

Bicentennial Restoration Project

Florida A&M University

FM
B L PERRY JR
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PRESIDENT
CAMPUS

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Bethlehem Baptist Church Belair, Florida

sent to Dr. Chose

HERITAGE

Just south of Tallahassee, in an area formerly known as Belair, Florida, there is a small, forlorn church building, no longer used as a house of worship. Tin-roofed and weather-worn, the building is barely visible to passing motorists and is remembered by only a few of the local citizenry. Yet, despite its obscurity, the church represents 125 years of rich and instructive heritage.

Founded prior to the Civil War by Rev. James Page, a slave belonging to Col. John Parkhill of Leon County, the church was well known during the period 1851-1885. On February 15, 1853, the Florida Sentinel reported the Rev. Page as "one of the most popular colored preachers hereabouts."

In 1870 Rev. Page left Belair to found the Bethel Baptist Church a short distance north of old Tallahassee. Upon his death, March 14, 1883, Rev. Page was buried in the old City Cemetary of Tallahassee, with "a large concourse of colored and white citizens, aggregating about three thousand persons," attending the funeral.

The original Belair church (called Bethlehem) continued in existence well into this century. In direct line of descent, a small band of hardy souls carries on the work today, led by Rev. B. F. Walker. In 1937 Rev. W. S. Lewis led his people in the rebuilding of the church, using many of the axe-hewn timbers from the original structure. Now a storage shed on the property of Mr. and Mrs. Charles F. Johnson, who are donating the building for this Bicentennial project, the church still shelters the old pulpit and pews. An aged and deteriorating foot-pump organ stands silent, reminiscent of earlier days when music filled the air.

Alleged to be the "oldest colored church in the state," the building now awaits the caring hands of those who will preserve it as an important part of Florida history and deep south Black culture. Through this brochure a general appeal is being issued for community assistance in the completion of this Bicentennial restoration project. Your help is needed. For details, see the back cover of this brochure.

EFFORTS TO PRESERVE THE BETHLEHEM BAPTIST CHURCH HAVE
ALREADY BEGUN:

1. The restoration of the church is an official project of the Area of Philosophy and Religion and of the Bicentennial Planning Committee of Florida A&M University.
2. The project has been approved by the Bicentennial Committee of Leon County, and it has been recognized and partially funded (\$4,500) by the Bicentennial Commission of Florida.
3. The project has received the endorsement of the Tallahassee Ministerial Association.
4. The Tallahassee Junior Museum has provided a site where the church will stand as a permanent historical attraction.

MEMBERS OF THE RESTORATION COMMITTEE:

- Dr. Jerry M. Chance, Chairman, Area of Philosophy and Religion, FAMU
- Dr. James Hudson, retired Professor of Philosophy and Chaplain, FAMU
- Dr. Grace G. Johnson, Professor of Music, FAMU
- Mrs. W. S. Lewis, member Bethlehem Baptist Church
- Mr. John W. Riley, retired Prof. of History, FAMU
- Dr. Charles U. Smith, Head, Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences, FAMU
- Rev. C. K. Steele, Pastor, Bethel Baptist Church
- Rev. B. F. Walker, Pastor, Bethlehem Baptist Church
- Mrs. Maggie Williams, member Bethlehem Baptist Church

TIMEFRAME FOR COMPLETION OF THE PROJECT:

With timely support from the citizenry of Tallahassee and from friends across the state, the project is expected to be complete and open to the public by late December, 1976.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESTORATION PROJECT:

1. To restore, furnish in its original condition, and relocate the Bethlehem Church on a designated site at the Tallahassee Junior Museum.
2. To preserve the church as a historical attraction, thus providing continual educational experiences for the visiting public.
3. To stimulate appreciation for the historic cultural influence of the Black Church, in keeping with the heritage emphasis of the Bicentennial celebration.

HERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP:

1. Make financial contributions, with checks payable to Florida A&M University Foundation, Inc., and designated for the "Black Church Restoration Project." Send checks to Jerry M. Chance, Box 171, Florida A&M University, Tallahassee, Florida, 32307. The Foundation will send you a receipt suitable for tax-exemption purposes. GOAL: \$8,750
2. Contribute labor (carpenters, painters, brickmasons)
3. Two stained glass windows need to be reconstructed. Photograph of original windows available.
4. Contribute old lumber and old kerosene lamps (4).
5. Help repair and refinish old upright piano and foot-pump organ.
6. Submit historical data, photographs, stories or personal memories about the old church.

IF YOU WANT TO HELP, CONTACT:

Any of the Committee members, or call Jerry M. Chance at 599-3786 (FAMU) or 877-9931 (Residence).

This public document was promulgated at a cost of \$85.00 or \$0.017 per copy to inform the general public of the activities of Black Church Restoration Committee, Florida A&M University.

Contribution 5

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B. L. Perry Jr

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