

BENJAMINVILLE (BENTOWN) ILLINOIS

County: McLean **Township:** Dawson (formerly known as Padua)

Research by Mary Stack 2010

Location: Take Rt 9 (1400N) 8 miles east of Bloomington IL, turn south on Bentown blacktop 2400E for 1 mile.

Benjaminville was founded in 1856 when three Quaker families, those of Joseph Marot, Isaac Clement and Timothy Benjamin, arrived in the area. The Kickapoo Indians under Chief Machina had ruled the area.

Settlement followed and was closely tied to the Society of Friends and the meeting house that was first constructed there in 1859. A burial ground was established soon after. Through the 1860s a slow but steady stream of Quakers moved to the area. Settlement continued through the 1870s and Benjaminville became a social, political and religious hub for Friends from Illinois.

An 1879 history of McLean County called Benjaminville "one of the strongest settlements of Friends that is to be found anywhere in the state."

Benjaminville never grew large though it did contain at least two churches besides the meeting house and a few shops.

A stage coach line from Champaign to Blooming Grove (Bloomington), to Peoria did stop at the general store (SWcorner) and post office. On the NW corner was the Thomas Pryor Blacksmith Shop. Today there is a boulder with a plaque on the NW corner telling of the history of Bentown. There were also two churches besides the meeting house. A schoolhouse was one half mile east.

THE PLAQUE

Benjaminville was founded in the 1850's by Quaker farmers looking for rich prairie soil on which to grow their wheat. It was located primarily at the corner of (intersecting) Dawson township (sections 6 and 7) and Old Town township (section 1 and 12).

Half mile north of Benjaminville is the Quaker meeting house. In 1859, three years after the first Quaker settlers arrived in the area, a meeting house was constructed on the site of the present-day Friends Meeting House for \$1,000. Quakers continued to flow into the area through the 1860s and in 1874 the current Benjaminville Friends Meeting House was erected, the only structure still existing from the town of Benjaminville. The Friends Meeting House is a typical example of traditional Quaker meeting houses. Elements common east of the Allegheny Mountains and found on the Benjaminville example are: plain, undecorated interiors, lack of stained glass, rectangular construction, some type of partition within the interior space, an attached burial ground, exterior simplicity, separate men's and women's entrances and the entryway location along the long wall. However, this building does have one major difference on its interior when compared with most

meeting houses. Traditionally, Quaker meeting houses had two rooms, divided by a movable partition, termed "shutters," meant to separate men from women during meetings; these shutters are noticeably absent on the Benjaminville Meeting House. The members of the meeting at Bentown were among "pioneers" with the Society of Friends in that they were one of the first seven groups to allow men and women to meet as one group of Friends. The room inside the Bentown building was simply divided with a waist-high partition as opposed to the movable wall. The Meeting House represents an outstanding example of Quaker meeting house architecture and contains within its design many of the major elements associated with the style. It is unique in that it allowed both male and female friends to worship together in the same room. The burial ground, however, maintains a strict separation, not by gender but by religious affiliation; there are three sections, one for Quakers, one for non-Quakers, and one for distant relatives of both. The original iron stoves have been replaced with oil-burning stoves, set into the original flues.

Family members buried in the cemetery are: Bridget Murphy Blair and her husband Moses Blair; their children and in-laws Elsie Blair, Frank Blair, Goldie Bean Blair, Joseph Blair, Philip M. Blair, Vera Worley Blair, Rosetta Blair. Jennie F. Sacry; Everett, Frank, Grace, Iliff, Mary and Orval Spencer; and Steve Hopt.

Society of Friends meetings often took political stances on issues of the day. Among these were, peace, Indian affairs, women's suffrage, and the evils of boxing, lotteries and gambling. Throughout the 19th century Benjaminville was home to a distinct local community of considerable political importance.

By 1870 the town's fate was sealed when the Lake Erie Railroad opted to bypass the town because of the elevation of its terrain. The local churches eventually moved closer to the new railroad and the town's businesses shut down. In 1981 the only other remaining structure, an old wagon shop, was destroyed by fire, leaving the meeting house as the last remnant of the town. The site was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984.

ROOTS REUNION AND BENTOWN

The history of Benjaminville, Illinois (known locally as Bentown) is of interest to the Roots group because that area is where James Murphy with his son and three daughters settled when they came to McLean County sometime between 1850-1855. Also the Cleary brothers lived and worked in early 1860s as farmhands (before moving north to El Paso area to purchase land). Both the Murphy and Cleary families spent several years living around New York area when the first arrived from Ireland.

The 1860 census shows Patrick Cleary with wife Mary, and Michael Cleary listed living near the Penn family in Old Town township. Family lore says that brother Thomas was living and working nearby in 1861. The Cleary brothers' sister, Mary, would soon marry into the Penn family. Location of Penn farm was 2 miles south of Bentown and 1-1/2 m. west.

The 1860 census shows James Murphy 67, Philip 26, and Sarah 19 are living together. James is shown owning real estate worth \$2,000 and personal property of \$500. Next door are living daughter Bridget and her husband Moses Blair (Moses 28, Bridget 22, John 3 and Jane 1) with \$0 real estate and \$300 personal property. Sometime after 1852 James Murphy purchased 160 acres of land directly across the road from the Friends Meeting House stretching south to Bentown corner. (Old Town Township, McLean County, 23N, 3E, section 1, SE) This section was originally bought thru warrants in 1852 by a John Niccolls, a large land speculator.

John Niccolls, born April 23, 1810, died July, 1893. He moved west to Harrison, Ohio, where he was a large holder of western lands, owning thirty thousand acres in Missouri, Illinois and Kansas. He lived during his latter years at Bloomington, Illinois.

In 1865 son Philip Murphy and his sister Mary Murphy Evans and her husband John Evans owned 80 acres each side by side. Both were purchased 10/23/1865. (Father James died in 1866 possibly while living with daughter Sarah Cleary in rural El Paso IL. He is buried at St. Mary's cemetery in El Paso.)

The brother and sister farms were 1 mile south and 1 mile east of where Benjaminville stood. (Go 2 miles south of Route 9 on Bentown blacktop 2400E, turn east on 1200N. One mile east, on the north side of the road, was Philip Murphy's 80 acres of land (1 mile to 1-1/4 mile) section 8, 23N, W2SW, Padua, 04E, 3. Next at 1-1/4 mile to 1-1/2 mile was 80 acres owned by his sister and husband, John and Mary Murphy Evans. Section 8, 23N, E2SW, Padua, 04E, 3.

In 1867 sister Bridget and her husband Moses Blair purchased 40 acres in Blue Mound township section 34, 24N, NESE, 04E, 3. This land was 2 miles north and xx miles east of her brother and sister's land in Bentown. In 1869 Moses and Bridget purchased the NWSE section. This is where the Blair home stands today. (2700E. **Location: ????** miles east of Bloomington IL, turn north on 2700E for .5mi. House sits back from the road on the east side.)

Philip Murphy sold up and moved his family west around xxxxx.

The John and Mary Murphy Evans family continued to grow and prosper in Bentown thru the 20th century. The site of the Evans farmstead from the late 1800s to 1980s is located by turning east on 1300E at Bentown, the third home on the south side of the road. This site was the farm of the son of John and Mary Evans--Stephen A. Evans followed by his son Stephen B. Jr. A new home was built on the homestead site around 1980.

The fourth house on the south side of the road was occupied by the grandson of John and Mary Evans--William and Laverne Leary Evans, until around 2000.

The first house on the north side of the road belonged to the Bedell family and is believed to have been built in the 1860s. The second house on the north side of the road was

owned by Melvin Hopt and later his son John. The first two homes on the south side belong to the founding Benjamin family.

Mary Stack August 2010