

## HISTORY OF ROARING RIVER BAPTIST CHURCH

(Overton County, Tennessee)

This was one of the oldest churches constituted in the Upper Cumberland Region of Tennessee. We are not able to ascertain the exact date of the constitution of this old church. In the records of the Green River Association we find that it was in working order July 25, 1801. Everything seems to indicate that it was constituted about 1800 from members of the Holston Baptist Association of East Tennessee.

Elijah Chism was a messenger in 1798 from the Powels Valley Baptist Church to the Holston Association. This same church dismissed 23 members by letter between 1799 and 1800. At least part of these members came to the Roaring River Church. Elijah Chism appears with the Roaring River Church in 1803.

Joseph Stewart, father of Elder Jesse Stewart, left Jefferson County, in the Holston Valley, sometime after August 1796. He appears as one of the first messengers from the Roaring River Church.

Other early members included:

Col. Stephen Copeland, who commanded the Third Tennessee Reg't. in the War of 1812; John Raney who married Elizabeth Stewart, sister to Elder Jesse Stewart; Benjamin and Samuel Stewart, brothers of Elder Jesse Stewart; Benjamin K. and Rev. J. G. Stewart, sons of Samuel Stewart; and Stephen Mayfield, an early settler from South Carolina whose daughter, Mary, claimed to be the first female child born in the Livingston area.

Roaring River Church remained a member of the Green River Association until 1804. In 1805, when the Stockton Valley Association was constituted, Roaring River fell within the boundary of the latter and remained a member of that fraternity for many years.

About 1827, Elder Jesse Stewart moved his membership to the Caney Ridge Church in Overton County. He remained a member of this church for a few years and then moved back to Roaring River.

J. H. Grime in his *History of Middle Tennessee Baptists*, said of Elder Stewart:

"I remember him as a feeble old man and very badly palsied. He is perhaps the first minister I remember to have seen, though I have no recollection of hearing him preach. It seems that I can now feel his trembling hand on my head and hear his faltering voice as he pronounces his blessings upon a white-haired boy. It is said he was a good, old-fashioned preacher."

About 1841, many of the churches in the Upper Cumberland area of Tennessee divided over "predestination." Those who were predestinarian in belief changed their names from "United Baptists" to "Regular Baptists."

In the records of the Spring Creek Baptist Church in April 1841 we find this entry: "Renounce United - become Regular," and in July 1842 this same church excluded several members for adhering to the "principles" of the Stockton Valley United Baptist Association.

Every effort made to bring about reconciliation failed. The membership wrangled and disputed, getting farther apart all the time. Elder Jesse Stewart, with the minority of the Roaring River Church took a stand for the United Baptists. Consequently, Elder Stewart was excluded from the church.

The general procedure, for that day, was for the name of any excluded minister to be published in the next minutes of the association. Roaring River hadn't pulled away from the Stockton Valley Association yet, and Elder Stewart's name appeared in the 1843 minutes, under the 6th order of business:

"Roaring River Church informs this Association that Elder Jesse Stewart is excluded from the fellowship of said church and that his credentials have been legally demanded and he refused to give them up."

The year following Elder Stewart's exclusion, this entry was made in the minutes of the Stockton Valley Association:

1844 - "This Association drops Roaring River Church out of her body she having refused to represent herself with us."

This was the beginning of sorrows for the old church. It divided into three parts. The majority of the church went to the "Caney Fork Association of Old Baptists," better known as the Primitive or Regular Baptists. A second faction joined the Freedom Association about 1847, and dissolved after a few years. The third party organized the Jirah Baptist Church near Okalonia, Tennessee and united with the Stockton Valley United Baptist Association in 1851. They changed the name of the church to Okalonia Baptist Church in 1867 and to West Union Baptist Church in 1886.

Associational Table of Roaring River Baptist Church

YEAR MESSENGERS NAMES Member

(Green River Association)

1801 Thos. M'Bride, Joseph Stewart 27

1802 Jacob Coons, Stephen Copland, Stephen Mayfield 47

1803 Elijah Chism, Jacob Coons

1804 Jacob Coons, William Allen, John Raney 47

(Stocktons Valley Association)

1806 Stephen Copland, John Raney 47

1807 C. Stone, Wm. Allen, John Raney 42

1808 Corden Stone, Levi Roden, Steph. Copland 40  
 1812 Benj. Stewart, Samuel Stewart, Jesse Stewart 57  
 1813 John Raney, Samuel Stewart 53  
 1815 Rev. John Raney, Benj. Stewart, Samuel Stewart 45  
 1816 Benj. Stewart, Sam'l Stewart 43  
 1817 S. Stewart, Benton Bilberry, John Raney 46  
 1818 Benj. Stewart, Benton Bilberry, John Raney 58  
 1820 Benj. Stewart, John Raney, S. Copeland 40  
 1822 John Raney, Frederick Hartsow 64  
 1823 George Hurns, John Wells, William Cooper 64  
 1825 George Hirn, John Raney, John S. Copeland 66  
 1826 . Goerge Hern, John Raney, G. Eli 85  
 1827 George Hern, J. Stewart, F. Harsons (?), S. F. Davis 70  
 1828 George Hern, Jno. Raney, Fred Hartsow 61  
 1829 George Hern, Nath. Williams 57  
 1830 X. Rufus, W. Langford, John S. Copeland 50  
 1831 Frederick Hartsow, John S. Copeland 49  
 1832 Nathan Williams, Fred'k Hartsaw, R. W. Langdford 50  
 1833 John S. Copeland, N. Williams, R. W. Langdford 50  
 1834 John S. Copeland 44  
 1835 J. Step, M. W. Copeland, John Copeland 45  
 1836 Frederick Hartsan, J. S. Copeland, Benj. K. Stewart 60  
 1838 B. Stewart, J. R. Copeland, J. S. Copeland 64  
 1839 Rev. J. S. Copeland, Benj. Stewart, Wm. G. Roberts 125  
 1840 John S. Copeland, Ben. K. Stewart, J. R. Copeland 128  
 1841 J. S. Copeland, Benton Billary, Jas. R. Copeland 120  
 1842 Rev. J. G. Stewart, R. W. Langford, Stephen West 90  
**Dismissed by letter 34**  
 1843 Rev. J. G. Stewart, R. W. Langford, Stephen West 80  
 1844 "12. This Association drops Roaring River Church out of her body, she having refused to represent herself with us."

Jirah (Okalonia) (West Union) formerly Roaring River  
(Stocktons Valley Association)

- 1851 Wm. Bilberry, John C. Jackson, R. M. Fitte 31
- 1852 John M. Jackson, Carter Bilbery, R. M. Fite 35
- 1853 J. C. Jackson, Carter Bilberry 38
- 1854 R. M. Fite, C. Bilberry 40
- 1855 W. Bilberry, G. L. West, Carter Bilberry 40
- 1856 J. Matthews, Wm. Bilberry, J. C. Jackson 42
- 1857 Josiah C. Jackson 43
- 1858 Carter Bilbery, J. C. Jackson, G. L. West 41
- 1859 Josiah Jackson, J. Matthews, Wm. Bilberry 42
- 1860 Josiah C. Jackson, George L. West, J. M. Jackson 38
- 1866 G. L. West, Dawson Jackson 34

**(Changed name to Okalonia)**

- 1868 G. L. West, D. Jackson, W. P. Bilbry 45
- 1869 G. L. West, D. Jackson, W. P. Bilbry 47
- 1871 G. L. West, W. P. Bilbry, W. Harris 51
- 1872 Rev. G. L. West, L. Billery, J. E. Copeland 37
- 1873 G. L. West, J. E. Copeland, L. Bilbrey 51
- 1874 G. L. West, Joseph Deck 54
- 1875 G. L. West, Carroll Bilbry 61
- 1877 G. L. West, James Bilbry, Erasmus West
- 1884 G. L. West, G. S. Matthews, L. Bilbry 58
- 1885 G. L. West, M. E. West, L. Bilbry 62
- 1886 (Changed name to West Union
- 1889 Lili Bilbry (Pastor: G. L. West, Clerk: G. S. Matthews) 53

Roaring River

(Caney Fork Association)

- 1849 Rev. Wm. B. Gordon, Rev. John G. Stuart, Stephen West 68
- 1851 R. W. Langford, L. Billberry 58
- 1852 Eld. W. Gordon 56

- 1853 W.B. Gordon, Land Bilberry 53
- 1854 W. B. Gordon, R. W. Langford 53
- 1856 W. B. Gordon, L. Billberry, B. West 50