

Ceremony Celebrates Martha's Chapel

On 31 March 2011, a historic marker was dedicated at Martha's Chapel by the Sir Humphrey Gilbert Chapter Colonial Dames XVII Century. Members of the Chatham County Historical Association attended the ceremony and were presented with a book of historic sites in North Carolina which have been marked by the Colonial Dames organization, which strives to preserve 17th century colonial records and historic sites. The story of Martha's Chapel is included in the volume.



Martha's Chapel is located off NC Hwy 751 in northeastern Chatham County. The Chapel is in excellent condition and has been in continuous service for more than 200 years. The exterior has been covered with vinyl siding, but the sanctuary remains largely unchanged from its original condition. The original yellow pine walls and pews remain, although the arrangement of the pews has been changed from a two-aisle to a center-aisle arrangement. A dropped ceiling has been added, but the original pine ceiling remains in the attic.

The bell in the belfry is original and there are two rope pulleys located in the entrance vestibule for ringing. The belfry was damaged in a hurricane and has been reduced in size to prevent future damage by high winds. The chapel is used frequently for weddings and local meetings. There is a large [cemetery](#) on the grounds with gravesites from the 1800s.



Photo by Barbara Pugh

Martha's Chapel was established by James O'Kelly, founder of the Christian Church. O'Kelly was one of several ministers in the Methodist Episcopal Church who withdrew from that denomination in 1792 in opposition to what they viewed as the church's theological rigidity and its governance by bishops. O'Kelly envisioned "a republican, no-slavery, glorious church" that would reflect the democratic principles of the newly formed United States.

O'Kelly moved to Chatham County in 1794 and established three churches: O'Kelly Chapel in 1794, Damascus Church in Orange County in 1797, and Martha's Chapel in 1803. He served as the circuit-riding minister of all three chapels. He died at age 92 and is buried nearby on what was once his Chatham County farm.

References:

Historic Sites Marked by North Carolina Society Colonial Dames XVII Century, 2009-2011 State President's Project, Otter Bay Books, 2011.

United Church of Chapel Hill, *James O'Kelly Founds the Christian Church*, [<http://www.unitedchurch.org/okelly-chapel>], 7May2011.

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