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Old-time religion

Members of Ebenezer Church go back centuries together

By Jeff McDonald, Special to the Herald-Leader

On the grounds of the Ebenezer Church in Jessamine County, time is measured in centuries, in generations, and in strings of great-greats before a name.

An overheard mention of "after the war" might be a reference to the Revolutionary, the Spanish-American, the Civil.



Mary Ann McCauley, left, George Dean and Bob Moore Jr. talked about the history of the Ebenezer Church, which sits near the Keene-Troy road. Members gather every year at the church on the second Sunday in September. "We're not a formal church," McCauley said. Ebenezer hasn't held regular Sunday services since the 1870s. Photos by David Stephenson

Of those on the church roll, the golden years are well-represented. Most haven't missed a service at Ebenezer in decades — which isn't quite as remarkable as it sounds, when you realize that the church convenes for only one Sunday a year.

"I'm kin to most everybody there," says Doris Marksbury, treasurer of the Ebenezer Cemetery Association. She is descended from the Black family and the Guyn family, which represent some of the oldest headstones in the 220-year-old cemetery that encircles the church.

"My grandparents are buried there. So are my great-grandmother, my parents, and my sister," she said. "I'm going to be buried there too."

As treasurer, Marksbury has been preparing for the annual gathering scheduled this year for Sept. 14. Announcements have gone out to the membership, and the Web site (www.raisemyebenezer.com) has been updated.



A 220-year-old cemetery sits beside the church. "My grandparents are buried there. So are my great-grandmother, my parents, and my sister. I'm going to be buried there too," said Doris Marksbury, treasurer of the cemetery association, who's busy these days planning the annual meeting.

But everyone already knows to keep their calendar clear for the second Sunday in September. Ebenezer hasn't held regular Sunday services since the 1870s.

"We're not a formal church," Mary Ann McCauley said.

The annual event is equal parts worship service, potluck dinner, family reunion and business meeting for the association.

"People stay pretty much right here," says church trustee Mary Ann McCauley. Like many of the Ebenezer members, she lives in the vicinity of the church property, which straddles the boundary between Jessamine and Woodford County just off Keene-Troy Road.

"I feel if you don't honor the past you are not going to make good decisions in the future. It's important for people to go back to their roots when times were simpler. You step back in time. It gives you perspective."

Served many purposes

According to Bennett Young's 1898 *A History of Jessamine County*, the first Ebenezer church building was a log meeting house built between 1785 and 1790. Like the well-known Cane Ridge Meeting House in Bourbon County, the structure served as more than a church. It was a frontier outpost, trading center and temporary supply house that increased the odds of survival for nearby settlers.

The church was organized by Adam Rankin, a minister of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church who had come to Kentucky from Greencastle, Pa. Rankin's home stands today at 317 Mill Street in Lexington (moved from its original High Street location to avoid destruction) and according to the historical marker is the oldest house in Lexington.



Ebenezer Church as it looked in 1910, after a long period of neglect. In 1922 a small group of descendants of the church founders began meeting on the church grounds for annual picnics. In 1946 talk started in earnest of restoring the church to its glory using the original stones that by then lay scattered.

As an Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Ebenezer employed the use of communion tokens — a sort of lead coin bestowed by the elders to church members deemed worthy of

receiving communion. A set of the crude communion tokens has survived and is a treasured Ebenezer artifact stored off the church grounds.

The church was constructed on a section of a 1,000-acre bounty land grant owned by Ephraim January, a French Huguenot born in Pennsylvania. Shortly after surviving the 1782 Battle of Blue Licks, January was given the land by the U.S. government in return for military service rendered in

the American Revolution. Land grants were a common form of currency in a fledgling nation that had been pushed into bankruptcy by the war.

Courthouse records show that January later made the transfer of property to the church official, deeding 11½ acres of land to the church for \$10.

Scottish immigrant Robert Bishop replaced Rankin as minister in 1803, and a stone building replaced the log meeting house. Like Rankin, Bishop resided in Lexington, where he held a professorship of history at Transylvania College. His students included Jefferson Davis and Benjamin Harrison. In 1824 Bishop moved north to Oxford, Ohio, where he became the first president of Miami University.

Other ministers followed, notably Neal Gordon of Georgia, who served from 1841 to 1870. During his tenure the Ebenezer Church entertained the General Presbyterian Synod of the South. After attending the conference, many attendees were riding home on a paddlewheel riverboat, the Lucy Walker, bound for New Orleans. When the steamer was about 5 miles below New Albany, Ind., a boiler exploded, killing more than 50 passengers and injuring dozens more.

Many years in decline

By 1875, the Ebenezer church had entered a decline in attendance, possibly because of a road relocation that obscured the church and the emergence of other churches in the area. Sunday services lapsed and the church went into a prolonged period of inactivity and decay.

But memories of the church persisted in the hearts and minds of the Troy community. Perhaps they drew strength from the namesake of the church — the Old Testament book of Samuel where Ebenezer translates from Hebrew to mean "stone of help."

In 1922 a small group of descendants of the church founders began meeting on the church grounds for annual picnics. They dubbed themselves the Ebenezer Cemetery Association.

*Here I raise my Ebenezer;
Here by Thy great help I've come;
And I hope, by Thy good measure,
Safely to arrive at home.*

Lyrics from the hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" by Robert Robinson, 1758.

In 1946 there began rumblings about restoring the beleaguered church to its glory using the original stones that now lay scattered. As the effort gained momentum, more than 250 people donated amounts between \$1 and \$100. And on Sunday, Sept. 13, 1953, the restored church was officially reopened.

Bob Moore has served as president of the Ebenezer Cemetery Association for "20-some years." Under his leadership the

church has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of the Interior. In the past year the church has gotten a much-needed face lift, including new shutters, refurbished windows and doors, and a new roof — some of which had not been upgraded since the 1953 restoration.



Some artifacts from the original church include communion tokens, center, offering baskets, and communion cups and trays. The church is on the National Register of Historic Places.

More important, Moore has overseen the growth of an endowment fund that ensures the perpetual maintenance of the church and cemetery.

"We've got a little nest egg," Moore said. "We don't have to worry about the place getting run down. We can put Christmas wreaths in the windows during winter and keep the grounds mowed. We've got a real active bunch on the board now."

Alan January is one of those board members. He's the multiple-great grandson of original 1780s member Ephraim January. He and his wife will make the trek to Kentucky from his home in Indianapolis for the annual gathering.

"Ebenezer is a very special place," January said. "Knowing that your ancestors had donated that land generations ago, and knowing that it's still there — that's really the extraordinary thing. The real credit goes to the Cemetery Association and the local people."

When the faithful arrive next weekend, they will find the church simply adorned — plank floor, straight-back wooden benches, stone walls and open rafters. And true to the spirit of the original Ebenezer, there will be no electricity and no running water.

And that's the way the friends of Ebenezer want it to stay.



Mary Ann McCauley, a trustee of the Ebenezer Church, headed into the cemetery where some of her descendants are buried. The stone church replaced the old log meeting house in the early 1800s.