
Bethel Academy

by G. Herbert Livingston

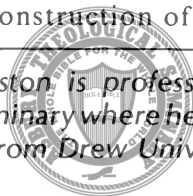
The dream of a bishop, the sacrificial labor of clergy and laymen, providing hope for a rugged frontier — Bethel Academy rose from the stone, clay and lumber of central Kentucky. The school had as a prototype the main building of Cokesbury College built at Abingdon, Maryland which was the first school of American Methodism.

Bishop Francis Asbury came to western Virginia in the spring of 1790 to hold the first conference of Methodist ministers and laymen at Masterson Station near Lexington, which was the home of the Masterson family and the first house of worship for Methodists west of the Appalachian Mountains. On May 13, 1790 (Clark, ed. n.d.: I, 639), the decision was made to establish a school in the area and call it Bethel. It was a daring decision, for there was only one other minister, Francis Poythress, first presiding elder of the Kentucky District. The others who made up the conference were five laymen: Isaac Hite, Colonel Hinde, Willis Green, Richard Masterson, and John Lewis.

Two problems immediately faced the decision-makers: Where to locate? How to finance? The first question was answered by John Lewis who offered one hundred acres of land. After the conference he took the bishop to the northern cliffs of the Kentucky River (actually east of a wide bend of the river) where the school site was selected. The second question was answered by a subscription of three hundred pounds taken at the conference and collections taken at the Methodist churches scattered throughout the area. At the time there were only three or four appointments in the conference, and there were a few more than one thousand Methodists living in the undeveloped frontier. Even at the end of the 1790s there were only six appointments and fewer than two thousand Methodists.

The details of the construction of the school building are

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unknown. The remains of the building show that the stone foundation was constructed of undressed stones without mortar; bricks, lime, plaster and lumber were used for its structure, all processed on the spot. After four years, the building was ready for occupancy, though the upper of the three floors was left unfinished. Bishop Asbury's journal describes the building as being thirty by eighty feet, with three stories and having a high roof (Clark, ed. n.d.: II, 253).

Bethel Academy opened January 13, 1794 (S.M. Duncan; 15), for boys only. The president of the trustees was the Rev. Francis Poythress, and he probably also supervised the construction of the school building. Rev. John Metcalf was chosen the first principal. He, with his wife Nancy and the new students, moved into the building. No records are preserved that tell us how many students attended or how old they were. During the early years of operation the instruction was on the primary level.

After the western part of Virginia was admitted to the Union in 1792 as the Commonwealth of Kentucky, one of the acts of its legislature in 1794 was the incorporation of Kentucky Academy at Pisgah. Bethel and Franklin academies were chartered soon after (Wittke, p. 308). There was also an "Act establishing Bethel Academy and Incorporating the Trustees thereof" passed by the legislature on February 10, 1798 (Littell). The trustees, of course, had been named five years prior to the incorporation.

Difficulties of several sorts troubled the school. Indian wars and raids generated fear and anxiety among those associated with the school; Bishop Asbury refers to this problem in one of his references to Bethel (Clark, ed.: I, 757). The founders soon discovered that it was too far from public places and settlers were not inclined to build a village around it. The most vexing difficulty was limited resources; the frontier families did not have enough money to spare for school expenses.

The burden finally became too much for the Metcalfs and they severed their relationship with the academy and moved to a new town that was forming called Nicholasville, some ten miles away. John and Nancy built one of the first log houses in the town and established a school for boys and called it Bethel Academy also. The year this happened seems to have been 1798. The Methodist conference was not happy with Metcalf's action and deprived him of his license to preach. The log house still exists as part of a home in

Nicholasville.

The trustees of the original Bethel Academy proceeded to install Rev. Valentine Cook as the new principal. He set up a curriculum of classical studies but resigned after one year (Arnold, pp. 86-87). The trustees then turned to one of its own group and placed Rev. Nathaniel Harris in charge. The Methodist conference seems to have withdrawn its support in 1804 (Redford, I, 124-125). Undaunted, Rev. Harris and family continued to live in the building and conduct a school for the neighborhood families for several years.

The building stood vacant for at least a decade and then was razed, probably about 1820. Some of the bricks, doors and windows were taken to Nicholasville for the construction of a smaller building and a school for boys was conducted there for about seventy years. An interesting advertisement in the county paper of 1883 reveals that A. N. Gordon was principal; the session was to start September 3 and continue for forty weeks. Mr. G.A.C. Hutchinson assisted as a teacher. The annual cost for pupils in the primary department was \$40.00; in the preparatory department, \$50.00; in the high school, \$60.00. The incidental fee was \$2.50. The pupils could board in nearby homes for \$3.00 to \$4.00 per week. The building still stands on South Third Street in Nicholasville and has been used as a residence in recent years.

The one hundred-acre site of the original Bethel Academy reverted to John Lewis and has been owned by a series of families through the years. The site is now part of a farm operated by Mr. Cecil Dillard.

The ruins of the school building are located about four miles from Wilmore, Ky. To find it, go south on State Highway 29 for about two miles and turn left on Handy Bend Road. Continue for more than a mile and turn right through a farm gate to a field. A rugged trail follows the north fence and then dips into a wooded watershed. On the other side of the dip enter a pasture and head to the right where a clump of trees and most of the stone foundation and debris may be found. The site is almost on the 900 foot elevation line with an axis that is east-west. To the north the slope slowly rises to a ridge and to the south the slope becomes a ravine known in those days as the Hempmill Branch of the Kentucky River gorge. In the branch is a spring which supplied the school with its water.

The first deed for the Bethel site was executed on November 28, 1797, and delivered to the court house in Lexington, Ky. on May 24, 1804. This deed, given by John and Elizabeth Lewis, refers to a

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contract (verbal?) made on May 16, 1794, between this couple and the trustees of the school. The following trustees are listed: Rev. Francis Poythress, president, James Hord, Nathaniel Harris, and Andrew Hynes. These men gave the Lewises five shillings for the land.

The document is somewhat lengthy, giving a surveyor's description of the land, the purpose of the school, and the powers and responsibilities of the trustees and principal. The deed refers to land as "herein possessed forever and his successors in trust as aforesaid forever . . ." The word "forever" is repeated several times in the document. When delivered to the courthouse, it was signed by John Lewis in the presence of James Hord, James Crutcher, Thomas Wilkerson, and Nathaniel Harris. The next year Nathaniel Harris certified the document on January 14, 1805. Thomas Wilkerson certified it on January 28 and James Hord on April 15, each in the presence of Levi Todd, the county clerk.

The next legal document is dated June 1, 1816. Because Jessamine County was separated from Fayette County, December 17, 1798, this document, as well as those which follow, were filed at the courthouse in Nicholasville. By this document, John Lewis gave the one hundred-acre Bethel tract to his son William. The deed of 1797 does not have a provision stating that the land reverted to John Lewis if the building on the site ceased to be used. One may surmise that the trustees verbally returned the land to John Lewis, and probably received payment for it.

However, on May 24, 1819, John Lewis executed a deed of gift of the Bethel tract to his son William; and on March 22, 1822, John made another deed in which he sold the Bethel tract to William for one thousand dollars. The descriptions on the several documents are clearly of the same portion of land. William sold the one hundred acres, April 19, 1822, to George Walker for three hundred and thirty-one g.c. (sic) dollars.

Meanwhile, the trustees of Bethel Academy were buying land in Nicholasville, Ky. A deed was executed on June 12, 1819, between John and Nancy Metcalf and trustees of Bethel Academy for two acres of land, costing three hundred dollars. Did the trustees obtain this money by selling the old site to John Lewis? The trustees listed on the deed were, Nathaniel Harris, Samuel H. Woodson, William Caldwell, Jesse Head, Thomas B. Scott, John Lewis, James Fletcher,

and Francis P. Hord.

Another deed dated February 24, 1820, reveals that Leslie and Margaret Combs sold two acres to the trustees of the school for two hundred dollars. This plot joined the one purchased from the Metcalfs. The trustees named are: Nathaniel Harris, president, William Caldwell, William Shrieve, Francis P. Hord, Robert Crockett, George J. Brown, Archibald Young and James Fletcher. It was to this site that the materials from the original academy were brought and a new building constructed.

A document is recorded in the courthouse at Nicholasville dated May 28, 1877. It is a rental agreement between the trustees of the Bethel Academy and A.N. Gordon for a ten year period. Beginning July 1, 1877, A.N. Gordon could live in a dwelling on the premises and operate a school for boys in the main building. George Brown signed the agreement as the president of the trustees.

The trustees of Bethel Academy probably thought A.N. Gordon would bring a new day to the academy and soon they were buying land adjacent to the school. On September 24, 1878, they bought a parcel of land from S.H. and Carrie Noland for one dollar. On January 27, 1880, they purchased a parcel of land from the Jessamine Female Institute for twenty-five dollars.

The record is silent about what happened when the rental agreement expired in 1887, but evidently Bethel Academy fell on hard times. A deed dated July 29, 1893 transferred the land and buildings of the academy to the town of Nicholasville for the sum of seven thousand dollars which was paid in full on August 26, 1896. B.M. Arnett signed the deed and the release on full payment as president of the trustees. Thus, the known history of Bethel Academy ended after a century of service as an educational institution.

The site of the original Bethel Academy overlooking the Kentucky River is important historically and archaeologically for several reasons: (a) the ruins of the Academy have been virtually undisturbed until archaeological excavation was begun there in 1965; (b) the building on South Third Street in Nicholasville which was constructed of materials salvaged from the original site still stands; (c) the engineering building of Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee has in one of its walls several bricks and a marble cornerstone with the inscription "BETHEL 1790"; (d) on the original site there is a stone monument which, until August 1983 bore a bronze plaque with this inscription.

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On this site stood
BETHEL ACADEMY
First Church School
In all the West
Planned by the First Methodist Conference
in Kentucky, 1790
Opened (about) 1793: closed (about) 1804
Brick building, 40x80 feet, three stories high
Stones in this pillar
Were in original foundation
Erected by
Kentucky Conference Historical Society, 1933

The theft of this plaque was reported to the county sheriff but he has not been able to recover it.

The author's interest in Bethel Academy was fanned by conversations with Dr. Howard Shippo, professor emeritus of Church History, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky. A visit was made to the site in 1964; and, with the aid of shovels, narrow trenches were dug from outer edges toward the center. Within a short time, a portion of the south wall was uncovered followed by the location of the east, west and north walls. Tape measures soon made it clear that the actual width of the foundation was thirty-five feet and the length was eighty-six feet, contrary to references to the building's size in literary sources and on the bronze plaque.

Because the author had done archaeological work in Israel in 1964 and was scheduled to teach a class relating archaeological discoveries in the Middle East to the Old Testament, a decision was made to challenge the members of the class to help in digging at Bethel Academy. During the visits to the site on weekends in the spring of 1965, it was learned that the outer walls were thirty-two inches wide and several cross walls were eighteen inches wide. The foundations of two single fireplaces were found attached to two of the cross walls.

The next time the students returned to the site, a grid pattern was superimposed on the ruins and digging was restricted to small areas, going down to unmolested soil. Soon a double fireplace was found related to a pair of rooms at the east end of the building and a matching double fireplace related to a pair of rooms at the west end.

The author reasoned that since it was difficult to take the students

to Israel to engage in archaeological work, it would be useful for students of the archaeology class to dig at Bethel to learn first hand the methods of archaeology. To take advantage of the drier autumn weather, the class was scheduled in the fall semester and digging was done on Saturdays or Mondays.

Exposed walls and balk walls have been carefully drawn to scale and photographed. All artifacts have been kept separate according to strata, cleaned, sorted, catalogued, and labeled at a room provided by Asbury Theological Seminary. Some of these artifacts are on display in cases in the library with the permission of the owners of the land. Due to lack of funds, only limited analysis has been undertaken; but the recent availability of computers on campus will make possible adequate analysis.

An examination of the debris layers has revealed that there are three basic strata, although, by the walls, one may discern a fourth strata. The top stratum, consisting of black humus about two inches thick, has yielded very few artifacts. This stratum represents accumulation since 1820. The second stratum averages about eighteen inches, some places thinner and elsewhere thicker. It is made up mostly of broken bricks and plaster. The latter has a course mix applied directly to brick or lath and a thin, white layer upon which is white paint. This stratum has also yielded a few metal objects, some nails and broken glass. Because this layer has never been disturbed, it represents the results of tearing down the building, probably in 1820. The third stratum is dark soil averaging about two inches in depth and yielding most of the artifacts. It would be the ground surface visible while the school was in operation and the artifacts would represent items broken by the inhabitants and discarded.

Overall, an abundance of thin fragments of glass, probably from broken window panes, show signs of oxidation, but are not large enough to indicate the size of the panes. Were they transported from the east coast to the site?

A number of shards of chinaware are among the artifacts. They represent cups, dishes and plates of several designs and decorations. Other shards are of almost porcelain quality with colorful designs. All of these items are of English origin.

Many fragments of earthenware are present in the collection. Some are thin and some are thick. The colors range from an off-white, to shades of brown or green to black. They seem to represent bowls, pitchers, jugs, jars and crocks. Some may have come from

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Europe, but most seem to be of American origin.

Also, there are glassware shards, broken metal objects such as knives, spoons, two-tined forks, scissors, pressing irons, hinges, screws, nails, slate fragments, slate pencils and pieces of broken marble.

The fourth stratum by the walls is soil removed from the foundation trenches and thrown back against the walls later. It contains broken stone and globs of brick mortar.

The overall picture is of a community with limited resources. Neither coins nor fancy items have been found. There is no evidence of a cellar under the building. As yet it has not been ascertained whether the south or the north side possessed the main entrance to the building.

As excavation progressed from year to year, the conviction grew that the kitchen was not in the main building but was probably in a separate building a safe distance from it. An area east of the foundations appeared to be an inviting place to dig.

The grid was extended to this area and in the fall of 1981 the search began. The first fall session was disappointing, yielding no clearly defined walls among a rubble of moderately sized stones with an abundance of lime mixed among them. The fall of 1982 provided a surprise. Digging in new squares, the students soon uncovered well laid, but unmortared, stone walls. There were four of them oriented northwest/southeast, parallel to each other and measuring seventeen feet in length. Firmly planted on top of three of the walls was a large maple tree, the roots of which created no end of digging problems. The two outer walls proved to be eighteen inches wide: one inner wall was thirty inches wide and the other twenty-four inches wide. Space between the parallel walls averaged eighteen inches in width. In each of the three spaces there was an abundance of ash.

In the fall of 1983 more of the walls, especially along their east ends, were uncovered and carefully drawn to scale. An area to the west of the group of walls yielded the lower course of four nicely arranged stacks of bricks. The conclusion was drawn that this structure was the brick and lime kiln where the building materials for the main building were produced. One may assume that this kiln was the first structure built on the site.

More excavation is scheduled for the fall semesters of the next several years. The location of the front entrance, a possible separate kitchen, and more details about the kiln are yet to be determined.

Records and scale drawings of walls must be completed. Many photographs must be taken of artifacts and data gathered about the artifacts must be analyzed with the aid of the seminary's computers. Technical articles must be written for journals and all aspects of the excavation properly deposited in archives, both denominational and governmental.

The task is far from being completed, but, the Lord being our helper, it shall be done.

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Sequence of Actions and Documents related to Bethel Academy

- 1790 Conference action to build Bethel Academy.
(May 13) Land promised by John Lewis.
- 1790-1794 Bethel Academy built.
- 1793
- April 30;
- May 1,2) Conference appointed trustees for Bethel.



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- 1794 Classes started; exact date unknown.
- 1794 (May 16) Contract (verbal?) between John Lewis and the trustees of Bethel Academy.
- 1797 (Nov 28) Written deed drawn up between John Lewis and the Trustees of Bethel Academy.
- 1804 (May 24) Deed sealed and delivered to Fayette County courthouse.
- 1804 Methodist Conference discontinued relationship and support of Bethel Academy.
- 1805
(Jan 14, 28, April 15) Deed certified by oath by three of the trustees at Fayette County courthouse.
- 1819 (June 12) Deed given by John and Nancy Metcalf for two acres in Nicholasville to the trustee of Bethel Academy.
- 1820 (Feb 24) Deed given by Leslie and Margaret Combs for two acres in Nicholasville to the trustees of Bethel Academy.
- 1877 (May 28) Bethel Academy rented for ten years to A.N. Gordon for school purposes.
- 1878 (Sept 24) Deed given by S.H. and Carrie Noland for a parcel of land to the Trustees of Bethel Academy. It adjoined the Bethel property in Nicholasville.
- 1880 (Jan 27) Deed given by Jessamine Female Institute for a small parcel of land to the Trustees of Bethel Academy. Adjoined the Bethel property.
- 1893 (July 29) Deed given by the Trustees of Bethel Academy for property owned in Nicholasville to the town of Nicholasville for public school purposes.

Land Transfer Documents of Original Bethel Tract

- 1794 (May 16) Contract (verbal?) between John Lewis and trustees of Bethel involving of 100 acres for a school.
- 1797 (Nov 28) Written deed filed in Fayette County courthouse by which John Lewis sold the 100 acres for five shillings to the trustees of Bethel.
- 1816 (June 1) Bethel tract (100 acres) given by John Lewis to his son William.
- 1819 (May 24) A deed of gift of Bethel tract by John Lewis to his son

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- 1822 William.
(March 28) Bethel tract sold by John Lewis to his son William for \$1,000.
- 1822 Bethel tract sold by William Lewis to George Walker
(April 19) for \$331.00 g.c. dollars.

