

Rev. Thomas Downs

(1773-1850)

By Jerry Long
c.2024



History of Daviess County, Kentucky,
(Chicago, IL: Inter-State Publishing Co., 1883):

p.57: Early Preachers

Thomas Downs and William Downs, brothers, were among the early Old-School Baptist preachers, both entirely self-made men, and reared in the wilderness. Their father was killed by the Indians near the old stockade fort at Vienna, now Calhoon, on Green River. Thomas, who resided south of Panther Creek; 1815-'35 and afterward, was a man of fair capacity, great piety, and indomitable energy in his holy mission. He devoted his life to his Master's cause, and was always poor, and for many years traveled on foot from ten to forty miles to meet his appointments and attend the sessions of the Association. Every person loved and respected Thomas Downs.

p.556: Curdsville Precinct – Early Settlement

Thomas Downs was the first man who lived in the vicinity of Alphonsus' Catholic Church. He built a house on the hill half a mile south of the church and directly opposite the place subsequently occupied by Dr. Blincoe.

p.713: Murray Precinct – Early Settlement

The first religious services were held in what was called "Tanner's meeting-house" in 1820. Thomas Downs was the first preacher.

pp.713-714: Murray Precinct – Churches

Green Brier Baptist Church — This church was constituted Oct. 29, 1820, at Tanner's meeting-house, now Buck Creek... Thomas Downs was the first Pastor and took charge of the church for twenty-seven years. The first regular meeting was at the house of James Johnson. Services were held from house to house for several years. Even after a meeting-house was built the members kept up the meetings in private families. Many of their most worthy and useful members were brought in at these family gatherings. Elders Thomas Downs and Benjamin Talbott composed the council of ministers when the church was constituted... Thomas Downs was a very noted preacher. He used to walk a great deal to his labors, often with his shoes in his hands, putting them on his feet after arriving at his destination. He frequently walked to Rock Springs church, seven miles above Owensboro. He had charge of four churches — Green Brier, Rock Springs

Bethel church, in Henderson County, and Pleasant Grove, on the Henderson road, six miles below Owensboro. He preached at each church once a month... A number of successful revival meetings have been held. The first was in 1835, during Mr. Downs's pastorate.

p.844: Vanover Precinct – Biographical

Jesse B. Moseley... was married Dec. 19, 1837, to Miss Joanna Downs, daughter of Thomas Downs, an early settler, where Delaware now stands, in Curdsville Precinct.

pp.851-852: Yelvington Precinct – Churches

Yelvington Baptist Church was organized in a private house, June 30, 1813, about two miles southwest of its present location, and at what was then known as the " Rock Spring." ... Weldon resigned in 1816, after a successful career; he was succeeded by Elder Thomas Downs. In 1817 steps were taken to build a house, and the name was changed to "Rock Spring."... Mr. Downs resigned, in 1840, to travel as missionary in the Association, but afterward closed that work and resumed charge of the church. About this time a new church was built, and the whites and colored people met in separate congregations. Downs gave up the church in 1842, having been its Pastor nearly twenty-five years.



Owensboro Weekly Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 3 December 1885, p.4:

CALHOON'S FIRST SERMOM.

The Difficulties Under Which it Was Preached – Progress of the Gospel There.

Rev. Geo. R. Browder, presiding elder of this district, who preached the thanksgiving sermon at Calhoon, says:

"The circumstances were different from those attending the first sermon ever preached at this place in 1847 or '48. Rev. Thomas Downs, Baptist, was the minister, then 74 or 75 years old, born in the old Vienna Fort where Calhoon now stands. The sermon was preached under a shed owned by Judge Calhoon. Loose lumber formed the seats and the carpenter's workbench the book board. Judge Calhoon read the scripture lesson, and Douglas Little, father of Hon. L. P. Little, read and sang the hymn. Mr. Waltrip offered prayer. Dram drinking was the custom of those days, and a long-neck bottle protruded from the pocket of the brother that led the prayer. A guard, consisting of Norris Foster and Napoleon Fitts, was appointed to keep order. These strange armed sinners found a poor fellow named Chamberlain in a state of intoxication trying to wend his crooked walk into the circle of worshippers, and they seized him each by an arm and a leg and pitched him by main force into Green river, just below the dam. Another noted drunkard, tall, lank and limber, walked about the shed shaking himself like a limberjack and singing, 'Jenny is your hoe-cake done,' while the good old man was trying to preach. The guards soon caught him and bore him away, despite his protest and statement, 'This is my shed, this is my shed.' A few years later the Baptist brethren had built a church, and gathered a considerable congregation. One Sunday morning just as worship was commenced a stranger of immense size and herculean strength, carrying a club about the size of a chair-post, walked in and took a seat on the floor about midway between the door and the pulpit. In the midst of the song he called out in a clear voice, 'I can out pray anybody in the house.' Judge Little immediately went to him and tried to put him out, but could not move

him. He called for help and men came to his assistance, but the giant held his seat on the floor and looked defiance at his assailants; but finally he said: 'It seems that you don't want me here, so if you will go with me to the grogshop and give me a dram, I'll leave.' The compromise was accepted, and the stranger left, and his name was never known. I am indebted for these items to Mr. Sam Johnson, long circuit court clerk of this county. Calhoun now has five churches and orderly congregations, Sunday schools, &c.



A History of Kentucky Baptists From 1769 to 1885, Volume II,
J. H. Spencer (Cincinnati, OH: J. R. Baumes, 1886) pp.571-572:

Rev. Thomas Downs was among the fathers in Daviess county Association. He was born, perhaps, in Nelson county, not long before the year 1780. He spent his childhood and youth, with his parents, among the wilds of the lower Green River country. His father was killed by the Indians, near the present location of Calhoun, in McLean county. In early life, he united with Hazel Creek church, in Muhlenburg county, and was early set apart to the ministry. Of this church, he remained a member, till about 1815, when he moved his membership to Panther Creek (now Yelvington in Daviess county) In 1824, he, with his wife, four daughters, his son and his son's wife, united with Green Brier church in Daviess county. Of this church, Rock Spring, Buck Creek and Ohio (la.) he was pastor many years. He was also pastor of various other churches, for briefer periods. But his work was not so much that of a pastor, as of an indefatigable pioneer missionary. He bore the standard of the cross among the early settlers on both sides of the Ohio river, from the mouth of Green river, 100 miles up the Ohio, and over a belt of country, about 100 miles wide. In this region he gathered many of the early churches, and supplied them with occasional preaching, till they could procure pastors. He raised a large family of children, all girls but one, and was so extremely poor that he had to do much of his traveling on foot, and often barefoot. "Many a time," writes his successor in the pastorate, "has he ploughed hard five days in the week, and then walked from Green Brier to Rock Spring, a distance of 25 miles, and preached two hours, shoeless and coatless; sometimes to but few hearers, and once, to only three sisters." Such was the labor and lot of this consecrated servant of Christ, during a ministry of nearly 50 years. He endured many severe domestic trials. In early life, he lost his father, who was murdered by Indians, while hunting in the forests for his horses. After he had raised a large family, his only son went to hunt horses in the forest, and was found hung by a bridle, already dead. About the same time, several of his children died of an epidemic, within a short period.

When Mr. Downs commenced preaching, not far from the year 1800, there were but two small churches in the broad field of his subsequent labors; when he closed his work, the same field was occupied by six flourishing and populous associations — four in Kentucky, and two in Indiana. In the closing years of his life, he became very corpulent and helpless. But such was the attachment of his brethren to their aged pastor, that they would convey him to Green Brier meeting house, and place him in a chair, where he, like the Apostle John, would talk to them about the love of God, and exhort them to love one another. Not far from 1850, the aged servant of God was called to his reward.

Mr. Downs was not regarded a great preacher, even at the time in which he lived. He was uneducated in the scholastic sense of the term; but he was a close, prayerful reader of the Bible, and few men of his times were better acquainted with the sacred oracles. He possessed only medium talents, but he had an easy flow of common English words, his heart was thoroughly

educated and deeply imbued with the grace of God, and he was an indefatigable laborer in the gospel of Christ.



**A History of the Daviess – McLean Baptist Association in Kentucky,
Rev. Wendell H. Rone (Owensboro, KY, 1943) pp.261-262:**

THOMAS DOWNS

Perhaps no one figured more largely in the planting of the Baptist cause in this section than the one whose name appears at the head of this sketch. Thomas Downs is indeed one of the founding fathers of this Association. His name was a household word among the Baptists of the Green River Country for four generations. His parents were among the first settlers in this country. Their first stop was at Barnett's Station near Hartford and still later they moved to Fort Vienna (Calhoun). His father was killed by the Indians and scalped while hunting for his horses on the outskirts of the Fort at Vienna, about the year 1792. Their first settlement was made in 1782, at Barnett's Station near the present site of the town of Hartford. Young Downs was then about 9 years old having been born in Pennsylvania on August 3, 1773.

The first record of Thomas Downs that we have is as clerk of the old Hazel Creek Church in Muhlenberg County, Ky., which office he held from June, 1800, to about the year 1815. He served as Messenger from this Church to the old Union Association in 1808 and again as the same to the Gasper River Association at its formation in 1812. After moving his membership to Rock Spring (Yelvington) he served as Messenger to the same association in 1816, 1817 and 1818. When Goshen Association was organized in 1817 we find Thomas Downs present at the meeting. Having been ordained by the Hazel Creek Church as deacon on September 5, 1805, he was licensed to preach by the same Church in 1808. His ordination took place sometime before the year 1816. We have found no record of this.

As has already been noted Brother Downs moved his membership to Rock Spring (Yelvington) in 1815. In 1824, he; with his wife, four daughters, his son and his son's wife united with the Green Briar Church in Daviess County where he held membership until his death in 1850. He became pastor of the Yelvington Church (then called Rock Spring) in June, 1816, and remained twenty-six years, until May, 1842. His pastorate at Green Briar lasted from 1820 to 1850, the last two years he was too feeble for active work, but was retained as pastor emeritus. He served Buck Creek Church from 1824 to 1840; Bell's Run from 1822 to 1824. Ohio Church in Southern Indiana near Rockport enjoyed his pastoral care for a time and perhaps several other Churches for shorter periods of time but we have no record of them.

His work was not so much that of pastor as of an indefatigable pioneer Missionary. He bore the standard of the Cross to the settlers on both sides of the Ohio River, from the mouth of Green River up the Ohio for 100 miles and over a belt of country 100 miles wide. In this region he gathered many of the early churches and supplied them with occasional preaching until the Lord raised up someone to take his place. From first to last we have record of the following churches that he assisted in constituting: Green Briar, 1820; Owensboro First, 1835; Pleasant Grove, 1835; Blackford, 1825; Mt. Liberty, 1840; Brushy Fork, 1846; Mt. Carmel, 1849; and Macedonia, 1849. No doubt there were others but alas we are short on records.

Brother Downs married Rebecka Saulsberry in 1798. She came from Loudon County, Virginia, and was born in the year 1774. Her death occurred in February, 1844. This pioneer

couple reared a large family, all girls but one. He was so extremely poor that he had to do much of his traveling on foot, and often barefoot. "Many a time," writes his successor in the pastorate, "he has plowed hard for five days in the week, and then walked from Green Briar to Yelvington, a distance of twenty-five miles, and preached two hours, shoeless and coatless; sometime to but few hearers, and once to only three sisters." Such was the labor and lot of this good man during a ministry of almost fifty years. He endured many severe domestic trials in life. As has already been said he lost his father in 1792. After he raised his large family his only son, William, was found hung to a tree limb already dead, probably a suicide. This was in 1848. About the same time several of his children died of milk fever within a short time. But these trials never swerved him from his path of duty and with unfaltering step he pressed on with faith and trust in God.

In his history of Green Briar Church written in 1920, Elder John A. Bennett has this to say about Thomas Downs: "He was one of the great pioneer preachers of the Green River Country. Without educational equipment he became a theologian. Handicapped by poverty and contradicted by heresy, ignorance, and anti-missionism, and fought by the world, the flesh, and the devil, he triumphed, held the Church on the solid rock of Bible truth and laid the foundation on which his successors have built."

When Elder Downs commenced his ministry there were but a few small Churches in the field of his subsequent labors; when he closed his ministry the same field was flourishing with six large and populous Associations. Four of them in Kentucky and two in Southern Indiana. In November, 1844, he went into the constitution of the Daviess County Association. At this meeting, in all due honor to this aged pioneer servant of Christ, his brethren called upon him to preach the Introductory sermon. He was also called to the Moderator's Chair and presided until his successor was chosen as the first Moderator of the new Association: Elder John Graves Howard.

In the closing years of his life he became very corpulent and helpless. But such was the attachment of his brethren to their aged pastor, that they would convey him to Green Briar meeting-house and place him in a chair, where he, like the Apostle John, would exhort them to love one another and talk to them about the love of God. He was called from earthly toil and care on February 8, 1850. His body was laid to rest beside that of his wife in a little plot of ground located about 500 yards southwest of the present cross-roads at Nuckols, Ky., on Highway 75. A large and spreading beech tree now marks the spot where he lies. Daviess County Association owes a debt of gratitude to this untiring servant of God that she can never repay. "Father" Downs, as he was called in his elderly years, by those who knew and loved him, left a testimony behind that is unequalled in all the history of the Association. In labors abundant; in perils many; in faithfulness unexcelled. We know that we will meet Thomas Downs in Heaven.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 2 March 1977, p.1C:

Pioneer preacher: Downs planted Baptist churches across area

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

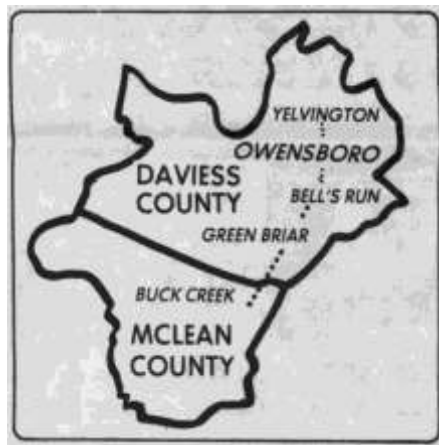
On a cold February afternoon 127 years ago, a small band of mourners carried the coffin of the Rev. Thomas Downs up a small knoll southwest of the McLean County town of Nuckols and laid him to rest beside his wife who had died six years earlier.

Through the years, the tombstone they erected over the grave has become weatherbeaten and worn with age. The small cemetery has been overrun with briars and bushes.



Rev. Thomas Downs' gravestone at Nuckols

Last year, Mrs. J. Powell Brown of Owensboro, whose husband is a great-great-grandnephew of Downs, launched a campaign to get the Daviess-McLean Baptist Association and the Kentucky Historical Society to give what she considers proper recognition to the Baptist version of Johnny Appleseed.



Left: Mrs. J. Powell Brown of Owensboro has launched a campaign to get the Daviess-McLean Baptist Society and the Kentucky Historical Society to give what she considers proper recognition to her husband's ancestor, the Rev. Thomas Downs. Downs organized many Baptist churches in the area. At one time, he was pastor of four area churches – Rock Spring (now Yelvington), Green Briar and Bell's Run in Daviess County and Buck Creek in McLean County. Right: One Sunday a month for 24 years, the Rev. Thomas Downs walked to each of these four Baptist churches in Daviess and McLean counties to conduct services.

At the same time Jonathan Chapman was planting apple trees across Ohio and Indiana, Downs was planting Baptist churches across midwestern Kentucky and southern Indiana.

A circuit rider too poor to afford a horse, he traveled by shanks' mare in an area 100 miles up and down the Ohio and Green rivers until his legs gave out.

Downs came to Kentucky as a 9-year-old boy from Pennsylvania in 1782. His family settled at Barnett's Station near present Hartford in Ohio County.

Downs' brother Billy – the Rev. William Downs – was born at Hartford the same year the family settled there.

"We sprang from William's side," Mrs. Brown says. "We're not particularly proud of it because he was an alcoholic."

In 1792, the family had moved to Fort Vienna on Green River where Calhoun is now. Downs' father went out one morning to round up the cows for milk to feed the babies at the fort and never came back. He was found later in the woods, scalped by Indians – the last white man known to be killed by Indians in this region.

Ten-year-old William was sent east to Nelson County to live with Evan Wilson, who saw to it that he received enough education to become a schoolteacher.

Nineteen-year-old Thomas became head of the family. Six years later, he had moved to Muhlenberg County and married Rebecka Saulsberry, a 24-year-old Virginia-born woman.

The following year William was also in Muhlenberg County where he married 30-year-old Rachael Ashby. He was 17 at the time.

Thomas was 27 when he first appeared as a religious worker in the area – being named clerk of Hazel Creek Baptist Church in Muhlenberg County in June 1800, a position he held for 15 years.

William was the first of the brothers to enter the ministry, having begun to "exercise" in public soon after his baptism. Rolling Fork Baptist Church, which had ordained him around 1802, summoned him for church trial on a charge of intoxication in 1805. He was 23.

That was the same year that Thomas was ordained a deacon in the Muhlenberg County church.

To avoid a church trial, William joined a Separate Baptist church and continued to preach, starting a church called Little Mount near Hodgenville. Also in 1805, he began teaching at a "loud school" near Centertown in Ohio County – a job he kept until at least 1842.

In 1808, 35-year-old Thomas finally was licensed to preach, but another eight years would pass before he set out on foot on a circuit extending from the Tennessee line to the hills of southern Indiana establishing churches.

In 1816, the 43-year-old minister was called as the second pastor of Rock Spring (now Yelvington) Baptist Church in the brand-new county of Daviess.

On June 8 of that year, he was in northern Spencer County, Ind., helping to organize Old Pigeon Baptist Church about one mile south of the new homestead of the Thomas Lincoln family. The Lincolns, including young Abraham, soon became members of this church and helped build its first sanctuary.

There is a coincidence here. Lincoln history shows that Thomas Lincoln was baptized by William Downs in Knob Creek in Hardin County, Ky., in early 1816.

Later that year, Lincoln moved to Indiana and joined a church founded by Thomas Downs.

In 1818, Thomas helped organize Baker's Creek Baptist Church at Luce Township in Spencer County. Two years later, he helped organize and became first pastor of Green Briar Baptist Church in southern Daviess County.

Also on Dec. 24, 1820, he helped organize Bell's Run Baptist Church and became its first pastor. Now he was pastoring three churches Rock Spring (1816-1840 and again in 1842), Green Briar (1820-1848) and Bell's Run (1820-1832).

Bell's Run is the only church on record as having had both Downs brothers as pastors, with William succeeding Thomas in the pulpit in 1832 and continuing until 1839.

In 1824, Thomas added Buck Creek Baptist in McLean County to his pastorate – one church was preached at each Sunday, giving him a full month's work. He continued at Buck Creek until 1840.

During the 1820s, Thomas is said to have preached several sermons in Owensboro which had no church until 1835.

In 1824, Thomas and his wife settled in the Green Briar neighborhood, raising a large family – all girls except for the first-born who was named for brother William.

Poverty was a way of life for the family. Thomas got little or no money from his churches and had to rely on his work as a farmer to support the growing family.

Church records show that he frequently worked hard in the fields five days a week. On weekends, he walked barefoot, carrying his only pair of shoes, the 25 miles to Yelvington to preach. Sometimes he found few had bothered to come to services, and once only three sisters were there to hear the sermon.

Then he would remove his shoes (saving the leather) and walk back home to start another week. He is said to have walked as much as 40 miles to preach a single sermon.

By 1828, William had established residence in Ohio County and became the third pastor of Bethabara Baptist Church (1828-35) at Habit in Daviess County that year.

Green Briar tradition says the church members there had a special place in their hearts for their first pastor. While Thomas roamed the countryside starting churches, the men of the church would break his ground, plant and cultivate his fields and harvest his crops. The women would divide their fruit, linsey, flannel, flax-linen, knitting yarn and dried fruit with Mrs. Downs.

In May 1835, Thomas was on hand to help in organizing the first church in Owensboro – First Baptist. Later that year, he became the first pastor of Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, which he served until 1840 and again in 1845-46.

By the 1830s, William was beginning to stir up controversy in the Owensboro area as he had earlier in central Kentucky. He was a great debater and was fond of debating ministers from other denominations.

Mrs. Brown says, "It's still a joke in the family that all the Downses argue."

Among his celebrated debates were those with a Universalist preacher at Hawesville and a Catholic priest and a Campbellite (Christian Church) minister in Owensboro.

Pioneer historian George W. Triplett wrote in the early 1880s that William once walked 70 miles to debate another Catholic priest. A crowd of 2,000 persons showed up at the dense birch grove to hear the debate but the priest never came.

So William preached a sermon to the crowd. Triplett wrote, "Downs did not walk home. He returned home superbly dressed and for some time seemed to be flush with silver dollars, halves and quarters. Uncle Billy, with all his ability, seems not to have been heavily burdened with piety."

William was apparently fond of the fruit of the vine and had his troubles with fellow Baptists. Temperance societies were something he couldn't abide.

He also was opposed to missionary efforts and began to organize anti-mission churches here in the 1830s. In February 1838, he started Shiloh Baptist in Ohio County with three men and five women. In April, he became its pastor.

The following year, he started Sardis Baptist four miles from Habit. Both churches were short-lived.

The Rev. Wendell Rone, who chronicled the history of the Daviess-McLean Baptist Association in 1943, wrote, "Its (Sardis) influence perhaps was not seen in the community as an inducement to sinners to repent but it seemed to be better able to retard the progress of the Gospel rather than to advance it owing to their opposition to all benevolent work in the denomination and to all efforts to preach the Gospel in the regions beyond."

Thomas was growing old in 1840 and was curtailing much of his walking circuit. But that August he was at Mount Liberty Baptist in McLean County to see that church constituted, then became its first pastor.

On Nov. 1, 1844, the 71-year-old minister walked up to Bethabara Meeting House as a delegate to the convention that created the Daviess-McLean Baptist Association. He was asked to preach the main sermon and serve as moderator of the convention.

By this time, William had almost disappeared from the religious scene. He and the Rev. Jasper Bristow organized the Panther Creek Association of United Baptists in 1843, but after that little was heard from William until his death around 1860. He is believed to be buried near Centertown.

According to an 1885 article by the Rev. George R. Browder, Thomas preached the first sermon ever heard in Calhoun around 1847-48.

Browder wrote, "Dram drinking was the custom in those days and a long-necked bottle protruded from the pocket of the brother that led the prayer."

At least two drunks were reportedly forcibly extracted from the service held in a shed, and tossed into Green River.

Tragedy was stalking the last years of the pioneer preacher's life.

In 1844, his wife died. Four years later, his only son, William, was found hanging in a tree, and several more of his children died of milk fever.

Despite all the exercise he got, Thomas grew fatter with each passing year until by 1848 he weighed nearly 350 pounds. Too fat to walk, Downs retired from the ministry, but the congregation at Green Briar wouldn't let him go.

Mrs. Brown says, "The men of the church would go and put him on a chair and carry him to church and set him up in front of them to preach on the love of God."

On Aug. 11, 1849, Downs took part in the organization of Macedonia Baptist Church. Six months later, he was dead.

His eulogy was written 70 years later by the Rev. John A. Bennett, who said, "Without educational equipment he became a theologian. Handicapped by poverty and contradicted by heresy, ignorance and anti-missionism, and fought by the world, the flesh and the devil, he triumphed."

Mrs. Brown thought 1976 – the Bicentennial year – would be an appropriate time for the state to erect a historical marker along U.S. 431 near Thomas Downs' grave. She sent all her records to Dianne Wells, chairman of the state historical marker committee.

Ms. Wells said recently Mrs. Brown's request is in the "suggestion file" along with numerous other requests. She could give no timetable for the marker's possible erection.

The Daviess-McLean Baptist Association also is interested in the marker. The Rev. W.J. Abbott, pastor of Lewis Lane Baptist Church, says, "We (the association) thought maybe we could buy a sign and have it erected, but we learned the state highway department is the only one that can put up signs along the highway and the authority must come from the historical society."

It's been awhile since the association did anything on the matter, he said. But Mrs. Brown hasn't quit yet. She plans to keep "agitating" both the association and the state historical society until maybe someday she'll get her marker.

Although local history has all but forgotten Thomas Downs and his brother, William, the barefoot preacher left his own monuments in the form of those churches he walked so many miles to found and minister to.



The History of Bells Run Baptist Church, 1820-1990,
Rev. Wendell H. Rone (Utica, KY: McDowell Publications, 1990) pp.21-28:

According to the "Historical Sketch of Bells Run Baptist Church, Ohio County, Kentucky," written and read by former pastor Joseph Perkins Ellis before the Daviess County (now Daviess-McLean) Baptist Association at its Thirty-Seventh Annual Meeting, held with the Beaver Dam Baptist Church, on August 10-12, 1880, in Ohio County, Kentucky, the following is stated on page 8 of the minutes for that year:

"This church was constituted by Elders Thomas Downs and Frederick Tanner, with 8 members, on the 24th of December, 1820, and adopted the name of 'United Baptist Church Of Christ, Located On The Waters Of Barnett's Creek, Ohio County, Kentucky.'"

Therefore, with this information before us, we introduce the history of the church by presenting biographical sketches of the illustrious men who formed the presbytery or council of recognition at the founding of the new church.

Thomas Downs, one of the leading pioneer Baptist, ministers in the Green River country, was born in Pennsylvania on April 3, 1773, and departed this life in Daviess County, Kentucky on February 8, 1850, at nearly seventy-seven years of age. His body was laid to rest in a private cemetery beside that of his wife who had preceded him in death in 1844, which is located at the southwest corner of the crossroads at Nuckols, McLean County, Kentucky, on the present (1990) U.S. Highway 431 about 500 yards from the intersection.

No one in his day and generation figured more largely in the planting and nurturing of the Baptist cause in this section than he. He was indeed a founding father of several Baptist churches and the Daviess County Baptist Association. his name was a household word among the Baptists of this section of the Green River and Ohio River Valleys for four generations....

Thomas Downs' name appears on the Nelson County, Kentucky tax list in 1795-1799. In June, 1797, he is listed in Nelson County with Charles Duncan and Coleman Duncan, probably kinsmen. Also, on February 22, 1797, a Thomas Downs was united in marriage to Rebecca Osburn, the daughter of Samuel Osburn, in Nelson County, Kentucky. If this was our subject, she had probably died within one year; because, reliable information states that Thomas Downs married a Rebecca Saulsberry of Christian County, Kentucky (later Muhlenberg County) in 1798. He is listed on the Nelson County tax list, in July, 1799 and on the Muhlenberg County tax list in 1800. Her maiden name is listed on her monument [note: this statement is wrong]. She died in February, 1844. She was born in Louden County, Virginia in 1774 and was about seventy years of age at her death. Mrs. Downs was probably the daughter of Thomas Saulsbury who is listed on the July 1799 tax list as possessing 200 acres on Pond Creek in the northern section of that county.

Rebecca (Saulsberry) Downs, in 1798, was a member of the historic Hazel Creek Church, founded on December 3, 1797. Thomas Downs, her husband, became a member shortly after their

marriage. On June 7, 1800, he was elected as the clerk of Hazel Creek Church, succeeding Spencer O'Neal, the first clerk. Brother Downs served the church in that capacity for nearly fifteen years. He was succeeded in April, 1815 by Simeon Vaught, who served in the same way for twenty years. Thomas Downs became a protégé of the famous pioneer Baptist minister and missionary, Benjamin Tolbert, founder of the Hazel Creek Church. The two often served as messengers from the church to the Mero District (1796), Cumberland I (1803), Union I (1806), Green River (1800), and Gasper River Associations, to which the church belonged in 1798-1811. On Saturday, September 26, 1812, at the Providence Meeting house in Warren County, Kentucky, the Gasper River Baptist Association was formed by 40 messengers from seventeen (17) churches in Warren, Butler, Ohio, Logan, and Muhlenberg Counties. Pastor Benjamin Tolbert and licensed ministers Thomas Downs and James Nanney represented the Hazel Creek Church at that meeting. Tolbert presided at the initial meeting and Downs was elected as the first clerk of the association. He served in the period 1812-1814 in that office.

Brother Downs also served as the second deacon of the church, being chosen to that office on September 5, 1805. He was licensed to preach the Gospel of Christ in 1808, together with James Nanney. Both of them were ordained by Hazel Creek Church to the full work of the Gospel ministry on October 2, 1814, with Baptist ministers Benjamin Tolbert, Lewis Moore, and Phillip Warden serving as the presbytery or council of recognition. At this point Thomas Downs was launched on an unparalleled missionary ministry which was to last, for over 35 years.

Thomas Downs is listed in Muhlenberg County tax lists as owning 100 acres on Mud River in 1801-1808. In 1809 he is listed as owning 200 acres on Hazel Creek in Muhlenberg County, and 200 acres on Rough Creek in Ohio County. Having disposed of his Muhlenberg County holdings, in 1815, he moved to Daviess County, after its formation from Ohio County, on June 1, 1815. He appears on the Daviess County tax list in 1816, still holding to his 200 acre farm on Rough River in Ohio County. This was increased by the purchase of a 100 acre tract on Buck Creek in Daviess County in 1825. He held to this property until his death.

On May 11, 1816, Thomas Downs and his wife were received into the fellowship of the Panther Creek I (1813) Church, which became Rock Springs in 1817 (now Yelvington). On that same date the church, at his request, voted to "release him from his pastoral chare of us and ... to give him a recommendation of his faithful chare over us" - - to their first pastor, John Weldon, who was moving across the Ohio River into Indiana. At the same time the church passed the following motion: "We the Church agree and make choyce of Bro. Downs as our pasture and adjourned." Thus began a pastorate which was to last for twenty-six years - through May 1842. We will have more to say concerning this pastorate.

Pastor Thomas Downs was thrust immediately into the work of organizing churches. As several members of the Panther Creek I (Rock Springs-Yelvington) Church had moved across the Ohio River into Warrick County, Indiana in 1815-1816; and upon expressing a desire to be constituted into a new church; and, in meeting the request of Brother Matthew Rogers to the church to appoint a committee to assist in the organization of the same; the church appointed Pastor Thomas Downs, Henry White, and Robert Allen to assist them. Therefore, on June 8, 1816, Pastor Thomas Downs and former Pastor John Weldon constituted a church on the following members of the church: Matthew and Nellie Rogers, Samuel and Savina Bristow, John and Jemima Harrison, Enoch and Patsy Garrison, William and Lucy Lamar, John Tennessee, Dinah Allen, and Sarah Powell. The new church was named Little Pigeon Creek, and Samuel Bristow, who had been licensed by the "Mother" church in August, 1813, was chosen as the first pastor of the Little Pigeon Church. He was duly ordained to the Baptist ministry by Brethren Downs and Weldon.

Two other Baptist churches were organized in Indiana in the year 1816. They were Ohio and Baker's Creek. The first was near Rockport. in Spencer County, Indiana. Brother Downs ministered to it as pastor during its early history. The second was also in Spencer County, Indiana. Both churches, together with the Panther Creek I (1813) Church, united with the Goshen Association in Kentucky in 1818. Little Pigeon joined in 1822, after being in the Wabash (1809) Association in 1816-1821. It helped form the Little Pigeon Association in 1822. Ohio went to this new association in 1826 while Baker's Creek did the same in 1823.

Panther Creek I (1813), later Rock Springs (1817) and Yelvington (1860), had united with the Gasper River Association in 1815, being represented by Brethren John Bristow and William B. Hudson. Thomas Downs represented the church in 1816-1817, while Thomas Downs and James Kennedy did the same in 1818. The church, together with the Tanner's Meeting House Church (Buck Creek), was dismissed from Gasper River at this time to unite with the Goshen Association, which was done. Thomas Downs again represented the church in the new fraternity of Baptists.

In the period 1816-1820, Pastor Downs served the Rock Springs (1813), Ohio (1816), and Baker's Creek (1816) Churches. In 1819, he and another Baptist minister, John Hall, constituted the Mt. Zion Church in Breckinridge (later Hancock) County on thirteen members, the first in Hancock County. It had existed in the area across from Troy, Indiana as an "Arm" or mission of the Rock Spring Church. Brother Thomas Willian was a leading member in this new organization, having moved into this area in 1817, the year the mission was set, up. Mt. Zion became the "Mother" church of the Hawesville Church in 1836, located in the county seat of Hancock County. It became extinct by 1854, but it lives on in the life and work of the Hawesville congregation.

The year 1820 proved to be exceedingly important in the life of Pastor-Missionary Thomas Downs, he had preached the annual sermon before the Goshen Association in 1819 at Concord Church in Grayson County; and the association had agreed to meet with the Rock Springs Church in 1820, which it did for its first meeting with the church. Only two Baptist churches existed within the bounds of Daviess County at that time - one was Rock Springs and the other was Tanner's Meeting House (Buck Creek). As the latter church had grown considerably under the pastoral ministry of Pastor Benjamin Tolbert, Brother Downs former pastor and mentor, it was deemed advisable to divide the membership and organize a new congregation from it.

Therefore, on October 29, 1820, in the Meeting House at Tanner's, the Green Brier Baptist Church was founded on twenty-five members who had been dismissed from that church for that purpose. Nine of the members were blacks, slaves of owners holding membership in the "Mother" church. Five of the whites were women and eleven were men; while four of the blacks were men and five were women. Thomas Downs became the first pastor of the Green Brier congregation and continued to serve it until his death on February 8, 1850. However, as he had become feeble by 1848, the church called Elder J. M. Bennett to serve as the co-pastor, retaining Brother Downs as the emeritus pastor. Brother Downs, his wife, his son and his son's wife, together with his daughters Nancy, Sarah, Malinda, Eliza and Rebecca, moved their letters from the Rock Springs Church to the Green Brier Church on January 10, 1824, where their membership remained for several years. Tolbert and Downs founded it.

Within less than three months after the organization of the Green Brier Church, Thomas Downs and Frederick Tanner organized the Barnett's Creek Baptist Church (Bells Run) in the home of Brother Martin Hudson on December 24, 1820, on eight members, all of whom probably came from the Tanners Meeting House Church by letter for that purpose. Most if not all of the charter members were members of the households of Martin Hudson and J. C. Chapman.

When Brother Downs became pastor of both the Green Briar and Barnett's Creek (Bells Run) Churches, he ceased serving the Baker's Creek (Spencer County, Indiana) and the Mt. Zion (Breckinridge County) Churches. In 1821, his pastorates were: Rock Springs, Ohio, Green Brier, and Barnett's Creek (Bells Run). He, at this time, was in his forty-seventh year.

In 1825, Elders Thomas Downs, David Jarrell Kelley, William Moorman, and Ancil Hall constituted the Blackford Creek Baptist Church on twenty-five members. its location was in Breckinridge County at that time but it became Hancock County in 1829. It and Mt. Zion were the only two Baptist churches existing therein when Hancock County was formed. Pastor William Moorman served the Blackford Church from 1825 until his death in 1834. As far as is known, Brother Downs did not participate in the founding of any other new churches until the middle of the 1830's.

The year 1835 proved to be very significant in the history of the Goshen Association, as three new churches were constituted; one in Hancock County and two in Daviess County within one week of one another and Thomas Downs participated in the founding of all three. The first was Union Baptist Church on January 5, 1835 (a Monday), in Hancock County, Kentucky, with Baptist ministers Thomas Downs, Reuben Cottrell, and John Hall composing the presbytery or council of recognition. Then on May 3, 1835 (a Sunday), Thomas Downs and Reuben Cottrell met and recognized the organization of the Pleasant Grove Church, west of Owensboro in Daviess County, Kentucky; which was followed in six days, on Saturday, May 9, 1835 with the organization by Thomas Downs and Reuben Cottrell of the Owensborough United Baptist Church in the seminary (school) building at Third and Lewis Streets, on eighteen black members and only eight white members, all of whom had come from the Rock Springs (Yelvington) Church for that purpose. The Pleasant Grove congregation was composed of three men and their wives - Samuel and Susannah Hemingway, Andrew and Hannah Jones, and James and Hannah Rafferty. All of them came from the Rock Springs (Yelvington) Church by letter of dismission. The Union Church charter members came from the Mount Zion and Blackford Churches, and possibly some from the Rock Springs (Yelvington) Church as did those forming the Owensboro Church. The following were in that charter membership:

The white members were: Leonard and Maria Daniel, George N. and Angelina McKay, Mrs. Lucy Pickett, Mrs. Pamela J. (Head) Triplett, and John and Elizabeth Stout. The black members were: Alcey (), Aggy (Vittitow), Ann (Lee), Anne (Adams), Ben (Griffith), Catesby (), Charlotte (), Esther (Rogers), Grace (Thompson), Hannah (Moreland), Henry (Thompson), Katy (), Nace (Griffith), Oliver (Potts), Violette (Lucy (Hawes), William (Harrell), and William (Thompson). In the foregoing, the () signifies that the last name of the owner was unknown. The () with a name signifies the last name of the person's owner. This was during the times of slavery in the United States. The black members were known as the "African Branch of the Church" and were given full independence by the "mother" church in May, 1866. It is now the Fourth Street Church in Owensboro. Its date of origin is also May 9, 1835 and Thomas Downs and Reuben Cottrell were its founders, too.

The church-founding activities of Brother Downs continued down to the close of his long and useful life. On August 22, 1840, Thomas Downs, Isham R. Allen, and Samuel Anderson met the prospective charter members who had been dismissed from the Buck Creek Church for that purpose, at the Mt. Liberty school house and organized the Mt. Liberty United Baptist Church. The original membership numbered fourteen, with two of them being black slaves - Tom and India (Walls). Six bore the name, Waltrip. They were: Stephen P. Waltrip, Nancy Jane Waltrip, Martha Waltrip, Joseph P. Waltrip, Mary Ann Waltrip, and Henrietta Waltrip. The remaining six were:

Thomas and Rachel Minton, Henry and Rebecca Eidson, and Wiley and Sally Tucker. When organized the church was located in Daviess County. When McLean County was organized in 1854, its location was in that county where it remained until the church's dissolution in 1987 after 147 years of existence.

Union and Owensboro Churches became affiliated with the Goshen Association in 1835, the year of their organization. Pleasant Grove united with the same association in 1836; while Mt. Liberty joined in 1841. In April, 1841, Brethren B. B. Rafferty, Isham R. Allen, and John G. Howard organized the Fredonia Baptist Church in the Bon Harbor Hills section of Daviess County near the Ohio River and west of Owensboro about three miles. The charter members came from the Pleasant Grove Church. The church joined the Goshen Association in 1841. At this point, eight of the Goshen Association churches, out of a total of thirty-one, were located in Daviess County. It is also possible that another, which had been organized in 1840 and known as Friendly Grove and located in Daviess County, had become a member of the Goshen Association. This brought the number of Daviess County Baptist churches to nine. The Friendly Grove charter members came from the Rock Springs (Yelvington) and Union Churches. Brethren Thomas Downs, Robert M. Snider, and Thomas Willian gathered this church. Its first pastor is unknown by the writer. It became a member of the Daviess County Association in the year 1845 along with the Station, New Hope, and Panther Creek II Churches.

On November 1-3, 1844, eight of the nine Daviess County Baptist churches met through their messengers with the Bethabara Baptist Church and formed the Daviess County Association of United Baptists. The following churches entered into the formation of this new association: Bethabara, Buck Creek, Fredonia, Green Brier, Mount Liberty, Owensboro, Pleasant Grove, and Rock Springs, all in Daviess County, and Bells Run in Ohio County. At the same time he was serving as the pastor still of one of them - Green Brier although he was in his seventy-first year. Out of respect toward this aged servant of the Lord, his brethren had him to preach the Introductory Sermon. his text was I Peter 2:4-5. He also presided as the moderator until his successor and son in the ministry was chosen - John G. Howard - and elected as the first moderator of the new body of Baptists.

Three more Baptist churches witnessed the presence of this aged and beloved minister as he approached the twilight of his life. On December 5, 1846, Thomas Downs, Isham R. Allen and John G. Howard founded the Brushy Fork Baptist Church in a school house known as Little's Camp Ground in Daviess County, Kentucky and located about five miles north of Calhoun. The site was located later in McLean County. Six members went into the constitution of the church: Benjamin and Elizabeth Short, Wilson Waltrip, John Igleheart, Jonas Little, and James F. Bennett. These persons had been lettered off from the Pleasant Grove, Mt. Liberty, Buck Creek and Walton's Creek Churches. Brother Downs was then seventy-three years of age.

The year 1849 witnessed the participation of Brother Downs in the organization of two more Baptist churches within a short time before his death. They were: Macedonia Baptist Church, organized on August 11, 1849 by Baptist ministers Thomas Downs, V. E. Kirtley, Isham R. Allen, Darnell Dowden and Hardin Haynes Ellis on twenty-five persons, twenty-one of whom had come from the Bethabara Church for that purpose. The Bethabara Church had become sorely divided over the stand of Rev. Reuben Cottrell against membership by Baptists in secret fraternities such as the Masons. The charter members were: Reuben Cottrell, Elizabeth Cottrell, Sarah Cottrell, Samuel Cottrell, John Stout, Tinson Stout, William Stout, Mildred Stout, Elizabeth Stout, James L. Kirk, James A. Kirk, Elizabeth Kirk, Susan Kirk, William and Elizabeth Hemingway, Enoch and James B. Stone, H. O. and Dorcas Vandervor, Jerry Barnhill, Miranda (Cottrell) Birkhead,

Elizabeth Lacklin, Syann Hazelrigg, Sarah Johnson, and Amanda Sanders. The church was organized in the home of John Stout, who later became one of the deacons of the church. This was the last church Brother Downs helped to organize.

Previous to the above, Baptist Ministers Thomas Downs, Richard Jones and James M. Bennett organized the Mount Cannel United Baptist Church on April 13, 1849 near Buford in Ohio County, Kentucky on forty members, most of whom came from the Green Brier Church for that purpose. They were: William D. T. Bell, Willis H. Bell, Mary E. Bell, Mary Bell, David S. and Sabina Cox, Frances G. Collier, Lee and Edna Davis, Daniel, Julia Ann and Ann French, George Hinton, Robert Hudson, Samuel Guest, Allen and Martha Johnson, Henry Jewell, Clement Knott, Eli Martin, Thaddeus N. B. and Parthenia May, James, Frances, Martha and James K. Newton, Thomas, Elizabeth D, Lousan, Lucretia and Mary Patton, George, Frances and George W. L. Richeson, Steven and Ann Lorena Walker, and William Wells. Brother Downs was the aged pastor of all of the above and had probably led most of them to the Lord and had baptized them into the fellowship of the Green Brier Church. The Mount Carmel Church united with the Daviess County Association in 1849 and remained a member until the year 1905 when it became a member of the Ohio County Association to which it still belongs.

From 1816 to 1850 Brother Downs served the following churches as pastor: Rock Springs (Yelvington), 1816-1842; Ohio, near Rockport, Indiana, 1816-1823; Baker's Creek, in Indiana, 1816-1821; Mount Zion, Hancock County, 1819-1821; Green Brier, 1820-1830; Barnett's Creek (Bells Run), in 1820-1830; Tanner's Meeting house (Buck Creek), in 1824-1840; Pleasant Grove, 1835-1840 and 1845-1846; and Mount Liberty, 1840-1842. After 1846, his ministry was confined to the Green Brier pastorate.

Thomas Downs was present and assisted in the organization of the following Baptist associations: Gasper River (1812), Goshen (1817), Little Pigeon (Indiana), in 1822, and Daviess County in 1844. He attended as a fraternal messenger from the Goshen Association the Baptist Fraternities of Gasper River in 1821; Salem in 1825; Little Pigeon in 1825; Highland in 1825; Gasper River in 1825; Gasper River in 1826; Little Pigeon in 1826; Highland in 1826; Highland and Gasper River in 1829, Gasper River, Little Pigeon and Highland in 1830; Little Pigeon and Highland in 1831; Gasper River, Salem and Highland in 1832; Highland in 1833; Salem, Little Pigeon and Gasper River in 1834; Salem in 1836; Kentucky Baptist General Association in 1839 as well as Little Bethel and Gasper River Associations; Little Bethel, Gasper River and Little Pigeon in 1842; Gasper River and Little Bethel in 1843; Gasper River and Little Pigeon in 1844. In the period 1844-1850, Daviess County Association corresponded with the Gasper River (1812), Goshen (1817), Little Pigeon (1822) and Little Bethel (1836) Associations. Downs represented it to the Goshen and Little Pigeon bodies in 1846.

Thomas and Rebecca (Saulsberry) Downs became the parents of the following children: Nancy Downs (b. c. 1799 - d. before 1860), who became the second wife of Peter Ashby on December 3, 1838 and who was united in marriage to him by her father on a Daviess County license; William Downs (b. c. 1802 . d. c. 1848), who married Milly Ann King on October 4, 1821 on a Daviess County license, he reportedly met his death in the year 1848 by the act of hanging by a leather belt, whether by his own act or not is not known. Their children were: Isaac, William, Bradford, Fetura B., Sary M., W., Thomas J., Rebecah, Eliza, Evan, Milly A., Jeremiah, and Cornelius H. Downs; Sarah Downs (b. c. 1807 d. c.), who married John M. Tanner on November 22, 1830 on a Daviess County license; Malinda Downs (b. c. 1812 . d. c.), who married Stephen R. Williams on a Daviess County license on July 29, 1835 with the ceremony being performed by Frederick Tanner; Eliza Downs (h. c. - d. c.), who married John B. Tanner on a Daviess County

license on September 29, 1832, with the ceremony being performed by her uncle, William Downs - she had been married previously on November 1, 1827 on a Daviess County license by Justice of the Peace Warner Crow; and Rebecca Downs (b. . d. September 5, 1852), who was married on a Daviess County license on February 10, 1829 to David A. Williams. She was buried in the Williams family plot (located on the Reuben Tinsley farm near the Ohio-McLean County line).

In his History of the Green Brier Church in 1920, Pastor John A. Bennett had this to say about Thomas Downs:

"He was one of the great pioneer preachers of the Green River Country. Without educational equipment, he became a Theologian. Handicapped by poverty and contradicted by heresy, ignorance, and anti-missionism, and fought by the world, the flesh, and the devil, he triumphed, held the Church on the solid rock of Bible Truth, and laid the foundation on which his successors have built."

In the closing years of his life, as already noted, he became very corpulent and helpless. But such was the attachment of his brethren to their aged pastor, that they would convey him to the Green Brier Meeting House and place him in a chair, where he, like the Apostle John, would exhort them to love one another, and talk to them about the love of God. "Father" Downs, as he was called in his elderly years, left a personal testimony behind that is unequaled in the history of the Daviess County (now Daviess-McLean) Association. In labors - abundant; in perils - many; in faithfulness unexcelled. The writer concluded his sketch of the life of Thomas Downs in the History of the Daviess-McLean Baptist Association, in Kentucky, 1844-1943, in 1943 with these words, which are still true:

"We know that we will meet Thomas Downs in Heaven."



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 3 April 1997, p.1C:

I couldn't have walked a mile in preacher's shoes

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

I was listening to an oldies station on the radio the other day. Billy Ed Wheeler's "The Rev. Mr. Black" was playing.

It's about an old-time preacher whose worship service is interrupted by a big lumberjack who "came in, but it wasn't to pray."

The lumberjack strides up the aisle and punches the preacher right in the face.

Well, this is an old-time preacher, not one of these modern holy warriors. So, he just stands there ... and turns the other cheek.

You know, some of those old-time preachers were pretty rugged fellas. And we had some of them around here. My favorite is the Rev. Thomas "Barefoot Tom" Downs. That man needs a statue somewhere.

Local histories say Downs preached to settlers on both sides of the Ohio River in the early 19th century. And they say he covered a territory 100 miles long and 100 miles wide.

That's 10,000 square miles of rugged frontier. How rugged?

Well, Downs' father was scalped by native Americans while hunting for his horses near modern-day Calhoun in 1792. Barefoot Tom was 19 years old.

Preaching over a 10,000-square-mile territory was no easy task. Not even as easy as you might think.

They didn't call the man "Barefoot Tom" for no reason. Downs was too poor to afford a horse for his travels. Or even shoes for that matter.

He had a big family. And church members mostly tithed in fruit, yarn and chickens in those days.

By 1820, Downs had become pastor of churches in Yelvington and Green Briar down by the Daviess-McLean county line.

He was 47 years old by then. Church histories say Downs worked his farm in southern Daviess County five days a week and then walked barefoot and coat-less in good weather and bad between his churches on weekends.

It was a distance, they say, of 25 miles through fields, woods and canebrakes from Green Briar to Yelvington. And he had to cross Panther Creek somehow.

Now, a good swift pace with shoes and on pavement is about 4 mph. And most people can't sustain that for very long.

So, you're talking about a walk of more than six hours for Downs. Each way.

And when he got to Yelvington, they say, the crowds were usually small. Heck, there were only 3,876 people scattered all over the entire county.

Once, they say, only three sisters showed up to hear Downs preach.

But he gave them a two-hour sermon. And then hiked back to Green Briar.

Now, I don't know about you. But I wouldn't have made that trip more than once.

Well, let's be really honest. I wouldn't have made that trip the first time.

But Downs continued to minister to both far-flung congregations for 22 years. That would have made him 69 years old.

And he was also preaching at at least two other area churches at the same time.

Histories don't say. But surely Downs had a horse by the end of his ministry. But even if he did, area roads were bad on a good day.

Downs died in 1850. He's buried beneath some trees on a hill overlooking U.S. 431 in Nuckols just south of the Daviess County line.

Yep, Barefoot Tom Downs was a heckuva man – by anybody's standards. They don't make men like him anymore.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 7 January 2007, pp.1A & 2A:

Solid tribute

Baptists erect monument to famous preacher with help of genealogist

By Karen Owen, Messenger-Inquirer

Some people play golf for a hobby. Gary Tunget erects tombstones.

Tunget, 50, of Owensboro completed one of his most ambitious projects Dec. 30 by erecting a monument to the Rev. Thomas Downs at Buck Creek Baptist Church.

The slab is almost 5 feet tall and stands along U.S. 431, not far from Downs' burial site at Nuckols.

Downs, who died in 1850, was a poor preacher and farmer known for traveling long distances across the Green River region, often on foot, to preach.

He started several of the oldest Baptist churches in Daviess County.

"Everybody was in favor of (the monument)," said Marshall Hatfield, the head deacon at Buck Creek. Downs was "the one that organized the church. It's sort of an honor for Buck Creek Church to have it out there."

Tunget owns Gary's Fleur de Lis but says he would pursue his tombstone hobby full time if he could.

"It doesn't pay that well," he said. Also, "I can't lift these things like I used to."

Tunget has erected about 30 tombstones or monuments in the past 16 years or so and has repaired others.

"I've placed stones in the most obscure places people will never see," he said.

"It's turned into a hobby that makes a lot of people happy," said Edith Bennett, one of his distant relatives and a fellow genealogy buff who was involved in the Downs project.

Tunget was drawn into his pastime by researching his family tree. He learned many of his ancestors rested in unmarked graves or their monuments had been destroyed.

Since then, he has attended restoration classes offered by the Indiana Historical Society and plans to attend more.

His hobby probably isn't any more expensive than golf or owning a boat, Tunget said. "I have no children to leave this to," he said, looking around his florist shop. "It gives me great satisfaction to do it."

When he finishes a project and is leaving a cemetery, he thinks of the "great cloud of witnesses" mentioned in the Bible, those who have gone on before and are watching the living. "They may be saying, 'You put it in the wrong place,'" Tunget said.

His Downs project was the brainchild of the Rev. Wendell H. Rone, a Baptist historian.

Rone died in 2003, but Bennett, his sister, revived the issue with the Daviess-McLean Baptist Association.

Tunget is not a Downs' descendant, but he was raised as a Baptist and says he admires Downs' dedication.

Downs was 19 when Indians killed his father in 1792 near Calhoun.

According to Rone's histories, Downs was licensed to preach by Hazel Creek Baptist Church in Muhlenberg County in 1808.

Eight years later, he became pastor of Yelvington Baptist Church, or Rock Springs.

In following years he helped start First Baptist, Green Brier, Pleasant Grove, Blackford, Mount Liberty, Brushy Fork, Mount Carmel and Macedonia Baptist churches and the local Baptist association.

His ministry even took him across the Ohio River at times.

"Many a time," according to the writings of one of Downs' contemporaries, "he has plowed hard for five days in the week, and then walked from Green Brier to Yelvington, a distance of 25 miles, and preached two hours, shoeless and coatless; sometimes to but few hearers, and once to only three sisters."

Modern Christians have "polished up the old rugged cross," Tunget said. "You think about an individual who would do that"

Downs served as pastor of Yelvington, Green Brier and Buck Creek churches simultaneously for 16 years, according to Rone's histories.

"Without educational equipment, he became a theologian," Rone quotes Elder John A. Bennett at Green Brier. "Handicapped by poverty and contradicted by heresy, ignorance and anti-missionism, and fought by the world, the flesh and the devil, he triumphed, held the church on the solid rock of Bible truth and laid the foundation on which his successors have built."

Downs' only son died of an apparent suicide in 1848, and several of Downs' other children died of "milk fever" soon afterward.

In his final years, Rone wrote, Downs became "very corpulent and helpless," but church members thought so much of him they would carry him to the meeting house at Green Brier, where he would "exhort them to love one another and talk to them about the love of God."

The Baptist association he helped form paid \$600 for Downs' new monument, which Tunget got from a friend in the business. His friend gives him a break on materials, especially if a stone has a small flaw or is difficult to sell. Ordinarily, a monument like Downs' would cost at least \$1,200, Tunget said.

He doesn't reveal his source.

"They don't want any more customers like me," he said with a smile.

There will be a dedication service for the monument, but no date has been set, Tunget said.



Mary Lisa and Gary Tunget of Owensboro pose next the monument dedicated to the Rev. Thomas Downs on Wednesday afternoon at Buck Creek Baptist Church. Several churches are listed on one side of the monument.

Inscription on monument includes: "He bore the standard of Christ to settlers of the Green River region in forming and serving as pastor of the following Baptist Churches: Green Brier 1820, Blackford 1825, Owensboro First 1835, Pleasant Grove 1835, Mt. Liberty 1840, Brushy Fork 1840, Mt. Carmel 1840, Macedonia 1840, Wellington, Bells Run, Buck Creek, Hazel Creek, Owens Bulletin Baptist Assoc. 1844"

Fork 1846, Mt. Carmel 1849, Macedonia 1849, Yelvington, Bells Run, Buck Creek, Hazel Creek, Daviess McLean Baptist Assoc. 1844.

[The monument to the Rev. Thomas Downs was dedicated on 22 April 2007 at the Buck Greek Baptist Church.]



Graves of Rev. Thomas Downs and wife – “Thos. Downs, born in Pa. Aug 3, 1773, came to Ky. 1782, died Feb. 8, 1850”) and “Rebecky wife of Thos. Downs, born Loudon Co., Va. 1774, died Feb. 1844.” Interred in the Downs family cemetery on a hill overlooking U.S. 431 in Nuckols, McLean County, KY, just south of the Daviess County line about 500 yards southwest of the present cross-roads on Highway 75.





Nelson County, KY Marriage:

Know all men by these presents that we Thomas Downs and Samuel Osborn are held and firmly bound unto his Excellency James Garrard Governor of Kentucky in the penal sum of fifty pounds current money to be paid to his Excellency aforesaid and his Successors to which payment well and truly to be made We bind ourselves our heirs Executors jointly and severally firmly by these presents sealed with our seals and dated this 22nd day of February 1797

The Condition of the above obligation is such that if there should be no legal cause to obstruct a marriage shortly intended to be solemnized between the above bound Thomas Downs and Rebecca Osborn daughter of the above bound Samuel Osborn

Then the above obligation to be void else to remain in full force

Witness
 Morris Meigs
 Thomas Downs
 Samuel Osborn

Marriage license recorded on 22 February 1797 in Nelson County, KY for Thomas Downs and Rebecca Osburn, daughter of Samuel Osburn. In 1943 Rev. Wendell H. Rone (1913-2003) in his A History of the Daviess - McLean Baptist Association in Kentucky (p.260) wrote that Thomas Downs “married Rebecca Saulsberry in 1798.” This writer could not find a record of this marriage or an original source that proved that Thomas Downs had a second wife – Rebecca Saulsberry.



See also articles, “William Downs, Sr. Killed by Indians in 1788” and “Rev. William Downs (1782-c1860)”, by Jerry Long, on website, West-Central Kentucky History & Genealogy.

