

**From:** SC News from SCIWAY <sciway-news@sc-news.net>  
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**Subject:** May SC Events + The Mystery of Mount Nebo

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## { SC's May Calendar + Our Featured SC Event }

Hilton Head Island, June 18, 2016 | This year's [May Calendar of Events](#) is brought to you by Hilton Head's annual [Juneteenth Celebration](#), featuring a special musical performance by American Idol winner Candice Glover. Families and friends are encouraged to make memories at any of the available event stations or while exploring the first freedmen's town in the United States through re-enactments of daily life in 1862. Authentic island food and specialty gifts will be available for sale.

[See all the other great South Carolina events coming up in May.](#)

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## { The Mystery of Mount Nebo }

*It may not look like much today, but this old church stands shrouded in mystery. Located less than 10 miles west of the now-vacant town of [Lone Star](#), Mount Nebo Presbyterian serves as a backdrop for a gripping story of both triumph and tragedy.*

### **Part 1: What We Know So Far ... Probably**

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Mount Nebo was organized in 1908 by the Reverend William L. C. Riley. An African-American, Riley graduated from South Carolina State College (now University) in [Orangeburg](#) and then went on to earn two diplomas from Lincoln University, an historically black college and seminary in Pennsylvania.

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( Pete Lawrence of Sumter, 2016 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent )

As near as we can tell, Riley moved to Lone Star to teach school in the early twentieth century, his arrival, noticed the absence of a church for local residents. With the assistance of another Presbyterian minister, a man named Uggams (likely Coyden Harold Uggams of Charleston) succeeded in establishing both a school and a church.

( Pete Lawrence of Sumter, 2016 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent )

The building shown here is thought to be the second edifice to house Mount Nebo's congregation in Calhoun County. Documented in the [South Carolina Historical Record Survey](#) (a function of the Progress Administration), it was under construction on or near June 15, 1939. Little information about Mount Nebo's original church, except that it was built in 1908 on land owned by Riley at Lone Star Road, was valued at \$1000, did not have a cemetery, and featured a large stand-alone bell tower. "The church is a square building with a hipped roof, a large corner, and a seating capacity of 300." The survey also gives the then-extant (original) building's dimensions as 40' by 40'; that the interior was divided with half being a church and half being a junior high school, "with a capacity of church being 150."

( Bill Segars of Hartsville, 2009 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent )

The present church was also built on land owned by the Reverend Riley - two acres - and its value is recorded, in 1939, as \$1700. Describing it as a "square frame building with a hipped roof[,] a large corner[,] and a seating capacity [of] 300," the survey does not mention how the space was divided between church and school.

( Bill Segars of Hartsville, 2009 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent )

Riley served dual roles as pastor and teacher, and the school was initially supported by the Missions for Freedmen, an entity organized within the Presbyterian Church at the end of the Civil War to educate and train former slaves. At some point, the board ceased its support, possibly because the school was assimilated by other branches of the church in 1923. Pupils at Mount Nebo eventually began to pay a small fee to attend the school, and Riley hired an additional teacher.

( Bill Segars of Hartsville, 2009 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent )

Both the church and the school were successful, with many of Riley's students transferring to the Brainerd Institute in Chester for high school. The Brainerd Institute was also run by the Missions, and its graduates often went on to study at places like Allen University and Benedict College in Columbia.

## Part 2: What We Don't Know Yet ... At All

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A degree of uncertainty surrounds both the building shown here and Mount Nebo's origins. The information posted above are based on our best reading of the South Carolina Historical Record Survey.

unfortunately, that brief document raises almost as many questions as it resolves. The survey of Mount Nebo's only known written record. While it states that birth, death, and Sunday School records exist for Mount Nebo prior to 1939, we have been unable to locate them thus far.

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( Bill Segars of Hartsville, 2009 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent )

One question of course is, "Where was Mount Nebo first located?" Was it located near or west of Star, or was it located further away? Early journals of the Board of Missions indicate that Riley had a church named Mount Nebo in the [Eutawville](#) (Pineville) section of neighboring [Orangeburg](#) and in fact, a Mount Nebo church exists there today. While the existing church is African-American and houses a Methodist congregation instead of a Presbyterian one. The building dates only from the late twentieth century, and it is not located on River Road, as described in the South Carolina Record Survey.

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( Bill Segars of Hartsville, 2009 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent )

There was, interestingly, an historic Mount Nebo church *and* school located in Calhoun County near a place called Staley Crossroads. This would put the original location nearer to Lone Pine building remains, but satellite images show that there may be a small graveyard. The coordinates of the site are N33.62682° by W80.94815°. It also is located neither on nor near a River Road.

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( Bill Segars of Hartsville, 2009 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent )

Further confusing matters is the fact that the current sanctuary was crafted with techniques that date to its mid-twentieth century construction by many decades. For example, the underside of the roof reveals a combination of both hand-hewn sills and circle-sawn joists - a combination that would be characteristic of a church in the range of the late 1800s to early 1900s, rather than 1939. According to architectural historian [Bill Segars](#), who crawled under the church to capture the image below, the fact that these features are still visible indicates that the church is likely older than we think. "Earlier than the late 1800s to early 1900s, the sills would have been hand hewn and the joists would have been sash sawn. Late in the late 1800s to early 1900s, the sills and the floor joists would both have been circle sawn. My opinion, Segars concludes, "is that 1939 is too late for this building, unless the framing material was from an older building, which is possible."

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( Bill Segars of Hartsville, 2009 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent )

A third issue arises when one notes that the dimensions of the original church measured 39' x 39'. Today's church, located on Hutto Pond Road, measures an almost identical 39' x 39'.\* If the second church did not provide additional space, why did the congregation decide to rebuild? One possibility is that the first church simply deteriorated over its first three decades. Another possibility is that Riley's family relocated, and he took his church and school with him.

Finally, in a similar vein, the survey notes that the then-existing (original) church's interior was

with half being a church and half being a junior high school - "with seating capacity of church b  
" Was the seating capacity of the school, which apparently took up 50 percent of the space, .  
Journals of the Board of Mission show that Mount Nebo's school did indeed have a large r  
pupils as early as 1909, when it served 123 children. Taken together, this would equal 300 se  
is also how many the survey claims the present church holds. This too begs the question, why  
not to enlarge?

An even more problematic take on this point is whether or not a building this size could actually  
people, as the survey states. As Mr. Segars points out, "Another example of the report's vag  
the seating capacity. I see 150 on each side and I see 300 people total. There's no way that thi  
will seat 300 people, hardly 150. Today a 1,600 square-foot building (40' x 40') would be rate  
people, max."

We are actively seeking more information about this church, its founder, and its members  
welcome any knowledge you can contribute. Please write us at [service@sciway.net](mailto:service@sciway.net).

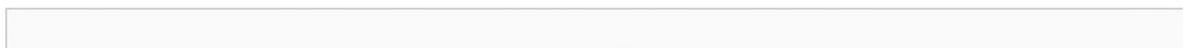
### Part 3: The Incredible Life and Death of William L. C. Riley

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Mount Nebo's founder, the Reverend William L. C. Riley,\*\* led an accomplished life by  
standards. In the era of [Jim Crow](#), he held three advanced degrees, owned at least two parce  
during his time, established a thriving church, and created a first-rate school that significantly  
the lives of its students. Nevertheless, without a few random words scrawled on a note at the  
Historical Records Survey, almost nothing would be known of the Reverend Riley today. The  
the Historical Records Survey, a clerk named Anna Sinkler, took the time to include the follow  
penned on a separate sheet and attached to the back of the standard form:

*Riley seems to be a very remarkable negro. He has two diplomas from Lincoln Univer  
and one from State College Orangeburg. He owns the land the present church and schoo  
on and has given two acres for the new church. He is very unassuming in manner and s  
he gets on well with all the white people of the community.*

Aside from this brief observation, we have only two documents to guide us. The first is a feder  
from 1920. It states that William Riley was 45 years old and the owner of a farm in Pine Grove.  
wife named Viola, four sons, and two daughters. The census predates the birth of his daught  
by eight and a half months. All of the members of his family were able to read and write.



( Census record for the Riley family in 1920. )

The second document is his death certificate, which adds only that his place of birth was  
[County](#). We are unable to find either a birth certificate or an obituary for Riley. Despite obvious  
his prominent role in the community, these few facts represent the sum total of everything we  
to learn about his life. Such is the fate of many African-Americans from the rural South. Few ne  
took notice of stories involving black people, and where written records may have existed, the  
scattered across place and time. Children move away in search of jobs, and stories of a family's  
not passed down. In Riley's case, this invisibility is especially frustrating, both because of his re  
life and his gruesome death.

[Redacted]

( Illegible in places, Riley's death certificate describes the murder and includes his birthpla

It appears that in addition to being a farmer, pastor, and teacher, Riley was also a merchant and store in Lone Star. In 1947, at the age of 61, Riley was murdered at his store with an ice perpetrator was believed to have been a 100-pound black man named Willie Edward Gidron, 19 at the time of the attack. Gidron had served as a private in the Army Air Corps and been discharged.

[Redacted]

( Gidron's family requested a headstone from the US military. He is buried at either St. John's Baptist or St. Luke in Lone Star. )

The sheriff of Calhoun County at that time, a white man named George David Tilley, app Gidron shortly after Riley's death. Everything we know about Riley's death and Willie subsequent execution comes from reports regarding Tilley. No news articles or legal records exist regarding Riley. His tragic demise passed, officially at least, without notice.

[Redacted]

( These clippings mention William Riley only in passing. George Tilley was widely regarded as a good man. )

Two days after Riley's body was discovered, Tilley and a fellow officer discovered Gidron in a several other men. They took him into custody and then, according to both parties, went to another called Week's. Tilley's partner went home after this, and en route to Riley's store to compare footprints to those left at the scene, Gidron pulled a gun out of his right boot and shot Tilley, eight days later. Gidron, who was handcuffed at the time and sitting in the front seat, hid in farmhouse until he was caught.

The details grow murkier after this, and although Gidron confessed to shooting Tilley, he adamant that he had not killed Riley. No other investigation into Riley's death can be found. G charged with the death of Sheriff Tilley and electrocuted eight months after his arrest. Riley remains unresolved, and no one has ever been convicted of or punished for the crime.

The Reverend William Riley's remains are interred at Mount Nebo, the church he founded and : so long.

*\* Special thanks to Bill Segars for his measurements of the existing sanctuary and especia patience and guidance as we worked together to unravel this mystery.*

*\*\* In one record, the Reverend's name is spelled Ryley and his first middle name is given as "Lc*

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SCIWAY, pronounced "sky-way," is an acronym for South Carolina's Information Highway.

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