

ST. PAUL AME CHURCH HISTORY

By way of an explanation let me state at the beginning that what is here, is not a complete authentic record of the life of St. Paul AME Church, but rather it is a recording of the events that I have knowledge of over a space of more than fifty years as a member and officer in St. Paul; together with bits of history which I elicited from members who preceded me in a previous generation; and what I have culled from old programs, brochures of special events held many years ago. Also we are indebted to the Liberian of the Ohioana Library for some of the facts which are contained herein. Knowing that there are many facts which should be included but which are not known, or, which cannot be included as factual, I hope that whoever reads these pages would look upon what is written as being "A HISTORY" and not "THE HISTORY" of St. Paul AME Church, at Columbus Ohio, as arranged by the writer.

On the shelves of the Ohioana Library in the State Office Building are two books which tell the early beginnings of churches in Columbus Ohio. One of the books has a title, "History of Franklin County", author William T. Martin, date of printing, 1858. On page 364 of the book under the heading of "Churches of Columbus", Chapter 36, sub-heading "Methodist" the first paragraph state "the first Methodist Church, or Class in Columbus was organized early in the year 181, and the first church was erected in 1814, by Rev. Samuel West, the preacher then in charge of the circuit. The Class first consisted of four members only, George McCormick and his wife, George B. Harvey and Miss Jane Armstrong, who soon became the wife of Mr. Harvey. The next member admitted was Moses Freeman, a colored man who some eight to ten years later left with his family for Liberia in Africa, where it is said he died not long after.

On page 365 of the same book, the first paragraph states, "About the year 1823, the colored part of the congregation separated from the whites, and formed a church, or society by themselves. They held their meetings in rented rooms until about the year 1839 when they erected their present church on Long Street. On page 366, at the bottom of the page there is just one paragraph which states, "Colored Methodist in 1857, Rev. J. H. Shorter, Pastor, number of members 113"

The second book has as its title, "History of Columbus", author, O.C. Hooper. Under the heading of "Churches", sub-heading, "Methodist", it states that the first Methodist Church was organized in 1812. It also corroborates the statements made in the first book concerning the first members, four in number and list their names and concludes the sentence with these words, "the next member admitted was Morgan Freeman, a colored man." Another paragraph describes the erection of the first Methodist Church in Columbus in 1814, as follows, "In 1814 the first Methodist Church was erected. Built of hewn logs, it cost it's members (colored and white) the modest sum of \$157.53 and one-half cents. It was located on a lot donated by the city on East Town Street, near High Street, and was named the "Town Street Methodist Episcopal Church." In 1823 Moses Freeman, the fifth member of the first Methodist Church separated from the Town Street Church and with 13 followers organized an Independent Society.

From these two books we are reasonably certain that the statements quoted therefrom are factual, and document the claim of St. Paul AME Church that it is the first and oldest church of Negroes organized in Columbus. The original name of the church was "BETHEL" and was the beginning of what is now known as St. Paul AME Church. In 1824 the little struggling church was able to worship in an edifice of its own, a log cabin located on the east side of Straight Alley (now known as Lazelle Street just north of Spring Street.) The congregation soon outgrew its little log cabin and next worshiped at what is now 71 East Long Street. In 1841 a brick church was built replacing the wooden one and the work was completed in 1844. Later, a larger church building was erected directly across the street, where the Municipal Garage now stands.

The original and charter members who withdrew from Town Street Church and organized Bethel Church were, Moses Freeman, Edward Smith, Allen Brown and his wife Sarah, George Stanton, Anthony Barrett and his wife Nancy, Wyatt Johnson and Cynthia, Amos Dandridge, Joseph and Ester Harris, Richard Butcher and his wife Mason, James and Abby Bland, Jacob and Ester Brown, Robert Butcher and family. It is not known whether the building in which they originally worshiped was rented or purchased. For seven years the little group worshipped in the log cabin on Lazelle Alley. Outgrowing the log cabin, a frame building 25 by 50 feet, located on the South side of Long Street (now 71 East Long Street) was purchased in the year 1830 for the sum of \$100.00. It was in this frame building the First Annual Conference of what was then known as the Ohio District was held. To accommodate the Conference it was necessary to enlarge the church building. The members went to nearby woods, secured long poles, upon these cross poles were laid and covered with bushes. This provided for the temporary covering for the extension of the building. Rough boards of hewn oak were used as seats, and tallow candles for light. A brick building was begun in 1841 and finished in 1844 to replace the old frame building.

Columbus in 1835 was the center of a Circuit, composed of Urbana, Springfield, Troy, Piqua, Mercer, Muddy Creek, Logan, Circleville, and Lancaster. The circuit was under the charge of Rev. Henry Oderisson who made his rounds to the churches on horseback. Provisions, books etc. were stored in his saddlebags. His pay was whatever the members could give him, supplemented by vegetables and fruit. During the Civil War a large number of colored people migrated to Columbus from Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee and North Carolina. To provide for a more adequate place to worship for the increased population, the congregation decided to buy a lot and build a larger church, and a local preacher persuaded Mrs. Henry Stanberry to sell them a lot on time payments for \$3000.00. Later the brick church where they had been worshipping at 71 East Long Street was sold to Shiloh Baptist Church in 1869. In 1870 work began on the new St. Paul on the site where the Municipal Parking Garage now stands on the north side of Long Street. In 1872 the new church was completed at a cost of \$14,000.00 under the pastorate of Rev. J.P. Underwood. With enlarged facilities the new St. Paul Church began to be the center of activities, contributing to the cultural and religious life of the community. The first Public School for the education of colored children was established and housed in St. Paul A.M.E., Church, Rev. Brown (presumably Rev. J. M. Brown, who later became a Bishop in the A.M.E. Church) was the Pastor of the church, and the first teacher in the school. The first colored graduates of the High Schools of Columbus were members of St. Paul Church. The names of the first two graduates were Everett Waring and Tom Spencer. The records show that the General Conference of the A.M.E. Church

was held at St. Paul in 1890. It is regrettable that we were unable to indicate in this history of our church, under whose pastorate, or, in what year that the name of the church was changed from Bethel to St. Paul. Evidently the Pastor and Officers did not sense how important that information would be.

Early in 1900 the colored population began to move eastward, and it became apparent that a move in that direction would be advisable. In 1905 under the pastorate of Rev. R. R. Downs, the lots on which the present church now stands at 639 East Long Street were purchased at a cost of \$6000.00. Erection of the edifice began immediately and was completed at a cost of \$40,000.00 under the pastorate of Rev. J. W. Henderson. The original building was gray, pressed brick with sandstone trim, and was considered at its completion as one of the imposing churches in the city. It had a seating capacity of 750 persons, and is artistically arranged throughout, with classrooms, assembly room, and with food preparation facilities to serve 200 people. A pipe organ was installed in March, 1920 at a cost of \$7,408.00. Ms. Emma Coleman has the distinction and honor of paying the last \$10.00 due on the organ in 1921.

In 1962 under the pastorate of Rev. A. A. Shaw, a building across the street was purchased and remodeled for additional use for classrooms, assembly hall, Pastors Study, Clerk Office, etc. Interior was completed in pastel shades. The "Annex" was dedicated by Bishop W. R. Wilkes in 1962.

Rev. Andrew A. Hughey was assigned the Pastorate of St. Paul A.M.E. Church in October 1968. He immediately began a program of improvements and rehabilitation of the church. This included repairing of sidewalks, new roofing, painting of the interior, completely refurbishing the finance room, nursery department and the large Sunday School room. By 1971 under his administration, the entire downstairs was modernized with a new kitchen, restrooms and windows.

At the end of Rev. Hughey's 5th year, the church burned the mortgage which he inherited in the amount \$39,000.00. Also the sanctuary of the church was re-carpeted. The estimated improvements made under the pastorate of Rev. Hughey are approximately \$60,000.00. The mortgage burning was held on Sunday, October 14, 1973.

Recent Pastors assigned to St. Paul A.M.E. Church include Rev. Dr. Thomas E. Liggins (1974 – 1989); Rev. Dr. Michael R. Bean (1989 – 2012); Rev. Dr. Taylor T. Thompson (2012 – 2019); Rev. Kevin Cooper (2019 – 2020); and our current pastor, Rev. Dr. Morné E. Meyer (2020 -)

Organized in 1823 as Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

St Paul A.M.E. Church is the oldest congregation of African descent in Columbus.