

Oak Hill Baptist Church, Massies Mill

A Rich History of Service to God and Community



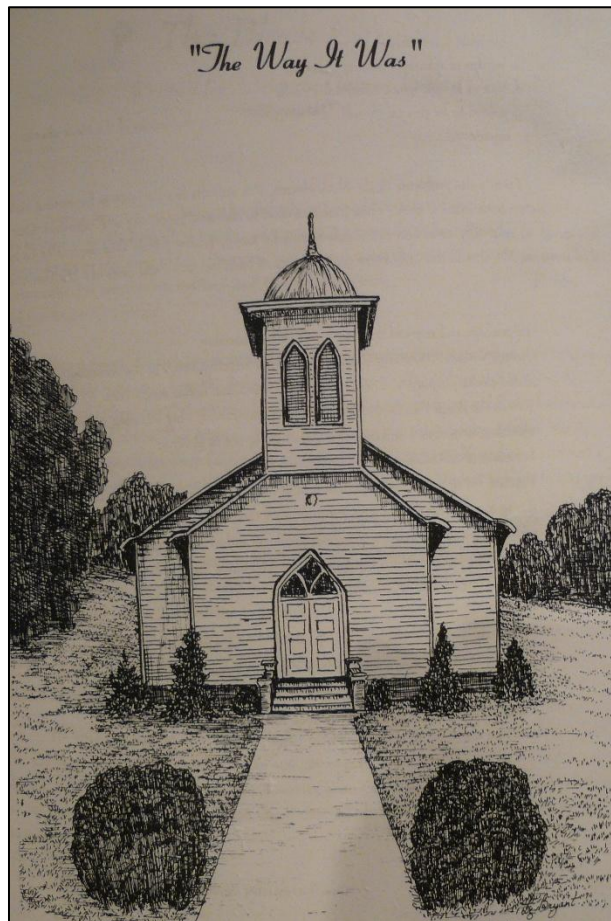
Oak Hill Baptist Church as it looks today

I have long admired the beautiful white church setting high atop a hill with the Big dePriest mountain as a backdrop. The sign at the junction of Dickie Road and Level Green had always fascinated me because of the early date; 1869, just a few years after the Civil War had ended. I was a vendor at the old Fleetwood School at one of the spring trail rides and was seated next to a kind lady by the name of Sandra Vaughn. I learned her family attended Oak Hill Church and when I asked if the pastor would be interested in letting me write the history of the old church for the sixth Backroads book, Crazy Quilt, she gave me his name and phone number. I called Rev. Edward Hendricks... he said yes... and the result was a delightful afternoon at the church with Pastor Hendricks, Deacons, Joseph Gaines, Calvin Green, and Delores Green, and Church Secretary, Veronica Glover, who were so kind to open the doors of Oak Hill as well as their hearts. The membership of the church is very gifted in many areas and their desire is to serve God and the community in any way He leads. The church celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2019 and I pray it will continue to be a beacon of God's light in our world and He will bless it for many more years to come.

Oak Hill Baptist Church was organized in the nineteenth century at Jonesboro Baptist church. In 1860, Jonesboro enrolled 182 Negro members. Six years later, in 1866, the membership had increased to 250. Because of that growth, the black members united and came together as a church body but continued to worship at Jonesboro until 1869, when they built their own temple to worship God, calling themselves Oak Hill Baptist Church.

The name "Oak Hill" was derived from the location in which the church was built; an area on a hill surrounded by beautiful oak trees. The church was built of hewed logs, which was not an uncommon building material in those days. Rev. Alexander Giles was the first pastor. Other members of the official board were: Deacons Lemmon Meade, James Smith, Jacob Napier, Boyd Loving, Mosely Gaines, Roland Johnson, Alexander Hughes and Joe Henley. The church custodians were Jashie Robertson and Ned Smith.

After twelve years of service in the little log sanctuary, a frame church was built from lumber brought there from an area called Shelter Bottom. Jackson Loving and his sister, Jane Johnson, transported this lumber to the building site by the use of a two-wheel cart, pulled by a team of oxen that belonged to Boyd Loving.



Early church drawing by Liz Bryant

In 1883, the “Rockfish Baptist Association” met at Oak Hill Church under the leadership of Rev. Rubin Loving and Richard Hughes.

In the early 1900’s Oak Hill School was established on the church grounds. Originally, the two-room building housed children from the primer level through the eighth grade. The school benefited under the tutelage of many instructors. Its most profound impact to the community came under the leadership of Othello R. Wilson. Through his expertise in music, he opened up a new world for the students by organizing the Musical Arts Choir, with students aged six to sixteen. This group was at times called the Sunday school choir as they shared their voices in the services of the church.



Early photograph of the Oak Hill School

The choir traveled many places in concert. Among the Virginia schools toured by this choir were: Hampton Institute, Virginia State College, Sweet Briar College, Roanoke College, William and Mary, Randolph Macon College, Southern College and Hollins College. These tours generated monetary gifts that were used to purchase school supplies and establish two additional rooms. At that time several grades above the eighth grade were added.

After the former Nelson Training High School for Blacks was opened in 1941, the Oak Hill School reverted to the elementary level grades. In 1952, it closed after the modern Massies Mill Elementary School was built.

In earlier years baseball was a favorite past-time sport for many Nelson County citizens. Before Jackie Robinson bridged the discrimination gap in 1947, there were Blacks who played in rough, open fields with superior skills. Fulton Ligon, a black entrepreneur, organized a team in Massies Mill in the 1920s and 1930s and was instrumental in supporting its success by contacting other sandlot teams to play against. His team traveled in trucks throughout the state of Virginia and later by bus they ventured to West Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D. C. to play.

Home games were played in an enclosed field in Massies Mill and were enjoyed by all who had the admission charge. Team members committed to the task were: Robert Giles, Thomas Ligon, Alex Giles, Hiawatha Giles, Garfield Giles, Otis Ligon, Tom Giles, William Epps, Johnny Steptoe, Alphonso Ligon, Phil Toliver, Edward Giles, Ben Vaughan, and the all-time great pitcher, Buster Giles. Buster tried out with the Homestead Grays but, because his family didn't want him to leave, he returned home.

Fulton Ligon was an industrious and successful business man and a professional carpenter who built the Oak Hill Church, and was also responsible for a bus to transport the children to and from school. He owned a store, a lumber business, a funeral home and houses in the Massies Mill area and he saw the need for community involvement thereby constructing a social hall that was used for various meetings, a night school and dances.



Oak Hill's growing congregation

By 1900, Oak Hill's membership had increased tremendously, thereby motivating them to build a larger church in 1923 under the leadership of Reverend William Bailey, the second minister of Oak Hill. The new church was built by Fulton Ligon. The church Clerk, Officers, Deacons, and Trustees were all established at this time. The church Clerk was Addison Brown. Other officers of the church were; Deacons, George Witts, Peter Page, Pleasant Wood, Paul Jones, Edward Allen, Phillip Napier and Jacob Johnson. Deacons of the younger generation were; Bland Thompson, Otis Ligon, Mathew Gaines, Walton Vaughan, George and Dandridge Oakcrum, Drew Allen, James Walter Thompson, Johnnie Jackson, and Leonard Brown. Trustees were; Patrick Epps, William Henry Thompson, William Johnson, Rubin Vaughan, Ralph Meade, Thomas Thompson, William Mason, and Alexander Meade.

Beginning in 1941, Rev. Herman Goode served as the church's third pastor. He was followed by Rev. Thomas M. McClendon who served the congregation for ten years. During his leadership several clubs were started, and donations were raised for the stained-glass windows, a walkway, and hymnals for the church were completed.

Rev. John W. Pride was installed as Oak Hill's fifth pastor for a short term and in 1958, a lady's room and choir loft was built by Thomas Ligon. Rev. Reginald A. Johnson became the sixth pastor and Rev. Alice Coles served as Assistant Pastor in 1964. The Deaconess Board was organized and the membership increased to 420 members.

On March 22, 1970, Reverend Carter R. Wicks, Jr. was installed as the seventh pastor of Oak Hill. Under Pastor Wicks teaching, the church began to have a worship service every Sunday, except the fifth Sunday. Communion was served on the second Sunday of each month, effective January 1971. The following ministers were licensed to preach under Pastor Wicks' administration: Rev. Mae Oakcrum, March 19, 1976, Rev. Joseph Vaughan, October 15, 1978, Rev. Margaret Bowling, November 5, 1978, Rev. Matthews Toms, Sr., October 6, 1985, Rev. Edward Gaines, October 9, 1989, Rev. Emma T. Jackson, November 18, 1990, and Rev. Emma Vaughan, December 9, 1990. The following clubs and/or groups were organized under Pastor Wicks' leadership: The Concerned Club, The Young Adult Fellowship Club, The Building Fund, The Kitchen Committee, The Missionary Circle, The Teenagers Rap Session Club, The Junior Choir, The Toms Sisters, The Toms Family Gospel Chorus, The Willing Workers also known as The Women's Auxiliary and The Bailey Memorial Usher Board. The Othello R. Wilson Scholarship Fund was formed in his memory to honor his profound impact on area students by helping those seeking higher education.

In June of 1970, the Concerned Members of Oak Hill was formed and organized in Washington, D. C. by Adrienne Gaines Jordon. This club is a union of outstanding Oak Hill members away from home noted for its provision of financial aid to improve the

facilities of the church. The idea of organizing the club was conceived after the devastating Flood of 1969 that claimed the lives of many relatives and friends. Under the leadership of Pastor Wicks, Oak Hill had various improvements, ordinations, appointments to positions, donations and purchases, all for the betterment of the church. This includes the beautification and renaming of the Oak Hill Cemetery to The Oak Hill Memorial Gardens.



The Memorial Gardens monument at Oak Hill Baptist Church

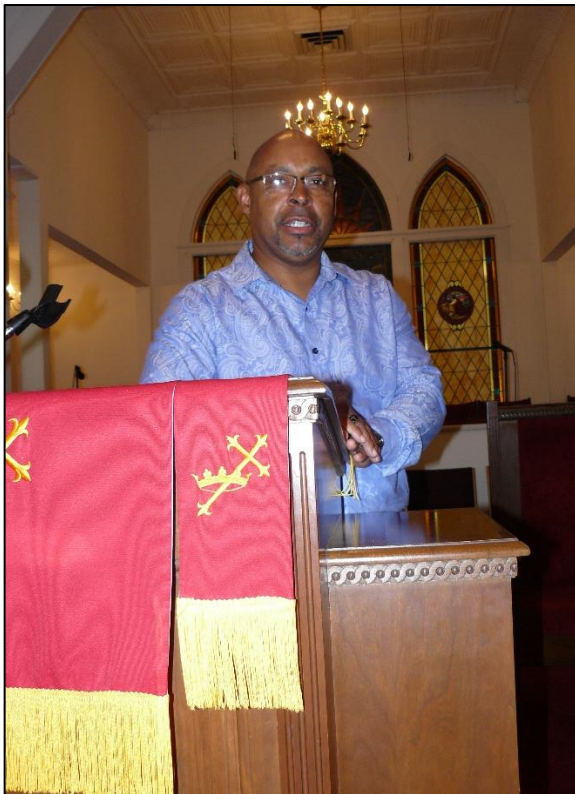
On May 6, 1995, Pastor Wicks retired with over 25 years of service. Rev. Wayne Jackson became the eighth pastor in June of 1995. Since Pastor Jackson's installation the Oak Hill Mass Choir was organized on August 12, 1995 by Sister Clarissa Jackson and directed by Sister Regina Toms. The Food Pantry was established in 1995 by Deaconess Lecie Barnett. Under her leadership, this food ministry not only served Oak Hill members but families in the surrounding communities and counties. Pastor Jackson resigned in September of 1996. Over the next few years various donations and renovations were done to beautify the church. From October 1996 to July 1998, Oak Hill was without a pastor. On July 12, 1998, Pastor Lorenzo Keith Otey was installed as the ninth pastor of Oak Hill Baptist Church.

During the years of Rev. Otey, Oak Hill ordained ministers, John Allen, Lucy Barnett, Ruth Toms-Canada, Annette Diggs, Paula Gaines and Belle Thomas, to name a few. The By-Laws were completed and adopted. A new addition was added which included the kitchen/dining room and fellowship hall, classrooms and conference room, pastor's study and church office. The parking lot was expanded and paved. Pastor Otey resigned in June of 2012.

In 2005, The Kate V. Loving Memorial Scholarship was established by Rachel Loving Hicks, daughter, to honor the 90th birthday of Kate Viola Loving, a lifelong member of Oak Hill. The mission of the scholarship is to provide funds to high school graduates who are active members of Oak Hill and have been accepted to college with a Grade Point Average of 2.0 or above.

On August 24, 2008, the Oak Hill Memorial Library/Museum opened. This is the fruition of artifacts and memorabilia collected to showcase in the museum the rich history of Oak Hill. This effort was spearheaded by Deacon Bobby Cabbell.

Oak Hill prayed faithfully for God to bless them with a new Shepherd. God answered their prayers and on September 15, 2013, He blessed the church with their tenth pastor, Rev. Edward M. Hendricks, Jr. On September 16, 2018, the Oak Hill congregation celebrated five years of leadership under Rev. Hendricks and looked forward to celebrating the church's 150th anniversary with him as pastor in 2019.



Reverend Edward Hendricks and his wife, Amanda at the church

Pastor Hendricks was raised in the Puppy Creek area of Amherst County but as a child his brother played baseball at Fleetwood, Roseland, and at the Ebony and Ivory Field and he would tag along to watch the games. “As a child I met all these people from the area, never realizing that much later in life I would become the pastor of Oak Hill and have a relationship with them.” He said the only two times he had any connection with Oak Hill was when he and a friend was working in Waynesboro and came across the mountain on the way home. “It was revival time and my friend Keith Thomas had to play the drums for the service so we stopped and while he played, I sat quietly in the back of the church. It went so well that we stopped again the next night.”

Edward said he was in his early 30’s at the time and was deeply involved in various ministries at his own church, Scott Zion Baptist Church in Madison Heights. His desire was never to pastor a church and when the Lord began laying that ministry on his heart Edward started running from what God wanted him to do. He recalls, “I remember it was a Thursday night and I started driving east on I-64, crying out to God, telling him I could not carry the mantle according to the way I thought it should be carried. I was about halfway to Richmond when I turned around and drove to my pastor, Gary Lee’s house about 11:15 that night. When he opened the door, he said ‘I knew you would be coming. There had been a tugging on my heart and God told me somebody would come.’

Edward wanted to be obedient to God’s call but was still somewhat resisting sending out a resume’ to area churches. In 2008 he started getting calls from different congregations, asking if he could come and preach. By 2009 he had married his wife, Amanda, and together they were serving God in different capacities at Scott Zion. He filled the pulpit for several years at different churches before becoming a full-time candidate for two of them. During that time Oak Hill also wanted him to come and preach as a possible candidate but with one difference... the nine-panel membership wanted to interview him before he came. After the interview Edward said he left nervous but later got a call saying they wanted him to come and preach every Sunday for a month, which he did.

“In July of 2013, our family was on vacation at the beach and on the way to my wife’s favorite seafood restaurant (Capt. George’s), I got the call from the Chairman of the Deacon Ministry, Joseph Gaines, who said, “After the votes were counted, the congregation has elected you to be the pastor if you so choose to take the office.” I humbly accepted and began my pastorship at Oak Hill on September 15th of that year.” He credits Joseph Gaines for taking him under his wings and introducing him to all the backroads of Nelson County, where many of the Oak Hill members lived.

Rev. Hendricks is going into his twelfth year as Oak Hill Baptist Church’s pastor and listening to him and other members of the congregation talk, it has been a good fit for all of them.

Edward Hendricks is a humble man of God, seeking only to serve the members of his church and local community. He adds, “I don’t ever question my call but I question my ability from time to time.”

He speaks freely about the people he shepherds, saying how blessed they are with talent that they use for God’s glory.

Throughout the years, Oak Hill has been a vital part of the Nelson County community. They have had a very successful food pantry program, providing food for about 70 families each month. In October of 2018 they moved the pantry to the Nelson Heritage Center on Route 29, where the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank has a mobile food pantry. Rev. Hendricks said, “I feel the move is going to greatly impact the area and move from 70 families we are currently serving to between 200 and 300 families.”

The church has added a computer room as well as a first aid room in case of emergencies. They have an extensive history museum in the basement, chronicling Oak Hill’s rich history of the past while faithfully documenting present additions in the form of notes, photos, programs, awards and rewards from the Spirit above.



A section of Oak Hill Church's history museum

There are six different choirs within the church body; the Gospel Chorus, the Mass Choir, Senior Choir, Men's Chorus, the Praise Team and Youth Choir. They are also blessed with members who are talented musicians who play for services. There is a woman's ministry, an usher's ministry, and the fourth Sunday in August is always reserved as Homecoming Sunday.



L/R: Joseph Gaines, Veronica Glover, Rev. Hendricks, Delores and Calvin Green

The church also developed a community garden and the harvest was given to anyone who wanted to come and pick fresh vegetables plus it was taken to seniors and shut-ins. Rev. Hendricks said it was developed on the “3-P” principal; Planters, Pickers, and Providers. I suggested they add a “W” to the mix; Weeders! For a future garden they hope to secure land closer to the church in which to plant and perhaps build a greenhouse.

In October of 2019 Oak Hill Baptist Church celebrated its 150th anniversary, commemorating its rich history and service to the Nelson County area and its motto continues to be relevant in today's world: “The Church Where Everybody Is Somebody.”



Othello R. Wilson

that is still inspiring others. In the 1930s, Wilson sparked a cultural and educational renaissance in one rural Virginia community for its struggling black citizens affected by Jim Crow laws and the Great Depression,” a synopsis of the film states.

Page was inspired by Wilson for the first time when he read an undergraduate thesis written about him by his mother, Barbara Page, while she was a student at Sweet Briar College. “It was such a compelling story... just to see where they came from and to see what they became, it really touched me,” said Jonathan Page, who grew up in Piney River and graduated from Nelson County High School and holds a degree from JMU in Music Industry and now lives in New York.

The 30-minute documentary tells the story of Wilson who created a student choir that went on to sing on CBS radio in New York, then tour throughout the U. S., Canada and Europe. The tour gave Nelson County recognition around the globe.

Page uses recordings of the choir in the documentary, and believes the group would have achieved even greater fame if they had been able to use today’s technology.

At first, the biggest challenge Page faced was finding students who attended Oak Hill School and worked under Wilson 80 years ago. But once Page found them, they had numerous stories to share. Then, it was a matter of condensing 15 to 16 hours of interview footage into a half-hour film. He relied on guidance from his mother and Wilson’s wife, Dr. Nancy Wilson, but mostly worked on the documentary as a solo project.

Page said Wilson and his choir’s accomplishments provide important life lessons: “To make the best of your situation,” and the concept of setting a glowing standard to “*Let Your Light Shine.*”

The public is invited to attend the documentary screening at Oak Hill Baptist Church, located at **382 Level Green Road in Massies Mill** or at The Rockfish Valley Community Center, located at **190 Rockfish School Lane in Afton.**

(Special thanks to the Nelson County Historical Society for providing this information)

Note: “*Othello Wilson: Let Your Light Shine,*” a documentary produced by Jonathan Page on how an African-American educator in Nelson County led his students to become international successes almost a century ago, will be screened at Oak Hill Baptist Church in Massies Mill on Monday, July 14, at 6:30 p.m., and on Tuesday, July 15, at 1:00 p.m. at Rockfish Valley Community Center in Afton. The screenings will be followed by a live Q&A with Page, as well as performances by LEAD Cooperative students. The events are co-sponsored by Wintergreen Music, Nelson County Historical Society and Oak Hill Baptist Church.

Othello Wilson was an African-American teacher, principal and musician who organized a student choir at Oak Hill School in Massies Mill that left a legacy