

By Nancy Mann Jackson  
Photography by Sheri O'Neal

# Hallelujah Trail

NORTH ALABAMA'S HISTORIC TRAIL  
FORGES a LEGACY of FAITH and COMMUNITY



As the frontier opened up after the Revolutionary War and thousands of people moved into what had been trackless wilderness, religious life suffered. Not only were there few houses of worship, but there were even fewer ministers to fill pulpits. Pioneers responded by developing the camp meeting, a multi-day religious gathering of tents or cabins hosting a number of traveling preachers, advertised by word of mouth and attended by frontier families from miles around.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Cambridge United Methodist Church, Athens

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Temple B'Nai Sholom, Huntsville; Detail shots of lantern and Bible, First Presbyterian Church, Athens; Detail shot with angel, St. Joseph Catholic Church, Florence; Detail shot of gate and courtyard, Episcopal Church of the Nativity, Huntsville



# In Alabama,

which was the new frontier during the 1820s and 1830s, some of the state's oldest churches originated as camp meeting sites in the early 19th century. For instance, in 1818, Adam Hodgson wrote in his *Letters from North America* of a trip through Cambridge, Ala., where he was told that a group of 4,000 had gathered for a camp meeting the week before his visit. That year, this longtime camp meeting site was established as the Cambridge United Methodist Church, and a permanent meeting house was built.

Almost 200 years later, the church in tiny Cambridge is still active and holds weekly worship services. And while the congregation hasn't ruled out the possibility of constructing a new building adjacent to its historic one—complete with central air-conditioning and a kitchen—“worshipping in a historic church building is very special,” says Sandra Holland, church historian and a fifth-generation church member. “Our ancestors worshipped there. They sat on benches with slatted backs. They came on horseback and parked the wagons under the trees. On occasion they would have dinner on the ground. I have pictures of them carrying those slatted-back pews outside to put the food on. They would have box suppers and ice cream socials. They made pallets with quilts for the babies to play while they worshipped. They would have weeklong revivals and families would take turns feeding the preacher. They always fed him well, too. It's a wonder he could preach after all that food. They would have singings, weddings, funerals, and many a soul was saved there. You can't find that in a new building.”

For many congregations like Cambridge, maintaining old churches is about more than historic preservation; it's about continuing a legacy of faith, family and community that has long sustained this region of the country. The North Alabama Hallelujah Trail celebrates this spirit of remembrance by opening the doors and sharing the stories of 32 historic churches across Alabama's mountain-lakes region. A self-guided driving tour, the North Alabama Hallelujah Trail includes churches that are scattered across 16 counties in the state's mountain-lakes region, which crosses east to west in North Alabama. Each house of worship is more than 100 years old, located on its original site and still holds worship services regularly.

In addition to Cambridge First United Methodist Church, the churches on the trail have plenty of interesting stories to tell and passionate parishioners—some warming the same pews used by generations of their families before them—who are willing to share. Here are a few highlights:

**GUNTERSVILLE FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, GUNTERSVILLE.** Upon meeting Richard Neely, a junior preacher on the Methodist Church's Jackson Circuit, Richard Riley, a half-Cherokee American Indian living in Alabama's Cherokee community, promptly invited him to come “preach to the Indians,” says Ann Lee, director of discipleship and communications at Gunter'sville First United Methodist Church. “[Neely] accepted and early in 1822 crossed the Tennessee River at Gunter's Landing and preached to the natives at the residence of Richard Riley and Edward Gunter. That fall, because of the success of Brother Neely's work, the conference passed resolutions establishing a mission in Mr. Riley's neighborhood to preach to the American Indians and teach their children. This new charge was called Cherokee Mission.”

By the end of 1823, membership in the church was reported as 108 Cherokees and 43 blacks, and in 1829, there were 448 church members out of the 1,028-member Cherokee Nation. “This was the high-water mark of missionary efforts by the Methodists among the Cherokee,” Lee says.

It couldn't last. “The agitation to relocate the American Indians west of the Mississippi had been going on for some time and, as a consequence of their removal, in 1838, the church membership declined until the influx of whites set in,” Lee says. “Not a single white member had been reported prior to that time, but all at once, statistics show for the circuit 192 American Indians and 237 white members. From that point on, the American Indian population of the church disappears.”

The church, in existence since 1822, finally erected a building in 1869, which was freely used by all denominations in

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OPPOSITE PAGE: Interior shot of Episcopal Church of the Nativity, Huntsville

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Detail shot of pew and exterior shot of Episcopal Church of the Nativity, Huntsville; Detail shot of a pulpit, Trinity Episcopal Church, Florence; First Presbyterian Church, Tusculumbia; Garden area at Trinity Episcopal Church, Florence





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the area until 1880, when the Presbyterian church built its own building. “The bell that currently hangs in the bell tower is from the original structure. At one time it tolled for every funeral in town, served as a school bell, church bell and fire bell,” Lee says.

After the original church building was destroyed in a wind-storm, the women of the Missionary Society committed to raising \$50 each through baking, knitting and other crafts to help rebuild the church. “Mrs. Sam Henry found her fund growing slowly, so she wrote about 500 letters to friends, business firms as far away as New York and to her favorite opera

star, asking for contributions for the church,” Lee says. “She received about \$1,500 and with it, bought the beautiful Gothic stained-glass windows in the current sanctuary.”

The current building was built in 1914, and among today’s parishioners are Pat Neely, a descendant of founder Richard Neely, and Albert Henry, whose family “was one of the first in Guntersville and has a biological connection to the Cherokee Indians,” Lee says.

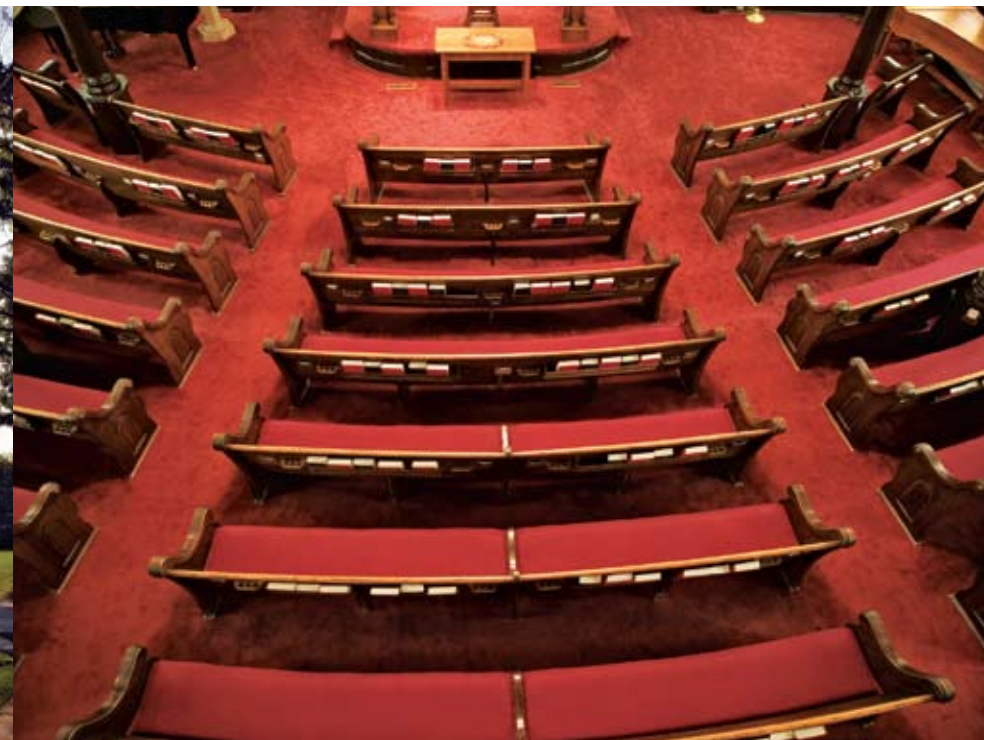
**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, TUSCUMBIA.** While the Union Army occupied Florence, Ala., during the Civil War,

several Union soldiers attended a worship service at the local Presbyterian church one Sunday morning. When the pastor prayed for Confederate President Jefferson Davis and the Confederate soldiers, the federal officers in attendance got up, pulled him from the pulpit, arrested him and sent him to a prison camp in the Midwest, where he spent several months, forcing the congregation to take a hiatus from Sunday services.

Soon after, federal officers attended First Presbyterian Church in Tuscumbia, located just across the river from Florence. “Pastor Sawtelle had heard about what had happened in Florence and made a point not to make the same mistake,” says Ron Hudson, a current member and unofficial historian of First Presbyterian. “That’s probably why we have the oldest continually used church structure in the state. There are buildings that are older, but a lot of churches that predate the Civil War have gaps during



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Detail shot of door, First Presbyterian Church, Athens; St. Joseph Catholic Church, Florence; St. John’s Episcopal Church, Decatur; shot of pews from the balcony, First Presbyterian Church, Tuscumbia; Courtland Presbyterian Church, Courtland; Interior shot of St. John’s Episcopal Church, Decatur; First Presbyterian Church, Athens



## Creating the Hallelujah Trail

“Traveling in Europe brought about the idea for the Hallelujah Trail,” says Dana Lee Jennings, president and CEO of the Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association, which created the trail. While European churches are centuries old, American churches also have fascinating stories to tell. “American architects’ ingenuity has created a plethora of church designs, examples of which can be found on the Hallelujah Trail,” she says. “Churches provide peaceful settings, whether a grand gothic structure or a simple clapboard building. With lives being so fast-paced, being in a church allows us to just be still, to take a deep breath and enjoy the surroundings.”

Winding across the 16 northernmost counties of the state, the Hallelujah Trail will take you to elegant Gothic Revival buildings and hand-hewn log structures. You’ll hear stories of Cherokee American Indians who organized their own Methodist congregation and of parishioners who heard the cannons of the Civil War’s Battle of Shiloh as they sat in a church more than 60 miles away. You’ll visit thriving cities, charming towns and tiny dots on the map. Along with rich history and arresting architecture, the Hallelujah Trail offers a chance to glimpse the spirit of the Deep South and its people.

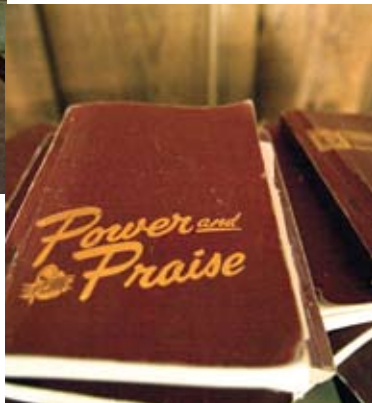
The Hallelujah Trail was made possible by grants from the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel and the Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association. For more information about the trail or to request a brochure, visit [www.AlabamaMountainLakes.org](http://www.AlabamaMountainLakes.org).







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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: St. John's Episcopal Church, Tuscumbia; Interior and exterior views of The Tabernacle, Hartselle, along with detail shots of the church's fans and hymn books; Stained glass detail in St. John's Episcopal Church, Decatur

the war when they weren't able to meet. We have held services consistently since the church was built in 1827.”

In addition to being the state's oldest house of continuous worship, First Presbyterian's Georgian Gothic building has been the spiritual home of a number of prominent Alabama families. For instance, family members of Tuscumbia native Helen Keller were longtime members of the church, and she was baptized there as an infant. Primarily built by slave labor with bricks made on site using local materials, First Presbyterian still retains its original slave gallery, which is now used for balcony seating and choir performances.

**LEBANON CAMPGROUND METHODIST CHURCH, SPRING GARDEN.** Another former camp meeting site, Lebanon Campground became a bona fide church during the 1830s and also served as the only school in the area. Although the

somewhere back in the family line. Once the church closed, people continued to do it, always eating together in the same groups. Now just one family still takes their lunches.”

Although the church is now inactive, a core group of local worshippers keeps it alive, if only once a year. “We hope it will continue,” Smith says. “We have a perpetual care fund and a couple who maintain the cemetery. It's important for us to maintain it, because our ancestors are buried there.”

**HELTON MEMORIAL CHAPEL, STEVENSON.** The widow of a country doctor created a memorial to her husband that became the lifeblood of their community and still draws weekly visitors more than a century later. In Stevenson, Emma Helton spent \$1,040 to erect the area's first church in 1900. Named in honor of her late husband, Dr. Pleasant Helton, Helton Memorial Chapel held about 500 people on the day of its dedication. Today, the same church has about 90 members on its roll.

Now a Baptist congregation, the Helton Memorial building was originally constructed “for all denominations, because it was the only church around the community,” says Jean Payne, church clerk. In addition to hearing stories about the early members of the church, visitors enjoy seeing the church's original stained-glass windows and chimney, which was used for coal heating.

**THE TABERNACLE, HARTSELLE.** Nothing more than cedar logs holding up a roof to cover hand-hewn benches, the Tabernacle is open on three sides and has served for more than a century as the site of the Hartselle Camp Meeting, which began as a 10-day revival in the late 1800s. The cedar posts that were first erected in 1897 still support the building, which has been



church was closed in 1972 due to low attendance, a perpetual care committee was appointed to maintain the building and the cemetery, “which dates back to before the Civil War,” says Linda Smith, whose family members were longtime parishioners of the church. Although the church no longer hosts weekly services, it still houses crowds of about 150 people each Mother's Day for an early Memorial Day service. It also opens for occasional funeral services.

Both Smith's grandparents and her husband's grandparents are buried in the Lebanon Campground Cemetery, so they are among the faithful who worship there each May. “We have gone there as long as we can remember for Memorial Day,” she says. “Years ago, families carried their lunch and gathered by family to eat. My family was the Sanfords, and we always ate with the Norton family because a Sanford married a Norton

declared a historic landmark in the state of Alabama.

In the early days of the camp meeting, families rode onto the campgrounds in wagons pulled by mules and cooked their meals around a campfire. Today, the site includes modern lodging and meeting facilities and draws families from across the region for a weeklong, interdenominational Christian revival each summer.

“The camp meeting has been known for its great food, warm fellowship and dynamic preaching,” says Rob Cain, president of the Hartselle Camp Meeting. “Hundreds of people have been saved around the wooden altar on the old sawdust trail, and countless people have entered the ministry or mission field from there.” 🍷

*Nancy Mann Jackson is a Florence, Alabama-based freelance writer.*