

## **“SNOW DAY” HAS ME THINKING ABOUT MEETING HOUSES IN THE 1780s AT KENTUCKY’S LOW DUTCH STATIONS**

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It’s snowing. I’m home. I’ve got a briefcase stuffed with personnel reports and other unpleasant work to do. But it’s the adult equivalent to a kid’s “snow day” and I’m going to make the most of it by scribbling down a few thoughts as I sit comfortably in front of the library fireplace and our golden retriever Arnie snoozes nearby. When I later put this in an e-mail it will be what Carolyn Leonard would call a “blog”. That’s appropriate since Carolyn got me thinking about the subject. Carolyn’s first Dutch Cousins “Letters to the Editor” e-mail this year opened with her notes about the District Court adjourning in 1783 to the Dutch Meeting House. She questioned where that meeting house was seventeen years before Old Mud was built. Jim Cozine copied me on a note back to Carolyn saying he thought the Dutch Station south of Harrodsburg was the location, but maybe I was the best person to answer the question. So on a snowy day a month later I’ll give it my best shot!

First, what was a “meeting house”? It was, of course, a church. But for the Low Dutch, at least in the early years, it was far more than a meeting place for worship services. It was also the community center. It often also doubled as the community school. In fact, the first priority for every Low Dutch community always was building not a church, but a school house. Providing for the education of their numerous children was an important tenet of the Calvinist faiths. Thus the 1786 Agreement forming the Low Dutch Company says “we will endeavour to have our children Taught and instructed in the Low Dutch Tongue so that they may Read the word of God and understand the Gospel when Preached unto them...” The quote also points out another important facet of what our Kentucky Low Dutch ancestors were up to. They came to Kentucky as that same Agreement says, “...with an intent and Desine to inCourage and permote a Settlement of the Low Dutch Reformed Church Society...” or, as their 1783 petition to the Confederation Congress says, “with a view and expectation to procure a Tract of Land to enable them to settle together in a body for the

conveniency of civil society and propogating the Gospel in their known language..." A group with a design like this needed a meeting house!

I have come to believe both Low Dutch Stations in Kentucky in the early 1780s had their versions of primitive meeting houses. These certainly would not have been the commodious hewn timber framed meeting houses we think of when we picture the Old Mud Meeting House or the Six Mile Meeting House. They were undoubtedly log structures. They may not even have been fully hewn logs given how early they were built. Nor would they likely have been near as large as Kentucky's two famous log meeting houses which still exist—Cane Ridge (1791) and Old Mulkey (1804). Those two log meeting houses are extra large because their unique construction in the form of the Cross (with twelve corners for the Apostles) allowed for the lengths of three log sections. Yet these primitive meeting houses of the Low Dutch Stations apparently were among the larger more commodious buildings of 1783.

For a great description of how our pioneer Low Dutch ancestors built their primitive log meeting houses, read David Demaree Banta's MAKING A NEIGHBORHOOD. This extraordinarily incomparable little pamphlet history was delivered in 1887 at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shiloh, a rural Low Dutch community in Johnson County, Indiana. If you have never read this work, then you are in for a treat! Simply Google "banta making a neighborhood" to find it.

Both Low Dutch Stations are shown on John Filson's famous 1784 map of Kentucky. Both stations were on lands rented from famous early Kentucky figures. Let's first take the Low Dutch Station on Beargrass Creek. This station was built in the spring of 1780 by the Low Dutch families led by "Father" Henry Banta who took the Ohio River route to Kentucky. John Floyd rented land to the Low Dutch for this station. This was a common and practical way for a landholder to get his lands cleared and improved cheaply. John Floyd was a brave and brilliant young man. He was made the Jefferson County Lieutenant in early 1781; in other words, head of the county militia. George Rogers Clark had recommended to him to Governor Thomas Jefferson as "the most capable in the County. A Soldier, Gentleman, and a Scholar whom the Inhabitants, from his actions have the greatest confidence in." Unfortunately for Kentucky, John Floyd's life was cut short by the Indians in the spring of 1783.

John Floyd surely found his Low Dutch tenants very much to his liking. They too were educated and they were industrious, having come to Kentucky with a plan. They were no doubt good renters! The Low Dutch Station on Floyd's lands was located about eight miles east of the Falls of the Ohio. It is on the eastern edge of the present-day Louisville suburb of St. Matthews. The large rock spring of the station can still be located off and away from the walking trails in the southeast end of the J. Graham Brown Memorial Park. The spring is east of Beargrass Creek tucked away in the wooded area immediately north of and below Interstate 64 just west of its interchange with the Watterson Expressway. The experience is a bit surreal visiting the spring which has reverted back to its natural state, but hearing the interstate traffic in the distance above.

The bronze Kentucky Highway Marker for the Low Dutch Station (No. 1848) is at the extreme opposite end of the Memorial Park along Kresge Way. By coincidence, Carolyn Leonard's "Letters to the Editor" e-mailed today has a photo of the marker.

There were seven stations in the Beargrass area in 1780. Less than a mile down Beargrass from the Low Dutch Station was Hoglan's Station at the site of the present-day Big Spring Country Club. Hoglan's was sometimes called the Lower Dutch Station while the Low Dutch Station was the Upper Dutch Station, referring to their relative positions along Beargrass Creek. Present-day Dutchmans Lane borders the edge of the Big Spring Country Club.

So what makes me think there was a meeting house at the Beargrass Low Dutch Station? First, we know there was a school at the station as was natural for any Low Dutch community. The Draper Manuscripts include an interview with a lady who as a girl lived at the station and recalled a Mr. Demaree taught school at the Low Dutch Station after the Long Run Massacre in September 1781. Even more compelling are the numerous references to accommodations at the station found in the George Rogers Clark Papers.

After the Revolution, the state of Virginia was essentially bankrupt. It balked at paying the heavy bills for waging the war in West and disputed many of the bills by requiring detailed records and receipts. This is fertile ground for historians (especially one trained as a CPA!). A commission was sent to Kentucky to collect, audit and verify all the documentation for the costs of the Revolution in the West. Col.

William Fleming, one of the Western Commissioners, in his Journal says they passed “the lower dutch station or Hoglans” on January 8, 1783 on their way to the Falls. The Journal of the Western Commissioners says they found they could not conduct business at the Falls as the garrison was scarce of provisions and forage for horses. It was also scarce of “entertainment for Persons obliged to attend the Board...” For those and other reasons they adjourned to “some convenient place in the Neighborhood”. Fleming’s Journal says they could find no vacant house at Floyd’s Station, the main Beargrass Station, but by Col. Floyd’s influence they got a cabin in the Dutch Station where they met from mid-January, through February and into March 1783. The Journal of Western Commissioners and the receipts in the Clark Papers often refer to the Beargrass Low Dutch Station as Holland or New Holland or the New Holland Station.

The foregoing evidence of a meeting house at the Beargrass Low Dutch Station is somewhat circumstantial since it contains no smoking gun. The term “meeting house” itself is never used in the primary or secondary sources so far as I have been able to determine. But the station was clearly the important center for the Low Dutch community. It definitely had a school and it definitely had a large cabin available as accommodations for the Western Commissioners and their business.

The evidence for a meeting house at our other early Kentucky Low Dutch Station is much more substantial and direct. Before getting into that evidence, let’s review the origins and location of that station.

The original mass Low Dutch migration to Kentucky in the spring of 1780 was two pronged. Father Henry Banta took his large group down the Ohio. The other group was led by his brother-in-law, Samuel Duree, along the land route settlers took from the East. They came by way of the Wilderness Road through the Cumberland Gap to the White Oak Spring Station near Fort Boonesborough. They intended to build the Low Dutch colony on lands selected the year before by Samuel Duree during his preview visit to Kentucky. These lands were in present-day Madison County about eight or nine miles east of Richmond, Kentucky. Dutchmen who had come by both of the migration routes met in that area in the winter of 1781 and started to build what they called Banta’s Fort. But the effort was soon given up. The Indians were a serious problem as evidenced by the “Duree Massacre” in March and the “Dutch Defeat” in July 1781. Even more

disheartening, the quality of the land was poor and the title was shaky at best.

In the spring of 1781 many of the Low Dutch moved to the "Great Settlement Area" centered around Kentucky's first town at Harrodsburg. From here and from Beargrass they could conduct their search for land. About May 1781 they rented land for the second Low Dutch Station from none other than James Harrod, founder of Harrodsburg. Harrod had a full black beard and was a natural leader of men (or of ruffians as Col. Henderson of Boonesborough thought in 1775). Harrod was a man's man. He ultimately disappeared under suspicious circumstances in the early 1790s searching for the legendary Swift's silver mine.

In May of 1781 James Harrod lived at Harrods Station near the Boiling Springs about five and a half miles south of Harrodsburg in what is now Boyle County (Mercer County until 1842). Harrod rented land to Low Dutch just west of and very near his own station. Both the Low Dutch and Harrods Stations were located on James Harrod's 400 acre settlement tract. The stations were on either side of Harrods Run (present-day Mocks Branch) about a mile up the creek from where it crosses U.S. 127 just south of the Cove Spring at the Mercer-Boyle County line. This is a little less than a half mile north of Gentry Lane (Road 1915). Harrods Station was on the east side of Harrods Run and the Low Dutch Station was on the west side. Unfortunately, nothing remains today marking the precise location of these two once substantial stations. Even the Boiling Springs are now dried up.

The close proximity of the Low Dutch Station and Harrods Station leads to the interesting possibility that the Low Dutch here actually built their meeting house between the two stations. In any event, it was this meeting house at or near the Low Dutch Station on James Harrod's land that the Supreme Court for the District of Kentucky met in March 1783. The three Kentucky counties (Jefferson, Fayette and Lincoln) had been formed into the District of Kentucky. A new court of common law was created to handle the increasing criminal and chancery cases. The court was opened at Harrodsburg March 3, 1783. But, as the historian Humphrey Marshall tells us in his HISTORY OF KENTUCKY (1812): "At this time there was no convenient house in Harrodsburg, within which the court could hold its sessions, and it adjourned to the meeting-house, near the Dutch Station, six miles from Harrodsburgh."

Humphrey Marshall had arrived in Kentucky the year before and quite possibly was himself a spectator in that court. Certainly his history was a contemporary account of many events. He was even rumored to have been the ghost writer of Daniel Boone's "autobiographical" adventures in John Filson's 1784 book that made Boone a legend in his own time. We are very fortunate indeed that Humphrey Marshall recounted the adjournment to the Dutch Station because the first four pages of the Court's Order Book no longer exist. The Order Book begins with page 5 on March 4, 1783. On March 5<sup>th</sup> the Court adjourned to meet next at John Crow's Station in November. The information Marshall gives us about the Dutch Station meeting house was apparently contained on those missing front pages.

I think it is very likely that this same meeting house at or near the Low Dutch Station was also the location of the first Presbyterian sermon preached in Kentucky. The Rev. David Rice at age 50 made a trip to Kentucky early in 1783 hoping to acquire land, apparently for investment. During his visit, Presbyterian settlers who knew him from back in Virginia asked him to preach. Robert Davidson in his HISTORY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE STATE OF KENTUCKY (1847) fortunately includes the following footnote: "His first sermon was heard by Dr. Joshua A. Wilson, then a child, at Harrod's Station, and was from the text, 'The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death, light is sprung up.' Matt. iv. 16."

While Wilson may have recalled Harrod's Station, it seems doubtful another meeting house would have been there when one large enough for the court was at the nearby Low Dutch Station or even between the two stations. Furthermore, the Calvinist Low Dutch would have been most eager to hear preaching by an experienced minister of the Presbyterian Church, the English version of their own church. Many Low Dutch later belonged to Father Rice's Presbyterian congregations. He performed many Low Dutch marriages.

David Rice returned home with little intention of moving to Kentucky, but a paper with 300 signatures promising him support induced him to move his family to Kentucky in October 1783. He immediately became very active including chairing the Board of the Transylvania Seminary (ancestor of Lexington's Transylvania University) which held its first meeting at Crow's Station on November 10, 1783. After the business of organization, the Board adjourned "to

sit in the meeting-house at Dutch-Station Thursday next succeeding Lincoln court in December,” but they were unable to assemble a quorum until March 4, 1784 (FILSON CLUB HISTORY QUARTERLY, April 1927). Obviously, Rev. David Rice was very familiar with the meeting house at or near the Low Dutch Station which is where I believe he preached the first Presbyterian sermon in Kentucky earlier in 1783.

The influence of Rev. David Rice was soon felt in the meeting house world. He gathered three large Presbyterian congregations in the area. A meeting house was built in Danville and at Cane Run in 1784 and at Providence in the Spring of 1785. The Low Dutch monopoly on pioneer Kentucky meeting houses was over.

Cane Run was three miles east of Harrodsburg. The congregation eventually moved to and became the Harrodsburg Presbyterian Church, but in the mid-1780s Harrodsburg “contained few who cared for religious matters.” Rev. David Rice’s first sermon was right on point. The Low Dutch and other religious people on the Kentucky frontier were indeed a “people which sat in darkness”! The Grand Jury empanelled by the Court that met that same Spring of 1783 at the Low Dutch Station presented nine persons for selling spirituous liquors without a license and eight for adultery and fornication. None of the accused were Low Dutch.

The frontier was a magnet for the disaffected and lawless. Our Low Dutch historian/president, Theodore Roosevelt, describes the type brilliantly in THE WINNING OF THE WEST. Our own historian D.D. Banta gave his usual colorfully description of the “considerable minority composed of that class which is ever found sulking in the gloom of the frontier” (from his 1874 history of the Franklin, Indiana, Presbyterian Church which unfortunately is not on the internet). Our Low Dutch pioneers were always on the crest of that wave of migration moving across the frontier. It was a hard physical life made dangerous not just by the Indians, but also by the lawless class they were inevitably thrown together with. But they almost totally stayed above it all. Their communities were paragons of order.

I certainly do not mean to paint the Low Dutch as saints. In fact one of those first Supreme Court indictments was of James Harrod for selling spirituous liquors without a license *at the Dutch Station*. No doubt he found the frugal Low Dutch to be good customers! We know

they were certainly not opposed to a social drink. They were no puritans! In fact, their New Amsterdam ancestors had made fun of their Puritan Massachusetts neighbors. But they did keep order and drunkenness was generally not tolerated. They were an educated and religious people, but also a happy people. There was real joy in their communities fueled by their hard work and large families. They were not saints, but they were good people!

We can be even more proud that they were good people despite being left in the wilderness by their Church. Many joined Rev. David Rice's early Presbyterian congregations and eventually the colony pretty much all went over to the English version of their Calvinist Church. But for many years they held out, petitioning and hoping their beloved Dutch Reformed Church would supply them and help them make their dream of a Low Dutch Reformed Church Society on the Kentucky frontier become a reality.

What did they do for worship in these meeting houses without a pastor? While they waited they carried on the time-honored traditional worship pattern they had always used on the frontier. The community elders conducted the services. There was reading from the Scriptures and reading a sermon along with singing of Psalms. The service pattern is described by Rev. David D. Demarest in his 1880 pamphlet history *THE HUGUENOTS ON THE HACKENSACK*. On the New Jersey frontier in the 1680s, David DeMarets conducted worship "like a patriarch of old, priest in his own household" much as Father Henry Banta must have done a hundred years later in the meeting houses at both of Kentucky's Low Dutch Stations. That very same pattern was used 50 years later on the Indiana frontier as described by D.D. Banta in *MAKING A NEIGHBORHOOD*.

Even when our pioneer ancestors obtained the services of a minister, it was usually for only one or two Sundays a month. Ministers served two, three or even four congregations on alternating weeks. This made the role of elders extremely important. They conducted the services on those Sabbaths the minister was absent. The Calvinist insistence on an educated laity helped in this regard. The role of the elders included teaching the Catechism to the children. No wonder the Low Dutch built school houses first. These were not hollow words when their 1783 Petition to the Confederation Congress talks about them "having principally in view the Glory of God, the promotion of Civil and

religious society, educating and instructing their rising generation in the principals of religion and morality...”

This little sketch of the meeting houses in the early 1780s at the Low Dutch Stations was hastily put together. Isn't that what blogs are? I have, however, been thinking about these early meeting houses for several years in contemplation of writing a more complete history of the Kentucky Low Dutch than what I put together 30 years ago. This has been a good start, but if I do not end it soon it will be midnight.

Vince Akers

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