



A Labor of Love Preserving B.B.'s Legacy



After years of restoration, the Keeton family unveils Tennessee Historical Commission marker for the old Dunbar Store

The Keeton Store has an immensely rich history. Housed in a hand-hewn log building built in the 1840's with a wood-burning stove at its heart, it was long the social center of the community now known as Bath Springs. It first began as a tavern and general store and also served as the stagecoach stop on the route between Clifton and Lexington. As a tavern, it also served as a barbershop, dentist office, church, school, post office, meeting hall and courthouse. Above, Tim Keeton, who spearheaded the family's efforts to restore the building, reads from the Tennessee Historical Commission marker that was unveiled Saturday.

By Pam McGaha

Today, Bath Springs is seen by many as a quiet and beautiful little river community at the south end of Decatur County. In fact, the people, places and events that took place on the old Stage Road between Scotts Hill and Clifton had a significant effect on the rest of the state, and, in fact, was a shaping force of the Civil War. At one time, the area was comprised of many smaller communities: Three Way, Bob's Landing, Tie Whop, Clifton Bend, Martin's Landing, Oil Well, Swallow's Bluff and more. But the heart of the area was the Keeton Store at Dunbar.

The store was built by Dr. Robert Keeton, who traveled in 1825 from Kentucky with his bride, Catharina, in a wagon train searching for a place to set up his medical practice. They laid claim to a tract of

land in what is now Decatur County, in a wilderness area where the roads were little more than narrow paths or trails tramped out by the buffalo herds - a place where the Cherokee Indians had left only a dozen years earlier.

In the 1840's, stagecoach services began running through the community, and the route followed the same paths that the Keetons had followed. Dr. Keeton, an intelligent man with a will to provide, realized that he had "location, location, location", and so he built a "cracker barrel" store, which also served as a stagecoach stop.

With their location on the route about halfway between Clifton and Scotts Hill, the store attracted new pioneer families, who settled their houses and farms near the store.

A few years later, the store played a pivotal role in the activities of the Confederate

troops during the Civil War. In December, 1862, General Nathan Bedford Forrest had left Columbia, Tennessee, traveled through Waynesboro and crossed the Tennessee River into West Tennessee at Clifton. His beleaguered troops had no percussion caps to ignite black powder charges to fire their weapons. Forrest sent advance scouts to Dunbar to try to find new supplies. When the general and his troops arrived, they camped near the store for two days as the women of the community fed them, clothed them and tended to their needs in the freezing weather. During this time the Dunbar store served as an emergency recruitment center, and although it is not known exactly where the percussion caps came from, Forrest left not only with a supply of them, but his ranks had swelled with new recruits from the area as well.

As the years rolled by, the store served as a political center where candidates campaigned and the community voted. From May, 1879 until April, 1901, the building was officially deemed the Dunbar Post Office, although it had served as an unofficial post office for years before that. Steamboats carrying passengers, goods (including much of the Keeton Store merchandise), and mail down the Tennessee River and dropped it off at Clifton, where it was transferred by stagecoach to Dunbar. Naturally, the community used the store as the point to send and receive mail, as well as the place to hear of news from afar. A letter slot can still be seen in the original front door today.

Two major events took place at the store during the Great Depression. During those tough times, many families subsisted mainly on cornbread, and so a gristmill was added in a lean-to shed beside the store. An Allis Chalmers Model B tractor that was used on the Keeton farm during the week powered the mill. The store's ability to grind corn was truly a blessing to the community. According to K. Donald Keeton,

who was born and grew up in a log house across the road from the old Keeton Store. "Grist mill customers from all over the county flocked to Keeton Store with their sackfuls of shelled corn for milling. Mainly, they came on horseback and in wagons but there were also some cars and pickup trucks. Saturday was the designated grinding day and the mill usually was running continuously from early morning until night." Trips to the Dunbar Store were usually a family affair - as the men gathered around the gristmill, women browsed the wares in the store, and the children played games outside.

Also during the Depression, an Esso gas pump was added just to the left of the front door, with just enough room for two cars to pull in at once, one on each side of the pump. And it was truly a pump. A handle was pumped by the attendant from an underground tank into a 10-gallon glass bowl on top of the pump. Then the gasoline was allowed to run down a hose into the vehicle.

A dozen years later, during Christmas week, the store moved across Highway 114, out of the log structure and into a larger and newer building. "We carried everything across the street in our arms," remembers Bryan Keeton, Donald's brother. The new building was a modern cinder-block one. The log building remained in use for seasonal and agricultural items like fertilizer. The store closed in the spring of 2005.

With the exception of a brief period of time, the store remained in the family. Dr. Robert Keeton's son, Dr. John Lawson Keeton followed in his father's footsteps. Robert Forrester Keeton succeeded his father and Bedford Benard Keeton followed him. And the rest of this story is all about Bedford, or B.B., as he was called.

One of B.B.'s sons was Bryan, who in turn had a son, Tim. Tim spent many an hour with his grandfather, a fine Christian gentleman who inspired him to want to follow in

See "Keeton Store" on B6



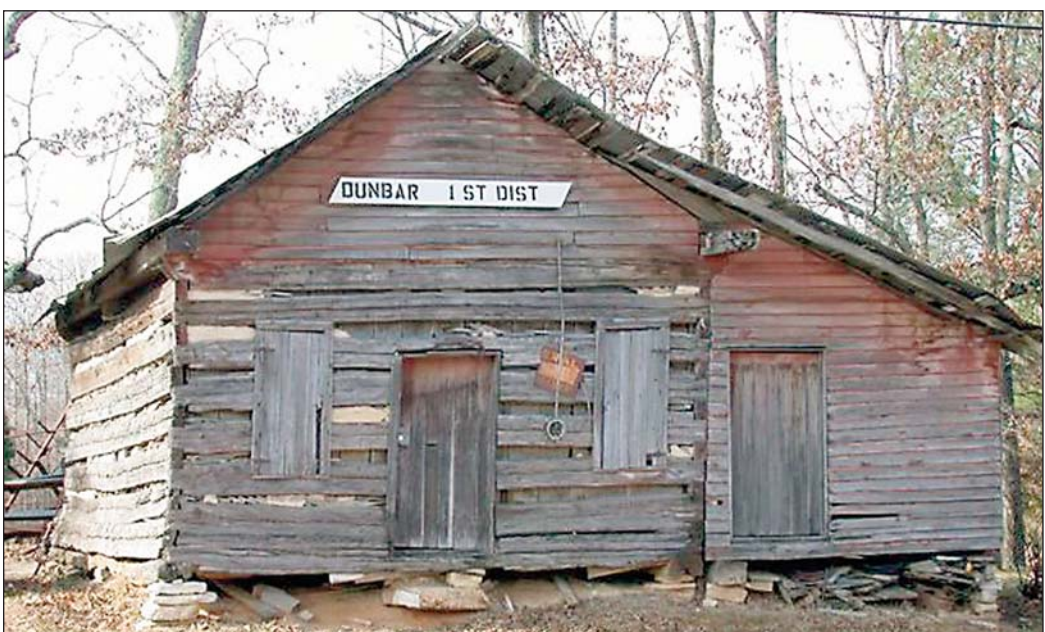
After the knuckle boom peeled away the roof and rafters, workmen used it to lift each log off and away from the structure.



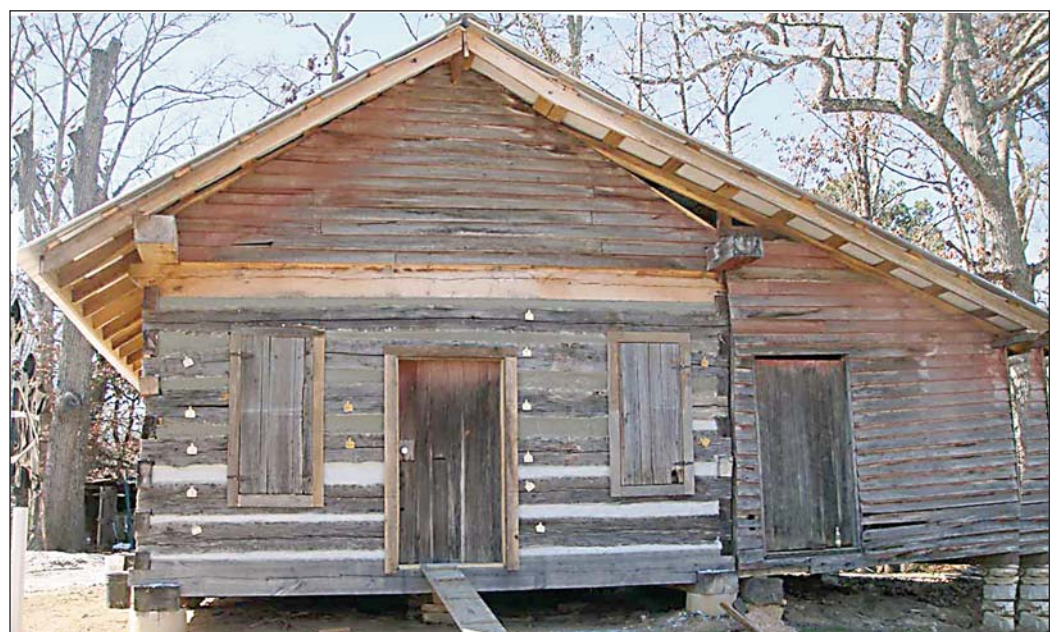
Some of the original hand-hewn logs had to be completely recreated. Here, Joel Keeton and Paul Keeton work to square a log in order to replace one that was too damaged to be repaired.



B.B. Keeton, Tim Keeton's grandfather, ran the store from 1925 until 1959 and served as a great inspiration to his young grandson, regaling him with stories of the store's past and teaching him life lessons never forgotten. Tim's restoration project began as a way to honor his grandparents wishes that the past be preserved.



Prior to late 2009, the old Dunbar Store had become so dilapidated that Tim Keeton was afraid that it would collapse before he could begin efforts to restore the building.



The rebuilt building still bears the tags that were used to number each hand-hewn log so that the cabin could be reconstructed in the proper order.

Keeton Store reconstruction brings history alive



Civil War reenactors from the Parkers Crossroads Battlefield Association fired several rounds from their cannon during the ceremony, and others in the crowd wore period clothing. The Keeton store was the resting place for General Nathan Bedford Forrest's troops, where they were fed, clothed and tended to by the women of the community. In addition to new recruits, Forrest also left the area with a new supply of badly needed percussion caps.



Tim Keeton, the grandson of Bedford and Ora Keeton, gave a few opening remarks during Saturday's unveiling of the Tennessee Historical Society marker. Behind him on the stage are, from left, Nelma Crutcher of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Betty Hughes of the Decatur County Tigers Chapter of the UDC, Ken Keeton, the son of family historian K. Donald Keeton, Richard Sanders of the DC Historical Society, Cotton Ivy, and Representative Steve McDaniel.

his footsteps. B.B. told Tim that that he liked to preserve things, and he wanted his legacy carried on.

In October of 2009, Tim began to realize that if the old log cabin was going to be preserved, it had to be done quickly. "I was worried that it would fall before we could get started," he remembers. His brother, Joel Keeton's, father-in-law, Carl Ray Wallace was visiting from Mississippi, and he was gung-ho on the idea of restoring the store. The trouble was, he got everybody started on it, and then said, "See ya!"

They might not have been sure of exactly what they were doing, but the Keetons were blessed with the help of the community, and the work got done. Each log was numbered and the dismantling began. Tim is especially grateful to N.L. Montgomery & Sons Sawmill, who gave them the use of a knuckle boom, which could peel off the roof as well as lift out the logs and rafters. Once the structure was dismantled, the foundation was

poured, and each log was returned to its original position. Some of the hand-hewn logs had to be replaced, and all of the timber for the new logs was cut from trees growing on the family land. Some were hand-hewn with axes by family members. Others were cut by sawmills.

The daunting project took three years to complete, but the pride and satisfaction felt by those who were involved in the reconstruction were incalculable. The family then approached Betty Hughes of the Decatur County Tigers Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy for help in sponsoring the store for consideration to receive a marker from the Tennessee Historical Commission. The markers are not easy to come by, and applications must meet stringent criteria, but through the diligence of the United Daughters and the abundance of painstaking information gleaned by family historian K. Donald Keeton, the application was approved. Donald Keeton also served as the

fundraiser for the bronze marker, which cost about \$1500. Donations for the marker were received from as far away as Texas and California.

Saturday, May 26, 2012 was the day that all of the blood, sweat, toil, tears, research and fundraising culminated in a wonderful afternoon of community fellowship and recognition. The crowd of neighbors was joined by special guests and dignitaries who felt privileged to be standing on such historically fertile ground. Memories flew under clear blue skies as stories were told of days gone by. Many present spoke of their experiences at the old store, including former Commissioner of Agriculture for the State of Tennessee Cotton Ivy, who recalled casting his very first vote at the store.

Representative Steve McDaniel regaled the assembled with his stories of the Civil War and the role that the store had played in those days. Accompanied by Civil War reenactors of the Parkers Crossroads Battle-

field Association, McDaniel brought the days of the conflict alive, and surveying the scene outside of the log store, one could imagine that they were experiencing a day in the early 1860's.

The Keeton Store now joins five other historically significant sites in Decatur County that have gained the recognition of the Tennessee Historical Society, and those who attended Saturday's ceremonies were humbled in the knowledge that we who tread these grounds today are making history for future generations. We can only hope that there are families like the Keetons who are willing to preserve that history.

The News Leader would like to thank the Keeton family for sharing their stories and photographs, and most importantly, K. Donald Keeton, who has provided invaluable historical information through his diligent research.



Mozella Scott, left, who is 97 years old, recalled the days that she and her brothers would go to Keeton's Store to buy candy and cheese and crackers. Scott is seated beside Barbara and R.C. Stegall, esteemed Decatur County historian. They were but a few of the notable guests who attended Saturday's ceremonies.

"If you don't know where you've come from, you don't know where you are." ~ James Burke