

Honoring Our Roots ~ Planted Legacy

Indian Woods Missionary Baptist Church Tree Dedication

From the Gospel Oak to the Seedling: A Legacy That Lives On

Today, we gather for something much greater than the dedication of a tree. We gather to remember. We gather to honor. And we gather to recognize a legacy that has been growing in Indian Woods for generations.

Indian Woods is not simply a location. It is a community made up of several historic communities—Saint Francis, Kings, Spring Hill/Cahaba, Beacon Light, Grabtown, and Indian Woods/Quitsna.

This land carries a history that reaches back generations, including the Native people who lived here long before the communities we know today were established. The historical record connects Indian Woods to the Tuscarora Indian Reservation established in 1717, with earlier English contact in this region dating back to 1584 at Moratoc.

So when we speak about Indian Woods, we are speaking about a place where generations of people have lived, worked, worshipped, raised families, struggled, persevered, and built something for those who would come after them. And in the middle of that history stood a great oak tree.

The Gospel Oak

At the end of Indian Woods Road, toward Windsor, in the area known as Grabtown, stood a majestic oak. But it was more than a tree. It became known as the Gospel Oak because beneath its branches, people gathered to pray, worship, sing, and fellowship.

The mother Gospel Oak is remembered as having stood for over 400 years. Think about that for a moment--Four hundred years. That means this tree was standing through generations of change. It stood while families were being formed, communities were being established, and history was unfolding around it.

It stood as Native people lived upon this land. It stood through the arrival and settlement of others. It stood through slavery and emancipation. It stood as formerly enslaved people began building churches, families, and communities of their own. And through all those generations, that oak remained.

During slavery, enslaved people faced restrictions that reached into nearly every part of their lives—including their ability to gather and worship freely. But they found a way. They gathered quietly; they worshipped secretly, and beneath the branches of that great oak, they found a place where they could call on the name of God.

When they could not always worship openly, they still worshipped. When they faced oppression, they still prayed. When they had very little, they still had faith. That Gospel Oak became a place where people could find strength, encouragement, and hope.

From the Oak to the Church

Eventually, what happened beneath that tree grew into something greater. After emancipation, formerly enslaved people began using their new freedom to gather openly, worship together, and build institutions for their families and communities. Indian Woods Baptist Church grew out of that tradition.

While historical records identify the church's formal establishment in the 1870s, oral history within the community places its beginnings even earlier, around 1866. That reminds us of something important: History is not always limited to what was written down. Sometimes history lives in the people. It lives in the stories grandparents tell their grandchildren. It lives in the memories passed from one generation to another. It lives in the places where our ancestors prayed.

The Gospel Oak was one of those places. From those gatherings came a church. And that church became part of the foundation of the Indian Woods community.

When the Mother Tree Fell

For generations, the Gospel Oak stood as a living witness. Its branches stretched across the landscape near the beginning of Indian Woods Road, near the area historically known as Liberty Hall. For roughly four centuries, that tree had seen generations come and go. It had witnessed prayers. It had witnessed worship. It had witnessed families. It had witnessed history. But in 2011, Hurricane Irene brought the great tree down. The mother Gospel Oak that had stood for generations was uprooted. And for a moment, it may have seemed like the end of an era.

But here is what we must understand: The tree fell, but the legacy did not. The branches were broken, but the faith was not broken. The tree was gone, but the prayers were not gone. The physical tree could no longer stand, but the story it represented could still stand. Because a legacy is not contained in a tree. A legacy lives in the people who carry it forward.

From the Mother Tree to the Seedling

And that brings us to this tree. In 2012, sprigs from the original Gospel Oak were planted on the grounds of Indian Woods Missionary Baptist Church by Deaconess Janie Rascoe. Today, that tree is close to 14 years old. Fourteen years ago, a piece of a tree that had witnessed over four centuries of history was placed into the ground.

Think about the connection. The mother tree carried over 400 years of history. And now, for 14 years, this tree has been carrying that history forward. The mother tree was no longer standing—but something from it was still alive. A piece of the past was planted into the future. And from that planting came new growth. A new Gospel Oak. That is why this dedication means so much. This tree is not simply replacing the one that was lost. It is continuing the story.

The Legacy Is in Us

Dr. Arwin Smallwood shared something with me that I believe is especially meaningful today. He reminded me that when our bodies are buried, eventually the body breaks down and returns to the earth. But something remains. Our DNA remains. Our blood, our sweat, our tears, our labor—all of those things become part of the ground. And generation after generation, something of us remains.

That made me think about this tree. Because our ancestors are connected to this ground. Their work is connected to this ground. Their sacrifices are connected to this ground. Their prayers are connected to this ground. Their tears are connected to this ground. And their faith is connected to this ground.

So when we look at this Gospel Oak, we should see more than leaves, branches, and roots. We should see ourselves. We should see the generations before us. We should see the generation standing here today. And we should see the generations that have not yet arrived.

Roots, Trunk, and Branches

The roots of this tree remind us of our past. They represent the people who came before us—the people whose lives, sacrifices, prayers, and perseverance helped establish the foundation upon which we stand. The **trunk** represents our present. It represents us. We are here now, carrying the responsibility of protecting and preserving what was handed down to us. And the **branches** reach toward the future. They represent our children, our grandchildren, and generations yet unborn. Those branches remind us that our story is not ending with us. It is still growing.

What We Are Planting

This tree has already survived close to 14 years. It has endured seasons. It has experienced storms. It has continued to grow. And isn't that what legacy does? It takes root. It survives the seasons. It withstands storms. And it keeps growing.

That is also our responsibility with our children and grandchildren. We have to give them roots. We have to teach them where they came from. We have to tell them the stories. We have to teach them about the people who prayed when they could not pray openly. We have to tell them about the people who built churches and communities when they had very little.

We have to remind them that the opportunities we have today were made possible by people who sacrificed before us. Because one day, we will become somebody else's history. One day, another generation will stand beneath this tree. They may ask: Who planted this? Why does it matter? What happened here? And our responsibility is to make sure they know.

A Legacy That Lives

So today, we dedicate this tree not simply as a monument to the past, but as a promise to the future. May this tree remind us to preserve our history. May it remind us to honor our elders. May it remind us to teach our children. May it remind us that our communities are stronger when we know where we came from.

The original Gospel Oak may no longer stand. But its story continues. Its roots are still represented. Its memory remains. And its legacy is growing. The mother tree gave us the seedling. The past gave us the present. And now the present has a responsibility to give the future something worth remembering. So let this tree continue to grow tall. Let its roots grow deep. Let its branches reach wide. And may generations yet unborn gather beneath its shade and learn the story of Indian Woods. May they learn that their ancestors endured. That they prayed. That they worshipped. That they built. That they loved their families. That they cared about their community. And that they never stopped believing that something better could grow. Because that is what we are looking at today.

Something is Growing.

A tree that traces its beginning back to a mother tree remembered as having stood for over 400 years. A tree that was carried forward through a sprig planted 14 years ago. A tree that now stands as a living connection between our past, our present, and our future. The Gospel Oak fell— but the legacy kept growing. The old tree returned to the earth— but new life came from it. And now this Gospel Oak stands as a testimony that what is planted with purpose can outlive the person who planted it.

So let us remember. Let us honor. Let us protect. Let us teach. And let us plant—not only trees, but faith, knowledge, love, courage, and hope into the generations coming behind us. Because one day, they will look at this tree and say: They remembered. They honored. They planted. And because they planted, we are still growing.

May God bless this tree. May God bless Indian Woods. May God bless the families and communities represented here. And may God bless every generation that comes after us. From the Gospel Oak to the seedling—over 400 years of history behind us, 14 years of new growth before us, and a legacy that continues to live on.

God Bless You! Amen.

(Information Composed and Presented by Sister Terrie Williams at the Dedication of the Tree on August 15, 2026)