

“Blacksburg Methodist Churches: Blacksburg Methodist Episcopal Church, South and the Beginnings of St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church”

presented by Christopher Ross Donald in conjunction with the Rev. Dr. Gunnar Teilman
Lectures for Blacksburg UMC and St. Paul AMEC at the Whisner Building, Blacksburg UMC,
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Historiography and the Problem

I think the best way to begin today is to introduce myself and to explain how I became interested in the story of these two churches. My name is Chris Donald; I was born and raised in Blacksburg. Currently I am a second-year student in the Divinity School at Duke University. After my graduation in May 2006, I will return to the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church in order to work as a pastor in a local congregation. One requirement of my class on Early Methodism was to write a major research paper. I already knew that the history of Blacksburg United Methodist Church was a long one, so I felt that its story would be good for exploration, examining how this local congregation fit into the broader context of Methodism in America.

My research began with a history posted on the church website, *Church and Community: A History of the Blacksburg United Methodist Church*, edited and adapted by Dr. James Shockley in 1996. It was taken from two earlier texts: memoirs of Miss Ellen McDonald written, which was before her death in 1927 (great-granddaughter of founders of the church); and an essay by Dr. Leland Burdine Tate written for the 1976 national bicentennial (Dr. Tate's family was also long-time members).¹ These documents initially pointed me toward the Women's Missionary Society, although the church records in Special Collections at the Virginia Tech library yielded little information.

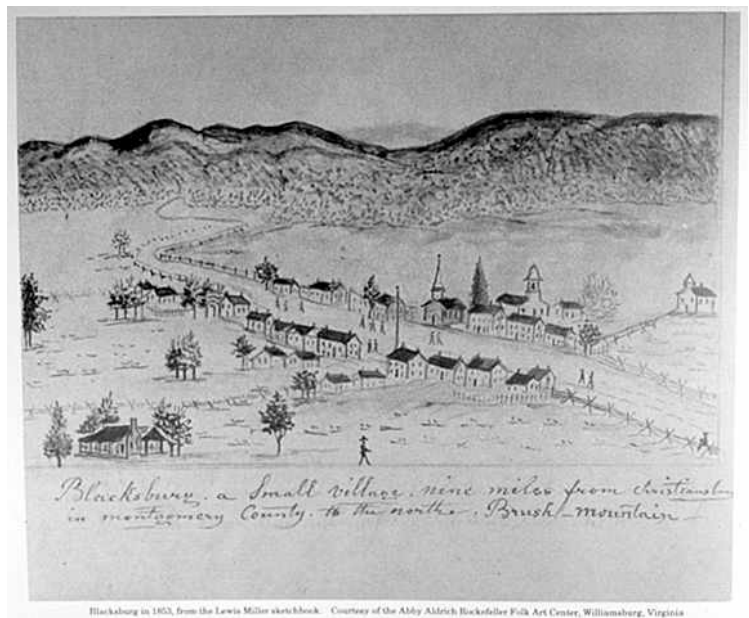
One record in Special Collections is the membership roll of the church, dating back to the late 1850s. In addition to a chronological listing of members, it contains class lists, baptismal records, and wedding records. As I flipped through this record, I noticed that several members baptized or married in the late 1850s and early 1860s had the notation “colored” beside their names. The Methodist church, at that time, required a six-month probationary period of its prospective members before joining the church. Between 1862 and 1864, twenty-three white

probationers and nineteen African-American probationers were listed. In fact, whole class lists were recorded of African-Americans; of the five class meetings at the church, two were African-American. In 1860, Blacksburg Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS)* had one-hundred and forty-two members, and forty-eight of those members were African-American. In less than fifteen years, however, all one hundred and eighty members of the church were white. Those African-American members had disappeared from the membership and class rolls.² Where did the African-American members of Blacksburg Methodist Episcopal Church, South go? Why did they leave?

I think the best place to begin answering these questions is by setting the scene in Blacksburg and then explaining how some other African-American churches were established in America. The national trends can then be applied to Blacksburg's history to track how patterns played out there.

Methodism in Blacksburg

This picture of Blacksburg³ is from the sketchbook of Lewis Miller, dating to the mid-19th century. The writing at the bottom states: "Blacksburg, a small village nine miles from Christiansburg in Montgomery County to the north of Brush Mountain." Although the timing is a little bit late, I think this picture illustrates the point that it is only recently that Blacksburg has become a thriving metropolis and home to the state's largest university. Only in the 1950s did the population of Blacksburg surpass that of the



* The term "episcopal" comes from the Greek word for bishop (*episkopos*). The use of this term in the name of these churches, Methodist Episcopal Church, South and African Methodist Episcopal Church, does not indicate affiliation with the Protestant Episcopal Church in America or the Anglican Church. Rather, "episcopal" describes the churches as organizations whose polity and mission is overseen by bishops.

county seat, Christiansburg. For most of its life, Blacksburg was a small mountain farming village.

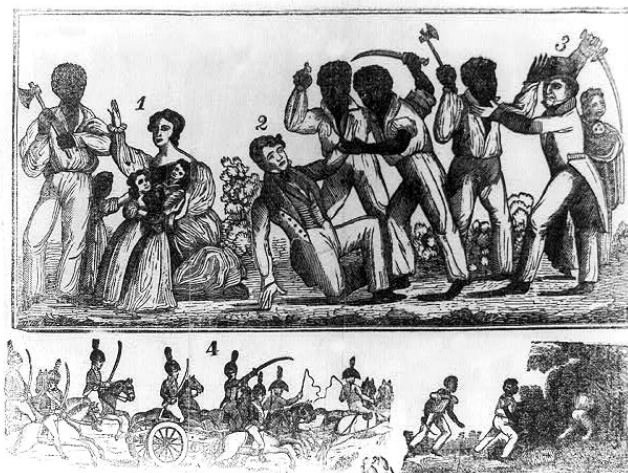
The economy of Blacksburg, from its beginnings in the late 18th century through the mid-19th century, was based on agriculture and mining. The people raised hogs and cattle and crops like corn, wheat, rye, flax, and hemp. Corn was the most popular because it could be eaten, milled, or made into whiskey. This farming was very small-scale and oriented toward local markets; very much unlike the large-scale farming based on slave labor that was done at this time in Tidewater Virginia. From the mid-19th century onward, significant mining also occurred for coal, iron, and other minerals.⁴

One way for a frontier town to put itself on the map was to establish a college. In 1853, the leaders of Blacksburg MECS, established Preston and Olin Institute as the men's college of the Baltimore Conference. The college operated sporadically until 1872 when it was bought by the state and turned into Virginia A&M College.

People in the area were mostly white and were descended from Scots-Irish and German immigrants. They had come to America as indentured servants or low-paid workers and then moved south from Pennsylvania through the Shenandoah Valley. The vast majority of the population – 83% according to the 1830 Census – was white. Still, slaves worked in and around Blacksburg, along with a few free blacks. This population ratio is small when compared to some eastern Virginia counties where the black-to-white ratio was two to one. The number of African-Americans in the area increased when mining became a larger part of the local economy.

While I am talking about race, before I move on to talk about Methodism in Blacksburg, I want to mention a major event in the history of Virginia that had long-lasting impact on race

HORRID MASSACRE IN VIRGINIA



This Series which the above Plate is designed to represent, are—Fig. 1, a Mother interceding for the lives of her children.—2, Mr. Turner, cruelly murdered by his own slaves.—3, Mr. Burton, who bravely defended himself until his wife escaped.—4, A camp of mounted Dragons in pursuit of the Blacks.

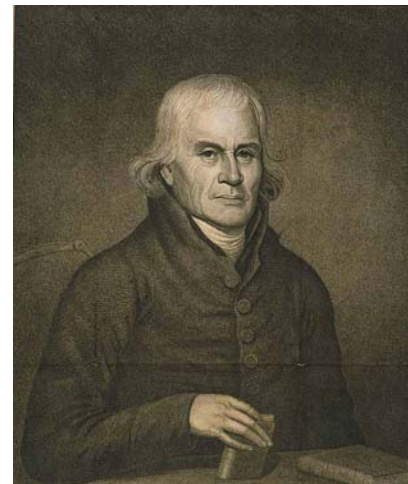
relations in this state. In 1831, Nat Turner, a slave and preacher from Southampton County, Virginia, led a slave rebellion that resulted in the deaths of dozens of whites and hundreds of blacks. In reaction, legislatures across the South passed a number of harsh and repressive slave-code laws. Two laws are

significant for this subject today. The first prohibited slave assemblies for worship unless they were under the supervision of a white preacher. The other was limitation on the travel of African-Americans, both slave and free. In fact, in border states like Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware, free African-Americans from the North could not even enter the state.⁵ The picture above, which depicts only the violence committed by blacks against whites and ignores the hundreds of African-American deaths at the hands of white mobs, illustrates well the fear that gripped white Southerners. Despite the unlikelihood that African-Americans in western Virginia would stage a violent uprising, Blacksburg's political leaders moved to solidify their control of the African-American community through legislation in the General Assembly.⁶ The threat was non-existent, but the fear was very real.

With that overview of Blacksburg's economy and demographics, let me sketch a quick history of Methodism in Blacksburg.

Methodism Comes to Blacksburg

Joseph McDonald was a Blacksburg farmer and merchant who was in Philadelphia on business just before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. While there, he heard Francis Asbury preach. Asbury had been sent to America by John Wesley in the late 1760s to superintend the work of Methodist preachers; Asbury was elected bishop soon after his arrival. After the service, McDonald made his way to Asbury and asked him to come to Blacksburg to preach. Asbury promised, at the very least, to send a circuit rider. The beginning of the war prevented this, but after the second annual conference, at the farm of Green Hill in North Carolina, a circuit rider named Jeremiah Lambert was dispatched to Blacksburg and the western frontier. When Lambert arrived, he found that McDonald had already organized a Methodist class meeting. Early visits by circuit riders were hosted by the McDonalds in their home or in the field at their farm.⁷



Methodism was popular in Blacksburg during those early days, attracting many of the village's leaders, including the Preston family, who built Solitude, Smithfield, and Whitethorn plantations; and the Black family, for whom the town is named. I recognized a number of

families on the rolls from their names on businesses or streets around Blacksburg or because their descendents remained active members of the church. When Blacksburg was laid out in 1798, a lot was set aside for the Methodist Church – the lot where the Whisner Building of Blacksburg United Methodist Church stands today. For the next thirty to forty years, it was the only church building in the community and was shared with the Presbyterians. After the church outgrew two log structures, a brick church was built in 1840. I'll talk more about this happening later.

Next, I will examine the pattern for separation established by the actions of African-American Methodists in Philadelphia, as well as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church's missionary efforts.

The Pattern of Separation

The pattern of separation that occurred in American Methodism is described by Methodist historian Frederick Norwood in his book *The Story of American Methodism*.⁸ This pattern was originally developed to explain the separation of African-American congregations from white congregations, but it is now applied more generally by Richard Heitzenrater and other historians to divisions created for political, geographical, and theological reasons.

The pattern begins with integration and shared worship. From there, segregation began – separation *within* worship and church activities. The minority group began meeting at a separate time and, eventually, in a separate place, sometimes driven out and sometimes of its own will. With little still tying the minority to the majority, an independent organization developed, which eventually led to affiliation with other similar congregations in a regional denomination. Examples of this change from Methodist history include the establishment of the Wesleyan Church and the Free Methodist Church. The earliest example, however, is especially relevant for today's topic: the establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Methodism in the 18th century was growing quickly. In Philadelphia, a booming commercial and political city, a number of Methodist preaching houses were built. One was St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church. St. George's had integrated worship



and licensed African-American preachers and exhorters, including Richard Allen (pictured here). In 1787, the balcony of St. George's was set aside for African-American worshipers; they were no longer welcome to sit on the main floor of the church. Allen and other African-American members found this segregation intolerable. One Sunday, as they knelt in prayer during the worship service on the main floor of the church, white ushers attempted to forcibly move Allen and his followers to the balcony. Instead, Allen and the African-Americans of St. George's walked out. They founded the Free African Society, a class meeting still technically under the supervision of St. George's Church.

The Free African Society bought an old blacksmith shop and renovated it as a separate place to meet. This chapel was constructed by the African-American Methodists at their own expense, and worship there was led by African-American preachers and exhorters. Although exercising autonomy in teaching, nurture, and worship, the Society was still ultimately under the control of the trustees and pastor of St. George's. Eventually, the Free African Society organized as the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, popularly known as Mother Bethel Church. In 1816, Richard Allen and the leaders of other African-American Methodist congregations in Philadelphia and New York met to organize the African Methodist Episcopal Church as a denomination. It followed Methodist Episcopal political organization with annual conferences, bishops, and itinerant pastors, and Methodist doctrine and theology given to American Methodism by John Wesley. Richard Allen was elected the first bishop.⁹

The common pattern of separation is given in this brief sketch of AME history: integration, segregation, separate meeting time and meeting place, independent organization, and regional denomination. This background leads to discussion of the African Methodist Episcopal Church's early mission efforts in the South.

African Methodist Episcopal Mission

Following its formation in 1816, the AME Church sent missionaries into the South. Their work was mostly limited to port cities like Norfolk, Charleston, and New Orleans, where larger populations of free African-Americans lived.¹⁰ This picture shows



Emanuel AME,
Charleston

Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, one of the oldest AME churches in America.

The missions were not successful for several reasons. First, slaves – many slaves attended Deep South Methodist Episcopal churches, sometimes outnumbering whites two or three to one – were still forced to attend Methodist Episcopal Church, South congregations. So, the missionaries experienced pressure from white Methodist Episcopal congregations that sponsored African-American chapels. Second, the whites in these areas did not like the message preached by AME missionaries; slave-owners wanted to control of the Gospel message preached to their slaves. The AME message, which was refined and fully articulated by Bishop Daniel Payne after the Civil War, was about self-help and social uplift through education, hard work, and middle-class behaviors. This message would also, the AME preachers hoped, dispel prejudice and fear among whites. Of course, the last thing that whites in the South wanted was education of slaves and social mobility; they liked the hierarchy and racial roles of their society and did not want it upset by northern missionaries. Third, political and legal pressures arose following the Nat Turner rebellion and other slave uprisings. These events were perhaps the most significant limitation to AME missions in the South. As mentioned above, repressive slave-code laws passed in the 1830s did not allow for assembly or free travel for African-Americans, often regardless of whether or not they were slave or free. In any case, by the 1830s the AME Church had withdrawn almost entirely from active mission efforts in the South.



Perhaps one of the most important fruits of the Charleston, South Carolina, mission work was the conversion of Daniel Payne (pictured here). Payne went on to become one of the most important leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He pastored churches in New York and Baltimore, served as church historian, was elected bishop in 1852, founded Wilberforce University in 1856, and later served as president of that school for thirteen years. He was also an accomplished author, writing the definitive history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church's first seventy-five years. In mission, he established the South

Carolina Annual Conference of the AME Church in 1865. In fact, I want to talk a little bit about the mission that returned to the South during and after the Civil War under Payne's leadership.

In light of the pattern of separation, most African-American slave and free congregations just before and during the Civil War had achieved the level of separate meetings times and places, if not independent organization. In fact, the pattern in the Virginia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (Blacksburg MECS was not included in the Virginia Conference at that time) indicates that churches would meet in separate, racially divided congregations: "In Virginia, separate Methodist churches were eventually set up for the blacks in certain cities, but in each case this was due to overcrowded conditions in the white church while after separation the parent body maintained complete control." One such church is St. John African Methodist Episcopal Church in Norfolk, considered the mother church of the AME in Virginia. It began as the St. John Chapel of the white congregation at Butte Street Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and was welcomed into the AME in the 1860s.

During the Civil War, the AME Church was presented again with the opportunity to evangelize and organize in the South. Following close behind Union armies into South Carolina and Virginia, the AME Church was able to gain a strong foothold. AME missionaries saw themselves as obeying Providence and as "gathering in the Methodists who were as sheep without shepherds" in their work throughout the South. In Charleston, before the war was even over, missionaries won over large numbers of African-American congregants from MECS churches where they had outnumbered white congregants two or three to one and yet had no say in church governance or worship. In Norfolk, Virginia, in 1863, Rev. Alexander W. Wayman welcomed the congregation worshipping at St. John Chapel into the Baltimore Annual Conference of the AME Church and, within three years, had added other AME churches in Norfolk, Portsmouth, Petersburg, and Richmond.¹¹ The work of Wayman and other AME pastors was so successful that, in May 1867, the Virginia Annual Conference of the AME Church was organized with thirty-five hundred members. One of the first orders of business was a resolution instructing the bishop: "...write an address to all colored Methodists in Virginia, defining our position and stating points of agreement and disagreement, and urging all to unite in one common fold."¹² The goal of the Virginia Conference was nothing less than winning over the African-American membership of the MECS to the AME Church; AME missionaries moved quickly, evangelizing and organizing independent African-American churches.

This previous description indicates that the missionaries of the AME church were not really evangelists as much as community organizers. Their method of evangelization did not rely on conversions, but focused on setting up independent African-American churches from the congregations of the MECS. Historian Harry Richardson recounts:

Many of the persons who joined the A.M.E.'s had already been converted by M.E. preachers. They were dissatisfied in the M.E. Church, and joined the A.M.E.'s in protest or retaliation. This also applies to the black sections of congregations as well as to persons. At times, whole groups would leave the white churches and come to the black. Thus, with the A.M.E. evangelists, the emphasis was as much on organizing new churches as it was on preaching and trying to reach the unconverted.¹³

African-American members of the MECS transferred to the AME Church for many reasons. Some were encouraged to join the AME Church by ministers of the MECS, who thought it would be better than having African-American members affiliate with the Yankee-controlled Northern Methodist Episcopal Church. Perhaps most importantly, though, former slaves sought to exercise their newly won freedom in choosing where to worship, away from the humiliating practices of slavery and the condescension of whites, thereby demonstrating the control they had over their lives. Consequently, the primary work of missionaries of the AME Church following the Civil War was in organizing already-existing African-American Methodist congregations and meetings into independent AME churches.

Let's turn back to Blacksburg Methodist Episcopal Church and see how the pattern of separation and the mission practices of the Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Churches are shown in the lives and beginnings of local churches.

The Separation in Blacksburg

Integration at Blacksburg MECS?

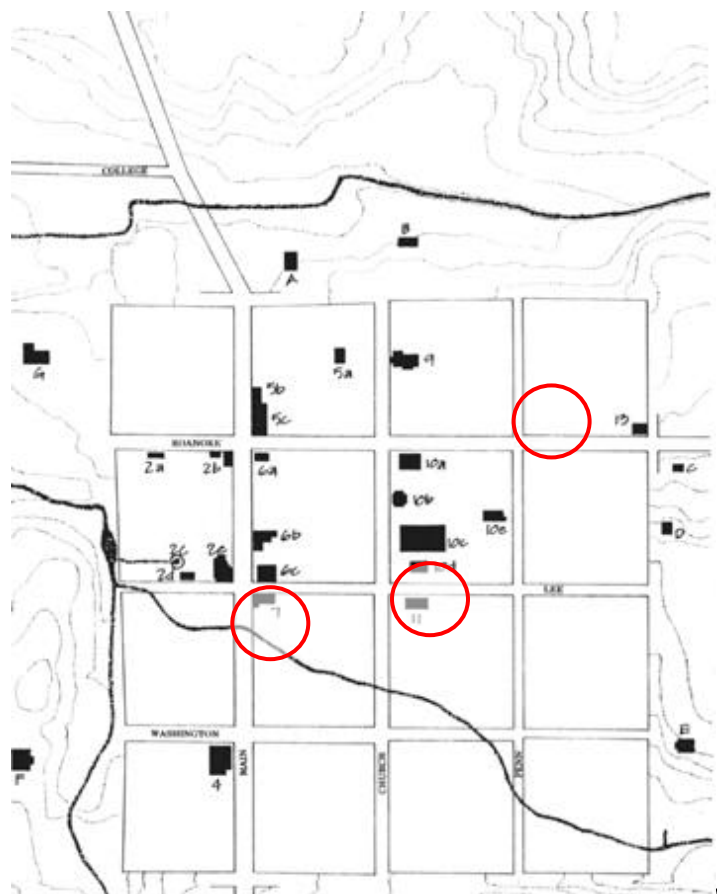
Very few systematic records exist that describe early preaching meetings in Blacksburg. Ellen McDonald notes that preaching and camp meetings were held at Green Hill Farm until 1826, at which point they were moved to Yellow Sulphur Springs. The historical record is unclear about the racial make up of these early classes and congregations in Blacksburg. The population of free African-Americans in Blacksburg in the 18th century was small, as it was in

most places in the South. Still, in other places in the South, free African-Americans attended Methodist preaching events. It seems reasonable to assume also that prominent and wealthy families of the community owned slaves who would attend preaching events.

This practice would be consistent with the pattern found in the rest of the Upper South, as historian William Montgomery writes: “The style of evangelical preaching, especially that of the Methodists, as well as the gospel itself, attracted large numbers of slaves, especially in the Upper South... Whites and blacks worshiped together, testified about conversion experiences, and enjoyed communion of Christian brethren.”¹⁴ Montgomery also suggests that Methodist preachers would draw African-American followers because: “Methodist theology did not draw invidious distinctions between whites and blacks; on the contrary it held that God was no respecter of man’s earthly condition and that he loved the poor and the despised as much as the rich and privileged.”¹⁵ Although the historical record is unclear about African-American or slave presence in these early Methodist meetings in Blacksburg, the broader pattern in the Upper South indicates that they would most likely have been present for preaching by the itinerant pastor, even if they were not participating in class meetings.

Segregation at Blacksburg MECS

This map shows Blacksburg in 1840 and is part of the architectural survey completed for the town’s bicentennial. No college building is yet shown. The Methodist Church is the large building on Church Street (labeled 10C) and the Presbyterian Church is the building on the corner of Main Street and Lee Street (labeled 6C). No African-American Methodist church building on Penn Street is yet shown.





Not much information is available on this Methodist church building (pictured here). It was built in 1840, was the largest and grandest building in town, and was condemned in 1906 because of sagging walls. At about the same time, the Presbyterians in Blacksburg built their own church. The building still stands on the corner of Main and Lee, serving for many years

as the South Main Café (currently Cabo Fish Taco). Blacksburg Presbyterian Church history records that the building was built almost entirely with slave labor. It seems likely that this fact was the case for the Methodist church as well.

Before I talk more about this building and what it tells about the racial history of Blacksburg Methodists, I want to mention two things that were happening in these decades, 1830 through 1860. First, remember the Nat Turner rebellion. Whites in the South were scared of slave rebellion and acted harshly and repressively towards African-Americans, using whatever means necessary. This attitude was especially present after 1860, when the additional threat was that slaves might join invading Union armies. Second, the Methodist Episcopal Church split in 1844 over the issue of slavery. Despite both John Wesley's stance against slavery and slave-holding and explicit statements in Methodist doctrine against slave-holding, Southern Methodists felt slavery was consistent with Scriptural Christianity. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South dedicated itself to a Scriptural defense of slavery, even while anti-slavery doctrines remained on its books.

The church at Blacksburg weighed in on anti-slavery doctrines in 1860, only a few months before the beginning of the Civil War. Dr. Harvey Black, a noted physician, town leader, and head of a Confederate Army field hospital, asked the quarterly conference of the Blacksburg church to approve a resolution demanding that the Baltimore Conference and the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South strike anti-slavery doctrines from

the *Book of Discipline*. Racial lines were hardening and racial roles were becoming more clearly defined as whites sought to exercise power and coercive authority over African-Americans by political and social means. White church leaders were leaving behind the interracial revivals of the 18th century and were instead using the church to solidify their control over the African-American community and to enforce social hierarchies. Blacksburg MECS helped white leaders communicate the secondary status of African-Americans in the church throughout the 1840s and 1850s.

Across the South, white masters became more intentional about Christianizing their slaves in order to exercise better control over them since the masters feared the message that might be preached by a traveling evangelist. In the hands of white masters, the Gospel was not a tool of liberation, but a weapon of repression. Historian Montgomery reports: “Most often, slaves... were segregated in the sanctuary, but they heard the same sermon, sang the same hymns, were bound by the same code of ethics... By taking greater responsibility for bringing the Word of God to the slaves, [the masters] could determine exactly what that gospel contained.” So, when a new brick Methodist Episcopal church building was constructed in Blacksburg in 1840, it had, and I’m quoting from a 1948 history written for the town’s sesquicentennial: “a gallery to accommodate Negro slaves who accompanied their masters to church in that day.”¹⁶ Segregation was the order of the day at Blacksburg MECS.

Separation of Blacksburg MECS

On the eve of the Civil War, then, the white leaders of Blacksburg Church were using the church to reinforce political and social orders. At this point, in the late 1850s, African-American Methodists began meeting separately from the white church. Ms. Jacqueline Eaves, the historian of St. Paul AME Church in Blacksburg, has indicated that St. Paul traces its history to “the Methodist church” established in 1857.¹⁷ The earliest minutes of Blacksburg Church date to 1858 and 1859, but do not mention a separate African-American congregation. AME records or minutes from a separate African-American congregation in Blacksburg for this time period cannot be located or do not exist, so no firm historical record exists for this date. Still, despite lack of a written record, I am not the type of historian who doubts the veracity of an oral history; 1857 seems like a reasonable date for a congregation of African-American Methodists to begin meeting separately from the white congregation.

While it is impossible to state certainly that a separate African-American Methodist congregation existed in Blacksburg, it is equally impossible to state that one did not exist. Racially separate congregations would both still have been under the control of the white trustees at Blacksburg MECS because fear of a slave revolt dictated policies of white leaders. As mentioned before, Virginia state law after the Nat Turner rebellion demanded that African-American congregations be supervised by white preachers, and Methodist practice at the time was for African-American classes to be led by white leaders. Thus, even if African-American Methodists in Blacksburg were meeting separately just prior to the Civil War, they continued to be under the affiliation and supervision of the pastor at Blacksburg MECS.

The rolls of the Blacksburg MECS support this possibility, as African-Americans continued to be baptized, married, and listed in classes at the church through the Civil War. Six African-American probationary members were enrolled at Blacksburg MECS on September 30, 1860, under the supervision of John B. Helm, a white church member, trustee, and a leader for one of the African-American classes. Between October 28, 1862 and September 6, 1863, twenty-eight African-Americans were baptized at Blacksburg MECS; of those, eight enrolled on October 28, six were later received into membership. Several marriages are also recorded and witnessed by prominent church leaders.¹⁸ Still, African-Americans are not found on any comprehensive lists of members from this time period, indicating that, while Blacksburg MECS ministered to the African-American community, it in no way considered freed African-Americans or slaves to be equal and fully participating members of the church. Separate class meetings indicate that African-American Methodists were meeting at a separate time from the white congregation.

What about a separate meeting place? Oral histories at St. Paul AME Church indicate that the African-American congregation in Blacksburg has always met at the present location on Penn Street. The map presented below shows, an architectural survey of the town for 1870; the Penn Street building had not yet been constructed. Also, minutes from Blacksburg MECS from 1867 indicate that the trustees were instructed to develop a plan to share their church building with the AME congregation.¹⁹ If the MECS church building was still being shared in 1867, it seems very unlikely that the African-American congregation was meeting in a separate place in 1857. Finally, property records and the AME reports in the denomination's journal, *The Christian Recorder*, indicate the purchase of a lot at a later date, after the affiliation of the



congregation with the AME Church. Perhaps the African-American congregation met at the Penn Street location in a brush arbor or a private home. However, no existing evidence points to a separate meeting place, owned either by the African-American congregation or the trustees of Blacksburg MECS. While African-American members of Blacksburg MECS likely were meeting separately beginning as early at 1857, they were still supervised by the white trustees and ministered to by the white pastor of Blacksburg MECS.

Affiliation of Blacksburg AMEC

While the beginning date for an African-American Methodist congregation in Blacksburg is unclear, the first date for involvement by the AME Church in Blacksburg came in June 1867. Rev. John Wesley Diggs, an itinerant pastor for AME churches in the Roanoke Valley, mentioned Blacksburg in his letter to *The Christian Recorder*. “I also heard of others at Blacksburg, about thirty-six miles from here,” Diggs wrote. “I went there and gathered forty...” This report indicates that the gathering in Blacksburg was not a regular AME meeting, but one which Rev. Diggs was visiting for the first time. The forty people he gathered were probably part of the fifty-six African-American members on the 1866 “Roll of Members, Colored” of Blacksburg MECS. This situation was ideal for the AME method of evangelizing, taking the African-American congregation from Blacksburg MECS and then reorganizing it as an AME congregation. Rev. Diggs apparently did his work organizing the ready-made gathering, because, as I mentioned previously, the fourth quarterly conference of Blacksburg MECS in December 1867 asked the trustees to develop a plan to “accommodate the African M.E. Church.”

The actions Rev. Diggs and African-American Methodists took were perfectly in accord with the AME model demonstrated elsewhere in Virginia.

This notation in the minutes seems to suggest that the whites at Blacksburg MECS were in agreement with the exodus of African-Americans from their congregation. The truth is that the white church leaders at Blacksburg MECS were also acting in accordance with resolutions passed by the Baltimore Annual Conference of the MECS and the General Conference of the MECS. The Baltimore Conference, meeting in 1866, passed a resolution declaring that the conference “has always taken a deep interest in the welfare of the colored people within our bounds...” and “we will not cease our efforts to benefit the colored people...” While these seem to be just kind words, they were apparently taken in earnest in Blacksburg, where the white congregation welcomed the formation of an AME church. The paternalist tone of the resolution was probably also reflected at Blacksburg as the white trustees sought to help set up the new



AME church. The exit of African-Americans, former slaves, whom many whites viewed as “uppity” as a result of their freedom, was welcomed. The pastor who supervised this final exit of African-Americans from the white congregation was Rev. Peter H. Whisner, for whom Blacksburg MECS was renamed in 1906 when this building (pictured here) was constructed.

This brings about the major question posed at the beginning: why did they leave? The exit seems to have been both a push and a pull. African-Americans generally, and the African-American Methodists in Blacksburg in particular, were eager to express their freedom in an independent church that was not under white control or supervision. Whites, on the other hand, were happy to have them leave because freed blacks in their congregation only served to remind them of the social control that they had lost.

This loss of social control through slavery and legal means led to the exercise of control through the church, and particularly through property issues. Throughout the South, local congregations and the leadership of the MECS and the AME Church fought over who owned and

controlled the chapels where black congregations met and worshiped. Property issues that emerged elsewhere in the South did not create animosity at Blacksburg. At Blacksburg, another chapel was not available for the African-American congregation, so all continued sharing the building even after the African-American Methodists had joined the AME in 1867.

While a spirit of cooperation seems to have existed, albeit paternalist cooperation, the leaders of Blacksburg MECS still used the church as a means of enforcing social control over the African-American community. As long as the Blacksburg AME Church met in the same building as the Blacksburg MECS, the AME congregants were beholden to the white trustees and were not truly independent. While no record shows mistreatment of AME church members at Blacksburg, it seems reasonable to assume that since they worshiped in a place where they had worshiped as slaves and since they asked their former masters for a place to meet, the old social order was still being reinforced through the white church and the trustees.

Despite this hardship of continuing to be under the supervision of the white trustees, the Blacksburg AME Church grew. In December 1868, Bishop Wayman wrote a letter to *The Christian Recorder* reporting on the activity in the Virginia Conference. The Blacksburg AME Church had been sent a pastor who finally finished the task of organizing, because Wayman reports: "Brother Diggs, at Salem; Williams at Wytheville, and Dericks [Derrick], at Blacksburg, have had great success in their work this year. When they went they had neither church nor people, but now they have both." Because of the reference to people and church, Bishop Wayman's reference to "church" may mean a building which is owned and controlled by trustees of the African-American Methodists. Still, the property was probably not the present Penn Street location, as the 1870 survey mentioned above and later AME records indicate the purchase of land in 1875.

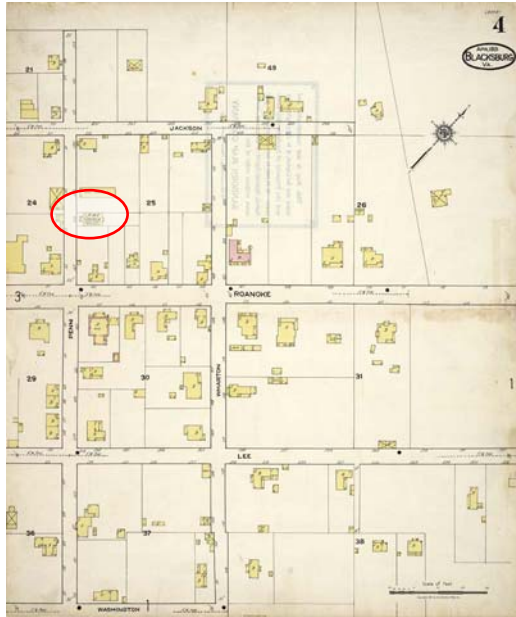
In 1869, Bishop Wayman wrote *The Christian Recorder* again, this time about a visit to Blacksburg:

Friday morning I took leave of Salem for Blacksburg. Rev. William B. Derrick met me at the depot in Christiansburg, with Colonel Preston's fine pair of horses and a Jersey wagon, and took me to Blacksburg where I spent the Sabbath. ... Brother Derrick has a fine congregation and a large day school of sixty-five scholars, and no man stands higher in the community than he, for anything he wished he can get.

While the white trustees and leaders of Blacksburg MECS may not have exercised direct control over the African-American Methodist congregation, they apparently took pains to win the pastor over in an attempt to control what happened in the church. Historian Montgomery writes: “Regardless of their motives or their perception of the freedmen’s religious condition, many whites remained paternalistically involved in the spiritual affairs of blacks who shared their world.” The AME Church grew and prospered, even with the paternal guidance and oversight of the white leaders of community, like Colonel Preston. The situation is difficult to tell from this passage, so this perspective that is one possibility. However, the pastors from the AME church in Blacksburg, well-educated and dedicated to uplifting the African-American community, may have accomplished the goal that Bishop Daniel Payne laid out, which was dispelling prejudice and hatred from whites. In any case, by 1869, just two years after organizing, a flourishing AME congregation existed in the Blacksburg African-American community.

The property question continued to create problems for the AME Church and the MECS generally. After forming the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church at the 1870 General Conference of the MECS, distrust between white Methodists and AME leaders grew. AME members felt snubbed and misled, and whites felt their former African-American members were being politicized and corrupted. This situation indicates that the independence that African-Americans in the AME church exercised free of white control was threatening because it would not have allowed whites to retain control and to maintain the antebellum social order by means of the church. The Blacksburg AME Church finally achieved total independence from Blacksburg MECS in 1875, when Rev. Jeremiah Cuffey arranged the purchase of a lot for the church as reported in *The Christian Recorder*. A later deed, dated 1882, confirms that this property was independently controlled by trustees of the AME church in Blacksburg.





On this 1921 map of Blacksburg, the AME church is shown at its present location on Penn Street.

Less than 10 years after it was organized, the AME Church at Blacksburg was on its own, without the conflicts over property that characterized many other MECS-AME splits in the South. It had more than doubled its membership to ninety-five and was finally independent of the supervision of whites who sought to enforce a repressive social order through the church.

Conclusion

So what do we do with this story?

The division of the Church of Christ into denominations is grievous to God. The separation of God's people along racial lines is contrary to our calling and our ability to witness to the world about the unity of God in Christ. When we share the Lord's Supper, we pray that God will make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to the entire world. No church can truly be the Church of Christ unless its earnest desire is for the visible unity of the Church in worship and in mission.

I pray that our common heritage, rooted in this place and in the teaching and ministry of John Wesley, will enable us to begin conversation. Our shared inheritance from the work of Methodist circuit riders and preachers in the 18th and 19th century, preaching Christ crucified for all, allows us to join in worship of God, prayer for the unity of the Church, and mission to the world. From that joint fellowship, I hope and pray that we could begin to address the separations of race, which still deeply divide our churches, town, and nation, and find our way towards the reconciliation and truth that Christ brings us.

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³ Most of the portraits and pictures of church buildings are from internet sources in the public domain. The maps and pictures of Blacksburg are taken from town bicentennial sites and the online edition of *A Special Place for 200 Years: A History of Blacksburg, Virginia* found at the website of Special Collections, Newman Library at Virginia Tech, <http://spec.lib.vt.edu/bicent/> (accessed 29 October 2004). Architectural surveys of the town for 1840 and 1870 were completed and mapped by Donna Dunay in *Blacksburg: Understanding a Virginia Town* (1986). The 1921 map is the "Sanborn map," completed for fire insurance purposes, and now belongs to the Planning and Engineering Department of the Town of Blacksburg.

⁴ *A Special Place for 200 Years: A History of Blacksburg, Virginia*, edited by Clara Cox (Blacksburg, VA: The Town of Blacksburg, 1998, accessed 29 October 2004); available from Special Collections, Newman Library, Virginia Tech at <http://spec.lib.vt.edu/bicent/recoll/histbook/specplac.htm>.

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⁶ *Special Place*, internet.

⁷ McDonald, 2-3.

⁸ Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1974), 169.

⁹ Norwood, 169-71.

¹⁰ Montgomery, 28 and Richardson, 90.

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¹³ Richardson, 99.

¹⁴ Montgomery, 19 and 22.

¹⁵ Montgomery, 9.

¹⁶ Turner, 6.

¹⁷ Jacqueline Eaves, interview by author, Blacksburg, VA, 29 October 2004; Julie Schwab, "Warm Thanks," *The Roanoke Times*, 28 November 1996, sec. NRV, p. 1-2; Elizabeth Obenshain, "St. Paul: Small in size, but big part of members' lives," *The Roanoke Times & World-News*, 25 December 1994, sec. NRV, p. 4.

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