

A stone building, dilapidated and crumbling from the outside in, still stands on Bacton Hill Road, some 500 ft. from Route 401, the former Conestoga Turnpike. The gravestones which surround the building clearly show that it is a church. Nearly all the headstones have fallen downhill and lie, face up, crumbling from the wind and rain.

Records show that this church, formerly named the Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church, was built in 1832 on what was originally known as the Yellow Springs Road.. A celebrated gospel church, it was regularly attended by Negroes who lived and worked on Bacton Hill. Very few of the lives of these people, who were once a great part of the history of East Whiteland, have ever been chronicled

Early tax records for Chester County show a listing of ‘free men.’ Actually, these “free men” were colored slaves who had been given their freedom from bondage when they reached they age of 38. Later on, the age of freedom was lowered to 23 years of age and finally a state law granted that any person born in the state of Pennsylvania was a guaranteed free man.

The farmers of the Valley Hills would often give these free men, after their term of bondage was up, a small plot of land for their own upon the bills in Bacton. On these, the former slaves built small log cabins or stone buildings. Many ran small farms while still working during the day timbering the summit of Bacton Hill and carting lumber down to the Great Valley for the lime kilns.

Evidently, this group of Negroes who lived and worked on Bacton Hill erected a meeting house for religious services. Deeds of land show the plot changing hands around 1832 in order that a stone church building could be built. Gravestones around the building dating back to the 1830’s show that burial services and, most likely, church services were held throughout this period. Apparently, because of riots and disturbances from 1848 to 1870, the church was hardly used and gradually fell into a bad state of repair. During the summer of 1872, however, the old church was brought back to life and was reopened on December 8th amidst a number of important clergymen. Records show that it was rededicated on June 22nd of the next year as the Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Church went on to be used through the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Quarterly meetings were held in the building and were publicized in the local papers. One such announcement went as follows;

EBENBZER A. M. E. CHURCH
East Whiteland township-Rev. R. L. Patterson,
Pastor-Quarterly Meeting. 9.30 a.m., love feast. 10.55 a.
m., preaching by Rev. Lewis Hood, of Norristown 1.15
pm., Sunday School, will be addressed by Rev. Hood. 2.15
p. in., preaching by Rev. Lewis Hood. Holy Communion
administered at the morning service. Come one;
come all”

Regular services were reported to be held up until 1910 and the most recent date on a headstone is from 1916. After this the church was not known to be used until the 1940's. Reports from residents, or former residents, of East Whiteland Township say that sometime during this period there was a sort of gathering at the church. People from all over Chester County as well as prominent clergymen from the A.M.E Church came together to celebrate one more time. Sometime during this time frame the building itself must have been redone once again, possibly in preparation *for* this event. Electrical wiring and sockets for lamps are clearly evident on the inside of the church and in the photograph from the 1940s the receptor and box for the wiring can also be seen (see attached page). But after this brief spark in its fading history, the church and surrounding cemetery fell into disuse and a wooded forest grew up around them.

The only record of a man living during the 1800's and being buried in the Ebenezer Cemetery is that of Hiram Woodyard. Listed in the history of the Conestoga Turnpike (Stuart H. and Catherine C. Quillman) as Hirman Woodward, his tombstone lies with unmistakable lettering stating:

HIRAM WOODYARD
DIED Dec 20 1900
In his 76 YEAR

Woodyard was known to have been respected for his six-foot muscular frame and his service in the Union Army as a teamster. Having lived in Bacton and gone to the Ebenezer A.M.E. Church he was also the object of many stories. Most were told of his travels crossing miles of muddy lumber trails with a team of six horses or mules and never once getting stuck.

There are also other men buried in the cemetery who had fought in the Civil War. One such stone which stands close to the back of the church tells of a man who was a private in the war. The following appears on his tombstone:

“Joshua Johnson
1846.1916
PVT. CO. K 45th U.S.C.T.
Civil war”

Other stones show the names of a family named the Reasons who were buried there. A ninth month old baby, Walter Curtis, is buried amidst the graves of his grandparents, William and Mary A. Reason. Reportedly a family of the Reason name still lives in Malvern.

The Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church was a very important place in the 1800's and early 1900's. It was a meeting place for the numerous hard-working Negroes who lived and worked amidst the Valley Hills. Famous clergymen from Chester County and the surrounding area came to participate in the services of this celebrated gospel church and many brave men and women were buried within its outer limits. The church was also a place of refuge from the aberrations that occurred during the mid 1800's. It was a place to hide from the evils of slavery which abounded in the land. And even though the writing on the stones continues to wash away with every rain and the walls of the old stone building continue to crumble inward, the memories, as well as descendants, of those who lie beneath the rich Bacton Hill soil will live on.