

Clark County's Early African-American Churches

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I have collected information on black churches in Clark County with the thought of preparing brief sketches of those established in the 19th century. With two exceptions, all of our known African-American congregations began after the Civil War. However, it was not until after emancipation that they were able to form churches. The favored denominations were Methodist and Baptist. According to Dr. Thomas D. Clark's *Clark County, Kentucky: A History*, "Documentary evidence describing the number and location of the colored Baptist congregations is skimpy." And the same is true for Methodist congregations.

Establishment dates given in this article are taken from deeds of trustees purchasing property on which to build a church.* While this may not be precisely accurate, other data are simply not available. Other documentation comes from county records and a few published church histories. The list of churches is fairly impressive, and it's possible I may have missed a few.

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Allen Chapel CME today

The first black church established was a Methodist congregation that later became

* An exception was made for Providence Missionary Baptist Church (see below).

Allen Chapel CME. Their history states that “a number of years before the Emancipation, the black people of this locality were permitted to worship in the basement of the First Methodist Church.” Then, in February 1866, Joshua Neale and his wife sold a lot at the corner of Broadway and Highland Street to John Allen, James Winn and John Massie, trustees for the church. In 1870 the congregation joined the newly formed Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) denomination. They built a frame church and parsonage; the former was replaced with a brick edifice in 1898 that still stands.

The church had a long history but membership declined in recent years. The congregation is no longer active, and their building has been purchased by First Baptist Church.

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First Baptist Church was established in 1867. According to a church history prepared by Rev. Alvin W. Farris, the congregation first met in the home of Henry and Dullie Ecton. Members were drawn from Old Friendship Baptist and other churches around the county. In August 1867 John and Anne Madigan sold a lot on North Highland Street to Madison Gentry, John Woodford and Lewis Hood, trustees for the Missionary Baptist Church. Rev. Farris stated that the congregation rented a building on South Church Street (Church Alley) until members could erect a 30 by 36 foot structure on their lot.

A brick church was built in 1893, and it was replaced in 1930 by the present brick structure on Highland Street. The sanctuary has now been completely updated and beautiful stained-glass windows installed. Their expanded campus now includes a Family Life Center/gymnasium. The Harris Hoops Summer Basketball League was inaugurated there in June. The congregation is ably led today by their community-minded pastor, Rev. Marvin King.



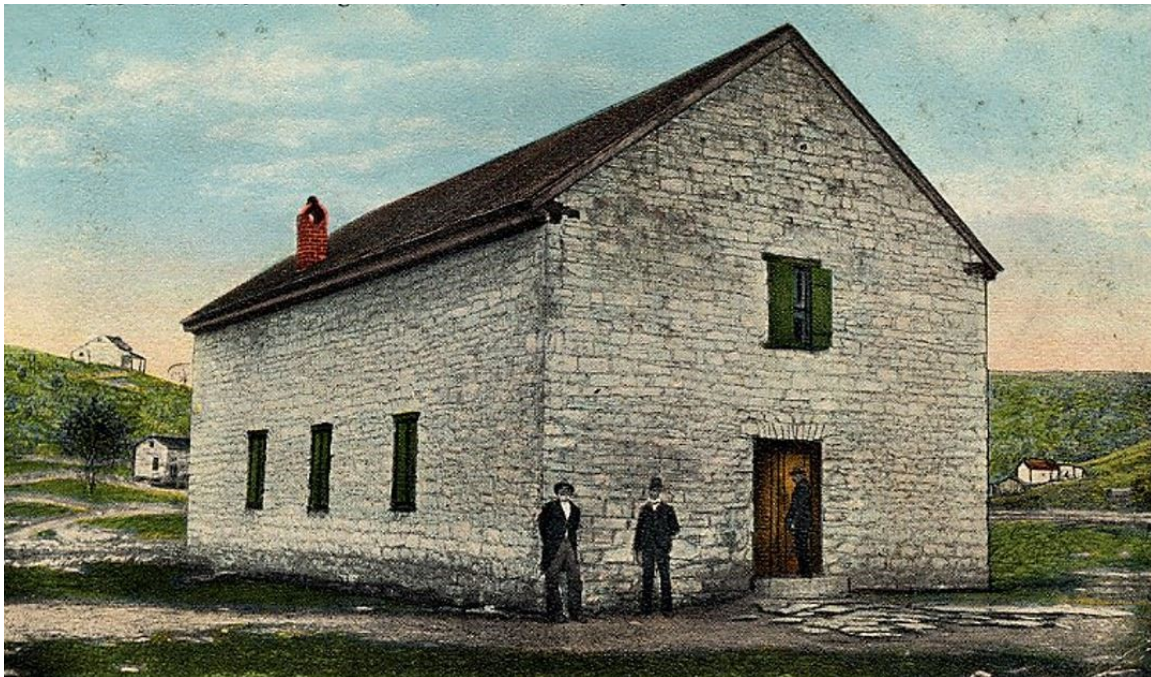
First Baptist Church during construction.

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The first black congregation that has come to light began as members of Providence Baptist Church on Lower Howard's Creek. This church, which came to Clark County in 1784, accepted its first black member in 1786. Church minutes indicate that, beginning in September 1849, "the coloured brethren" were permitted to hold irregular meetings on their own. Then, in October 1854, the church agreed to allow regular Sunday meetings with the condition that "some two or more of the white brethren be present at each meeting." The black congregation continued to meet in this manner until after the Civil War. Finally, on July 4, 1868, nineteen "Coloured Brethren & Sisters of this Church" were granted letters of dismission, presumably in order to form their own separate body.

White Providence members erected a new meeting house in 1870 on the road to Boonesborough, and in 1872 they sold their old church to "Thompson Ragland, Robert Bush, John Covington, Silas Gentry and Lewis Woodford, trustees of the Colored Baptist Church." All except Covington had previously been members of Providence.

Although the deed was made in 1872, the evidence above suggests an establishment date of July 1868. This congregation, today known as Providence Missionary Baptist Church, has been meeting continuously ever since. Their place of worship, long known as the Old Stone Church, is now the oldest operating church in Kentucky.



Postcard view of the Old Stone Church

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In November 1869, Dry Fork Colored Methodist Church purchased a lot from Pleasant Conkwright and wife Annie. Trustees Andrew Rucker, Peter Buckner and Click Vivion paid \$50 for two acres of land on the Dry Fork of Upper Howard's Creek. This would have been in the Ruckerville area. Their pastor in 1870 was Reuben Taylor. No other information found.

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The third Methodist congregation, Clark Chapel AME, is now known as Clark United Methodist Church. Its original members came from Allen Chapel CME. They

withdrew from that congregation when it departed from the much older African Methodist Episcopal (AME) conference. They purchased a lot at the corner of Church Alley and Broadway known as “the Old William Factory.” The sale was made in January 1870 to trustees Reuben Ragland, Shelton Jones and William Irvin. An 1872 deed indicates the congregation first met in the old factory: “The brick house that was formerly used as a carding Factory but is now owned by the African Methodist Church and used as a Meeting House....” They sold this building to Ernest Jordan in 1926 and moved to a new church at the corner of Broadway and Burns Avenue.

Clark United Methodist is an inclusive, neighborhood-focused church currently pastored by Chrysanthia Carr-Seals. Their original building on East Broadway has been purchased by Pillar of the Community and is currently being restored by Mt. Folly Enterprises.



The old AME Church today

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In April 1872, James S. Lane sold one acre on Holder’s Road to James Baker, Charles Fishback, John Green and Civil War veteran, Jack Rones, “trustees of the Colored Baptist Church of Pine Grove.” The land was on what is now Venable Road, a half mile from Old Pine Grove. The church building is long gone, but the foundation stones, spanning about 30 feet by 30 feet, are still in place. Hillcrest Cemetery is located on the adjacent site. The successor congregation, Gentile Pine Grove Baptist Church, now simply Gentile Baptist Church, moved to Winchester, where it stands at the corner of Elm and Fifth Street.

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Broadway Christian Church today

In March 1876, W. N. West sold a lot fronting on the south side of Broadway to the “Colored Christian Church of Winchester” represented by trustees John Judy, Granville Woodward and Alfred Frazier. The frame church that burned here in about 1896 was replaced by a larger frame building. In 1957 the latter building was torn down and the present brick church erected on the site. Broadway Christian Church is still an active congregation led by their charismatic pastor, Rev. Raymond H. Smith Jr.

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In March 1881, Lewis McVane, Nelson Seals and Dudley Irvine, “committee men for the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church,” purchased a small lot on Jouett Creek from Lydia Aldrich. The church stands on the south side of Athens-Boonesboro Road, where the road crosses the creek. An early colored school also stood on the site. The church and grounds are still well maintained, and a small cemetery has been fenced off to protect the gravestones.



Pleasant Hill Baptist Church

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In August 1881, Jeremiah McKinney sold an acre of land to trustees Newton Murray, Joseph Murray and James Johnson, for “a place of Divine worship for the use of the Ministry and Membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America.” Four years later, Joseph Murray sold the trustees of “M. E. Church of Howard’s Lower Creek” a small parcel of land “on which to build a church edifice.” The deed description places the lot in a bottom on the north side of the creek, less than a half mile downstream from the Old Stone Church. Murray’s deed states that the church was to be known as “Boone’s Chapel.” In 1892 when they sold off part of their lot the church was referred to as “Murray’s Chapel.” No other information found.

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In November 1883, George and Phillis Gaitskill sold an acre of land to William Wilson, Manson Vivion and Harry Haggard, who were trustees of the “Colored M. E. Church of Corinth.” A black congregation met here for more than a century, but Corinth CME Church is no longer in use. The handsome frame building, located on L & E Junction Road, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The church has begun to fall into disrepair.



Corinth CME Church (Photo courtesy of the National Register of Historic Places)

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In October 1888, D. P. and Charlotte Scott sold a lot to Clark Tibbs, Jackson M. Taylor, Lee Mason and Perry Richardson, who were “trustees of a Colored Baptist Church being organized in Clark County.” These men represented “the Colored Baptist Church at Becknerville.” A 1926 map of the county shows the “Colored Church & School” on the west side of Waterworks Road at Becknerville. Now known as Houston Baptist Church, with Rev. Timothy F. Lynem pastor of the congregation.



Houston Baptist Church today

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In November 1889, Wayne Morton, Thomas Miller and Sanford Miller, trustees for the “Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America,” paid \$20 for one quarter acre of land “on the waters of Stoner Creek.” The premises were to be used “as a place of divine worship” and “for public school purposes.” Two years later a deed of correction was signed stating that the original purchaser “of the lot on which a church is now being built” was actually the Colored School District #7. Church trustees and school trustees agreed to joint ownership of the lot and building that would be used by both parties, and further agreed to share expenses equally. Deed records indicate that the church and school were located on Goose Creek Road, a dirt lane at that time. When Sanford Miller’s estate was divided among his heirs in 1896, the accompanying map shows the church lot on the left side of Goose Creek Road, about 100 yards south from where the road crosses Goose Creek. The school was not mentioned. No other information found regarding the church.

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According to their written history, Broadway Baptist Church was formed by 60 former members of First Baptist Church on Highland. Their charter was granted in December 1889. Rev. R. T. Huffman served as the first pastor. In April 1890, Isaac Skinner sold a lot in Winchester to Edward Turner, Charles Dedman and Beverly Jackson, “as Trustees for the Broadway Baptist Church.” The church paid \$300 of the \$1,350 purchase price, giving notes for the remainder. A black architect from Nashville drew up plans, and the cornerstone of the new church was laid in 1890. The handsome brick building with its tall steeple was erected on the north side of Broadway near Maple Street.

Construction costs put the congregation further in debt. The church was almost lost to indebtedness on several occasions but somehow managed to survive. Deed records indicate that in 1904, the congregation paid George Nelson \$1,335 in cash to regain the title to their church. At that time, trustees were Orrin W. Bates, Sid Boone, Charles Wills, Silas Coach and Charles Dedman. The last of a series of mortgages was paid off in 1923.



Broadway Baptist Church

The church was led for 38 years (1955-1993) by Rev. Henry E. Baker Sr. Reverend Baker was a tireless worker for the black community of Winchester. He played a prominent roll dealing with integration of local government and schools. Baker was the first African-American elected to public office in Clark County, serving as a city commissioner and vice mayor from 1980 to 1984. A month before his death in 2014, the new Henry E. Baker Intermediate School was named in his honor.

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Much more work needs to be done to document these historic churches. My apologies for any errors that may be found in my work. I would appreciate any corrections or additions (henoch1945@gmail.com).

Thanks to Lyndon Comstock, who prepared voluminous, detailed information on the African-American members of Providence Baptist Church and whose book will soon be forthcoming. Thanks also to Jerry Cecil for help with this article

Sources

Allen Chapel: Church history in the Centennial Edition of the *Winchester Sun*, September 9, 1978; Clark County Deed Book 42:216. **First Baptist:** Church history in *Winchester Sun* Centennial Edition; Clark County Deed Book 43:27. **Providence Missionary Baptist:** Clark County Deed Book 45:9; Providence Church Minute Books 1, 2 and 3. **Dry Fork Colored Methodist:** Clark County Deed Book 43:541; C. H. Phillips, *History of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Jackson, TN, 1925), p. 46. **Clark United Methodist:** Church history in *Winchester Sun* Centennial Edition; Clark County Deed Book 44:158, 45:67, 104:230. **Gentile Baptist:** Clark County Deed Book 44:493. **Broadway Christian:** Clark County Deed Book 48:102, 52:499. **Pleasant Hill Baptist:** Clark County Deed Book 48:549. **Murray's Chapel ME:** Clark County Deed Book 49:61, 51:449, 61:94. **Corinth CME:** Clark County Deed Book 50:303. **Becknerville Baptist:** 54:492. **Stoner Creek CME:** Clark County Deed Book 56:541, 57:377; Clark County Division of Lands Book 1:187. **Broadway Baptist:** Church history, *Winchester Sun* Centennial Edition, September 9, 1978; Clark County Deed Book 56:559, 72:630; Betty Ratliff Smith, *Winchester Sun*, September 9, 1989.