

Walks through History
Frenchman Mountain ME Church, South & Cemetery
(now known as Cato Historic Church & Cemetery, Inc.)
13915 Frenchman Mountain Road, Sherwood, Pulaski County
August 11, 2012
By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the Walks through History tour of the Frenchman Mountain Methodist Episcopal Church, South and Cemetery (better known as the Cato Methodist Church and Cemetery)! The Historic Preservation Program is one of seven agencies in the Department of Arkansas Heritage, and we work to register and preserve the state's historic and cultural resources.

I'd like to recognize and thank a few people for their help with the tour—

Bill Burgin, president of the board of trustees here at the church;

Suzanne Jackson, who serves as board secretary and is portraying Sarah Elizabeth Josie Beasley (1st wife of Ruben Beasley), and her husband Johnny Jackson, who will portray Ruben Beasley, a charter member of the church;

Roger & Ann Harrell, treasurer/assistant treasurer;

Bill Henderson, chairman of the cemetery committee;

Monty Bradburn with the NLR History Commission, who put together the wonderful display boards on Cato;

Terry Elliott, who will play some traditional church hymns;

Pulaski Co. Historical Society and Faulkner Co. Museum, tour co-sponsors;

And last but not least, the Pulaski Co. Historical Society and Cato Historic Church & Cemetery, Inc., for providing refreshments.

The church was built in 1880 and was altered to its current Craftsman-style appearance in 1944-45. The church and cemetery were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

Cato community

The Cato community is located right on the Faulkner-Pulaski county line. Technically, the business section of Cato was historically in Faulkner County, and the Cato Methodist Church, cemetery, and school were in Pulaski County. But before it was known as Cato, the area was called Frenchman Mountain (or Frenchman's Mountain). While the exact origin of this name is unclear, it likely refers to an early name for Clifton Mountain, just west of here. It is plausible that an early French trapper could have settled on or near Clifton Mountain in the late 18th or early 19th century. [White trappers settled at Cadron beginning ca. 1805, but the settlement had vanished by the 1850s. The Cadron settlement was located about 5 miles west of Conway where Cadron Creek flows into the Arkansas River.] Keep in mind that the Frenchman Mountain/Cato community predates Conway—Col. Asa Robinson, an engineer for the Iron Mountain Railroad, platted Conway Station in 1871, and in 1875, the town incorporated as Conway. Faulkner County wasn't created until 1873. There were at least a few families in Cato by 1819. It was a convenient overnight camping stop for travelers heading north from Little Rock.

Regardless, an influx of settlers from South Carolina came to Frenchman Mountain in the early 1870s as a result of the Homestead Act of 1862, which enabled adult individuals, including women and freed slaves, to homestead

federal land west of the Mississippi River. In order to qualify, you had to be the head of the household or at least 21 years old, live on the land, build a home, make improvements, and farm for five years. There was an application process and a small fee, but the rewards were great—the prospect of getting land at a cheap price (amount of acreage varied, but 160 acres was the standard). Early family names include: Beasley, Jagers, Harrell, Smith, Farris, Burgin, Henderson, Proctor, Dubose, Spann, Clements, Springer, McPherson, Hayes, Dennis, McDowel, Butler, Watson, Skinner, Brown, White, Castling, and Upton, among others. Former slaves came to Arkansas after the Civil War and settled here as well. The eastern end of Frenchman Mountain Road (what used to be Cato Road) and the area along Watson Road was historically an African-American community.

Silas Stewart operated a store at Frenchman Mountain, and in the early 1880s, he applied for a post office, but for some reason, the U.S. Post Office Department did not approve the use of Frenchman Mountain as the name (may have already had a post office by that name), so according to the Post Office Department's records, the next name suggested was "Doko," but that too was refused. Finally, they settled on the name "Cato" in honor of a pioneer family that came to the area in the 1830s. The Cato post office was established in 1884 (and was discontinued in 1954, with the mail being forwarded to Jacksonville at that time).

The Cato family, of which Bill Burgin's great-grandmother was a member, emigrated (with Cherokee Indians) to present-day Arkansas from North Carolina one year before the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. They are believed to have appeared at the French trading post at Cadron on the Arkansas River. About 1835, the James Cato family came to the present Cato area. The original Cato homestead was located on the west side of Mitchell Road just south of Bridge Creek. [If you take Cato Road back to Hwy. 89 and cross over 89, you are on Mitchell Road. The site would be on your left just before the small bridge.]

Cato residents engaged in subsistence farming and mainly grew cotton and corn. Other crops like wheat, sorghum, and peas were also planted. Wilson's orchard

consisted of 73 acres of grapevines and fruit-bearing trees. Most, if not all, families had their own vegetable gardens and a few livestock as well.

While Cato was largely a farming community, some residents had jobs working for the railroad shops in Argenta, which became North Little Rock.

Cato's first cotton gin, powered by a steam engine using water from two mill ponds, was built in 1901 by W. R. Spann. George Proctor and Henry Harrell later partnered with Spann to operate the gin. The steam engine also powered a sawmill and a gristmill in the same building. In the 1930s Ralph R. Harrell became the owner of the operation. The main building and a seed house are no longer extant, but they were located on the west side of Cato Road about ¼ mile north of its intersection with Frenchman Mountain Road (would be just north of the road that goes over the hill, now called Artesian Well Road). Once cotton was ginned and baled, the bales and/or seed was transported by wagon, and later by truck, to the markets in Little Rock or North Little Rock. The gristmill ground local farmers' wheat and corn between two mill stones for a small fee. The gin was powered by large electric motors after 1939 when the Rural Electric Administration (REA) extended power lines to Cato.

Cato probably hit its peak of business activity between 1910 and 1920. During that time period, there were at least 6 general mercantile/hardware stores, a grocery store, drug store, 4 doctors in town, a telephone switchboard, a wagon factory, and a blacksmith & casket shop run by W. A. Farris as well as the cotton gin/sawmill, gristmill, post office, a public well, the Cato school, Methodist church, and cemetery. The business center of Cato (or downtown Cato) was located on the east and west sides of Cato Road just north of Frenchman Mountain Road. Cato was marked off in lots and blocks but never incorporated as a town.

By the late 1930s, Cato residents were buzzing about the possibility of discovering oil in the area. Ralph Harrell, longtime Cato resident and the grandson of Cato's first postmaster, Silas Stewart, started the Cato Oil Company in the 1930s and

leased as much land as possible around Cato and drilled test wells. He hit a lot of natural gas, but he never struck oil. The property ownership map of the area was drawn up by the Cato Oil Company, and you can see a few derricks in Cato. [Ralph Harrell was born at Faulkner Gap in 1903 and died in 1999 at Conway. He operated the gin and mill at Cato as well as the oil business. He was a long-serving Sunday School Superintendent at Cato Methodist Church, and he also served in the Arkansas State House of Representatives.]

Cato Schools

In 1900 Cato was one of the few communities in the area that had a high school, or grades beyond the 6th grade level. In 1910 nine students attended the 7th grade at Cato, and most of them were the age of present-day senior high students. The school was housed in a 2-story building across the road from the Cato Methodist Church (near the site of the current red brick house), but in 1918, it was destroyed by a tornado. A new Colonial Revival-style building was constructed to replace the 2-story school, and it had 4 large rooms, front and back porches, and a bell tower. In the 1920s and 30s, Cato School went up to the 8th grade, and later the 7th and 8th grades were eliminated. At that point, there were two teachers—one taught grades 1-3 in one room, and the other taught grades 4-6 in another room. Students who remained in school beyond the 6th grade were bussed to Sylvan Hills Junior High, and those continuing on beyond 9th grade were bussed to North Little Rock High School (Sylvan Hills did not have a high school until the late 1960s). During the Depression, probably in 1933 or 34, the Pulaski County School District did not have enough money to pay teachers' salaries for the second semester, so the Kiwanis Club of Little Rock donated money to keep the school open. After that, a large sign was posted in the front porch gable and read, "Cato Kiwanis School."

In 1940 the families living west and south of the Cato School and Methodist Church were forced to give up their homes and land for the U.S. Army's expansion of the Camp Robinson Reservation training grounds. The displacement of these families left the Cato School with very few students, so it was forced to close.

Remaining students were bussed to Sylvan Hills and North Little Rock. More on Camp Robinson in a few minutes...

The Cato School building remained in use as a community center, where people gathered for various events, and they showed movies every Saturday night. In the 1960s, the school district sold the building at auction, and it was demolished and the lumber used to build a house on Batesville Pike north of Double-S Hill.

Cato Church

The Cato Methodist Church and cemetery are the only tangible reminders of the community that was once here. The congregation was organized in 1872 as the Frenchman Mountain Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The Annual Conference of 1872 assigned Rev. R. L. Kirkman (also listed as R. S.) as pastor of the Bartlett Mission in the Little Rock District of the Little Rock Conference. Rev. Kirkman served the following churches at that time: Warners Chapel, Belchers Chapel, Pine Grove, Palestine, New Prospect, New Church, Mt. Zion, Pleasant Grove, and Frenchman Mountain. Within the next three years, Mt. Carmel, Argenta, Bethel, and Concord were added to the circuit. The mission or circuit name was then changed to the Mineral Charge (for Mineral Township) in the White River Conference. These classifications changed over the years.

During the winter of 1872-73, a log building was constructed to house the church. C. R. McPherson brought the first log to the site using a team of oxen. A man named Burton contracted to build the log structure. In the spring of 1873, Rev. Kirkman preached the first sermon in the church. The Little Rock & Fort Smith Railroad donated 5 acres for the church and cemetery to the trustees (John J. Jagers, Noel Beasley, and William D. Springer) in a deed dated May 2, 1874. You see, in 1866 the State of Arkansas gave over 1 million acres of land to the Little Rock & Fort Smith Railroad Company for the construction of a rail line from LR to Ft. Smith. The railroad did not need that much land; it just allowed them to choose the best route in the area. The railroad ended up bypassing Cato and

going through Morgan and Palarm instead. So that explains how the railroad had ownership of this land and donated it for a church and cemetery.

The log church building was destroyed by fire and replaced in 1880 with a two-story, wood-frame building. A man named Wilkerson was the contractor for the 1880 building, and the majority of the work was done by his son, Clark Wilkerson, and Bud Easter. The church held services on the first floor of the building, and the upper story was used as a lodge hall by local fraternal organizations, including Frenchman Mountain Lodge #359 Free & Accepted Masons (combined with Big Rock Lodge in NLR after 1940), International Order of Odd Fellows Lodge #605, and the Woodmen of the World Cato Camp #310 (I also saw Cato Camp #340 on a grave marker).

In 1907 the church name officially changed from Frenchman Mountain ME Church, South, to Cato ME Church, South (I think...because the Uniting Conference did not take place until 1939).

By the mid-1940s, the church was starting to lean, and the upper story was no longer used as a lodge hall. So in 1944-45, the upper story of the church was removed. The attic and roof were reframed, and a steeple and two small front porticos were added. The church now has a Craftsman-style appearance with its exposed rafter tails, triangular brackets under the eaves on the rear gable end, and fieldstone foundation. Interestingly, the 1880 building originally had 6-over-6 windows, but they have been replaced with 3-over-2 windows (which are somewhat mismatched because the upper sash is more Craftsman—20s, 30s, 40s-in appearance, while the lower sash is more turn of the 20th century).

Even though the 1880 building was altered in the 1940s, it is still an excellent example of a vernacular one-room church. The 1880 cornerstone is still intact and features a Masonic square and compass symbol. The building retains its original front door configuration so that men & boys entered and sat on the left side of the sanctuary, while women & girls entered and sat on the right side of the sanctuary (or perhaps men entered on one side and women and children entered

on the other). The 1880 pulpit and pews are still in use. The pine pews were cut from virgin timber and were made with square nails (you start seeing wire nails in the late 1880s or early 1890s). The cast-iron stove dates from the 1940s when the building was remodeled. The stained glass window in the rear wall was installed in 1995 (was never one there historically).

Methodist History

The largest and most divisive split in the Methodist Church happened in 1844 over the issue of slavery (the Methodist Protestant Church had already split off). The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, supported slavery, while the Methodist Episcopal Church did not. The break would not be healed until the “Uniting Conference” of 1939, when THE Methodist Church was formed. The Cato congregation was aligned with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, until 1939. The United Methodist Church was created in 1968 when the Methodist Church joined with the Evangelical United Brethren Church in Dallas, Texas. Therefore, the name was changed to Cato United Methodist Church.

Cemetery

The earliest marked grave in the cemetery belongs to Mrs. Watt Caples, who died in 1872 (or 1873?). The cemetery contains many burials from the late 19th and early 20th centuries and interesting examples of funerary art and iconography. And the cemetery is still in use today. We’ll talk more about the cemetery in a few minutes...

Camp Robinson

In between World War I and World War II, Camp Pike was used by the State of Arkansas as the headquarters for the Arkansas National Guard, and it also housed a CCC unit and was the site of the yearly Citizen’s Military Training Camp. In 1937 the post was renamed Camp Joseph Taylor Robinson in honor of the late U.S. Senator, Joe T. Robinson, from Arkansas. In early 1940 the U.S. Army reclaimed

control of Camp Robinson for use as a training post before the U.S. officially entered World War II.

Also in 1940, the U.S. Army began the expansion of the Camp Robinson Reservation's training grounds. The post needed additional acreage to the north for artillery ranges. So the Army put up eviction notices on homes, and residents of the areas south, west, and northwest of the church had to vacate their property by February 1, 1941. As you can imagine, there was much local opposition to the military's actions.

An article from the December 17, 1940, issue of the *Arkansas Democrat* painted a clear picture. It was titled, "Loyalty to Country vs. Love of Home: Creation of Camp 'No Man's Land' Means Mass Exodus." The following quotes are from the article.

"There are many around Cato who already have intimated that when the deadline approaches for them to move, they won't, but will just sit tight—even until the time when the shells start falling."

Regarding Ralph Harrell's oil company... "Its equipment had rusted in abandonment until this week. Monday, however, Mr. Harrell was working feverishly. Oil, he says, is only 200 feet deeper...Maybe if there were oil in the area, the government wouldn't want it [our land]."

"General impression in Little Rock has been that the area wanted for the range is nothing but a mass of gulleys and abandoned no man's land. Some of it is. Yet, a tour by this reporter yesterday revealed that there are numerous farms and homes, large and small, both old and new, directly in the area to be evacuated. Then there are about 1,200 persons, eight schools, and eight churches and cemeteries, which will be affected either directly or indirectly."

From Cato resident, Mrs. G. W. Harper, "We believe in National Defense. We want to bear our share, but this seems to be National Defense versus self-defense."

In the end, the U.S. Army won out, displacing many families and cutting off the community's most direct route to North Little Rock, the Mt. Vernon Road, which ran from Levy in North Little Rock north through Camp Robinson to Cato, Faulkner Gap, Otto, and Vilonia to Mt. Vernon in Faulkner County.

Play newsreel from late 1940-early 1941

As transportation methods improved, people shopped in NLR or LR, hurting local merchants. The Great Depression hurt everyone in the area. But the final blow was the expansion of Camp Robinson in 1940-41. It virtually killed Cato.

Church upkeep & restoration

Although the population of Cato dwindled, the Cato Methodist Church continued to hold regular worship services until 1962, when the church was declared inactive. Most remaining members moved their memberships to nearby Bethel United Methodist Church.

Since that time, the church has had a board of trustees and a cemetery committee, who work to maintain the building, grounds, and cemetery. They administer a permanent fund for maintenance to which donations are taken each year at the Homecoming and Christmas programs, or mailed to the treasurer.

The annual Homecoming program is held each year on the first Sunday in June, and the Christmas service is held on the last Saturday night before Christmas Eve.

In 2001 the rear of the building had begun to lean more and more toward the north, the roof had begun to cave in, and sills under the east side of the building had been heavily damaged by termites. The building also needed painting inside

and out. The board of trustees voted to pay for the restoration from the treasury and donations. The deteriorating sills were replaced, the back wall siding was removed, plywood sheathing was applied to the studs, and the siding was replaced with cypress milled to match the original siding. Two interior columns were replaced, which had been removed in the 1944 remodeling. And the painting was done.

A nonprofit corporation called “Cato Historic Church and Cemetery, Inc.” was formed, and the United Methodist Church deeded the property to the corporation effective January 27, 2012.

Currently, the church is used for the annual Homecoming, the Christmas service, and for funerals and weddings.

Go outside and talk about cemetery markers

The cemetery contains some wonderful examples of late 19th and early 20th century funerary art and iconography. It also contains some interesting zinc markers, which we will get to in a minute. In this time period, grave markers were very personal and represented a person’s wealth, status, hobbies, vocation, etc. Obelisks were one of the most popular monument shapes. Obelisks are associated with Egyptian culture and represent a ray of sunlight. Monument companies wanted something that would take up limited space, but reach great heights, conveying higher status. You don’t see many huge obelisks in the Cato Cemetery, but there are many of them.

The cemetery also contains the following:

fieldstones

hand-engraved concrete markers

open and closed bibles (symbolizing the word of God)

lambs (symbolize innocence and often found on graves of children)

urns (a reference to Egyptian culture because they placed vital organs of the deceased inside urns thinking that they would be resurrected in the afterlife; Resurrection)

angels (heaven and protection for the deceased)

low stone and concrete coping/cradle coping (to delineate family plots or an area for planting)

clasped hands (symbolizing unity and affection even after death; or the individual being received by God)

fingers pointing upward (to heaven)

doves or pearly gates with a dove flying through (symbolizes the soul ascending to heaven)

Fraternal markers (these organizations met upstairs in the church building):

Woodmen of the World (typically look like a log—you see many of these in old cemeteries because this fraternal organization used to provide headstones for its members when they died)

Masonic symbols (Masonic square & compass and sometimes the letter “G” for God)

Probably some IOOF with the three links of a chain. The three links represent Friendship, Love, and Truth. The Odd Fellows also purchased burial plots for their members or arranged for their members to purchase plots at a discounted rate

Military markers

CSA (Confederate States of America)

Probably other examples

Interesting epitaphs

Two children's markers—

Dove on the top to represent the soul's ascent to heaven

"Pearly. Dau(ghter) Of J. W. & Mat(ilda) Mitchell. Born March 9, 1881. Died September 30, 1881. Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God."

Lamb on top of marker to represent innocence

"William Claudy. Son of J. W. & Mat(ilda) Mitchell. Born September 9, 1883. Died December 25, 1887. Our little darling has gone to sleep. The good Lord thought it best. To take him home to rest."

Zinc markers—all manufactured by the Monumental Bronze Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut, or its subsidiaries in Chicago, Des Moines, Detroit, and Philadelphia. Markers were made from the early 1870s to about 1914 (when the facility was used to make munitions for WWI), while the interchangeable panels were made up until the late 1930s. Zinc markers, commonly called "white bronze" as a selling point, were touted as an inexpensive, durable, more artistic alternative to marble or granite monuments. The markers were made from pure zinc, which is nonmagnetic and heavier than iron. Zinc will not grow lichen or moss, and it stands up well to the elements. You would pick your monument design from a catalog or through a salesman. Then you could have the individual panels personalized with a different symbol and epitaph once someone died...the flat panels are removable for that reason...to add people to the marker. Only problem is "creeping" or sinking in from the weight of the metal over the years, as well as stress fractures, also from weight.

Examples:

Proctor marker

Mary E. Proctor. Born Sept. 2, 1871, Departed this life, Oct. 4, 1901,
Another link is broken in our household band, but a chain is forming in a better
land.

Opposite side panel:

Monda E. Proctor. Born Aug. 2, 1894, Departed this life, Aug. 28, 1895, And
peaceful on the mother's breast, Her angel babe has sunk to rest.

Yarborough marker—zinc; shaped like an anvil with scroll

Clements marker—zinc; another panel marker

Harrell marker—Mahala Beasley Harrell was a charter member of the
church.

Mahala C. Harrell. Wife of C. W. Harrell. Born March 27, 1838. Died July 31,
1906. Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord.

(Masonic symbol) Charles W. Harrell. Born Nov. 30, 1832. Died Feb. 1, 1906.
Thy trails ended, thy rest is won.

Price markers under oak tree (not zinc)

Extras:

There is still an old cotton gin and a church off of Mitchell Road in the Faulkner
Gap community.