

Journey to Nacogdoches: Massie Millard and the Old North Church

June 16, 2016

Old North Baptist Church, four miles north of the Nacogdoches city limits, is the oldest active *missionary* Baptist church constituted in Texas. (Elkhart's Pilgrim Baptist Church is the oldest *anti-missionary* Baptist church in existence in the state. Read about Daniel Parker and Pilgrim Baptist Church [here](#).)

Old North originally was called the Union Church, because settlers from varied Christian denominations comprised the first congregation. The story of the Baptists who formed a congregation here is a fascinating one, filled with danger, drama, devotion to Christ and, in its earliest days, inspired by a 19-year-old newlywed—Massie Millard.

In 1834, a group of settlers made their way from South Carolina and Mississippi, across Louisiana, to the western borders of the new Republic of Texas, where they hoped to start a new life. One of the young couples who made the journey was James and Massie Wadlington Sparks. Once they arrived, they acquired land and settled with extended family in Sparks Settlement, in what is now Nacogdoches County. James died from an arrow wound four years later, leaving Massie with two small sons.



The Sitton log house at Millard's Crossing Historical Village. During Indian raids, Massie showed herself a woman of courage and prayer, gathering local women and their children together and hiding them in thickets on her property until the raids were over. While the women huddled together, sometimes for days at a time, they formed prayer, Bible study and mission groups. They longed for a church to be established in their part of Texas.

Soon, their prayers were answered. Massie's late husband's brother, Richard Sparks, donated five acres of land upon which a church could be built in Sparks Settlement, just north of the growing village of Nacogdoches. Massie invited Isaac Reed to preach the first Baptist sermon to a small group of Americans on April 21, 1836, beneath a huge spreading post oak tree at the nearby springs. This tiny congregation determined to build a one-room cabin that could be used both as a schoolhouse, which they later named Liberty School in honor of the Battle of San Jacinto fought that day, and a church building. The log structure was raised later that year. Old North Church constituted in 1838, with Isaac Reed and Robert Green presiding. John and Betsy Eaton, Charles Whitaker, Sarah Tipps, Mary Crain, Emily Knight, Ruth Anderson and two slaves, Anthony and Chancy, brought letters for membership. Charles Whitaker was elected church clerk.

This cabin was used until 1852, when the church constructed a frame building on the same foundation. In 1882, the building was remodeled and painted. In 1933, the sanctuary was situated to face the oak tree, where it remains today. When Hurricane Rita swept through Texas in 2005, the

historic old post oak tree that had stood since long before 1838 was destroyed.

Nearby is the site of the earliest baptisms in East Texas, and the Old North Church Cemetery, adjacent to the church. Established in 1836 before the church was organized, it is the oldest Protestant cemetery in Nacogdoches County. Veterans of the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Texas Revolution, and some 47 Confederate Civil War soldiers are buried here. The early Baptists of Texas credited this work to Massie, whom they named “the greatest of the great pioneer women.”



Visit the church and find Massie Millard’s headstone in the cemetery nearby. It is a tall rectangular pillar that reads: “Massie Millard, died October 1878. In memory of her great faith when she knelt at the foot of this old hill.” Also visit the Historic Millard’s Crossing Historical Village, a collection of 19th century buildings brought together and arranged in the pattern of a small village on part of a 37-acre estate by Mrs. Albert Thomas. All of the restored structures are from Nacogdoches County and are an effort to preserve and display early buildings, antiques, tools and memorabilia that are part of the state’s cultural heritage. The Ruby M. Mize Azalea

Garden in Historic Nacogdoches, the largest azalea garden in Texas, is a wonderful last visit to make this historic jaunt complete.

For more information:

- Learn more about Old North Baptist Church [here](#).
- Read more about this story and of many other Texas Baptist women [here](#).

- Discover more about Massie Millard's life [here](#).
- Read more about the Old North Church in the Handbook of Texas [online](#).
- Find more interesting sites nearby [here](#).
- Learn more about the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden [here](#).

Directions to Old North Church and Cemetery near Nacogdoches

From Dallas

Follow US-175 E to TX-204 E in Jacksonville.

Follow TX-204 E to US-259 S in Nacogdoches County.

Continue on US-259 S to Industrial Blvd. Take the Farm to Market 343 exit from US-59 S.

Continue on Industrial Blvd. Drive to Co Rd 205 one mile.

From Houston

Take I-45 N.

Follow US-59 N to Industrial Blvd in Nacogdoches County.

Take the FM 343/Industrial Blvd exit from US-59 N.

Take the FM 343/Industrial Blvd exit.

Continue on Industrial Blvd. Drive to Co Rd 205 one mile.