

LIBERTY

The Alpha Omega Chapter, Alpha Delta State of the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International, an honorary women educators' group, in co-operation with the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, presents a brief history of Liberty Township and its schools.

Liberty Township lies across the line just north of Youngstown, and in early history these two subdivisions were closely associated. Liberty is situated north of Vienna, with Hubbard on the east, Mahoning County south, and Weathersfield Township on the west. It was originally a part of the civil township of Youngstown; and it was in 1806 that the people residing in range two (south) and town three, by petition to the proper authorities, gained their liberty. For this reason, the new township was named Liberty.

The original owners were Daniel Lathrop, Moses Cleveland, Samuel Huntington, and Christopher Leffingwell, none of whom settled on their land. Huntington settled in Youngstown, later moved to Cleveland, and was elected governor of Ohio.

It is not known with absolute certainty who was the first settler in Liberty. Several sources named Jacob and Henry Swager as the original settlers, who came in 1798 and located near Church Hill. Henry Swager settled west of Church Hill on the east and west center road on the northeast corner of Lot No. eight. He lived there for several years; then he sold to Jacob Boyd and bought a farm of 100 acres in the southeast part of the township, where he lived until his death at age 97. Henry Swager must have been delighted with the virgin forests as he was a great hunter; and his excellent marksmanship proved fatal to bear, deer, wild turkeys and other game.

James Mathews also arrived in 1798 and settled in the southwest part of the township on lot number one. He lived there for 27 years until he moved to Warren Township. Mr. Mathews was a shrewd businessman. He opened up the first public house in those early days and also operated the first distillery. He had a ready market for his product. Other early settlers were John Stull, Valentine Stull, John Ramsey, John Thorn and William Stewart. Most of these pioneers came from Pennsylvania.

The road from Pennsylvania into Ohio then lay along the Mahoning as far as Youngstown. In the early 1800's numerous immigrant families from Connecticut, New York and Pennsylvania came to the Western Reserve. They brought a few pieces of furniture, cooking utensils, and a month's supply of food in their covered wagons. They had four horses to the wagon and several head of cattle. The mountains were very hard to cross because the roads were winding and were just narrow tracks made by other wagons. It was a happy sight to reach a settlement where they could rest for a while before continuing on their way into the wilderness. This wilderness had been surveyed into townships and marked by blazed trees.

The building of the log cabins was accomplished with the help of friendly neighbors. The place to build the cabin was chosen with care and the logs skillfully cut and shaped to provide sturdy shelter. The pioneers built their cabins much as birds their nests. After the logs were notched and set in place, the cracks were filled with mortar made of mud, mixed with leaves and grass.

The furniture was simple -- a bed of poles and bed slats made of birch bark. The mattress was cornhusks and straw. Would you care to trade your comfortable mattress for a pioneer bed? The pioneers had very few chairs but sat on benches made of logs. Their tables were often brought with them on the wagons.

A frying pan called a "spider," a large kettle called a "Dutch oven," and a couple of smaller kettles took care of all the cooking needs. Everything was cooked over an open fire. Corn was used, and meat from game was plentiful. The pioneer always carried a gun because hunting was necessary to provide food. Elk and deer were plentiful and provided meat. The hunter often met with bears, black and gray foxes, raccoon, wild cats, opossum, porcupine, skunks, black, gray, red and ground squirrels and wolves. The wolves killed hogs and sheep and sometimes attacked travelers. Their eerie howls could be heard on all sides, and they sometimes peered through the cracks in the cabin. The hunters feared the panthers most of all; but fortunately, they disappeared as the land was cleared.

Early activities in Liberty Township centered to some extent about what is now known as Church Hill. East of Church Hill, a grist mill, the first township industry, was established in 1800. Church Hill is located near the central part of the township, receiving its name from the height of the hill and the location of a church at this high elevation. There are now five churches at this corner. A post office was established in Liberty in 1833, and Matthew Walker was the first postmaster. Liberty was first designated as the post office name; but Washington, D.C., officials rejected the name because there was another Liberty postal area in the nation. So it was decided to select Church Hill as the name for the post office.

Church Hill was an important place even in the early days, but the discovery of coal and opening of coal mines in 1860 provided a real boost. The first mine was on the Alexander McCleery farm. Other mines were operated by the Church Hill Coal Company, Briar Hill Company, and others. Church Hill prospered from 1860 to 1890 -- a place of stores and shops and much business activity. With the coal came Welsh immigrants, who were very skillful and experienced in coal mining.

Aside from Church Hill, Sodom, in the northeastern section of the township, and Seceder's Corners, in the eastern part, were thriving villages. An early missionary gave Sodom its name when he failed to convert the village to temperance and said it was like the wicked city of Sodom in the Bible. Seceder Corners was named from the old line Presbyterian Church -- about 1803, when Rev. James Duncan preached. Rev. Duncan preached there until 1815, first in the tent on a lot donated by Alexander McCleery and later in a log church. There were also three Welsh churches and a Methodist Episcopal

Church. One historian tells that there were ten taverns but only five churches in Liberty; but it was a quiet, decent place to live.

The first schoolhouse was located near Church Hill, at the west side of the cemetery. This house was rudely constructed after a well-known style of early times. The school was first taught by John Taylor, an elderly man about 60 years of age. Some of the other noted people from the Church Hill school building were: Early Mathews, Opecher Johnson, Bessie Jennings, Mrs. J. Baird, Jr., Elizabeth Thomas, Coral Boyd, and Beulah Leeder. There was also a two-room structure at Holmes Road. The noted names from this school are Mable Williams and Cora Shively.

Another house was built about one-half mile east of Church Hill, where William Sampson's barn now stands. This principal schoolhouse of the neighborhood was built in 1818.

It was a huge log house covered with clapboards, which were held to their places with weight poles. Elias Grover was the first teacher. He came to the neighborhood as a stranger, announcing himself as being from the District of Maine. His school was very successful and well attended. Many pupils came from a distance and boarded in the neighborhood for the purpose of attending his school. This teacher first made the advance in education matters beyond the speller and "single rule of three," which then comprised the higher degree of pioneer education, and introduced grammar, geography, and surveying, which he successfully taught for some years.

A graded school was afterwards held in the house built for that purpose, now occupied by the Welsh Methodist Church. Books were few and reading not indulged in to any extent. In fact, it was considered almost wicked to waste daylight in study.

Occasionally, a boy who had determined to become a professional man did most of his studying winter evenings by the light of the log fire.

When schoolhouses began to appear in Liberty, the smaller children attended in the summer, the older ones in the winter.

They walked to school, girls in cotton dresses, boys without overcoats. They carried their dinner in a pail or basket, and often ran most of the way. In winter, the children ate their dinners in front of the blazing logs in the fireplace and out under trees in the spring and fall. The only thing the early settlers of Trumbull County had was plenty of firewood.

Neighbors would sometimes gather in schoolhouses where the men held debates. No one thought of asking a woman to debate a question any more than they would have thought of urging her to become a candidate for governor.

Teachers were paid by the patrons of the school. One of the earliest teachers received in compensation calves, corn, and a bureau.

The present Union School building was erected in 1871 and is a commodious building of three departments and was located at Church Hill.

The school was originally under the superintendency of William Barrett and was supported by the union of three districts, with from five to six hundred children, of which number, however, not more than one-half attended school. The township also supported nine school districts in which there were the usual provisions made for ordinary school.

The village of Girard was settled a little later than Church Hill. It has a story in itself and will be related on another tape.

The old-time link between Liberty Township and Youngstown is being revived today. Youngstown is now built up to the Liberty Township line, and the southern part of this township is being adopted by wealthy Youngstown people as a residence place.

This script by Patricia A. Hetzler and Katie Von Thaeer, narration by Gene Roberts. These programs were prepared by the Delta Kappa Gamma Society, in cooperation with Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, to promote better understanding of the history of the townships of Trumbull County with a focus on early education and the role of the woman educator.