

HISTORY OF BETHEL A. M. E. CHURCH

Champaign, IL

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A DOCUMENT IN PROGRESS  
WORKING COPY

The Bethel Historical Committee is in the process of updating Bethel's early history. What follows is a compilation of information gathered from a variety of sources, including past Founder's Day programs. The Committee invites Bethel members, descendants of early members and community members with any written, visual, or oral history to share it with them.

Committee Co-Chairs: Estelle Merrifield  
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EARLY HISTORY  
OF  
BETHEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
A WORKING DOCUMENT

Since neither Bethel church records nor Quarterly Conference minutes before 1880 are available, the time of Bethel's founding has been determined from the history of Champaign County which shows that the church was organized in 1863. The Quarterly Conference Journal of 1891 stated that the church was 28 years old. Using that date, the time of origin would be 1864. So in 1863 or 1864 a small group of people, who had been holding prayer meetings and other religious meetings in their homes, got together and raised funds in the amount of \$600 and erected a small frame building on the property of Mr. Jake Taylor at 405 E. Park Avenue.

In 1877, the property at the southeast corner of Fourth and Park Streets was purchased and the frame building at 405 E. Park Avenue was moved to 401 East Park Avenue, thus, making both building and ground the property of Bethel A. M. E. Church.

Park Street, as it was called then, was an unpaved street, fringed by wooden sidewalks, whose protruding nails and splinters were a constant menace. These were bordered with a generous growth of dog fennel and weeds - the Street, when unfrozen, was often a mudhole in the winter, and in the early spring it contained two lanes, of rough and uncertain surface, drained by two deep open ditches - one on each side. The church building resembled the typical rural schoolhouse. With little or no foundation except the supporting brick piers, it flattened itself upon the ground.

## FIRST PARSONAGE

During the ministry of Reverend Charles Holmes, 1880 or 1881, the first parsonage was built in back of the church on Fourth Street. It was a modest, story and a half cottage. Prior to that time, the pastors lived in rented houses. Rev. Holley resided in the old brick house at 408 East University Avenue, where Mrs. L. A. Riley formerly resided. Rev. Holmes, Rev. W. J. Davis, and Rev. Derrick lived in a house which would now be 307 or 309 East Park Avenue.

## NEW CHURCH

Records for June 1892 show an abstract for the property signed by the following trustees: Robert English, L. H. Walden, Clay Brown, John Moss and General C. Lee. On October 5, 1892, a meeting was held to incorporate the church and take action to build a new church and the following were named trustees: William Lee, L. H. Walden, Clay Brown, John Moss and General C. Lee. The corporate name of the church was to be "The African Methodist Episcopal Church of Champaign, Illinois."

Building upon the new church began in early June 1892, and the building was completed in January 1893, at which time the church was dedicated. A Corner Stone laying by Lone Star Lodge No. 18, F. & A. M. featured the early stages of building. The church was financed by a loan from the Urbana Citizen's Building Association, subscriptions from the members, and generous donations from other citizens. Later a loan was made by the A. M. E. Extension board. For a number of years afterwards, each member paid fifty cents monthly to keep up the payments to the Loan Association. Benches and pulpit and the organ from the old church were installed in the new church...[as was] an old furnace donated by the First Presbyterian Church of Champaign, which was never quite usable. The dedication was a special occasion. In the

afternoon a Men's chorus from the University of Illinois and the pastor and a large representation from the First A. M. E. of Champaign were present. A large sum of money was donated by members and friends. The dedication was the greatest event in the history of the Church.

The new church was a brick building with beautiful stained glass windows. There was an auditorium, lecture room, choir room, often called the Baraca room because of its use as a Sunday School room for the Baraca class which had an enrollment of 100 at one time. Bethel was the first church in the Twin Cities to have a Baraca-Philathea affiliation with the National Baraca-Philathea Bible Study group.

In 1895 at a church conference, it was voted to furnish the church with pews, a new furnace, altar rail and 100 folding chairs. On October 13, 1911, under Rev. George W. Jones' leadership, the church voted to borrow \$1400 to make extensive repairs on the church. Trustees were elected and empowered to borrow the money needed to make improvements. Those elected were Archie Penny, A. R. Lee, P. J. Carey, B. J. Woodruff, and George Pope. Rev. George W. Jones was the pastor. A loan of \$1500 was made by Fred Price. An architect was employed and the contract given to A. W. Stoolman. The Church was improved by excavating under the Lecture Room, re-finishing the basement, adding a dining room, kitchen, toilets, and coal room. Water and electricity were installed; a new flue was put in; the doors between the auditorium and Lecture Room, pulpit and loft enlarged; tie rods to protect the roof were added.

In 1915, during the pastorate of Dr. H. W. Jameson the reed-pipe organ was installed. The choir loft was enlarged as was the

## MEMBERSHIP

The growth of the membership of the church was gradual but steady. Figures for the membership from the beginning are unavailable but it must have been very small as the number of Blacks in the community was small. In 1888 the membership was sixty-two. In 1938 it was approximately 270.

## BETHEL CHOIRS - EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Bethel has always been blessed musically. At various times the Sunday School boasted of excellent orchestras, and the church never had to leave the membership to find a pianist or organist. Bethel has had a choir since 1893. In 1917, the first choir robes were purchased for \$4.00 each. In 1922, the choir was well organized with a complete set of officers and various committees, all working together to make Bethel A. M. E. Choir the finest in the community and the district.

Bethel has been fortunate in the quality of its choirs. Even in the early days in the old church, there were good voices and what they lacked in musical technique they more than made up in the quality of their voices. These choirs carried on into the new church. In 1894 a group of young people voluntarily organized a choir. This group was reorganized by Mrs. P. M. Lewis in 1895 and became the first "note reading" choir in the Church history. All of its members could not read notes but all were taught to sing by note. Rev. P. M. Lewis used the choir to sing at white churches and at the public opera house to raise money for the church indebtedness.

In 1896 and 1897 the choir at its own expense employed a teacher of vocal music from the University of Illinois to instruct and train it how to sing.

The choir was reorganized in 1908 or 1909 with Ernest Harlan Scott as its director and Albert R. Lee its president. The choir continued under this management except during 1919-1920, until the passing of Mr. Scott

in 1922. The choir bore the expense of enlarging the choir loft and the installation of the organ. In 1916 during the pastorate of Rev. E. G. Jackson, the choir purchased its vestment robes and caps at an outlay of approximately eighty dollars. It has continued as a vested choir from that date to the present.

The choir has featured Christmas and Easter Cantatas; indoor and outdoor picnics and other socials; participated in Songfests; sang in other churches - both white and Black; maintained records; kept the organ and piano in repair; purchased its own music, robes and equipment.

The history of the Bethel Choir is not complete without the mention of Mr. Cecil Pope, Director of the Choir over sixteen years - carrying on where Mr. Scott left off. He made distinct contribution to the musical life of the church.

The dramatic chorus was organized and directed by Mrs. Clara Allen in 1933. It put on many high grade and worthwhile musicals, cantatas and plays; sung in other churches, both Black and white. The Gospel Chorus was organized by Mrs. Sadie Shaw, assisted by Mrs. Mary Blackburn Jones. It has sung in other churches and participated in Songfests. The Sunday School Choir - the children and teenage youths - began in 1938.

#### BETHEL REBUILDS

The new Bethel was fast becoming old and in need of extensive repair. In 1948, the Helping Hand Club served meals in a basement for a Sunday School and Church Conference and they raised \$190. Rev. Elsie Taborn, who was pastor at that time, asked them how they would like the money used and they indicated it should be used as a starter for a building fund for a new church. Rev. Taborn added \$100 and Mrs. Nellie Bradley added another \$100. This was the beginning of a drive to raise \$95,000. The members of the Helping Hand Club were Carrie Nelson, Emma Hines, Bessie Evans, Mable Rice, Bessie Wesley, Mary Woods and Belle Woodruff. The church trustees

were Herman Harris, Robert Earnest, L. P. Diffay, Johnson Tinsley, Speedie McDowell, Sr., Homer Chavis, Timothy Owens and R. M. Scott.

In 1953, Rev. Taborn established a Building Committee naming R. M. Scott Chairman. Other members were Elmer Brown, Eddie Glover, Speedy McDowell, Dawson Banks, Sr., Nathaniel Banks, Eugene Suggs, James Henderson, Nathan Williams, James Trotter, Herman Jordan, C. A. Martin and Cecil Pope.

The leadership of Bethel passed from Rev. Taborn, who died, to Rev. Parks, but the building program continued. Under the slogan "Let Us Rise Up and Build" Mr. Scott encouraged Bethel to continue to build. Mr. Scott was still chairman of this committee at the time of his death on January 23, 1957. In 1957 the leadership of Bethel was changed again because of the death of the pastor. Rev. C. M. Curry assumed leadership and continued the building program. Before Rev. Parks' death, he had established a Planning Committee for a new building. Eugene Suggs was elected chairman and other members of the committee were Erma Bridgewater, Ora Edwards, Herman Jordan, Eddie Glover, Cecil Pope, James Henderson and Kenneth Stratton. Rev. Curry added Arthur Evans, Nathaniel Banks and George L. Pope to the planning committee.

On April 6, 1958, ground was broken using the plans of architects Laz and Edwards. After many meetings and exchanges of ideas, the final plans were presented to the church conference and the conference approved the same. Construction began in the fall of 1958, and was completed in early 1959. On April 26, 1959, the church was dedicated.

Since the dedication of the New Church, Bethel has had the good fortune to have five leaders including Rev. H. H. Walker; others were Rev. C. M. Curry, Rev. Blaine Ramsey Jr., Rev. W. R. Stewart, and Rev. William. N. Guy.

In 1969 under the leadership of Rev. W. R. Stewart, a church conference voted for the trustee board to buy the property adjacent to the church at 405 East Park Street. This was done and immediate plans got underway for improving the property. The church suffered a loss by fire to the property at 405 in the summer of 1970. Because of extensive damage, the improvement program was given top priority by the church. Under the leadership of Eugene Suggs, George Evans, and Rev. Walker, the property was remodeled. Many other improvements have since been made to the church and parsonage. One of the improvements was the addition of an electric organ. In 1971 the Young Adult Choir, consisting of 25 voices under the direction of Ms. Shirley Hursey, purchased an electric organ from the proceeds of "My Faith," a long playing record of Gospel music which was made by the group and sold to raise money for the organ.

On February 8, 1976, under the leadership of Rev. C. E. Carr, Bethel had its Mortgage Liquidation Service with Bishop Howard Thomas Primm officiating. Rev. C. E. Carr also appointed a planning committee to draw plans for a new parsonage to be constructed at 405 East Park Avenue. Under the leadership of Rev. Alexander C. Wright, Jr., construction of the parsonage began in August of 1977 and was completed and furnished on December 23, 1977. Rev. Wright and his family took occupancy on December 23,

1977. Open house was held on January 11, 1978. On November 23, 1980, the parsonage was dedicated by Bishop Hubert N. Robinson, the Presiding Bishop of the Fourth Episcopal District.

In 1983 Rev. John Q. Owens was appointed as Bethel's pastor and continued the excellent spiritual guidance and leadership for one conference year.

Rev. Alfred Johnson was appointed pastor of Bethel in 1984. Under his leadership, many church improvements were made. The Willing Workers Club initiated a project to upholster the church pews. They purchased some pew Bibles. They paid for renovating the church kitchen, purchased curtains for the educational wing of the church, the church office, the choir room and the Sunday School rooms. The club also purchased coat racks. The indebtedness of the church was also paid off during Rev. Johnson's tenure.

Rev. H. H. Walker assumed the pastorate of Bethel for a second time in 1988 and served until March 17, 1990.

In 1990 Rev. Steven A. Jackson was appointed to the pastorate of Bethel. Under his leadership, Bethel has begun to generate new spirit, reactivate valued programs, and create new ones.

#### PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES

Bethel has a history which includes activity in the community as well as in the church. During the early part of the century

when segregation was a fact of life, Bethel maintained a park for the neighborhood children on Ellis Street. The church also established a library, had a church orchestra, and served as a meeting place for black students attending the University of Illinois.

There have been many active groups in the church which include the Lay Organization, the Helping Hand Club, the Fleur de Lis Club, the LouAnna Riley Women's Missionary Society, the Usher Board, the Willing Workers Club, and the Men's Club.

As in all A. M. E. churches, Bethel has long had an active Sunday School. Teachers in the early Sunday School of Bethel taught the Bible and the primer used in the public schools. It became one of the foremost Bible schools in the connection. It also had the first teacher training classes, separately organized classes, Boy Scouts and an excellent Sunday School orchestra. At one time the Men's Baraca Class held a meeting at which Dr. Booker T. Washington spoke and a reception was given for him.

A newly formed group in the church first started in 1983 is called the Bethel Biblical Arts Players. This group evolved from a program idea to help make the Bible come to life, and from a desire of its members to have an outlet for their acting ambitions. The idea caught on and money was raised from private donations to sponsor dramatic productions. The first performance was at the Annual Founder's Day Church Banquet in February 1986. The Players depicted the first "freedom march". They have also presented a Family Thanksgiving Dinner and a 1990 Kwanza Celebration.

While continuing many of its historical programs and activities, Bethel is engaged in developing new ones.

MINISTERS OF BETHEL A. M. E. CHURCH

Rev. Knight	H. H. Hackley 1918
J. W. Jackson 1874	J. A. Sherman 1920
Richard Holley 1877	George W. Jones 1924 (2nd time)
Rev. Derrick	John H. Smith 1929
Wm. J. ?Daos (1864)	Charles Brooks 1930
Chas. Holmes 1880-81	C. O. Mitchell 1932
Henry Depugh 1872-1883	Isaac S. Stone 1933
A. A. Burleigh	George T. Shaw 1934
E. Prior Moore 1887	M. C. Wright 1936
Rhinehart 1888	J. W. Wedley 1942-1944
Campbell 1888	T. S. Henderson
Henry Lackey 1892	John W. Wright -1948
Peyton M. Lewis 1894	Elsie Taborn 1948-1953
Jesse S. Woods	Andrew R. Parks 1953-1957
F. T. Harvey 1896	C. M. Curry 1957-1961
Peter Cooper 1897	Blaine Ramsey 1961-1967
Benjamin Arnett 1899	W. R. Stewart 1967-1970
George Chreslburgh 1900	William N. Guy 1967-1970
Levi P. Christy 1902	H. Henry Walker 1971-1974
J. H. W. Jackson 1904	C. F. Carr 1974-1978
Andrew Jackson 1905	A. C. Wright 1977-1983
George W. Jones 1911	John Owens 1983-1984
Henry Simons	Alfred Johnson 1984-1988
Henry Jameson 1914	H. H. Walker 1988-1990
E. G. Jackson 1916	Steven A. Jackson 1990-