



By Mark Milligan—Potomac News

The Oak Grove Church, a Davis Ford Road landmark, lies in ruins. The aging meeting hall, unused since the death of its last preacher in 1938, collapsed Christmas morning.

Oak Grove Church gives way to time and weather

By CLINT SCHEMMER
of the Potomac News

Oak Grove Church, like the congregaton buried at its feet, finally rests in peace.

The historic Baptist meeting hall, a Davis Ford Road landmark familiar to thousands, has succumbed to four decades of weather and neglect. Better known to most as Bacon Race Church, the listing clapboard structure toppled over before dawn Christmas morning.

"About 3 a.m. Christmas day, my husband and I were woken up by a loud noise, kind of a swoosh, thump," said Marie Tassa, the church's next door neighbor. "We thought a tree had hit the house. I didn't look at the church until later that morning. It's just such a shame; that church should have been restored."

"It's got to be symbolic that it keeled over on Christmas Day," said her husband, county magistrate Vince Tassa. "Later that morning, my wife had tears in her eyes about it. It really troubled her to see the old church hit the ground. It's kind of sad."

The Tassas have company in their sorrow at seeing the old church downed by time.

When Dale City residents Lorraine and Hal Reney drove by Tuesday and saw the chapel had hit the ground, they pulled into the churchyard to have a closer look.

"We used to stop here 20 years ago for picnics with my brother-in-law and look in the windows," Mrs. Reney said. "It's a beautiful place; I just hate to think of coming by and not seeing that church."



The meeting hall, also known as Bacon Race Church, in its last days.

According to the Tassas and the local history books, the church's fate was sealed by the death of its last preacher, Elder William M. Smoot, in 1938. Smoot was a charismatic figure in local history.

According to the book "Prince William: A Past

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To Preserve." "The legend surrounding this very powerful preacher arose, in part, from his death-bed announcement that he would one day return to preach at Bacon Race Church, and his request, dutifully adhered to by his followers, that until his return no one else should be permitted to preach there."

After Smoot's death, no one ever preached at Oak Grove again, and the church was shuttered.

But the legend about him is poppycock, say Catherine Fair and Arthur Carter, two longtime residents who attended Oak Grove as youths.

"I heard him say, as many times as I have fingers and toes, that God would bring a stronger preacher to follow in his footsteps," said Mrs. Fair, 82, who lives in Woodbridge. "He cared for that building; he never intended for it to sit there without a preacher and fall down."

Carter, a Manassas resident who is the church's eldest trustee, agreed. "[Smoot] would have been ... happy ... if the Lord had sent another elder to preach the gospel as he saw it," he said.

The tales of Smoot's death-bed decree are an "absolute lie," Carter said. He should know: Carter, 76, was among the few church members who found Smoot dead in his Occoquan home at age 90, sitting in a rocking chair, a Bible in his lap, glasses still perched on his nose.

Other stories about Smoot abound, but the church's history dates back nearly a century before his tenure began.

According to tax records, the church property — four acres where Asdee Lane meets Davis Ford and Bacon Race roads — has been used for religious services since 1794.

Originally, it was called the Occoquan Church, then Bacon Race Church when Baptist Andrew Broadus built a church there about 1845. Oak Grove Church, built in the 1880s, was the last meeting hall erected there.

Its predecessor — Broadus' church — figured in the Civil War. In December 1862, Confederate Col. Wade Hampton's brigade camped nearby to defend the Occoquan River crossing at Wolf Run Shoals, using the church as a storehouse for ammunition, tents and quartermaster supplies.

Later that winter, led by Hampton's chief of staff, Maj. S.D. Lee, several Confederate regiments camped in the vicinity to support the rebels' blockade of Union shipping on the Potomac River. Several Confederate veterans are buried in the churchyard, which hosts some 200 graves.

Oak Grove Church was built through the efforts of Smoot, a circuit preacher who also had congregations at Beulah Baptist Church in Occoquan, Quantico Baptist Church in Independent Hill and at a rented meeting hall in Washington, D.C.

Smoot, who is buried beneath a big white oak tree in the church's graveyard, was revered by his loyal followers, Carter and Mrs. Fair said.

"He had a very peculiar way of doing things," recalls Mrs. Fair, whose family used to have Elder Smoot and his wife to supper in their Hoadly Road home. "He wouldn't let anyone of another denomination preach in that pulpit — only Old School Baptists."

"We were called the Hardshell Baptists by some, because Elder Smoot preached hard. He didn't soap anything down. When he preached, he really preached."