By 1899, the Lotts were numerous, and most were relatively prosperous. Dan P. Lott was at the Sunday meeting at Mount Zion Church and, like Joseph Adams, left the meeting with an enthusiastic curiosity about this strange new religion. Months later, he and two other converts, Richard and Levy Jewell of Pearson, were baptized. He would become a staunch supporter of Mormon missionaries in the area and, through a fateful – almost biblical – freak storm, would join his family with that of Joseph Adams, creating a populous community of Saints along the Satilla River.³⁴

Dan P. Lott’s father, Elisha Lott, had moved from the northeastern part of the county, where the family had first settled in the 1820s, to an area south of the river, in what is today Atkinson County. There, near the small village of Kirkland, he had acquired large land holdings, passing some of his property on to Dan. In the Spring of 1900, Dan Lott, Joseph Adams, and every other farmer in South Georgia planted their crops with high hopes of bountiful harvests. “And then,” as a son of Joseph Adams later stated, “It began to rain.” The rain poured down relentlessly throughout most of the

³³ Ward, *Ward’s History of Coffee County*, 47-51; Wilkes, “Coffee County’s Cumorah Chapel,” *The Douglas Enterprise*, 13 Sep 1989.

³⁴ Ward, *Ward’s History of Coffee County*, 47-51; Wilkes, “Coffee County’s Cumorah Chapel,” *The Douglas Enterprise*, 13 Sep 1989; 15 October, Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary, Vol. 3, 172-173.

growing season. The previous year had also been wetter than usual, resulting in low crop yields and empty pockets. Both Joseph Adams and Dan Lott were forced to sell their farms.³⁵

Adams and Lott, having become close friends through their membership in the LDS Church, bought neighboring tracts of land about three miles south of Douglas. The two families became even closer with the marriages of two of Lott's daughters to two of Adams' sons. Other Lott and Adams children began marrying into other local LDS families, including the Morris, Mills, Douglas, and McKinnon families. Before long, the area directly between Douglas and the Satilla River was heavily Mormon.³⁶

Other Important Converts

The elders had also made friends south of the river, the most zealous among them residing in and around a town called McDonald, or McDonald's Mill, located in the extreme southeastern part of the county – now called Axson. To this day, founding LDS family names such as White, Bennett, Spivey, Mizell, Davis, Wall, Fussell, and Williams adorn the mailboxes of eastern Atkinson County, indicating the church's influential and lasting presence in the area.

As early as 17 November 1899, Jensen and Elder W.N. Elderedge had made the acquaintance of Calvin W. Williams, a fairly prosperous farmer who owned upwards of six-hundred acres a few miles north of McDonald. Williams "entertained" the elders that

³⁵ Ward, *Ward's History of Coffee County*, 47-51; Wilkes, "Coffee County's Cumorah Chapel," *The Douglas Enterprise*, 13 Sep 1989; 28 August 1899, Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary, Vol. 3, 150-151; 16 September 1899, Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary, Vol. 3, 158.

³⁶ Wilkes, "Coffee County's Cumorah Chapel," *The Douglas Enterprise*, 13 Sep 1989; Ancestry.com, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940 United States Federal Census, Douglas, Coffee County, Georgia, [Records indicate heads of households as well as their spouses and children].

night, allowing them to stay at his home, where they “held a very interesting meeting.”³⁷ Thereafter, he evidenced great interest in the LDS, riding considerable distances on his red mule, “Bill,” to hear the missionaries speak as often as he could. “After six months investigating,” according to his son, Jesse Green Williams, “he knew they had the gospel.” On 9 January 1900, he joined the church in the chilly waters of the Satilla River, along with his wife, “Sarah,” his parents, Allen Raymond and Sara A. Williams, and his sister, Emma Williams. Other converts baptized that day included Benjamin Irvin and Laura Spivey, and Morning Parker Davis, mother of Sarah Williams.³⁸

Jensen established close relationships with the families of Jesse M. Wall, James Higgs, Benjamin Irvin Spivey, Sebe Wright, Dianna Shadd, Jordan F. Flanders, J.J. McClelland, Thomas Wilcox, Wiley Vickers, Richard Jewell, Levy Jewell, Dianna Bennett, and numerous others in addition to the Adams, Lott, and Williams Families. By the time of his release from mission work in June 1900, Jensen had established a firm foundation for the Latter-day Saints in South Georgia. He had personally baptized twenty-three converts, and was responsible for many others. He even managed to gain one convert after his mission work was over, and without having ever met him in person. On his journey back to Utah, Jensen missed his train in Macon, Georgia. After making arrangements to take a different train, he realized his luggage had been misplaced. In trying to decide whether to wait for the next train and locate his luggage, he claimed to have heard a voice say to him, “Take this train.” He did not hesitate to heed the warning,

³⁷ 17 November 1899, Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary, Vol. 4, 25.

³⁸ Historical Monument at the original site of Little Utah Church” (LDS) near Axson, Georgia [Information provided in the appendix of this paper], hereafter referred to as Little Utah Historical Monument; Jesse Green Williams, “Life History of Jesse G. Williams,” in Irene Porter Williams and Berniece Williams Ricks, *The American Ancestry and Southern Posterity of Marmaduke and Mary Williams, 1756-1986: Henry Davis Family of Georgia and Florida*, (Rexburg, ID: Printed by Ricks College Press for the authors, 1986).

and boarded the first train. Upon arriving in Atlanta, he received the horrifying news that the second train had derailed, killing most of the passengers. As it turned out, his belongings were onboard the train and had been scattered across the wreckage. Some documents, upon which his name was printed, landed near an unidentified body, leading many to believe that the body was his. His parents were even informed of his “death” by SSM President Ben E. Rich, before the error could be corrected. Among the scattered papers were some missionary tracts, which were picked up and read by a man who had witnessed the accident. He later joined the LDS Church – a fitting close to Jensen’s extraordinary mission career.³⁹

In the depths of the notoriously hostile Southern States, Nephi Jensen gained the trust, respect, and admiration of many in Coffee County, converts and non-believers alike, by providing anyone who would listen with a positive, trustworthy view of the LDS Church and its adherents, and zealously contending with the spiritual powers-that-be in the Wiregrass South. His influence – through his theological knowledge, oratorical ability, and sheer personality – cannot be ignored as a major factor in both the establishment and the prosperity of Mormonism in the Pine Barrens of South Georgia.

³⁹ Jeffrey S. Hardy, “Nephi Jensen,” Mormon Missionary Diaries, Digital Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, <https://lib.byu.edu/collections/mormon-missionary-diaries/about/diarists/nephi-jensen/>; “Elder N.U.S.C. Jensen,” *Southern Star*, Vol. 2, No. 82 (7 July 1900), 253.

III – *SOUTHERN SAINTS*: A Unique Brand of Mormonism

“In the South, one is first and foremost a Southerner”

Parker Blount, in an article written for *Sunstone* magazine, described life growing up as a Mormon in the Deep South, and the conspicuous differences between his faith and that of the more standardized church in Utah. Born and raised a member of Atkinson County’s Little Utah Church, Blount tells of being oblivious to the outside world, including greater Mormondom, throughout his childhood. Only when he left home to attend college in the West and carry out his mission did he realize the extent to which he was more Southern than Mormon. “Mormon churches stood on every corner, but none of them looked like mine.” “I realized that once you had seen one LDS church, you had seen them all.” The glaring differences in regional versions of the Latter-day religion center mostly around non-doctrinal issues such as emphasis on temple ceremonies, and church architecture. In the case of the South Georgian Mormons, however, it seemed, at least on the surface, that every conceivable break with Salt Lake Mormonism had been made.

The Satilla Saints had, in their isolation from the world, created a completely unique flavor of the LDS faith that was more consistent with Pinewoods Protestant culture than with that of Utah. This made them more competitive in the southeastern religious scene. Though some of their beliefs were quite removed from mainstream Christian doctrine, they looked like southern Christians, they acted like southern Christians, they certainly sounded like other southern Christians, and they even shared

most of the beliefs of southern Christendom. This gave them an almost equal footing with their Baptist and Methodist counterparts in the regional spiritual market.⁴⁰

Blount's experience was typical of many young, southern missionaries. Just as any small-town, Georgian Baptist would feel out of place at Joel Osteen's Lakewood, Texas megachurch, southern Mormons come home from Salt Lake City telling stories of culture shock. This is the result of almost a century of isolation and relative autonomy for southern LDS congregations. The Saints on the Satilla are an excellent example of perhaps the most important of Mormonism's southern survival mechanisms – advantageous adaptation. While attending a Latter-day Saints meeting in South Georgia during the early years of the twentieth century, one would have seen all the doctrinal aspects necessary for Mormon worship. Before the service began, however, it might as well have been a meeting of Methodists or Baptists, with all the familiar characteristics of southern rural churches – one-room, typically whitewashed buildings; wooden, often backless pews; open windows; hand-held, paper fans furiously propelling heat and gnats from congregants' faces. Lack of exposure to the greater 'corporate' church, and a cultural emphasis on independence, forced southern Mormonism to bend to regional social norms. This made the Satilla congregations less conspicuous to their Protestant neighbors, and allowed them to flourish with relatively little friction.⁴¹

⁴⁰ H. Parker Blount, "A Place Called Little Utah," *Sunstone* (March 2004), 12-18.

⁴¹ Blount, "A Place Called Little Utah," *Sunstone* (March 2004), 12-18; Hepworth; "Through a Glass, Darkly," 85-94; Ward, *Ward's History of Coffee County*, 105-106; George L. Tate Missionary Diary, Photo copy, (Douglas, GA: Douglas Stake Family History Center, LDS).

Advantageous Adaptation: “Little Utah”

Atop a sand hill on the Banks of the Satilla River, near Axson, Georgia, stands a granite slab, upon which is engraved the depiction of a chapel, and a brief history of that chapel. The words at the top of the monument read:

“THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS
LITTLE UTAH CHURCH AND CEMETERY”

Directly behind the marker lie some five-hundred graves, well kept, adorned with flowers, American flags, and a few small angelic sculptures – but no church. This is the site where, five years after his baptism, Calvin W. Williams helped build a chapel for the Latter-day Saints in southern Coffee County. He had donated two acres of his large farm for the purposes of building a house of worship and a cemetery, and, in 1905, the congregation did just that.⁴²

The original name of the church was the Satilla Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, named for the nearby river which served as the baptismal font for many years. The official name was later changed to the “Axson Branch” of the LDS Church, when the town of McDonald was annexed into the newly created Atkinson County. The town was renamed Axson in honor of President Woodrow Wilson’s wife, Ellen Axson Wilson. The congregation later elevated to ward status, being attached to the Jacksonville Stake of the Southern States Mission, the oldest stake in the South. It was the first ward organized in the state of Georgia.⁴³

⁴² Little Utah Historical Monument.

⁴³ Little Utah Historical Monument; Hepworth, “Through a Glass, Darkly,” 85-94; Ward, *Ward’s History of Coffee County*, 105-106; Wilkes, “Coffee County’s Cumorah Chapel,” *Douglas Enterprise*, 13 September 1989.

The monument on the church site, however, does not mention the Axson Ward. The word “Axson” does not appear once on the engraving. This is because the congregants and their neighbors did not refer to it as the Axson Ward. They were not accustomed to using the word “Ward” at all. Just like any other body of worship, this group was a *church*, not a *ward*. After the successful missions of Nephi Jensen and George L. Tate, both of whom were from Utah, so many local residents had become LDS adherents that non-church members began calling the area surrounding the church “Little Utah.”⁴⁴ The name was originally used as a slight, generally by those who had opposed the elders, whom they considered to be “emissaries of the devil,” who came “wrecking homes and carrying away women.”⁴⁵ Church members rather liked the name, however, and took a certain degree of pride in the fact that their social dominance of the area was such that it had become named for them. Acknowledgement of the church had spread throughout the region through the passive-aggressive nickname. The Saints embraced the name, making it their own, thus defeating the derogatory intent with which it was created.⁴⁶

Similar use was made of the term, “Mormons,” which was also originally intended to be an insult. Although the word has become accepted and widely used by LDS Church members today, it was not well received in the late nineteenth century. This was probably due to its attachment, by non-church members, to the practice of polygamy. Although the church officially ended the doctrine of plural marriage in 1890, its legacy

⁴⁴ Little Utah Historical Monument; Hepworth, “Through a Glass, Darkly,” 85-94; Ward, *Ward’s History of Coffee County*, 105-106; Wilkes, “Coffee County’s Cumorah Chapel,” *Douglas Enterprise*, 13 September 1989.

⁴⁵ Ward, “Mormon Church,” *Ward’s History of Coffee County*, 105.

⁴⁶ Little Utah Historical Monument; Hepworth, “Through a Glass, Darkly,” 85-94.

affected mission work – particularly in the South – well into the 1900s. Early missionaries to Coffee County frequently put quotation marks around the word in their journals, indicating their disapproval of the word or, at least, mild amusement towards its usage. In time, however, church members embraced the term, and today it is used almost completely without negative connotation worldwide. In the rural South, and perhaps as elsewhere, “Mormon” was quickly adopted as an acceptable descriptive term primarily because most non-Mormons simply did not know the official name of the LDS Church. To avoid unnecessarily long explanations in mission work, as well as in casual conversation, one could simply say “I am a Mormon,” or “the Mormon Church,” as opposed to “I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” By taking the negativity out of the pejoratives assigned by their critics, early Mormons in Coffee County displayed their adaptability and made their faith more easily acceptable to South Georgian society.⁴⁷

A Fairly Simple Affair: Cumorah Church

Fifteen miles northwest of the Little Utah monument stands another example of Mormonism’s supreme adaptability to Wiregrass regional culture. Two years after Little Utah’s chapel was built, on the other side of the Satilla River, another LDS Church was in the making. In July 1907, during a meeting with Elders George L. Tate and Charles Foote, church members began discussing the need for a building to serve the Saints on the north side of the river. By the end of the meeting, Joseph Adams had donated a plot of his land, Daniel P. Lott had agreed to supply timber and William Baxter Mills, another

⁴⁷ Coline Corbitt, interview by author, Douglas, Georgia, 16 Mar 2016; Blount, “A Place Called Little Utah,” *Sunstone* (March 2004), 12-18.

local member, would cut and haul the logs to the sawmill for the building of a church. In late August, construction was complete, and the upper-Satilla Saints had a new, one-room chapel in which they could worship. Appropriately, Elder Nephi Jensen preached the first sermon in the new church while visiting friends he had made on his first mission.⁴⁸

The construction of both Little Utah, and Cumorah chapels was, to their congregations, not a monumentally significant event. They were surely excited to have buildings of their own in which to exercise their faith, but no barriers had been broken as far as they were concerned. To them, the next sensible step in the progression of their churches was to facilitate a place to worship. The thought of ownership of the church, and approval from the General Authorities probably did not cross a single mind among the founding members. Blount related the general sentiment of Coffee's early Mormons: "In the rural South, the construction of a meeting place was a fairly simple affair. A group of like-minded believers would decide they needed a place to worship, and they would build one." Like any other southern body of faith, they responded to a congregational need with a congregational effort. Unlike their cooperative, Western counterparts, "They didn't need anyone's permission to build a church." "It was *their* place of worship." Blount suggested that this "sense of ownership" strengthened their "individuality and independence in worship and belief," making them less dependent upon the 'bigwigs' in Salt Lake City, and more influenced by Southern culture than Mormon doctrine.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Wilkes, "Coffee County's Cumorah Chapel," *The Douglas Enterprise*, 13 Sep 1989; 30 July-15 September 1907, George L. Tate Missionary Diary, 126-131.

⁴⁹ Blount, "A Place Called Little Utah," *Sunstone* (March 2004), 12-18 Coline Corbitt, Interview by the author, Douglas, GA, 16 March 2016.

Slow, Solitary, Southern Spirituality

Buffered by remote isolation from the influence of what Blount calls the “cool and energetic” Western church, Mormons in the Deep South maintained the same relaxed, patient approach to their faith that they had before the Elders came along, with the relatively minor adjustment to a new, “Reformed” doctrine. Their version of Mormonism was “warm of heart, slow, perhaps sluggish, and a bit charismatic.” True to their predestinarian roots, even the most zealously Arminian of pinewoods country folk, raised in reverent solitude, believed that if you truly needed something, it would come to you in time. This constituted a significant difference in spiritual attitude from the do-it-yourself, proactive Saints of Utah.

Blount suggests that the slower pace of Southern religion and society can be attributed to the hostile climate in which it is nurtured. “In a hot country, the art of conserving your energy is highly refined,” he wrote, alluding to the effect of the stifling heat upon the energy with which Southerners go about their lives. “Southerners loved God, but they had made their peace with Him,” and they had agreed “not to make too many demands of each other.” Utahan Mormonism had made no such agreement, and demanded much of its adherents. The Saints along the Satilla River, however, were not within range of LDS obligations, nor its hyperactive business. They had slowly, patiently, calmly gone about their lives, as did their Baptist and Methodist neighbors, not getting ahead of themselves or their god, but stoically accepting the lot given to them.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Blount, “A Place Called Little Utah,” *Sunstone* (March 2004), 12-18.

Salt Lake on the Satilla: The Early Seat of Southeastern Mormondom

In his *History of Coffee County*, published some thirty years after his first experience with the elders, Judge Warren P. Ward was considerably more generous to the Mormons of Cumorah and Little Utah. Though careful to avoid any mention of Mormon scripture, he noted the growth of the Latter-day Saints congregations – Cumorah and “Utah Church” – as they grew “more in favor with the people,” even adding “Coffee County has been a fruitful field for the Mormon Church, it having grown to a membership of more than seven hundred.” Although he greatly overestimated, or perhaps exaggerated, the local LDS membership, his words are curiously positive when compared to his conversation with Jensen and Sellers three decades prior. He even printed a transcript of one of LDS President Joseph F. Smith’s sermons in his column in the *Coffee County Progress*. His change of policy regarding Mormons reveals a steady acceptance of the Latter-day Saints religion, by South Georgians, in the years following the founding of the Satilla River colony of Saints.⁵¹

In the first decade of the new century, the Satilla Saints seem to have quickly become accepted and acknowledged as a legitimate religious institution in South Georgia. Their standing in the regional LDS Church seems to have accelerated their establishment among other faith groups. In 1907, after the completion of Cumorah Chapel, Elder Nephi Jensen, upon his return visit to the church that he had helped establish, spoke to a crowd of about five hundred. He was followed in 1908 by SSM Presidents Charles Callis and Ben E. Rich, and in 1916 by Apostle James E. Talmage, who spoke there “to great

⁵¹ Ward, *Ward’s History of Coffee County*, 105-106; Hepworth, “Through a Glass, Darkly,” 32-38; Hepworth, Interview by the author, Douglas, GA, 20 February 2016; Ward’s Column, *Coffee County Progress*, 15 November 1934.

applause.” Numerous conference meetings and other important regional church events took place at both Cumorah and Little Utah between 1910 and 1930.⁵²

By 1926, the area surrounding the Upper Satilla River, stretching from Ambrose and Willacoochee in the West to Waycross in the East, had become the epicenter of the southeastern LDS Church. There were organized congregations at Axson (Little Utah), Douglas (Cumorah), Waycross, and Willacoochee. Home meetings were regularly held in Ambrose (3 different meetings), Kirkland, and Nicholls, as well as in homes outside of Coffee and Atkinson Counties – at Baxley in Appling County, Alma in Bacon County, Alapaha and Enigma in Berrien County, three around Homerville in Clinch County, one at Hazlehurst and two at another community named Kirkland in Jeff Davis County, and one at Mershon in Pierce County. Southeastern Georgia was home to a majority of the state’s Latter-day Saints, and all LDS activity in the region centered around the Saints of the Satilla.⁵³

Members of the branches at Little Utah and Cumorah, because of the prominent status of their congregations, became well acquainted with many from among the church’s high leadership. Jesse Green Williams, son of Little Utah’s Calvin Washington Williams, wrote of having known personally Ben E. Rich, Charles A. Callis, Melvin J.

⁵² 14 September 1907, Nephi Jensen Missionary Diary, Vol. 6; 14 September 1907, 17 February 1908, George L. Tate Missionary Diary, 131; Hepworth, “Through a Glass, Darkly,” 92; “Summary for June, 1908,” *Liahona: The Elders’ Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 7 (1 August 1908), 170.

⁵³ *Improvement Era*, Vol. 19, No. 9 (July 1916), 829-832, No. 10 (August 1916), 893-894, No. 11 (September 1916), 990-993; *Liahona: The Elders’ Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (20 June 1908), 24, No. 7 (1 August 1908), 170, 1241, Vol. 10, No. 5 (23 July 1912), 75, No. 15 (1 October 1912), 234, No. 21 (12 November 1912), Vol. 12, No. 4 (21 July 1914), 60-61, No. 8 (18 August 1914), 127, No. 11 (8 September 1914), 175, No. 14 (29 September 1914), 222, No. 23 (1 December 1914), 366, Vol. 19, No. 2 (19 July 1921), 39, No. 13 (20 December 1921), 261, No. 20 (28 March 1922), 400; “Latter-day Saints (Mormon),” in WPA, Historical Records Survey, Churches, General, Denominations in 1926 Census of Churches, Church Records Survey, Works Progress Administration, U.S. Government Collection, RG 44-2-15, Georgia Archives, Morrow, GA.

Ballard, and James E. Talmage, among others, all of whom had slept at the Williams' home on several occasions. Local Mormon leaders were respected, if not beloved, both at home and across the Southeast.⁵⁴ When Cumorah's Daniel P. Lott died in 1912, a reported eight-hundred mourners from across the state came to the funeral to pay their last respects. An arbor was built in the churchyard, and still the crowd was so large that some could barely see or hear the service.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Jesse Green Williams, "Life History of Jesse G. Williams," in Irene Porter Williams and Berniece Williams Ricks, *The American Ancestry and Southern Posterity of Marmaduke and Mary Williams, 1756-1986: Henry Davis Family of Georgia and Florida*, (Rexburg, ID: Printed by Ricks College Press for the authors, 1986);

⁵⁵ *Liahona: The Elders' Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 15 (1 October 1912), 234.

CONCLUSION: FRUITS OF THE HARVEST

Mrs. Frances Vickers Wilkes, a member of the Douglas Ward of the LDS Church, wrote an article in the *Douglas Enterprise* in 1989 in which she summarized the history of the Saints along Satilla River as one of “early struggles followed by years of steady growth and progress.” For the congregations at Douglas and Pearson (the descendants of Cumorah Church and Little Utah, respectively), this is an accurate claim. Both groups have seen nothing but steady growth since their founding. The Douglas Ward even had to split its congregation into two separate wards due to its rising numbers. Mormons in South Georgia are no longer a fringe sect. Many church members are prominent citizens, as well as doctors, educators, business owners, and politicians.⁵⁶ The most notable accomplishment for the church’s social status was the election (and frequent re-election) of church member J.C. Adams as Mayor of Douglas. Adams was a descendant of Cumorah’s Joseph Adams, the owner of the local Dairy Queen, he had been bishop of the Douglas Ward and president of the stake, and a beloved figure in Coffee County. Church members are confident in their congregation’s spiritual life. One member of Douglas’ Second Ward, who moved to the area from the Mormon-dominated West, said that his current ward was “the strongest Ward we’ve ever been a part of.”⁵⁷

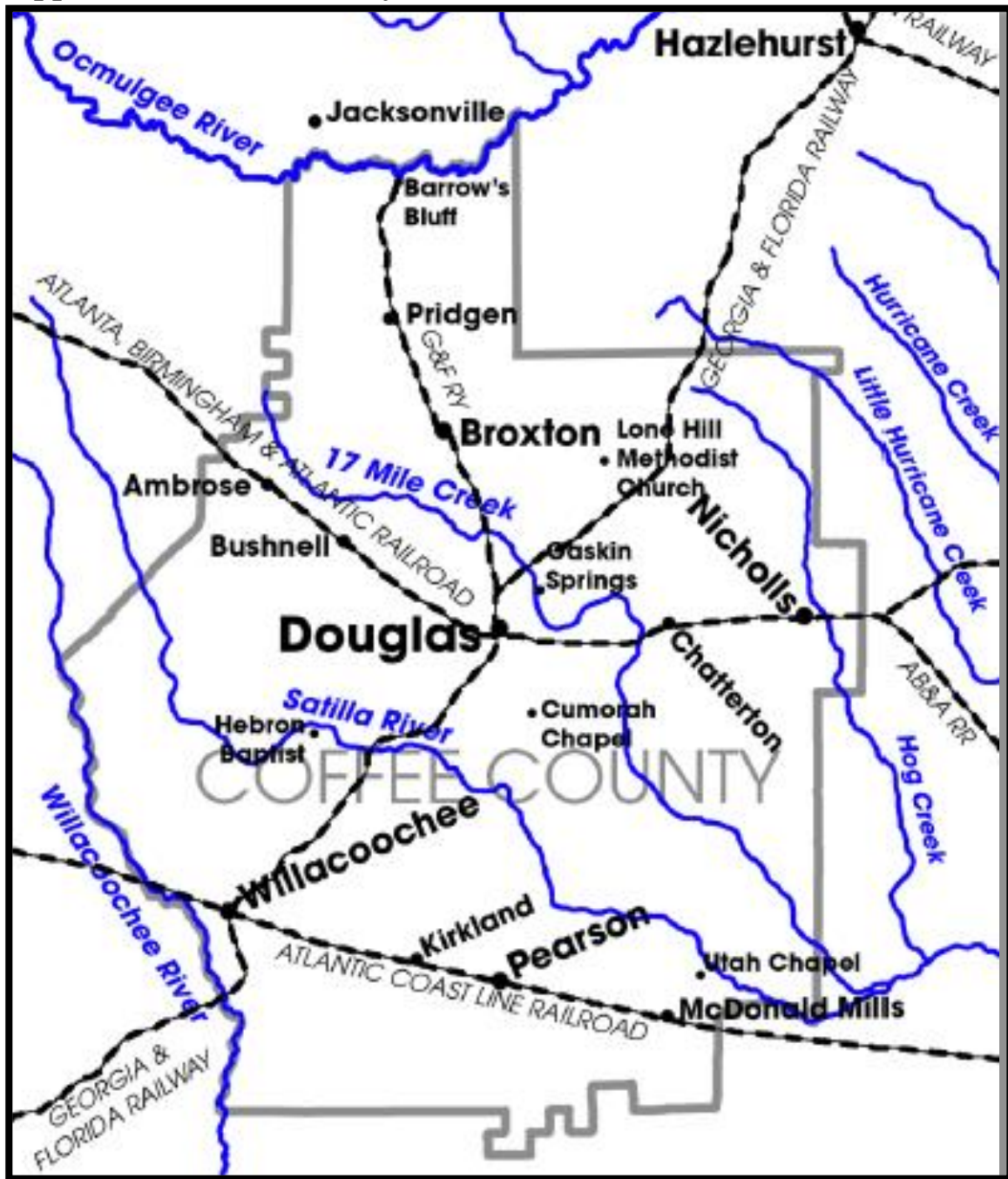
⁵⁶ Wilkes, “Coffee County’s Cumorah Chapel,” *Douglas Enterprise*, 13 September 1989; Catherine G. White, “History of LDS Douglas Wards,” *Douglas Enterprise*, 2 September 2001.

⁵⁷ Quote by Elder Doug Gilbert [Member of Douglas Second Ward, LDS, and former Bishop, Stake President], Interview by the Author, Douglas, GA: 22 April 2016; Additional information by Kay Jordan [Member, Douglas Second Ward, LDS, descendant of pioneer LDS members in Northern Florida], Interview by the author, Douglas, GA: 22 April 2016.

The strength of the Douglas and Pearson Wards – indeed, the strength of Mormonism in South Georgia – is the result of the extraordinary efforts of the area’s pioneering Latter-day Saints. The invaluable work of Elder Nephi Jensen and his successors, as well as the dedication of early families like the Adams’s, Lott’s, Williams’s, and others, brought about a sense of stability in the face of the rampant, relentless changes accompanying the turbulent turning of a new century. The persistent and consistent enthusiasm on the part of church members over the course of a century has ensured the Church’s enduring success in the Wiregrass. From its humble, but unique beginnings, the Latter-day Saints community in Coffee and Atkinson Counties has moved ever upward. Through the grueling challenges of establishing a church in the depths of the South Georgia Pine Barrens, whose doctrine contrasted that of the ruling Protestant tradition, the devout, and perseverant Saints succeeded in putting their faith on relatively equal footing with that of the powerful mainliners in the region. They did so by making the faith their own. They were South-Georgians, and they were Mormons, complete in their sense of belonging to both. Their church life reflected the society in which they lived as much as the religious beliefs under which they practiced their faith. Thus, the Saints and their church not only survived, but *thrived*. Their numbers grew, keeping to the values and traditions of their community, as well as their church.

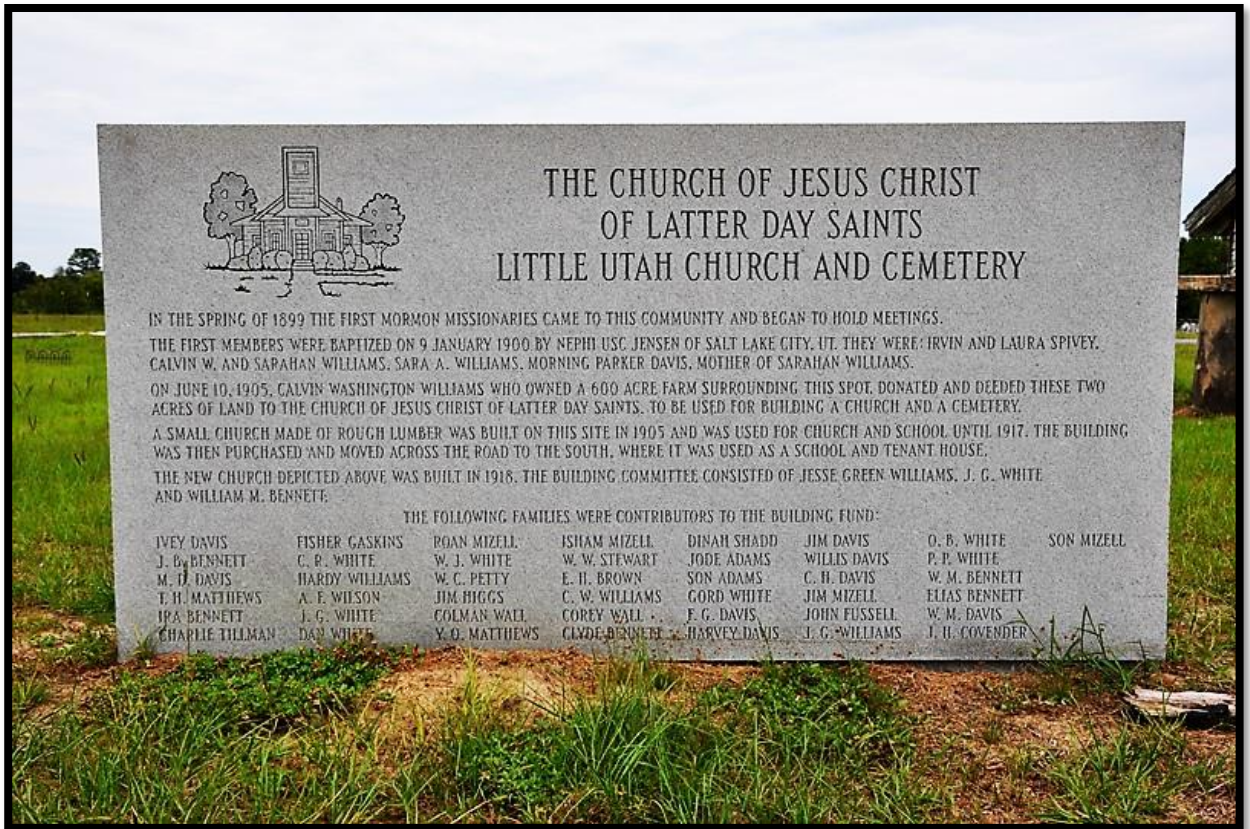
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Coffee County, circa 1910



Map by Jonathan D. Hepworth, in *“Through a Glass, Darkly: The Changing Past of Coffee County, Georgia”* (Master’s Thesis, Clemson University, 2012), 165.

Appendix B: Little Utah Historical Monument

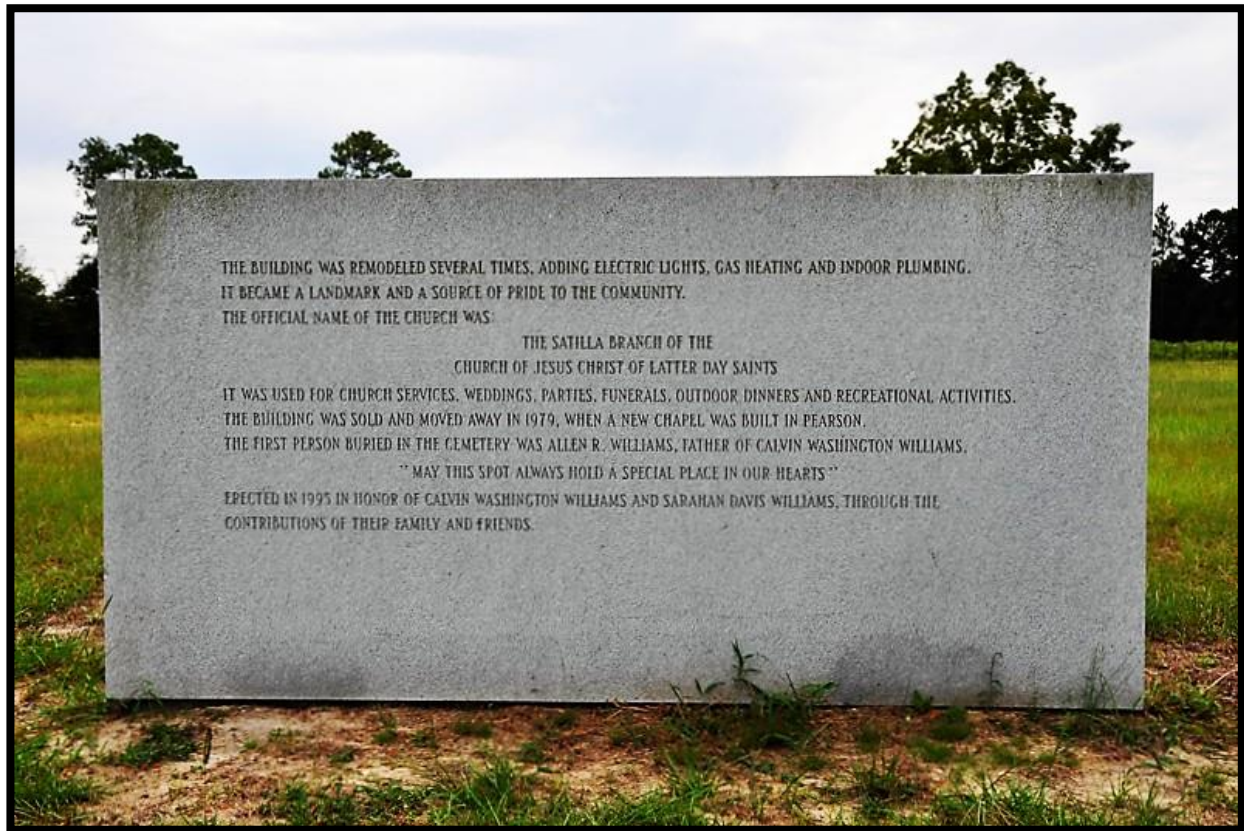


FRONT:

“In the spring of 1899 the first Mormon missionaries came to this community and began to hold meetings. The first members were baptized on 9 January 1900 by Nephi USC Jensen of Salt Lake City, UT. They were Irvin and Laura Spivey, Calvin W. and Sarah Williams, Sara A. Williams, Morning Parker Davis, mother of Sarah Williams. On June 10, 1905, Calvin Washington Williams who owned a 600 acre farm surrounding this spot, donated and deeded these two acres of land to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to be used for building a church and cemetery. A small church made of rough lumber was built on this site in 1905 and was used for church and school until 1917. The building was then purchased and moved across the road to the south, where it was used as a school and tenant house. The new church depicted above was built in 1918. The building committee consisted of Jesse Green Williams, J.G. White and William M. Bennett.

The following families were contributors to the building fund:

Ivey Davis, J.B. Bennett, M.D. Davis, T.H. Matthews, Ira Bennett, Charlie Tillman, Fisher Gaskins, C.R. White, Hardy Williams, A.F. Wilson, J.G. White, Dan White, Roan Mizell, W.J. White, W.C. Petty, Jim Higgs, Colman Wall, Y.O. Matthews, Isham Mizell, W.W. Stewart, E.H. Brown, C.W. Williams, Corey Wall, Clyde Bennett, Dinah Shadd, Jode Adams, Son Adams, Gord White, F.G. Davis, Harvey Davis, Jim Davis, Willis Davis, C.H. Davis, Jim Mizell, John Fussell, J.G. Williams, O.B. White, P.P. White, W.M. Bennett, Elias Bennett, W. M. Davis, J.H. Covender, Son Mizell”



BACK:

“The building was remodeled several times, adding electric lights, gas heating and indoor plumbing. It became a landmark and a source of pride to the community. The official name of the church was:

The Satilla Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

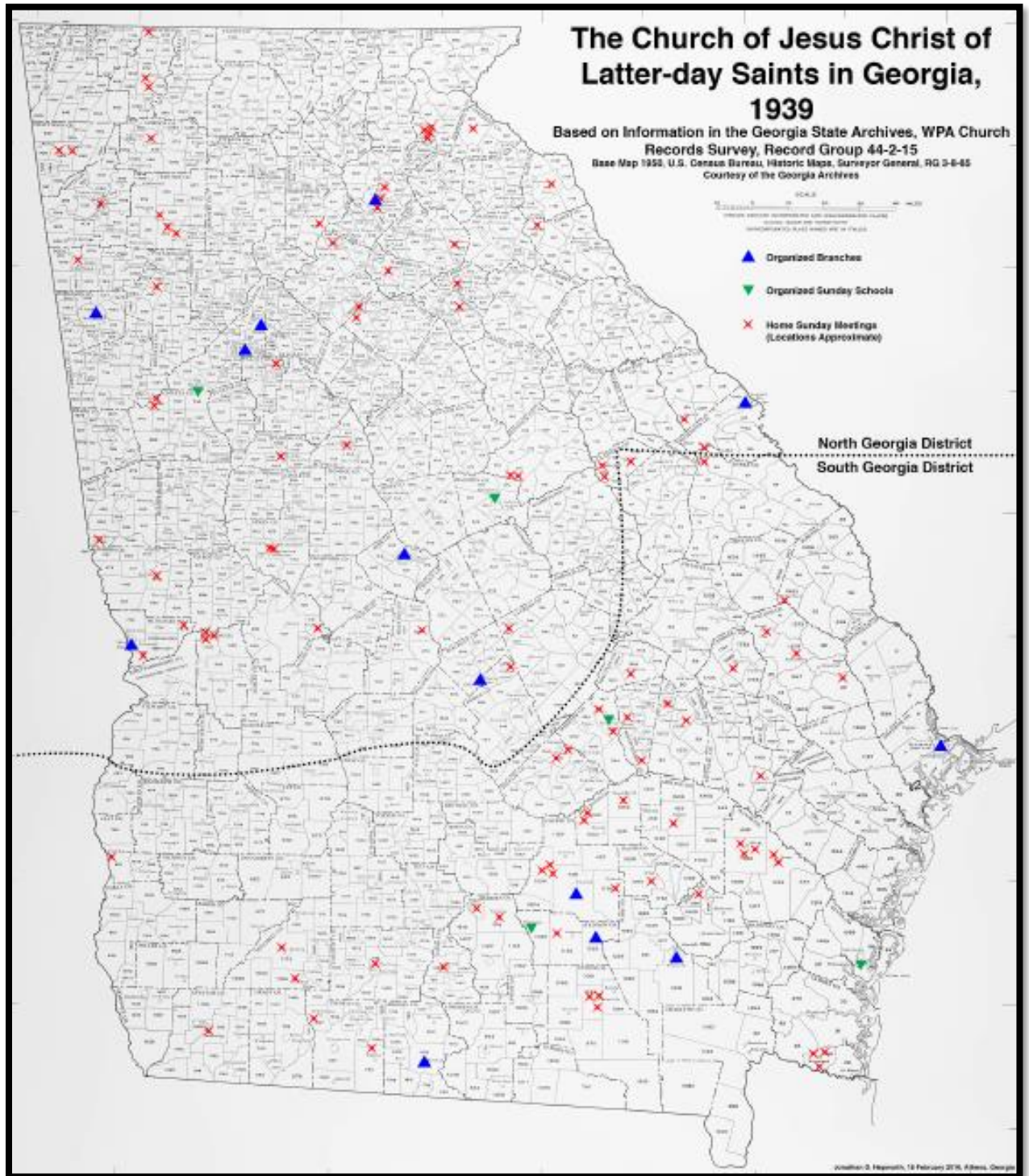
It was used for church services, weddings, parties, funerals, outdoor dinners and recreational activities.

The building was sold and moved away in 1979, when a new chapel was built in Pearson. The first person buried in the cemetery was Allen R. Williams, father of Calvin Washington Williams.

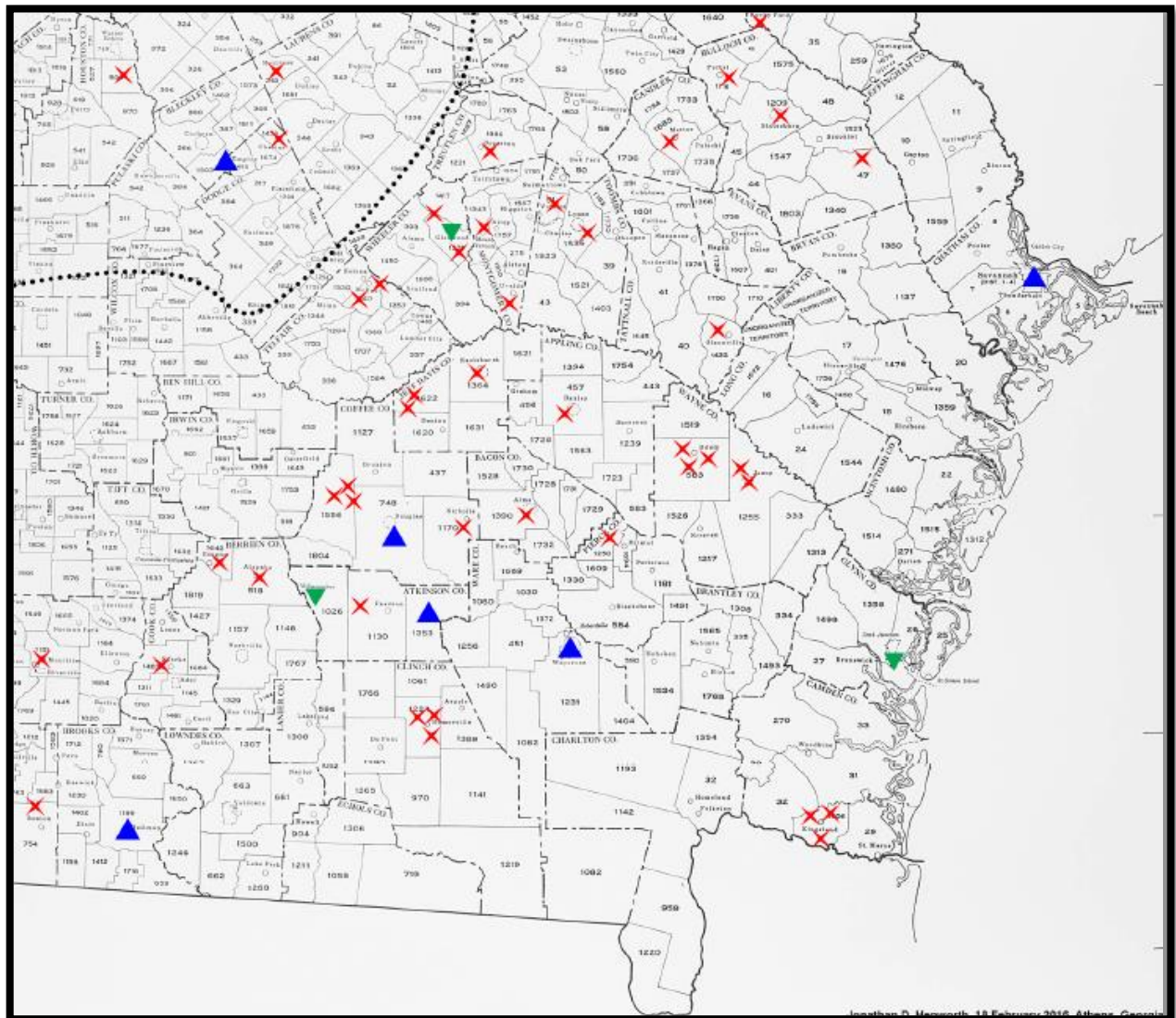
‘May this spot always hold a special place in our hearts.’

Erected in 1995 in honor of Calvin Washington Williams and Sarahan Davis Williams, through the contributions of their family and friends.”

Appendix C: The LDS Church in Georgia, 1939



The LDS in Southeastern Georgia, 1939



This map illustrates the density of LDS presence in Southeastern Georgia. The geographical area in which the Latter-day Saints are most prevalent stretches northeastward from Thomasville in the southwest to Rocky Ford (Screven County) in the northeast, and is anchored around the “Satilla Saints” wards of Cumorah, Little Utah, and Waycross.

Appendix D: Cumorah and Little Utah Historical Photographs



Nephi Jensen baptizing Joseph Adams in the Satilla River, 9 January 1900



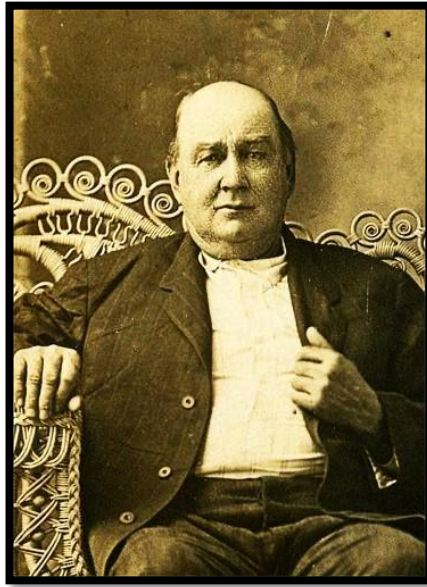
Cumorah Chapel, Orson Adams Farm, 2016



Little Utah Chapel and Congregation, circa 1953



Abandoned and Dilapidated Little Utah Chapel, 2016



Daniel P. Lott



*Allen Raymond Williams, Sarah Ann (Parker) Williams,
with children: Calvin Greenbery Williams, and Mary Jane Williams*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Manuscript Sources

Journals, Correspondence, and Personal Histories

- Brewer, Adam Rufus. Missionary Diary, 1899-1908. Mormon Missionary Diaries, Digital Collections. Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.
- Fussell, Wilford Ray, Sr. "My Life History." Douglas, GA: Edited and Published by J. Timothy Fussell for the Douglas Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985.
- Jensen, Nephi. Missionary Diary, 1898-1907. 7 Volumes. Mormon Missionary Diaries, Digital Collections. Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.
- Tate, George L. Missionary Journal, 1906-1908. Douglas, Georgia: Douglas Family History Center, Douglas Stake, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Censuses

- Coffee County, Georgia, Nonpopulation Census Schedules for Georgia, Social Census, 1860 (National Archives Microfilm Publication T1137 reel 24) Records of the Bureau of the Census, RG 29, National Archives, Southeast Division, Morrow, GA

Published Sources

- Ward, Warren P. *Ward's History of Coffee County*. Reprint 2001. Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, Publishers, 1978.
- Williams, Jesse Green. "Life History of Jesse G. Williams," in Irene Porter Williams and Berniece Williams Ricks. *The American Ancestry and Southern Posterity of Marmaduke and Mary Williams, 1756-1986: Henry Davis Family of Georgia and Florida*. Rexburg, ID: Printed by Ricks College Press for the authors, 1986.

Government Documents

U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872.

_____. *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883.

_____. *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902.

_____. *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913.

_____. *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920: State Compendium, Georgia*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1924.

Newspapers, Periodicals, and Serial Publications

Coffee County News

Coffee County Progress

Deseret News

Douglas Breeze

Douglas Enterprise

Elders' Journal (SSM)

Improvement Era

Liahona, The Elders' Journal

Southern Star

SECONDARY SOURCES

Published Volumes

- Bushman, Richard L. *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984.
- Crowley, John Gordon. *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South, 1815 to the Present*. Tallahassee, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998.
- Gaustad, Edwin S. "Regionalism in American Religion." In *Religion in the South*, edited by Charles Reagan Wilson, 155-172. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1985.
- Gannon, Michael V. *Rebel Bishop: The Life and Era of Augustin Verot*. Milwaukee, WI: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1964.
- . *The Cross in the Sand: The Early Catholic Church in Florida, 1513-1870*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1965.
- Huxford, Folks. *History of Clinch County, Georgia*. Primary Source Edition. Macon, GA: The J. W. Burke Company, 1916.
- Gaskin Avenue Committee. *From Graveyard Road to Silk Stocking Row*. Douglas, GA: Gaskin Avenue Committee, 2010.
- Huxford, Folks. *Pioneers of Wiregrass Georgia*. 12 Volumes. Homerville, GA: Huxford Genealogical Society, Inc., 1951.
- Larson, Charles M. *By His Own Hand Upon Papyri: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri*. Grand Rapids, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 1992.
- Mason, Patrick Q. *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2011.
- Naifeh, Steven and Gregory White Smith. *The Mormon Murders: A True Story of Greed, Forgery, Deceit, and Death*. New York: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1988.
- Owen, Christopher H. *The Sacred Flame of Love: Methodism and Society in Nineteenth-Century Georgia*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.
- Walker, Laura Singleton. *History of Ware County*. Macon, GA: J.W. Burke Company Publishers, 1934.
- Wetherington, Mark V. *The New South Comes to Wiregrass Georgia, 1860-1910*. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994.
- Williams, Irene Porter and Berniece Williams Ricks. *The American Ancestry and Southern Posterity of Marmaduke and Mary Williams, 1756-1986: Henry Davis Family of Georgia and Florida*. Rexburg, ID: Printed by Ricks College Press for the authors, 1986.
- Wilson, Charles Reagan, ed. *Religion in the South*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1985.

Articles

- Anderson, Edward H. "Mission Leaders: Nephi Jensen." *Improvement Era*, Vol. 22, No. 8. June 1919: 707-708.
- Blount, H. Parker. "A Place Called Little Utah." *Sunstone*, March 2004: 12-18. *Improvement Era*. "'Mormonism's' Message to the World." Jul-Sep 1916: 829-832, 893-894, 990-993.
- Hayes, John. "Hard, Hard Religion: The Invisible Institution of the New South." *Journal of Southern Religion* Vol. 10 (2007), 1-24.
<http://jsreligion.org/Volume10/Hayes.pdf>.
- Webster, Gerald R. "Geographical Patterns of Religious Denomination Affiliation in Georgia, 1970-1990: Population Change and Growing Urban Diversity." *Southeastern Geographer* (University of North Carolina Press) 40, no. 1 (May 2000): 25-51.
- Wilkes, Frances Vickers. "Coffee County's Cumorah Chapel." *The Douglas Enterprise*, September 13, 1989.
- White, Catherine G. "History of LDS Douglas Wards." *The Douglas Enterprise*, 2 September 2001.

Theses, Dissertations, and Informally Published Works

- Anderson, Ted S. "The Southern States Mission and the Administration of Ben E. Rich, 1898-1908, Including a Statistical Study of Church Growth in the Southeastern United States During the Twentieth Century." Master's Thesis, Brigham Young University, April 1976.
- Hepworth, Jonathan D. "Through a Glass, Darkly: The Changing Past of Coffee County, Georgia." Master's Thesis, Clemson University, 2012.
- Seferovich, Heather M. "History of the LDS Southern States Mission, 1875-1898." Master's Thesis, Brigham Young University, August 1996.
- Trowell, C. T. "Douglas Before Memory, 1854-1905: A Study of Everyday Life in a South Georgia Town." Douglas, GA, April 1995.
- Trowel, C.T. and Lorraine Fussell. "Exploring the Okefenokee: Railroads of the Okefenokee Realm." Occasional Paper from South Georgia, No. 8, 1998.

Atlases and Maps

- GeorgiaInfo. "Historical Atlas of Georgia Counties." Digital Library of Georgia, 2016.
<http://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/histcountymaps/index.htm>.
- Hodler, Thomas W. and Howard A. Schretter. *The Atlas of Georgia*. Athens: The Institute of Community and Area Development, University of Georgia, 1986.

Databases, Encyclopedias, and Reference Websites

- Luce, W. Ray. "New Georgia Encyclopedia." <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/>.
December 4, 2013. <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/church-jesus-christ-latter-day-saints> (accessed January 12, 2016).

Interviews and Personal Communication

- Corbitt, Coline. Interview by the author. Douglas, GA (16 March, 2016).
- Crowley, John G. Interview by the author. Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA. (25 April 2016).
- Elliot, Renee. Interview by the author. Douglas, GA (22 April 2016).
- Fussell, Joah. Interview by and personal correspondence with the author. Douglas, GA (20 February – 25 April 2016).
- Gilbert, Doug. Interview by the author. Douglas, GA (22 April 2016).
- Hepworth, Jonathan D. Interview by and personal correspondence with the author. Douglas, GA (20 February – 25 April 2016).
- Jordan, Kay. Interview by the author. Douglas, GA (22 April 2016).