

Our History

Rocky Branch Baptist Church (RBBC), also known as the Cathedral in the Country, sits in the heart of Sutherland VA. RBBC had its beginning in the year of 1873. Through our 150-year journey we see evidence of His plans for us to prosper and to have hope and a future. On March 24, 1880, land was donated for the church. The Dinwiddie County records show two acres of land were donated to the “Rocky Branch Baptist Colored Church” by John Walker. It was stated that the property was to be used for the sole purpose of the church, or to be returned to his heirs.

It was also determined that the first worship services on the land were likely held in a bush arbor. The terms bush arbor, brush harbor, and hush harbor are interchangeable. It is a secluded informal structure, often built with tree branches. Trees and brush were used to build a temporary outdoors shelter to protect worshippers from the harsh sunlight and rainfall.



A bush arbor is a rough, open-sided shelter constructed of vertical poles driven into the ground with additional long

poles laid across the top as support for a roof of brush, cut branches or hay. Appearing in the 1700's and early 1800's, bush arbors were used by some churches to protect worshippers from the weather during lengthy revival meetings.

The patriarchs of the congregation had a strong desire to move forward, therefore they came together and constructed a new edifice which was a one-room structure made from logs. This church was built approximately 200 yards to the left of what was known as the "Old Rocky Branch Church Site". Interestingly enough, for many years the place was marked with a very large rock. A bit further down was the branch that was used for baptismal services. It is conceivable that the rock and the branch motivated the patriarchs to name the church "Rocky Branch Baptist Church".



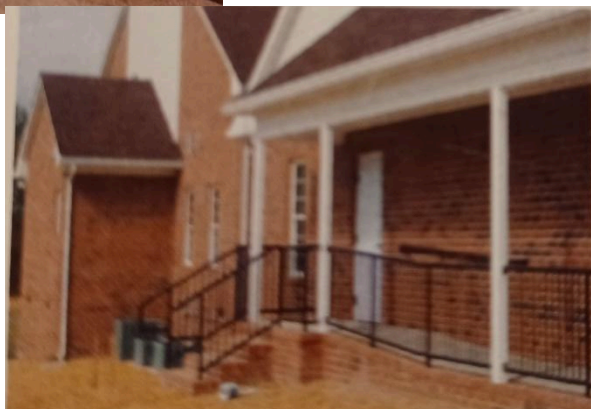
Over the years updates were made to facilitate worship and meet the needs of the people. This building was constructed during the 1890s.

In 1968 renovations were made to the initial building.

In 1985 a major expansion was done to extend the fellowship hall.



Construction began on the new building in September 2010.



In December 2011 construction was completed.



The first service in the new building was commemorated on Sunday, July 22, 2012.

In March 2020 when COVID closed the doors of the world to everything, churches were not excluded. However, the faith of the congregation was not deterred, and other options were used to worship. Like other churches, worship services were conducted virtually. In the spring of 2021, services were moved to the parking lot. Parishioners came out and listened to service from their cars while sermons were preached in the parking lot of the church. The online giving process grew to be a more convenient method to collect tithes and offerings.

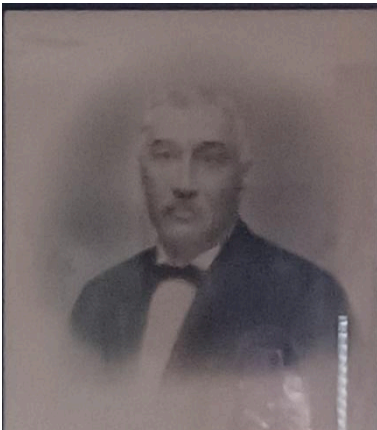
When the church did partially reopen, masks were required and full services were held on the 1st and 3rd Sundays, with the choir and musicians. Services for the 2nd and 4th Sundays had a lower attendance with no choir and musicians. On May 7, 2023, the church reopened to have the full choir every Sunday, and masks became optional.

Our Leadership

Little is known about who conducted the first services due to the fact there was little documentation regarding date and time frames. However, for the church to continue to strive and grow, we recognize Rocky Branch has had some of the finest leadership of the past century. Among them were names like the Jones Brothers, each rendering four years of service. Then came Rev. Pittman followed by Rev. Henry Wiggins. Their exact dates of service are unknown.

Rev. F. A. Brown followed Rev. Wiggins and during his tenure two rooms were added in back of the pulpit. He was followed by Rev. W. T. Wyatt and during his time a baptism pool was built on the outside of the church. Later Rev. Isaac Ruffin was called to the church, however, there is no date recorded.

Rev. Leonard Keiser, Sr. followed Rev. Ruffin and during his tenure, a choir stand was built to the right of the pulpit. Additionally, electricity, new windows, and central heating were added. Succeeding Rev. Keiser, Jr. was Rev. H. F. Ritchie, followed by Rev. Milton A. Reid. During his time, a renovation program was adopted.



Rev. Leonard Keiser, Sr.



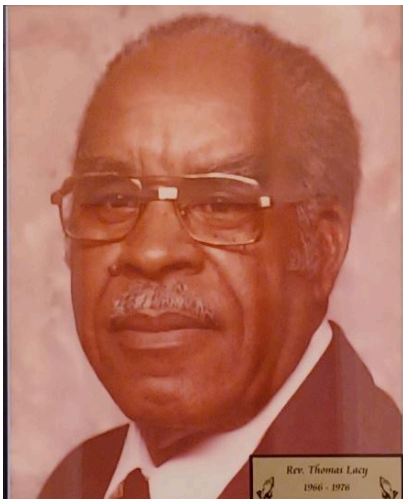
Rev. Leonard Keiser, Jr.



Rev. Milton Reid

Rev. Clarence L. Robinson

Rev. Clarence L. Robinson was called to pastor on the recommendation of his predecessor, Rev. Reid. During the three years that Rev. Robinson served as pastor, Dinwiddie County began to consolidate schools, and as a result, the church purchased the Rocky Branch School, which still stands and serves as a historical attraction for tourists today. The departure of Rev. Robinson would leave the church without a pastor for three years. However, during this time, God continued to bless the church.



In 1966, Rev. Thomas A. Lacy, Sr. was called to pastor. During his tenure, major renovations were initiated, consisting of a sanctuary for seating more than 150 parishioners, a fellowship room, two choir rooms, boardroom, multi-purpose room, pastor's study, furnace room, restrooms, kitchen, baptistery, and central heat and air conditioning.

Rev. Thomas A. Lacy

Additionally, Rev. Lacy ordained Rev. Robert W. Roberts and Rev. John Winbush to the work of the gospel ministry, as well as two deacons into the Diaconate Ministry. He served faithfully for 10 years before his retirement in 1976.



Following Rev. Lacy was Rev. Willie E. Williams who pastored the church from August 1977 to November 1987. Under his leadership, the church modernized its air conditioning, electrical systems, extended the fellowship hall and kitchen, added additional restrooms, and a storage space. Additionally, Rev. Herbert Anderson was ordained to the work of the gospel ministry
Rev, Willie E. Williams

under the leadership of Rev. Williams. Also under Rev. William's tenure was the first youth ministry, the Anxious Achievers, under the direction of Mrs. Lottie H. Williams.



After Rev. Williams' departure in 1987, the church was without a pastor for a year and a half before Rev. Carl Lee Easley, Jr. was installed in April 1989.

Under his leadership, the church experienced spiritual and programmatic growth.

Rev. Carl L. Easley

Several new ministries were established, including the Nursing Home Ministry, Prison Ministry, New Members Class, Advisory Board, Tape and Radio Broadcast, and 24-hour devotional prayer line.

Moreover, a track rack and two front doors were installed, and a billboard was placed on Route 460 with the church's name. Furthermore, the church was blessed to pay off its mortgage, purchase a state of the art public address system, a computer, and a van.

It was during Rev. Easley's tenure that worship services increased from two to four Sundays per month, the Voices of Rocky Branch became a combined choir, and the theme: "The Cathedral in the Country" was developed.



Rev. Norwood G. Carson

In January 1993, Rev. Dr. Norwood G. Carson became pastor. During his tenure membership increased along with twelve deacons being ordained into the Diaconate Ministry.

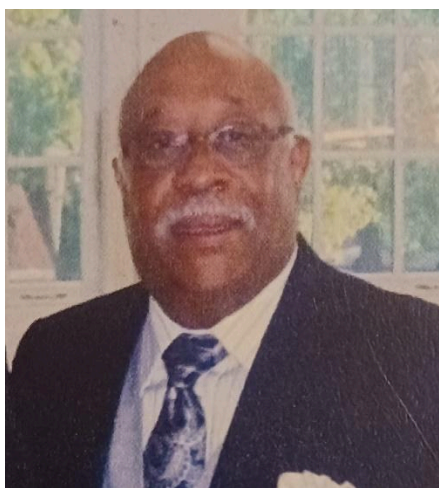
Additionally, many improvements were made to the church property.

This included Rocky Branch Road being widened and surfaced, the cemetery and parking areas extended, and one side of the parking lot was paved. Furthermore, the church purchased a television /VCR monitor, Hammond Organ, and a telephone voice mailbox.

A “Building on the Rock Fund” was also established for future investments.

It was Dr. Carson who added the fifth Sunday worship service and modified the church theme; “The Cathedral in the Country” by adding “Where the Ministry of Recovery, Redemption, Restoration, and Rejoicing is Manifested in Christ Though Every Believer.”

In April 1997, Rev. Dr. Lynn G. Robinson was installed as the seventeenth Pastor of Rocky Branch Baptist Church. Under his leadership, the church grew in Christ with an overwhelming increase in membership. With his guidance, a Diaconate Sheepfold Ministry was established, the New Generation Steppers Praise Team was created, Children Ministry, Sisterhood and Brotherhood Ministries, and Beatification Ministry have all been developed. In addition, the Prayer Line was reinstated, and a church website was created. Dr. Robinson also installed five additional trustees and ordained six deacons into the Diaconate Ministry.



Rev. Lynn G. Robinson

It was under Dr. Robinson’s leadership that the vision and construction of the new church edifice was fulfilled. On January 12, 2014, Rocky Branch Baptist Church added to its’ rich history by installing Rev. Vodricka Epps as the first Associate Pastor under his leadership. After 25 years of service Rev. Robinson retired.

As of the writing of this documentation the church is in search of the next pastor to lead the fold.

The Sons and Daughter of the Church

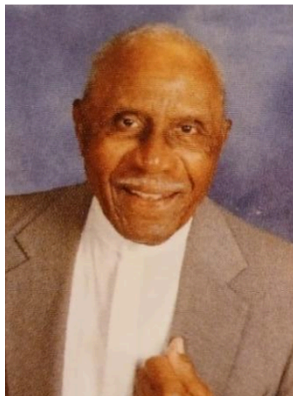
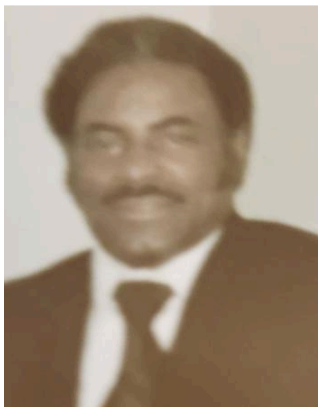


Rev. Herbert Anderson



Rev. Faye Banks-Taylor

Rev. Beverly Harris
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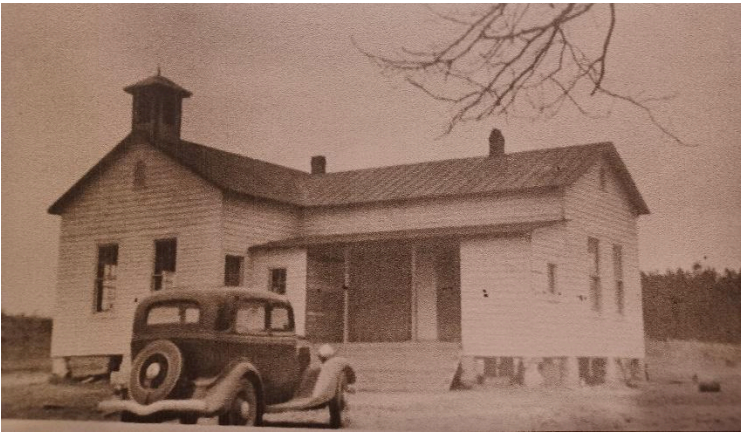


Rev. Robert Roberts

Rev. John Winbush

From inception and worship in a bush arbor, followed by the donation of land, Rocky Branch, by the Grace of God, has continued to thrive throughout the years. God has continued to bless the church both spiritually and physically, while providing additional space and resources to meet the church's growing requirements.

Rocky Branch School - An Extension of the Community



Rocky Branch Schoolhouse in the 1930s

It is hard to talk about the church without talking about the school. They both played a major role in the formative years of our youth and a result of the trust and faith our ancestors had in God our Father. When there was progress for the school there was progress for our church.

In the early 1900s a group of Dinwiddie County's African American residents established the Rocky Branch School in Sutherland. On September 5, 1913, Mr. and Mrs. John Walker donated one acre of land to be used as a colored school. The deed was filed in

the Clerk's office of the Dinwiddie Circuit Court on February 25, 1914.

At the June 5, 1928, Dinwiddie County School Board meeting, it was ordered that the school building known as the Sutherland School be purchased from John Thomas for the sum of \$250 to be used as a colored school. The original location was across from the Ocran Methodist Church on U.S. Route 460 West, about two miles east of the current site. It would be moved by the patrons of the Rocky Branch School and made part of their current one room schoolhouse. The newly purchased school would be added to the one room school and creating the two-room schoolhouse that stands today.

Reading, writing and arithmetic were taught in first through seventh grades. Each school day began with a short devotion. Students were required to recite Bible verses and sing patriotic and gospel songs daily. During the winter, students often had to huddle around the stoves to keep warm during their lessons. Sometimes the teachers would bring soup for the students so they could have a warm meal at lunch.

Transportation was not provided for the school's students, resulting in many boys and girls walking four or five miles to school each day. Despite this challenge, attendance was always high, and a large percentage of the school's students continued their education through high school and college.

The school's heating system consisted of a large potbellied stove in the room for first through third grades and a long cast iron stove for fourth through seven grades. The sixth and seventh grade boys had the responsibility of keeping the wood dry by stacking it under the school.

The school's wooden floors were oiled with used motor oil to help settle the dust from outside. Water was supplied by a deep well pump located on the right front side of the school, with separate facilities for males and females.



Current state of schoolhouse as of 8/27/2023

The school closed in 1963, but the building stands as a symbol of education to all.” [Rocky Branch School Historical Marker \(hmdb.org\)](https://www.hmdb.org/showImage.do?image=RockyBranchSchoolHistoricalMarker)

In the early 1960's schools were beginning to consolidate, and the Rocky Branch School was put up for public auction. The trustees of the church at that time were Willie Cone, Willie Jones, Tom Bates, Nathaniel Harris, Jr., Sandy Washington, T. Mack Williams, and Al Johnson. On July 17, 1963, the County School Board was authorized and directed to sell the interest of the property on which the schoolhouse sat. On August 30, 1963 the property (and schoolhouse) were purchased by RBBC for \$1,925.00.

For over 100 years the Rocky Branch School served as the educational source for the African American community. After schools integrated, the schoolhouse became an auxiliary of the

church. At one point it served as a changing room for baptismal candidates as baptisms were held outside in the inground pool. Later it was used to serve food after special occasions including annual homecoming services. The last known purpose was for the clothes closet that provided free donated clothing to those in the community.



Today the school is listed on the Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail. A grant was recently awarded to renovate the building. The revitalization of the building will allow it to continue to be an educational resource to the community.

