

# THE FINEST PIONEERS THE LOW DUTCH IN KENTUCKY ILLUSTRATED BY EIGHT DOCUMENTS

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For the Dutch Cousins Reunion, Harrodsburg, Kentucky

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Cousins, we are descended from the most unusual collection of pioneers that ever made the dangerous 18<sup>th</sup> century trek west to Kentucky! Tonight I'm going to show you copies of eight historic documents that will prove the point while telling us who our Low Dutch ancestors were and why they came to Kentucky.

Obviously, most of Kentucky's pioneers came to improve their lot in life. But our Low Dutch came here not just to create *material* wealth, but also to create *spiritual* wealth for their families and descendants. It was all part of a plan!

## **CONEWAGO BAPTISM RECORDS**

The first document isn't even a Kentucky document. It is the baptism record book of the Dutch Reformed Church of the Conewago colony near present-day Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. I show it for two reasons... first, because Conewago and its off-shoot colony in Berkeley County, Virginia, were the *bridge* to Kentucky and second because the original baptism records just recently resurfaced.

Let's take that first reason... Conewago was *truly the bridge to Kentucky*. It was founded in the 1760s—100 years after the English took over New Amsterdam and renamed it New York, pretty much ending the Dutch migration to New Netherlands. Our Dutch ancestors resisted assimilation into English society. They fanned out into New Jersey as soon as the English took over New York. They then founded communities across the frontier for the next 150 years always trying to stay a step ahead of, or at least separate from their more numerous English

neighbors. Few groups in American history maintained their cultural identity for so long or in the face of such hardships as our people endured!

Conewago and its Virginia satellite were near the eastern frontier, but that hardly kept away the English—and Germans—who swarmed in, around and among them. Our people carefully used the term “*Low Dutch*” to identify themselves as coming from the *low lands* of Holland and France and to distinguish themselves from the more numerous Germans or *High Dutch*. On the frontier, anyone who spoke broken English was called “Dutch”, usually referring—often in a derogatory way as uncouth—to Germans. Our Low Dutch were comparatively quite well educated and did not like being confused with the Germans.

Men from Conewago and Berkeley were drawn into Revolutionary War service on the western frontiers where they heard the wild stories told about rich Kentucky lands. This triggered an idea that grew like a fever—“Kentucky fever”—and circulated among our Low Dutch until it became their master plan. The plan was to make a wholesale move to the Kentucky frontier and acquire thousands of acres of cheap fertile land—enough for generations of large families and enough to keep them off to themselves to preserve their Dutch language, religion and identity.

So Conewago was the actual bridge from New Jersey to Kentucky and these baptism records are the historians’ bridge linking our Kentucky families back to Conewago, New Jersey and New Netherlands! The information in these 35 pages is absolutely priceless! We can decipher from them who headed west and when. Baptism was one of the few Catholic sacraments retained by the Calvinists. And our Low Dutch ancestors were educated people, adhering to the Calvinist doctrine that they should read and know the word of God themselves rather than rely on priests to tell them. Documenting baptisms was important to them and thus, thankfully, they left us written records like these! It was locating this “bundle of tattered and age stained leaves” that inspired Rev. John K. Demarest to write his 1884 history of the Conewago colony.

This brings me to the second reason for showing them to you... the original records only recently resurfaced. The records had kind of “gone missing” for more than 100 years! Rev. Demarest wrote in his 1884 history that they would be placed in the archives in of the Historical Society at Harrisburg. Thankfully, at least two transcriptions were made in the 1880s, the originals were lost track of. Indeed, there is no State Historical Society in Harrisburg. But in 2007, Judy Cassidy, the persistent history detective many of you no doubt know, tracked the

records down at the State Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia! In 2009 and 2010 Judy had three articles appear in *The New Netherlands Connection* about these records.

### **CLAY vs BANTA MAP**

The second document gets us to Kentucky. It is the map from the gigantic land suit in Madison County, Kentucky, styled *Green Clay vs Henry Banta*. Madison County historian William Chenault said, “The amount of surveying ... done in this case ... was probably the largest ever done ... in any single suit in the county.” And I dare say the case may also have a record for the number of depositions taken.

Green Clay went to extraordinary lengths to break the title of Henry Banta for lands on which our Low Dutch ancestors had hoped to build their colony. Green Clay was a general in the War of 1812. He was a cousin of Henry Clay and father of Cassius Marcellus Clay, the abolitionist “Lion of White Hall” for whom the boxer Mohammed Ali was originally named.

After many years of litigation, Clay won the suit. *Clay vs Banta* was tough luck for Henry Banta, but it is the absolute *mother load* for us Low Dutch historians! It is from the testimony in this suit that we positively know what our Low Dutch ancestors were up to in their earliest attempts to plant their colony in Kentucky.

This 1810 survey plat is representative of the entire case file. It is huge! This 1810 survey starts at Boonesborough at the top, shows the entire length of Muddy Creek and, important for us, shows the locations of all of the sites important to the Low Dutch venture in the area.

More important than the survey plat—but not as dramatic to show—are the hundreds of pages of depositions which detail what our Low Dutch ancestors tried to accomplish in Madison County. Among the depositions are those of Low Dutchmen Daniel, Henry, John and Peter Banta; Cornelius Bogart; Albert Duree; Simon Vanosdall; and Albert and John Voris.

The *Clay vs Banta* depositions detail how our ancestors sent fifty-six year old Samuel Duree on a scouting mission to check out the Kentucky wilderness in the spring of 1779.

The depositions tell how Duree returned to the old settlements in the fall of 1779 and how the first migration—the mass migration—of Low Dutch settlers was made the next spring, some coming over the Wilderness Road

to Nathaniel Hart's White Oak Spring Station near Boonesborough and the larger group coming down the Ohio River to the Falls at Louisville.

The depositions also tell the sad story of how the plans to settle on Muddy Creek in present-day Madison County went down in defeat. The Low Dutchmen actually built a fort in the spring of 1781 on Muddy Creek called Banta's Fort, but before it could be settled the Duree family was massacred at their cabin and other Low Dutch were killed by Indians in the area. Then a group of Low Dutchmen with Captain James Estill were defeated trying to return to the fort in an incident known as the "Dutch Defeat." Those Indian troubles, together with dissatisfaction with the land quality and questionable land title, spelled the end of the Low Dutch attempts to plant their colony in what is now Madison County.

### **FILSON'S MAP OF KENTUCKY**

Which brings us to the third document. Our Low Dutch ancestors were literally *all over the map* of frontier Kentucky! And John Filson's famous 1784 map of Kentucky proves it!

John Filson, was Kentucky's first historian and a founder of Cincinnati where he was killed by Indians in 1788. His book, *The Discovery, Settlement And Present State of Kentucke*, was published in Wilmington, Delaware in 1784. Not really a history, the book was kind of a Chamber of Commerce brochure for the Kentucky frontier. "The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boone" in the appendix made Boone *a legend in his own time*. The book was immensely popular with would-be immigrants. It was reprinted in London and translations were even published in 1785 in French and German. And a big part of the attraction was this map which Filson had printed in Philadelphia in 1784 for sale with the book.

John Filson's 1784 map of Kentucky shows us that ten years after the founding of Kentucky's first permanent settlement here at Harrodsburg, there were now just over fifty towns, stations or forts. Amazingly, two of these—4% of Kentucky's settlements—are Low Dutch Stations!

First, let's look at the Low Dutch Station along Beargrass Creek, east of Louisville. Our Conewago ancestors who came down the Ohio were part of a tidal wave of 300 large family boats filled with settlers who arrived at the Falls of Ohio in the spring of 1780. Those settlers swarmed into the lands east of Louisville on Beargrass Creek in present-day Jefferson County. John Floyd built his station here in November 1779. Floyd's Station became the principal station of the area in the spring of 1780 as six more new stations were built on Beargrass. One of those—aptly named

the Low Dutch Station—was built by our newly arrived Conewago ancestors. It was also called the Holland or New Holland Station, or simply New Holland. It was located at a large spring that can still be found today tucked away in the southwest corner of J. Graham Brown Memorial Park. Present-day Dutchmans Lane to the south takes its name from the Low Dutch settlement of the area.

The Low Dutch Station was built on land rented from Col. John Floyd. This was good for the landowner as an easy way of getting large tracts cleared. Small or free rents attracted settlers, but the real attraction was mutual protection the stations afforded against the Indian menace. Stations were a temporary stop for most settlers, to be abandoned when the Indian threat passed.

While some stations were little more than fortified cabins, we know the Low Dutch Station on Beargrass was much more. It was a substantial stockaded fortification with a front gate and smaller back gate. The Western Commissioners appointed to settle General Clark's military accounts met here in early 1783 after failing to find suitable accommodation at the Falls or other Beargrass stations. We also know, as was their custom wherever they went, that our Low Dutch ancestors kept a school at their station.

The lands rented from John Floyd around the Low Dutch Station on Beargrass were not sufficient for the entire Low Dutch Company. Of course, as know from *Clay v. Banta*, they had originally planned to *all* move to the lands located by Samuel Duree near Boonesborough. But that venture failed early in 1781 and by late spring 1781 another rental arrangement was worked out with another famous name of early Kentucky history—none other than Col. James Harrod, founder of Harrodsburg, where we meet tonight. That leads us to the other Low Dutch Station shown on Filson's famous 1784 map.

The lands rented from Harrod were in the relatively safer interior. During 1781 many Low Dutch families removed to near James Harrod's Station at the Boiling Springs where they built the second Low Dutch Station. Filson shows it smack dab in the center of all the cross-roads in the "Great Settlement Area." This station was located near the present-day Mercer-Boyle County line between Harrodsburg and Danville a little north of present-day Gentry Lane on the west side of Mocks Branch.

The Low Dutch intended to settle here only temporarily, until they could locate and settle their own tract. But this "temporary" Low Dutch settlement was very substantial. They even built one of the earliest, *if not*

*the* earliest, meetinghouses in Kentucky even though they had yet to procure their own Dutch Reformed minister. But they were apparently open to other Calvinists and thus the first Presbyterian minister in Kentucky—Father David Rice—preached his first sermon in Kentucky in 1783 at the Dutch Meetinghouse between the Low Dutch and Harrods Stations. The sermon was taken from Matthew 4:16, “**The People which sat in darkness saw great light...**” The Low Dutch certainly needed the “great light” for not only were they adrift without a minister from their mother church, but also adrift among *infidels*. We can see this from the first Court of the District of Kentucky which met at the same Dutch meetinghouse in the same year 1783. During that court the grand jury presented nine persons for selling spirituous liquors without a license and eight for *adultery and fornication*. The Low Dutch landlord, James Harrod, was one of those indicted, for selling liquor... **at the Dutch Station!**

Besides home to drunken infidels, stations were dirty, cramped and dangerous. The lands were owned by others, so clearing ground and making improvements would be to someone else’s benefit. What was keeping our hearty Low Dutch farmers from finding their own Kentucky lands? That leads us to the fourth document.

### **THE 1782 PETITION TO CONGRESS**

The Low Dutch colony had discovered that their master plan—a tract of thousands of acres of cheap fertile land—was no easy order to fill. The Indian menace that kept them confined in stations for safety was part of the problem. But the principal difficulty lay with the convoluted land laws of Virginia. Those laws promoted speculation and confusion to such an extent that a large tract of good unclaimed land was simply not available. So our ancestors, not at all shy about their worthy venture, went to Congress for help! In 1782 the Low Dutch sent a petition to the *Continental* Congress. That petition explicitly reveals their master plan and eloquently describes their distressed situation:

The petition is addressed...

To the Honourable President and Delagates of the Free United States of America in Congress Assembled.

It opens with an introduction by Rev. J.M. Van Harlingen, a Dutch Reformed minister in New Jersey familiar with the petitioners—in fact, he had performed baptisms in 1769 at Conewago...

Gentlemen... a Memorial and Petition of a number of Inhabitants of Kentuckey Settlement of the Low Dutch Reformed Church persuasion in behalf of themselves and other intended Settlers was brought to me by one of those petitioners desiring me to give a Testimonial of their character to the Honourable Congress because I was personally acquainted with them, some have lived amongst us and belonged to my Congregations. They were a plain, honest, peaceable, sober & industrious people—remarkable for agriculture—and by current reports we have of them, they are all hearty friends to our Glorious Revolution and the Honourable Congress

Cutting past the lead-in, listen to our ancestors' own words...

Humbly Sheweth... That in the Spring of the Year 1780, they moved to Kentuckey with their families and effects 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.

When they arrived there, to their sorrow and disappointment, they were, through the dangerousness of the times, by a cruel savage enemy, obliged to settle in Stations or Forts in such places where there was the most appearance of safety. Notwithstanding all their precaution, numbers of them suffered greatly in their property—several killed and others captivated by the Enemy.

Living in such distressed confined way, always in danger, frequently on military duty, it was impossible for them to more than barely support their families with the necessaries of life, by which means they are much reduced, and what adds more to their disappointment and affliction is, that contrary to their expectations, most or all the tillable land has been Located and monopolised by persons that had the advantage of your Memorialists by being acquainted with the country, and your Memorialists being strangers and confined and so reduced are rendered unable to purchase Land at the advanced price... especially in a body conveniently together agreeable to their wishes.

Whereas Providence has been pleased to prosper and support the virtuous resistance of the United States in the glorious cause of Liberty, which has enabled them to obtain an Honourable Peace whereby they have obtained a large extent of unappropriated Territory... Your Petitioners therefore humbly pray... the Honourable Congress would indulge them with a grant of a tract or territory of land

in Kentucky settlement if the Virginia claim thereto should be made void, or otherwise on the northwest side of the Ohio river... to enable them to settle in a body together, on such reasonable terms as Congress in their wisdom and prudence shall see just and reasonable... to enable them to put their intended plan and purpose in execution... they 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: hoping the Honorable Congress will give all due encouragement to such a laudable undertaking.

This is undoubtedly ***the*** key historical document preserving the story of our Low Dutch ancestors! How could their plan be any more clear than their own words to the Continental Congress?

The petition was signed by 151 heads of families, including widows whose husbands had fallen victim to the Indians. The signers are divided between the 46 inhabitants of Kentucky and 105 “intend friends” who intended to join the inhabitants should the lands be acquired, but who were still living in the East.

Many years ago I obtained a photographic quality copy of the petition from the National Archives. On display here tonight are blow-ups of pages where you can hunt for your ancestors’ signatures.

So who discovered this precious document—our ancestors’ description of their mission and plea for help? The first reference I have seen to it was from a young historian who had rummaged through the Department of State records looking for documentation of how our great American West was won. In 1889 that 31-year old historian published his first two of four volumes titled *The Winning of the West*. He describes the Low Dutch petition and footnotes it with an exact reference to its location. That historian was himself of Dutch descent and he was destined to become president of the United States! He was, of course, Theodore Roosevelt. I highly recommend *The Winning of the West* if you have never read it.

It probably will not surprise you to hear Congress took no action—some things never change! Congress tabled the petition and our ancestors continued their search for a tract without government assistance.

### **THE 1786 AGREEMENT**

This leads us to the fifth historic document I want to show you tonight. Low Dutch now turned to yet another famous name of early Kentucky to



fulfill their dream—Squire Boone, Daniel Boone's younger brother. In 1780 Squire Boone had built his Painted Stone Station a few miles north of present-day Shelbyville. Some of the Beargrass Low Dutch had moved to Painted Stone and were at the Long Run Massacre and Floyd's Defeat in September 1781 when Painted Stone was temporarily abandoned. Squire Boone's family moved in at the Low Dutch Station on Beargrass after the Long Run Massacre.

Squire Boone had an entry for 12,000 acres six miles northeast of his Painted Stone Station along the great buffalo road from Drennon's Lick. It seemed perfect for the Low Dutch colony! The Low Dutch agreed to buy this tract from Boone around 1783 or 84—shortly after Congress rejected their plea.

It took a couple years to sort out conflicting overlapping claims, before the actual survey for Boone's portion of the Low Dutch Tract was finally run in February 1786. It held out at 5,610 acres. To Boone's 5,600 acres they added another 3,000 acres of adjoining claims, thus making their Low Dutch Tract 8,600 acres in total—about 3,500 acres in present-day Shelby County and 5,100 acres in present-day Henry County.

On March 13, 1786, Squire Boone assigned his survey to Abraham Banta, as agent for the Low Dutch Company. The price was 935 pounds sterling—250 pounds down and the remainder due in seven annual installments of 97 pounds 17 shillings, due each June 1st beginning 1786 payable "... in produce such as hemp, tobacco, flour pork & bacon to be delivered at the Falls of the Ohio at Market price..."

The next day, March 14, 1786, the Low Dutch community met at their station in Mercer County to witness the signing of this document... the "Article of Agreement" formally organizing the Low Dutch Company. The agreement served as a sort of constitution setting forth some basic rules to be followed in the settlement of the Low Dutch Tract.

The Agreement lay folded up and forgotten for 150 years—filed away in an old Shelby County Circuit Court case. In 1974 I went through all the dusty grimy old case files in the clerk's office looking for Low Dutch history. With this Agreement I hit the jackpot! The document is over 3-1/2 feet long, measuring 13 by 43 inches, on four pieces of heavy parchment sewn together. Like most of Kentucky's old courthouse records, it is now at the State Archives in Frankfort.

The Agreement spells out once again our ancestors' dream for a Low Dutch colony. To quote a brief section...

Whereas... Abraham Banta has purchased a certain tract or quantity of land of Squire Boone of the County of Jefferson in the State of Virginia, lying on the dividing ridge between the waters of Six Mile Creek and Clear Creek...

with an intent and design to encourage and promote a settlement of the Low Dutch Reformed Church Society...

now it is covenanted and agreed...

That we will subscribe to and support the Low Dutch Reformed Church Society by giving a call and invitation to a regular instituted Low Dutch minister to associate in said Church...

and that we will endeavor 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...

[and] that we will each of us, in proportion to the quantity of land we hold, pay towards purchasing 200 acres of land for a parsonage or plantation for the minister to be called or invited...

Taken with the 1782 petition to the Continental Congress, the master plan, which had been the unifying force for our Low Dutch ancestors since leaving Conewago is dramatically described. In short, their intention was to perpetuate on the Kentucky frontier the Low Dutch culture whose American roots already dated back 150 years to New Amsterdam!

So at last our ancestors had their large tract of land! This was six long years after they had made the dangerous trek to the Kentucky wilderness. Their dream had turned mostly into nightmares those first six years with Indian massacres; filthy, crowded station life; and that frustrating search for land. Did their dream of a Low Dutch Reformed Church Society come true now that they had their land? Or did the nightmare continue? Well... let's say it was not sweet dreams!

Our ancestors organized immediately in the spring of 1786 to take possession of their Low Dutch Tract and make their dream a reality. Unfortunately, spring 1786 was the worse of times to attempt the new settlement. It was a period of severe Indian depredations all over Kentucky, but especially so in the immediate vicinity of the Low Dutch Tract. They were driven back from that and repeated attempts over the next few years to settle their Tract. Physical possession and settlement of the Low Dutch Tract did not come until after General "Mad" Anthony Wayne's victory over the Indians in 1794 at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. By that time, the dream of a unified Dutch colony had come unraveled.

Our sixth document—actually, documents—show what happened to the physical part of the dream.

### **THE LOW DUTCH COMPANY RECORDS**

I have here copies of the Low Dutch Company record books dating from 1786. These books were preserved by the descendants of Col. George Bergen, the last trustee of the Low Dutch Company. They were in the hands of his grandson Albert Bergen around 1900. Using that lead, I tracked them down in 1973 in the hands of Albert Bergen's granddaughter, Jayne Bergen—Mrs. Frederick Beers—of West Palm Beach, Florida.

These books document what became of our ancestors' dream of coming to Kentucky to locate "a tract of land to enable them to settle together in a body for the conveniency of civil society."

Unfortunately, inability to take possession of the Low Dutch Tract between 1786 and 1794 doomed the physical part of their master plan. Our ancestors became impatient. They were farmers. They wanted to work their own lands, not rented lands. Nevertheless, they waited patiently until 1789. Before 1789, not a single individual farm had been purchased in the relatively safe and comfortable Mercer County area even though the Dutch had lived in this area since 1781. Significantly, however, the first private farm was purchased by none other than the Low Dutch Company agent, Abraham Banta. After Banta bought the first farm in 1789, it was a virtual Low Dutch "land rush" as individual families began buying their own farms here in Mercer County.

As a consequence, the Kentucky Low Dutch would forever be split. Split almost equally for many years between the families who eventually did settle on or near the Low Dutch Tract in Henry/Shelby Counties and the families who remained behind here in Mercer County.

Although split, they remained closely connected. Their 8,600 acre Low Dutch Tract was held in common as a company for a full generation. It was divided into 200 acre "lots" or "plantations" which changed hands without deeds, but rather only upon approval of the Low Dutch Company which kept records of ownership in its leather-bound parchment "Book of Accounts" which summarizes the financial dealings related to each lot in the Low Dutch Tract. Regular company meetings were held to govern the "Dutch Manor" as they referred to their tract. The 145-page "Minute Book" records 79 meetings between 1790 and 1831. The first meetings

were held in Mercer County and even after settlement of the Tract, decisions were deferred until the Mercer County members could vote.

But with the physical split, the dream of settling together in a single large Low Dutch colony was never realized. But even split, what of became of the spiritual element of the dream? That leads us to our final two historical documents.

### **THE 1800 MUD MEETINGHOUSE AGREEMENT**

Our Low Dutch ancestors held tenaciously to the dream of a “Low Dutch Reformed Church Society” where their children would be “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”. In the 1790s they sent eloquent yet pathetic pleas back East for their mother church to send them a missionary, preferably one who could speak Dutch. Ironically, preaching in the Dutch language had already mostly died away in the East. There seemed to be little interest out East in helping our Low Dutch ancestors to keep the language alive in the Kentucky wilderness.

But somehow Church leaders in the East prevailed upon 22-year old Peter Labagh to accept the call for a missionary to Kentucky. In late 1796 he set out alone on horseback for Pittsburg where he was detained until able to proceed down the Ohio River to Kentucky. He reached his destination in February 1797 and stayed less than three months during which he organized the first Dutch Reformed congregation west of the Alleghenies with the Low Dutch families here in Mercer County. Some necessity induced him to quickly return to New Jersey to settle his personal affairs. He was so confident in his expectation to return, that he left his books and other articles of property behind in Kentucky. Among the items he left behind here were two pewter cups his congregation used as their original communion cups. Like baptism, communion was one of the few Catholic sacraments the Calvinists retained. One of Peter Labagh’s communion cups has survived and is now in the Harrodsburg Historical Society’s museum.

For some unexplained reason, young Peter Labagh never returned, but back here in Kentucky the congregation he formed in 1797 somehow pulled together the resources to build the Old Mud Meeting House in 1800. This leads us to the seventh document, the “Articles of the Low Dutch Reformed Church of the State of Kentucky the County of Mercer Near Salt River” signed “at the House of Peter Carnine on Salt River May 12, 1800”. The document opens as follows... “we the Inhabitants of the above said Church Have Taken into Consideration as a

Christian People our Lamentable Situation in Regard of Being Destitute of Gospel service Likewise of a House of worship. Having agreed to Raise By way of Subscription as Much Money as to Build a house of worship... fit for Divine Service... for any Lawfull Minister... Called... to Preach the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ... by our Consistory... the above s<sup>d</sup> House is To Be Built 45 feet By 50 feet Square... on a 3 acre Lot of Land Purchased from David Adams for that Purpose Lying on Dry Run...”

Professor Scomp missed this important document in his careful research for his 1900 centennial history. A copy was recorded in Mercer County Deed Book 5 in 1804, but the original document has also survived. We have tonight a blow-up of the document which is now at the State Archives in Frankfort among the Mercer County Circuit Court files for the 1822 case of *Peter Carnine vs. James Westerfield*. Some of you may recall that was the case in which the remnants of the old Dutch Reformed congregation sued James Westerfield for trespass for having kicked in the door of Old Mud so the Haydonites could hold services in the building. They eventually worked out a compromise in which they used the meeting-house on alternating Sundays. The original May 1800 agreement was entered as evidence in that suit and thus has been preserved more than two centuries for us to see!

So our ancestors formed the first official Dutch Reformed congregation and built the first Dutch Reformed Church west of the Alleghenies! It would seem their dream of a “Low Dutch Reformed Church Society” had indeed come true. But unfortunately that spiritual part of the dream—much like the physical part of the dream to settle together on a large tract of land—did not quite come true as they had hoped it would. Peter Labagh never returned and the mother church in the East sent no one else. The one and only Dutch Reformed pastor to serve the Old Mud congregation was Thomas Kyle, but he apparently had no formal Dutch Reformed training and he eventually quit and joined the Methodists! Our ancestors had gone too far west. They were abandoned by their beloved Dutch Reformed Church. So what became of our people spiritually—a people so determined to instruct their rising generation in the word of God?

### **THE SIX MILE SESSION BOOK**

We can see what became of them with the final document I want to share with you tonight. This is the Session Book of the Six Mile Presbyterian Church located in the heart of the Low Dutch Tract in Shelby-

Henry Counties. Our ancestors there invited the Rev. Archibald Cameron to organize a Presbyterian Church in 1800—the same year their brethren in Mercer County built Old Mud, still clinging to the dream of a Low Dutch Reformed Church Society. The Session Book was also preserved by the Bergen family. It had last been handed down to Anna Bergen—Mrs. Wilson Ricketts—of New Castle, Kentucky. When I contacted her in 1973 she had just recently donated the book to the Presbyterian Historical Society in Montreat, NC, who kindly made a copy for me.

Our ancestors in the Low Dutch Tract turned to the Presbyterian Church of their Scotch-Irish neighbors. Except for the language, the Presbyterians followed the same Calvinistic beliefs and same church governance as the Dutch Reformed Church. As for the language, the Low Dutch had become quite accustomed to English during their Indian struggles and search for land. They always had an affinity for the Scotch-Irish Presbyterian preaching as we know from Father David Rice preaching the first Presbyterian sermon in Kentucky at the Low Dutch Meetinghouse here in Mercer County.

The Low Dutch longed for direction from a Calvinist minister and in the Low Dutch Tract the eccentric Scotsman, Archibald Cameron, who had studied theology under Father Rice, filled that void for 30 years. He was pastor when the Six Mile Meetinghouse was built in 1824. The Dutch Cousins visited that rebuilt meetinghouse outside of Pleasureville during their 2007 reunion.

So our ancestors in the Low Dutch Tract gave it up and joined the English version of their beloved church. Even here in Mercer County when Thomas Kyle ran off to the Methodists, the mother church out East advised them to find a Presbyterian pastor. And indeed, Old Mud shared Rev. Thomas Cleland many years with the New Providence Presbyterian Church.

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Ultimately the end of our ancestors' Kentucky venture came with the "mass exodus" into Indiana in the early nineteenth century. Cheap pre-surveyed government lands in Indiana attracted farmers like the Low Dutch wanting to escape Kentucky's land title mess. Low Dutch were among the earliest Indiana settlers.

About 1817 a large Low Dutch settlement was formed in present-day Switzerland County in the southeast corner of Indiana. By the early 1820's as rich lands opened up in the middle of Indiana—primarily in

Johnson County south of present-day Indianapolis—the migration from both the Low Dutch Tract and Mercer County was so large and rapid that it was actually called “the exodus” by the Low Dutch at the time.

So what can we conclude from all this? Did our Low Dutch ancestors fail or succeed in what they came to the Kentucky Wilderness to do? They came to find a tract of land to enable them to settle together in a body as a Low Dutch Reformed Church Society. They eventually found a large tract of land, but not soon enough to keep together in one body. And they formed the first Dutch Reformed Church in the West, but were unable to sustain it. They became geographically split and eventually joined the English-speaking Presbyterians. So the “dream” of a Low Dutch Reformed Church Society ended in Kentucky along with the “master plan” to settle together on a large tract of land.

Was this failure or success? I would argue this represents a kind of *truly American success story*. The Kentucky failures and the mass exodus to Indiana represented ultimate *assimilation* for the Low Dutch. In Kentucky and Indiana they entered into the mainstream of the population. They were finally fully absorbed into the *melting pot* of the new American nation. As educated, moral, hard working farmers they added a strength and durability to the amalgamated mass called “Americans”.

Yes, they gave up their “master plan” to live apart as a group in a single large colony. Instead they availed themselves of uncontested pre-surveyed government lands on which they joined their Scotch/Irish/English neighbors to build strong rural communities.

Yes, they gave up their Low Dutch tongue and adopted English. They also adopted the church of their neighbors. But instead of pleading for Dutch Reformed missionaries from the East, they soon were sending their own Presbyterian missionaries West into Iowa, Kansas and Missouri.

Rather than seeking to **escape** from general society—English society—they **joined** it, improved it and began to **lead** it. We have every reason to be very proud of the dreams our Low Dutch ancestors had for their Kentucky migration. And we also have every reason to be proud of what they actually accomplished in spreading their culture westward thereby strengthening the new American culture!