

# Church remains tribute to local black heritage

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By GLENDA McQUEEN  
of the Potomac News

As the glistening white cornerstone was lowered into the ground, the moment was etched in time as deeply as the name Ebenezer Baptist Church was cut into the stone.

It was the first Sunday in May of 1883. A group of black people dressed in their fineries had walked several miles to stand on the dusty, dirt road to witness the event.

The preacher and founder of the church, the Rev. Henry Bailey, a slight man and former slave, had summoned his tiny congregation for the special occasion. The ceremony marked the birth of Ebenezer Baptist, the area's first black congregation church.

The small, white church in Occoquan serves as one of the few remaining testaments to the existence of Occoquan's once thriving black community. During the time the church was built, there were at least 100 black families living in or near Occoquan.

"It was always a very friendly town," said Madeline Bell, who was born in Occoquan and has been a member of Ebenezer Church for 35 years. Black and white children "played together even though we attended separate schools and churches."

Mrs. Bell's father owned the neighborhood general store and lived across the street from Ebenezer Baptist. She still maintains the house in which her parents once lived, but

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By Ron Sinfelt-Potomac News

Madeline Bell, left, and her sister, Saluka Tolliver, have roots deep in Occoquan and the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Northern Virginia's oldest existing black congregation.

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the empty store next door has been closed for nearly 19 years.

"My uncles, brothers and aunts all lived here ... My grandfather lived there in the house just up from me," Mrs. Bell said pointing. "My grandmother was a midwife."

As a child, Mrs. Bell and her family would walk across the street to attend Sunday service at Ebenezer.

"The church was always filled up," she recalled. "We always served dinner after the afternoon service. People came from all over to our church. Those who didn't have horses and buggies walked."

In the early 1800's, Occoquan was a meeting place for lawyers, doctors and wealthy planters. The town had a good reputation for its food and taverns.

It had a robust industrial life with several mills, including an iron mill. In 1836, the town began to decay when the Occoquan River gradually silted up, a result of clearing from tobacco farming. Ships could no longer reach the town's mills.

A 1859 financial report of the Rappahannock Company stated: "The boating has almost entirely ceased and nothing of consequence is transported over the entire length" of the river.

Many of the town's businesses closed. Between the mid- to late 1800s, many of the black residents bought property in the area.

"There were the Thomases, Jacksons, Whites, Blackburns, Harrises, Snyders, Coles ... over 100 black families in the area," said Saluka Tolliver, Mrs. Bell's 88-year-old sister. "A good many are dead and many of them sold their homes. About five black families are left."



The Rev. Henry Bailey  
founder of Ebenezer Baptist

A number of the black Occoquan residents were born free men and women during a time when the enslavement of blacks was the status quo in Virginia. Many of them found it initially difficult to accept the former slave as their leader, Bailey's daughter recalls.

"People down there were free blacks," said Annie B. Rose, Bailey's only living child. "It was hush-hush to say anything about being a slave."

Pride helped drive the close-knit black community to rebuild Ebenezer after the church burned in 1923, Ms. Rose admits.

Ebenezer was built 20 years after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves.

The Rev. Bailey had been freed after the Civil War when he was 21. Records show that he began the first black school in Prince William County, when he established the Summit Elementary School. He founded seven churches throughout the Washington, D.C., area and began a number of religious organiza-

tions. Bailey was born a slave on a farm in the Dranesville area of Fairfax County. As a small child, he and his family were taken to the Franklin and Armfield Slave Market in Alexandria to be sold. More than 3,750 slaves had been sold to farmers through the market, which was the largest interstate slave market in the nation.

Bailey was sold to a man in Texas.

"The man who bought him was mean and cruel, not only to Papa but to slaves period," Ms. Rose said.

The preacher was later sold to a Texas farmer who bought him as a servant for his daughter.

"She tried to teach him to read and write," Ms. Rose said. "But during that time, whites went to prison for teaching black people how to read. So she said to him: 'Henry, let's don't bother with paper and pencil. I want you to write what I tell you on the table of your heart. It might be that one day you won't be a slave and these qualities and values will carry you throughout your life.'"

After the Civil War, the family freed Bailey and he walked back to Alexandria to find his mother, Martha Bailey.

After finding his mother, Bailey got a job working for the Richmond Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad.

While working there, "a white man taught him to read ..." Ms. Rose said.

Bailey later married Ella Jean Dean, the sister of Jeannie Dean, founder of the first high school for blacks in Prince William.

Today the church is still thriving with 300 members, according to Mrs. Tolliver.

"There are a lot of new members," Mrs. Tolliver said. "People who have just moved. Many of them I don't know."