

The Farmville Herald
A Common Bond

*Churches Share History,
Lay New Foundation*
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By ROB CHAPMAN

PRINCE EDWARD — *In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me:*

*As He died to make men holy,
let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
While God is marching on.*

The reverberating words of this 1861 hymn could have been the end of any Veteran's Day church service, but this wasn't a church in the building sense. There were no rafters. No wooden floor or pews. Only what mattered most on this brisk November day.

People.

Members of the Jamestown Presbyterian Church and High Bridge Baptist Church gathered under a tent atop a hill down a winding country road to seemingly nowhere Sunday, November 11.

Two churches—one white and the other black, one Presbyterian and the other Baptist—bonded together in God's presence to worship.

This, however, was not a road to nowhere, but rather an ending and a beginning. It is here at this place where the members of the two churches with shared roots will exchange signed covenants of love and understanding.

"...All my life, I've been a part of a divided community. It was a way of life. We didn't think much about it," says Rev. William Wilson, the now near 90-year-old moderator of Jamestown Presbyterian Church. "But, as we have become more spiritually aware of people and more aware of the obligation God has put upon us to do His will, there came to me the thought that here's a strange contraction. Two communities side-by-side living in a land where the government has abolished segregation and discrimination, but there's still something lacking. And the thing...that's lacking is something that government can't do. The government cannot make spiritual communities, but with God's help and by the grace of our Lord, we can do it."

Spiritual community, he added, is not only their obligation, but their privilege to find neighbors, get to know them, share their problems, to weep with them, to laugh with them, to worship with them, to pray with them, and to live together as a family of God.

"Man cannot put this together," Rev. Eva Hurt, copastor of High Bridge Union Baptist Church, would later add. "God has to do it. And God has done this."

She maintained, "...If God created us, that means there's no you or no me. We are all one in Jesus Christ. And...in His word He tells us to be in unity and in peace and in love."

James Town once was a viable community on the banks of the Appomattox River. Chartered by the General Assembly in 1796, it was the hub of agricultural activity (when tobacco was king) as bateaux made their journeys along the Appomattox River.

James Town had a tavern, stores, a warehouse where tobacco was inspected, a bridge spanning across the Appomattox River into Cumberland and a school for the education of young girls.

And a church building that, at times, served black and white congregations.

The Town, some eight miles east of Farmville, was supplanted by its neighbor as an agricultural center with the arrival of the rail line.

Today, only the foundation remains of the church.

A flier, written by local historian Ken Shores, details the history of the building. Established in 1821 as a Baptist congregation, it was purchased by Presbyterians in 1876 and conveyed to an African American congregation and eventually taken down in 1953.

There are a few scattered headstones of what was once the cemetery, but the most prominent marker is a stone tomb that, as legend has it, is for an unknown traveler who died with a handsome sum of money. The money was used for his burial.

As state officials planned to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Virginia's more historically known Jamestown, Prince Edward unearthed some of its own history of this nearly forgotten community and found something else among the ruins.

Healing.

A bell tolls eleven times as a reminder that today is Armistice Day. It's also, Moderator Samuel Wilson cites, the feast day of St. Martin of Tours, who died November 11 of 397, who was the patron saint of soldiers and social justice.

“Our forbears from both races sleep in graves on this hill,” Wilson cites, “side by side. During their earthly lives, they worshiped, albeit at separate times, in this same sanctuary where we now are seated. We pray the prayers they prayed, we sing the hymns that they sang.”

He added, “...Our ancestors not only know that we are here but they know why we are here and they are pleased with what we are doing. They know that, with God’s help, we are reaching out over that racial divide that has acted to separate us for so many years—for some of us, sad and bitter years—and seeking to fulfill God’s commandment that we love each other even as He has loved us.”

It’s the fifth and last scheduled community program. Separate programs have already been held at each church, and it almost seems appropriate that they return to the wooded area where it all began for the two congregations.

On this site last year, there was no road and identifying the outline of the church’s foundation was even a chore. Scattered through the leaves are tiny American flags placed at part of the gravesites.

Some are for white ancestors.

Others buried there are black.

Often separated in life. Together in death.

The proclamations that the two ministers exchange bind the two congregations—it expresses a firm intent to preserve, perfect and perpetuate positive values of their common heritage by establishing the chapel in the woods as a memorial and a meeting place for all who, under God, love freedom; and that by seeking God’s grace and using all earthly means available they pledge to build upon the faith, hope, vision and courage of forbears, by covenanting to teach, practice and proclaims God’s love and justice for all persons for all times and in all places.

The proclamation also states a common purpose—that they love God and one another “in humble awareness of our shared lives...and that we pursue God’s peace in the land... “and that we fold to our hearts our brothers and sisters, following in the steps of His son, Jesus...”

While the local James Town project initially began under the umbrella of the County’s response to honor the 400th anniversary of historic Jamestown, its winding story, like the newly cut road, has led to a surprising destination.

“...Things have really changed,” reflected Ms. Carney of how the site has developed since it was first explored last year. “And it could not have been done without the cooperation, the real grass roots effort of bringing a community together.”

Still, she noted, “...This is not the last step. This is just the first step and I think as we move forward, you can see that there’s all sorts of wonderful opportunities for us to continue to bring our community together. And, you truly have brought your community together as a family.”

Delegate Clarke Hogan, who was in attendance, commended the group, noting that you would have to know where you have been to have any idea to find out where you might want to go.

“And I think this effort this morning was a testimony to your understanding of that,” he said.

The “congregation” would be treated to a Sunday school lesson from Lacy Ward Jr., who built upon the division of Noah’s family and the curse of Ham.

“There is a way for us to collectively attack the problems that our future holds, but to do it, we must once again see ourselves as family,” Ward said.

Robert R. Moton, Ward said, envisioned an America where the strengths of all were united toward a common goal.

“We come asking you to stir anew the hope that we have through Christ and the promise You give us of eternal life in Your kingdom,” offers Elder Blair Garnett in prayer. “We pray that You would move us with the power of Your Holy Spirit to serve you in a new way in this community—here in Rice. Here in Prince Edward County. Help us, oh Lord, to let Your light shine through us so that others would know Your love.”

In unison, individually, those gathered join hands and recite the Lord’s Prayer and Herbert Doswell croons *America The Beautiful* a cappella.

Four historical figures (in costume) from James Town's past look on the day's events including Robert Russa Moton, a famous African American educator advisor to five presidents and, as S. Wilson cites, "arguably the most famous American to come from Prince Edward County"; Emily Moton his mother; John Thomas Morrisette who taught Robert as a young boy—including Sunday afternoons in the church; and Sarah Reed Blanton Vaughan, the Wilson brothers' grandmother who attended church there with her husband. The two are buried about 40 yards from the foundation of the church.

The next step after this day is still to be determined. An historical marker from the state has been sought and Ms. Carney hopes when it arrives they will have an opportunity to do some additional work at the James Town site.

Roll on, sweet river, roll on.

It wasn't the final song of the day, but the High Bridge Baptist Church Choir summed up the emotions of day: "I've got a feeling, everything's gonna be alright."