

HISTORY

OF

BETHEL A. M. E.

CHURCH

PREPARED BY

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PREFACE

At a Church Conference and Get-together held at Bethel A. M. E. Church, July 14, 1938, there arose a discussion on the early history of the Church. In consequence Reverend Thomas H. Stoner, the pastor, appointed a Committee on Church History for the purpose of making research and securing facts concerning the early history of the Church. The personnel of the committee were set forth and the work distributed to the members. The Committee consulted files of the old newspaper and histories of Champaign County as found in the Library of the University of Illinois & State Historical Library; examined such old records as could be found; conversed with old citizens who had resided in this community sixty years or more. Early church records before 1880 were not found, if kept, nor was the Committee able to secure Conference Minutes of the early years. As Bethel Church is older than the Illinois Conference their unavailability is explainable. The members of the Committee, with one exception, were natives of this community, and all of its members have resided here for a number of years. They were able to draw upon their own memories, and relate the traditions that have come down to them from their parents. The Committee met, checked the facts, interpreted and evaluated all data obtained, and reached conclusions and agreements, which they have embodied into their outlined History of Bethel A. M. E. Church. In presenting it no attempt has been made to give an exhaustive detailed literary history, but only a summarized outline of the salient and outstanding facts, events and conditions which constitute a history of Bethel A. M. E. Church.

Champaign, Illinois

September 14, 1938

HISTORY OF BETHEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The history of a person, an institution or a state is a record of the outward deeds, with a background often unexpressed, of his longings, aspirations, and struggles; of his failures and triumphs, his defeats or approximation of success; which reveal character, and enable posterity to view retrospectively and objectively the record; and evaluate his worth in terms of religious and spiritual values, and at the same time consider the contribution he has made to his time and generation. So it is with a Church

The history of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church may not be one of brilliant achievement viewed from material standards, but when all factors are taken into consideration its lustre remains undimmed. Founded in an early period of the Civil War, in a pioneer community built upon virgin prairie lands in a young commonwealth; organized by a handful of Freedmen - just released from the chains of slavery, and a few other Negroes; with only a few of their group to draw upon; with an economic handicap inherent in a situation of a settlement of impecunious emigrants, with little work - at small wages, and their own personal struggle for existence and to eke out a competence for the proverbial "rainy day"; with a little financial assistance from their white neighbors, who too were struggling to erect churches, schools, and a College, and create business; with little or no educational background upon which to draw, its founders with almost prophetic vision, laid a most enduring foundation for a building that was to be a sacred heritage to posterity in succeeding generations, serving them with ever increasing usefulness and effectiveness; and erected an enduring monument to typify their struggles, aspirations and achievements. To their vision, consecration, and dedication of self to a great cause; and to their singleness of purpose and practical sense that prompted them to translate their dreams into objective reality; we are today, their beneficiaries, deeply indebted for this priceless legacy.

EARLY HISTORY

The early history of Bethel A. M. E. Church is shrouded in darkness, but from diverse accounts given by the early settlers reconciled with newspaper stories, and excerpts from the chronicled histories of Champaign County, it must be true that the church organization now known as Bethel A. M. E Church, came into being sometime during the year 1863,¹ after adherents and members had been holding Prayer Meetings and other religious meetings in their homes. Mention has been made especially of the homes of Mrs. Toles, then located on the west side of six hundred block of North Hickory Street, Champaign. It is said that persons of the Baptist faith met with them first. A church was build by members of the A. M. E. church in 1864 at a cost of \$600.² The Church was a frame building erected on a lot belonging to Mr. Jake Taylor, former husband of Mrs. Julia Summerville, at what is now 405 East Park Avenue, Champaign. In early years Circuit Rider preached at infrequent intervals, according to tradition, Rev. W. J. Davis, Rev. Charles Jacobs,

(The copy ends abruptly here)

¹ Quarterly Conference Journal in 1891, stated the Church was 28 years old, which would place its origin in 1863.

² Lothrop's History of Champaign County in its list of Champaign Churches, states that the "Colored Methodist" was built in 1864, at a cost of \$600.

The following excerpts from the local press of an early period will be of interest:

"NEW CHURCHES The people of Champaign will soon be well provided for with good houses of worship. Besides the new and elegant structures now being build for the Congregationalists, there are two other churches going up - one for the Christian denomination, on Main Street, east of the Park, and one for the use of the German Lutheran, east of the Doane House. The Colored population are negotiating for a house to be used by them as a place of worship. The people of Champaign now have seven churches and saloons 'without number'. Though we believe God's people are gaining prestige and Champaign will soon have as many churches as there are saloons."³

³ Central Illinois Gazette, Dec. 1, 1865.

"COLORED BAPTIST AND METHODIST CHURCHES - The Colored people of Champaign and Urbana are at present evincing a great interest in the cause of religion. Quite a number have been admitted in the Baptist and Methodist Churches during the past month. On Sunday last, and the Sabbath previous, several were baptized in the creek at Urbana. We learn that both denominations intend to building churches this season."⁴

⁴ Gazette and Union, May 4, 1866.

In a writeup of Champaign Churches, it gave nine Churches: Presbyterian, Methodist Episcopal, Congregationalist, Roman Catholic, Baptist, and two Colored Churches.⁵

⁵ Champaign County Gazette, August 25, 1869.

"The African M. E. Church held a festival in Bailey's Hall, Friday evening. The proceeds to go to paying off an indebtedness of the church."⁶

⁶ Champaign County Gazette, Dec. 22, 1869.

"The festival held by the colored people on the evening of the 24th ult., for the benefit of the A. M. E. Church was quite successful and netted a nice little sum."⁷

⁷ Champaign County Gazette, Jan. 5, 1870.

List of Deeds recorded "Sarah and Jas. Dean to Trustees of the Second Baptist Church, Dec. 4, 1870. Lot 46, Su. Lot 1, S. W. 7, 19, 9."⁸

⁸ Champaign Gazette, Jan. 5, 1870.

"The members of the African M. E. Church held a little festival in their homes of worship on the 3rd. inst., and cleared \$35. They have an indebtedness resting upon their building of about \$200.³

³ Bethel Church Abstract of Title.

In 1887 at a meeting held October 29, presided over by the Pastor Rev. Richard Holley, with Thomas Williams as Secretary, on motion of Columbus Green, it was voted that "we the members of A. M. E. Church authorize the Trustees to buy lot 53 of Mr. and Mrs. John Kreiger at \$350." Carried. Trustees: Gordon C. Taylor, John Moss, Henry Johnson. Sect. 7, Town. 19, range 9 E, now a part of Champaign City.

DESCRIPTION OF OLD CHURCH

Approximately in 1880 or 1881 the frame church was moved to the lot purchased in 1887 - the present location of the church, Park Avenue and Fourth Street. During the pastorate of the Rev. Charles Holmes, it was slightly enlarged and beautified. It is presented from the memory of one of the *Committeeman* (The italicized letters may have been crossed out). The Church, as previously stated was moved to the present site. Park Street, as it was called then, was an unpaved street, fringed by wooden sidewalks, whose protruding nails and splinters, were a constant menace to the barefoot urchins; These were bordered with a generous growth of dog fennel and other weeds - the Street, when unfrozen, was often a mud hole in the winter, and early spring, contained two lanes, of rough and uncertain surface, drained by two deep open ditches - one each side of the street. The Church building resembled the typical rural school house, with little or no foundation except the supporting brick piers, it flattened itself upon the ground. Its exterior was usually painted white, but once it was coated with grey. Its interior was the usual type. A high, three steps pulpit stood in the center of the south end, approached by steps on either side, and fronted by by a one step platform surrounded by a rail. In this enclosure set a table, which served a desk for the Superintendent and Secretary of the Sunday School during the School hour. On the southwest gable wall was the flat-topped organ, finally supplanted by the chapel organ, now discarded and located in the present Baraca room. On the Southeast was the library - containing the collection of songbooks, Bibles and

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literature. Carpenter made benches bordered the two sides of the Church, with a row down the middle, forming two aisles. About two-thirds the way from the front towards the door, in the center, was the heating plant—a large heating stove, faced by two benches. To the right and left of the Altar and facing it, from both sides, were two benches. On the left was the "Amen Corner" occupied by the Church Officers; and on the right the benches were used by the choir during service, and by the "Infant Class" in the Sunday School. The pulpit and aisles were carpeted. Coal oil lamps with glass reflectors on the sides of the church, and later supported by chandeliers in the center, furnished the illumination. When entertainments were held the benches were piled up and some were moved to the outside. An old shallow well was located just in front of the Church. This is the picture of the old church as remembered by a Committeeman.

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

NEW CHURCH

The Abstract tells of a Church Meeting held June 6, 1892. Trustees elected, Robert English, L. H. Walden, Clay Brown. Additional trustees John Moss, G. C. Lee. Church meeting held October 5, ¹⁸⁹² (1982) to incorporate the Church and take action on building a new church. The corporate name of the Church was to be "The African Methodist Episcopal Church of Champaign, Illinois." The following Trustees were elected: William Lee, L. H. Walden, Clay Brown, John Moss, General C. Lee. It was voted to authorize the Trustees to mortgage Lot 53, "upon which the new church is being erected, to secure payment on loan of \$2000, made August 23, 1892, and ratifying the action of the Trustees in applying for loan" to the Citizen's Building Association of Urbana, Illinois. Rev. Harry Lackey, Pastor, presided.

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 old organ from the old church, were installed in the new church. Also an old furnace donated by the First Presbyterian church of Champaign, which was never quite useable. 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 M. E. Church 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 CHURCH REFURNISHED AND IMPROVED

Meeting of the church members on October 22, 1895 to elect Trustees. Elected: L. H. Walden, John Moss, William Lee, G. C. Lee, Clayborn Brown, Robert English, Albert R. Lee. Rev. P. M. Lewis, Pastor. "Meeting of the members held on November 6, 1895. It was voted to borrow the sum of \$1600 from the Citizen's Building Association of Urbana for the purpose of finishing up the Church inside, seat and carpet it. The Church was carpeted, the present pews were installed. The present pulpit and altar rail were put it, a new furnace and one hundred folding chairs for the Lecture room. Several large and successful rallies were held under the leadership of the Pastor, Rev. P. M. Lewis, who succeeded in getting the cooperation of some of the white churches."¹⁰

¹⁰ From the Church Abstract.

EXTENSIVE REPAIRS ON THE CHURCH

Church meeting held October 13, 1911. Voted to empower Trustees to borrow \$1400 approximately, to make improvements. Trustees were elected as follows: Archie Penny, A. R. Lee, P. J. Carey, B. J. Woodruff, George Pope. Rev. George W. Jones, Pastor. A loan of \$1500 was made by Fred M. Price. An architect was employed and contract given to A. W. Stoolman. The Church was improved by excavating under the Lecture Room, re-finishing basement, making dining room, kitchen, toilets and coal room, water and electricity installed, new flue put in, doors enlarged between auditorium and lecture room, tie rods to protect roof, pulpit and choir loft enlarged.''

' ' From the Church Abstract

NEW ORGAN INSTALLED

During the pastorate of Dr. H. W. Jameson the present reed-pipe organ was installed. The choir loft was enlarged as was the altar. Funds were provided by the Choir for the down payment of Fifty dollars, and for the installation of the motor. This was in 1915.

PARSONAGE REBUILD

Church meeting was held August 19, 1919. Voted that the Trustees secure a loan for improvement of parsonage, painting interior and exterior of the Church; moving parsonage back, adding two new rooms, remodeling interior and making the building modern. Voted to secure a loan of \$2500. A loan was made by Margaret Coffey, Filed August 19, 1919. Trustees: B. J. Woodruff, Clay Brown, R. I. Green, F. J. Jordan, Woodward Thomas, Cecil Nicholson. Rev. R. H. Hackley, Pastor.¹² The parsonage was rebuild, and the Church painted inside and out. These improvements added much to the value and appearance of the Church property.

¹² See Abstract of Title

MORTGAGE OF 1924

Church meeting held August 6, 1924. Voted to borrow \$1400. F. K. Louis, secretary, Rev. Edward King, pastor. Trustees: George Pope, Frank D. Gray, Robert I. Green, B. J. Woodruff, Allen Green. Loan secured from Margaret Coffey. Minutes did not state the purpose of the loan.¹³

¹³ See Abstract of Title

WATSON BEQUEST

In 1925 during the pastorate of Rev. George W. Jones, Mrs. Sarah Watson, a staunch member of Bethel passed away, and bequeathed to the Trustees of Bethel A. M. E. Church, the property of herself and her late husband, Henry M. Watson, who too had been a member of Bethel. The property was located at 1014 West Main Street, Urbana. The will provided that the proceeds of the sale after deducting burial expenses should be given to the Trustees for the purpose of liquidating the mortgage indebted of the Church. The requirements were carried out and Bethel was freed from its mortgage debt through the love and liberality of one of its most loyal members.

MEMBERSHIP

The growth of the membership of the Church has been gradual but steady. We have no figures of the membership from its beginning but it must have been very small as the number of Negroes here was small. In 1888 the membership was sixty-two. The present membership (October 1938) is approximately 270. There have been many outstanding revivals in a series running through the years. Those producing the greatest ingathering were held by Rev. Charles Holmes, Rev. P. M. Lewis, Rev. R. H. Hackley by Rev. Mary Evans.

CONFERENCES AND CONVENTIONS

The Church and Sunday School has entertained the Sunday School Conventions a number of times. The Illinois Annual Conference has met here in 1897, 1922 and 1936.

PASTORS

Bethel has been fortunate in the assignment of Pastors over the period of years of its history. An Appended list will follow this history, probably incomplete for the years before 1870, but complete thereafter. Eight pastors were previously or afterwards, Presiding Elders. Six pastors purchased property here. Five resided here after their pastorate.

CHURCH ORGANIZATIONS

In addition to the Boards of Stewards, Stewardesses and Trustees, the Sunday School and the choir, Bethel has had many organizations, boards and clubs. Each has made its contribution and usually passed out, only a few have endured. In the early days were the Sewing Circle, and Church Aid; many Literary Societies featuring debates and forums, existed in different periods. Rev. Prior Moore organized a "Band of hope" for boys. During Rev. H. Lackey's pastorate the Independent Order of Good Templars - a temperance lodge - flourished, organized in the old church, they occupied the present quarters of the Baracas Class in the new church. They sumptuously furnished this room. The Church Extension a club for the young people existed during Rev. F. T. Harvey's regime. The Trustee Aids, organized many years ago, still exists, has been a powerful factor in the financial affairs of the Trustees. The King's daughters in 1923-24. The Presiding Elder Clubs under different names, now the Willing Workers; the Sunshine club, the Helping Hand, and other clubs whose names have been forgotten. Some of the organizations deserve special mention, which will be given below.¹⁴ The Boy Scouts and Campfire Girls during 1911-1915 must be included.

¹⁴ The Rose of Sharon, Fleur-de-lis, should also be included.

THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

The early Sunday Schools taught the primer used in the public schools as well as the Bible. From 1896 to 1930 Bethel Sunday School developed until it became one of the foremost Bible Schools in the connection. It was a pioneer in modern methods, having the first teacher training classes, cradle roll, home department, organized classes, Boy Scouts of any school in the District and perhaps in the Conference. It gave leadership to the Springfield District, where S. S. methods and organization became standardized and the District became one of the foremost in the Connection. The S. S. membership was upwards of 200 and the attendance ran above 100 each Sunday. At various times - three or four, the School boasted of excellent S. S. Orchestras. After the hour was changed from afternoon to morning the attendance decreased, especially that of adults.

Men's Baraca Bible Class came into existence in about 1906, and the corresponding Women's Bible Class - the Philathea was organized about the same time. The Baraca Class dug out the basement under the auditorium, concreted the floor and put on a steel ceiling. It also operated a public Reading Room up town for a few years. With the Philathea Classes it maintained a S. S. Playground in 1916-18. At one time the Baraca Class held a meeting at which Dr. Booker T. Washington spoke and gave a reception for him. He honored the Class by taking honorary membership. September 13, 1907 the Class was honored by a visit from its National President and Founder, Marshall A. Hudson of Syracuse, New York. The class entertained the Negro members of the Illinois General Assembly on their biennial visits to the University many times. It also furnished lecturers and speakers from the University of Illinois and the local community. The class still exists. The present Lyceum was organized by the Baraca Class nearly thirty years ago.

CHRISTIAN ENDEAVOR

The First Christian Endeavor was organized by Rev. P. M. Lewis in 1895. Afterwards the movement became the Allen League of Christian Endeavor. There have been several organizations existing at various times. At present there is a live Allen League in Bethel Church.

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 in 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 the instructress of vocal music at the University to instruct and train it how to sing. The Choir became organized in 1908 or 1909, Ernest Harlan Scott became its director, and Albert R. Lee, its President. The choir continued under this management except during 1919-20, until the passing of Mr. Scott in 1922. As previously mentioned, the Choir bore the expense of enlarging the Choir loft and the installation of the present 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 Negro; 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 for the past sixteen years - carrying on where Mr. Scott left off, he has made distinct contribution to the musical life of the Church. The Church is proud of its other musical organizations. The Dramatic Chorus was organized and directed by Mrs. Clara Allen since 1933. It has put on many high grade and worthwhile musicals, cantatas and plays; sung in other churches, both Negro and white. The Gospel Chorus organized in 1937 and directed by Mrs. Sadie Shaw, assisted by Mrs. Mary Blackburn Jones, has made a real place for itself in the musical life of the Church. It has sung in other churches, participated in Songfests, and made itself generally useful. The Sunday School Choir in two divisions - the children and the teen-age youths, began in 1938, is fast becoming one of the the most popular organizations in the Church. Bethel Choirs have been the center of the choir social life of the United Church Choirs. This is an organization of Choirs and Choruses of the five local churches. Two most successful all-choir socials were managed by Bethel last year.

USHER BOARDS

Bethel has had ushers serving periodically for a number of years. Only within the past six years have they been organized into boards. The present Usher Board consisting of young people under an adviser, is rendering good service. They are neatly uniformed and make a good appearance.

MURAL DECORATIONS

The first mural painting on the walls of Bethel was a painting of the Angel Gabriel by Mr. Bert Bidwell in 1893. It was repainted and greatly improved by Mr. George Riley, an art graduate of the University and one of Bethel's finest products. This painting was destroyed when the church was repaired in 1911. In 1936 two of Bethel's own young people, Miss Rosemary Louis and Mr. Cecil Nelson, Jr. painted the beautiful murals that adorn the south and north gables of the auditorium. The one by Miss Louis represents Christ in the Garden. That of Mr. Nelson, the Blind Bartimæus.