

EBENEZER

Frontier church house is window into the settlement of Jessamine County

BY JEFF MCDANALD

Before there was a Nicholasville or a Jessamine County, there was the log meeting house on the American frontier known as Ebenezer Church.

“This church is a landmark in the history of my family,” said Kentucky Senator Tom Buford, who is a descendant of the founding January family. “I find such a sense of calm and rest when attending any event on the Ebenezer property.”



On Troy-Keen Road not far from the Woodford County line there is a historic marker at the entrance of Ebenezer Cemetery Road. At the end of the road stands the restored church and cemetery grounds. The church is simply adorned, true to the spirit of the original Ebenezer, with plank floor, wooden benches, stone walls and open rafters. There is no electricity, and no running water.

In the late eighteenth century, Kentucky was still smarting from the defeat at Blue Licks,

the last battle of the Revolutionary War. The threat of Indian attack, although less frequent, was still a real possibility. In spite of this, there was a missionary zeal on the frontier, and the formation of churches like Ebenezer was inevitable.

The Ebenezer Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church was organized by Reverend Adam Rankin in about 1793; some accounts place the date as early as 1785. The original church was a log meeting house located on one and one-half acres of land owned by Ephraim January, which he and his wife Sarah deeded to the church for ten dollars.

REVOLUTIONARY WAR BOUNTY LANDS

Ephraim January had been given 1000 acres of land in what is today Jessamine County in return for his military service in the Revolutionary War. These “bounty land” grants were responsible for much of the settlement in the Bluegrass area in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

In the book “Revolutionary War Bounty Land,” genealogist Lloyd Dewitt Bockstruck explains how the land concept worked: “The newly organized United States government offered these free bounty lands in exchange for military service, but they strategically did so on the presumption that they would be victorious in their struggle. They would not actually award the lands until the war had been concluded and the British defeated. Such a policy not only imposed no financial constraints on the war effort, but also insured a degree of support for the Revolutionary cause. Bounty lands were an effective propaganda technique for enrolling support for the war among the citizenry and preventing them from lapsing into the British fold when the tide of battle ebbed.”

Ephraim January was born in Pennsylvania, the grandson of a French Huguenot. He and his wife Sarah along with several other families had set out down the Ohio River in a flat boat in 1780. They landed in Louisville and stayed at Spring Station Fort, then Fort Harrod, and settled in what was to become Jessamine County in 1783.

He built a small log cabin in the midst of the forest. His family grew to eleven children, five sons and six daughters. The large family was an asset to their farming lifestyle.

Aside from its function as a church, log meeting houses like the one that was built on January’s property were important as regional trade centers and social gathering places. An example of another log meeting house still stands today in Paris, Kentucky at Cane Ridge, site of the Great Revival of 1801.

In 1803, a stone building replaced the original log meeting house. The founding Reverend Rankin was succeeded by Robert H. Bishop, and later Neal Gordon. A cemetery sprung up around the church which contains graves of many of the church founders and their descendants: Guyn, Lowrey, Gordon, Black, Moffett, Mahin, Woods, January, Crutcher, Young, Garret, Steele, Beach, Montgomery, Renick, McCauley, Davis, and Simpson.

The church flourished until the 1870s when a shift in roadways rendered Ebenezer’s location unsuitable, and beloved Reverend Neal Gordon died. The church fell into decline and was abandoned.

RAISE MY EBENEZER

But the church lived on in the hearts and minds of the descendants of the Ebenezer families, and in 1922 the Ebenezer Cemetery Association was formed as a tribute to the Ebenezer pioneers.

At every meeting of the Ebenezer Cemetery Association the perennial question would arise as to what to do with the wreck of the old church walls. In 1946 a movement was started to restore the old church to its original state, and on Sunday, September 13, 1953, the restored church was officially re-opened.

After 200-plus years, the friends and descendants of the Ebenezer Presbyterian Church still meet annually on the second Sunday in September for a commemorative service and picnic lunch. During this one day each year, the church comes to life with homemade food, singing of old hymns, and lively discussions about local lore.

“In this day and age, I appreciate Ebenezer and this heritage of faith,” said Alice Virginia Dodd who traveled from Louisville to honor her pioneer relatives for the 2006 gathering. “It’s very encouraging to me that my grandmother’s grandfather had the Christian faith. They were brave in their time and it encourages me to be brave in today’s time.”

Alan January, a great-grandson of founder Ephraim January, made the pilgrimage to Ebenezer from Indianapolis. “I lose track of how many great-greats,” said January. “My father, Lewis Edward January, helped get Ebenezer listed on the National Registry of Historic Places.”

The Jessamine County Historical Society is actively involved in uncovering, restoring and preserving old cemeteries like Ebenezer. “We’re currently on our 45th cemetery project,” said Ernestine Hamm, who is currently president of the Historical Society, and was invited to Ebenezer as keynote speaker for the annual gathering.

Jessamine County has been a leader in Kentucky in passing Cemetery Protection Legislation. In 2001 Magistrate George Dean drafted a county ordinance protecting private cemeteries from being destroyed by development. The Nicholasville City Commission enacted similar legislation later that same year.

“A lot of people deserve credit for saving cemeteries in Jessamine County,” said Magistrate Dean. “Representative Bob Damron used his influence and ability to push through the legislation. And people like Ernestine Hamm and others from the Jessamine County Historical Society are the ones traipsing through the briars and deciphering inscriptions.”

Hamm has researched numerous Revolutionary Soldiers that settled in the county. “It’s a tragedy that some of these soldiers got 1000 acres of land, and now all we have left is a headstone and a 3-by-6 plot.”

“Ebenezer Church is one of the jewels of preservationists in central Kentucky,” adds Senator Buford. “Today we’re seeing it live on as a reminder of our past and how our forefathers established their vision of Kentucky and America.”

To find out more about the Ebenezer Church visit www.raisemyebenezer.com