

Hebron: Bethel Colony Cemetery Lay Them Down, One By One

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The settlement began. The mill, their source of income was built; their homes, the way of life were built; and the church, their spiritual source, was built. And their cemetery, their final resting place, was established.

Hebron Cemetery, north of Bethel, was established to contain the remains of the Bethel Colonists. The cemetery remains today, a remnant of the past and a link between the families of yesteryear and today.

Mrs. Lucille Bower, historian of the Bethel Colony Foundation and probably the most knowledgeable person concerning the Bethel Colony history, says the cemetery was located so far from the colony, two miles, due to the quality of land. The German settlers were thrifty when it came to planning use of their valuable land. In life their houses were built almost directly on the streets to save land and in death their cemetery was located in the poorest farming area to save valuable crop land. The land wouldn't support many years of good crops so the dead were laid there instead.

As the colonists died they were buried in rows, one after another, with no regard for family plots. Even husbands and wives were separated in death if someone died between the deaths of the mates.

The original grave markers were carved from walnut with the name and dates of the deceased on the marker. Later, around 1850, the markers were changed to limestone with the stone and engraving being original Bethel Colony work.

Through the years the walnut markers have been destroyed or lost and buried so the first grave locations and the name of the occupants have been lost but with the use of the limestone tombstones the records of the dead are intact.

The earliest dated stone is that of Jonahs Werner who was born in 1778 and died in 1850. A number of stones are marked 1857 when a small pox or malaria fever epidemic hit the colony Eleven colonists died that year. Between the years of 1850 and 1879, the years after the colonists began using the stone markers and the year the colony disbanded, 94 colonists were buried in the cemetery.

Among those buried in Hebron are the old Bethel names, Schnauffer, Will, Bauer (later changed to Bower), Bair, Ziegler, Keller, Scholl, and Stahl. And, of course, the name most associated with the Bethel Colony, Keil. Dr. William Keil, the leader of the colony, has several family members buried in Hebron. Two of his granddaughters, Aurora and Louisa are buried side by side. They died one day apart and it is assumed they were victims of the epidemics. Also buried in the cemetery is August Keil, son of Dr. Keil, who was sent back to Bethel after his father had journeyed to Oregon. August is buried in th early 1900's and is buried in the relatively new part of the cemetery. August also had a son buried in the cemetery, Julius H. who died in 1878.

A feeling of the past is in Hebron Cemetery with the markers dating nearly 125 years ago. The feeling turns to wonderment as one begins to realize and consider that these are the people that came hundreds of miles in the mid-1840's to begin an experimental settlement in the wastelands of Missouri. The result of their efforts is two miles to the south and is called Bethel. And their reward for the hard work is a final resting place in a patch of unfertile farming land.