

The Rise of African Methodism in Lancaster County

Dr. Leroy T. Hopkins, Jr.

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Histories of the African experience in America emphasize the impact of slavery but seldom examine a factor that helped Africans survive an economic and social system designed to dehumanize and keep them in a state of perpetual inferiority. At moments of extreme anxiety or danger, a belief in a power outside human agency can be a source of solace and comfort. Early Protestant leaders in the American colonies were extremely appreciative of the African's spirituality. Francis Asbury, for example, noted in his journal on November 17, 1771:

I feel a regard for the people: and I think the Americans are more ready to receive the word than the English; and to see the poor Negroes so affected is pleasing, to see their sable countenances in our solemn assemblies, and to hear them sing with cheerful melody their dear Redeemer's praise, affected me much, and made me ready to say, 'of a truth I perceive God is no respecter of persons.'

Over a generation before Asbury, Heinrich Melchior Muhlenberg had expressed similar thoughts and was quite upset by Southern slaveholders' unwillingness to allow their slaves to be taught so they could read the Bible. Muhlenberg had no objection to slavery. Like many of his contemporary theologians, he considered slavery a worldly institution imposed by God as a sort of earthly purgatory. True freedom for the African awaited in the after-life; thus, it was imperative that Africans be allowed access to the Gospels.

The paradox of being a slaveholder and yet believing as Asbury that God was no respecter of persons, that is, that all men are equal before God, was also to be found in Lancaster County. In the decades before the incorporation of Lancaster County, several religious groups settled on the lands east of the Susquehanna. Although the Scots-Irish have the reputation of being the county's chief slaveholders in the 18th century, Africans also served other groups as unfree laborers. The small group of Quakers led to the shores of the Susquehanna in 1726 by Samuel Blunston, land agent for the Penns, depended in part on slave labor to establish itself. Pastoral records from such diverse congregations such as Lancaster's Trinity Lutheran, St. James Episcopal, First Reformed, and Moravian churches reveal that Africans not only served members

of those churches but also received the sacraments of baptism, marriage, and burial.

The passage of the Gradual Abolition Act in 1780 and its subsequent amendment in 1788 not only ushered in the transition from slavery to indentured servitude, a process that lasted 50 years, it also stands at the beginning of the era in which free African communities began to coalesce throughout the Commonwealth. In tracing the evolution of a community, property ownership is one measure of progress. Black property ownership in Lancaster and Columbia Boroughs dates from the 1790s and 1818, respectively. A more accurate measure of community building, however, is the evolution of the free African Church.



Bishop Richard Allen

The transition from being a tolerated presence in white congregations to establishing autonomous congregations was a gradual process. In general, however, it seems clear that the growth of the Black population after 1780 was accompanied by increased racism and discrimination. Because of my own religious affiliation, I will restrict my comments to the African Methodist Episcopal Church. At various times in the 19th century Black churches were found in Lancaster City, Columbia, Marietta, Conestoga, Manor Township's Charlestown, Mt. Joy, Little Brittain, Salisbury, Paradise, Coleraine, Martic Townships as well as Fulton Township's Perm Hill and Rigby. Most of these congregations belonged to the corporate structure of the AME Church that originated in Philadelphia in the years after the American Revolution, as the result of coordination between five African congregations concerned about the rising tide of discrimination directed against Africans worshipping in white congregations.

Free Africans led by Richard Allen, who had been an itinerant in our area with Francis Asbury, organized their own church, today's Mother Bethel. It was not until March 1816, after a protracted legal battle, that the African Methodist Episcopal Church was incorporated. From the outset, the corporate structure of the AME Church signaled an effort to organize free Africans not only for spiritual but also for social and economic goals important to the future of the emerging free African community. This is especially evident in Lancaster County where the AME Church has been deeply involved in important local issues for African Americans.

A little over a year after the incorporation of the AME Church, an article appeared in Lancaster's *Lancaster Journal* announcing local African Americans' intention of seeking assistance to establish their own church. In

doing so, local free Africans publicly acknowledged their subservient status to achieve their ultimate goal of autonomy. Between 1817 and 1861, two free African congregations existed in Lancaster: Isaac Gilmore's African Church and St. James' African Church. Both are documented in the city's first directory (1843) and the latter congregation is today's Bethel AME Church. The designation "St. James' African Church" demonstrates close ties to St. James Episcopal Church and is probably indicative of a degree of control which the older congregation exercised over its younger counterpart.

Evidence of that control is that James Clendenin, the free African tradesman selected by his community to organize the creation of a church, negotiated with a select group of influential members of St. James and Trinity Lutheran to achieve that goal. It was recognized that without the support and approbation of these influential citizens, the African community's goal was untenable. Clendenin himself was well known at St. James. Even though the African church had been organized in 1817 and was officially dedicated in 1821, Clendenin received adult baptism at St. James on September 9, 1823. A perhaps final indication of the control exercised over the emerging Black congregation is the fact that it took almost three decades before the junior congregation was incorporated in 1848 as the AME Church in Lancaster.

During the period from 1817 to 1848, when Lancaster's AME Church approached stabilization, similar congregations were established in other Lancaster County locales that had a significant free African population. Much research remains before a definitive history of the AME Church in Lancaster County can be written and certainly anything in that direction far exceeds the time limitations facing me today. By comparing and contrasting AME churches in rural and urban settings, it may be able to suggest some interesting features of the planting of African Methodism in Lancaster County. Our urban settings are Lancaster and Columbia; for contrast I will make some comments about Conestoga, a free African community and church that disappeared on the eve of the World War I.

Elsewhere I have written about the growth of the Antebellum free African populations in all three locales, and need therefore not include too many details of that history here.¹ Between 1817, when Lancaster's Bethel AME was founded, and the Civil War, the AME Church in Lancaster County was more than just a stabilizing element in its community. Both Lancaster's Bethel and Columbia's Mt. Zion AME organized free African schools in which future generations were to be prepared to take their place in a more equitable society. This was done in the face of extreme adversity and animosity from the community at large. In my recent article on the education of African Americans

¹See Leroy T. Hopkins, Jr. "The Negro Entry Book: A Document of Lancaster County's Antebellum Afro-American Community," in *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society*, Vol. 88 (1984), 142-180.

in 19th century Lancaster City,² frequent reference was made to the number of times when the African School was closed because of reported under-enrollment. Yet under the tutelage of Rev. Lewis Hood during the 1840s, the school prospered only to fall into neglect again when a weak replacement was found. Little is known about Columbia's Free African School except for an interesting snippet: in the wake of the infamous Snow Hill Riot in Washington, DC in 1831, a noted Black educator escaped the turmoil in the nation's capital to teach for a year in Columbia when he was replaced by another teacher. Obviously there were connections between the African Schools that extended beyond the state's borders.

Another connection was apparent in 1830 when Bishop Richard Allen, concerned about the rising tide of racism, called for the first of a series of national conventions to address the future of the race. Columbia's Stephen Smith, the leading African businessman of the era and most recently an ordained deacon in the AME Church, led the delegation to the first meeting in Philadelphia. From that point up to the Civil War, both Smith and his partner, William Whipper, were in the forefront of the emerging civil rights struggle. Whipper was a confidante of Frederick Douglass who visited the county on at least four occasions between 1847 and 1875.

The Conestoga AME Church was organized about 1837, when a group of local residents, including my great-great-grandparents, incorporated it. To my knowledge, no school was attached to this church but the members were involved with their community in other ways. Men from the small congregation served in the USCT units raised after 1863 and apparently acquitted themselves with valor. The colorful figure of Harriet Sweeney, a local pow wow doctress, is associated with this congregation. She gave land to erect a more commodious building in the 1870s and was a well-known and perhaps feared personality in the Hollow.

Men from the Columbia and Lancaster churches also served in the Civil War, as I have described elsewhere. The events of the war probably did more to cement the existing bonds between the various congregations. The late Mrs. Maude Wilson Ball, Bethel Lancaster's oldest member (1897-1995) recalled fondly county-wide meetings which alternated from one church to the other. She also remembered the veneration with which the Civil War veterans were viewed. Also in civil affairs the churches were very active. Celebrations of the ratification of the 15th amendment were organized out of the churches in Lancaster, Columbia, Conestoga, and the Gap. This civic engagement led to active organization in the 20th century that created the Negro Civic League (1917-22) and ultimately resulted in the creation of the Lancaster Branch of the NAACP in 1922.

²See Hopkins, Leroy T., Jr. "Door For Opportunity: Public Education for African Americans in Lancaster City, 1880-1895," in *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society*, Vol. 103 (2001), 126-152.

The African Methodist Episcopal Churches in Lancaster County were not just a “rock in a weary land.” Besides providing a refuge from the pandemic racism of the general society, they were also proving grounds on which future generations were given opportunities to acquire and hone skills that would prove handy in the outside world. Lancaster’s Bethel Church had a Juniper Grand Cabinet of Color in the years before the Civil War, where burning issues of the day were debated. Such activities continued well into the 20th century when, for example, the consul from the Virgin Islands was invited to speak on the state of his homeland. Needless to say, men from all of the congregations were also active politically, and some were active as freemasons. Today’s Mt. Horeb Lodge #14 F & AM was organized in Columbia in 1852, moved to Marietta at the end of the century, and then after World War I moved to Lancaster, where it still thrives today. Many of its members were African Methodists. Historically, the church has been at the heart of the Black community and, as we can see from the Civil Rights movement and its aftermath, there is much still for the church to do.

Jarena Lee in the Lancaster Area

Editor’s Note: as an appendix to Dr. Hopkin’s article, we include the following excerpts from Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving An Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel (Philadelphia: for the Author, 1849). Jarena Lee was an itinerant evangelist who is thought to be the first black female preacher in the United States. Born in 1783, Lee received the endorsement of Bishop Richard Allen to preach in 1819, and in her 1849 autobiography, she chronicles her career throughout the northeastern United States. Though as a woman she met with great opposition, Lee was acclaimed by both white and black audiences, frequently crossing both racial and denominational lines. The following passages describe visits to Lancaster and vicinity.

From pages 40-41:

In 1825, I left Philadelphia for a journey through Pennsylvania. I spoke first at Weston; we had an elder on West Chester Circuit, named Jacob Richardson. We had buried a young Christian before preaching the sermon, and [he] gave me the sacrament sermon in the afternoon. I spoke from Matt. 26 chap. 26-27 ver. I felt as solemn as death; much weeping in the Church, tears stole down the faces of the people. Jacob Richardson was a spiritual preacher. God attended the word with power, and blessed his labors much on his circuit. From there a friend carried me to Downingtown, where I took stage and went on to Lancaster; but prospect not so good there; they had a new Church but not paid for; the proprietor took the key in possession and deprived them of

worshipping God in it. But I spoke in a dwelling house, and I felt a great zeal for the cause of God to soften that man's heart, or kill him out of the way; one had better die than many. Brother Israel Williams, a few days, called to converse with him on the subject, and he gave him the key; he was then on his death-bed, and died in a short time afterwards, and we must leave him in the hands of God, for he can open and no man can shut. I went on to Columbia and spoke in the Church, and my tongue fails to describe the encouragement I met with. The Lord converted poor mourners, convicted sinners, and strengthened believers in the most holy faith. God's name be glorified for the display of his; saving power. I led class, held prayer meetings, and left with a good conscience for little York...

From page 43, as part of her return trip:

On my return I stopped at Lancaster; the Church was opened, and I preached to large congregations, and with powerful success; the dead were brought to life by the preaching of the cross of Christ. From there I left for Philadelphia.

From pages 51-52, about 1828 or 1829:

While I was in Buffalo, a journey to the West was shewed to me so plain that I could not stop in the city of Philadelphia but five weeks only, then left for the western country. I started in a mail stage, and stopped first at Westtown and spoke in our own connexion Church, and then at West Chester in the old Methodist Episcopal white connexion. We had a large congregation of quiet hearers. I felt liberty but no great displays of God's power. I had several meetings in different places, visiting the sick. Having discharged my duty I left there and proceeded on to Old Lancaster and spent some days. We have a good Church there, and great meetings – the word of the Lord grew and was multiplied. God poured out his spirit upon us, and we had a shout in the camp. I then started for Columbia, Pa. The people are much divided, and it looked very gloomy, but God directed me, and he commanded his disciple to be a sheep among wolves, and harmless as doves, notwithstanding the darkness, God aided me in speaking to the people, and aided them in hearing, and his name was praised.

From page 82:

July 15th, 1838, I left for West Chester, preached two sermons. From there I went to Chichester, from that to the Valley, laboring as I passed along to lively congregations. On the 23rd I left for Colombia, calling on Rev. S. S. ----- he gave me three appointments. God revived his work in the hearts of his people, and while my pen moves my heart burns with love to God. Next I left for Westtown and visited some aged friends, such as could not get to the church, and two remarkable ones in particular, which were regarded as pillars of the church. I was conducted on board the canal boat for Lewistown.

From pages 89-90:

I again was impressed upon to go into the western part of the State of Pennsylvania and labor for the Lord, as the field appeared large before me...

My sister leaving for England to visit the World's convention, I started alone. My first appointment was over Schuylkill – then I was conveyed nine miles farther, preached three sermons, and then returned to the city; on the following week I left again for Lancaster, Pa., but meeting friends going to Columbia, I went with them. The meetings were attended by the spirit of God, and the speakers felt the spirit of their station, and the feast was glorious; over thirty were added to the church in less than a week, and many of them found peace with God.

From thence I went to Marietta, preached two sermons, and then left for Lancaster. The Lord owned the word spoken, and after preaching, ten joined the church. "Praise the Lord, for He only doeth great wonders." – Psalms. I then proceeded on to Carlisle. Seemingly the wolf had got in among the fold and had scattered some clear away. But God's word will have its effect where it is promulgated in its purity. The consequence was, we had a great rejoicing. I preached six sermons, including one for the Protestant Methodists. I employed my time, as usual, endeavoring to explain the effects of the everlasting gospel of the kingdom even in common conversation. The happy seasons I have seen are ever memorable to me, and my prayer is, that all Israel may be saved, not only from the trials of life, but from the power of hell. I then proceeded to Harrisburg, preached one sermon to a good congregation, and felt considerable liberty in speaking. I left next morning for Marietta; it was a very cold day; sometimes I rode in a sly and sometimes in a carriage. I preached one sermon on Sabbath, and next day took passage in a sly for Penningtonville. I preached there on Sabbath day to a good congregation of different denominations – it was a glorious day to my soul. Upon the authority of God's word, there need be no doubt about religion, for they that have it carry the witness within themselves. Thus, having finished my visit with a peace of conscience, I returned to Philadelphia, March 1st, and found all my friends well.



Jarena Lee