

# Historical society forms to preserve Navarre's past

By Richard G. Ellers

NAVARRE — The razing of a dilapidated flour mill here five years ago inspired the creation of a local historical society that plans to preserve vestiges of three old villages that are now Navarre.

Roots for the Navarre-Bethlehem Township Historical Society were set when Marilyn R. Cook grumbled for weeks about the razing.

She found other villagers were also upset about removing the old mill, which had been a symbol of local history.

"We held a public meeting one Sunday to talk about what we could do to prevent losing more landmarks, and to preserve what we have for future generations," she said.

"The first step obviously was to form a historical society."

Don M. Cooke, society president, said the group would also like to help Navarre gain a place in Ohio's history.

"This is where the first white settler's cabin was built in Ohio," Cooke explained. "And the Bethlehem section is the third oldest community in the state."

What is now Navarre was created by the merger in 1872 of three villages: Bethlehem, Rochester and the original Navarre.

The first village was Bethlehem, founded in 1806 on the eastern curve of an S-bend in the Tuscarawas River.

Later, when the Ohio Canal was built along the Tuscarawas, Bethlehem was found to be too high for commercial access to boat traffic. So in 1833, developers established Rochester a quarter mile east on lower land between the bends.

A year later, another developer established the original Navarre between the other two villages.

Civic and commercial rivalry flourished among the villages for nearly 40 years until leaders in the three towns saw that more harm than good came from the competition. They worked for merger and in 1872, the three became one, taking the name of what then was the largest village.

The historical society has identified 15 buildings in Navarre it feels are worth saving and restoring as examples of the village's early times.

The oldest is a house-and-tavern in the Bethlehem section that includes a log house built in 1808 and a brick-and-stone blacksmith's shop built a few years later.



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Don M. Cooke and Marilyn R. Cook of the Navarre-Bethlehem Township Historical Society talk with J.D. Define, the oldest active businessman in Navarre, in front of his grocery, one of the oldest buildings in the village.