

The African Methodist Episcopal Church Moves into Central Pennsylvania

Rev. Jeane B. Williams, 1996¹

Daniel Coker and the Establishment of African-American Churches

African-Americans, slave and free, moved northward and westward, as did European-Americans, when the growing country expanded its boundaries during the early 1800's. Escaping slaves were seeking an existence beyond the legal jurisdiction of human bondage, and free persons of color were exercising their rights to an independent livelihood.

Like the European-American community, African-Americans sought to fulfill the need for the ministrations or spiritual bulwarks of the church. Preachers, ministers and evangelists traveled, mostly on horseback, to hold religious services wherever they could be arranged. Sometimes the opportunity was in a home where they were invited to eat, drink and/or bed, and sometimes it was by previous invitation from a small settlement of pioneers.

Having left behind a highly restrictive lifestyle, many of these African-Americans sought to own and control their church properties, ordained preachers from their own race, and separate services. They did not always desire total separation of worship, but were frequently led to that decision because of the kind of "Christian love" shown by their European-American neighbors.

The origin and growth of the African-American church during the period 1770 to 1850 was in spite of the Fugitive Slave Laws, the Black Codes, etc. It was a dangerous time for African-American church workers and may have added impetus to the zeal that inspired the westward evangelistic thrust.

In spite of the dangers, one of the most active traveling preachers of his day was Daniel Coker of Baltimore, a contemporary of Richard Allen. Not restricting his preaching to Baltimore, he traveled the surrounding area and also ventured across the Maryland border into south-central Pennsylvania.

Coker assisted Richard Allen in the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in 1816.² His preaching places made up a large portion of what was designated as the Baltimore Conference, and preachers of the new denomination agreed to supply the appointments he had laid out and served.

Originally included in the Carroll County Circuit until a separate Harrisburg Circuit was formed at a later date, the Pennsylvania preaching places included Little York, Wrightsville-on-the-Susquehanna, Columbia, Lancaster, Harrisburg, Shippensburg, Chambersburg and Greencastle.

Two pioneer preachers assigned to the Harrisburg Circuit were the Reverends Shadrach Basset and David Smith. They traveled it on foot and scheduled each appointment for every two

weeks.

Basset and Smith continued the method for establishing churches used by Coker. Wealthy European-Americans of the community were approached by Smith, who presented references from lawyer John T. Barr of Baltimore. Smith obtained their consent to serve as trustees of the proposed local African-American church. Although Basset was considered the better preacher, Smith took charge of collecting the money to buy lots and build churches. Despite their success, the two worked together for only one year before Basset was assigned elsewhere.

Like their European-American Methodist Episcopal counterparts, the AME's held large "quarterly meetings." When word was spread that an African-American preacher was to hold such a gathering, the congregation would be well integrated. The meetings typically began on Saturday and ran until sunset on Monday or Tuesday.

Having pioneered the African-American work in south-central Pennsylvania and the organization of the AME church there, Coker eventually involved himself in wider circles. Around 1820 he was persuaded to join the American Colonization Society. After several unsuccessful attempts, this group helped free African-Americans and emancipated slaves establish the colony of Liberia in 1822. Daniel Coker subsequently became involved in a leadership capacity in the work in the adjacent British colony of Sierra Leone, where he labored for the rest of his life and where he is buried. Long under-recognized within the AME Church, "the figure of Coker," reports Singleton in his denominational history, "looms larger with the flight of time."

Brief Histories of Some Central Pennsylvania Coker Preaching Places

Following are abbreviated accounts of locations within the UM's Central Pennsylvania Conference which enjoyed significant AME activity during Coker's ministry. Other African-American Methodist communions and independent Black congregations also existed at this time, but they had not become as evangelical in their missionary endeavors as the AME Church -- the first to reach into central Pennsylvania to feed the "sheep" and "lambs."

Chambersburg, Franklin County. This is the location of the oldest organized African-American church in continuous existence in south-central Pennsylvania. Local history records the purchase, in 1811, of a log structure on North Second Street which had been formerly used by a Catholic congregation. That building was moved to a lot on South Main Street, then known as Kerrstown.

Chambersburg remained part of the Baltimore Conference, in spite of frequent petitions to annual conferences to be placed for convenience of travel in the Philadelphia Conference, until 1872. Today, St. James is a member of the Harrisburg District of the Philadelphia Conference. The congregation has worshipped at its present location, 510 South Main Street, since 1839.

Greencastle, Franklin County. Bethel is this town's first organized African-American church. A small log building erected here in 1816 served the African-American communities in Antrim and Greencastle for nearly sixty years. It was frequently used, as were many African-American churches, as a refuge for fleeing slaves.

Local Presbyterian assistance has helped to keep this dedicated congregation viable. Located on South Carlisle Street, on the site of the original log structure, the church is a member of

the Harrisburg District of the Philadelphia Conference.

Carlisle, Cumberland County. Although some records credit Richard Allen with founding this congregation, most historians agree that it is one of Daniel Coker's plantings. Carlisle's oldest continuously-existing African-American church of any denomination, Bethel is listed in the 1821 Baltimore Conference journal with a membership of fifteen, "the weakest point" on the Fredericktown Circuit.

The congregation's first building was erected at the present site, 131 East Pomfret Street, in 1827. It was here that the young Daniel Payne³ was introduced to African Methodism in 1836. He spent his vacation time from Gettysburg Seminary assisting local deacon John Peck, while John Cornish and his assistant Henry C. Turner were the elders on the circuit.

For many years the basement of the church housed a school for African-American and Native American children that was taught by Miss Sarah Bell, a European-American woman of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. The church is in the Harrisburg District of the Philadelphia Conference.

Shippensburg, Cumberland County. While the 1823 Baltimore Conference journal lists Shippensburg as an appointment on Fredericktown Circuit, information confirmed by the 1824 minutes of the denomination's Second General Conference, the local church history gives 1867 as the congregation's starting date. Research is currently underway to account for the forty plus "missing years." St. Peter's church is located on South Penn Street and is a member of the Harrisburg District of the Philadelphia Conference.

York, York County. Like a number of churches, Bethel has had valuable historical records destroyed by natural disasters -- including three major floods at its 350 West Princess Street site. But its inclusion in the listing of Coker's preaching places under the name Little York, and an 1824 Baltimore Conference journal statement that the appointment had thirty-nine members, help to confirm its early existence.

According to the published Recollections of Bishop A.W. Wayman, he dedicated church buildings in York in 1862 and on Sunday, April 13, 1873. Before moving to its present location in 1953, the congregation used at least four previous places of worship -- a hall on North Duke Street, 216 West King Street (the Masonic Lodge), West King Street, and South Newberry Street. Bethel is a member of the Harrisburg District of the Philadelphia Conference.

Wrightsville, York County. The 1820 list of Coker's preaching places names this "Wrightsville-on-the-Susquehanna." For most of its early years it was "supplied" by the same preacher who visited York. In 1844 the Harrisburg Circuit was divided and the Lancaster Circuit was organized, but Wrightsville remained on the Harrisburg Circuit. Apparently the congregation was significant, for the 1887 journal refers to a Wrightsville Circuit -- consisting of Wrightsville and York.

The bridge between Wrightsville and Columbia, the first such crossing of the Susquehanna north of the Mason-Dixon line, made this church an important stop on the underground railroad. From here, fugitives from the Delmarva Peninsula and Maryland's eastern shore were channeled to York and the west. Down to four living members, the congregation disbanded in 1962.

Harrisburg, Dauphin County. Denominational records and writings indicate that Harrisburg was one of Coker's regular preaching places as early as 1817. Local municipal records of 1821 list the AME church as one of five church buildings in the borough. The 1823 Baltimore Conference journal also confirms the existence of the congregation.

Sometime between 1824 and 1829, a group withdrew and established a church at Third and Mulberry Streets. A second division occurred in 1834, and those who remained at the site united with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) denomination which had been organized in New York City in 1821. This appears to have left the city without an AME congregation for a brief period, and the 1834 conference journal does not contain a report from Harrisburg.

Dissidents loyal to the AME connection reorganized in 1835 and the present congregation has had a continuous existence ever since. The second oldest African-American congregation in the city, Bethel is a member of the Harrisburg District of the Philadelphia Conference. The sanctuary they had been using since 1955, the former Ridge Avenue Methodist church building, a large structure that had hosted several annual conferences, was destroyed by arson in November 1995. Since then they have been worshipping in the Ben Franklin Elementary School, the Otterbein UM building, and other nearby sites.

Mercersburg, Franklin County. Although there are numerous spellings of the name in the records, Mercersburg was the site of an African-American congregation with membership in the AME connection prior to 1834. The 1834 Baltimore Conference annual minutes acknowledge thirty-four communicant members. In 1843, the minutes report a school, taught by a European-American, under the heading of Sunday Schools.

Despite the above references, and an 1844 General Conference statement including Mercersburg on the Chambersburg circuit, local church history records the founding year as 1892. A name change and/or the variant spellings mentioned above may account for the gaps in the history of this congregation, and more research is in progress. Bethel is a member of the Harrisburg District of the Philadelphia Conference.

Lewistown, Mifflin County. Although several existing AME congregations did not submit reports to the 1834 Baltimore Conference, Lewistown was the only one noted by name. In 1838 Lewistown was placed on the Columbia circuit, and they reported having a school in 1841. A new church building was erected in 1842, which was a cause for much rejoicing.

Apparently there was a question about the placement of the AME work in the area, and a resolution attaching Lewistown circuit to the Baltimore Conference was introduced and carried at the General Conference of 1844. Bethel, once named Wayman, is located at 23 Juniata Street and is a member of the Scranton District of the Pittsburgh Conference.

Gettysburg, Adams County. Daniel Payne, in his Recollections, notes as follows: "While pursuing my studies at the Seminary, I obtained permission to use an old building belonging to the college for Sunday School instruction. So, gathering in all the colored children in the neighborhood, I opened the school, having for teachers such persons as I could obtain from the village and the Seminary. As occasion did permit, I also held religious meetings and labored to produce revivals, which labors were blessed by the coming of many souls to Christ."

This activity began in 1837 and was still flourishing in 1841. But Payne goes on to record that the choice of an intemperate class leader by the minister in charge was so unfortunate that a real AME church never prospered.

Williamsport, Lycoming County. AME work in this area, which was physically distant from other early efforts, probably began because the region was the northern terminus of the branch of the Underground Railroad that came up the Susquehanna River. Records of the 1847 session of the

Ohio Conference note that "all the appointments east of Washington, Pennsylvania, were cut off from the Washington Circuit and converted into one, bearing the name of the Williamsport Circuit."

Local church history indicates uncertainty as to the founding date, but does begin with meetings held in 1862. The first African-American church building was erected on Jefferson Street, between Hepburn and West Streets. This structure was apparently shared with and eventually lost to the AMEZ denomination. Another church was built on the north side of Mill Street, now Front. Seven years and two moves later, the church was dedicated on the present Hepburn and Memorial Streets site. Bethel is a member of the Scranton District of the Pittsburgh Conference.

Female African-American Preachers of Central Pennsylvania

African-American female preachers were also active in the ministry move into central Pennsylvania. Jarena Lee, who was "permitted" to preach by Richard Allen, engaged in a preaching tour of the settlements as early as 1825. She traveled to Columbia, where she held prayer meetings and led class meetings. She was the preacher for the 10 am service when she arrived in York, where she was well received and stayed several weeks.

Jarena then spent New Year's Eve in Harrisburg and conducted the service for the occasion. From there she journeyed to Carlisle, where she spent ten days. During this time she led the class meetings and preached to "a small body of members." She took the stage to Shippensburg where, under her persuasive delivery of the gospel, fifteen persons joined the church. She also traveled by stage to Chambersburg where she preached to "large congregations in and out of doors." There were great revivals on this circuit.

Amanda Berry Smith⁴ joined Bethel, York, in her youth. She moved from York in 1856 and was employed in Columbia, where she met and married her second husband James H. Smith, a local deacon in the AME Church. Although Amanda's world travels as an evangelist were not sponsored by the denomination, she never relinquished her AME church membership.

The African Methodist Episcopal and United Methodist Churches: Similarities and Differences

A reading of the most current Disciplines of both the AME and UM denominations will find numerous parallels on theological positions. Any differences are usually found in administrative structure and terminology.

In the AME system, the appointment to pastor a local church is given to one person. There is no legislation legitimizing co-pastorships as in the UM system. Neither is there a "teaching parish" in African Methodism. The UM Charge Conference seems to function much as the AME Local Church Conference.

Lay Speakers and Lay Preachers are not a recognized preaching ministry in the AME Church. Neither is the Diaconal Ministry, which is primarily a ministry of service in United Methodism.

Upon entering the AME preaching ministry, one is classified as a licentiate. Based upon age,

education, or personal choice, the candidate begins studies on one of two tracks -- local or itinerant. Regardless of the track, the first ordination is into the diaconate (local deacon or itinerant deacon). The second and final ordination is as local elder or itinerant elder. The Local Pastor in the AME preaching ministry serves just the local church in an ordained capacity and may act only as a "supply" in the pastoral ranks.

Itinerant elders in African Methodism have no guarantee of rights to a pastoral appointment by a bishop. The Book of Discipline does contain a Bill of Rights for preachers that seems to give that right, but it has not been upheld or supported by the Judicial Council of the AME Church. A reading of the legislative provision seems ambivalent and is used to apply only to those with pastoral appointments.

UM bishops are elected from the list of nominees from Annual Conferences as well as from the floor of the Jurisdictional Conference. In true "democratic" practice, anyone can choose to "run for bishop" in the AME Church, and the electioneering held at General Conference is almost a duplicate of the Republican or Democratic nominating convention.

There is no mandatory retirement age for active clergy, except bishops, in African Methodism. [author's note: This was changed by legislation at the 1996 AME General Conference, and the exact wording is not available at this re-writing.] For the latter, it is mandatory retirement at the General Conference immediately following the bishops seventy-fifth birthday.

The presiding elder is referred to as "middle management" in African Methodism. As with the UM's district superintendent, the presiding elder is appointed by the bishop, and the duties of the office are similar. Presiding elders hold quarterly conferences, district conferences and Sunday School conventions. The latter two are convened annually in each presiding elder's district.

The voting membership to the AME General Conference consists of an equal number of clergy and lay, and one youth delegate from each Annual Conference.

Episcopal Districts in African Methodism are groups of annual conferences largely determined by geographic ease of administration first and census second. At the General Conference one bishop is assigned to each Episcopal District.

The UM Church has commissions of archives and history at the conference, jurisdictional and denominational levels. To care for African Methodism's heritage and records, the AME Church has only a denominational historiographer. A few Episcopal Districts and Conferences also designate historiographers, but they function independently. I feel a real need for the restoration of the Bureau of Research and Statistics as defined in the AME Discipline and pray that future episcopal leadership of the Philadelphia Conference will be so led by "Godly judgment."

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assorted records of the First, Second, and Third Episcopal Districts of the AME Church

Editor's Endnotes

1. The Reverend Jeane B. Williams is the former Historiographer and Director of the Bureau of Research and History of the 1st Episcopal District and the Philadelphia Conference of the AME Church. Previously on staff at the University of Pennsylvania library, Rev. Williams pursued theological studies and was ordained an Itinerant Deacon in 1978 and an Itinerant Elder in 1980. Now on staff at the Mt. Zion AME Church in Devon PA, Rev. Williams has pastored congregations and served on various boards and agencies in the Philadelphia Conference of the AME Church. The paper presented here was originally delivered as the keynote address at the 1996 annual meeting of the Historical Society of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the UM Church.

2. In early 1816 Richard Allen of Philadelphia invited Methodist-related African-American leaders from other cities to come together for a conference. The group convened in Philadelphia on April 9, with Daniel Coker as chairman. Fourteen year old Richard Allen Jr, although not an official member of the group, was chosen secretary because of his ability to write. It was decided to organize "under

the name and style of the African Methodist Episcopal Church of the United States of North America, and that the book of Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church be adopted as our Discipline." Richard Allen of Philadelphia and Daniel Coker of Philadelphia were elected bishops for the new denomination. The next morning Allen, who had not been present for the election, addressed the group and stated that two bishops were too many to start with. He offered to resign, or to let the convention re-vote to chose a single episcopal leader. When the matter was reconsidered and a new election held, Allen was chosen bishop. And so today Richard Allen's name is recognized as that of the founding bishop of the AME Church, and Daniel Coker's is all but forgotten. There is strong tradition, supported by specific oral accounts, that Daniel Coker was not chosen on account of his color. As his mother was an Englishwoman and his father was a Negro slave, Coker was very light-skinned and described as "being nearly white."

3. Daniel Alexander Payne (1811-1893) was born and raised in Charleston SC. A precocious child with a penchant for learning, he was converted at the age of 15 and opened a small school for both free and slave African-Americans. The success of Payne's educational venture aroused curiosity and hostility on the part of the European-Americans, and his career as a teacher was cut short in 1833 when the state legislature enacted a law which made it a punishable crime to teach Negroes. It was soon after that he travelled north and enrolled in the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg, and the 1926 centennial history of that school twice refers to his studies there. One page 111 it reports that "In 1835, a colored student, D.A. Payne from Charleston SC entered the seminary and there was no discrimination against him. It does not seem to have occurred to Dr. Schmucker, however, to send him as a Lutheran missionary among his own race. He afterwards became a bishop in the Methodist [sic] Church." On page 293 it states that, "The Seminary had only one colored student. This was Daniel A. Payne, who came from Charleston SC and entered the Seminary in 1835. After spending two years at Gettysburg, he was licensed [1837] and ordained [1839] by the Franckean Synod. Fourteen years [?] he spent in Lutheran pastorates. Then he was made a bishop of the AME Church. He became a distinguished man, an author, editor and educator, a doctor of divinity and a doctor of laws... Of his record the Seminary may well be proud." Payne's Carlisle AME contacts while a student at Gettysburg led him to join that denomination a few years later, and he soon assumed a leadership role. He introduced legislation calling for ministerial annual conference study courses at the AME General Conference of 1844, was elected a bishop in 1852. He was a true spiritual giant and one of the ablest leaders in the history of the AME Church. In the words of denominational historian George Singleton, "But of all the heroes of the Church, Daniel A. Payne's name must be written first in letters of gold."

4. Amanda Berry Smith (1837-1915) had a Pennsylvania state historical marker erected in her honor in 1993 in front of Shrewsbury's Grace United Methodist Church. The marker reads: "A renowned evangelist and singer, born a slave in Maryland. Her father bought the family's freedom, and then moved to a farm near here. While still a child she was converted at this church. She committed her life to missionary work and traveled in the U.S. and to Britain, India and Africa. Published a monthly paper, "The Helper." Founder and superintendent, Industrial Home for Colored Children in Illinois." In a 1967 paper *This, Too, Is Harrisburg District History*, former conference archivist C.F. Berkheimer described Amanda Smith as "the greatest woman evangelist the Methodist Church ever produced" and noted "she is said to have had the greatest contralto voice in America in her time, the Mahalia Jackson of that day." In addition, she spent twelve years in Liberia with Bishop William Taylor, was a great promoter of holiness, and served as guest soloist at two Methodist Episcopal General Conferences.