

New Liberty, Kentucky and Part of It's History

By Berta Gayle

Although a thriving community in 1900, New Liberty has become a small bedroom community, because most of it's citizens work elsewhere.

In 1800 New Liberty was a wilderness with giant trees, plenty of water, wold animals, and Indians.

After the Revolutionary War people from Virginia, Pennsylvania, Carolina, Maryland and possibly New Jersey, moved to Kentucky and surrounding states, settling down in choice areas. New Liberty was one of those places with rich soil, a plentiful water supply, and wild life.

As settlers cleared the land and built cabins a town started emerging. Now history does not say how the town got its name, but it does say: "in 1806 John Gayle, Sr. and his slaves built a ten room two story log house, believed to be the first house in that area".

New Liberty used the water way to bring in supplies. Some would be shipped up or down the Ohio River to Ghent and loaded into horse drawn wagons – over land to town.

The Northwest end of town was known as Adamstown and the southeast end was known as Brownstown. This was a thriving and prosperous community nineteen years before Owen County was organized. It's streets were laid off and lined with beautiful trees. The alleys had homes and livery stables. In 1827, the town had seven stores, thirteen mechanic shops, two churches and a population of 304. Most people did not realize New Liberty was the largest, wealthiest and most important community in that part of the county.

In 1800 the first pioneer preacher from the "Great Mississippi", by the name of William Hickman came through. He states, "in those days I went down and visited my friends on Eagle Creek and baptized a number there".

Bible study and religious services were being held in the homes of John Price, Thomas Brown or John Davis who later helped organize the first Baptist Church, calling it "The Church of the Twins" after the two bodies of water that ran close to town, probably being Big Twin Creek and Little Twin Creek which were tributaries from the Kentucky and Ohio Rivers.

This first church started with fourteen brothers, fourteen sisters, and two colored people, Uncle Harv and Aunt Becky Brown. The first pastor of this church was Elder John Scott from 1802-1833. He was born in Ireland in 1767 and raided a Presbyterian. After studying the New Testament and phamplets on baptism, he joined a Baptist church and later became a preacher. He helped establish the first Baptist Church and the Baptist influence in this part of the state after he settled there. By 1802 the church membership had grown to 38 members, in 1833 it had grown to 179.

For the first sixty-seventy years the church was the law that influenced the community life. Some examples: A lady named Sister Bishop joined a class of people called "the Campbellites", when a complaint was made, she was excluded from the church. Another sister confessed she gave way to temper, the church agreed to bear with her. In those days most of the complaints brought before the church was for excessive drinking, without a satisfactory reason they were excluded from the church.

"For the first 94 years the church records were unbroken. The oldest three books had on the inside pages, "this book was purchased for the use of The Church of the Twins by John Scott, price 12 shillings, August 1801".

The first church building was made from logs and finished in 1810 with a gallery for colored people. The second building was made from brick I 1819 to seat 600 people. This

church too had a gallery, but in 1836 much of it was destroyed by fire after a meeting, the fireplace was blamed, and by 1837 the church was rebuilt using the present walls. This time the members bought stoves to heat the building. By 1854 the walls of this church started crumbling. Feeling it unsafe the members built a new one. It had a gallery without anterooms and at this time the membership had dropped to 550.

Up to 1838 the preacher did not receive a salary, but at the end of that year the members decided to give him the money left over at the end of the year called surplus, being \$22.50.

By 1862 the church had a membership of over 1100, and pastors started being ordained in 1868 to preach. Mission work was started in 1846 with the church taking a collection on the first Sunday of every fourth month. Then they decided the time was right to spread the gospel, so ten colonies were formed to go start new churches in other parts of the county, they were: Sharon in Carroll Co.; Emmaus near the Kentucky River, that lasted two generations; Harrisburg at Long Ridge; Dallasburg at Wheatly; Liberty Station at Sanders; Bramlett at Caeson; Sparta; Popular Grove; Owenton, and Salem at Muscle Shoals. Seven of these colonies were successful.

Secret societies were not allowed by the members, however in 1859 the church did accept a lodge called The Masons.

In the late 1800's the colored people got permission to build a church apart from the white church. One was constructed from logs on the Two Mile Road. It was called Little Hope and was a place of worship for forty years.

After that time a lot in New Liberty was purchased and a frame building was put on it and called Second Baptist.

Twenty-eight years later a religious group called the Campbellites built a new church, selling the old church to the color deacons for \$3,000, which is used in 1993.

When slavery ended many people of color stayed on the same farms as tenants, some found jobs in the city, while others bought farms and raised their families there.

Entertainment back then was going to church, having picnics or barn dances.

The first school started in that framed church building. Years later a school was built for the children of color by the county. This school lasted until integration and all the children in that town went to the same school.

Like the white church, the black church was law and order for the community. All things of importance was held at the church, the Christmas plays, graduation programs, Thanksgiving services.

In the early churches, the deacons were in charge of church services. Sometimes a traveling preacher would come through and stay awhile having church and staying at one of the members homes. Finally a preacher from Louisville moved to the area by the name of Rev. W. B. Hall. He became the pastor of Second Baptist for the next forty years.

In the late fortys Second Baptist was host to the Kentucky Baptist Convention for a week. Most of the families with women and children who attended found shelter with the families that lived in the community, while the men and boys camped out in barns or fields near by. The community banded together and fed the multitude at the school house.

A lodge group called the Odd Fellows held a march every fall, all the members (men) would dress in bright colored velvet sashes and cummerbunds and do drills by the beat of a bass drum. This program would end with a supper topped off with homemade cake and ice cream fixed by the ladies of the church.

One of New Liberty's oldest and dearest citizens, Mrs. J. S. Moody has this to say: "Memories are precious and as you grow older, say 84 years as I am – they become more precious, because you live with them. I recall events since I was six years old.

The most vivid are connected with church and school, all social life was in some way around them.

Through the church, there were the Christmas programs when the churches had joint programs with giant trees and Santa made a visit – I can sometimes feel as if I can smell the cedar and see the lighted candles. Always the nativity was proclaimed, and the choir singing Silent Night.

We had an independent school in New Liberty. There were box suppers, parties. We did not call it proms, just parties.

Graduation was held in church, as it was considered the proper sent off into life to recognize and put God first.

I lived through World War #1, #2, Korean, Vietnam – but the most important event I remember was during World War #1 when it was the first time I had ever seen an Army uniform. Our local Doctor George Purdy was a handsome sight to see, and he would address our assembly programs at school when he was on furlough.

There were bond rallies. When the war was over, we made a "Kaiser", dragged him to the corner and burned him on a bond fire. This was high drama in those days.

Probably the greatest thrill was when we finally got a road built from Sparta to Worthville. It brought laborers and engineers into our community. All the work was done by mules and wagons. When the road was completed, it was dedicated in great style. The Governor W. J. Fields was guest and I along with Ollie Gayle Lusby rode in the parade with the governor. There was a huge crowd, 200 to 300 people attended a burgoo served on the school ground.

Then I remember the first radio. Mr. Barber known as our only millionaire owned a battery set. He would open a window of his home and let everyone set or stand on the street to hear."

Mr. J. S. Moody said, "New Liberty once had a jail, the service of the pony express, that started at Ghent and went to Lexington. The rider would stop at New Liberty for a fresh horse and food." He remembers when a group of citizens from New Liberty would go the Perry Park boat landing to enjoy a night of social life on the riverboat.

Included in the history was three major fires, one was on "March 28, 1864. Most valuable portion of New Liberty, Owen Co. – destroyed by fire (Collins 157). Oct. 1904 most of New Liberty destroyed by fire the third time.(Collins 133)"

In 1865 on March 24 a portion of the 54th Ky. Under Major John Russell and Capt. George Buckley came upon a party of guerrillas near New Liberty, Owen County, killed three, wounded three and the rest disbursed (Collins 670)."

In 1855 New Liberty had a Girls Academy and a Boys Academy. In 1867 the town had Concord College whose only equal was Georgetown College.

The location of the town of new Liberty, Kentucky is in the Northwestern part of Owen County on Highway US 227 and KY 36, nine miles from Owenton, KY., and about 85 miles from three major cities: Louisville, Lexington, and Covington, all in Kentucky, plus its forty miles from the capital north of Frankfort.

Some things stayed the same from 1800 to 1993. It is still the county's oldest town, the church still plays a major in the lives of it's citizens and the water supply and rich soil are still there. In 1993 the town had a population of about 100.

The main industry is farming - raising corn, tobacco and cattle. The volunteer fire dept., one bank (Citizens), one general store (Trusty's), three churches - Black and white Baptist and one Christian, US post office, two garages - one working and two antique shops.

Highway US 227 and KY 36 run through the middle of town with an alley on one end and an ally and street on the other.

The social life was: ladies meetings, eating out at Trusty's, and going to church on Sunday. Some of the citizens are retired, the rest are working outside the community to maintain one of the well kept homes in that quiet and beautiful little community.

---Works cited: Burroughs, Prince E. Rev. History of the Baptist Church, New Liberty, KY 1801 - 1901; Gibson, Katie, President of Owen County Historical Society personal interview 3 March 1993; History of KY Vol 11 March 26, 1865, p 670; Houchens, M. S. History of Owen County, Louisville Standard Printing Co 1976; Moody, Mr. & Mrs. J. S. New Liberty's oldest residents personal interview 28 Jan 1993; Roland, Clayton New Liberty A Brief History of Owen County's Oldest Town reprint of a feature Article appearing in The News Herald, Owenton KY Oct 18, 1956; Towns and Villages News Herald Vol #27, July 4, 1974.

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