The Rev. Leon Terrell holds his granddaughter, Sandra Marintel, in front of Calvary Baptist Church in Bayou Chicot, which was founded in 1812.

Baptist church may be oldest west of river

BY JENNIFER REINERT
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BAYOU CHICOT - Tucked away in a remote corner of Acadia Parish is a long-forgotten gem of Louisiana history as well as American history, having been around since 1812 and regarded by members as the oldest Baptist church west of the Mississippi River. "House Upon a Rock," a history of Southern Baptists in Louisiana, lists it as the last-second oldest Baptist church in Louisiana.

The church has been rebuilt twice on its site. Its third incarnation, a crimson clapboard church trimmed in white built in 1963, is simply constructed and architecturally unremarkable.

A modest bell tower points heavenward, but there is no brilliant stained glass, no cathedral ceiling, no marble floor.

The Rev. Leon Terrell says it is the approximately 140 registered members and the church founders who make the church special.

Although almost 200 years separate the founders and current members, Terrell credits a focus on the gospel for keeping the church together.

However, there are noticeable differences between today's congregation and that of 1812.

"Their discipline was much stronger," Terrell said, enumerating the differences of the modern church. "The services were much longer, because the (pastor) only had one time in a month to preach at them. The people were. I want to say, closer to each other because they had to be. They depended on each other for doctoring and everything."

The church did not retain a permanent pastor until the mid-20th century.

Before that, circuit-riding preachers rotated among small regional churches, making the Sabbath day into a weekend with a sermon, songs, dinner and a camping out for those too far away to return home.

Janice McCoy, left, sings a hymn accompanied by Jeanette Terrell at Calvary Baptist Church. The church's founder was circuit-riding preacher Joseph Willis.
The Rev. Leon Terrell speaks to members of Calvary Baptist Church in Bayou Chicot. Terrell says 'the hand of God' has held the church together since 1812.

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The circuit-riding preacher with whom the congregation is most familiar is the Rev. Joseph Willis, the church's founder. He grew up in the South Carolina colony as the illegitimate child of an English planter and his Cherokee slave, Terrell said.

Willis' father, who loved his mother but was unable to marry her under British law, treated Willis as a son although society viewed him as a slave.

Willis served in the Revolutionary War, fighting alongside the Swamp Fox, Francis Marion. His fellow soldiers encouraged him to move to what is now Louisiana, so he sold his land and moved.

He followed the Spanish Trail, which led him through Bayou Chicot, where he discovered a group of Baptist believers.

On Nov. 13, 1812, the same year Louisiana became a state, five men and one woman founded the church. "George Washington had told them about the fertile land along the Mississippi River," Terrell said.

Terrell estimated that Willis wed four or five times, fathering 19 or 20 children. Deacon J.R. Holden's first wife, Betty Willis, came from the Willis lineage. Holden's own family has attended the church since 1887, beginning with his grandfather, Joe. "Joseph Willis was her three-time grandfather," Holden said. "My children are descendants of Joseph Willis. My roots go back pretty good, too."

Terrell said when Willis arrived, he brought slaves. The pastor added that owning slaves and being a former slave did not present Willis with a moral quandary.

"Having been a slave and owning slaves was not a conflict," Terrell said. "He didn't mistreat slaves. This was money to them. He freed slaves after a period of time. If they'd work hard, he'd free them, sell them 40 acres of land, or something like that.

To him, it was no conflict.

Slaves were actively involved in the church until after the Civil War, when black members formed their own church. Although slaves could not vote at business meetings, Terrell said in other ways, they may have been more active than their owners.

"The slaves would make professions of faith, they'd baptize them, and I really believe they led some of the masters to the Lord," Terrell said.

Slaves held their own business meetings, where they could air grievances. These complaints were forwarded to the main business session, in which white men participated.

According to church minutes from 1829-1837, calls for the exclusion of sinners were one of the most common uses of the white members' business meetings.

Church members would denounce others for sins, and if the congregation felt it was necessary, it would exclude that person from voting in business meetings "to bring them back in the way of the Gospel," Terrell said. After an apology, they were absolved and allowed to participate again.

"All it (exclusion) did was say 'You can't vote,'" Terrell explained. "They still wanted them to come to church and everything, but they couldn't vote 'til they apologized to the church."

Disputes among members were common, and Terrell said the church based its exclusion policy on Hebrews 10:18, from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The story suggests that the injured party confront the wrongdoer and then a small group of Christians try to resolve the situation, but "if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to even listen to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

Should the church still exclude members for unseemly behavior?

"Yeah, I think we should, although we wouldn't have very many members," Terrell said with a smile.

Several other now-extinct customs included creek baptisms and assigned seats, of sorts.

"Women and children would be seated to one side, because during business time, they couldn't vote," Terrell said. "Also, it separated the young couples from holding hands during church service."

Another feature of the 19th-century church was adopted during the July 9, 1849, business session. The church commissioned Thomas Keller to make tobacco spitoons, "enough to supply each seat with one on the gentlemen side of the house, one for the pulpit and two for the seat at the desk."

The church's land, adjacent to the middle school, was purchased in 1843. Terrell said all that remains of the previous buildings, torn down because of disrepair, is a painting that used to hang behind the baptistery in the "white building," the structure that stood from 1938 until 1963. He has never seen the painting, though; the Rev. Porter Lazenby, Terrell's predecessor, said it was hidden in the paneling of the new building. Terrell said although he is intrigued and would love to recover the painting, he is reluctant to tear up walls to do so.

Today, the church's past remains a backdrop for its present and future. Every Sunday, the strains from the ivory upright piano, tickled by Terrell's wife, Jeanette, can be heard from the parking lot as the six-member choir joins in, singing classic hymns and older, forgotten melodies. During the church's annual anniversary celebration, songs such as "That Old Country Church" and "The Church in the Wildwood" remind the congregation of its roots.

The building is edged by 5-foot azalea bushes that bloom in shades of fuchsia in spring. An airy covered shed with a warped ceiling fan houses the church's barbecue pit, the source of many church suppers.

The aroma of Community Coffee percolating in the fellowship hall lures churchgoers to visit after Sunday school until the choir arrives to warm its collective vocals. The conversation then moves to the auditorium, where the sheen of the honey-bewn pews invites the congregation to sit. People chat between pews, leaning over to catch up with their neighbors.

How has a tiny rural church managed to stick together?

"Just by the hand of God, that's all," Terrell said.