

Narrative - Allen Chapel
Bryan, Texas
By: Callie Turner and John P. Blair
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I. CONTEXT

The roots for the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church began in 1787 at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Led by a 27-year old former slave, Richard Allen, a group of people of African descent politely walked out of St. Edwards Methodist Episcopal Church due to inhuman treatment and discrimination. These individuals had a growing sense of dignity and self-respect. They wanted social recognition and to be more involved in the church services of the worship of God. They also sought the ability to express themselves in their own unique ways. In 1793 Allen purchased an old blacksmith shop and moved it to Sixth and Lombard Street in Philadelphia. This structure was organized as the Bethel A.M.E. Church and became the first place of worship owned by African Americans in the United States. Today the edifice that stands there is known as “Mother Bethel” and is one of the historic Shrines of Philadelphia.¹

The African Americans who started the Church were very poor and most could not read or write. In an effort towards self-improvement, Allen conducted night school classes to teach many to read and write. Thus, education became one of the church’s strongest commitments to its community, which continues to this day. Members are encouraged to seek higher education and ministers are required to have at least a Bachelor of Arts.

Later other African American churches were started in Baltimore, Maryland; Salem, New Jersey; Attleboro, Pennsylvania; and Wilmington, Delaware. In 1816 these

churches came together and formed what is now known as the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Methodist churches are characterized by their hierarchical structure. Individual congregations are grouped together into districts and then into conferences, with administrative officials including presiding elders and bishops. This makes up the Connectional Church. Prior to the Civil War the A.M.E. was not allowed to operate in Texas or in most of the south.²

II. OVERVIEW

The history of Methodism among African Americans in Texas predates the Civil War. The earliest known congregation, Reedy Chapel in Galveston, was founded as a branch of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1848.³

In Brazos County, little is known about the daily religious life of residents prior to the Civil War, white or black. Antebellum congregations in the county consisted of Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian faiths. Methodist churches were located in the communities of Alexander, Millican and Boonville. And, while nothing is known currently of the racial composition of the Alexander or Millican churches, the Boonville congregation had many African American members—a pattern common throughout the pre-Civil War South.⁴

The earliest known African American minister in Brazos County was Manuel Hammitt, a slave later known as Reverend Emmanuel Hammitt. According to documents, Hammitt first preached under the supervision of a white minister, Reverend W. S. South, on June 26, 1864 at Wheelock in Robertson County, Texas.⁵ Hammitt

would continue to preach the gospel under the auspices of South at many locations throughout neighboring Brazos County; however during this period, ministers, both white and black, could only preach to slaves with their owner's permission. Some planters feared that the ministers would speak about freedom. A convention of white men in Dallas, in 1858, said concerning preachers advocating abolition:

“Resolved, That we deny the existence of any state of affairs among us that would warrant the effort on the part of Northern churches, benevolent or aid societies to send us those ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing’ who, with Bible in hand and evil in their hearts, go forth preaching the most dangerous and insurrectionary doctrines; and that we do not accord to any such societies the privilege to interfere with our rights and institutions, manners and customs. That we are opposed to the presence of such persons among us, and will expel them from our (community) as a public nuisance.”⁶

Following emancipation and the end of the war, many African American churches were organized in Brazos County. Those located in the rural areas often consisted of cheaply constructed building erected by landlords in order to keep the Negroes close to home on weekends and holidays. Some buildings occupied no more than one room measuring 20x40 feet and most were never painted. The pews were straight-backed benches and only a very few had a musical instrument of any kind. These churches left little documentary history. Even the early congregations in the city of Bryan produced few records and most of the local newspapers of this period have been lost.⁷

Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church in Bryan chose its name in honor of Richard Allen. While the first use of this name is found in 1880, the congregation may have taken the name much earlier. As a result, some uncertainty exists when trying to decipher the organizational history of this church.⁸

Oral tradition among both the members of Allen Chapel and the Shiloh Baptist church states that the first African American meeting place in Bryan consisted of a “brush arbor” where the Baptists and the Methodists took turns holding services on alternate Sundays. The published history of Allen Chapel gives a founding year of 1873, but evidence indicates that the congregation existed prior to that time. Perhaps the congregation took the name “Allen Chapel” in 1873. While various sources demonstrate that the commonly quoted date of 1873 is incorrect, none provide the actual founding date. Since Shiloh Baptist bought land in 1870 and constructed their first building in 1872, this seems to imply that the A.M.E. congregation did exist at least by 1870.⁹

Further evidence supports an earlier date as well. Reverend Hammitt returned to Bryan after having been sent to Galveston in 1866 to be ordained a deacon in the Methodist Episcopal Church South. While in Galveston, he met Reverend Molliston Madison Clark, who after providing him with the history of the A.M.E. Church, persuaded Hammitt to transfer his membership to that organization. In Bryan Hammitt was surprised to learn that local blacks “became indignant at the name African” and “thirty-seven left him at one time” over this issue. He persisted and “succeeded, however at least in affecting an organization, and thus the sills of the church were laid in Bryan.” Thus, it seems difficult to argue against the assertion that a church exists once it has both

a congregation and a minister, and would support the year 1866 as the beginning of the Allen Chapel congregation in Bryan.¹⁰

Hammitt performed many marriages between November 18, 1866 and October 17, 1867. He also taught school, first at the Edrington Plantation, and then later at the Wilson Plantation. This was the beginning of a decades' long involvement of members of Allen Chapel with educational efforts in the local African American community. One of the Chapel's most notable educators was Arthur H. Colwell. Born in Louisiana, Colwell came to Bryan in 1885 to accept the position as superintendent of the city's school for African Americans. A gifted musician, Colwell also assisted in the publication of the *Bryan Republican*, a short-lived local paper for African Americans. In 1894, he ran unsuccessfully on the Republican ticket for the Texas State Superintendent of Public Instruction.¹¹

At the Annual Conference of the A.M.E. Church held in Galveston in October 1868, some of the local ministers present included Hammitt, Charles B. Foster, and Campbell Siler. It was Foster who would eventually replace Hammitt¹²

Foster, too, performed many marriages beginning on July 2, 1868 through May 1, 1873. In fact, on November 17, 1872, the county records note that Foster performed a marriage at "the African church in Bryan." Foster continued the precedent in promoting education established by his predecessor by supporting the work of the Freedmen's Bureau. By April 1868 Foster was serving as a teacher at the Bryan Freedmen's School, and in August he made an attempt to have a suitable building constructed to be used as both a school and church. Both James Adams and Morgan Canton contracted to repair the existing structure. The remodeled building was to have eight windows, six lights, two

doors, and thirty benches, nine feet long and one foot high. They were to receive \$230 to cover the cost of material. It is not known if funds were ever obtained or whether the finished building conformed to the original specifications.¹³

Foster also held services for the A.M.E. congregation in the federal schoolhouse, which was located on present-day Military Drive in Bryan. Thus, the Freedmen's school building was the Allen Chapel's second meeting place, and most likely where Foster hosted and presided over the second Quarterly Conference of the African Methodist Church of Bryan on Saturday May 15, 1869. Brother R. Sloan was chosen as secretary for this meeting and his report included the following details: standard disciplinary questions were asked; there were 35 new members with 8 still on probation; the minister received \$35 in pay; there was one Sunday school with 60 pupils; and, while nothing had been collected for building purposes or repairs, there was a debt owed of \$37.80.¹⁴

Foster was also active in local civic and political life. Purchasing three town lots in 1869 from William Joel Bryan, Foster resided in what was then referred to as "Freedmantown." In June 1870, he obtained an appointment from the governor of Texas to serve as an alderman for the city of Bryan—one of two African Americans at the time. Two years later, Foster was forced to flee Bryan apparently due to legal problems. At that time white Texans sometimes misused the legal system to attack prominent African Americans. This was done, for example against Texas State Senator Matthews Gaines, as well as one of Brazos County's other ministers, Willis Van Hook. Foster willed his land to his wife, Lettie, and not long afterwards they both disappeared from the historical record.¹⁵

The deed for the first known land purchased by the A.M.E. congregation, which was filed in the Brazos County courthouse in July 1870, states:

“I, Harvey Mitchell in consideration of my desire to promote welfare of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Bryan do hereby convey to James Adams, Peter Huffman and Horace Hubbard, Trustees of said church for the purpose of erecting thereon a house of worship, a lot of land one hundred feet square in the western corner of land in Brazos County Texas conveyed to me in March last by Guy M. Bryan and adjacent to the tract on which Alfred Smith Freedman now resides, to have...as long as the said lot and the house and the houses to be thereon erected shall be exclusively used and occupied for purpose of religious worship and no longer. . . .”¹⁶

This definitely proves that the A.M.E. Church had an organized board of trustees and was functioning as a church in 1870.

The *History of Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church* notes that the first building constructed as a church was located on north Houston and east 22nd Street in Bryan. This property, identified as lots 1–4, block 54, was purchased from G. W. Green on June 13, 1878. The trustees had previously purchased lots 1 and 2, block 56—located between Preston and West 20th Street—in 1870. This first church building also served briefly as a schoolhouse for African American children following the destruction of their school by fire in 1914. The property on Houston Street has contained all the succeeding church buildings of this congregation to this day.¹⁷

The second church was built in 1920 under the supervision of Reverend A.J. Smith. It consisted of a frame building with a sanctuary, pastor's study and choir room on the first floor; balcony and two classrooms were located on the second floor. The windows in the front of the church were stained glass. The Masonic Lodge laid the cornerstone for the church on February 29, 1920 at the 3:00pm service where Reverend D. H. Shivers, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church, preached the sermon. A dedicatory Service was later held on May 26, 1920 with the Right Reverend William D. Johnson, Bishop of the 10th Episcopal District of the A.M.E. Church preaching the sermon. Johnson also baptized six infants and small children at this service.¹⁸

In 1923 Allen Chapel defaulted on its mortgage payments, the property was foreclosed on and the local newspaper even published a Sheriff's Notice for Sale of the property. There existed at that time a real possibility that the church and land would be sold at auction to satisfy the debt. Various appeals for donations were made, mass meetings were held and eventually enough contributions were received to avert the sale. Some of those donating included the Methodist Women organization, members of the various African American churches, individuals, and even the Ku Klux Klan. The church later published its gratitude in the *Bryan Daily Eagle*. The congregation constructed a new parsonage sometime in the 1930s under the supervision of Reverend O.H. Bennis.¹⁹

The third and current church building was built in 1961. Dedicatory services for the church were held April 9, 1961 and at 3:00 p.m. the church was set apart for worship of God and the service of man. Bishop W.F. Ball of the Tenth Episcopal District of the A.M.E. Church provided the sermon. H.L. Boyd was the presiding elder and S.L. Berry served as the pastor of the congregation at that time. The cornerstone service was held at

Shiloh Baptist on May 19, 1961, where Reverend O. R. Short, pastor, delivered the sermon. Later, the processional departed Shiloh Baptist to Allen Chapel.²⁰

Under the leadership of Reverend Dubyuer Harris, who had been named the new pastor of the church at the 102nd Session of the Texas Annual Conference convened at Allen Chapel from October 30–November 3, 1968, the church's indebtedness was liquidated on April 30, 1971—following the eleventh “Battle of Flowers” fundraiser. Two years later, the Reverend W.D. Turner led the congregation's efforts to remodel the parsonage and added cushions to the existing church pews. Even though the church continued to struggle financially it remained steadfast in its support to local organizations, such as the NAACP, Bryan Charity Fund, Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation, Bethune Woman's Club, Gideon Organization as well as families in need.²¹

In 1975, the church treasurer and trustee Ples Turner ran for city council and won—the first African American citizen to serve since Reconstruction. Another politically active member of the congregation was Erma Fay Jefferson who attended many Democratic Conventions and presidential inaugurations. The debt incurred for the parsonage remodeling was liquidated in 1977 when the church again borrowed money to purchase new furniture and window air conditioning units for the parsonage. A year later, a public address system was eventually purchased for the church, the parsonage was painted and repairs were made to the parsonage garage.²²

Allen Chapel has a youth choir and an active Sunday school and Youth Department. In 1984 it established a men's cooking group. The church continues to fellowship with other local congregations with choirs from each church choosing two alternating selections. When Reverend J.L. Woodfaulk arrived in September 1986, he

served until November 1989 and it was during his tenure that new Bibles were purchased for the church as well as new robes for the choirs and a new typewriter. His wife, First Lady Woodfaulk, led the church in a celebration to honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Ms. Rosa Parks each January.²³

After Reverend C.L. Boyd became pastor in 1993, a new roof was put on the parsonage and a new copy machine was purchased. First Lady Lillian Boyd, a talented singer, added much inspiration to the church when she introduced a new Easter Program entitled “Women In Red.” This program, held every Palm Sunday evening, witnessed the women of the congregation dressed in red to symbolize the Blood of Christ. She also introduced “Seven Last Words From the Cross” on Good Friday nights with seven ministers taking the pulpit to preach from the scriptures of Christ’s Passion. The proceeds from both these programs were used for the Missionary’s college scholarship fund. Pastor Boyd retired from the ministry in October 1995 and the Reverend Barry Spencer was assigned to the church. Spencer was a great visionary but due to lack of funds most of his ideas never came to pass. He, however, was the first to really teach and stress the importance of tithing to the congregation. Spencer also started a Men’s Bible Study group.²⁴

When Reverend Robert Louis Jeffries became pastor in 1997, he decided to change meeting frequency of the Official Board meetings. He also oversaw the installation of hardwood flooring in the parsonage and plans were made to remodel the church bathrooms; however this unfortunately, was never accomplished under this administration. In August of 1998 under Jeffries’s leadership, the Women’s Missionary

Society gave vouchers to 100 children to purchase two or three pairs of back-to-school shoes.²⁵

Allen Chapel's current pastor Reverend Fred Paul Blair, Jr. was given the charge in October 2002. He executed the plan to remodel the bathrooms and a handicap facility was added. Blair also directed the installation of new flooring in the fellowship hall, a new roof on the church and the remodeling of the kitchen cabinets. Today, the church continues to fellowship on every third Sunday evenings with Shiloh Baptist Church, North Bryan New Birth Baptist Church and Pleasant Grove Baptist Church with proceeds from these gatherings going to assist the needy of the community. The parsonage was demolished in 2009.²⁶

III. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church is among the oldest continuing churches in Brazos County. While the minutes of 1880 Conference of the Texas African Methodist Episcopal Church, held in Huntsville, are the first to mention "Allen Chapel" of Bryan, oral history gives the date of the church's possible organization as 1873. However, legal and other well-kept records point to a much earlier date. Reverend Richard Emanuel Hammitt, a newly ordained A.M.E. minister, conducted religious observances and services upon his arrival in Bryan in 1866. If the formation of a church is measured by the presence of a minister and a congregation, then Allen Chapel would be one of the earliest organized A.M.E. congregations in the State of Texas.

Allen Chapel, with its various programs, scholarships, and schools contributes to the field of education in the local community, in the state and nation, as well as

internationally; thus continuing the legacy left by the Church's founder, Richard Allen. In fact, Arthur H. Colwell, a church member, who served as the superintendent of Bryan's school for African Americans beginning in 1885, ran unsuccessfully as the Republican candidate for the Texas Superintendent of Education in 1894. Over the years Allen Chapel has produced several ministers, young men and women who grew up in Bryan and include: Charles W. Jackson, Joe Toliver, McCoy Ramson, Ralph Campbell, Ruby Harris, Freddie Carter Jr., and J.W. Ford, Jr., who is now the presiding elder of the Tyler district. The church also supports local charities and community initiatives to improve the lives of those with special needs. And, it joins with other local denominations for shared services and functions.

Church membership has diminished over the years due to deaths, young people going away for college and remaining to work in larger cities, some people preferring larger churches and only a few new members. However, Allen Chapel remains blessed to possess life-time members, others of long tenure as well as sixth and seventh generation members who continue to attend regularly. The members of Allen Chapel believe they have made an impact on the lives of countless individuals throughout the church's history, and will continue to do so. With God's help and guidance they know they will be able to do even greater things in the future.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

¹ Allen purchased his freedom as well as his brother's in 1777—see White, Andrew Nathaniel, *Know Your Church Manual: An Introductory Study of the Local Church for Officers and Members* (Nashville, TN: Division of Education, African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1965), 13; "African Methodist Episcopal Church," in *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ima02>; accessed August 19, 2010).

² "African Methodist Episcopal."

³ Reedy Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church,” in Handbook of Texas Online (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ima02>; accessed August 19, 2010).

⁴ Brundidge, Glenna, ed., *Brazos County History Rich Past – Bright Future* (Bryan, TX: Family History Foundation, 1986); Antebellum Minutes of Texas Annual Conference for the year 1859. . . . Springfield district Boonville . . . “93 white members, 62 white probationers, 32 col’d members, 15 col’d probationers – loc’l preachers . . .”—see “Texas Christian Advocate,” April 5, 1860. This article concerns the Methodist conference, and reveals that slaves made up nearly 25% of the members and probationers of the Boonville church in 1859. Despite sharing membership in the same church whites and blacks were not treated equally within the congregations.

⁵ *The Diary of Rev. South*, Hull Papers, Cushing Library, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas. Richard Emanuel Hammitt was born at Cape Girardeau County, Missouri on July 6th 1819. He was licensed to exhort in 1841 and soon afterwards licensed as a local preacher. Initially taken to Fannin County, Texas in 1857 where he remained for 20 months, his owner then sold him to a man named George Young in Robertson County, Texas. Emanuel was permitted to preach subject to the oversight of white circuit riders—see H.T. Kealing, *History of African Methodist in Texas* (Waco: C.F. Blanks, 1885), 138–41.

⁶ “Slavery Excitement in Texas,” *The Liberator*, October 7, 1859.

⁷ Marshall, Elmer G., “The History of Brazos County, Texas” (masters’ thesis, University of Texas, 1937).

⁸ The 1880 Conference of the Texas African Methodist Episcopal Church was held in Huntsville. The history of that conference notes that the “daughters of the conference” from Allen Chapel, Bryan, donated \$10 to the conference. That donation was signed by Hettie Davis and Miss P.C. Wheeler. Ministers at the Conference included C. Siler, J. R. Bryan, E. Hammitt and C. Cramer—see H.T. Kealing, *History of African Methodism in Texas* (Waco: C.F. Blanks, 1885) 91–2.

⁹ “Shiloh Baptist Church Celebrates 111 Years Under a Roof,” *Bryan-College Station Eagle*, November 26, 1983; Pruitt, Robert L., *The 116th Anniversary of Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1873–1989* (Bryan, TX: s.p., 1990).

¹⁰ Kealing, *History of African Methodism*, 32, 138–41.

¹¹ Brazos County Marriage Records, Book B, 125-255; “The Ticket”, *Dallas Morning News*, August 30, 1894.

¹² National Archives Microfilm Publications, *Records of the Education Division of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865–1871* (hereafter as *Records of the Education Division*; *Ibid.*, *Records of the Superintendent of Education for the State of Texas* (hereafter as *Records of the Superintendent*); Kealing, *History of African Methodism*; “Texas Conference,” *The Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia, PA), November 14, 1868.

¹³ Brazos County Marriage Records, Book B, 228 –344; *Ibid.*, Book C, 23–445; *Ibid.*, Book D, 31, 457–75; *Records of the Education Division*; *Records of the Superintendent*.

¹⁴ Baum, Dale, “Burdens of Landholding in a Freed Slave Settlement: the Case of Brazos County’s “Hall’s town,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 113, no. 2 (October 2009): 184–204; “Quarterly Conference,” *Houston Union*, May 21, 1869; Foster and Hammitt were both delegates to the Fifteenth General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church of America, held in St. Paul Church, Nashville, Tennessee on May 6–24, 1872—see Centennial Retrospect History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Nashville: Sunday School Union Print, c. 1916), 114–7.

¹⁵ Brazos County Deed Records, Book L, 268; Texas Election Registers 1838–72; Baum, “Burdens of Landholding.”

¹⁶ Brazos County Deed Book L, 241.

¹⁷ Lane, Irene, et al., *The History of Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church , (A.M.E.) 1873–1989* (Bryan: s.p., 1989); Brazos County Deed book L, 244.

¹⁸ Lane, *History of Allen Chapel*; the pastors of this second church from 1920 to 1961 were: Revs. A.J. Smith, T.D.L. McDonald, T A. White, J H. Hardeman, E.M. Smith, D S. Robinson, O.H. Benns, A J. Jones, J.J. Hardeman, J.G. Gilford, S.H. Alexander, A.R. Nelson, T.L. Sanders, J. Francis Baker, J.C. Curry, T.L. Singleton, I.C. Oliphant, A.J. Henley and S.L. Berry—see Buford, Michael Dwain, *Up From Cotton: A Pictorial History Book of Blacks in the Brazos Valley* (Bryan, TX: s.p., 1980).

¹⁹ “Notice for Sale,” *Bryan Daily Eagle*, June 19, 1923; Page, Bill, *Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Bryan , Texas, Founded 1866* (Bryan, TX: s.p., n.d.), 48; Lane, *History of Allen Chapel*.

²⁰ Brundidge, *Brazos County History*; Lane, *History of Allen Chapel*.

²¹ Lane, *History of Allen Chapel*; Allen Chapel A.M.E.C. Official Board Minutes, Ledger #1.

²² Allen Chapel , Ledger #1; Allen Chapel A.M.E.C. Official Board Minutes, Ledger #2.

²³ Allen Chapel A.M.E.C. Official Board Minutes, Ledger #2–#4.

²⁴ Allen Chapel A.M.E.C. Official Board Minutes, Ledger #4–#5.

²⁵ Allen Chapel A.M.E.C. Official Board Minutes, Ledger #5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*