

Church doubled as hospital during Civil War

Prince William Library
Manassas, Virginia

By JULIA KENDRICK
for the Potomac News

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Bethel Methodist Church

The Old Bethel Church did double duty during the Civil War, housing sick soldiers along with sick souls.

Exactly when the church on Davis Ford Road turned into a hospital is unknown. But local historians estimate it was used regularly in 1861 and 1862, when typhoid fever struck the area's soldiers. In the 1950s, between 30 and 40 soldiers' bodies were found near the church.

Places

In an address to the Historic Dumfries Virginia Inc. on Jan. 8, 1981, Janna Lee Murphy Leepson said, "After combat, the wounded were brought into the building where straw would be scattered on the floor to soak up the blood."

The church closed after the war for restoration. Blood-stained floorboards and broken glass had to be replaced, and some general reconstruction occurred throughout the building.

Some current members of the Bethel United Methodist Church, built between 1977 and 1985, believe a slave balcony that once stood in an upper corner of the church was probably removed after the war.

Old Bethel Church was built by about 12 farmers in 1850 when land was donated by the family of a traveling minister, Burr Glasscock. Glasscock was a self-educated minister who read the Bible to people in their homes. Once the tiny community had finished constructing the church, a minister would come to preach there twice a month, and the members held a weekly Sunday school.



By Steve Davis-Potomac News

Bethel United Methodist Church was used as a hospital during the Civil War.

Little is known of the church's activities between the Civil War years and 1930. About 12 members gathered twice a month in 1930, and, one year later, activity picked up when Sunday school again began to meet weekly.

The 1940s brought growth to the church. Community involvement prospered in forms of political rallies, fiddling

contests and parties for men departing for World War II.

The shadows of war transformed into light at Bethel. The church's candle-lit chandelier turned on with electricity in 1952.

In 1977, the church was moved 500 yards west. Today, members hope to recreate the church as it was in 1850.

"After combat, the wounded were brought into the building where straw would be scattered on the floor to soak up the blood."

Janna Lee Murphy Leepson

Glass kerosene lamps hang beside each window. A cross made from a tree in the 1850s stands near the altar. Above, two chimneys remind present-day spectators of wooden stoves that once warmed the building from chilly winters.

Painted white wooden pews that were used in the church in the 1850s are slated to reappear in the church's single room this summer.

The lower-level room is being turned into a museum, housing church and community artifacts. Undated song books and hand-outs rest beside the church's original Bible. Old glass milk bottles stand near an old iron with a black rubber grip. A photo taken in 1959 of a political rally held at the church appears behind glass.

"We need something that we can show the youth what it was really like," said John Miller, president of the Bethel Historical Society.

In recent years, the building has been used as additional classroom space for the Muriel Humphrey School for Retarded Children and a meeting place for the Boy Scouts of America and the 4-H Club.

The church is on 3130 Davis Ford Road. For more information, call 670-4929.