



# Randolph County Historic Landmark Preservation Commission

204 East Academy St. ♦ P.O. Box 771 ♦ Asheboro, North Carolina 27204

September 23, 2014

The Randolph County Historic Landmark Preservation Commission (HLPC) met in the Meeting Room of the 1909 Historic Courthouse at 145 Worth Street, Asheboro, NC, and the meeting was called to order by Chairman Hal Johnson at 2:00 p.m.

Members present were Hal Johnson, Chairman; Fran Andrews, Vice Chair; Warren Dixon, Nan Kemp, Lynne Qualls, Bill Johnson, Marsha Haithcock, Mac Whatley and Robyn Hankins.

## **Approval of Minutes**

*On motion of Qualls, seconded by Andrews, the HLPC voted unanimously to approve the minutes of the regular meeting of May 27, 2014.*

## **Request and Approval of Resolution Designating Strieby Congregational Church, School and Cemetery as a Cultural Heritage Site**

Chairman Johnson welcomed Margo Williams, who completed the application and prepared the history report for this request.

Ms. Williams introduced Elbert Lassiter and Jerry Loflin, who are her cousins and also decedents of Edward and Pricilla Hill.

Chairman Johnson provided a PowerPoint of pictures while Ms. Williams gave the following details of the historical elements included in her report that support her request for designation as a Cultural Heritage Site:

The central family around whom Hill Town grew, in what became Union Township, was that of Edward “Ned” Hill and his wife, Priscilla Mahockly, who were affectionately known as “Uncle Ned” and “Granny Prissy.” Ned was reportedly a free man of color, however, he does not show up as a head of household prior to 1850. Priscilla on the other hand had a known slave background, but must have been freed around 1830, when she and Ned began having children. Some descendants have said she was from Maryland, but in 1850 she says she was born in North Carolina.

It is thought by descendants that Ned had a relationship with a white “Hill” family. The only Hill family in 1830 and 1840 that has free people of color in the household (though not named of course) was that of Samuel Hill, a prominent, local, Quaker lawyer and abolitionist. Samuel Hill and his family were members of the Uwharrie Friends Meeting, a preparative meeting for Back Creek Monthly Meeting. Sometime between 1840 and 1843 Edward “Ned” Hill became a free man of color living in the Southern District of Randolph County, most likely in the Uwharrie Mountain neighborhood he lived in most of the rest of his life. It was at this time that he bought a piece of property. One of the trustees on his deed of trust was Healy Phillips Lassiter, wife of Miles Lassiter, an African American Quaker who was also a member of Uwharrie Meeting. Healy and Miles lived in the Lassiter Mill area of what would become New Hope Township about 2-3 miles from what would become “Hill Town.”

With the end of the Civil War, there were more families of color with the ability to choose where they wished to live. While the Uwharrie River and its streams which included the Lassiter’s Mill area of New Hope Township seemed to be a magnet for many of these families. On the other hand, the adjacent Uwharrie mountain area of Union Township that would become

known first as Hill Town and then Strieby seemed to attract very few. Although in the Uwharrie there was an active gold mine, a federal distillery, as well as sawmills for the dense pine forests, most families in either area seemed to be either farmers or farm laborers.

By 1880, however, the Uwharrie community in Union township had grown significantly to 10 families, for a total of 60 people. By this time, several of Ned and Priscilla's children had married and their families settled in the community. Because of the large number of Hill family members now living in the community, it began to be known as "Hill Town." The community also included a young minister and teacher, the Rev. Islay Walden, who had been educated at Howard University and the New Brunswick Theological Seminary (New Jersey). He was a former Randolph County slave who had returned in 1879 to bring both the gospel and education to the community. Walden would also serve those living in the nearby Lassiter Mill area in New Hope Township.

The Rev. (Alfred) Islay Walden was born a slave circa 1843 in Randolph County, North Carolina, the son of Ruth Gar[d]ner and Branson (Gar[d]ner), according to his obituary in the *Congregational Yearbook*, of the Congregational Church, published in 1885. However, other research indicates his father was a Free Man of Color, William D. Walden Jr. Though his first name was "Alfred," he dropped that name after a tragic lynching involving a man named "Alfred."

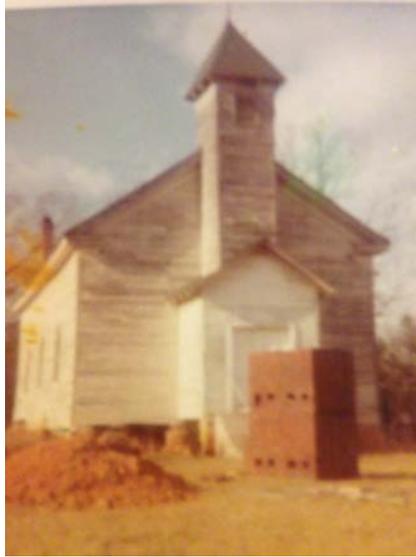
As a young man Islay reportedly worked as a laborer, hotel servant, and at the gold mines of Randolph County. His math abilities and quick mind were recognized early in his life by his master, who was the first to call him a "poet," after hearing his first rhyme recited upon the death of an ox. Shortly after Lee surrendered he learned of his freedom from his master.

In the winter of 1867-68, though nearly blind, Walden walked to Washington, D.C., determined to get both eye-glasses and an education. There he supported himself by selling poems and political ballads on the streets, doing manual labor, and organizing Sabbath schools for black children. However, he did not stay in Washington, for reasons that are not known. Instead he went on to New Brunswick, New Jersey, supporting himself by giving lectures and selling his poetry. In New Jersey, he met a professor from Rutgers College who befriended him. The professor was able to convince the Second Reformed Church to give Walden a scholarship that enabled him to return to Washington DC to study at Howard University, where he earned his degree from Howard's Normal program in 1876. He then returned to New Jersey to attend the New Brunswick Theological Seminary where he became the second African American to graduate with a divinity degree. During his years there, despite his own poverty and compromised eyesight, he put his teaching skills to work and established a mission school for poor African Americans. In both 1876 and 1877, Walden published books with his poems and they have been reprinted.

After Walden was ordained in 1879, he turned down a lucrative position in New Jersey in order to return to the Lassiter's Mill area of New Hope Township, in Randolph County, North Carolina, under the auspices of the American Missionary Association (AMA). There he established a Congregational church and "common school," as AMA one or two teacher schools were called, in an area in the Uwharrie Mountains called "Hill Town." It is likely that he decided to take this post because it was in the same community where his sister, Sarah (Callicutt) Hill, wife of Emsley Hill, lived. The church was first called Promised Land Church. According to Aveus "Ave" Lassiter Edmundson, in an article that appeared in *Asheboro Magazine* in 2011, Priscilla Hill, (affectionately known as "Granny Prissy") helped build the brush arbor that was used as this early meeting place.

Walden's job as AMA missionary, however, was to plant a permanent congregational church for the community. This church was called the First Congregational Church of Randolph County. It would eventually be named Strieby Congregational Church and School, after a prominent Congregational minister and Corresponding Secretary of the AMA that Walden

admired. Kate Lassiter Jones believed that it was Rev. Strieby who helped Walden found the church, but it was apparently the Rev. Joseph Roy, the Field Superintendent, who assisted. Rev. Roy stated that a man in Hill Town offered “*three acres of land and timber in the tree for all the lumber needed for a church school-house, and that man was an ex-slave.*” He may have been referring to Ned Hill. In 1880, Walden, as agent for the AMA purchased a six acre plot of land from a neighboring white family, Addison and Cornelia Lassiter on which the church was built.



In 1880, Rev. Islay Walden founded the First Congregational Church of Randolph County, as well as a school, under the auspices of the American Missionary Association (AMA), in an area called Hill Town in Union Township. In 1884, Rev. Walden was successful in obtaining a US Post Office for the community under the name of Strieby, thus the church and school were renamed, Strieby Congregational Church and School. The school continued until it was absorbed by the Public School system. The church and cemetery are still in use by descendants of the founding families. The community that would be served by this minister and teacher comprised about 120 people.

In 1883, Walden successfully petitioned the government for a postal office thus eliminating the long ride to the Lassiter’s Mill post office and thereby making Strieby the official name of the community. Walden became the first Postmaster. In February 1884, *The American Missionary* reported this achievement: *Rev. Islay Walden’s school and church whose post-office was formerly that of Lassiter’s Mill, have now secured a new post route and their own post-office, called by the government Strieby, and served by the pastor as postmaster.*

Walden’s ministry and career were cut short by his untimely death from Acute Bronchitis (more likely pneumonia) on 2 February 1884, at age 40. He is buried in the Strieby Church Cemetery.

Ms. Williams said she had interviewed surviving student, Aveus Lassiter Edmondson (now 101 years old), remembers that the school had about 4 or 5 rooms, each devoted to a different age group. The teacher would go from room to room giving age appropriate lessons. The school day, she stated, was from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm each day. The day began with prayer and there was a prayer before lunch, but there were no special religious services. There were no special chores or responsibilities that the students had with regard to the maintenance of the school beyond the basics of keeping one’s space neat.

The impact of Strieby Church and School on the community of “Hill Town” cannot be overlooked. According to the 1870 census, there were only 4 independent households of families of color in Union Township, containing 21 individuals. In 1880, when the Rev. Islay Walden first started the church and school, Hill Town, in Union Township, had grown to 10 families

containing 60 people. Already 13 children were attending school, according to the 1880 census. By the 1900 census, the community included 21 families, containing 101 people, with 33 children in school.

Ms. Williams concluded with another story she thought was very important to the history of the community. Vella Lassiter was one example of both the legacy of educational excellence encouraged by schools in the American Missionary Association tradition, as well as their stance against injustice. Born Novella Anna Lassiter, “Vella” was the second of thirteen children (twelve of whom survived) of Winston and Ora (Kearns) Lassiter, of the Lassiter Mill community in Randolph County, North Carolina, and members of Strieby Church. Vella attended Strieby Church School.



Vella graduated in 1913 from Bennett College and eventually earned her Master’s degree from Miner Teachers College, in Washington, DC. Vella went on to become a teacher, first back at Strieby, and eventually at a school in Reidsville, in Rockingham County, North Carolina, where she taught for 40 years. She was close to her family and often came home on weekends to visit. In 1937, when she was returning to Reidsville Easter Monday afternoon, she was on the first of her two bus trips. The first bus would take her from Asheboro to Greensboro, about 35 miles away in Guilford County. From there she would take a bus to Reidsville. She had bought her ticket and was seated on the bus – next to a white person; the bus was crowded; there were no more seats. The bus driver apparently objected to Vella sitting next to a white person. Vella was asked to give up her seat, get off the bus, and wait for the next one. Anyone who knew Vella knew she was a force of nature. Vella said “No.” The bus driver attempted to force her off the bus. Vella resisted. Eventually two policemen were needed to drag her to the door and throw her onto the sidewalk. She would later tell people there was no way she would make it easy for them to throw her off that bus. After all, she had bought a ticket and she was just as good as any white person.

Vella called one of her brothers to come and take her to Reidsville, but she also called her cousin, prominent High Point, North Carolina, African American attorney, T. F. Sanders. With his assistance, Sanders sought assistance from the prominent Winston-Salem attorney, F(ranklin).W. Williams. Williams had ties to the NAACP. With Sanders’ and Williams’ help, Vella sued the *Greensboro-Fayetteville Bus Line*, on the grounds that they had sold her the ticket for that specific bus trip and consequently were required to transport her. To everyone’s surprise they won the case in a jury trial in November of that year. She was awarded \$300 in damages. The bus company appealed to the North Carolina State Supreme Court. Two years later in 1939, the decision was upheld by Judge Allen H. Gwyn. Vella had won. In reporting the victory on 18 August 1939, *The Carolina Times* newspaper, published in Raleigh, wrote the following:

*Possibly the most significant victory regarding the rights of Negroes was won in Randolph County last month when attorney P. W. Williams, prominent Winston-Salem lawyer emerged victorious in a suit against the Greensboro-Fayetteville Bus Line.*

Ms. Williams said that although the school is gone, Strieby Church continues in a church building built in 1972 and the original church bell hangs in the bell tower. Services are currently led by the Rev Winston Lassiter, who is the son of the late Leonard Lassiter, nephew of Grant and Vella Lassiter, a great grandson of Colier Lassiter, and great-great grandson of Miles Lassiter. Strieby Church still holds its annual Homecoming-Revival Services in August. Strieby descendants continue to bury their loved ones in the cemetery.



**Elbert Lassiter** spoke in favor of the request saying that the church and area is rich in history and he is proud to be a part of it.

**Jerry Loflin** also spoke in favor of the request and said the community is such a big part of his heritage that he came back and built near the church.

Chairman Johnson read the Resolution of Recognition.

*On motion of Qualls, seconded by Dixon, the HLPC voted unanimously to approve a Resolution of Recognition for Strieby Congregational Church, School and Cemetery, Ca. 1880, as follows:*

### ***Resolution of Recognition***

***WHEREAS***, *The Randolph County Historic Landmark Preservation Commission desires to recognize those Cultural Heritage Sites that provide a tangible link to the past, with the people and events that have made significant contributions to Randolph County history, and thus shaped our present; and*

***WHEREAS***, *in 1880, former Randolph County slave the Rev. Islay Walden, founded the First Congregational Church of Randolph County, as well as a school to serve free people of color in an area called Hill Town in Union Township, Randolph County, which was renamed in 1884, due to Rev. Waldens's effort to obtain a U.S. Post Office, as Strieby Congregational Church and School; and*

***WHEREAS***, *the impact of Strieby School continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, producing teachers, doctors, nurses, ministers, and others for the African American community of*

*Southwestern Randolph County and beyond, and*

***WHEREAS**, the new Strieby Church, constructed in 1972, continues to serve the community, holding special services led by a descendent of one of the founding families, and descendants of the founding families continue to be buried in the cemetery.*

***NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED**, that official recognition as a Randolph County Cultural Heritage Site is given to:*

***STRIEBY CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, SCHOOL, & CEMETERY, Ca. 1880***

***BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that this Resolution is approved by the Historic Landmark Preservation Commission and recorded in its minutes, with appropriate history and photographs placed on the Commission's historical website, and a suitable copy of the Resolution presented to the recipient.*

**Adjournment**

*At 2:46 p.m., on motion of Qualls, seconded by Whatley, the HLPC voted unanimously to adjourn.*

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Hal Johnson, Chairman

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Amanda Varner, Clerk to the HLPC