

DUSTY ROADS®



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Kewanee's First Black Congregation

But the African Methodist Episcopal Church Had to Wait 33 Years for a Place to Call Home

In the 1870s, Kewanee's Black population hovered around 40 residents. There were a few single adults and 18-20 children spread across seven or eight families. The 1876 Kewanee City Directory listed those citizens (female spouses' names not included):

Name	Occ.	Gender	
		M	F
Emanuel Bailey	laborer	3	3
Wiley Burton	laborer	2	2
Richard Carroll	miner	1	6
Archibald Hobson	miner	1	1
Nelson Johnson	laborer	2	2
Frank Lewis	porter	3	1
Mary Turmus	-	0	1
George Washington	laborer	1	0
Lucy Wiley	-	0	1
Peter Wiley	laborer	2	6

For their religious needs, and to the extent they could, Kewanee's Blacks attended various Kewanee churches. Others made the trip to Princeton to attend religious services conducted by Rev. S. F. Johns of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded there in 1861. The Princeton congregation then consisted of about 11 families who worshipped and conducted a Sunday school for 20 in a wood building

which had cost \$650 to erect.

But finally, on April 15, 1877, the AME Church of Kewanee was organized. Rev. Johns led the effort to provide Kewanee's Blacks with their own church, and he initially traveled periodically from Princeton to Kewanee to lead services.

The AME Church had a long history in America. In 1787, a group of Blacks withdrew from St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia because of discrimination. They first formed the Free African Society and built Bethel African Methodist Church in Philadelphia. In 1799 Richard Allen, a former Delaware slave, was ordained its minister by the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1807 and again in 1815, Allen successfully sued in the Pennsylvania courts to establish Bethel's independence from White Methodists. In 1816, Allen was



Richard Allen

consecrated bishop of the newly-organized African Methodist Episcopal Church, which accepted Methodist doctrine and discipline. Allen was called one of the “Four Horsemen” instrumental in establishing the church.

The Kewanee AME Church initially rented space from the Swedish Episcopal Church for worship and “*a very interesting Sunday School.*” But the church struggled financially. In 1878, congregation member R. E. Carroll, a former slave and Civil War veteran, wrote in the paper about the “*hard struggle*” the church was experiencing in paying rent and expenses for a place of worship and for providing religious training for its children. While thanking the benefactions of its sister churches in the past, he appealed “*once more for HELP, and we assure you we will try to prove ourselves worthy [of] all the confidence and help you may confer upon us.*”

The church survived, but it continued to struggle to make ends meet, and it continued to solicit help from the community. Over time, the church rented other space around the village in which to hold services, conduct Sunday school, and to bring in speakers and events to raise funds. The rental places included Hoffrichter & Fischer Bros. Hall, the hall above Meyer Bros. clothing store, John Howarton’s studio, Butterwick’s Hall, Bennison Hall, and Guest Hall, as well as in other Kewanee churches.

During this time its members included the family of Walter T. Bailey, soon-to-be Illinois’ first Black architect, and soon-to-be Mr. Kewanee Baseball, Lou Reynolds.

By the end of the 19th century the Black population in Kewanee was approaching 300 citizens, and the AME church was raising funds for its own church building. Toward the end of 1903, it began a more formal process, setting up a committee to solicit funds. The congregation also ran

numerous fundraisers, suppers, socials, and other events. However, the funding raising was slow.

Finally, in 1908, the congregation’s endeavors began bearing fruit. The Bethel Business Club arranged for the purchase of a lot on Elliot Street. Initially, they purchased a large tent in which to hold services when the weather cooperated. But the long-range plan was to finally build a church on the lot.

The church’s new pastor, Rev. D. W. Brown, who also ministered to the Princeton AME Church, was a catalyst. He was popular among the congregation and the community.

In the spring of 1910, the congregation still planned to build its church on the Elliot Street lot. However, things changed. The congregation acquired the property at 340 Fifth Avenue and soon began constructing its long-awaited church.

The first services in the new church were held on August 7 while the church was still under construction. Attendees “*expressed pleasure at the excellent appearance of the new edifice. The auditorium, which easily seats one hundred and fifty, is attractive as well as commodious.*” Part of the

building was to be used as the parsonage for Rev. Brown. “*The congregation was not only pleased with the new building but also with the fact that there is only a very small debt remaining after the bills are all paid.*”

On Sunday, November 6, the church celebrated the laying of the cornerstone, with a number of visiting pastors attending. Elder Rev. L. J. Phillips was the master of ceremonies, assisted by Pastor Brown.

Then, on January 15, 1911, the formal dedication ceremony of the new Bethel A. M. E. Church was held. The interior of the sanctuary had been finished, and construction was nearing completion. The Rt. Rev. C. T. Shaffer, M. D. D. D.



Rev. D. W. Brown

Bishop of Chicago, officiated at the services, assisted by other city ministers and Pastor D. W. Brown.

While the Second Baptist Church built the first church building for Kewanee Blacks a few years ear-

lier, Kewanee's first organized Black congregation had finally reached its 33-year old dream of having a place to call home.



Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, ca 1961