

Bryant's Chapel Baptist Church

Whitesville, Daviess County, KY

By Jerry Long
c.2025



History of Whitesville, Kentucky, Anna Hamilton & Don Greenwell (Utica, KY: McDowell Publications, 1982) p.27:

Bryant Chapel Baptist Church, a colored church, located off the south side of Walnut Street in Whitesville, was organized in 1892 under the leadership of three charter members, Mrs. Lovewell (Katty) Howard, Henry Clay (Bay) Rhodes, and Eli Rhodes.

The meetings were held in a small school house until they were strong enough to build a church.

The first pastor was William O'Bryant, for whom the church was named.

A few years ago the church was given a new look, when rose colored tiffany glass windows were placed there. It now has about 20 members. The pastor is Reverend Carter of Owensboro. The deacon is Hayward Norris and the secretary is Katty May Norris.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 3 March 1975, p.1A:

**2 boys held
in wrecking
of church**
Whitesville damage
estimated at \$5,000

Two boys – aged 8 and 9 – were taken into custody last night in connection with an estimated \$5,000 worth of vandalism at Bryant's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Whitesville.

State police detective Gerald Nickens reported he picked up the youths in Whitesville about 8 p.m. after a 24-hour investigation. The damage to the interior of the church was discovered early Saturday night by a member of the congregation.

Nickens said the boys admitted to the act after he questioned them. The detective quoted the youths as saying the vandalism occurred sometime Saturday.

Yesterday afternoon the inside of the church appeared practically demolished. All windows and light fixtures were shattered, a gas heater was smashed and a piano stood wrecked among overturned pews.

The church was uninsured, according to Gary Taylor, a member of the congregation. He guessed the damage at \$5,000 but said a formal estimate would be made today.

"We're going to have to work hard" to restore the church, said Bryant's Chapel secretary Katie Norris.

Organist Jessie Epison added, "'We've put a lot of money into the church,' noting that the heater and the windows were new. "The chandeliers were not antique but they were old," she said.

"Fantastic" and "absurd" were comments frequently heard at a gathering of some of the members at the Norris home yesterday afternoon.

The Rev. E.A. Hollins of Louisville, pastor of the church for its two monthly services, said services probably will be held in someone's home until the building is repaired.

He said it must have taken "quite a bit of work" to wreck the church, which has about 15 active members.

The boys were released to their parents pending an appearance in Daviess Juvenile Court.

[Note: The boy's parents agreed to pay the full cost of repairs (Messenger-Inquirer, 26 March 1975, p.2A)..]



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 15 May 1993, pp.1B & 3B:



By Karen Owen, Messenger-Inquirer

WHITESVILLE - Jessie Epison attends various churches on Sunday morning, but her heart always goes back to Bryant's Chapel Baptist Church.

The 109-year-old building crowning a hill on the outskirts of town is her spiritual home. But it's a home badly in need of repairs, and she and her father, 92-year-old Jesse Haywood Norris, are hoping to gain the community's help in saving it.

Epison and Norris remember when the little tin-covered building rocked with the shouts and singing of a fervent, happy congregation.

They were here when prayer meetings, Sunday school and youth meetings were a weekly occurrence, and when revivals ran all week, followed by two days of socializing.

"That was a solid week of pleasure," Epison recalled Friday as she and her father worked around the church property.

They remember when even cleaning the church was an excuse to party, as children rolled around under the pews and played outside while their mothers worked.

But those days are gone.

She and Norris and other members want to keep the old building in good enough shape to use for special events, such as their annual homecoming in July.

When everybody gets together, "we still have a good time in the Lord," Epison said. "We have to try to keep the people together."

A leaky roof has been fixed, but Epison is worried about the flue of the bottled-gas stove that provides heat in the church. "I think that's a dangerous area there." Some ceiling tiles have fallen down. The wall is streaked with soot. And the tin outside is rusty and needs painting.

Members are hoping they can get some help from the community in making a few repairs.

"My daddy always told me as a child, a community without a church wasn't any good."

Whitesville used to have a sizable black community, but "they couldn't find work," Epison said.

In recent years, the congregation has dwindled as members "died out and moved out," Norris said.

Services held twice a month were drawing about 10 people on Sundays when the church's pastor moved away two years ago. That was the last time regular services were held.

Bryant's Chapel was built in 1884 and named after its founder, a traveling preacher who was holding services in private homes.

"He got with some leaders of the community," Epison said. "The white folks helped us build this church."

Attending church here was "a pleasure. That was a memory you can't bury," she said.

"This church has a meaning to a lot of us. Serving God is serving God, but we are peaceful here."



Bryant's Chapel in Whitesville was constructed by Rev. Bryant in 1884. The tin exterior is showing rust and part of the ceiling inside has fallen. Still, Epison plans to "shout" and "have fun with the Lord" in the antique church again. "There's nothing like an old country church," she said.



Left: At 92, Jesse Haywood Norris is one of the oldest members of the congregation at Bryant's Chapel. He joined the congregation at the age of nine, and still cleans and repairs the church. Left: Jessie Epison has been trying to re-unite Bryant's Chapel. The congregation has 12 members and currently has no pastor, but Epison plans to have a homecoming for all former members of the congregation in July.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 27 June 1993, pp.1A & 2A:

Blacks, whites work together to restore Bryant's Chapel church

By Karen Owen, Messenger-Inquirer

WHITESVILLE – The tin-covered walls gleam with a new coat of silver paint.

The soot-streaked interior is being covered with clean paneling.

The piano's been tuned, and a stranger has offered to preach.

Bryant's Chapel Baptist Church is nearly suitable for worship again, thanks to both blacks and whites who have pitched in to repair the crumbling 109-year-old church.

"Everybody has been so nice to us," said Jessie Epison, one of the members trying to restore the building.

The black church was built in 1884 after the congregation was formed by a traveling preacher. In its heyday, the pews were packed, members said, and the church had several weekly activities and services.

But in recent years, members died or moved away in search of jobs, and the congregation could no longer support a pastor. Regular services ceased about two years ago.

Epison and a few others hung on, meeting at the church for special occasions.

Now they can be proud when their children come back to Whitesville for homecoming July 11. "We've got a little church here, but we're hoping it will be packed," Epison said.

As she talked, she had to raise her voice at times to be heard over the roar of power tools as her son-in-law, Ronald Gossom, cut paneling for the church walls.

Local businesses and individuals have donated or loaned paint, paneling, tools, brushes, rollers and a ladder. People who heard about her efforts also sent \$585 in donations, Epison said.

A white minister from Fordsville offered to preach for the congregation, but Bryant's Chapel had already booked a preacher and choir from Oakland for homecoming. She's going to invite the Fordsville man to the service, Epison said.

Whitesville Baptist Church, a white congregation, donated \$200 for the restoration work, and teen-agers volunteered to provide some labor. The church "has a long history in Whitesville," said the Rev. Tim Burdon, pastor there. "We wanted to do our part in the community to help it."

Ann Sabetta, a 71-year-old Owensboro woman, had no connection with Bryant's Chapel or with Whitesville, but she was so moved by the congregation's story she tried to help the group get a state matching grant.

She called the Kentucky Heritage Council to get an application, which she passed on to Epison. "I thought it would be nice to preserve that little church."

Bryant's Chapel members decided not to pursue the grant because they thought they would have to pay the money back, Epison said. But "she was such a sweet little lady," she said of Sabetta. "I fell in love with her."

When the restoration work is done, "I'm going to feel like there's a load off the top of my head," Epison said.

She never doubted help would arrive, though, she said. "I knew it would come through. I think if you pray for a thing, you get it."



Donna Draper, left, and Clara Ewan paint the exterior of Bryant's Chapel in Whitesville Wednesday. The church, which is being restored, was built in the late 1800s. The congregation's 12 members are planning a homecoming for past members the second weekend of July.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 12 April 1998, p.3H:

Building Permits

The following Owensboro Metropolitan Planning Commission building permits were approved between March 23 and April 6:

10296 Walnut St., Whitesville, Bryant Chapel Baptist Church. Construct addition to church. \$10,000.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 21 April 1998, pp.1A & 2A:



By Steve Vied, Messenger-Inquirer



"This means a lot to me. You're helping those who need help," said Willard Wise, as he marks a saw line while expanding a

window opening Monday at Bryant's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Whitesville. Wise is a carpenter from Campbellsville who is working with Campers On Mission, a group that is remodeling and building an addition to the 23-member church.

With each swing of the hammer and each cut of the saw, little Bryant's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church of Whitesville moves closer to becoming the kind of church Jessie Epison knows it should be.

"We decided we didn't want to eat out in the yard and put up tents on special days," Epison said. "We wanted to be like other churches."

Other churches have kitchens. They have fellowship halls where members and guests can enjoy a meal together. They have vestibules and a study for the pastor. They also have running water and bathrooms.

Bryant's Chapel – a tin-covered, starkly simple structure located at the end of a long gravel drive in Whitesville – has none of those things considered basic necessities by modern churches. But that is rapidly changing.

By this time next week, a transformation of Bryant's Chapel should be complete. The tin exterior will be covered with vinyl siding. A wrap-around addition will include a vestibule, a pastor's study, a 28-by-14 foot fellowship hall, a small kitchen and a pair of rest rooms. Old windows are being replaced and fresh paint will be applied to the auditorium's interior.

The church's predominantly black congregation of about 23 members is paying for the material, which is expected to cost upwards of \$15,000.

But the labor is costing the church nothing. Workers from the Kentucky chapter of Campers on Mission, an organization of the Southern Baptist Convention, are heading up the renovation of the 104-year-old church.

Epison, a lifelong member of the church, has pushed hard for the improvements, despite its small size and the fact that it holds services just twice a month. Rev. Larry Boards of Bowling Green, Epison's son-in-law, is the pastor.

"We realize we can't have a fancy church, but we can have a decent church that anybody can come to," Epison said. "We feel good about that."

It would have not been possible without the workers, who not only donate their time, but also their expertise, Epison said. David Fuqua of Owensboro, a retired truck driver, responded to the church's call for help. What he found was a very difficult job. The old building, though built of stout stuff, was sagging on one side.

"I talked to the men, and they said we could do it," Fuqua said. "These guys are the most giving people I've ever known. They have it in their hearts to help."

With help from a volunteer crew from Indiana, the walls, floor and roof of the addition were built in a matter of a few days. Monday, Fuqua and a handful of workers were replacing windows. Today, workers from Paducah, Princeton and Evansville are expected to return to the site.

"It means serving the Lord," said Bobby Field of Owensboro, who was cutting 2-by-4's for window openings. "We don't want any acclaim of our own. I do whatever I can do."

Willard Wise, a 75-year-old master carpenter from Campbellsville, is living at the site in his Airstream trailer. As he pounded nails Monday, Wise said he enjoyed the work.

"The joy is, you're helping those who need help," he said.
As she watches her church being transformed, Epison shakes her head and smiles.
"Oh Lord, it's going to be great," she said. "For so many years we've wanted to do something. Nowadays, people want modern things and that's what we want. The Lord is blessing us."



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 30 March 2002, pp.4C & 7C:

Religion & Values
By Karen Owen, Messenger-Inquirer

Raccoons have been wreaking havoc at Bryant's Chapel Baptist Church at Whitesville. The small, predominantly black congregation averages between seven and 20 at worship services held twice a month. The members remodeled their 100-year-old building with the help of Campers on Mission, a Southern Baptist group, back in 1993. Local businesses, individuals and other churches donated hundreds of dollars in cash or supplies for the renovation, which included new restrooms, a pastor's study and a fellowship hall. Now furry intruders are breaking in where the old section of the building joins the new. The raccoons have fallen through the ceiling and otherwise ransacked the sanctuary, Joyce Taylor, a church member, said. "At Christmastime, they just really did a job in there." One bandit apparently has taken up residence in the walls, she said. "You can hear him making a whole lot of racket in there." The congregation also needs new benches, a new floor and a replacement for the church's gas space heater, so an "evening of praise and worship" benefit concert is scheduled for 3 p.m. today.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 3 May 2002, p.5C:

Bryant's Chapel cleaning Hamilton Cemetery

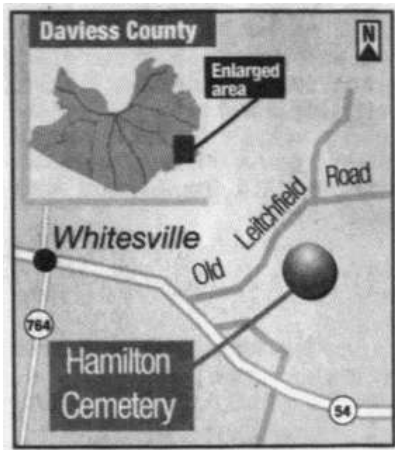
Bryant's Chapel Baptist Church, Whitesville, is looking for volunteers to help clean Hamilton Cemetery. No one has been buried in the church cemetery since 1981, said church member Jessie Epison, who is one of the organizers of the effort. She said when church members get the grave sites cleared and grass mowed, they may choose Hamilton for their final resting place. Volunteers will meet from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. May 11, 18 and 25 at the cemetery. Participants are asked to bring their own rakes and other tools.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 17 May 2002, p.6C:

Cleanup of Hamilton Cemetery under way; help requested

By Mark Cooper, Messenger-Inquirer



Perhaps inspired by success at Greenwood Cemetery, a tiny black church in Whitesville is beginning to restore a cemetery of black residents there - and could use a little help.

Bryant's Chapel Baptist Church, which has about 15 active members, began cleanup work at Hamilton Cemetery last weekend. Church members and other volunteers will be there Saturday and again May 25, church secretary Jessie Epison said.

The cemetery on Old Leitchfield Road just east of Whitesville is about 100 years old and contains an unknown number of graves, perhaps as many as 200, Epison said.

"Until recently, I didn't even know that the church owned it, and I've been down there six years," said the Rev. Larry W. Boards of Bowling Green. "Since it belongs to the church, it's our duty to get it cleaned up."

The first day of the cleanup attracted only six volunteers, "but if we can keep going at it like we are, we can get it done," Boards said. "There's been some volunteers to do the mowing and spraying."

Trees in the cemetery may be cut and sold for lumber to help pay for the cemetery's upkeep, Boards said.

"We only had six people, but we got a lot of underbrush mowed down, and we trimmed some trees," Epison said. The cemetery has been the main burial spot for most of the members of Bryant's Chapel Baptist Church, which is at 10570 Jefferson St.

"The cemetery has been growing up and growing up," Epison said. "It has been cleaned before, but we didn't have enough members. We just have a few people here, but we're trying to get the graveyard cleaned up so that if someone dies and they want to be buried there, there'd be room for them. There's room for more graves."

Epison followed the cleanup of Greenwood Cemetery on Leitchfield Road in Owensboro and thinks that effort could be repeated in Whitesville.

"I've got some people buried there in Greenwood," Epison said. "I thought it was wonderful. They've done a beautiful job."

Greenwood Cemetery is the burial place for many blacks from the Owensboro area, including veterans of the Spanish-American War, World War I and II and at least one Civil War veteran.

The restoration of that cemetery began in 1996 by a volunteer group. Daviess Fiscal Court bought the cemetery last year.

To Get Involved – Volunteers interested in helping restore Hamilton Cemetery near Whitesville should bring their own rakes and tools to the site on Old Leitchfield Road just east of Whitesville. For more information, call 275-4511.



Owensboro Times, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 30 November 2025:

Answering the call: Bryant’s Chapel keeps the faith in Whitesville,
132 years after starting in a schoolhouse

By John Kirkpatrick



From left, Josh Taylor, Joyce Taylor, Jerry Anderson, Patsy Anderson, and Britton Hibbitt stand outside Bryant’s Chapel. Photo by Ryan Richardson

Down a narrow dirt lane off Walnut Street in Whitesville, a small white church sits quietly above a pasture, guarded by trees and time. It’s easy to pass by without notice, but impossible to forget for the families who have worshiped there for generations.

Bryant’s Chapel Missionary Baptist Church traces its roots back to 1892, when local Black families began meeting for worship in a one-room schoolhouse for Black children in Whitesville. According to historical records, the congregation was first organized under the leadership of Mrs. Lovewell “Katty” Howard, Henry Clay “Bay” Rhodes, and Eli Rhodes. Two years later, they bought a small lot and built a wooden church on the property that still stands today.

A deed dated October 8, 1894, documents the sale of land from J.M. Hall and his wife Nancy Hall to three trustees — Milton Kelly, John Jackson, and J.F. Smith — “of the Colored Missionary Baptist Church of Whitesville, Ky.” The handwritten note in the margin reads simply: Whitesville Black Church Deed.

That was the church's original legal name. But in the community, it was known as Bryant's Chapel, named for its first pastor, the Rev. William O'Bryant — a traveling preacher who helped organize services in those early years.

"The church has always been special to our family," said current pastor Britton Hibbitt. "Everybody came on Sundays. Through the years, we had a lot of young pastors get their start here. Over time, people moved away or passed on, and it got hard, but when times get tough, someone always steps up. The Holy Spirit is the reason this church is still here."

The building itself tells a story of perseverance. The first structure was built of narrow wood slats, later covered with tin, before volunteers added siding and an addition in 1997. Underneath, the floor beams were hand-hewn with axes and carried to the site by horse and wagon. Family accounts say the congregation raised the money through small offerings — pennies and nickels at a time.

By the 1980s, after a series of pastoral changes, attendance had dwindled. Hibbitt said services were sometimes held in his grandmother's home when the congregation didn't have a pastor. The last listed leaders in a book titled "History of Whitesville, KY," by Anna Hamilton and Don Greenwell, were Reverend Carter of Owensboro, Deacon Hayward Norris, and Secretary Katty May Norris, with about 20 active members.

But the spirit of the church never died.

In the mid-1990s, Hibbitt's late father, the Rev. Larry Board, felt called to reopen and revitalize Bryant's Chapel. Under his leadership, the congregation grew again.

"He was the right man at the right time," Hibbitt said. "He said, 'We're going to work here,' and we never looked back."

Board's wife at the time, Patsy Anderson, said her family's ties to the church go back to its founding.

"My great-grandparents helped start it," Anderson said. "We bought the lot in 1894 and built the church that year. Under the floor are logs cut by axe teams. Folks hauled them in with wagons. It wasn't fancy, but it was ours."

A few yards away sits Hampton Cemetery, established so Black residents could bury their loved ones when they were not allowed in the white cemetery. Many of the graves are marked by small, weathered white stones — some dating back to the 1800s.

"It tells you we were here, and we mattered," Anderson said.

Longtime member Bernie Taylor remembers when the area surrounding the church was a thriving Black neighborhood.

"My grandmother used to say that at night, the lanterns looked like fireflies," she said. "Families lived up and down this road. It was a beautiful community."

As years passed, the population thinned. Older residents died, and younger generations moved to Owensboro or other towns for work. Still, Taylor said, the church has remained a place of gathering and belonging.

"People either got old or moved away because there wasn't much to keep them here," she said. "But when we host homecomings, pastor anniversaries, or Thanksgiving services, folks still come back. This is home."

Today, Bryant's Chapel still opens its doors each Sunday at 1:30 p.m. The congregation is small, but the faith is strong. Hibbitt also streams services on Facebook so family and friends can worship together from afar.

"It's the people and the community that make this place special," he said. "God always finds a way, and someone always answers the call."

For younger generations, the memories endure.

“As a kid, I remember the big homecomings and pastor anniversary dinners,” said Joshua Taylor, Bernie’s son.

“People came from everywhere. When the sanctuary got too full, they’d send us outside to play, and we’d run the hill until Mom called us back in. It felt like the whole world was gathered at church.”

More than 130 years after its first service in a schoolhouse, Bryant’s Chapel Missionary Baptist Church still overlooks the same rolling pasture. The congregation is smaller now, but the message remains the same — faith, family, and perseverance.

The door, as always, remains open.

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Bryant’s Chapel Missionary Baptist Church

