

St. Patrick's Catholic Church (1848-?)

L. Jarod Pearson

One of great mysteries in Cowan history was the existence of a Roman Catholic mission during the construction of the Cumberland Mountain Tunnel.

It is well documented that Irish railroad builders came to Cowan to help build the famous tunnel. Franklin County's 1850 census lists 146 people living in a labor camp on the western end of the tunnel and about 30 people living on the eastern end. Most of these individuals are listed under the heading "Born in Ireland".

In the Year 2004 I received a call from a state-contracted agency trying to find a St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church in Cowan. I told the caller that there were never any churches in Cowan by that name. The caller explained that she was trying to find any of the living heirs of an Irish laborer who lived in Cowan in the 1850's. The only information the state provided on this gentleman was that he was a member of St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church in Cowan.

I never knew of a Roman Catholic Church in Cowan, so I phoned the historian at Good Shepherd parish in nearby Decherd. He too had never heard of a St. Patrick's Church in Cowan, but said it would not surprise him that a church by that name may have existed while the Irish laborers were camped at the tunnel.

I then paid a visit to the Franklin County Archives Department in Winchester and found a very reliable piece of documentation. The June 1974 issue of *Franklin County Historical Review* includes a short letter from Mr. Frank N. Bratton, a former Franklin Countian living in Athens, Tennessee. The letter says:

"I notice with considerable interest that Mr. T.L. Myers had an article in the December, 1973, issue of the Franklin County Historical Review concerning the Good Shepherd Parish which is very interesting. However, I note that he did not mention the Catholic Church which was built about 1848 on the South side of the railroad tracks of the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railroad Company approximately 500 yards East of the entrance to the railroad tunnel above Cowan. I believe this was the first Catholic Church erected in Franklin County. It was built in order to accommodate the Irish immigrants who were brought over by the railroad to cut the tunnel. My Grandfather, who was born in the old log house that used to stand at Wonder Cave, was "Grog Boy" who dispensed rum and whiskey to the Irish who were driving this tunnel although he was a Scot. He told me many times about this Catholic Church."

We can safely assume that the church closed and disbanded following the completion of the tunnel.

It was truly a pleasant surprise to learn about the church's existence, and I am honored to know that the very first Roman Catholic Church in this region was located in Cowan, of all places!