

"Rest in Peace and Now in Honor"

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Karen Sisk (left) with Paw Creek Presbyterian Church and Madge Lawing Hopkins with Woodland Presbyterian Church unveil a monument at Sunday's ceremony to honor slaves buried in the cemetery at Paw Creek Presbyterian Church. (Photos by Robert Lahser, Charlotte Observer)

Two Charlotte churches cross the Sunday color line to reclaim a slave cemetery, pay respect to those buried there and forge new ties of friendship

After a rousing worship service at Paw Creek Presbyterian, its white members and black guests from nearby Woodland Presbyterian turned quiet as they paraded to the white church's 200-year-old cemetery.

Once inside, they kept walking, passing by hundreds of headstones and monuments that spelled out details - names, dates, family titles - of the remembered dead, many of them one-time slave owners.

Finally, this long-overdue funeral procession reached a field of 58 graves, each marked with

an old rock and a new cross. Buried beneath them, four feet down instead of six, their bodies originally wrapped in blankets rather than sheltered in caskets, were unnamed black men, women and children who had died in bondage.

On Sunday, the two churches - one founded by slave owners, the other by former slaves - gathered to erect a stone memorial honoring, as the etched words put it, "the lives of those buried here - once enslaved by men, but who are and have always been precious children of God."

The dedication of the slave cemetery climaxed a day that began with about 300 churchgoers joining hands and voices at a Pentecost Sunday service and ended with a potluck lunch with 13 tables of food.

Macon Lawing, a Woodland Presbyterian member who will turn 90 in August, put it this way in between bites: "To me, this day is history."

Churches intertwined

Paw Creek and Woodland, both members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), share more than just a denomination. Their histories have been intertwined from the beginning.

Founded in 1809, Paw Creek Presbyterian was for decades the spiritual home to many of its white members' slaves, who worshiped from the balcony. In 1868, three years after the Civil War ensured their emancipation, these now-ex-slaves left Paw Creek Presbyterian to start Woodland Presbyterian, about two miles away.

In the years since, members of the two close-by churches often knew each other, even had the same last names sometimes. But for well over a century, they kept to themselves on Sunday.

Then, in February 2008, Paw Creek Presbyterian began discussing possible projects for its 200th anniversary this year.

"We were in a meeting," said Karen Sisk, who sings in the choir at Paw Creek. "And somebody said, 'We have the slaves buried back there somewhere.' And hairs stood up on my arms."



Joy Tyler (left) of Paw Creek Presbyterian hugs Maxine Davis of Woodland Presbyterian during Sunday's service at Paw Creek Presbyterian, which is celebrating its 200th anniversary. (Photos by Robert Lahser)

She went to the church's lay governing body and got the OK to proceed. The first step: Find the unmarked graves, dated 1810 to 1868, which were known to be somewhere in the back of the 11-acre cemetery.

Sisk turned to Willis Cox, 80, who had joined Paw Creek at age 12, and whose father had looked after the church cemetery for years. Church records told them little. But using a metal rod to find soft spots that indicated a grave, they probed the ground and located 58 gravesites.

The congregation at Woodland, which had marked its 140th anniversary in 2008, was invited to become part of the Paw Creek celebration.

The two churches had a night of storytelling. They came together again to collect the rocks and hammer the silver Christian crosses atop each of the graves. And on Sunday, each step in the dedication ceremony - from the prayers to the placing of a wreath of white roses and carnations - was shared by both churches.

Unveiling the memorial with Sisk was Madge Lawing Hopkins, 66, a retired educator who believes she's related to some of the slaves honored Sunday.

"I think of it not so much as a slave cemetery but as an ancestral cemetery," she said. "In all we have done today, I have felt their presence."

Focus on future friendship

Slave cemeteries are common in the Carolinas, which were once part of the Confederacy. But it's still rare for white churches to recover and mark such graves, said Vernon Herron, director emeritus of Comprehensive Genealogical Services, a black history education group.

Herron, who attended Sunday's dedication, said Paw Creek and Woodland "helped to rescue souls who were willed to obliteration. Now they're the end product of a person again as well as God's creation."

But with all the talk about the pain of the past, the real theme that emerged Sunday was about friendship in the future.

This is only the beginning of these two churches working together, agreed pastors Larry Hill of Woodland and Gary Bryant of Paw Creek.

"Maybe God has called us together to lead by example," Hill said in his spirited sermon. "Maybe God wants to show that even when there has been tension and separation in the past... God can start a new Pentecost in Paw Creek."

The last words on the memorial unveiled Sunday also looked ahead:

"This monument is not made from stone, but rather from the hearts of a community of faith that has come together.... We weep for the suffering they endured and we weep for the transgressions of our ancestors. But today is a new day."