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OLD METHODIST CHURCH NAMED FOR INDIAN

By HAMPTON DUNN

FORT WHITE --- Here in southern Columbia County, there is the Tustenuggee United Methodist Church, which in its beginning was involved in mission work with the Indians and which was named for an Indian chief. Tradition is that it is named for Halpatter Tustenuggee, or Alligator Warrior. At one time, the county seat of Columbia County, Lake City, was called "Alligator," recognizing the strong Indian chief. Some say that the Alligator Warrior is buried in the Tustenuggee cemetery, but this is not verified.

The Tustenuggee Society (Methodist churches originally were called "societies") is the oldest church in the Fort White Circuit and one of the oldest in Florida.

The church first occupied a log house which had been used as a tool shed by Major John Bellamy in 1825-26, while building the "Old Bellamy Road" or "Spanish Trail" between St. Augustine and Pensacola. The present church stands on that site.

In 1829, the Rev. Issac Boring came this way and preached to the Indians. In the early days, circuit preachers had to carry guns for protection, and also guards watched out for hostile Indians during church services.

In the year that Florida became a state, 1845, the Rev. John. C. Ley came to the Tustenuggee community. He conducted a revival and after that the Tustenuggee Society was officially organized, according to William E. Brooks, editor of the history of Methodism in Florida, "From Saddlebags to Satellites." A log building with a split pine floor was built to house the congregation.

A tradition of this church is that there was a tree at, or near, the site where the church was built that was known as "the armchair of Tustenuggee," which according to Indian belief had magical power over those who sat in its shade.