

Christian religion has long played a role in the storied history of Washington County, as made evident by the many churches which have come to dot our towns and the surrounding rural areas. But perhaps no congregation has more tales to tell than the Old Blue River Christian Church. Hang a right by the old Pierce School building and you'll eventually find the quaint church house nestled along a wooded road. Though unassuming, the building boasts some of the deepest roots in the area. "The church was started back in 1810," according to Faye Cochran, church secretary and keeper of the congregation's historical records. "In fact, it's the oldest church in the state!" Cochran points to a 1919 article in the Indianapolis paper celebrating Old Blue River Christian's centennial as proof. The numbers don't seem to quite add up, but Cochran says it's all about the name.

Blue River Church was started after John Wright, Sr., who would become known a prominent preacher in southern Indiana, moved his family by the Blue River in 1909. He soon founded a congregation of Free Will, sometimes called Dependent, Baptists and with the help of his father Amos, Sr., and brother Peter allied nine other local Baptist congregations together in what became known as the Blue River Association.

"He was a great preacher," Cochran stated about John Wright. "The stories go that he carried a yard stick through the church while he preached, and if he caught you sleeping, he'd hit you with it."

Growing discontent with denominational creeds and wishing to base his ministry on the Bible alone, Wright initiated a shift away from his Baptist roots. The church was briefly affiliated with the Church of Christ and became known as the Church of Christ as Blue River, before coming into contact with the Disciples of Christ.

This is believed to have influenced the church's name change to Blue River Christian Church in 1819, which has stuck ever since. This is also the year which most consider the church to have officially started, which led to the centennial being held in 1919.

The current church house was built in 1856, and Cochran says it was dedicated on November 22 of that same year. The original meeting house was little more than a log cabin. It eventually burned down, though the records are unclear whether this occurred before or after the new building was constructed.

With nearly two hundred years of history under its belt, the church has obviously seen its share of excitement. The church was closed down during the War of 1812 while the Wright family was temporarily relocated to Old Fort Hill.

John Morgan and his men traveled through the Blue River community during his infamous raid in 1863. "They came through looking for horses," Cochran said, sharing the stories passed down by the congregation's oldest members.

One of her favorite stories about the church also happened during the Civil War era. The church record tells of Jacob Ratts, an Elder at that time, deciding to join the army. He sent his

resignation to the other Elders, along with an apology for joining the military. They voted unanimously to accept his apology.

The church was again closed for a period of time after America joined World War II. Murray Cauble, another prominent preacher of the time, reopened Blue River Christian Church by 1947 at the behest of local residents.

Stepping into the church's auditorium almost feels like going back in time. The original pews have been preserved all this time. You can even still see the indentions in them where lanterns stands were once hung. All of the church's stain-glass framed windows are original, save for two that were broken during a flurry of vandalism in 1999.

It's a site steeped in history, yet time and progress march on. A movement to restore the building began this past September. Cochran says so far they've rebuilt the foundation and replaced some paneling damaged due to termites, but the renovations will slowly continue for the time being. The restoration is partially happening in anticipation of the church's bicentennial celebration in 2019.

There are no official plans for the special event as of this writing, but Cochran says church leaders are already brainstorming ideas for the celebration.

Cochran began attending Old Blue River Christian Church as a teenager when her friend invited her one Sunday morning. She and her family have been there ever since. She can remember a vibrant congregation of about 30 or 40 members back then, but in the decades since, that number has dwindled down to about 20 members who consistently attend every week.

The congregation is plagued by a common problem among many smaller churches across the country – a generation of youth who are growing more disinterested in the church, and those who are involved are looking for more activities than country congregations like Old Blue River can adequately provide.

But good things continue to happen at the church too. They recently celebrated the baptism of one of the congregation's younger members. There is also a lot of excitement surrounding the restoration, a look ahead at the possibilities to come while honoring the Biblical principles and traditions which the church was founded on to begin with.

"This [place] is precious, it's our heritage," Cochran said. "Most of all, it's the house of God. We need to help the next generation understand that."

Old Blue River Christian Church meets on Sunday morning, evenings, and Wednesday evenings. James Cooper is the current minister there.

For more information, call 883-1285.