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Historic church in state's 'forgotten port'

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MIDDLEBURG --- This tiny community in Northeast Florida is said to be the state is second oldest town and it is one of Florida’s forgotten ports. Back in the 1840s they used to bring cotton here by ox carts to load aboard ocean-going vessels which came down the narrow but deep Black Creek.

Another distinction of the village is that its ancient wooden Methodist Church is one of the oldest congregations of its denomination in the state.

A rather complete history of the church records that it was formed in the early 1800s, probably 1823 as part of the Jacksonville circuit. Settlers of this Clay County community date back to families who were granted lands directly from the King of Spain.

As nearly as it can be determined the present building was constructed in 1847 with slave labor. The structure is of wide clapboards on the exterior and wide random width tongue and grooved ceiling on the ceiling. Nails were wrought by hand at the forge. The pews are of mahogany. All of the lumber was dressed by hand and shows the markings of the draw-knife.

The church history notes that in keeping with the style of the days, there is a wide aisle between the pews---intended to keep the men and women wide apart and on their respective sides of the church. In the early days, the black slaves worshiped here and there were two back pews reserved for them. The bell in the tower dates back to 1852.