

Written In Stone

By Sherry Johnston

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Hampden Ridge UMC Cemetery

In planning family reunions, there are always lots of last minute details to attend to. Just when you think you've got it all done, something else crops up and you're reminded of what you haven't done rather than what you have. Over the last six months or more, our family has been getting ready for a family reunion and it's finally here! This weekend, descendants of Charles W. Beasley; David F. Henderson; and Benjamin Mellinger will gather together for the first time in historic downtown Evergreen. Members of these families were raised in Owassa, Belleville, Hampden Ridge, Old Sparta and Brownville of Conecuh County. Our ancestors are buried in several cemeteries across the county like the Hancock Cemetery located in the woods off of CR 18; Hampden Ridge UMC on CR 23; Olive Branch; Brownville; Belleville; the Magnolia and Brown-Beasley Cemeteries.

This past Saturday, I assisted in clean-up of the headstones and grounds of the Hampden Ridge UMC Cemetery where my great grandparents and grandparents are buried, along with other allied families and residents of early Hampden Ridge and Belleville. My mother grew up attending church in the Hampden Ridge area, and we always enjoyed going to hear Grandmother Beasley play the piano—the church is a little different, but the feeling of 'home' is still the same. Homecoming is held every August and many members of my family have attended for years—we used to have 'dinner on the grounds' with long tables stretched out, groaning under the tons of food between the old oak trees near the final resting places of these early residents of Conecuh County. Now, it happens indoors under the air conditioning—the tables still groan though from the amount of food and we all enjoy the fellowship.

Hampden Ridge served as the first county seat of Conecuh before the removal of it to Sparta. The very first courthouse in Conecuh County was a one-room log cabin with a long table in the middle, and the jurors adjourned into the nearby woods to deliberate their cases. The name of the community comes from the home estate of Alexander Autrey, so named in memory of his mother, Elizabeth Hampden of VA. Inside the church, there is a plaque to the memory of Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Autrey, who gave the land for the original church. At one time, adjacent to the church, there was a school where many of the residents attended until it was torn down and the students bussed to Castleberry. Nearby was the Lee Post Office, attended by Asberry C. Beasley for many years. L.L. Lee was a prominent farmer and strawberry grower in the area, and strawberries were shipped to markets outside of Conecuh far and wide.

In the Hampden Ridge Cemetery, one would find Beasley, Nored, Johnson, Daw, Broxton, Mellinger, Griffin, Scroggins, and Hancock just to name a few. There are a few Italian marble headstones, elaborate sculptured ones and simple hand-carved grave markers, along with shell covered mounds. There are Masons, War Veterans, Woodmen of the World members, and folks just like you and me at rest in Hampden Ridge UMC Cemetery.

If you'd like to know more about the preservation efforts for this cemetery or others in our community, give me a call at (251) 578-2670 or email me through canebrakesociety@yahoo.com