The People and the Churches
of the
Collierstown & Kerr’s Creek Area

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Collier's Creek and Kerr's Creek originate at the same place on North Mountain and flow in opposite directions. The Collierstown Presbyterian Church lies to the west on Collier's Creek as a daughter of the Old Oxford Church some miles to the south. The "little brick church," Kerr's Creek Baptist, Bethal, Ebenezer A.R.P. Church, and the Old and New Monmouth Churches lie to the east of the origin of the two rivers. By their banks history has taken shape. From the Red Man and the early settlers to the development of the churches; the Scotch-Irish and other immigrants have been shaped into a different type of man. The frontier hardened them and shaped them but they have kept their religion strong. "The territory was extensive; the demands on the traveler and the sense of a challenge called for spiritual and physical stamina."  

The Ulster bred Scotch-Irish had been discriminated and disgraced for over a century under the English law in North Ireland. Fighting, famine, and pestilence had been allowed to prevail. They had acquired the Presbyterian faith to give them hope against the unbearable conditions. The word of the Borden Land Grants in Virginia was a great opportunity for these people to gain economic and religious freedom. These were the people that would shape the Southern wilderness, the Shenandoah Valley, the "backwoods of Virginia." They came to America in droves. Many found the cities in Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, and Delaware very inhospitable. The move down the Shenandoah Valley was harsh but the peoples were persistent. They finally made it to the Rockbridge area.  

When the Scotch-Irish settled into an area they
would first construct their home and then two things were sure to follow: the church and the school. In the Rockbridge area the schools and churches usually began as a single log structure. The pioneer, once settled on their grant of laws, "gave his fall attention to the education of the heart and mind". The pioneers of Rockbridge were steadfast to the idea of the pursuit of knowledge first in the Lord and then with reading, writing, and arithmetic. Therefore, the early frontier families once settled in would form religious groups. These first settlers "erected places of worship, but, as the law did not allow them to be called "churches", they were known as "meeting houses."

The first meeting house in the area was Hall's Meeting house which stood about an hours walk west of Lexington. It was at the "Fork of the James". The deed for the ground was given around 1754. John Craig was one of the first preachers in the Rockbridge area commissioned here by the settlers. John Craig traveled extensively teaching the word of the Lord in our area.

An off shoot of Hall's Meeting House was Old Monmouth which is presently located north of Lexington. This church was begun in 1789. The Kerr's Creek Presbyterian, little brick church, was believed to be born for the purpose of supplying the peoples of the Denmark area with Presbyterian prayer due to travelling purposes until the New Monmouth Church was constructed around 1853 at which time the Kerr's Creek Presbyterian was closed and since then has become the Advent Christians Church.

The settlers that came into the Rockbridge area were about 80
percent Presbyterian but of three separate types. "While the new settlers lived together and worked together, they did not allow this to alter their religious convictions - the Associate, the Reformed, and the "Assembly" Presbyterians, in heart and mind and spirit, remained aware of their religious distinctions." This, however, does not mean that they did not pray together. These peoples were very active with one another. It is believed that these groups were engaged in religious worship at the time of the "Kerr's Creek Massacre." The gathering was at the home of Johathan Cunningham's at Big Spring, which was originally his father's who was an immigrant from Ireland who received it from Benjamin Horden on November 12, 1748. The time of this bloody holocaust was on July 17, 1763. Jonathan and his wife Mary survived but it is believed that their children were slain along with many of the other worshippers.

The Associate and the Reformed branches of the Presbyterian Churches came together to form the Associate and Reformed Presbyterian Church on November 1, 1782. They formed the House Mountain Meeting House which has since become the Ebenezer A.R.P. Church. The Ebenezer Church was very popular and the need was felt to reach the benefits of the church. So in the fall of 1859 Rev. McElwee of Ebenezer accepted an offer from William Miller up near the Denmark area to construct a small brick church which would be named the "Bethal Church". On January 15, 1860 the dedication took place with a full church and a warm fire.

Now west of the origin of Kerr's Creek is Collier's Creek, first settled by John Collier in 1746. This area flourished and more people moved there. The Oxford Church, several miles south, was the only religious building in the area. So a school house in Collierstown,
erected in 1800, became a house of worship as many places with log school buildings had done.

The Rev. A. B. Davidson became pastor at Oxford in 1816, was minister at New Monmouth from 1822-1829 and organized the Kerr's Creek Presbyterian in 1824 and the Collierstown Presbyterian in 1843. Andrew B. Davidson married Carmen Clark (a women who has helped me dearly) four sets of great grandparents. This goes into the Goodbar family which was a prominent family through the Collier's Creek area. The school house became to small and a larger building was built in a beautiful grove of sugar maples about a quarter mile farther up Collier's Creek. Here "Ship Rock Meeting House" was built in 1833. Then in 1854 it was decided to relocate the church. "There was a thorough canvass of the people for funds, an effort that was very successful, the people giving liberally." On June 16, 1856 the dedication was held and Rev. Davidson gave the dedication speech. People had come from near and far. Some walked miles, some came days ahead and stayed with relatives, it was a great county affair. Some were dressed in the latest fashions and some in plainer clothes. It was a memorable affair. The hardships in the country were trying. The religious and rugged Scotch-Irish needed the church to be their savior and confront these hardships. On the farm away from society the tasks were great for the settlers of this virgin wilderness. It was so easy to be distracted from the Lord's word. The farming of the land, the feeding of the family and animals, the upkeep of the house and the ranch area, along with many other chores
of the early pioneer ware· rough to accomplish and could easily have overshadowed the preaching of the Bible. But the Scotch-Irish had a strong sense of religious duty that bound them to teaching the word of the Lord and the strength of the mind in the home. In 1825 Rev. Andrew Heron at the Timber Ridge Church sent out a message to the members of the Ebenezer and Timber Ridge Churches. Rev. Heron was concerned that the people were losing sight of the word of the Lord. He felt that the people were neglecting their religious duties in the midst of their daily work. He said that "the history of past ages tells us, that systems of error and delusion which have ever run the church, have usually crept in little by little." He felt that slowly over a period of time he had witnessed a changing attitude toward the Lord. He wrote: "With too many, a pure profession, and a circle of outward duties pass for religion; and they sit down satisfied, without considering that they have to deal with a God who searches the hearts and tries the reins." He told his congregation to watch out for the evils of intemperance and to keep the holy Sabbath strictly. He said, "the phrase, 'works of necessity,' frequently becomes synonymous with 'works of convenience.'" He meant that prayer to God is not only to be done at one's convenience but that it is essential above all else to the true salvation of the soul. Rev. Heron preached for secret prayer, and that "the man who 'restrains prayer before God,' makes it evident that he has 'cast off his fear.'" He wanted the word of the Lord to be taught in the home and to not only the family
members but also the servants. He called it the families duty.\footnote{9}

From speaking to residents of Rockbridge, Mrs. Carmen Clark in particular, it seems that the people did not miss church for little inconveniences. The ideals of the early 20th century family were much stronger than those present today. The children went to church regardless of the days activities and travelling was kept to a minimum except for that to and from the house of worship.

Almost all of the families owned Bibles, they carried a gun and Bible wherever they went, and amazingly enough an incredibly high percentage of the families in Rockbridge were literate and able to read the Bible.\footnote{7} Teachings from the Bible were taught in school and in the home. A large family in the High Hollows area was that of the Goodbars. Several interesting facts about these pioneers culture comes from them. It is obvious that the family was a close group back then due partly to the seperation from other peoples. One custom or shall it be called an accepted part of the family was that the children were under the fathers command until the age of 21 years. In the Rockbridge area a member of the family owed his or her parents 21 years of their life to work and help around the home in appreciation for their upbringing. Carmen Clark's grandfather's brother Newton Goodbar was given two and one-half years of his "time" in her great grandfather's will. In otherwords, Newton was let go at the age of eighteen and one half years. Newton asked for this so that he could leave before he was drafted into the Confederate Army. He and another brother John fought for the Union Army. It is interesting that 30,000 Virginians went and fought for the Union.
The churches of Rockbridge formed one of the few centers of social intercourse. The congregation's members most likely knew relatively few people outside of themselves save for the local merchants and close neighbors. The church gatherings formed the center for the High Hollows social existence. The folks in the area would most likely attend one to three services a month, and those would draw very large crowds. The services would last all day long beginning at 10:00 in the morning and winding up at sunset with a break in the afternoon for lunch. These would be all day social affairs. At the time of communion the service might go on for days with several ministers present. Other than these church going times there were several times in the year when the social setting was not church oriented. These were the corn husking, molasses making, barn raising, apple butter making, and log rolling get togethers. These would be followed with dinner at the host's home.

As far as the set up of the old churches, Tinkling Spring Church at this present day a typical example of what most of the churches used to look like. The pews were very high backed with deep aisles so that when standing only the shoulders and head could be seen. Church, as can be seen, was not taken lightly within the walls. The pews were rented as 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th class and the price fluctuated between the different classes. In one church they were even rented with corn bushels instead of money. They also had footwarmers in the pews which had hot water in them. The grave stones had biblical quotations upon them and at the Bethal Cemetary
Footnotes


5. George West Diehl. *Manuscript on Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Va.* Washington & Lee University


8. Ibid


11. Interview with Carmen Clark, Rockbridge Historical Society, Collierstown, Va., 24 May 1982

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1) Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Va.
2) Big Spring Cemetery, Va.
3) Collierstown, Va.
4) Falling Spring Presbyterian Church, Va.
5) Frontier Presbyterianism
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7) Kerr's Creek, Va.

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