

CONTACT

David Blackburn
Heritage Preservation Coordinator
Chester County Planning Dept.
[610-344-6285](tel:610-344-6285)

Mark E. Dixon
Tredyffrin Township Historical Comm.
610-952-4092

Cheri Christakis
The Baptist Church in the Great Valley
610-427-3630 (cell) (or you can leave a
message at the Church's Office - 610-
688-5445)

**August tour at Tredyffrin's Baptist Church in the Great Valley
will focus on stories of oppression and resistance from its 300-year history**

BERWYN, Pa. – Tredyffrin Township's Baptist Church in the Great Valley (BCGV) – founded in 1711 by Welsh immigrants – will be featured on the August 1 tour of the Chester County Planning Department's 30th annual free summer series, *Town Tours and Village Walks*.

The 10-week series debuts June 6 at the Chester County History Center with the theme, "Celebrating Success in Historic Preservation," and ends Aug. 15. Each of the walks begins at 5:30 p.m., ends at 7 p.m. and is free. The walks proceed rain or shine. (In case of severe weather – thunder storms, tropical storms, etc. – a decision to cancel will be made by 2 p.m., and announced on the planning department's website: chescoplanning.org.) No registration is required.

BCGV's 14.3-acre site at 945 North Valley Forge Road in Devon has been a community fixture since 1722 when the congregation – immigrants from Wales who, until then, had met in private homes – built a 28-foot-square log meetinghouse alongside the road from Centerville to a junction with the road from Philadelphia to Lancaster at the ridge of the hill. The meetinghouse was surrounded by the church burial ground. According to an 1881 history of Chester County, "The situation was pleasant, being on rising ground by the highway, and near a small brook called Nant yr Ewig." The original log building was used until 1805, when it was replaced by the current stone church.

BCGV's 1805 building resembles the structure of the church at Rhydwlilm, Wales, from whence the immigrants came. The Baptist movement in Wales dates to the mid-17th Century when, to avoid persecution, members met in secret. The first Rhydwlilm meetinghouse – constructed in 1701 and

rebuilt/remodeled in 1763, 1841 and 1875 – survives today. Despite the end of official persecution, however, unofficial oppression continued, and a large group of Rhydwylym Baptists came to America in the first quarter of the 18th Century. A portion of those immigrants settled in William Penn's "Welsh Tract," of which Tredyffrin Township is a part.

"Perhaps the most significant legacy of these Welsh Baptists," wrote Baptist historian Gerald L. Priest, "can be found in areas of local church ministry: congregational singing, fervent expository preaching, Reformed doctrine, itinerant evangelism, and especially their organizational skills as reflected in the first and most influential of all Baptist associations in America – the Philadelphia Baptist Association (1707)."

By 1881, BCGV had helped establish seven additional Baptist congregations at French Creek, Chester Springs, Phoenixville, Norristown, West Chester, Malvern and Radnor.

In addition to touring BCGV's 1805 building, tour-goers at the Aug. 1 event will visit the graves of four prominent church members:

- Rev. David Jones (d. 1820), pastor and missionary, was also Chaplain to Gen. Anthony Wayne and served the troops at the encampment at Valley Forge. He survived the Paoli Massacre and later dedicated the battleground. In addition to his chaplain duties, Jones served as an occasional courier between Washington, Wayne and Franklin. In a 1776 letter to Benjamin Franklin, Wayne wrote in part, "Through the medium of my Chaplain (David Jones) I hope this will reach you as he has promised to blow out any man's brains who will attempt to take it from him."
- Rachel Cleaver, (d. 1836) with her husband Isaac and five others, left the church in 1821 for two years to become missionaries to the Cherokee in Tennessee. Members of this team taught trades such as blacksmithing and life skills to the natives at a time when the US government was beginning its ethnic cleansing of the Cherokee Nation. One Welsh clergyman, who originally went on the mission trip and continued to be supported by combined Philadelphia mission efforts, Rev. Evan Jones, stayed with the Cherokee people throughout their tragic and cruel relocation to Oklahoma.
- Rev. Leonard Fletcher (d. 1859), the pastor who led during the period of largest growth in BCGV membership, baptizing 447 people, was also a leader of the anti-slavery Wilberforce Society in Chester County.
- Phillis Burr (d. 1872), one of 127 Africans rescued from slavery in 1800 when the U.S. warship *Ganges* encountered two private vessels carrying slaves to Havana. The vessels were diverted to the Lazaretto Settlement House in Philadelphia where the sick and largely naked passengers would be cared for by a local Quaker relief agency and placed with families. Though they were not returned to their homelands, they were not sold as slaves and were given indentured contracts and apprenticeships. For reasons that are

unclear, the tombstone does not reflect Ms. Burr's real story, but she was a member of the church.

After 313 years, The Baptist Church in the Great Valley continues to be an active American Baptist Church and member of the Philadelphia Baptist Association and, more recently, a member of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists.

The Aug. 1 event is co-sponsored by the Tredyffrin Township Historical Commission, an advisory body to the township supervisors, and which functions to build awareness of local historical structures and encourage their preservation.

Town Tours and Village Walks has been a county institution since 1995 when it was launched to foster interpretation and preservation of historic structures, landscapes and other resources at the County level is a collaborative partnership of the Chester County Planning Commission, the County Archives & Records Services Department and Chester County Parks + Preservation. For details, see www.chescoplanning.org/Historic/TownTours.



BCGV's 1805 building (top) in Devon, Pa., resembles the Baptist church at Rhydwylym, Wales, where the Baptist movement dates to the mid-17th Century when, to avoid persecution, members met in secret. The first Rhydwylym meetinghouse – constructed in 1701 and rebuilt/remodeled in 1763, 1841 and 1875 – survives today.