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# MANATEE VILLAGE HISTORICAL PARK

By Janet Snyder Matthews

It was two hours past noon on the national Bicentennial, July 4, 1976. Pealing bell tones vibrated over a southern city. Below the belfry, a man rhythmically tugged a rope. Standing there with a few others, he was as glad as the sounds he powered. Together, bell and man signaled a preservation dream come true.

Because of that dream, a quiet corner of old Manatee Village became an historical park. Inside a brick enclosure stand the Manatee United Methodist Church (1889) and the original county courthouse (1859) which once housed judicial business for all of Florida lying between Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor, from the Gulf of Mexico to Lake Okeechobee - a space of about 5,000 square miles, nearly a tenth of Florida's total land mass. The two buildings which now constitute a heritage for seven counties, nearly 400,000 Florida residents, were all but lost five years ago when the long road to their preservation had its doubtful beginnings.

A familiar story was repeated here in the 1970s when "progress" seemed to dictate destruction of the old and the unsightly. The 1889 Methodist Church had become too small. The very land on which it stood was coveted for a bigger, newer sanctuary to house the contemporary equivalent of a frontier congregation established in the 1840s. Behind the church stood a one story frame building, once used as the church (1886-1889), then the parsonage, then a private residence. More important, this historic treasure was the original courthouse of Manatee County.

In the church meetings held to consider alternatives, the voices for preservation were often outnumbered, their volume diminished by a growing impatience for action. Out of that debate was born a group which would, with others, accomplish the complex task of preserving the buildings. Called "H.O.M.E.," Heritage of Manatee's Environment, the group was composed of church members and other citizens. During the 1974 Christmas holidays, they teamed up with the Manatee County Historical Commission, newly constituted and directed by Ken Dierks, Mrs. Thurmond Smith, Warren Johnson, Mrs. James Tellum, and Dewey Dye, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

"We knew it was a tough job, but no one member gave up until it was accomplished," said Johnson, who has been chairman of the Historical Commission, is currently president of the Manatee County Historical Society, and was one of those who faced every task from stripping walls to sleuthing out the locations of original furnishings.<sup>2</sup>

Funding, the eternal problem, came up right after the basic question of saving or demolishing. The preservationists started immediately to plan a conceptual park to include several structures within a setting functional for meetings and celebrations. "We concluded that if we could get something started, it would be a lot easier to raise the money," remembers Johnson. Twenty months and \$80,000 later, their hopes would be nearly realized after a series of pitfalls and setbacks. Two thousand dollars in seed money came from the Elizabeth Eaton Fund. The Manatee Methodist Church congregation offered \$6,000 to purchase the old courthouse and deed it to the Historical Commission.



**The 1889 Manatee Methodist Church being moved in December, 1975. Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Commission**



**The Original Manatee County Courthouse as it appeared (with additions) when used as a residence. Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Commission**

A host of barriers emerged but were scaled by the efforts of multiple agencies and friends of preservation. There were rezonings, permits, contracts, termites, time delays, and the money problem. Techniques of the contemporary world combined to rescue the historic: the mailing of 15,000 brochures, a Silver Tea, benefits, and personal calls for solicitation. Contributions from the brochure mail ranged from 25¢ to \$500 and included several "sick" letters. The personal approach brought donations from \$180 to \$2,000. Overall totals were adequate by August, 1975, to fund the moving of the church and courthouse to a site set aside for that purpose by the City of Bradenton. Support from agencies included the Bicentennial Commission with \$12,500, Manatee County Commission with \$6,000 and \$1,500 in administration, Sarasota County Commission with \$750, and two C.E.T.A. workers from Manatee County's Parks and Recreation Department. Funds evaporated quickly in the face of expenses. Moving costs alone were \$20,000 for the church and \$3,000 for the courthouse.

One cold December night in 1975, a year after the first joint meeting of H.O.M.E. and the Historical Commission, the old courthouse started slowly down Fifteenth Street followed by the church. They moved a block and a half between disconnected power lines through midnight darkness broken by camera flashes and spotlights. On they went to the corner of Fifteenth Street East and Seventh Avenue that was to become Manatee Village Historical Park. It was an eight-hour job ended at eight o'clock in the morning.

At that point, both buildings appeared deformed. The church needed a new roof and was missing two sides. The courthouse was sporting twentieth-century windows and doors, witness to its years as a residence. Gaping holes testified to additions and connectors freshly removed. Both would require new foundations in keeping with architectural origins. A period of restoration obviously lay ahead, and Colonel Johnson became supervisor.<sup>3</sup>



**The 1859 Manatee County Courthouse restored at Manatee Village Historical Park.**



**Interior of the restored courthouse.**

The history of the structures was about to be reconstructed. Spearheaders had always known the historical significance of the buildings, and now it was time to make them *look* as old as they were, to remove the architectural intrusions and return the structures to their original integrity, and to interpret through them the frontier era of south Florida.

The church and courthouse represented two distinct frontier eras, but their functions were intertwined. The courthouse (1859) coincided with Manatee County's origins. Under contract with Ezekial Glazier, it was constructed adjacent to land donated in 1850 as "the old burying ground" by Josiah and Mary Gates, credited as Manatee's first settlers under Armed Occupation. That era's pioneers regularly doubled their duties. Glazier, the contractor, was also the first elected judge of probate and the community coffin maker. Gates was treasurer and founding father, giving another parcel in 1860 for the courthouse and the county seat on land he had platted by surveyor John Jackson, who also laid out the Village of Tampa.<sup>4</sup>

The courthouse, built in 1859-60, was "a neat one story frame building, and a credit to the county at that time," according to Joseph Simpson, chronicler of Manatee history.<sup>5</sup> The structure served the vast county and its tiny population of less than a thousand - roughly one person for every five square miles. In the first county election for Congress, 56 total votes were cast; the sheriff's race was decided by a vote of 25 to 23; only 46 voters comprised the county seat precinct at Manatee Village.<sup>6</sup>

The area was a northern borderland of the Seminole lands when the first settlers came. The Reverend Edward Gates, whose parents had deeded the church and courthouse lots, later reminisced about the settlement era before the last Seminole War. Routine callers to his family's dinner table were Chief Holata Micco, usually known as Billy Bowlegs, and Chief Tiger Tail, who eventually committed suicide at the scene of his tribe's 1857 deportation from the Gulf coast to the Arkansas reservation.<sup>7</sup> The Manatee Methodist Church, as successor of the Union Congregation, had its beginnings on that frontier.

The climate, an important factor in today's Florida, was not the prime consideration for those pioneers. Though the climate has not changed, predrainage Florida seasons featured

water-covered land, black clouds of mosquitoes, and poor drinking water. For the few often isolated families, eking out a living was a difficult task, and most of Manatee's earliest settlers raised crops for their family table as well as their economic livelihood. It was the homestead opportunity, the federal government's series of offers of free land for the price of filing, improving, and occupying, which generally brought the claimants.

Generally, it was financial necessity and opportunity which enticed men and women to the frontier challenge. Then as now, they counted on an ascending value for their Florida real estate. Indeed, the Manatee pioneers' greatest complaint about Indian Wars was that they held down property values. The very location of the Manatee frontier brought many without choices, such as soldiers stationed at Tampa's Fort Brooke or passing through during the Mexican War or assigned to south Florida during Indian conflicts. Many of those stayed after discharge or "got sand in their shoes" and were later compelled to return. Much early Manatee land was acquired from the federal land office by use of military bounty land warrants, given to soldiers as added incentives for voluntary enlistment in the unpopular 1846-48 war with Mexico.

The recent immigrant was often lured into the army. In 1849, Fort Hamer on the Manatee was populated in two out of three cases by immigrant enlistees. It was a true frontier, a refuge, a hiding place. The little Manatee courthouse was the scene of pioneer cases over land and mortgages, and during its construction year, the setting for a case against a German-immigrant settler, Joseph Atzeroth, charged with harboring a runaway slave, a fugitive from an upstate owner.<sup>8</sup>

The first preacher noted in the church register was Frank Stewart, 1847-48, described by Edward Gates as "a young man in his first year of his ministry, his mission field extended from Newnansville to Manatee." For one year's preaching, Stewart received four dollars, according to a receipt dated 1852, in the Manatee County Historical Society archives.<sup>9</sup>

A string of circuit riders, including Leroy G. Lesley of Tampa, filled the pulpit in early years. The first wedding registered was in 1851, that of William H. Whitaker, Sarasota Bay pioneer fisherman and cattleman, and Mary Jane Wyatt, daughter of William Wyatt, who had pioneered earlier in the Tallahassee capital and rose to territorial power as the state's Whig leader before coming to Manatee to plant sugar and claim land under Armed Occupation.<sup>10</sup>

At the close of the Civil War, the county seat was moved to Pine Level, a flat pine forest nearly in the center of the county and forty miles from Manatee. Pine Level, a town created far from southern control, was barely accessible even by frontier standards. Most trips to court from anywhere in Manatee County required at least one overnight camp.

The little Manatee Village courthouse was replaced at Pine Level by one described by Simpson as constructed "of small peeled unhewed logs" later followed by a two story frame structure which "never was ceiled or plastered.... There were a few inches of sawdust put on the floor of the courtroom and the suffering the people had to endure from fleas ... was almost unbearable! It was said to be the worst courthouse in Florida."<sup>11</sup>



**The Manatee Methodist Church relocated in Manatee Village Historical Park. Photograph courtesy of Greg Oliver**

Succeeded by such buildings, the original courthouse was auctioned by Manatee County and purchased by the congregation, becoming the Manatee Methodist Church. Twenty years afterward it was moved a little to the east to make room for the 1889 church on the same spot.

The courthouse-turned-church then became the parsonage until 1906, and afterward a private residence.

Public recognition of the 1859 courthouse and the 1889 church has come in the recent past. Both buildings received historical markers from the Historical Society in 1966. When the preservation move matured in 1974, Manatees came up with many artifacts of the buildings - the old bell, pews, and furnishings. About that time in 1976, Rodney Little, Florida's historic preservationist, who was appointed State Historic Preservation Officer for Maryland in 1978, wrote to County Commissioner Ken Dierks, "current research indicates that the old Manatee County Courthouse is the oldest surviving building constructed expressly for use as a county courthouse with its nearest contenders dating from the 1870s."<sup>12</sup> In spite of its having been moved, an exception to the general rule was made when the "Original Manatee County Courthouse" was added to the *National Register of Historic Places* in September of the Bicentennial year, following nomination by Rita Anderson of the Historical Commission.<sup>13</sup>

On that Bicentennial day, when the old bell rang out across Manatee's River and lands and its tones resounded once again from ancient oaks and summer blossoms, it symbolized a constancy, a modern-day determination to preserve a frontier heritage. The fate of the old church and courthouse was no longer in question. They would be saved for the future.

To visit the courthouse and church, go toward the south banks of the Manatee River and find Manatee Village Historical Park at Bradenton's Fifteenth Street East and Seventh Avenue, open weekdays, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and Sundays, 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. It is a pleasant place, a successful preservation project, and a rare opportunity to revisit frontier Florida.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Warren Johnson, Jr., "Restoration of Church and Courthouse," unpublished paper, February, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Johnson, March 3, 1979, Bradenton, Florida.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, "Restoration."

<sup>4</sup> Rita E. Anderson, "Old. Village of Manatee Historical District," nomination to *National Register of Historic Places*, February 4, 1976; Johnson and Anderson, "Summary" addendum to *National Register* nomination; Initial meeting, March 10, 1856, Book 1, Manatee County Commissioners Minutes, 1856-69, Manatee County Courthouse; Joseph Herman Simpson, "History of Manatee County, Florida," published serially, *The Herald* (Bradenton), initial date, June 15, 1915; Carl D. King, "Visit to Old Manatee Historical Park," Manatee County Historical Society, May 18, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Simpson, Chapter XV, "Court Houses of the Original Manatee County."

<sup>6</sup> Election certification, Manatee, October 9, 1856, Manatee Election Returns, 1856-64, Secretary of State Papers, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee; 1860 U.S. Census, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.

<sup>7</sup> Simpson, "History of Manatee County."

<sup>8</sup> Docket Book, on file, original Manatee County Courthouse, Manatee Village Historical Park; U.S. Census, 1850, 19th Division, Hillsborough County, Manatee Settlement, p. 265, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.

<sup>9</sup> E. F. Gates, "Some Interesting Florida History," a paper read at the dedication of the Manatee Methodist Church, June 31, 1897, records of Manatee Methodist Church, Bradenton; Negative 752A, Manatee County Historical Society archival negatives, Manatee County Public Library.

<sup>10</sup> Church Register, records of Manatee Methodist Church, Bradenton.

<sup>11</sup> Simpson, Chapter XV.

<sup>12</sup> J. Rodney Little to Ken Dierks, August 26, 1975, records of Manatee County Historical Commission, Manatee Village Historical Park, Bradenton.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Williams to A. K. Leach, September 20, 1976, *ibid*.