Even though the African American population of Champaign County was small during the 1860s, both the Salem Baptist and Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Churches of Champaign were founded in the middle of the decade.

Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church

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 religions 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.

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.

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 Lou Anna 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.

Bridgewater, Erma & Merrifield, Estelle. *History of Bethel A.M.E. Church.* (Bethel A.M.E. Church: Champaign, 1991)