

**CARVING OUT COMMUNITIES:  
BLACK INSTITUTION BUILDING IN  
RUTHERFORD COUNTY, TENNESSEE 1860-1890**

By

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my beautiful wife Jennifer and our two wonderful sons Pierce and Jude.

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## ABSTRACT

"Carving Out Communities: Black Institution Building in Rutherford County, Tennessee 1860-1890" explores a still neglected topic in public history and historic preservation: the significance of space in considering the significance of Black churches in community formation and institution building in the 19th century rural South. Historic preservationists in particular still neglect African American space making and Black institution building when they assess the cultural landscape or consider the significance of where and when Black churches were located. This study focuses on Black churches and cemeteries in Rutherford County, Tennessee. The county seat of Murfreesboro once briefly served as the state capital in the 1820s; during the Civil War, the U.S. Army occupied the county at two different times, and created a major military base in the county by 1863, after the Battle of Stones River had devastated adjacent farms and plantations. Using documentary evidence and the substantial material culture evidence left behind by the congregations as they formed and built their churches, the study investigates how Reconstruction-era Black congregations acquired land and created sacred safe havens within an increasingly hostile social and political environment of white supremacy, racial atrocity, and political disenfranchisement. The acquisition of space and construction of Black institutions were key points of resistance and allowed Black groups and neighborhoods to carve their own identity and protect their own community within a racially contested landscape.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2003, Sheryl Jones of Arvada, Colorado, stumbled upon an old photograph album containing eight images taken during the Civil War depicting a Southern town square and surrounding townscape. By a saving grace, one of the photographs was labeled with the location “Murfreesboro, Tenn,” which became the only geographic identifier to someone unfamiliar with this town in Middle Tennessee. With this revelation, Sheryl set about finding a local university or historical organization willing to accept the photographs to send them back to their place of origin. Ultimately, Sheryl and her husband, Don, donated the album to the Albert Gore Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU).

In the summer of 2003, I was director of the Bradley Academy Museum & Cultural Center, which is located in a 1918 African American school building in Murfreesboro. I was one of the first historians to gaze upon these long-lost images that vividly capture the Union occupation of a Southern town. The acquisition and subsequent digitizing of the images opened the door for interpretation through an exhibition funded by the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, a partnership unit of the National Park Service administered by the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation. In March of 2004, the Bradley Academy Museum premiered a four-panel traveling exhibit and accompanying exhibit guide, both titled “Occupied Murfreesboro: Historic Photographs

from the Civil War Era.”<sup>1</sup> Twenty years later, this rare collection of photographs still provides the ideal beginning for understanding African American acquisitions of space and institution building during and after the Civil War.



Figure 1. Photograph of south side of square in Murfreesboro, circa 1864. Source: Sheryl and Don Jones Collection, Albert Gore Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University.

Taken sometime between 1863 and 1865, following the Union victory at the Battle of Stones River (December 31, 1862 – January 2, 1863), the photographer most likely took this series of photographs to capture images of the Union occupation of Murfreesboro. While the photographer took some images at ground-level, their liberal camera use caught far more than the Federal Army’s encampment surrounding the

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<sup>1</sup> See *Occupied Murfreesboro: Historic Photographs from the Civil War Era* (Murfreesboro: Center for Historic Preservation Middle Tennessee State University, 2004). Available at the Rutherford County Archives, Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

courthouse. When the photographer moved to a vantage point on the roof of the courthouse, their focus changed to large panoramic views that captured tall church steeples, Greek Revival-styled homes, and two of the grandiose collegiate institutions located at the edges of town, those being the Soule Female Academy and Union University. Viewing this collection, the photographer captured images of a county seat in



Figure 2. Photograph take from atop Murfreesboro courthouse looking down East Main Street, circa 1864. Source: Sheryl and Don Jones Collection, Albert Gore Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University.

the chaos of war. However, to the scholar of material culture, these images reveal how space was carved and defined in an antebellum Southern town. The photographs detail clearly defined streets radiating in four directions from a central courthouse square

design. Commercial buildings, with facades facing the central courthouse, line all four sides of the courthouse square. Town lots are clearly defined by usage, be it commercial buildings, residential lots surrounded by fences and marked with homes and outbuildings, educational spaces marked by academic buildings, or religious spaces defined by steeple-topped churches.

This dissertation considers the significance of Black institution building in Rutherford County, Tennessee, from 1860 to 1890 through the lens of material culture. Understanding space – the size and mass of buildings and their location in the context of race, gender, and class – is crucial to determining the significance of Black churches in the development of communities and institution building in the 19th century rural South. Focusing on the earliest histories of Black churches and cemeteries in Rutherford County, this study centralizes the importance of African American space making and Black institution building when assessing the cultural landscape. How and where did Reconstruction-era Black congregations acquire land and create sacred safe havens within an increasingly hostile social and political environment of white supremacy, racial atrocity, and political disenfranchisement? Where would newly freed persons seek assistance to push their socio-economic and political agendas, and on whose terms? The acquisition of space and construction of Black institutions were key points of resistance and allowed African American groups and neighborhoods to carve their own identity and protect their community within a racially contested landscape.

Very few if any African Americans were captured in the series of photographs found in Colorado. Therefore, focused images of the transition from enslavement to

freedom, as witnessed by African Americans, are what is missing from this collection. However, when the photographs were taken, newly freed African Americans were fleeing by the thousands to places of Union occupation, including Murfreesboro. If the photographer had captured closer images of Union University, Soule College, a few of the larger houses, and other Union-acquired buildings, they would have captured images of African American occupancy, resiliency, and agency as recorded in government records and other documentary sources.

## **HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT**

This study builds upon a legacy of scholarship centered around material culture and the concept of Black agency in the acquisition of space and institution building that started coming to the forefront of historical inquiry in the latter half of the 20th century. Henry Glassie and James Deetz were two of the first scholars to draw renewed attention to the importance of material culture as a primary source for historical inquiry. During their professional careers, Glassie and Deetz pushed then-contemporary theories and hypotheses in new directions, bending the understanding of what we can learn from vernacular architecture and styles, archeological evidence, and studying “common” people. As American society and culture were changing during the turbulent 1960s, these scholars chose to challenge their fields, questioning older ideas about race, gender, and social constructs. They brought their fieldwork experiences back into the classroom where they taught generations of young scholars who would, in turn, shape ideas as to how historical material culture can better inform the contemporary world. What they

presented to the field through new ideas regarding material culture will forever impact the historiography for future students and scholars. The revolutionary theories of these two professors remain the bedrock of new scholarship and studies.

Glassie is a trained folklorist, having received his master's and doctoral degrees in this field before serving as the State Folklorist for Pennsylvania (1970-1976) while also serving as a professor at Indiana University and then later taking a position as professor and chair of the Department of Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania (1976-1988). A thorough review of his earlier work, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States*, reveals a three-fold approach to his studies. First, he set upon perfecting the criteria defining material folk culture, which he concludes by stating, "Essentially, then, a folk culture is composed of objects produced out of a nonpopular tradition in proximity to popular culture."<sup>2</sup> In other words, he had to define how and why some people held onto their traditional folk arts, objects, and ways in defiance of popular culture and trends. Secondly, he shows that while there was a wide array of prior studies related to material culture of varying capacities, a listing which he presents through extremely comprehensive bibliographical references, no concise studies were looking at "pattern," that is grouping objects and artifacts by regional and cultural identifiers. Glassie mapped the division of "the major folk cultural source areas" originating in the Atlantic coastal states before showing "the movement of [cultural] ideas," east to west,

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Glassie, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), 6.

resulting in larger “material folk culture regions.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Glassie theorized that material folk culture did not originate in microcosms based on temporal dimensions, but could be better understood by their ethnic roots and geographical reference points. Lastly, his book presents many case studies representing his diverse field studies. On this point he concludes, “The best student of folk culture is both field worker and theorist.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the book was a plea for students and scholars to re-address the study of material culture with a strong emphasis on fieldwork to develop hypotheses in the classroom that could articulate into proven field theories.

James Deetz is best known for his impact in the field of historical archeology. Through his book, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*, Deetz shows that a better understanding of material culture yields a better understanding of American history by arguing that “if we could in some way find a way to understand the significance of artifacts as they were thought of and used by Americans in the past, we might gain a new insight into the history of our nation.”<sup>5</sup> Deetz impacted the field by focusing on everyday people doing everyday things, or what he said, “Simple people doing simple things, the normal, everyday routine of life and how these people thought about it, are not the kinds of things anyone thought worthy of noting.”<sup>6</sup> More so than Glassie, Deetz was more culturally aware of contemporary issues and therefore included

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 37-39. Historical geographers, especially Fred Kniffen, were a major influence on Glassie. See Fred B. Kniffen, “Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 55 (1965): 549-577.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>5</sup> James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 11.

a more specialized focus on African American material culture. Deetz counterpoints historical records with archeological discoveries to detail how African American material culture can reveal facts about Black society not recorded by their white contemporaries. Like Glassie, Deetz presents a vast assemblage of case studies and examples from his fieldwork to show how the written records and extant examples interplay with archaeological discovery. However, Deetz stresses that archaeology yields more factual interpretation about America's past than the written record. He concludes, "For in the seemingly little and insignificant things that accumulate to create a lifetime, the essence of our existence is captured."<sup>7</sup>

In the late 1970s, historians Orville Vernon Burton and Robert McMath, Jr., saw a need to re-analyze the focus of community studies. Burton and McMath observed that scholarly publications on community studies were too holistic and too focused on the New England region. Meanwhile, they noticed an interdisciplinary revival looking to save cultural heritage and looking to push a "new" social history focused on topics including enslavement, class status, social mobility, family life, and religion, among other facets, especially in studies of the 19th century American South. As they noted, "Most striking, in our view, is the lack of comprehensive studies . . . [that] integrate analysis of the physical environment and material culture with the social, cultural, economic, and political history of a community."<sup>8</sup> In 1978, Burton and McMath hosted a conference at the Newberry Library in Chicago from which they selected and edited the essays

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>8</sup> Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr., eds., *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), xvii

published in two volumes: *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies*, and *Toward a New South?: Studies in Post-Civil War Southern Communities*. By limiting the essay submissions to topics pertaining to 19th century Southern studies, the editors stated that their collection of essays provided “both the structure required to make comparisons between communities and the flexibility needed to bring out the diversity among them.”<sup>9</sup>

In *Towards a New South*, Armstead L. Robinson presents one of the first works focused on the idea of Black agency through institution building in his essay, “Plans Dat Comed from God: Institution Building and the Emergence of Black Leadership in Reconstruction Memphis.” Armstead details the story of Reverend Morris Henderson who in 1866 purchased a \$5,000 lot in Memphis upon which his congregation built the Beale Street Baptist Church. This church became the “mother church” of numerous Black Baptist churches in and around Memphis by 1880. However, by presenting this story of Black leadership and institution building, which similarly played out in urban centers throughout the South, Armstead argues that scholars must go beyond documenting “the sudden profusion of black-operated churches, schools, and benevolent societies” because that does not answer the root question of *how* these institutions came to be.<sup>10</sup> He asks, “In short, what were the sources of the ‘plans’ out of which the freed people’s communities emerged?”<sup>11</sup> Robinson presents his case study on Memphis using a rather complex

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<sup>99</sup> Orvil Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr., eds., *Toward a New South?: Studies in Post-Civil War Southern Communities* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), xvi.

<sup>10</sup> Armstead L. Robinson, “Plans Dat Comed from God” in *Toward a New South?: Studies in Post-Civil War Southern Communities*, ed. Orville Veron Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), 72.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

analysis model in order to move beyond what he calls “variations in the historical experience” to get to the true root of “explanatory synthesis.” To this extent, he offered this summation: “By viewing the vast majority of former slaves as members of an evolving southern working class, it becomes easier to integrate various community studies into a coherent whole. In turn, this synthetic perspective facilitates answering many of the most critical questions about the emancipation experience.”<sup>12</sup>

Armstead’s thorough analysis of Freedmen’s Bank records found that while freedmen were guided by religious and political leaders, they were truly driven by economic forces in a quest for urban survival. He argues that the transition from enslavement to freedom was a matter of adapting to the urban environment and the economic means for survival. He asserted:

What mattered most as blacks struggled to survive in cities were the objective conditions that impelled these blacks, much like other working-class groups, to develop and to sustain a panoply of religious, benevolent, social, and political institutions. These remarkable institutions helped soothe the new urban burdens of unemployment, sickness, and death. In turn, these burdens originated from a hidden source, the unseen forces of the capitalist world. It was these forces that impelled men like Reverend Morris Henderson to develop the ‘plans’ for the successful adjustment to freedom.<sup>13</sup>

A little over a decade after the publications by Burton and McMath, historians Kenneth Goings and Raymond Mohl edited a collection of essays in 1996 titled *The New African American Urban History* that presented works encompassing “new directions” in urban social history. The editors stated that they were seeing a shift in the historiography

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 99.

away from the concept of African Americans as oppressed victims to “an *agency model*, demonstrating the extent to which African Americans in slavery and freedom shaped and controlled their own destinies.”<sup>14</sup> Historians were starting to research and interpret the Black reaction to outside agitation and oppression as African Americans moved to urban centers to create new lives and shape a new future. While Goings and Mohl mention the expansion of studies looking at the role of women and religion in the Black community, especially in the social gospel movement, the editors also wanted to present essays looking at the Black agency projected through spatial acquisition as African Americans claimed their own space in urban centers.

One of the essays presented in *The New African American Urban History* is Elsa Brown and Gregg Kimball’s “Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond,” which looks at how African Americans showed agency by impacting the spatial and social dimensions of Richmond, Virginia, during Reconstruction. By overlapping the physical and social dynamics of a Southern industrial city, their purpose was to “suggest ways in which a closer reading of the spatial dimensions of the city may aid our exploration of the dynamics of power and culture . . . and complicating our understanding of the changing racial discourse between black and white Richmonders.”<sup>15</sup> Specifically referencing churches, Brown and Kimball note how these central Black institutions served a well-defined secular purpose for mass meetings in which African Americans so successfully

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl, eds., *The New African American Urban History* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg D. Kimball, “Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond,” in *The New African American Urban History*, ed. Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996), 67.

united that the white city leaders tried to ban such meetings in Black sacred spaces. The authors conclude by stating,

[African Americans] used the urban landscape to articulate their own stories of emancipation, freedom, progress, and success. Like all histories, these too, were contested. Black Richmonders not only manufactured a built environment that could generate new meanings of possibilities, they also struggled to control those meanings and symbols . . . It is, therefore, necessary for historians to pay close attention to the actual spaces in which black and white residents carried out their daily lives, seeing the possible simultaneity of relationships of hierarchy and relationships of camaraderie.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1999, Lisa Tolbert’s *Constructing Townscapes: Space and Society in Antebellum Tennessee* focused on the spatial formation and antebellum transformation of four county seats in the mid-state. Centering her research on the towns of Franklin, Columbia, Shelbyville, and Murfreesboro, Tolbert argues that the “evidence of architectural and spatial change suggests that in the years before the Civil War, the small-town South had much more complex history of social development than we have heretofore understood.”<sup>17</sup> Through primary source analysis relying heavily on diaries, memoirs, and other personal accounts, Tolbert details how these smaller urban centers were just as crucial to plantation culture and economies as larger river and seaport towns. By studying the placement of social and economic structures in these county seats, Tolbert details how architectural choices and location within the town reflected social organization and reorganization over time. To this she concludes that “small county seats

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>17</sup> Lisa C. Tolbert, *Constructing Townscapes: Space and Society in Antebellum Tennessee* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 2.

served as dynamic forces for cultural change, challenging the configuration of a southern landscape that places the plantation at the center of central authority.”<sup>18</sup>

Quoting diaries and personal letters, Tolbert gives voice to both the women, as well as all African Americans, those residents who seemingly had little overall authority in the creation of small towns yet wielded much social and economic control. Tolbert offers that “by interpreting architectural meaning as social experience, it is possible to see how groups of residents who had little control over the actual design of individual structures had considerable impact on the social construction of space within the townscape.”<sup>19</sup> Specific to enslavement, Tolbert concludes that “above all, town slavery had the potential to produce extremely complex living and working arrangements that slaves themselves played an influential role in formulating . . . the experience of slaves defined the distinctiveness of small-town life.”<sup>20</sup> In reference to Black churches, Tolbert states that in the town, what had been an “invisible institution” on the plantation was the only tangible landmark allowed to the Black community. Although the first autonomous Black church building would not appear in Murfreesboro until the early Reconstruction period, Tolbert points out that such properties were becoming part of the townscape in other parts of Middle Tennessee, such as Columbia and Nashville, in the decade preceding the Civil War.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>21</sup> According to Tolbert, the Burns’ Spring Church was organized in Columbia in 1843. The First Baptist Church (African American) was allowed to separate from the white congregation in 1847.

In 2008, Angel Nieves and Leslie Alexander presented a group of essays in their book *“We Shall Independent Be”*: *African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States* as a cross-humanities approach to offer a “means of examining the historical significance of race and place to African Americans in their struggle for self-definition.”<sup>22</sup> The introduction, written by Nieves, is a compelling call for public historians to push further in researching and interpreting African American agency on the landscape. Nieves stresses that “such rarely used sources as burial grounds, artifacts, and other aspects of material culture” are essential tools for historical analysis and will offer “new forms of historical evidence, methodologies, and analyses.”<sup>23</sup> While the essays cover a wide array of case studies looking at African American space making, Nieves still concluded that more work was needed since very little prior research has focused on the idea of African Americans working as “active agents of their own social change through space making in the face of racial segregation or political disenfranchisement.”<sup>24</sup>

## **METHODOLOGY**

On the post-emancipation landscape, African Americans knew too well that land was scarce, and material resources were sacred. Understanding where African Americans constructed their first institutions on the racially contested landscape gives voice to the

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<sup>22</sup> Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander, eds., *“We Shall Independent Be” African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

agency wielded by Black communities to carve a space of their own. Therefore, this dissertation looks to answer the questions of where, by whom, and under whose authority would the first Black churches be built? Chapter One, “Early Black Religion in Middle Tennessee,” introduces and analyzes the historical context of religion as it evolved on the frontier and developing towns in Middle Tennessee. After exploring the roots of mainline (white) denominational patterns that stemmed from the Great Revival, this chapter analyzes early “slave religion” in Middle Tennessee to better understand the development of early Black religiosity within the enslaved community. From here the chapter explores what it meant to be a Black “member” in a white congregation. Chapter One concludes by contextualizing Rutherford County within the larger narrative while exploring the roots of Black religion that developed in pre-war Murfreesboro and the surrounding countryside, thereby laying the foundation upon which to further analyze post-war Black institution building.

Chapter Two, “Building a Religion of Their Own,” looks at the founding of numerous early Black churches in Murfreesboro and Rutherford County, focusing extensively on the Black Methodist (A.M.E. and United Methodist Episcopal) and Baptist (Missionary and Primitive) denominations. This chapter analyzes the agency wielded by Black leaders to change the course of African American religious autonomy during and after the Civil War. This chapter then addresses the willingness of formerly enslaved people to accept or deny white benevolence to build Black institutions, as well as the multifaceted denominational quandaries that sometimes split congregations and thereby expanded Black institution building.

Chapter Three, “Black Autonomy and the Politics of White Supremacy,” explores the political landscape that shaped the Black experience in Murfreesboro and Rutherford County from 1860 to 1890. This chapter analyzes the shifting tides of state and local political domination from “Republican Rule” to “Democratic Domination” to reveal a parallel chronology of racial atrocities against African Americans. This chapter studies how the formerly enslaved used the quasi-protections afforded by U.S. military occupation, the Freedmen’s Bureau, and Northern benevolence organizations to push Black advocacy for institution building. However, the politics of white supremacy points the way to analyzing the topic of lynching, which is also addressed in this chapter.

Chapter Four, “Legacies of Black Institution Building,” grounds the dissertation firmly in public history by fusing scholarly research with field experience. African American churches, schools, and cemeteries formed the nuclei of historic Black communities. This chapter presents fieldwork by the author and various community partners who have spent years surveying and recording Black spatial acquisitions on the landscape in Rutherford County. This chapter shows the methodologies for surveying historic Black churches and cemeteries within the confines of localized studies, driving home the importance that through sheer determination, African Americans left a lasting imprint of land acquisition and institutional recognition.

An abundance of monographs exists dealing with general histories of the Black church in America, in addition to Black denominational histories, and studies planting the centrality of Black religion and the Black church within the African American

experience.<sup>25</sup> Yet, there is still a need for research focused on the spaces carved out by African Americans as they constructed their first post-Civil War institutions, which will shed light on the histories and legacies of Black agency and Black community formation on the landscape. Through historical research and the practical application of fieldwork, this dissertation adds to the historiography and provides a case study for researching African American space making and Black institution building in the South.

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<sup>25</sup> Foundational works detailing the general history of the Black church in American history include: W. E. Burghardt Dubois, ed., *The Negro Church* (Georgia: The Atlanta University Press, 1903); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Black Church* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021); William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1993). Some African American denominational histories include: Wayne E. Croft, Sr., *A History of the Black Baptist Church: I Don't Feel No Ways Tired* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 2020); Dennis C. Dickerson, *The African Methodist Episcopal Church: A History* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Othel Hawthorne Lakey, *The History of the CME Church (Revised)* (Memphis, Tennessee: The CME Publishing House, 1996). Important works studying the centrality of Black religion and Black churches in the African American experience include: Stephen Ward Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992); James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970); Matthew Harper, *The End Days: African American Religion and Politics in the Age of Emancipation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1990); Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African American* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), and *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" In the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979); Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973). Books giving "voice" to the Black religious experience by using oral interviews and other primary sources produced by African Americans include: Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings, eds. *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991); Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-slaves* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: United Church Press, 1969); Milton C. Sernett, ed., *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1985). Books detailing African American women in the Black Church experience include Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993); Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2010).

## CHAPTER ONE – AFRICAN AMERICANS AND ANTEBELLUM RELIGION IN EARLY RUTHERFORD COUNTY

Founded in the Fall of 1803, Rutherford County lies in the geographic center of the state of Tennessee. The town of Jefferson, the original county seat, was founded on the Stones River in the northern quadrant of the county. However, in 1811, local citizens petitioned to establish a new town named “Murfreesborough,” thereby moving the county seat to a centralized location.<sup>26</sup> From its early years through the antebellum era, Murfreesboro witnessed patterns of economic growth and prosperity typical of many towns in Middle Tennessee based on slavery and a varied mixture of agriculture and commerce. Murfreesboro served as the state capital from 1819 to 1826 before losing that status to Nashville. However, Murfreesboro was still positioned to expand exponentially in the decades leading up to the Civil War. As Lisa Tolbert states, “By the 1840s, [Murfreesboro resident] John Spence might properly have declared the townscape to be ‘completed.’ Substantial public buildings joined numerous town ‘houses’ to separate town space from the countryside, and the county seat had become the ceremonial center of the county.”<sup>27</sup> By the end of the 1850s, Murfreesboro was spatially carved into distinct economic, political, and social spaces by those who worked, and lived in these spaces. Therefore, to give context and clarity to the study of post-Civil War Black institution building, the research into Black church founding must begin during the earlier decades

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<sup>26</sup> Note that the original spelling of “Murfreesborough” was shortened to “Murfreesboro” during the Civil War.

<sup>27</sup> Lisa C. Tolbert, *Constructing Townscapes: Space and Society in Antebellum Tennessee* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 81; see also John C. Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume Two 1829-1870* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Rutherford County Historical Society, 1993).

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as African Americans began defining religion on their own terms and in their own spaces.

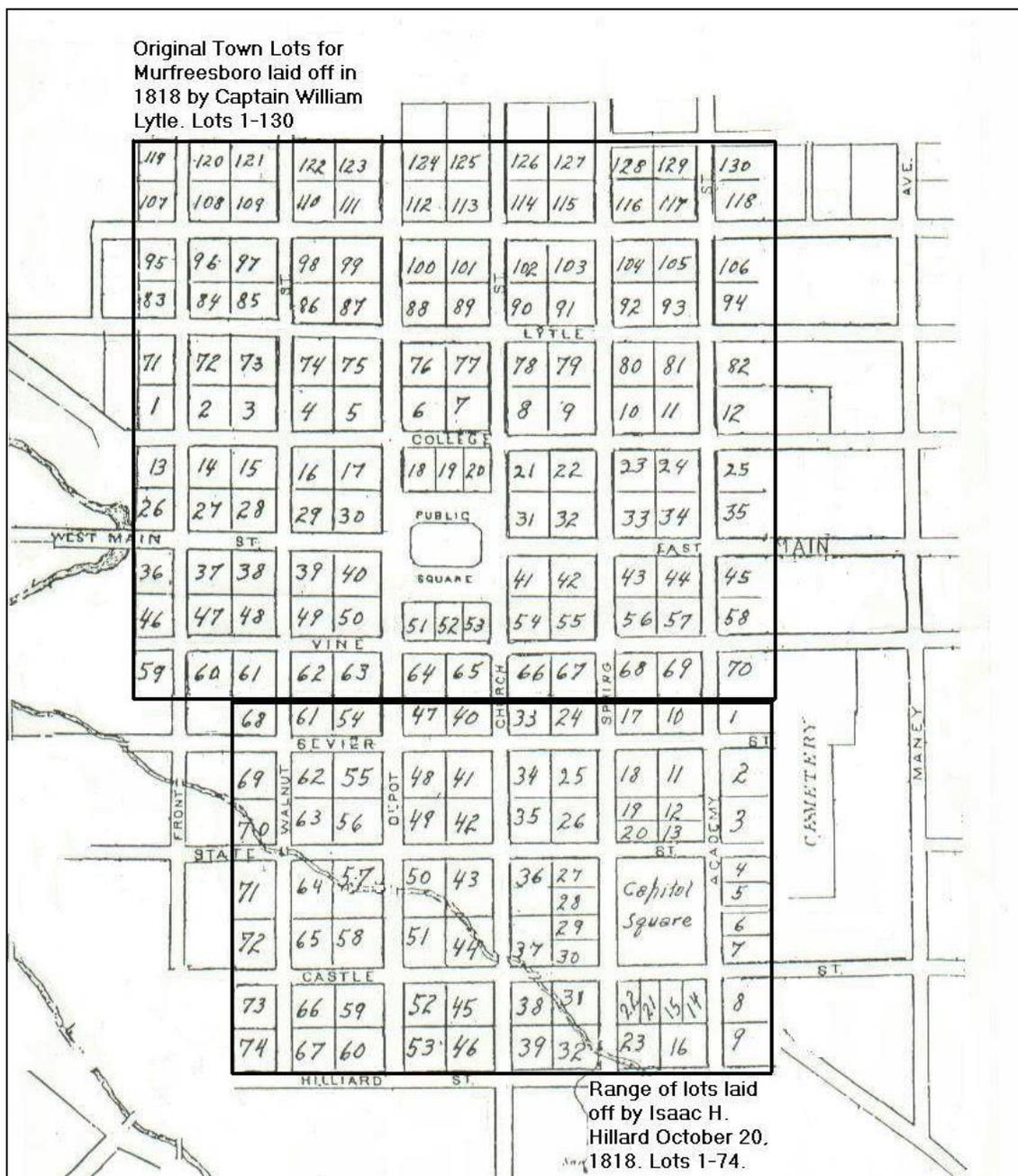


Figure 3. Plat Map of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1818. Source: Reconstructed map by William Lytle Patterson between 1975 – 1986 on file at the Rutherford County Register of Deeds Office.

## IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE GREAT REVIVAL

The early growth of Christianity in Tennessee was a direct result of the Great Revival that swept across the frontier starting in the 1790s causing congregations to swell and engulfing whites and Blacks alike, especially in the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations. John Boles explains in his book, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, that “this was the first revival common to the whole South, and the first in which all denominations shared simultaneously.”<sup>28</sup> The Great Revival was fueled by camp meetings, typified as outdoor mass gatherings called together by itinerate preachers to spread evangelical ideals to an interested and eager audience. As Conrad Ostwalt explains in an article in the *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, “As a result of the rural setting, the sparse population, and the small number of churches on the southern frontier, camp meetings flourished by providing a central location for crowds that numbered from a few hundred to several thousand.”<sup>29</sup> Herman Norton in *Religion in Tennessee 1777-1945* calls the camp meetings the most striking manifestation of the Great Revival by stating that “the camp meetings in Tennessee made marked impressions upon numerous participants. Thousands were deeply moved; a large number professed conversion and many, whose religious beliefs had been only nominal, found their faith invigorated.”<sup>30</sup> Boles notes that by the summer of 1801, “awakenings” were being reported throughout Tennessee as Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist preachers joined forces on the frontier

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<sup>28</sup> John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, paperback ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 70.

<sup>29</sup> Conrad Ostwalt, “Camp Meetings,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia* (Tennessee Historical Society, October 8, 2017). Accessed April 15, 2022. <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/camp-meetings/>

<sup>30</sup> Herman A. Norton, *Religion in Tennessee 1777-1945* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 26-27.

to spread their evangelical convictions.<sup>31</sup> Boles provides the following summation of the character at these events:

The emphasis of popular religion in the Old South was totally personal. Sermons were aimed at single uncared ‘sinners’; ministers called persons, not the society, to account for their transgressions. There was no communal or abstract approach. The revivalist always had in mind the individual whom God would judge. The all-encompassing purpose of the ministers was to bring such persons to conversion. A felt conversion, one that was fixed in time and place and memory, was the primary object of evangelical preaching. After conversion it was thought essential that the new believer push himself ever nearer to that perfection which he would attain in full splendor only with death.<sup>32</sup>

Norton further concludes that although the revival movement peaked in 1805 and steadily declined afterward, it pushed the three major denominations toward unprecedented growth in the new state.<sup>33</sup>

While individuals and groups established several religious campgrounds early in Rutherford County’s history, the most noted was the four acres donated by John Windrow in 1812 and subsequently named in his honor. Located ten miles west of Murfreesboro, historian Jerry Brookshire made these reflections about the site:

Windrow was a fine site . . . located along a road and a creek, and the land had good drainage. The moderately level lower land had sufficient space for the tents and other structures, perhaps even a church building, located some hundred feet uphill from where the 1914 Windrow church now sits. Prayer meetings, singings, testimonials, and preaching were there at the base of gentle hills forming a natural asymmetrical theater, where hundreds would gather for the major preaching event.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Boles, 71.

<sup>32</sup> Boles, 193.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Jerry E. Brookshire, “The Early Years of Methodism in Murfreesboro 1820-1843,” in *The First 200 Years: A Bicentennial History First United Methodist Church Murfreesboro, Tennessee 1820-2020* (Murfreesboro: First United Methodist Church, 2020), 7-8.

John C. Spence makes several mentions throughout his memoir of the local “camp grounds” used for these religious revivals. Spence makes this mention at the time that Murfreesboro was incorporated in 1818:

The people having establish system of camp meetings for the better accommodation of the masses scattered remotely apart, and the want of churches in the country. Such meetings were generally held about the close of summer seasons . . . These meetings lasting about a week. The preachers attending, with few exceptions, were traveling of more generally known Circuit riders. When the exercises commenced, it lasted day and a greater part of night, with intermissions of an hour for refreshment. Few local preachers that time. When the exercises commenced, it was usually led off by one of the oldest and best preachers.<sup>35</sup>

Spence concludes that there were several such revivals each year at this time due to the scarcity of local preachers and church buildings.

One unique aspect of the early camp meetings was the full-participatory inclusivity offered to free and enslaved African Americans, resulting in bi-racial religious interactions. In *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South*, Albert Raboteau states:

The individualistic emphasis of revivalism, with its intense concentration on inward conversion, fostered an inclusiveness which could border on egalitarianism, Evangelicals did not hesitate to preach the necessity of conversion to racially mixed congregations. Revivalist preachers had little doubt – indeed they were enthusiastic – about the capacity of slaves to share the experience of conversion.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> John C. Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume One 1799-1828* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Rutherford County Historical Society, 1991), 139-140.

<sup>36</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 132.

In *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900*, William Montgomery states, “The Great Awakening evangelicalism . . . surging through the South during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, attracted significant numbers of slaves to Christian theology and profoundly influenced their religious views.”<sup>37</sup> In the 1810s and 1820s, both free and enslaved African Americans at times joined the large crowds at the camp meetings. Mechal Sobel in *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* states, “The presence of many Afro-Americans at these revivals was one of the most important happenings for the blacks in America.”<sup>38</sup> Sobel continues, “The revivals opened common ground on which whites and blacks could share religious experience, and blacks immediately responded. Blacks were attracted to the revivals in great numbers.”<sup>39</sup> Samuel Avery-Quinn in *Cities of Zion: The Holiness Movement and Methodist Camp Meeting Towns in America* details the physical space set apart for African Americans:

Maintaining the biracial but segregated character of traditional Methodist revivals, camp meeting organizers set aside a space for black worship and tenting, often to the rear of a preacher’s stand. Although camp meeting organizers created a separate space for African American religious practice, black attendees could cross a revival’s racial boundaries and take part in the large white space at times when white Methodists were swept up into emotional sessions of exhortation and professions of conversion.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 19.

<sup>38</sup> Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 97.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Avery-Quinn, *Cities of Zion: The Holiness Movement and Methodist Camp Meeting Towns in America* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2019), 52.

The early religious services offered at rural campgrounds allowed bi-racial interactions and even segregated spaces for African American inclusion. Yet, how would these rural camp meetings manifest into urban churches, and what spaces were afforded to African Americans in this new setting?

### **PRESBYTERIANS BUILD FIRST CHURCH IN MURFREESBORO**

It appears that the Presbyterians were the first denomination to establish a church building in the town of Murfreesboro in the early years. According to the earliest church records, Reverend Robert Henderson first preached to the future congregants of the First Presbyterian Church of Murfreesboro on June 1, 1811, in the vicinity of Murfree Spring. This meeting took place just a few months before the town of Murfreesboro was established on high ground to the north of Murfree Spring. According to Spence, the church was started in April 1812 by Rev. Henderson as the Murfree Spring Church in a log schoolhouse located on a hillside just west of the spring. The congregation met alternately in the schoolhouse, members' homes, and the Murfreesboro courthouse for the next several years. The congregation was renamed the First Presbyterian Church in June 1818 as the members began raising funds for a new structure. Completed in 1820, the new brick church of imposing size was located southeast of the town square on property donated to the congregation by Captain William Lytle for one dollar. Lytle previously sold the land for the new county seat, Murfreesboro, nine years prior. A cemetery parcel soon joined the church lot, which was forever known as the Old City Cemetery. Spence gives the following account of the church structure:

A brick building forty by sixty ft, two storys, windows, painted shutters, three doors in front, two leading to the gallery, finishing off with a cupaloe, about seventy feet high, neatly finished with painted shutters, a large golden ball on the top, a hundred and twenty five pounds bell. The inside work, a gallery on two sides and end, pannel work all round, also three rows seats round the gallery. The whole supported above and below with turned pillars, standing at proper distance apart. The lower story, all pewed, closed with doors. An elevated pulpit, about three feet from the floor, stair way either side for entrance with doors, seating three men. All well finished and neatly painted.”<sup>41</sup>

Spence concludes by stating that the church construction cost an estimated \$4,000.

During the time that Murfreesboro served as state capital from 1819 to 1826, the

Tennessee State Legislature met in the church starting in 1822 after the Murfreesboro courthouse burned. By the Civil War, two hundred members were attending the church.

This church remained one of the most imposing buildings in Murfreesboro until the U.S.

Army dismantled it for its building materials during the war.

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<sup>41</sup> Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume One*, 80.



Figure 4. Circa 1976 artist rendering of First Presbyterian Church in Murfreesboro based on historical descriptions. Source: Susan Daniel, Libby McKay, and Ernest Hooper. *The First Two Hundred Years: A History of First Presbyterian Church Murfreesboro, Tennessee*, (Self-published, 2012), front cover.

## METHODISTS IN MURFREESBORO

Although the early camp meetings were not confined to single denominations, these religious revivals brought increased vigor to the Methodist congregants. In a chapter titled “The Early Years of Methodism in Murfreesboro 1820-1843,” historian Jerry Brookshire highlights a camp meeting at Windrow in October 1820. At this meeting, a few leading Methodist preachers took charge, including presiding elder Thomas L. Douglass (Nashville District Superintendent), and chief speaker Sterling C.

Brown. A camp meeting the month prior in adjacent Williamson County at Mt. Nebo intensified the fervor of this meeting. Many young converts from the Mt. Nebo meeting attended the meeting the following month at Windrow.<sup>42</sup>

In 1821, the Reverend Robert Paine encouraged members of the Methodist denomination in Murfreesboro to form a “station” or congregation named the Methodist Episcopal Church of Murfreesboro. This congregation established a subscription to build a church, which they constructed in 1823. Major John Lytle donated a large town lot for the church and an adjacent cemetery.<sup>43</sup> Spence described the building as forty feet wide by sixty feet long, constructed of brick, with a small bell tower fronting the road.<sup>44</sup> The church lot was located three blocks north of the square on the edge of town. A conference meeting was held at the church in 1828, which invigorated the congregants and increased their membership. Having outgrown their first building, the congregation sold and vacated their church in 1843 and moved into a new building on the square’s northeast corner (Fig. 4). Despite some disruption during the Civil War, the building remained in use by the congregation until 1888.

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<sup>42</sup> Brookshire, 8-10.

<sup>43</sup> Brookshire, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume One*, 186.

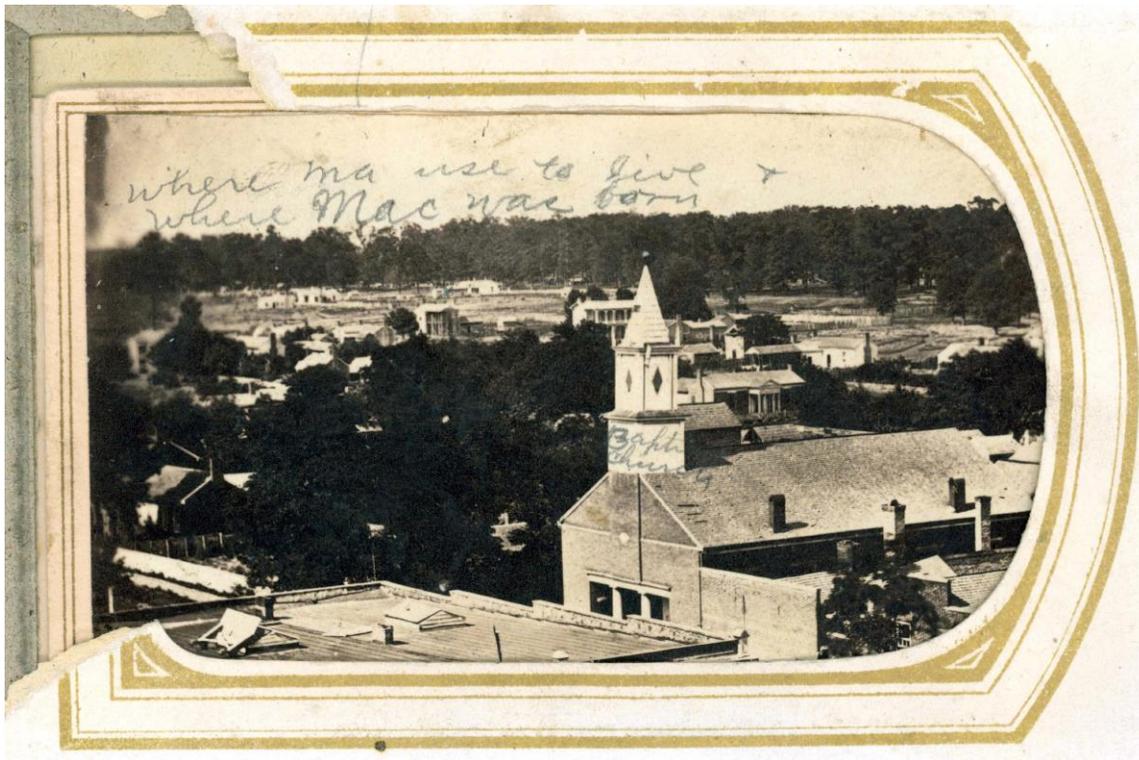


Figure 5. Photograph looking northeast from atop Murfreesboro courthouse, circa 1864. The First United Methodist Episcopal Church is shown in the center of this picture, although it is mislabeled as the “Baptist Church.” Source: Sheryl and Don Jones Collection, Albert Gore Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University.

## **FOUNDING OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (A.K.A. CHURCH OF CHRIST)**

In the early 1800s, there was a general movement to unify and reform church congregations based solely on biblical teachings from the New Testament. A former Presbyterian preacher, Barton Stone, and a former Baptist preacher, Alexander Campbell, emerged as two of the most influential itinerate preachers who independently spread the ideals of this new loosely organized “Restoration Movement” throughout Middle Tennessee and the region. Stone’s preaching resulted specifically in some Baptist congregations voting to reidentify as “Reformers,” while Campbell and his followers started the “Christian Church.” In 1832, this movement solidified under the sole name of

the Christian Church, although in later years, some congregations and fractions would refer to themselves as Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ, or the Reformers. Herman Norton states in his book, *Tennessee Christians*, that the merger went smoothly since “in all the state there were less than ten congregations of the Reformers, with approximately one thousand members, and no more than twenty-five congregations of the Christian Church, containing about two thousand members.”<sup>45</sup>

Although both Stone and Campbell preached in Rutherford County in the earlier years as they worked to build congregations in the region, the first Christian Church was not constructed in Murfreesboro until late 1832. Tolbert Fanning, then a student at the University of Nashville, was the first to preach in the new building in January 1833.<sup>46</sup> Fanning is credited with helping to grow this early congregation. The Christian Church building was located at the southwest corner of Vine Street and Front Street. The congregation remained in this location until 1860, when they purchased a lot and constructed a new building on East Main Street due to continued growth in membership.

## **BAPTISTS TAKE ROOT IN MURFREESBORO**

According to historian Albert Wardin, Jr., Baptists constructed the first churches in the future state of Tennessee by 1781, preceding both the Presbyterian and Methodist

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<sup>45</sup> Herman Norton, *Tennessee Christians: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Tennessee* (Nashville: Reed and Company, 1971), 28.

<sup>46</sup> Louise Houck Wiser, *History of Rutherford County Churches of Christ 1811-1996* (No publisher, 1996), 10.

denominations.<sup>47</sup> By the time that Rutherford County was founded in 1803, Middle Tennessee contained a scattering of Baptist churches loosely associated under the Cumberland Baptist Association. And by the founding of Murfreesboro in 1811, Baptist churches in the general vicinity found fellowship through the newly formed Concord Association. Yet despite an early founding in the county, Baptist churches would not take root in Murfreesboro until after 1820.

Complicating the research into the origins of antebellum Baptist churches in Tennessee are the historical divisions that took place within the denomination's associations over issues such as educational outreach, missions, and of course, slavery. In his book, *A History of Rutherford County*, local historian Carlton Sims summarizes the state of Baptist affairs in the county by stating, "After 1820 the meetings of the Association were none too harmonious. Disputes arose over Calvinism, Campbellism, foot washing, missions, Sunday schools and a state convention. It is not surprising, therefore, that by 1860 there were four or five different Baptists groups in the county, not to mention the rapidly rising Church of Christ."<sup>48</sup> In 1833, the Tennessee State Baptist Convention was organized, which divided Baptist convictions in Rutherford County, leading to a separation of churches in 1836; those that remained associated with the state convention became known as "Missionary Baptists," while a second group formed the Stones River Association and became known as the "Primitive Baptists."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Albert W. Wardin, Jr., *Tennessee Baptists: A Comprehensive History, 1779-1999* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Executive Board of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, 1999), 15.

<sup>48</sup> Carlton C. Sims, ed., *A History of Rutherford County* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: privately printed, 1947), 175-176.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

In his history of the First Baptist Church, local historian Homer Pittard claims that a Primitive Baptist church opened on the Murfreesboro square as early as 1820, yet he does not cite the source for this recollection and no historical evidence can be found to support his claim.<sup>50</sup> The United Baptist Church (Primitive Baptist) was possibly the first Baptist congregation to organize in Murfreesboro. Reverend John M. Watson constituted this congregation on November 14, 1835. The minutes of this church are microfilmed and available at both the Rutherford County Archives and the Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives. Sims not only claims that Watson was “the most outstanding Primitive Baptist preacher in the United States,” but also “one of the leading surgeons in the state and one time professor of medicine at the University of Nashville.”<sup>51</sup> Wardin expands on Watson’s biography by detailing that the doctor-preacher moved from North Carolina to Wilson County, Tennessee, as a young boy. After graduating from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of New York, he returned to Middle Tennessee, where he not only taught at the University of Nashville, he also worked as a practicing physician, served as president of the Medical Society of the State of Tennessee, and served as a contributing journalist in medical publications.<sup>52</sup> Watson is noted to have resided in both Nashville and Murfreesboro during various cycles in his life. By 1841, Watson was preaching at four churches, including the one he founded in Murfreesboro.<sup>53</sup> Wardin, describing Watson as “the leading spokesman of the Old Baptists in Tennessee,” states that the preacher was best known for his ardent defense of the Primitive Baptist faith in

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<sup>50</sup> Homer Pittard, *Pillar and Ground: First Baptist Church 1843-1968* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: First Baptist Church, 1968), 4.

<sup>51</sup> Sims, 177.

<sup>52</sup> Wardin, 140.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

Watson's book, *The Old Baptist Test*, published in 1855. Watson was revising his book when he passed away in 1866, and the book was subsequently republished in 1867.<sup>54</sup>

A first-hand account of the life and activities of Rev. Watson in Murfreesboro is given in John C. Spence's memoir as he recounts that the preacher moved back to Murfreesboro in 1833, having become a Baptist preacher before this time. Spence states of Watson, "...as minister in the Primitive Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, one of their best preachers, having great strength of mind as a reasoner, and was greatly beloved by all his members."<sup>55</sup> Spence states that this early church first met in a brick warehouse at the corner of Vine and South Church Streets before moving to another building southeast of Murfree's Spring, known as "Old Bradley Academy."<sup>56</sup> Minutes of the church confirm these statements and recount how the small congregation rented their initial "meetinghouse" before purchasing the Old Bradley building in August of 1842.<sup>57</sup> In 1850, the congregation sold this building and acquired a lot north of the public square. Spence recounts that Watson worked to oversee the construction of the new church building, "he bearing the brunt of the expense of the building, now known [as] the Primitive Baptist Church."<sup>58</sup>

In the 1830s, the Primitive Baptists in Middle Tennessee lost some of their members as Missionary Baptist "converts" rallied around the leadership of Reverend

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>55</sup> John C. Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume One*, 109.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

<sup>57</sup> There were several early buildings that served as "Old Bradley Academy" in its early history of this institution in Murfreesboro.

<sup>58</sup> Rutherford County Deed Book 4, 497. Rutherford County Register of Deeds Office; Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume One*, 94.

Robert Boyte Crawford Howell. Pittard explains that Howell took over the pastorship of the First Baptist Church in Nashville in 1834, thereby “re-energizing” the Concord Association. Pittard states, “Expressive and dynamic, full of missionary zeal, and presenting a remarkable figure of a man . . . Howell was instrumental in forming the Tennessee Baptist Convention and launching the new publication, *The Baptist*.”<sup>59</sup> After a majority of the original First Baptist Church congregation converted to “Campbellism,” Howell successfully reorganized the Missionary Baptist church in Nashville, organized and promoted missionary and education societies, and helped organize the Baptist General Association of Tennessee and Alabama in 1842.<sup>60</sup> After leaving Nashville in 1850, Howell returned to the city to pastor the First Baptist Church again in 1857, just in time to lead the debate and battle against “Landmarkism,” which was a Baptist movement promoted by a member of the church by the name of James R. Graves.<sup>61</sup> This battle continued through the Civil War, having far-reaching implications to Baptist followers in the South. Therefore, Howell was in key positions, both geographically and professionally, to influence the Missionary Baptist impact on Murfreesboro in the formative years.

Another push for the Missionary Baptist movement in Murfreesboro came in 1841 when Howell supported the establishment of a centrally located university called Union University, which was planned and formulated through the recently established

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<sup>59</sup> Pittard, 3.

<sup>60</sup> James Strong and John McClintock, *The Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (New York: Haper and Brothers, 1880). Accessed online April 15, 2022. <https://biblicalcyclopedia.com/H/Howell-robert-boyte-crawford-dd.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Baptist Education Society of Tennessee.<sup>62</sup> With financial support from citizens of Murfreesboro, Union opened and operated on a small scale inside one of the old Bradley Academy buildings until they acquired a new campus and constructed a three-story building to the east of town in 1849. Joseph Eaton, a prominent Baptist preacher, headed the institution for many years until he died in 1859. Another prominent Baptist preacher and promoter of Landmarkism (much to the chagrin of Howell) was James Madison Pendleton, who joined the Union University faculty in 1857 and became president after the passing of Eaton. The school ceased operations in 1861 with the onset of the Civil War. It reopened briefly following the war in 1868, but shuttered its operations in Murfreesboro entirely in 1873 when it relocated to Jackson, Tennessee.<sup>63</sup>



Figure 6. Photograph of Union University located on East Main Street in Murfreesboro, circa 1880. Source: Shackletts Historical Images Collection, Rutherford County Archives.

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<sup>62</sup> Warden, 96.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

By the early 1840s, at the time of the opening of Union University, Pittard makes the following summation of Missionary Baptists' activities in Murfreesboro:

Strangely, those of the missionary faith in Murfreesboro appeared to be very small in number. Not only did this group chafe under the dominance of the Primitive Baptists who had many years before taken "squatter's rights" on the public square and had steadily increased in number, but the intermittent Sabbath trips to rural churches (Enon, Bethel, and Overall Creek) were inconvenient and even sometimes hazardous. A few missionary Baptists made periodic journeys to Nashville to worship at the First Baptist Church there.<sup>64</sup>

On June 9, 1843, a small group of citizens and visitors from other Baptist churches in the region met at "Fletcher's Schoolhouse" on the outskirts of Murfreesboro and constituted what would become the First Baptist Church in Murfreesboro. Rev. Howell led them in prayer. Although a local citizen and businessman named Robert January served as the initial interim pastor, Joseph Eaton was "called to pastor" the church before the end of 1843.<sup>65</sup> Pittard notes that from its inception, the First Baptist Church and Union University shared intertwined histories since the first four pastors of the church either headed the school or served on its faculty.<sup>66</sup> The First Baptist Church showed slow but steady increases to its congregation in the years prior to the Civil War. The congregants acquired a lot south of the square in 1846 and moved into their newly constructed brick church building in 1849.<sup>67</sup> The Missionary Baptists enjoyed continuous operation of their building until the U.S. Army confiscated it during the Civil War.

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<sup>64</sup> Pittard, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. See also "Minutes of First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1843-1976." Microfilm, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, publication no. 6025.

<sup>66</sup> Pittard, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. See also Rutherford County Deed Book 2, 495. Rutherford County Register of Deeds Office.

During the Antebellum Era, mainline white denominations built substantial church buildings in Murfreesboro, thereby establishing distinct religious spaces on the evolving townscape. While these congregations offered segregated spaces to accommodate African American “members,” an important question remains as to how African Americans, both enslaved and free, wielded their agency to define religion on their own terms while seeking spaces of their own.

### SEEKING A RELIGION OF THEIR OWN

Like their white counterparts, the appeal of Christianity to African Americans was that of individualism. As historian Jon Butler surmises in *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, “Here was a god of compassion, a god of deliverance, and ultimately, a god of freedom,” thereby offering enslaved African Americans a degree of hope from oppression, whether in this life or the next.<sup>68</sup> Donald Mathews in *Religion in the Old South* makes the following summation tying back to the religious egalitarian aspect of the early camp meetings:

As with whites, the conversion experience had egalitarian implications for [African Americans] because it was the portal of a new life offered freely to all people. The testimony of all persons had to be listened to; the religious perception of all persons had to be examined; the inner lives of all persons had to be valued. Members did not have to know theology, or the Bible, or the precious mysteries of reading and writing in order to be acceptable.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 248.

<sup>69</sup> Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 67.

In addition to the Christian instruction provided by whites upon the enslaved, several historians shed light on the spiritual conversion among the enslaved themselves as they sought to define Christianity on their own terms and in self-determined spaces.<sup>70</sup> Albert Raboteau reveals, “From the abundant testimony of fugitive and freed slaves it is clear that the slave community had an extensive religious life of its own, hidden from the eyes of the master.”<sup>71</sup> He continues, “In the secrecy of the quarters or the seclusion of the brush arbors (‘hush harbors’) the slaves made Christianity truly their own.”<sup>72</sup> The enslaved would “steal away” at night to the woods where they found some physical freedom to express their religiosity, often consisting of dancing and singing religious genres and listening to the sermons of their un-ordained slave preachers.

No matter in which ways slaves received religious instruction, it was by their individual authority to seek divine hope in a hopeless environment. Mathews expresses the connection between Christianity and the enslaved when he deduces, “What was needed, therefore, was a religion which could provide a sense of ultimate justice, establish a claim upon the oppressor for recognition of the slaves’ dignity as human beings, enhance their self-esteem, order their daily lives in an ultimately meaningful way, and create a special identification with the Supreme Being and His Mediator.”<sup>73</sup> E. Franklin Frazier in *The Negro Church in America* advances this summation further by

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<sup>70</sup> In addition to Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, see also Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>71</sup> Raboteau, 212.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Mathews, 213.

adding that the enslaved were particularly drawn to the Baptist and Methodist denominations:

We are on sounder ground when we note first that the Baptist and Methodist preachers, who lacked the education of the ministers of the Anglican church, appealed to the poor and the ignorant and the outcast. In the crowds that attended the revivals and camp meetings there were numbers of [African Americans] who found in the fiery message of salvation a hope and a prospect of escape from their earthly woes.<sup>74</sup>

A quick survey of the Tennessee slave narratives compiled during the 1930s by the Federal Works Progress Administration reveals religious revelations on a local level that concur with broader trends. Ann Matthews, who was born and raised on the Stones River near Murfreesboro, stated, “Durin’ slavery de white folks didn’t want de [slaves] ter sing en pray, but dey would turn a pot down en meet at de pot in de nite en sing en pray en de white folks wouldn’t ‘yer dem.”<sup>75</sup> An interview with Wesley Maney, who was owned by the Maney family at Oaklands Plantation just outside of Murfreesboro, gives a more elaborate expose’ of slave religion and religious instruction for the slaves:

That’s the way we rode to church too, when we did ride to church. We had an old ox cart and oxen, and we would pile up in it and drive the oxen. But we wasn’t allowed to go to church or anywhere else without a pass. They’d have prayer meetings at times at home, but they had to get permission, and if they didn’t I’ve known them to have to turn down a pot to keep the sound in. No’m, I have never known them to get caught while the pot was turned down at my home . . . The white ministers would baptize them when they ‘fessed religion;’ the colored ministers wasn’t allowed to do so. They didn’t know enough to carry out the

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<sup>74</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1964), 15.

<sup>75</sup> The WPA Slave Narratives have been published in numerous formats since the 1930s. The excerpts in this paper were taken from the following edition: *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves Tennessee Narratives*, affordable & high quality paperback book ed. (Lexington, Kentucky: Filiquarian Publishing, LLC., 2019), 35.

service. The first colored minister I knowed was Jack Maney; and Cal Overall was one of the first colored ministers too. They were both Methodists . . . The first church I was ever in was Overall's church. It was an old shed, and the seats was made out of rails.<sup>76</sup>

It is apparent from the testimony of the enslaved that African Americans often sought religion on their own terms either in spaces afforded by whites, or in spaces of their own choosing.

### **BI-RACIAL FELLOWSHIP IN ANTEBELLUM SOUTHERN CHURCHES**

Published in 1977, Donald Mathews wrote *Religion in the Old South* as “an invitation to further discussion of the character, function, and significance of religion in shaping and defining the South as a distinct part of a new American nation.”<sup>77</sup> Mathews argues that Evangelical Protestantism, specifically in the “Old South,” offered the lower and middle classes an identity and solidarity within the church, which was awarded with personal self-esteem and liberties, at least in the religious realms of society. At the time of the book's publication, Mathews stressed that limited prior historiography dealt with the importance of both Southern evangelical religion as a whole and more importantly, the bi-racial facets within this history. The development and expansion of Black Christianity forced the transformation of white Southern evangelicalism within the larger context of enslavement's role in altering American social, economic, and political spheres during the

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<sup>76</sup> George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Vol. 18, Unwritten History of Slavery (Fisk University), (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), 53. It should be noted that the original interview in book form was not attributed to a specific interviewee, but recent inquiry by the author of this dissertation with Fisk University has confirmed the interviewee to be Wesley Maney.

<sup>77</sup> Mathews, xiv.

antebellum years. He summarizes his argument by stating that his book “. . . attempts to make sense of the undeniable participation of blacks and whites in common religious exercises, a fact which made southerners ‘more religious’ than nonsoutherners and made southern religion different from that of the rest of the nation.”<sup>78</sup>

In his book of essays, editor John Boles solicited works speaking directly to the advent of bi-racial fellowship in antebellum southern churches because, as he states, “I have been more interested in probing black participation in so-called white churches – actually biracial in membership – and the white ‘mission to the slaves’ than in other forms of black religion.”<sup>79</sup> Giving recognition to previous historiography looking at the “invisible institution” of enslaved religion by Raboteau, Genovese, Levine, Blassingame and others, Boles’ research interest lay in the agency yielded to and gained by African Americans, mostly the enslaved, who interacted with whites in churches throughout the South. Acknowledging the separate spaces where antebellum African Americans held autonomous religious services – “brush harbors,” independent Black churches, racially segregated services – Boles argues that “the normative worship experience of blacks in the antebellum South was in a biracial church.”<sup>80</sup>

African Americans found some sense of biblical “equality” in these confined bi-racial settings. Boles surmises one potential ideal that “in the sight of God all were equal and were members of His spiritual family.”<sup>81</sup> Perhaps more importantly, African

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>79</sup> John B. Boles, *Masters & Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 12.

Americans gained a sense of “community” when seated together in segregated church spaces. The bi-racial church also bolstered the enslaved’s sense of self-worth and spiritual strength to resist their bondage. Lastly, Boles stresses that the bi-racial church was one of few antebellum institutions where African Americans gained leadership and organizational skills that served them well once emancipated:

Black participation in the biracial churches – as preachers, deacons, stewards, and Sunday school teachers – had given them practical leadership and administrative experience, as had their islands of autonomy within the demographically biracial churches. Theologically and experientially blacks were ready to seize the moment offered by emancipation to withdraw from their old allegiances and create autonomous denominations.<sup>82</sup>

William Montgomery notes that by 1800 “there were twelve to fifteen thousand black Methodists and perhaps nearly twenty thousand Baptists in the South.”<sup>83</sup> But why would African Americans be drawn so strongly to the Baptist appeal more so than the other frontier denominations in the South? The Baptists were one of the largest religious denominations to settle on the Tennessee frontier, but more important to the equation was their strong anti-slavery stance in the years following the American Revolution. However, as the state entered a new century and economic pursuits competed against religious ideals, an earlier historian C. Perry Patterson summarized that “the Baptists became slaveholders in large numbers, and adopted the policy that it was the work of the church to mitigate slavery into a humane institution.”<sup>84</sup> Despite the nature of enslavement within the Baptist denomination, Patterson states, “Among the attractive features of the Baptist

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>83</sup> Montgomery, 19.

<sup>84</sup> C. Perry Patterson, *The Negro in Tennessee, 1790-1865: A Study in Southern Politics* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1922, published by Hard Press Publishing, no dates), 126.

faith to [African Americans] were immersion, the congregational form of government, which gave them participation in church meetings, the liberality of the Baptists in permitting them to preach, and the Baptist method of communion, which did not discriminate against them.”<sup>85</sup>

Writing about sixty years after Patterson, Mechal Sobel’s fourth chapter further explores why African Americans were so drawn to the Baptist faith while giving credence to Black agency in the process:

In the Baptist faith the blacks found a Sacred Cosmos with which they could integrate their African values. What emerged was a new whole, a new integrity, a new coherence that was both African and Baptist. Blacks accomplished an almost impossible task, one that was not much appreciated then and has not been widely understood since. Blacks actually created a new world view that, despite their status as slaves, established order, values, and the possibility of personal development, including effectiveness, potency, achievement, and even fulfillment.<sup>86</sup>

More so than Methodism, the Baptist’s less stringent structuring and more open acceptance of Black lay preachers, combined with the early cultural melding during the frontier revivals, caused Black Americans to be swept into the “born again” dogma of Baptist theology.

In an article titled “Biracial Fellowship in Antebellum Baptist Churches,” Larry James states that primary sources, including “individual church records, associational minutes, ministerial diaries, and tombstone inscriptions,” reveal the true experience of

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<sup>85</sup> Patterson, 126-127.

<sup>86</sup> Sobel, 101.

biracial antebellum congregations.<sup>87</sup> Through his survey of church and association minutes from Mississippi and Louisiana, James argues that these statistical resources are “a virtually untapped source for antebellum social history.”<sup>88</sup> James summarizes his findings and interpretations by stating:

A degree of closeness and an experience of real fellowship existed between black and white Baptists in biracial churches that, though recognized in the past, has not been adequately explored or analyzed. In a society of absolute inequality, local Baptist churches often provided for slaves and masters, blacks and whites, temporary interludes of symbolic equality, which found expression in various aspects of local congregation life . . . Church records positively establish that the memberships of a majority of Baptist congregations of the period consisted of black and white believers functioning together as they shared at least a degree of genuine fellowship based on a common faith.<sup>89</sup>

What is not accounted for here is the Black agency and Black consciousness as felt by Black congregants in dominant white churches. Yet, James’ statistical analysis and primary source findings reflect the nature of these bi-racial Baptist churches and provide comparables to similar studies.

## **BI-RACIAL FELLOWSHIP IN MURFREESBORO’S EARLY CHURCHES**

Of the twenty-five founding members of the United Primitive Baptist Church in Murfreesboro in 1835, four were enslaved persons, and one was listed as a “freewoman

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<sup>87</sup> Larry James, “Biracial Fellowship in Antebellum Baptist Churches” in John B. Boles, ed., *Masters & Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740 -1870* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988), 37.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

of color.”<sup>90</sup> By 1843, the membership rosters accounted for the following members by profile: 22 white males, 34 white females, 10 Black males, and 23 Black females. It is interesting to note that only five of the enslaved member’s owners were also members of the church, thereby reflecting a potential religious zeal on the part of the enslaved, separate from that of their owners. This facet may also show a possible willingness of local slave owners to oversee the religious instruction of those they enslaved even if they were not members of the same church. The church continued mentioning African Americans members in their minutes in the years leading up to the Civil War. Like their white counterparts, these Black members were “received” into membership either by letter from another church or by “experience” before being immersed in the Stones River or Lytle Creek on the outskirts of town. Some members, both Black and white, were sometimes dismissed by letter, as well, for various reasons.

In contrast to the Primitive Baptist Church, no Black members appear in the First Baptist Church (Missionary) minutes until three years after its formation. The following memberships were recorded at the meeting of the church on October 12, 1846:

Sister Milly the property of Mr. James B. Reed presented the church a letter of dismission from the church at Enon and was unanimously received. Louisa property of John Molloy recited to the church the work of grace in her heart and was unanimously received and was baptized by the Pastor.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> “Minutes of the United Baptist Primitive Church in Murfreesboro, Tennessee,” Microfilm, Rutherford County Archives.

<sup>91</sup> “Minutes of First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1843-1976.”

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Names of Black male members	Names of female members
Scipio — Benjamin Clayton	Patsy Saunders <sup>dismissed</sup> a free woman
Tom David Dickerson Sr	Roxana Benjamin Clayton
Samuel N D Bowen	Phillis Enoch Dickerson
James S Hartwell	Sally <sup>dismissed</sup> Wm Lillard
Henry R B Letton	Armissa Martha Henderson
Lucius Charles Anderson	Lucy Lemuel Baird
Jes Grant	Patsy Saunders <sup>dismissed</sup> 1836
Simon J Jones	Amara D Dickinson
Williamson A Henderson	Lucy B Dickinson
Gilbert E Williams	Grace David Wendel
William Craig Jr	Isiah Janna Helough
	Adelaide W M F Lytle <sup>colour</sup>
	Patsy Saunders, a woman of <sup>colour</sup>
	Rachel David Dickerson
	Hannah N D Bowen
	Franklyte
	Franky J F Henderson
	Jamary Hartwell
	Mary A Hartwell
	Ester J F Henderson
	India Mrs C Hallorton
	Oliver R B Letton
	Ann Sarah Fenison Dis L
	Lucisia E Williams
	Lettice Whiddens
	Lidda W Deane
	Rancy E Williams

Figure 7. Page from the minutes of the United Primitive Baptist Church in Murfreesboro showing African American members, both enslaved and free. Source: "Minutes of the United Baptist Primitive Church in Murfreesboro, Tennessee," Microfilm, Rutherford County Archives.

The next mention of receiving a new Black member at the First Baptist Church would not appear in the minutes until April 1848 when "a colored Brother by the name of Boling"

was received into the congregation.<sup>92</sup> Pittard mentions that at a Concord Association meeting in 1849, the First Baptist Church of Murfreesboro reported one hundred white members and four African American members.<sup>93</sup> Yet, Wardin reports that by 1852, twenty-three percent of the Concord Association church members were Black.<sup>94</sup> One of the last mentions of enslaved persons in the minutes of First Baptist Church occurred on December 16, 1859, when it was recorded, “On application letters of dismissal were granted to Bro. W. R. Galley, Bro. W. S. Perry, Sister Nancy A. Perry and two servants Mary and Lucinda.”<sup>95</sup> Although African Americans appear on the roles of both the Primitive and Missionary Baptist churches in Murfreesboro, the Missionary Baptist’s appeal to preach to the Black “congregates” outside of white-dominated services would play out in the decade preceding the Civil War and possibly unbeknown to the white church leadership at the time, offer African Americans new avenues to achieve Black autonomy.

In contrast to Murfreesboro’s Baptist denominations, an article by historian Jerry Brookshire elaborates on the treatment of Black members in the “white” Methodist Church. Brookshire details that the “first General Conference [of the Tennessee MEC, South] strongly recommended that there not be separate Black congregations (called African missions or colored missions) within districts; rather, Blacks and whites should belong to the same congregations and worship together even though there would be

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Pittard, 26.

<sup>94</sup> Wardin, 72.

<sup>95</sup> “Minutes of First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1843-1976.”

segregation in seating.”<sup>96</sup> Brookshire elaborates that in Murfreesboro, white and Black congregates sometimes met at the same service since both early church buildings (the first constructed in 1823 and its replacement constructed in 1843) contained upper galleries for the seating of the enslaved. However, there were also instances when the enslaved met at different times and often in the basement of the white church, but always attended to by a white preacher. Brookshire’s general survey of Tennessee Annual Conference reports reveals that white and Black congregants were typically included on the same church rolls, and therefore considered part of the same (white) congregation. However, of interest is the fact that in a few specific years, namely 1845, 1854, and 1858-1860, the Black members were not included on the rolls of the white church and instead were listed on the rolls of either the “Stone’s River African Mission” or the “Rutherford Colored Mission,” which seems to contradict the original wishes of the Tennessee Conference.<sup>97</sup>

## **WHO SHALL PREACH TO THE BLACK CONGREGATES?**

In their missionary style, the Missionary Baptists looked to spread the gospel to Black “congregants” inside and outside their churches. Wardin notes that “as early as 1835, the [*Baptist/Tennessee Baptist*] periodical carried a letter from a correspondent who suggested that ministers should engage in Sunday afternoon preaching to blacks and that

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<sup>96</sup> Jerry H. Brookshire, “Methodist and Murfreesboro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Rutherford County Historical Society* 10 (Winter 1978): 65.

<sup>97</sup> Brookshire details that the “Rutherford Colored Mission” only lasted one year, 1854, under the charge of a white preacher, Elisha Carr. See Brookshire, 66-67.

churches should provide adequate seating for them in their houses of worship.”<sup>98</sup> Wardin further states that after arriving in Nashville in 1835, Rev. Howell “was probably the first minister in the state to provide special and separate instruction for his black constituents.”<sup>99</sup> By the 1840s, the missions of several Baptist churches in the state began Sunday schools for African Americans in addition to the one maintained by Howell at the First Baptist Church in Nashville. In 1843, the Nashville church “licensed” its first enslaved preacher, Jim Dickinson. By 1846, the Nashville church allowed its Black congregants to hold their own meetings, although still subjugated to white oversight.<sup>100</sup>

While the ordination of Black preachers by white Baptist churches was occurring during the antebellum years, Black Baptist preachers were still limited in number. The advent of autonomous Black churches was even more rare, especially in Tennessee. Wardin details the story of Edmund Kelly, an enslaved preacher whom Rev. Howell ordained at the First Baptist Church in Nashville on October 3, 1843. Less than three weeks later, Kelly and five other enslaved persons constituted the Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church in Columbia, recognized as the first Black Baptist Church in Tennessee.<sup>101</sup> Pittard notes that during a meeting of the Concord Association in Davidson County in 1845, Rev. Eaton, who was pastoring in Murfreesboro, presented a resolution to purchase Kelly, possibly to serve as a Black Baptist itinerate preacher among the Concord Association churches.<sup>102</sup> Both Wardin and Pittard claim the Association purchased Kelly in 1847, and

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<sup>98</sup> Wardin, 78.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>101</sup> Wardin, 79.

<sup>102</sup> Pittard, 18.

afterwards he moved north. However, contemporary findings suggest that Kelly refused to be purchased by the Baptists. Instead, he insisted on purchasing his own freedom and that of his enslaved wife and children, who belonged to a different owner. According to research presented by Patrick O’Conner, “Edmund’s owner, Nancy White, acquired a pass for Edmund that gave him a license to preach anywhere in the country to avoid being sold when her estate became insolvent in 1846.”<sup>103</sup> According to this research, Kelly moved north to New York and then Boston, serving in pastoral duties, and by 1851, had earned enough money to purchase his freedom and that of his family.<sup>104</sup>

Wardin states that in 1849, the Baptist General Association of Tennessee and Alabama issued a report “encouraging churches to adopt some plan to enable their pastors to provide instruction to their black members.”<sup>105</sup> The minutes from the First Baptist Church in Murfreesboro recorded the following notation on June 8, 1850: “After some edifying [illegible] consultation with regard to two important objects the non-attendance at this temple of those who profess to love the Lord Jesus Christ supremely and the furnishing of the Colored population with preaching and religious instruction.”<sup>106</sup> In June 1851, the minutes of the First Baptist Church in Murfreesboro recorded, “On motion brethren Perry, Fly, Hale, Westbrook were appointed a committee to provide for the religious instruction of the colored population in our midst.”<sup>107</sup> An article from 2007

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<sup>103</sup> Patrick O’Conner, “Emond Kelly” *The Fight for Black Mobility: Traveling to Mid-Century Conventions* (University of Delaware, 2013). Accessed April 15, 2022. <https://coloredconventions.org/black-mobility/delegates/edmund-kelly/>

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Wardin, 77.

<sup>106</sup> “Minutes of First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1843-1976.”

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

posted in the *Daily News Journal* states, “The earliest record of First Baptist Church [African American, Murfreesboro] dates back to 1853 when Rev. Nelson ‘Pap’ or ‘Pappy’ Nelson’ Merry visited monthly in Murfreesboro at which time he held prayer services in the homes of the Black Baptists and delivered a sermon to these members in the afternoon at the white church.”<sup>108</sup> Pittard offers the following narration about the pastoral duties that Merry carried out in Murfreesboro:

It was during the first years of [William] Shelton’s ministry that Nelson G. Merry was employed part-time to preach to the colored members of the congregation. Merry, a [Black] sexton in the Nashville church, had been trained by R. B. C. Howell for the ministry and had been ordained in 1853 under Howell’s direction. The Reverend Merry began his pastoral duties in the African Mission Church [in Nashville]. His work in Murfreesboro called for monthly Sabbath visits at which time he held prayer services to these members in the afternoon at the church.<sup>109</sup>

The First Baptist Church (white) minutes record no mention of Nelson Merry or any other provisions to provide preaching to Black congregants between June 1851 and March 1856. Therefore, Pittard must have derived his narrative from the minutes of other churches or possibly the minutes of the leading Baptist associations.

The March 1856 minutes of the First Baptist Church confirm the prior preaching of Merry in Murfreesboro when they recorded: “Bro J. W. King was appointed to see bro Nelson Merry on the subject of continuing him as preacher to the colored people of this place and report at the next meeting of this church.”<sup>110</sup> On May 31, 1856, the following was recorded in the minutes:

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<sup>108</sup> *Daily News Journal* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee), October 6, 2007. Accessed February 6, 2022. Newspapers.com.

<sup>109</sup> Pittard, 33-34.

<sup>110</sup> “Minutes of First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1843-1976.”

Bro. King from the committee to report some plan for the reception of and the oversight of the colored members of this church reported the following rule: When any colored member or members are to be received into the church, it shall be the duty of the pastor to call a meeting of the church to be present at the reception of the same and hear their experience or letters of dismissal from other churches.<sup>111</sup>

In November 1856, a white mob harassed Merry in Murfreesboro and ran him out of the town on the accusation that Merry was inciting slaves to revolt. This incident correlated with the fear of a larger regional slave uprising as detailed in an article by Charles B. Dew titled "Black Ironworkers and the Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856."<sup>112</sup> Without any definitive evidence, news of slave uprisings spread from Texas through Kentucky in the months preceding the presidential election. Dew summarizes the elements that lead to white hysteria in the iron-production counties to the north and west of Rutherford County:

Between 1852 and 1856 no less than twelve new blast furnaces were constructed, five older furnaces were rebuilt and returned to production, and two new forges were erected along the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers; these installations probably raised the number of slave ironworkers in the area to approximately 3,000 men. Although whites outnumbered blacks in each of the counties that made up the iron district, the substantial increase in the number of furnaces and forges in the four years prior to the panic, the introduction of even greater numbers of industrial slaves, and the relative isolation of many of the ironworks could easily lead to heightened fears of slave uprisings in a year of political turmoil and uncertainty and widespread and well-publicized insurrection rumors.<sup>113</sup>

Southern-white hysteria towards slave revolts quickly subsided after the Democratic victory in the November 1856 election. On December 6, "A letter was read

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Charles B. Dew, "Black Ironworkers and the Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856," *The Journal of Southern History* 41 no.3 (August 1975): 321-338.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 325.

from bro. S. M. Scott clerk of the 1<sup>st</sup> Church at Nashville indicating the Christian character of bro Nelson Merry. A committee was appointed to confer with the 1<sup>st</sup> Church at Nashville in relation to the Christian character of bro Nelson Merry and report at the next meeting of this church.”<sup>114</sup> The February 1857 minutes of the First Baptist Church in Murfreesboro contain a two-page accounting of Merry’s time in the town up to that point.

In part, it reads:

His success and usefulness as a minister of the Gospel soon became so apparent that he was persuaded to extend his labors into adjoining neighborhoods and at the request of the Church at Murfreesboro, he has for several years past made monthly visits to this place and preach to the colored portion of this congregation. . . .Your committee are entirely satisfied that bro Nelson Merry was in no way cognizant of or a party to any plot of insurrection and it is their opinion that the unprejudiced and law-abiding portion of the community are now convinced that the suspicion of an intended insurrection among the slaves was without a just foundation.<sup>115</sup>

On February 28, 1857, the minutes noted, “On motion brethren [Asa] Copland and [J. G.] Greer were appointed to preach alternately to the colored people with a pay of \$25.00 each for the year and bro Eaton was appointed to secure the amount.”<sup>116</sup> This arrangement lasted into 1859, but not in the remaining years before the war. Another note of interest is that on June 5, 1858, “A request was made to allow brother Houston, a colored member of this church, to exercise in public as an exhorter. On motion, the Pastor together with brethren Eaton and Morton then appointed a committee to investigate the subject and report at the next meeting.”<sup>117</sup> The committee looking into the ability of

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<sup>114</sup> “Minutes of First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1843-1976.”

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

Houston to preach delayed their report through October of the same year and then the matter never resurfaces in the church minutes. It is assumed that the arrangement made with Copeland and Greer to provide preaching to the Black members of the church satisfied the congregation.

While the Baptists generally recorded their missionary work to their Black congregants in church and association minutes, far less is known about similar work in the other mainline Murfreesboro congregations. In his book, *The Story of Murfreesboro*, C. C. Henderson states that for the Methodists, “[Blacks] worshiped in the church every Sunday afternoon at 3 o’clock, with Thomas Hartwell as their preacher.”<sup>118</sup> When the Murfreesboro Methodists constructed a new church in 1843 on the square, this building contained a basement, which according to Henderson, was used by their Black congregants “for general purposes and Sunday school purposes.”<sup>119</sup>

As for the Presbyterian and Christian Church denominations in Murfreesboro, they, too, recorded very little about the white congregants’ commitment to their Black members. While one of the upper galleries of the pre-war First Presbyterian Church constructed in Murfreesboro was reportedly used for the seating of the enslaved, no African Americans are specifically mentioned in their church membership records.<sup>120</sup> In the Christian Church denomination, historian Herman Norton similarly states in his book, *Tennessee Christians*, that African Americans in general “were seated in a segregated

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<sup>118</sup> C. C. Henderson, *The Story of Murfreesboro* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: The News-Banner Publishing Company, 1929), 131.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Susan Daniel, Libby McKay, and Ernest Hooper, *The First Two Hundred Years: A History of First Presbyterian Church Murfreesboro, Tennessee*, (Self-published, 2012), 11.

section of the church building, however; generally, in the rear but sometimes in a gallery, built for their special use, or in a wing of the building.”<sup>121</sup> Norton concludes that while Black members had no voting rights in church affairs, they were listed in the membership roles in a separate “colored” section after the white members.<sup>122</sup>

### **AUTONOMOUS BLACK CHURCHES IN PROXIMITY TO RUTHERFORD COUNTY**

While no known autonomous Black church buildings were constructed in Rutherford County before the Civil War, there are two such institutions in Nashville with direct ties to the formation of Black congregations in Rutherford County. The First Baptist Church, Colored, started in 1847 when 500 Black members (under the leadership of Nelson Merry) left their white church. A white pastor then ordained Reverend Merry in 1849 as the first Black preacher to lead the new church.<sup>123</sup> In the mid-1850s, Merry made frequent visits to the First Baptist Church in Murfreesboro and preached to African American audiences, both inside the church and in the surrounding area.

According to research by historian Linda Wynn, Nelson Merry was born into slavery in Kentucky in 1824 before being moved to Tennessee. “In 1840, [Merry’s] widowed mistress willed the sixteen-year old slave to the First Baptist Church” in Nashville where “he was employed by the church, baptized, and finally freed on

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<sup>121</sup> Norton, *Tennessee Christians*, 128.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 204.

November 1, 1845.”<sup>124</sup> *The Black Past* website adds to this history by explaining the relationship between the white Baptist church and their Black congregants and what would eventually become First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill:

First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill lays claim to the designation as the oldest continuously operating African American church in Tennessee because it traces its origin back to First Baptist Colored Mission, which first met to hold prayer services in 1835. Up to that point, Nashville’s black Baptists, both enslaved and free, worshipped at First Baptist Church, which was founded in 1824 as the first Baptist Church in the city. In fact ten years after its founding, African Americans comprised half the congregation.<sup>125</sup>

By 1835, Nashville’s Black Baptist congregation received permission from the white church to hold separate prayer services, and by 1847, they received permission to rent a building of their own.<sup>126</sup> Historian Bruce T. Gourley states that “the First Colored Baptist Church of Nashville consisted of slave members of the white-led First Baptist Church. From that point until the Civil War, the church functioned under the legally-required supervision of white Baptist leaders.”<sup>127</sup> Merry grew the congregation to be one of the largest churches in the state with over 2,000 members, and helped them complete independence from the white surrogate church in 1866.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Bobby L. Lovette and Linda T. Wynn, eds., *Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee* (Nashville: Annual Local Conference on Afro-American Culture and History, 1996), 92.

<sup>125</sup> Felicia Mack, “First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, Nashville, Tennessee (1835-),” *Black Past*. Accessed February 6, 2022. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/first-baptist-church-capitol-hill-nashville-tennessee-1835/>.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Bruce Gourley, “Baptists and the American Civil War: September 17, 1865,” *Baptists and the American Civil War: In Their Own Words*. Accessed February 6, 2022. [civilwarbaptists.com/thisdayinhistory/1865-september17/](http://civilwarbaptists.com/thisdayinhistory/1865-september17/)

<sup>128</sup> Lovette and Wynn, 92.

The second such church with direct ties to Rutherford County was the African American Christian Church, which was organized in 1859 under the leadership of a former slave, Peter Lowery. This autonomous Black congregation began as a Sunday school program of the white Nashville Christian Church before splitting off to form the Grapevine Church. According to Norton, this was the first antebellum Black Christian Church congregation in the South.<sup>129</sup> Peter Lowery became one of the most outspoken African American church leaders in the South. He came to Rutherford County after the war to lead the Tennessee Manual Labor University for Black students during Reconstruction, which is further discussed in Chapter Two.

## CONCLUSION

The Great Revival forever altered and shaped the Black religious experience in America. As Butler concludes, “From the eve of the American Revolution to the Civil War, Afro-Americans in enormous numbers formally adopted and re-adopted Christianity as their principal collective expression of supernatural ideals.”<sup>130</sup> Therefore, the influence of the Great Revivals in the newly founded Rutherford County would mimic the larger historical context of the region and have lasting impacts as religious zeal spread, directly impacting the trajectory of the pre-war slave society and, therefore, post-war Black institution building.

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<sup>129</sup> Norton, *Tennessee Christians*, 129.

<sup>130</sup> Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 248.

Denominational trenches were firmly established throughout the South by the waning years of the Antebellum period. The predominate religious affiliations in pre-war Murfreesboro consisted of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MEC, South); the Southern Baptists, both Missionary and Primitive; the Presbyterians and Cumberland Presbyterians; and the Christian Church. However, even before the Civil War unfolded, African Americans in Murfreesboro and Rutherford County were expressing their desire for spaces they could control.

## CHAPTER TWO – BUILDING A RELIGION OF THEIR OWN

During and after the turbulent years of the Civil War, Murfreesboro was no different than other county seats throughout the South in terms of freedmen and women seeking refuge while searching for the physical and social boundaries that would define their new lives. Black leaders, many of whom were preachers, rose to lead African Americans into a life of social, political, and religious reconstruction. They hoped to spread Christian ideals to a gathering of people who yearned for civil rights and holy uplifting. Several battles would begin on these frontlines of the spiritual landscape as Black congregations fought for both physical space in a white-dominated environment and a Black theology that would be either truly unique or at least accommodating for this newly liberated Black audience. While many African American leaders sought to build church buildings hoping that sacred spaces would also offer secular safety, they often had to rely on white benevolence to reach their goals. Deeper within the religious realm was the battle across denominational lines. Would the formerly enslaved remain quasi-associated with the churches of their former masters, or would they seek a truly freeing theology of Black liberation within solely Black denominations? And from the onset, Northern influences would find a foothold within these Southern confrontations as white (and some African American)

missionaries from Union states flooded the South to shower the formerly enslaved with benevolence but also their often racially biased Christian teachings.<sup>131</sup>

Despite the obstacles and influences, the end of the Civil War brought the reality that the previously “invisible” institution of Black religion could now develop into very visible centers for new Black communities throughout the South. In a chapter titled “Sacred Spaces of Faith, Community, and Resistance,” historian Carroll Van West states, “As freedpeople, [African Americans] consciously redesigned the space of the antebellum South to carve out their own distinct community space within the larger built environment, and from these roots in the built environment they created . . . safe havens from the very real threat of violence and retribution in the Jim Crow South.”<sup>132</sup> Three factors contributed to where former slaves would build their churches: relative safety, availability of land, and offerings of benevolence to assist in the purchasing of both land and materials. Therefore, tracing the founding of the earliest Black postwar churches adds clarity to the history and historiography of Black institution building by defining how, where, and on whose terms African Americans showed agency and autonomy in defining their community spaces.

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<sup>131</sup> For studies centered on the founding of the earliest post-Civil War African American churches see: Edward J. Blum and W. Scott Poole, eds., *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2005); Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*; Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*; Raboteau, *Cannan Land*; Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*.

<sup>132</sup> Carroll Van West, “Sacred Spaces of Faith, Community, and Resistance: Rural African American Churches in Jim Crow Tennessee,” in *“We Shall Independent Be” African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, ed. Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 439.

## **ORGANIZING BLACK RELIGION DURING THE WAR - THE REVEREND BRAXTON JAMES**

One of the most influential Civil War-era Black preachers in Murfreesboro was Reverend Braxton James. Born enslaved, James gained notice during and after the war as he transitioned to freedom. He officially became recognized first in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and later the Northern Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC). James navigated racial and political boundaries as he positioned himself as a leader in the quest for equal rights. Studying the story of this lesser-known, but important Black leader reveals much insight into Black religious history in Murfreesboro as James navigated the racial constraints of Reconstruction.

The Allen James family, who resided on a plantation in the Sulphur Springs district of Rutherford County, several miles northwest of Murfreesboro, most likely owned Braxton James. Allen James passed away in March 1851, leaving his vast estate to his widow, Ann James.<sup>133</sup> By the time of the Civil War, Ann James resided from time to time in town and was associated with the Murfreesboro MEC, South. Braxton James first appears in the primary sources when Kate Carney mentions him officiating a “slave wedding” in 1862. Carney started keeping a diary in 1859 when she was seventeen years old. Lisa Tolbert stated that the diary is “remarkable not for its self-reflection or probing

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<sup>133</sup> For information pertaining to the probate of the estate of Allen James, see Donald Detwiler and Susan G. Daniel, eds. *Rutherford County, Tennessee, Deaths and Estate Settlements Vol. II*, (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Rutherford County Historical Society, 2009). Although it does not specifically make reference to individual enslaved persons by name, see also the will of Allen James in Daily Court Minute Book AA, pgs. 330-331, Rutherford County Archives.

analysis of small-town life but for its straightforward description of what she did almost every day.”<sup>134</sup> On May 10, 1862, Carney wrote:

Mrs. Henderson & Mrs. Levi Reeves called this afternoon also, but being very busy preparing the table for Nicie’s wedding supper, (she is an old family servant that is to be married) did not see any of them. We have been quite busy all day. The table was set in our dining room, and quite a pretty one too it was. She was married in the front hall by Uncle Brack, their colored preacher. Everything passed off very nicely.<sup>135</sup>

In the days following the wedding ceremony at the Carney house, Murfreesboro whites cringed at the beginning of military occupation by the U.S. Army. No one recorded the slave reaction. The federal occupation was short-lived. On July 13, 1862, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest raided the town with a troop of roughly 3,000 cavalymen who killed, captured, and routed U.S. soldiers, ushering in 6 months of Confederate control. In 1934, local author Will Allen Dromgoole published an account about Braxton James that supposedly transpired during Forrest’s raid:

I have heard my father many times tell of one who practically helped save the City of Murfreesboro to Forrest when he took the town. His name was Braxton James and he was coachman to a Mrs. James, whose full name has slipped my memory. The Courthouse was full of Yankee soldiers, who refused to surrender, and every man sent to break open the door was shot down. Finally the ax was broken and Uncle Brax ran to the Methodist Church to get his own ax, being the church sexton. With this the door was opened, but the soldiers had, I believe, been smoked out, as the building was fired.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Tolbert, 124.

<sup>135</sup> Kate S. Carney, *Diary*, April 15, 1861-July 31, 1862. Electronic edition, Manuscripts Department, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1999.

<sup>136</sup> *Nashville Banner*, August 5, 1934, accessed June 15, 2020. Newspapers.com.

Although the facts cannot be verified, this story connects Braxton James with Murfreesboro's (white) MEC, South, congregation during the war.

From December 31, 1862, through January 2, 1863, the U.S. and C.S.A. armies fought just north of the town in the Battle of Stones River, after which the Confederates retreated from the battlefield and the U.S. Army claimed victory and occupied most of the county. To further maintain their resolve to protect two essential supply arteries, the main turnpike leading to Nashville and the railroad leading from Louisville, Kentucky, through the Deep South, the U.S. Army constructed a large earthen fortification, which they named Fortress Rosecrans in honor of their commanding officer General William Rosecrans. The U.S. Army constructed this 200-acre fort adjacent to the town with cannons sited on the courthouse and square, in addition to main roads and the railroad (Figure 8). In addition to the fort, federal officers, soldiers, and officials moved into town and occupied houses, churches, and other buildings as hospitals, housing, storage, and other military uses. Federal soldiers encamped on the courthouse lawn for the remainder of the war as a direct show of force.

One of the most revealing primary sources shedding light on the activities in and around Murfreesboro in the 1800s is the two-volume memoir written by John C. Spence in which the author details the transactions of the town, year by year, from 1799 through 1870 (although Spence himself was not born until 1809 and Murfreesboro was not founded until 1811). Spence kept an additional diary during the Civil War and frequently wrote about activities of U.S. military personnel and their associates, in addition to events involving African Americans in their quest for liberation.



Spence first mentions Braxton James on May 20, 1863, when Spence is disturbed that “a [Black] preacher who is familiar to us all by the name of Brack” was associating with a “Yankee” Methodist preacher by the name of H. A. Patterson.<sup>137</sup> Spence’s reference was in reaction to a phenomenon happening throughout the entire occupied South as Northern agents, including missionaries and preachers, moved into the South following the Union Army. In his book, *Reconstruction*, Eric Foner describes this band of roaming “military officers, Treasury agents, Northern investors, and a squad of young teachers and missionaries” who had their “own ideas about how the transition to freedom should take place and how to judge its success or failure.”<sup>138</sup> In his book, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, William Montgomery concurs that although the African American Methodist denominations (AME and AME Zion) sent Black missionaries throughout the South, their “chief rivals in recruiting southern blacks to Methodism were the representatives of the northern-based Methodist Episcopal Church.”<sup>139</sup> Spence’s memoir reveals that in 1865 local white Methodists petitioned the U.S. military authorities to reclaim their church, which had been used as a hospital during the war. The army granted the petition and cleared it of military use. However, when the white congregants began having services, they discovered that Rev. H. A. Patterson took charge. Patterson came from the Michigan conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. By late 1861, Patterson was appointed chaplain of the 11<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry

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<sup>137</sup> John C. Spence, *A Diary of the Civil War* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Rutherford County Historical Society, 1993), 92.

<sup>138</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, updated ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 52.

<sup>139</sup> William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 71.

Regiment, which fought at the Battle of Stones River.<sup>140</sup> Spence recounts, “[Patterson] and Brack, a colored preacher, usually sitting in the pulpit together, doling out hymns, edifying the few [sic] hearers present.”<sup>141</sup>

A few pages later, Spence mentions James in reference to the starting of a school for former slaves in the basement of the (white) MEC, South, church building. Again, James was in the company of Patterson as they met with a group of African Americans to announce their new enterprise. Patterson began the meeting with introductions and as Spence states, “gives the audience to understand that they are equal to the white people and as capable to receive an education as they are.”<sup>142</sup> Spence goes into specific detail about this occurrence in rather demeaning tones:

Mr. Back now rises with all the dignity of a Congo King, makes a few [sic] flourishes, sets out by giving very logical reasons for the necessity of getting an education, giving his own experience in the matter, how he had to steal the time from his masters work to get what little education that he had, urged them to accept of the opportunity, not to delay, for you may never have such a chance again. He detains the hearers in this manner for a short time, then takes his seat. Apparently satisfied with his effort on the occasion.<sup>143</sup>

Spence recounted that the next day, the school began under the direction of James and Patterson with about 130 students ranging in age from roughly eight to forty-five. With girls dressed in “white aprons with pockets” and the boys dressed in “loyal blue,” the students were provided with books and pencils.<sup>144</sup> Not only did

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<sup>140</sup> *Detroit Free Press* (Detroit, MI), November 16, 1861; *Detroit Free Press*, September 20, 1859.

<sup>141</sup> John C. Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume Two 1829-1870* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Rutherford County Historical Society, 1993), 198.

<sup>142</sup> Spence, *A Civil War Diary*, 110.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

Spence record these specific liberating events, but he also recorded parts of a speech recited by James:

“This battle of Stones River opened up a glorious day on us. It was not the Yankee, as we call them, it was God that took off our chains. We are as free as the birds that flies in the air, and then when we used to come to preaching at night, we had to sculk home, for fear of the patrols, Had to be scringing all the time for fear they would see us.”<sup>145</sup>

In his book, *Canaan Land*, Raboteau stressed the importance of education to the newly freed by stating, “The former slaves demonstrated an intense desire to learn to read and to ‘figure’ (do arithmetic) because they fervently believed that there was a direct connection between education and freedom.”<sup>146</sup> He concludes, “For people who had been prohibited from learning to read and write as slaves, reading offered tangible proof that they were really free.”<sup>147</sup> It is unclear as to whether Spence was an actual eyewitness to these proceedings and recorded James verbatim, or the transcript was fictionalized. Either way, these accounts give some insight into the transformation from slavery to freedom specific to Murfreesboro and possibly a rare glimpse into the thoughts and hopes of the Black community leaders.

Over a year passed before Spence mentioned the next proceedings of Braxton James. On July 4, 1864, African Americans celebrated their liberty with numerous parades and gatherings around Murfreesboro. Spence counted six

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>146</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

picnics by different Black religious groups with “Elder Brack heading the Methodist school.”<sup>148</sup> This particular crowd paraded from the Methodist Church around the town and terminated with a large gathering at Maney’s Spring, located on the grounds of Oaklands plantation, with much food and several speeches by appointed dignitaries. In observing this newfound freedom, Spence states “. . . the chains of slavery now taken from their shoulders, moving on free and independent citizens, enjoying the 4<sup>th</sup> of July as other people.”<sup>149</sup> It should be noted that although Spence’s *Annals* continue through 1870, this is the last entry specifically mentioning the accounts of Braxton James.

## **BLACK BAPTISTS DURING THE WAR**

On the same day as the Methodist’s July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration, Spence recorded the happenings of the “rival” Black Baptist congregation who, likewise, paraded from their acquired church building down to Murfree’s Spring for fanfare, food, and lectures. Spence states that the Black Baptists “emerged[ed] from the church,” thereby acknowledging that there was at least one Black Baptist congregation at this point and they had attained some usage of a church building. The Baptist’s honorary guests included U.S. military officers who took the stand to address their African American audience. Spence concluded that all the celebrations were “under obligation to the officers of the army, rendering assistance in getting up the

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<sup>148</sup> Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume Two*, 214.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*, 215.

displays” and that “the Yankees were very solicitous for the welfare of the [former slaves].”<sup>150</sup>

The Civil War-era minutes of the Primitive Baptist Church (white) in Murfreesboro reflect the U.S. occupation of local churches and ensuing uses by the formerly enslaved. According to their minutes, the Primitive Baptist Church continued their monthly meetings until January 1862 under the pastoral duties of Rev. Watson. The following summation was offered in the church minutes in 1869 as to the state of the church during the war:

The War coming on between the North & South. Our beloved Pastor Bro. J. M. Watson, being forced to go South, left us without a pastor. The brethren and sisters in the meantime being somewhat scattered. Our meeting house fell into the hands of the Federal Authorities and used first as a hospital and afterwards as a schoolhouse for colored people and was returned to the Church (Primitive Baptist) on June 1, 1866, in a very dilapidated condition.<sup>151</sup>

While these primary-sourced revelations speak to the organizing of war-era Black Baptist congregations, they do not clarify which congregations by name, and therefore hinder a better understanding as to when Murfreesboro’s earliest Black Baptist Churches were founded.

One key piece of historical evidence linking the founding of First Baptist Church as an autonomous Black congregation in Murfreesboro before the close of the war is found in the minutes of the First Colored Missionary Baptist Association of Tennessee, held in Nashville on April 8 and 10, 1865. According to these minutes, “Elder N. B.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 216.

<sup>151</sup> See “Records of the United Baptist Church Murfreesborough,” microfilm, Rutherford County Archives.

Frierson of Murfreesboro [was] elected Assistant Moderator.”<sup>152</sup> Elsewhere, the minutes relay that “Rev. N. B. Frierson” of Murfreesboro led some of the devotional services.<sup>153</sup> Therefore, by these accounts, Rev. Napoleon Bonaparte Frierson pastored to the newly formed First Baptist African American congregation before the closing of the war since it is documented that he was indeed the first post-war pastor of this church.<sup>154</sup>

## POST-WAR BLACK INSTITUTION BUILDING

With the ending of the Civil War, U.S. soldiers began mustering out of Murfreesboro on July 1, 1865, in a transition that lasted for several months.<sup>155</sup> However, with the dedication of a Federal cemetery at Stones River battlefield for the internment of Union dead, the 111<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Troops remained for another year under the command of Chaplain William Earnshaw. Newly freed African Americans who resided in Murfreesboro would have direct access to some federal protection and possible benevolences with the founding of a Freedmen’s Bureau office on the square. The U.S. Congress formed the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, commonly referred to as the Freedmen’s Bureau, to provide aid to all war refugees. Established within the U.S. War Department, the Freedmen’s Bureau was staffed by army personnel and

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<sup>152</sup> “State Conventions and General Associations, 1863-1929,” microfilm, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, publication no. 6332.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> See also Melvin E. Hughes, Sr., *A History of Rutherford County’s African American Community* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church, 1996), 14.

<sup>155</sup> Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume Two*, 245-246.

organized under military command. Between 1865 to 1872, the Freedmen's Bureau oversaw African American schools, negotiated labor contracts, and in some locations, they organized hospitals, orphanages, and elderly homes.<sup>156</sup> Against this backdrop of federal intervention, as Raboteau states, "Black churches experienced explosive growth as the 'invisible institution' took on visible form, Black preachers who had been ministering to their people for years under the supervision of whites rapidly formed Black congregations."<sup>157</sup>

In Murfreesboro, the next three years, from 1866 to 1869, proved pivotal to planting new African American churches. Black congregants now had the liberty to choose whose doctrine to follow and what denomination would best serve their religious and social needs. In his book *African American Religious History*, Milton Sernett reflects, "Now blacks could set up churches for themselves or decide to join up with a host of competing agencies and denominations, white and black, northern and southern, each of which claimed the freedmen as a kind of religious contraband."<sup>158</sup> Unbeknown to the freedmen in Murfreesboro, their opportunity to plant broad foundations for new Black communities would be limited to this short duration. The end of the decade

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<sup>156</sup> For contemporary readings on the Freedmen's Bureau see: Katherine R. Zebley, "Freedmen's Bureau," *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, Carroll Van West, et. al, eds. (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Society, 1998); Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Mary J. Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

<sup>157</sup> Raboteau, *Canaan Land*, 70.

<sup>158</sup> Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975), 245.

brought the Democratic takeover of the state government and the concurrent rise of the Ku Klux Klan, bringing a rise to white supremacist violence and terror. However, despite general racial threats, Blacks in Murfreesboro showed their resolve and agency through the entire era of Reconstruction as the town witnessed the dedication of several new Black churches as African American congregations grew and sometimes divided into yet other congregations.

In addition to spiritual enlightenment, African Americans built churches for secular safety in a white man's world. The famous sociologist and author, E. Franklin Frazier, wrote extensively about the condition of the Black family in American society. In his posthumously published book, *The Negro Church in America*, Frazier stressed the role of the Black church in improving the overall welfare of African Americans. Regarding the Black church during the Jim Crow Era, Frazier offered this abstract:

The [Black] church with its own forms of religious worship was a world which the white man did not invade but only regarded with an attitude of condescending amusement. The [Black] church could enjoy this freedom as long as it offered no threat to the white man's dominance in both economic and social relations.<sup>159</sup>

The physical church quickly proved more than just a haven for the Black community; it became the central power and supporting arm of the Black community. Foner, calling on a quote from W. E. B. DuBois, states, "The church was 'the first social institution fully controlled by black men in America,' and its

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<sup>159</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1963), 51.

multiple functions testified to its centrality in the black community.”<sup>160</sup> Frazier points to this centrality by equating these functions to include social, moral, economic, political, and educational dominance of the Black community by Black leaders.<sup>161</sup> Foner concludes, “In severing the ties that had bound black and white families and churches to one another under slavery, the coming together of blacks in an explosion of institution building, and the political and cultural fusion of former free blacks and former slaves, Reconstruction witnessed the birth of the modern black community.”<sup>162</sup>

Five cornerstone African American churches acquired autonomous space in Murfreesboro during Reconstruction: Key Memorial United Methodist, Allen Chapel AME, First Baptist Missionary, Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist, and Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist.<sup>163</sup> Therefore, Black religion in Murfreesboro fits the mold of broader Southern religious history during this time as African Americans started their new quest to rediscover and redefine “church.” Yet, building a truly autonomous Black church in Murfreesboro initially proved impossible without white benevolence. The question then became, would formerly enslaved people seek benevolence from their Southern white denominational counterparts, or from Northern interests?

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<sup>160</sup> Foner, 92.

<sup>161</sup> For his analysis of the complex social roles played by the church, see Chapter Three “The Negro Church: A National within a Nation,” in E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1964).

<sup>162</sup> Foner, 102.

<sup>163</sup> Note that the Key Memorial United Methodist congregation started under the name of James Chapel, later changed to Key Chapel, and finally changed to the current name around 1912. The name Key Memorial will be used universally for the duration of this dissertation.

## MURFREESBORO'S BLACK METHODIST ORGANIZE

No known minutes survive from the first years of any of Murfreesboro's historic Black churches, thereby hindering historical research into their founding in the broader history of the town. However, some narratives can be pieced together for these cornerstone Black churches from remaining records, including minutes of white churches, deeds, oral histories, and various denominational association minutes. The history of one of the oldest Black churches in Murfreesboro, Key Memorial United Methodist, starts with the oral tradition that Rev. Braxton James, with the assistance of Union Chaplain William Earnshaw, acquired an old commissary building from Fortress Rosecrans to use for materials and repurposed it as a church and school in town.<sup>164</sup> For 1865, Spence gave the following account of the beginning of Key Memorial:

At this eventful time, a church sprung into existence for the colored people. The Post Chaplain Earnshaw, feeling greatly interested in their welfare, out of the Great Northern Methodist fund, purchased a lot of ground, and with a fortification ware-house, erected a church building for the use of the colored people, all costing about six hundred dollars. Dedicating and naming it the 'Earnshaw Chapel,' alias, Ark-Chapel Bracks Church or Colored Methodist. This one of the northern churches founded in the south, and of such swell their books of southern church membership.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> This common local story is retold in several sources, but the story is not documented in primary sources. See Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume Two*, 251; *Daily News Journal* (Murfreesboro, TN), October 20, 1931. See also "History of the Key Memorial United Methodist Church," in *History of First United Methodist Church Murfreesboro, Tennessee*, ed. N. C. Beasley (Murfreesboro: First United Methodist Church, 1977).

<sup>165</sup> Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume Two*, 251.

A local newspaper article from 1931 further recounts the founding history of Key Memorial, claiming that the congregation sent James and another Black leader, John Clayborne, to Louisville, Kentucky, to be officially ordained as ministers in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination. According to this account, the original Black congregation (of loosely AME affiliation) was meeting in the white Primitive Baptist Church building by the end of 1865. A white traveling MEC preacher, Reverend Pearne, visited the Black congregants in early 1866 after the Primitive Baptist congregation reclaimed their building. Pearne supposedly convinced the Black congregants to join the (Northern) MEC who were willing to offer benevolence to establish a new church. Between sixty to seventy of the congregates, “by standing vote,” accepted Rev. Pearne’s offer and James was placed as the presiding elder. After the white Methodists purchased a lot, the Black congregation built a brush harbor and hosted a revival, which resulted in 200 new members. This newspaper account includes the “commissary” story, dating it to 1866.<sup>166</sup>

The September 17, 1864, and the November 25, 1865, editions of *The Christian Recorder* both include listings of the “Missouri Conference Appointments,” which clearly have Braxton James assigned to Murfreesboro, and therefore associated with the AME denomination.<sup>167</sup> This source, therefore, corroborates parts of the 1931 newspaper account. However, of interest, is the fact

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<sup>166</sup> *Daily News Journal* (Murfreesboro, TN), October 20, 1931.

<sup>167</sup> *The Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia), November 25, 1865, accessed June 15, 2020, <file:///D:/Christian%20Recorder%20research/1865%20AME.html>.

that John Clayborne does not appear in the 1864 listing, but the 1865 listing has him appointed to Paducah, Kentucky.

Braxton James married Charlotte Tompkins on August 20, 1865, in Rutherford County, with Chaplain William Earnshaw officiating the wedding.<sup>168</sup> Under a new legal sanction passed by the State of Tennessee in 1865 and with the encouragement of the Freedmen's Bureau, Mr. and Mrs. James joined over 700 other African American couples wedded in the county in August 1865. However, both James and Earnshaw appear on marriage records as early as May 1865, along with Black Baptist ministers, including Napoleon Frierson and Robert Bond, as they solemnized the marriages of formerly enslaved people. Despite apparent early acceptance of Black ministers solemnizing Black marriages, white supremacist notions apparently enveloped James on September 10, 1866, when he was brought before the Rutherford County Circuit Court on an "indictment for solemnizing rites of matrimony between persons illegally."<sup>169</sup> Two days later, James appeared before the court again, where he was found not guilty and the charges dropped.<sup>170</sup> James was the only Black minister brought before the court on this charge. James continues to appear in the marriage register of Rutherford County as an officiant into the 1870s.

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<sup>168</sup> Rutherford County Marriage Record Book, 1863-1870, Rutherford County Archives.

<sup>169</sup> Rutherford County Circuit Court Minute Book, 1866, 94-95, Rutherford County Archives.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

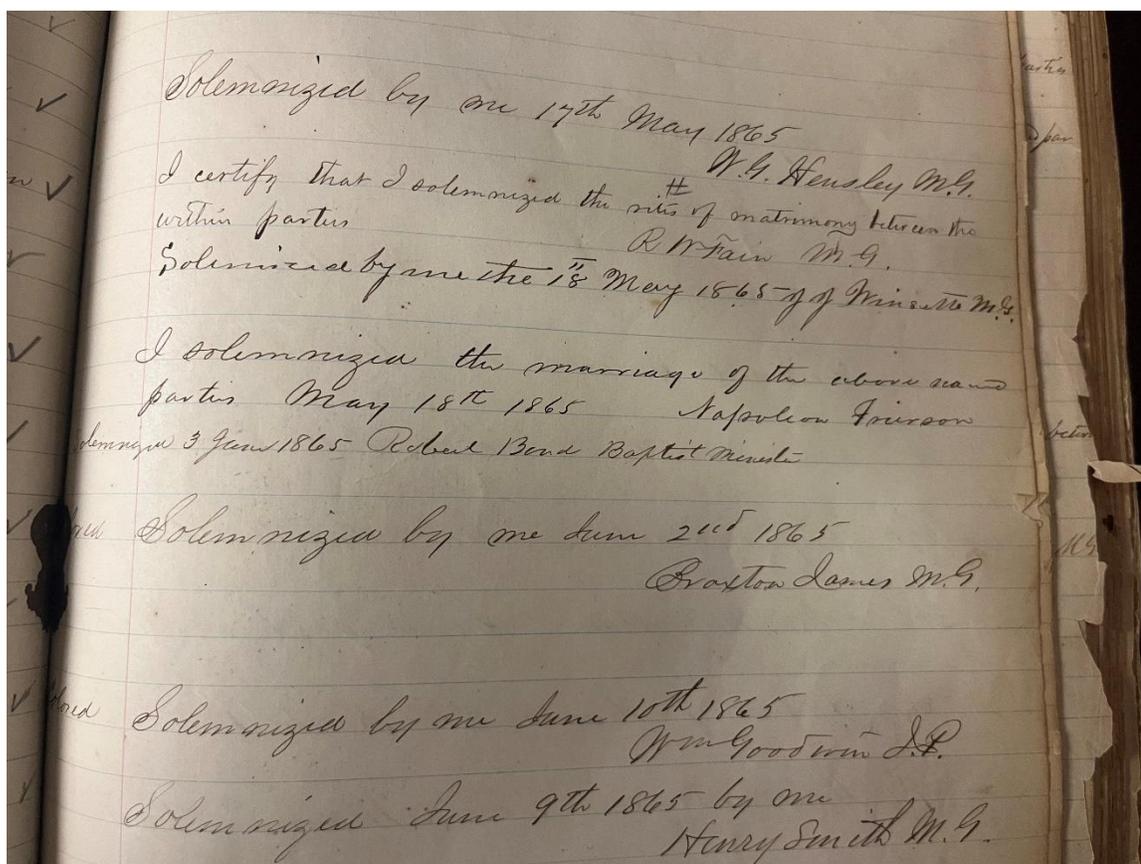


Figure 9. Photograph of page from Rutherford County Marriage Register, May and June 1865, showing marriages performed by African American ministers in Murfreesboro. Source: Rutherford County Archives.

Braxton James' obituary, published upon his death in 1885, clarifies his initial ordination as an AME preacher and his later acceptance into the Northern UMC denomination:

In 1866 [Braxton James] was received into the Tennessee Conference, at its organization in Murfreesborough, as an elder from the Missouri Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and appointed to Murfreesborough, which charge he served for three years very acceptably. He was then made presiding elder of the Murfreesborough District for four years.<sup>171</sup>

<sup>171</sup> *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church: Fall Conferences 1885* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1885). Accessed online November 15, 2023.

In October 1866, the *Memphis Daily Post* ran a story detailing the “Proceedings of the Tennessee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church” at its first meeting held in Murfreesboro.<sup>172</sup> This report is key to understanding the denominational strife between the Black AME and MEC (North) in Murfreesboro and helps to compile a more accurate history of Key Memorial Church. Although the 1931 *Daily News Journal* article claims that the Tennessee Conference was founded at the Key Memorial Church building, the *Memphis Daily Post* article clarifies that the Conference actually met at the Christian Church (white). This article also confirms that W. H. Pearne was indeed an MEC minister serving in Memphis. At this conference, Braxton James was accepted and appointed to the “Public Worship” committee alongside the Reverend Allen A. Gee (white), who was appointed to the Nashville District for 1866-1867. Chaplain William Earnshaw was also present at this conference. The presiding Bishop D. W. Clark, stated that because “a pure gospel is demanded by the country, preached by men who were loyal to the country [and] loyal to the church” this new organization, the Tennessee MEC Conference, was being formed.<sup>173</sup> The article states that the members present believed that “wherever a pure gospel is preached and practiced, all hatred, both of the government, the church, and the people, vanishes away.”<sup>174</sup> A white preacher by the name of Amasa A. Brown was placed in charge at Murfreesboro under the charge of the “Nashville District.” Meanwhile Braxton James was appointed to Murfreesboro under the charge of the “Nashville

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<sup>172</sup> *Memphis Daily Post*, October 16, 1866, accessed June 15, 2020. Newspapers.com.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

Missionary District,” thereby showing the continued paternal and racial oversight between the white MEC governance and local Black MEC churches.

While John Clayborne was not mentioned as being present at the Tennessee Conference, it is important to note that next month, on October 20, 1866, *The Christian Recorder* ran a short excerpt stating that “Rev. John Clayborne has organized a new Society at Murfreesboro consisting of 50 members.”<sup>175</sup> This notice seemingly confirms the time when Clayborne and James parted ways. James then launched Key Memorial United Methodist Church under the guidance and benevolence of the MEC (North) while Clayborne founded Allen Chapel AME Church.

While the Northern Methodists were assisting with the formation and construction of a Black church in Murfreesboro, the white affiliation of this same denomination could not gain a permanent foothold. Although H. A. Patterson (Northern Methodist) had taken charge of the white Southern Methodist building during the war, by late 1865, the local trustees of the MEC, South, petitioned President Andrew Johnson to return their building, which was granted.<sup>176</sup> With the mustering out of the Union soldiers, Spence no longer mentions Army Chaplain Patterson in his *Annals*. Under the heading “Northern Methodist in the South,”

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<sup>175</sup> *The Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia), October 20, 1866, accessed on June 15, 2020. file:///D:/Christian%20Recorder%20research/oct%201866%20Clayborne.html

<sup>176</sup> Alice P. Nunnery, “Division, Civil War, and Reconstruction 1843-1888,” in *The First 200 Years: A Bicentennial History First United Methodist Church Murfreesboro, Tennessee 1820-2020* (Murfreesboro: First United Methodist Church, 2020), 51.

Spence states, “There is an uneasy revengeful feeling rankling in the veins of the Northern Methodists.”<sup>177</sup> He concludes on the same page:

The Northern Methodist in Murfreesboro, finding they were defeated in holding the church of this place, they rented a room in the second story east side of the public square, fitting up and opening for regular services, with a minister and about thirty attendants at church. With all the efforts building a church membership, it appeared doomed to failure. They continued holding meetings some time that place, when the enterprise finally dying out. This is about the history of the ‘loyal’ Methodist people attempting to establish and rule southern Christianity by fear, and influence of the bayonet.<sup>178</sup>

With the assistance of white benevolence, Braxton James and his Black congregants claimed a space of their own on the edge of Murfreesboro between 1866 and 1867 and constructed their first church building. However, there is some confusion as to who actually purchased the original lot for Key Chapel and when. A traveling Northern MEC preacher, Davis Wasgatt Clark, wrote the following statement in a letter to his wife dated January 23, 1866, while visiting Murfreesboro:

The colored Methodist Church has nearly three hundred members, and a good solid man – Braxton James – for a preacher; but they are without a place of worship. They assured me if I would get them a lot they would build a church for themselves. This was really their only hope. I felt that it was a cause demanding immediate aid. We found a good lot – just the right thing – and I bought it for seven hundred and fifty dollars. The colored people were made joyful in prospect of a temple in which to worship.”<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume Two*, 251.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, 251-252.

<sup>179</sup> Daniel Curry, *Life-Story of Rev. Davis Wasgatt Clark, D.D., Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1874), 215. Accessed online November 15, 2023.

However, deeds confirm that the white pastor, Allen A. Gee, purchased the lot at the corner of College Street and High Street (now known as Highland Avenue) from another white man, W. M. Cosby, on February 24, 1866. Gee, in turn, transferred this lot to the “trustees of Church Extension Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the colored people of said Church” on February 20, 1867.<sup>180</sup>

Concurrently in 1867, Rev. Amasa A. Brown was appointed to the position of county superintendent of public schools.<sup>181</sup> In September of that year, Brown appealed to the Freedmen’s Bureau for three stoves to be used in freedmen schools.<sup>182</sup> On October 16, 1867, the *Freedom’s Watchman* published the proceedings of the Annual Conference of the MEC, again confirming Rev. Brown’s appointment as “1<sup>st</sup> charge” in Murfreesboro, and Braxton James’s appointment as “2<sup>nd</sup> charge.”<sup>183</sup>

Rev. Brown remained in Murfreesboro only a short duration. As early as March of 1868, Rev. Brown traveled and lectured in several western states until settling in Indiana by 1870.<sup>184</sup> In the 1870s, the church’s future namesake, Hillary Wattsworth Key, replaced Braxton James as pastor. Key was from Gallatin, Tennessee. By 1879, Key led the Murfreesboro congregation in an initiative to build a new church building in the same

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<sup>180</sup> See Rutherford County Deed Book 14, 89 and Rutherford County Deed Book 14, 537-538. Rutherford County Register of Deeds Office.

<sup>181</sup> *Daily News Journal* (Murfreesboro), February 7, 1988. Accessed June 15, 2020. Newspapers.com; *Freedom’s Watchman* (Murfreesboro), November 6, 1867. Accessed June 15, 2020. Newspapers.com.

<sup>182</sup> “Tennessee, Freedmen’s Bureau Office Records, 1865-1872, Murfreesboro,” accessed June 1, 2020. FamilySearch.org.

<sup>183</sup> *Freedom’s Watchman* (Murfreesboro), October 16, 1867. Accessed June 15, 2020. Newspapers.com.

<sup>184</sup> See *Lawrence Daily Journal* (Kansas), March 22, 1868. Accessed 12/1/2022. Newspapers.com; *The Weekly Commonwealth* (Topeka, Kansas), June 8, 1868. Accessed 12/1/2022. Newspapers.com; 1870 Federal Census of the United States. Accessed 12/1/2022. Ancestry.com.

location as their original structure. This new building and, thereby, the congregation, would forever be known as Key Memorial United Methodist Church.

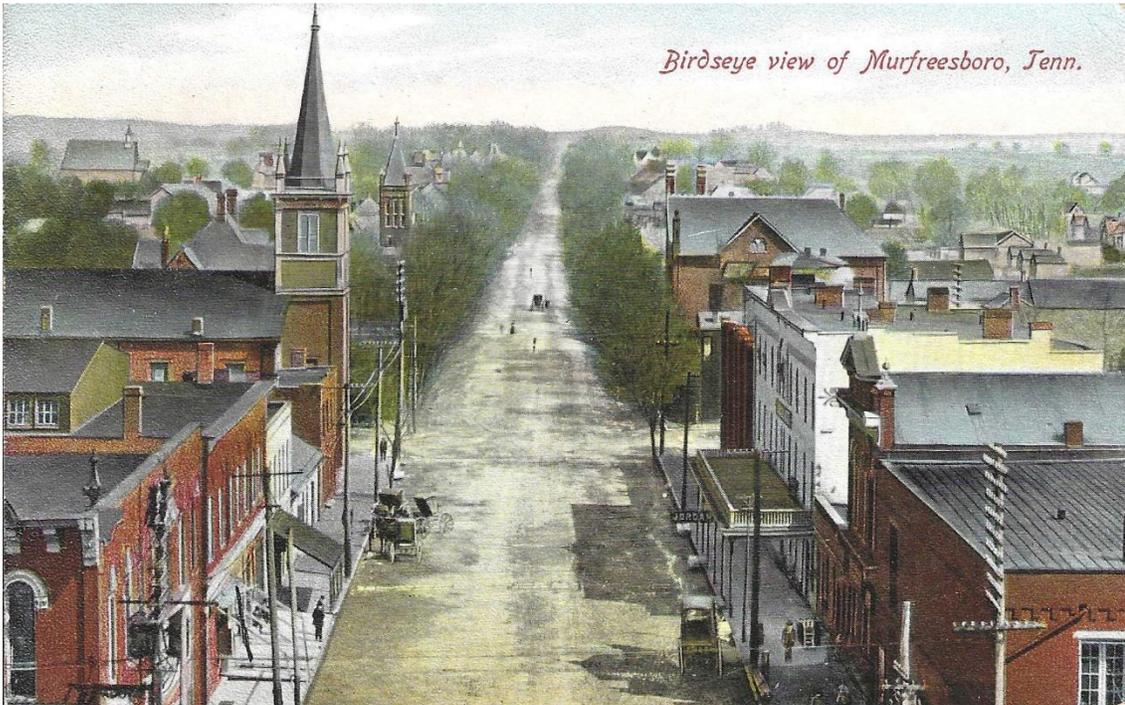


Figure 10. Postcard image taken from atop the Murfreesboro courthouse looking down East Main Street, circa 1900. The 1879 Key Memorial United Methodist Church building is depicted in the distance, top left in this image. Source: Bill Jakes Collection, Rutherford County Archives.

## **BEGINNING OF AME CHURCH IN MURFREESBORO**

In 1996, the late Reverend Melvin Hughes, pastor of Allen Chapel, published a work titled *A History of Rutherford County's African American Community* that contains a short history of this congregation. Without clearly designated sources (although he cites a ca.1993 church membership manual), Hughes places the beginning of Allen Chapel before the Civil War (“before 1860”) under the pastorate of a Reverend A. W. Thorns “with worship services

conducted in the homes of various members.”<sup>185</sup> Although Black Methodists were congregating during the Civil War, it seems most probable that John Clayborne officially organized the Allen Chapel AME congregation in October 1866. Spence recorded that the “African Methodist” had started a church that year, south of the square, with a small number of members.<sup>186</sup> An interesting plea appears in the September 15, 1866 edition of *The Christian Recorder* when a traveling missionary, H. Reedy, makes the following statement:

There is wanted at Murfreesboro, Shelbyville, Woodbury, and McMinnville, good ministers, who are able to stand their ground. The white citizens have promised to give to our Connection ample means to build a Church at Murfreesboro, if the Bishop will send an able minister to that place for the benefit of the A.M.E. Church. There are many other points in Tennessee, which have not yet been noticed, nor supplied with competent ministers.<sup>187</sup>

Historic deeds confirm that John Clayborne purchased a town lot from a white man, Nathan Hall, on November 28, 1865.<sup>188</sup> On August 5, 1867, Clayborne purchased a house and additional lot from Hall for \$600. This second lot was in the same vicinity as the initial purchase, located south of the square at the intersection of South Spring Street and East State Street. On September 10, 1867, Clayborne, in turn, sold one-third of this lot to the “trustees of the African Methodist Episcopal Church – Allen Chapel.”<sup>189</sup> According to this latter deed, the Allen Chapel building was already standing on this lot. These primary sources

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<sup>185</sup> Hughes, 9.

<sup>186</sup> Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume Two*, 255.

<sup>187</sup> *Freedom's Watchman* (Murfreesboro), September 15, 1866. Accessed June 15, 2020. Newspapers.com.

<sup>188</sup> Rutherford County Deed Book 13, 353. Rutherford County Register of Deeds Office.

<sup>189</sup> Rutherford County Deed Book 15, 146. Rutherford County Register of Deeds Office.

seem to indicate that the official founding of Allen Chapel Church occurred after the Civil War.

John Clayborne continued to pastor the Allen Chapel congregation into the 1870s, before his move to Shelbyville. While not much is known about Allen Chapel's first church building, the second building is better documented since it has been in continued use by the congregation since 1889. On October 8, 1888, the trustees purchased a lot on South Maney Avenue.<sup>190</sup> The congregation dedicated their new brick building during the meeting of the Tennessee Annual Conference (AME), which was held at the church in 1889. It is documented through the oral history of the church that the building was fully constructed by members of the church, from the digging of the foundation through the firing and laying of the bricks; this work speaks to the sheer determination and agency of the Black congregation to not seek white benevolence in building their new sanctuary. The new church building was located adjacent to the Old City Cemetery founded in 1820 along with the First Presbyterian Church on Vine Street. Allen Chapel AME is the only Black church in Rutherford County listed on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Rutherford County Deed Book 30, 254-255. Rutherford County Register of Deeds Office.

<sup>191</sup> See Carroll Van West, "Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1993), Section 8. <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/AssetDetail/ffc97a40-d0ef-4e7a-aab7-209f4c439253>. Accessed Oct. 15, 2023.



Figure 11. Photograph of the Allen Chapel AME Church constructed in 1889. Source: Taken by author, 2023.

### **Black Baptist Institution Building in Murfreesboro**

By the ending months of the Civil War, Reverend Napoleon Bonaparte Frierson emerged as the pastor of the First Baptist Church (African American) in Murfreesboro. By August of 1865, Frierson was solemnizing African American marriages at an equal rate to his Methodist counterpart, Braxton James. For 1866, Spence noted, “Baptist Church Col. This church, a brick edifice south of the public square, opened and occupied by Elder Bony Frierson, up to his death, having a large congregation belonging to this church, keeping up nightly services through the week to twelve o’clock, baptizing great

numbers.”<sup>192</sup> This entry helps confirm the founding of Murfreesboro’s First Baptist Church as an autonomous congregation with its own building by at least 1866 if not during the war. It is unclear from these sources which building the African American congregation first occupied. However, oral history dictates that the Black congregation were possibly meeting in “James Hall” on South Maple Street before gaining use of the old First Missionary Baptist Church (white), located south of the square, possibly as early as 1866.<sup>193</sup>

Not wanting to reoccupy their war-torn building, the First Baptist congregation (white) purchased a lot on East Main Street in January of 1868 to construct a new church building. The congregation once again convened their meetings on June 5, 1868, and in the ensuing months they met in various locations including the old Primitive Baptist Church, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Union University, and the courthouse. They took occupancy of their newly constructed church building in the Fall of 1870.

Meanwhile, Pittard states that the Concord Association recorded the following resolution at its meeting in 1869, “recommended that, whereas, the colored people were not organized into churches of their own and separated from us, that our pastors aid their rising ministry by instruction and counsel; that servants be afforded every reasonable facility for church attendance”<sup>194</sup> Pittard notes, “Following the lead of the Concord Association, the Baptist Church permitted the [Black] Baptists the use of the old building

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<sup>192</sup> Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume Two*, 255.

<sup>193</sup> Hughes, 14. See also Kreda Frierson, “The History of the First Baptist Church,” in *Exploring Rutherford County* (Murfreesboro: Middle Tennessee State University: Mid-South Humanities Project, 1979), 33.

<sup>194</sup> Pittard, 62.

at the corner of Sevier and Spring Streets.”<sup>195</sup> Pittard states that the building had been so ravaged during the war that “one wall of the building was being propped up with large timbers.”<sup>196</sup> Hughes adds that the building served as a hospital, and later a school.<sup>197</sup> Deeds confirm that the white First Baptists allowed use of their old building to the Black First Baptist congregation following the war, although the deed was not recorded until September 29, 1879.<sup>198</sup> By this point, the Black congregation was already sectioning and selling parts of the original church lot, with the earnings possibly going towards the construction of a new building.<sup>199</sup> The following plea appeared in the *Murfreesboro Weekly News* on April 1, 1880:

First Colored Baptist Church- To the Editor of the News: Please allow me [space] in your valuable paper for future thanks for our white friends who have so kindly and cheerfully responded to our call for help, and considering the unsettled state of our people, we feel compelled to continue to importune your aid in the erection of our so much needed house of worship. It is true many of our people have gone and many are preparing to go, but we believe if they had good churches, they would become better satisfied to remain among their friends. Many have remarked to me that we have no churches and no prospects for any, and that they are going to leave as soon as they could get money enough. Our people are not able to build without the assistance of white people. While it is their fortune to be independent of our little aid, it is our sad misfortune to be dependent on them; though I pray God for the time when we will not be so much so as we are now. For one, I hail as an auspicious omen the coming of better days in the sunrise land when better feelings will be fostered by both races; when the glad anthem will be heard from the cold lakes of the North to the warm Gulf of the South glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, good will toward men under that blessed song jails and penitentiaries will perish for inmates and churches and school houses will be erected throughout the South, and those who are more ignorant will become educated and prosperous people. This can be done if our white friends aid us in

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Hughes, 14.

<sup>198</sup> Rutherford County Deed Book 24, 532-533. Rutherford County Register of Deeds Office.

<sup>199</sup> The sell of the first sectioned lot took place on July 6, 1877. See Rutherford County Deed Book 24, 403-404. The white First Baptist congregation gave legal title to the entire church property, in addition to the previous sale of the sectioned lot, with the deed recorded on September 29, 1879.

our so much needed house of worship, we also appeal to the white ladies for assistance and hope they will help the following named persons who are appointed to solicit aid for the First Baptist Church: Sister Rhodes Wards, Sister Maggie Ward, Sister Mason Jordon, Sister Bettie Knight, Sister Winnie Bolds, Sister Nannie Moore, Sister Marcia Key, Brother Henry Williams. Each will have his or her name on their book. G.D. Olden, Pastor<sup>200</sup>

The annual minutes of several Black Baptist Associations recorded transactions of the First Baptist Church in Murfreesboro during Reconstruction and the Nadir Era. These documents help clarify the proceedings of the congregation in the early years. According to the Minutes of the Second Annual Session of the General Missionary Baptist Association of Tennessee, held in Memphis in August 1869, the First Baptist Church in Murfreesboro oversaw a “Sabbath School” with seventeen teachers and 265 “scholars.”<sup>201</sup> The following year, the First Baptist Church reported only 136 scholars attending their Sabbath School. Frierson was once again listed in association with Murfreesboro and active in the annual meetings in 1869 and 1870.<sup>202</sup>

When Rev. Frierson passed away in Murfreesboro in 1874, his son-in-law G. D. Olden became pastor.<sup>203</sup> The Eleventh Annual Session of the Stone’s River Missionary Baptist Association of Middle Tennessee, which convened at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Nashville in 1881, noted that Rev. Olden was “recognized” and later appointed to the executive board of the meeting. Olden reported 300 church members. At a convention meeting in 1883, Olden reported 350 church members, and 125 Sunday School scholars

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<sup>200</sup> *Murfreesboro Weekly News*, April 1, 1880. Accessed June 15, 2020. Newspapers.com.

<sup>201</sup> “State Conventions and General Associations, 1863-1929.”

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

under the leadership of six teachers.<sup>204</sup> By 1885, membership of the church declined to 250, and Rev. Olden had moved to Chattanooga.<sup>205</sup> Rev. N. C. Crutcher replaced Olden and pastored the church for several years. Under the leadership of Rev. Crutcher, the First Baptist church congregation succeeded in building a new church in 1889 located on the original parcel of land they occupied for the preceding two decades.

As for the founding of the Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church, their oral tradition states that a dispute arose in 1872 among the members of the Black First Baptist Church, causing some members to leave. This small group started the Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church under the pastoral leadership of Reverend Jimmy Stewart.<sup>206</sup> The 1876 meeting minutes of the General State Convention of Tennessee, North Alabama, and South Kentucky, held in Nashville, list Rev. Stewart as representing Mt. Zion Church in Murfreesboro. At that time, the church reported a Sunday school attendance of eighty students under the leadership of six teachers.<sup>207</sup> According to the church history, the congregation initially rented a building on the lower end of South Maple Street. The congregation purchased a lot at the corner of Lytle and North Maple Streets in 1879.<sup>208</sup> The church history states that the Mt. Zion Church building was constructed in 1884; it was built to be identical to the Black First Baptist Church building.<sup>209</sup> Rev. Stewart was listed in several annual meeting minutes until 1883 when W. G. Parks became pastor. At an Association meeting in 1883, Parks reported 230

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Frierson, 33; Hughes, 14.

<sup>207</sup> "State Conventions and General Associations, 1863-1929."

<sup>208</sup> Rutherford County Deed Book 24, 571. Rutherford County Register of Deeds Office.

<sup>209</sup> "History of Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church," unpublished paper provided by the church, 2015.

church members with a Sunday school attendance of 100 students and five teachers.<sup>210</sup> However, by 1885, church membership was down to 150.<sup>211</sup> By 1889, Rev. M. Martin was pastor at Mt. Zion. Of the five cornerstone African American churches founded in Murfreesboro in the years following the Civil War, Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist is the only congregation still retaining their original building on its original town lot.



Figure 12. Photograph of Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church. Source: Taken by author, 2023.

Of the three legacy Black Baptist churches in Murfreesboro, the Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist Church has the least historical documentation to narrate its history. It is quite possible that this congregation split from the early “white” United Primitive Baptist Church founded in Murfreesboro in 1835 since that church had a high concentration of

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<sup>210</sup> “State Conventions and General Associations, 1863-1929.”

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

African American members. However, no historical evidence has surfaced to link those early Black congregants to the post-war Black Primitive Baptist church. The minutes of the First Colored Missionary Baptist Association of Tennessee, held in Nashville on April 8 and 10, 1865, recorded that Rev. Robert Bond of Murfreesboro led some of the devotional services.<sup>212</sup> The minutes also record the following note of interest: “The case of Robert Bond was taken up. A notion made that each church contribute \$5 for this year, for the purpose of educating Brother Robert Bond, carried.”<sup>213</sup>

In 1870, Spence noted: “Old Baptist Col. This church, an old frame house on the branch street leading to the Depot. Established by Robt. Bond Col. (Mt. Zion), name of the church, he the preacher, having a membership of forty. Also conducting a Sunday School, about fifty scholars in attendance.”<sup>214</sup> Rev. Bond continued to be listed in association with the Murfreesboro church until he moved to Lebanon around 1873. Dempsey Childress became the second pastor of the church. Although Childress is somewhat elusive in the historical records, a 1928 *Daily News Journal* article mentions the pastor and claims that he “became quite famous in this part of the state as an advocate of old time religion.”<sup>215</sup> In 1884, John Clayborne and his wife sold a lot to the “Primitive Baptist Church colored of Murfreesboro,” located on Sevier Street and on the same block as the First Baptist Church (African American).<sup>216</sup> In 1887, the Mt. Zion Primitive

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Spence, *Annals of Rutherford County Volume Two*, 292.

<sup>215</sup> “Dead Woman Missing Four Days Found Dead,” *Daily News Journal* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee), February 23, 1928. Accessed April 18, 2022. Newspapers.com.

<sup>216</sup> Rutherford County Deed Book 28, 539. Rutherford County Register of Deeds Office.

trustees purchased additional property to expand their lot, and it is assumed that they constructed their church building around that time.

Documenting the five foundational Black congregations that organized in Murfreesboro in the years following the Civil War adds to the understanding of Black land acquisition and institution building in a Union occupied Southern town. The history of each of these churches explains acceptance of benevolence on varying terms and the wielding of agency in carving autonomous spaces for their own use. However, seeking similar stories of early Black institution building in rural regions returns varied results due to the isolation of these Black communities from their urban counterparts, and therefore relatively less historical documentation.

### **Survey of Historic Rural Black Churches in Rutherford County**

Churches and cemeteries became the nuclei of the rural Black communities in the post-war South. Early Black church buildings often served the dual function as school buildings since resources and the availability of land for African Americans was relatively sparse. Therefore, surveying the locations of early Black churches and researching the history of Black schools in a geographic area can lead to a broader understanding of post-Civil War Black institution building in the rural South. Specific to Rutherford County, several previous surveys of schools and churches help unlock key elements of the history presented in this study. Prior surveys of cemeteries in Rutherford County are addressed in Chapter Four.

In 1986, the Rutherford County Retired Teachers Association published a two-volume series titled *A History of Rutherford County Schools to 1972*, which was the first attempt at providing a concise compellation on the history of white and Black educational facilities in the county.<sup>217</sup> In the early 1990s, Laura C. Jarmon worked with the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Center for Historic Preservation (hereafter noted as “CHP”) and other contributors on a project titled “Classrooms With and Without Walls”



Figure 13. Students standing in front of the Gladeview School, Rutherford County, circa 1925. Source: Laura C. Jarmon Collection, Rutherford County Archives.

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<sup>217</sup> See Louise Houck Wiser, ed., *A History of Rutherford County Schools to 1972*, volumes I and II (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Rutherford County Retired Teachers Association, 1986).

to provide a more focused history on Black education in the county. This endeavor led to Jarmon's 1994 publication, *Arbors to Bricks: A Hundred Years of African American Education in Rutherford County, Tennessee 1865 to 1965*.<sup>218</sup>

In 1997, the CHP started a program titled "The Tennessee Rural African American Church Project" after "a series of racially targeted arsons posed serious threats to cultural heritage."<sup>219</sup> This project led to a multiple property National Register nomination and a published field guide for assessing eligibility criteria specific to historic Black churches in the South. The CHP also offers access to over 400 church research files compiled during the project.<sup>220</sup>

More recently, in 2016, local historian Dr. George Smith, who was then serving as president of the African American Heritage Society of Rutherford County (AAHSRC), led a project to identify Black churches in the county that had been in continuous operation for at least 100 years. This project resulted in several products including a wall calendar, and an unpublished booklet titled *Celebrating 100+ Years Churches* that was used during the organization's annual black-tie fundraising dinner.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> See Laura C. Jarmon, *Arbors to Bricks: A Hundred Years of African American Education in Rutherford County Tennessee 1865 to 1965*, (Murfreesboro: The Division of Continuing Studies and Public Service, with the assistance of the Center for Historic Preservation, Middle Tennessee State University, 1994).

<sup>219</sup> Center for Historic Preservation Middle Tennessee State University, *Powerful Artifacts: A Guide to Surveying and Documenting Rural African-American Churches in the South*. PDF file. Accessed November 2020. [www.mtsuhistpres.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Powerful-Artifacts.pdf](http://www.mtsuhistpres.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Powerful-Artifacts.pdf)

<sup>220</sup> For more information regarding the National Register nomination, see Carroll Van West, "Historic Rural African-American Churches in Tennessee, 1850 – 1970," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1999). Accessed November 2020. [npgallery.nps.gov/GetAsset/55b6bcf1-2b93-4289-ad38-d19bc6304540](http://npgallery.nps.gov/GetAsset/55b6bcf1-2b93-4289-ad38-d19bc6304540).

<sup>221</sup> Dr. George Smith's research files were transferred to the African American Heritage Society of Rutherford County upon his death in 2019. A copy of the calendar and unpublished booklet are available in the *Rutherford County African American Historical Society Collection* housed at the Rutherford County Archives.

Collectively, these prior studies serve as the foundation for the church survey. A thorough review of the previously mentioned sources yields a list of approximately thirty-five rural Black churches that developed in the county from 1860 to 1890 (see Table 1. Survey of Rural African American Churches in Rutherford County, Tennessee, to 1890). Regarding denominational alliances, ten were Methodist affiliated, three were Church of Christ, nineteen were Baptist-affiliated, one was Presbyterian, and one of unknown denominational affiliation. According to the research files compiled by the AAHSRC, six of the congregations claim to have started during or before the Civil War; nine of the congregations formed between 1865 and 1870, while the remaining congregations began between 1871 and 1890. However, simple statistical analysis does not answer the complex questions regarding the social, economic, political, and racial dynamics of early Black religious space making in the rural areas of Rutherford County.

In 1989, Janet Goodrum Hudson wrote an honors thesis, *A Profile of Black Landownership in Rutherford County During Reconstruction*, that offers some insight into white benevolence towards early Black landowners, including the founding of several rural Black churches and schools. Hudson found that only 5 percent of Black households in the county were able to buy land during Reconstruction. Statistically, Hudson found that 23 percent of African American purchases occurred within the city limits of Murfreesboro, while 48 percent of Black landowners purchased property in the four civil districts surrounding and bordering Murfreesboro. The remaining 29 percent of

Table 1. Survey of Rural African American Churches in Rutherford County, Tennessee, to 1890.

<b>Name of Church</b>	<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Year Founded</b>
Cedar Grove	AME	1890
New Bethel	AME	1882
Rockvale AME	AME	1865-1877
Webb Chapel	AME	1865
Carter's Chapel	Baptist	pre-1878
Green Meadows	Church of Christ	ca.1859
Highway 231 South	Church of Christ	ca.1890
Keeble's Chapel	Church of Christ	pre-1880
Overall's Chapel	Methodist Episcopal	1865-1877
Beech Grove	Missionary Baptist	ca.1860
Bethel	Missionary Baptist	ca.1875
Bradley's Creek	Missionary Baptist	1865/1882
Cedar Grove	Missionary Baptist	pre-1857
Cherry Grove	Missionary Baptist	1863
Hickory Grove	Missionary Baptist	ca.1865
Hickory Grove (Halls Hill)	Missionary Baptist	ca.1889
Mt. Olivet	Missionary Baptist	ca.1884
Mt. View	Missionary Baptist	1870
Mt. Zion Barfield	Missionary Baptist	1880
Mt. Zion Rucker	Missionary Baptist	ca.1884
Grace Baptist	Missionary Baptist	1866
Prosperity	Missionary Baptist	ca.1860
Silver Springs	Missionary Baptist	1883
Walnut Grove	Missionary Baptist	1875
Brown's Chapel	Presbyterian	ca.1876
Antioch	Primitive Baptist	pre-1878
Cedar Grove	Primitive Baptist	ca.1885
Ebenezer	Primitive Baptist	ca.1888

Stones River	Primitive Baptist	ca.1880
Emery	United Methodist	ca.1869
Lillard Chapel	United Methodist	pre-1887
Locke's Chapel	United Methodist	pre-1878
St. John's	United Methodist	ca.1885
Stones River	United Methodist	pre-1865
Bryant's Grove	unknown	ca.1880

Black property purchases transpired in the remaining twenty-one civil districts of the county.<sup>222</sup> The overall location of Black land purchases may attest to African Americans' need to be close to employment and to community institutions such as churches, schools, and lodges.

Hudson's research reveals early land transactions related to seven of the Black rural churches (and sometimes dual schools). Five of these transactions involved white grantors selling to Black grantees starting in 1867 when Joseph Watkins sold one and a half acres to five trustees "for a church and schoolhouse for colored people."<sup>223</sup> These trustees oversaw the construction of White's Chapel at this location. The other four transactions between white landowners and Black benefactors occurred in the 1870s with the founding of a Rockvale AME church (1871; name unknown), Antioch Primitive Baptist (1876), Emery United Methodist (1876, although the church claims to have a founding date of 1869),

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<sup>222</sup> Janet Goodrum Hudson, "A Profile of Black Landownership in Rutherford County During Reconstruction," (Honor's Thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 1989), p.14. Special Collections, Walker Library, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, 27.

and Overall's Chapel Methodist Episcopal (1877). The other two transactions involved Black grantors selling land to Black church founders, including the founding of Mt. View Missionary Baptist (1874) and Brown's Chapel (1876, unknown denominational affiliation).<sup>224</sup>

### **A UNIQUE CASE STUDY – CEMETERY COMMUNITY**

One unique case study in Rutherford County centers around the formation of a post-war Black community called Cemetery, established adjacent to the Stones River National Cemetery a few miles northeast of Murfreesboro. Two factors contributed to the creation of Cemetery, one being the existence of a sizable contraband camp established adjacent to Fortress Rosecrans, and secondly the employment of the 111<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the United States Colored Infantry, charged with the job of reintering Union dead into the newly established Stones River National Cemetery in 1865 and 1866. One of the best resources for understanding the history of Cemetery is a compilation of prior research presented in unpublished form by Rebecca Conard and her graduate students in 2016 titled *Historic Cemetery Community: The Cedars*.<sup>225</sup>

Before her retirement that same year, Conard worked for almost a decade in her capacity as a Professor of History in the Public History graduate program at

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<sup>224</sup> Hudson, 7-29. Jarmon, 30-31. See also original deeds at the Rutherford County Register of Deeds: Deed Book 15, pgs. 132-133; Deed Book 18, pg. 99; Deed Book 19, pg. 211; Deed Book 20, pgs. 439-440; Deed Book 21, pgs. 592-593; Deed Book 21, pgs. 601-602; Deed Book 21, pg. 640; Deed Book 22, p. 626.

<sup>225</sup> Rebecca Conard, "Historic Cemetery Community: The Cedars," (2016). Stone River National Battlefield.

MTSU overseeing student research projects on the history of Cemetery from multiple facets. These research initiatives, which often worked in collaboration with Stones River National Battlefield and other historical organizations and professionals, produced several exhibits, GIS workshops, digital humanities initiatives, and two M.A. theses.<sup>226</sup> Conard points out that “remote, unincorporated settlements do not generate an abundance of historical evidence.”<sup>227</sup> Yet, the heavy presence of the Federal fort and contraband camp, the post-war development of the National Cemetery, and the Federal acquisition of private land for the creation of the National Park in the 1920s added additional records, aiding the research of this particular community. Through their persistent research, Conard and her students pieced together enough histories to conclude, “By the mid-1880s, three churches, a burial ground, and a school signified the presence of an established community.”<sup>228</sup>

In her Master’s thesis titled *Settling In: Tracking the Formation of the Cemetery Community through Public Records*, Lydia Simpson summarizes that “the movement of African Americans into the area because of the cemetery and the camp, plus the persistence on the land of former slaves from nearby plantations, converged to create a sizable black community on land that

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<sup>226</sup> See Lydia Simpson, “Settling In: Tracking the Formation of the Cemetery Community through Public Records,” (M.A. thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 2011). See also Elizabeth Goetsch, “All Could Not Help but Feel It: A Cultural Landscape Approach to History at Stones River National Battlefield,” (M.A. thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 2011).

<sup>227</sup> Conard, 3.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid*, iii.

represented their struggle for freedom in a very tangible way.”<sup>229</sup> John Cimprich, in his book *Slavery's End in Tennessee 1861-1865*, estimates that 2,000 African Americans resided in the contraband camp outside of Murfreesboro.<sup>230</sup> Drawing on the research of Janet Hudson, Simpson noted that by 1877, there were twenty-one Black land-owning households in the district, “which represented almost one-fifth of total [African American] purchases made in the county.”<sup>231</sup> Simpson deduces that due to the “increased security” afforded the community due to the size of its Black population and Black land ownership, these residents may have witnessed an increased ease to express their freedom in this rural setting.

An interesting religious and educational tie to Cemetery was the establishment of the Tennessee Manual Labor University. The father and son duo of Peter and Samuel Lowry from Nashville started and promoted this endeavor. In *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870*, Stephen Ash had this to say about Peter Lowery, “a purchaser of his own freedom, successful businessman, and minister of Nashville’s independent black Christian congregation, was one of the antebellum South’s outstanding black leaders.”<sup>232</sup> In his book, *The African-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930*, Bobby Lovett offers extensive details into the Lowerys and their educational endeavor. Having both studied under the famous white Church of Christ preacher, Tolbert Fanning, the

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<sup>229</sup> Simpson, 13.

<sup>230</sup> John Cimprich, *Slavery's End in Tennessee 1861-1865* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 53.

<sup>231</sup> Simpson, 18

<sup>232</sup> Stephen V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 62.

Lowerys dreamed to build a Black industrial school modeled after Fanning's Franklin College, located in Nashville from 1843 to 1862. The General Assembly of Tennessee chartered the Tennessee Manual Labor University in December 1866. In 1868, the Lowerys and their associates established the 307-acre campus in Cemetery. However, the endeavor proved short-lived due to financial constraints as the school, with only a few small buildings constructed, closed in 1874. The land eventually sold in 1880, parts of which were parceled and resold to African American purchasers in what was becoming Cemetery Community.

As West ascertained from his extensive survey, "The early churches of the 1860s were commonly first located where African Americans expected to have a degree of safety and freedom. Many stood on the outskirts of the large 'contraband camps' created by the Federal government to shelter and control the thousands of freedmen and freewomen who rushed to Federal encampments from 1862 to 1865."<sup>233</sup> Three churches were established in the Cemetery community: the Stones River Methodist Episcopal, Mt. Olive Missionary Baptists, and Ebenezer Primitive Baptist. In an unpublished paper on the history of Stones River titled "Stones River United Methodist Church: A Historical Perspective," church member Elaine Washington claimed that the church was organized in 1828 and its earliest existence was under a brush harbor. One of the earliest maps of Rutherford County, the D. G. Beers map of 1878, shows a Black church structure in this location. According to West's survey, the current church structure dates

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<sup>233</sup> West, 441.

from ca.1900 although the first deed for the church property was not recorded until 1914.



Figure 14. Photograph of Mt. Olive (left) and Ebenezer churches after they were relocated north of their original locations due to the creation of Stones River National Battlefield, circa 1930s. Source: Shacklett's Historic Images Collection, Rutherford County Archives.

In 1884, H.H. Kerr, a white farmer, merchant and one-time mayor of Murfreesboro, sold lots for the establishment of both Ebenezer Primitive Baptist Church and Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church. These lots were located close to Van Cleave Lane in an area called the “Cedars” section of Cemetery community. During the Federal confiscation of Cemetery community properties for the creation of Stones River National Battlefield, Ebenezer and Mt. Olivet were relocated north on the Nashville Highway, across the street and close to the Stones River church. The Mt. Olivet congregation remained active until the 1970s, after which the abandoned building fell into disrepair before finally being

razed in the late 1990s for a new development. As of this writing, the Stones River and Ebenezer congregations are still active.



Figure 15. Photograph of Stones River United Methodist Church in Cemetery, Rutherford County, circa 1930s. Source: Shackletts Historic Images Collection, Rutherford County Archives.

## CONCLUSION

While African Americans achieved success in establishing at least forty Black churches in post-war Rutherford County, their persistence was met with resistance from the broader white community. The Black push to acquire land for sacred spaces proved a necessity for establishing secular safety with the introduction of Democratic rule and Jim Crow legislation that ushered in the new decade (1870s) in Tennessee and throughout the South. Chapter Three looks at the white action to control African American freedoms and mobility during Reconstruction and into the Nadir Era. Yet the determination of Black persistence is revealed by comparing Rutherford County's lynching narratives against a timeline of Black institution building. The result is a new narrative of Black agency as

Rutherford County's African America congregations never yielded to white-supremist notions of total Black suppression as revealed in the continual acquisition of Black spaces.

### CHAPTER THREE – LYNCHING, BLACK AUTONOMY, AND THE POLITICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY

The Civil War came fast and hard to Murfreesboro. With several early Union victories in the northern part of the state, including the conquering of Fort Henry and Fort Donelson in February 1862, Confederates were forced to retreat further south, leaving much of the mid-state open for Federal military occupation by the spring of 1862. The ensuing U.S. military governance of the Upper South created an atmosphere that was rather unique in the formulation of Reconstruction that took place in Middle Tennessee. As historian Eric Foner points out in his book *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, "Unlike the border states, the Confederate upper South, especially Tennessee, experienced wartime Reconstruction under the auspices of direct military rule."<sup>234</sup> Foner argues, "By an accident of war, Tennessee's Reconstruction began not in the staunchly Unionist eastern mountains, but in the middle and western parts of the state, where slavery was deeply entrenched and Confederate sentiment dominant."<sup>235</sup> Historian Stephen Ash agreed that Middle Tennessee was peculiar from the vast majority of the South. Ash argues that the mid-state served as what he calls a "third South." He states, "Broad prosperity, a large slave population, and wide-spread slaveholding sharply distinguish Middle Tennessee from the Southern highlands; yet the absence of King Cotton and of the economic hegemony of planters set it equally apart from the Deep

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<sup>234</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, updated ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 43.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

South.”<sup>236</sup> He concludes “that Middle Tennessee’s story is distinctive and in certain crucial respects it diverges sharply from the Southern experience as a whole.”<sup>237</sup>

As the Civil War ended, formerly slaved persons in Murfreesboro, like much of the rest of the mid-state, witnessed some “protections” due to military occupation, the stationing of Freedmen’s Bureau agent offices throughout the region, and the political domination of the Republican party in Tennessee and throughout much of the South. However, as author Lester C. Lamon points out in *Blacks in Tennessee, 1791-1970*, although Republicans ruled the political arena in the state, “they experienced an internal conflict between political loyalty to congressional policy and a desire to maintain clear racial distinctions in the areas of civil rights and social intercourse.”<sup>238</sup> So, while former slaves were witnessing some new “freedoms,” they were still under the suppression of white supremacy to most extents, as the freedmen would soon realize. However, within these parameters, African Americans persisted with the notion that the acquisition of autonomous spaces for Black institution building would mitigate protection from the real threats of white retribution.

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<sup>236</sup> Stephen V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), xxi-xxii.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Lester C. Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee 1791-1970* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 35.

## THE SHAPING OF POLITICS AND THE KLAN

While the first two years following the war proved foundational for Black institution building in Murfreesboro, the election year of 1868 began a reactionary period that ushered in the beginning of the Jim Crow era with a noticeable renewal of white supremacy equating to an increase in Ku Klux Klan activities, and a reversing shift in state and local politics. As Raboteau mentions, “Ministers took an active role in politics during the period of Reconstruction as a matter of course because they were the major profession within the black community and they were trained in the oratorical and organizational skills needed for political leadership.”<sup>239</sup> Foner would add this calculation, “Over 100 black ministers, hailing from North and South, from free and slave backgrounds, and from every black denomination from AME to Primitive Baptist, would be elected to legislative seats during Reconstruction.”<sup>240</sup> Although not explicitly recorded, there is little doubt that the local Black congregations under the strong leadership of Braxton James, Napoleon Frierson, Robert Bond, and John Clayborn led the charge to vote at the courthouse in 1868 when the Tennessee Legislature extended suffrage to Black men.

The history of white supremacy and race-based atrocities in Rutherford County mimic those of a more national narrative when, in the later part of the 1860s and early 1870s, Republicans began to lose power, the Federal government began to remove military control in the upper South, the demise of the Freedmen’s Bureau, and the

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<sup>239</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 69.

<sup>240</sup> Foner, 93.

formation of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Confederate veterans organized the KKK was organized in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1866. As former slaves and white Republicans established local chapters of the Union League in 1867, Klansmen increased their use of violence to intimidate freedmen and “Union” supporters. The Klan greatly expanded in April 1867 when representatives from across the state met in Nashville and elected Nathan Bedford Forrest as their “Grand Wizard.” By 1868, the KKK was highly active throughout Tennessee, spreading their tactics of violence, intimidation, and murder.<sup>241</sup> Steven Ash points out that lynching became the premier “hallmark” of the KKK, “Over and over again, in ghastly ritual that would become even more familiar to subsequent generations of Middle Tennesseans and all Southerners, black men accused of arson or (more often) rape of a white woman were taken from jail by disguised gangs and shot or hanged in a public spectacle.”<sup>242</sup> So although lynching occurred in American history before the Civil War, the rise in KKK activity correlated with a rise in violence against African Americans, often ending as lynchings.

### **THE RUTHERFORD COUNTY POLITICAL RALLY OF 1868**

In 1868, with the consent of Governor William Brownlow, the Tennessee General Assembly expanded suffrage to Black men. Republican politicians running for state elections visited the Rutherford County courthouse in March of that year to solicit

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<sup>241</sup> Mark V. Wetherington, “Ku Klux Klan,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, Carroll Van West, et. al, eds. (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Society, 1998). See also Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2002).

<sup>242</sup> Ash, 204-205.

support from the new African American voting class. John C. Spence reminisced years later, “The [African Americans] collected around the stand, having the appearance of near a solid half acre compact, it was impossible to number them, all showing a great anxiety to be present on the important occasion.”<sup>243</sup> Two white speakers and one Black speaker from Nashville mounted a stand and gave speeches in favor of Black suffrage and the Republican party. However, about two hours into the presentations, the occasion was disrupted when gunfire erupted, causing everyone to scatter for safer quarters.

Spence dedicated three pages dictating the details of this critical day to the Black community, although his biased demeanor shines through in his narrative. Following the presentations by the three dignitaries from Nashville, Spence records that a local African American “conservative” named “Jack Smith” attempted to mount the stand to give a speech in objection to the main speakers when he had to be rescued by his “white friends” as the crowd was not pleased with his remarks. Upon the loud commotions that this presented in the crowd, a volley of fifteen to twenty gun shots were heard and rocks thrown as people ran for safety. Spence potentially downplayed the casualties of the riot stating that “several [African Americans] slightly wounded in the great scramble to get away” and that “[African Americans] were cautious venturing in town for some time after.”<sup>244</sup>

A concurrent story in the Republican-controlled *Freedom's Watchman* detailed a slightly different version of the same story under the long headlines: “Republican

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<sup>243</sup> John C. Spence, *The Annals of Rutherford County Volume Two 1829-1870* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Rutherford County Historical Society, 1991), 273.

<sup>244</sup> Spence, *Annals Volume Two*, 273-275.

Meeting Broken Up; Conservatives Ringleaders; A Disgraceful Riot; Clubs and Pistols Freely Used; Several Wounded; The Fruits of the Ku Klux.”<sup>245</sup> This version of the story claims, “During the whole of its delivery ‘Free Jack,’ an old crazy and drunken [Black man] was used by the Conservatives as an instrument to disturb the meeting.”<sup>246</sup> This version continues, “Soon pistols were drawn and the ball opened. Pistols, clubs, brick-bat and stones were freely used for a while, and the whole square a perfect panic.”<sup>247</sup> The *Watchman* claimed that most of the shooting was from white citizens and that eight to ten Black men were wounded, a couple possibly severely. This article concludes by stating, “It may be well to state that scarcely a fortnight has elapsed since the Ku Klux made their first appearance on our streets.”<sup>248</sup> Nevertheless, despite white deterrence, Black men in Murfreesboro took full advantage of the new right of suffrage when they entered the courthouse in the Fall of 1868 to cast their votes. Spence recounted, “There was a heavy press of [African Americans], about thirty deep at the entrance door. From the time the polls were opened until the closing, they were so compactly pressed together, a person may have walked on their shoulders without falling.”<sup>249</sup>

## **A HISTORY OF LYNCHING IN RUTHERFORD COUNTY**

The first recorded lynching in Rutherford County occurred in January of 1869 when a white gang in Klan outfits forcibly removed Joe Copeland from the Rutherford

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<sup>245</sup> *Freedom’s Watchman* (Murfreesboro), March 4, 1868. Accessed June 15, 2020. Newspapers.com.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> Spence, *Annals Volume Two*, 280.

County jail one night and lynched him. At first, it was alleged that the men were part of a ring of horse thieves that Copeland was believed to have belonged to and, therefore, arrived on the scene to break Copeland out of jail. However, almost a month later, on February 20, Copeland's body was retrieved from under the Salem bridge near Murfreesboro; the rope around his neck was evidence to his hanging, and the murderers tied a large rock around the corpse to hide the body underwater.<sup>250</sup> The murder of Joe Copeland marked the beginning of the lynching saga as it played out in Rutherford County during Reconstruction and the Nadir era.

In his 1965 book, *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson*, historian Rayford W. Logan wrote about the transitional period in American history between the end of Reconstruction (1877) and the early 1900s, a period he termed the "nadir" of race relations due to the decline in African American rights gained during and immediately after the Civil War.<sup>251</sup> Although this work is rather dated, one vital aspect of Logan's research was his insistence on the fact that newspapers had the power to shape popular opinion and attitudes in favor of white supremacy. He states, "attitudes endorsed the policies and approved the events that steadily reduced the [African American] to a subordinate place in American life."<sup>252</sup> Logan concludes that

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<sup>250</sup> *Nashville Union and American*, January 17, 1869. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com; *Public Ledger* (Memphis, Tennessee), January 30, 1869. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com; *Nashville Union and American*, February 20, 1869. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com; *The Monitor* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee), February 20, 1869. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>251</sup> Note that Logan originally published this research as: Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954). Logan expanded this original book and republished it as: Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Collier MacMillan, 1965).

<sup>252</sup> Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro*, 159.

more than any other minority, African Americans were “attacked, caricatured and stereotyped” in newspapers, journals, and mass-produced media.<sup>253</sup>

More contemporary research by historian Christopher Waldrep chronicles the importance of print media in shaping the history of lynching. In his book *Lynching in America: A History in Documents*, Waldrep states, “The relationship between journalism and mob violence remains one of the most understudied aspects of lynching.”<sup>254</sup> He writes, “American lynching is a story of private enterprise—journalism—exposing lynching to national audiences.”<sup>255</sup> Although he makes a strong argument about the effective use of Black journalism to combat racial violence, Waldrep states that “most Americans learned about lynching through printed narratives, stories told and repeated and distributed for sale” and even goes as far as to say that “lynchers learned their rituals by reading of other lynchings.”<sup>256</sup>

Historian Philip Dray also researched the impact of media on the history of American lynching in his book, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. Dray showcases how white newspapers often aided to help fabricate the “crime” (especially when actual evidence was lacking), build and inflame an audience into mob violence, and promote the idea of spectacle lynchings.<sup>257</sup> Therefore, the mention of Rutherford County lynching incidents in local, state, and national newspapers presents

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Christopher Waldrep, ed., *Lynching in America: A History in Documents* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), xvii.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., xix.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>257</sup> See Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2002).

a solid foundation for further research into how journalism shaped not only a national narrative, but also impacted history on the local level.

The use of newspapers as a tool by journalists to shape and change the narrative of lynching atrocities in Rutherford County in “real time” is evident even with the first recorded lynching, that of Joe Copeland. In the month preceding the recovery of Copeland’s body, a local paper ran a lengthy article defending the KKK in general, under the headline “Not the KuKlux: Copeland was Taken from the Jail by His Friends.”<sup>258</sup> The article alleges that Copeland’s associates, disguised as Klansmen, aided his escape from the jail and that he was afterward seen alive in Decatur, Alabama. Again, in defense of the Klan, the paper states, “It demonstrates that, under the mask of the Ku Klux, malefactors have been enabled to rescue their confederates from the clutches of the law, wreak vengeance on persons whom they supposed to be cognizant of their unlawful deeds, and violate the law with impunity.”<sup>259</sup> The newspaper concludes that “whole communities have been condemned by the State authorities for the acts of a few banded outlaws,” thereby trying to portray the KKK in a positive light at a time when the Klan was receiving increased recognition for race-driven violence, albeit under the façade of secrecy.

However, with the discovery of Copeland’s corpse, the headlines quickly changed from speculative and directed narrative to stark reality when, on February 20, 1868, *The Monitor* ran an updated headline, “Copeland Again: His Body Found in Stone’s River.”

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<sup>258</sup> *The Monitor* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee), January 30, 1868. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

The journalist who penned the updated article was quick to blame any prior “mis-information” on “public opinion [that] gradually settled down on the conclusion that his friends had liberated him.”<sup>260</sup> Without mentioning the KKK by name or association in this particular article, the writer still defended the organization by concluding, “It may be, therefore, that Copeland’s own associates, fearing that he might implicate them by confession, pursued this course to get him out of the way” and ended the article by stating, “Indeed, this is the most probable solution of the affair.”<sup>261</sup>

In addition to the workings of white journalists, the political atmosphere of Tennessee during Reconstruction did nothing but add fuel to the fire of racial strife in the mid-state. In his dissertation titled “‘Farewell to All Radicals’: Redeeming Tennessee, 1869-1870,” William Hardy highlights the structure of Tennessee’s politics in the late 1860s and how the political agenda directly influenced social and racial constraints. Tennessee was the first Southern state readmitted to the Union, thereby avoiding post-war Federal military occupation that swept the South by U.S. Congressional authority starting in 1867. From 1865 to 1869, Tennessee was under the political control of the “Radical” Republican Party, which supported the idea of better rights for African Americans, especially with the passage of enfranchisement for all Black men in the state. Granted, the Republican party mainly supported Black suffrage for their political gain. During this period, the state was under the leadership of Governor William “Parsons” Brownlow. As Hardy states, “Brownlow brought to the governorship his own special blend of

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<sup>260</sup> *The Monitor* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee), February 20, 1868. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

vituperation and uncompromising politics; in doing so, he stoked Tennessee's superheated postwar atmosphere."<sup>262</sup> However, when Brownlow abruptly resigned his office in February 1869 to pursue a seat in the U.S. Senate, the Democrats regained power. According to Hardy, "The era of Reconstruction in Tennessee came to an impromptu—but decisive—close with Brownlow's departure" as the Democrats worked quickly to unwrap all reconciliatory legislation passed to benefit the freedmen and partook a course of increased Jim Crowism.<sup>263</sup>

In his book, *The African-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930*, Bobby Lovett picks up the narrative of the fate of the freemen after the demise of the Republican party. Lovett states, "Corruption, violence, and a coalition of conservative Republicans and Conservatives in the elections of 1869 set the stage for the end of Radical Republican rule not only in Nashville but throughout Tennessee."<sup>264</sup> Among other initiatives, the Democrats quickly repealed laws directed at attacking the KKK and repealed the public-school law, which had supported Black education. More importantly, they called for a new constitutional convention to convene in January 1870 to rewrite the state constitution. The revised constitution added a poll tax for voting and laid a strong foundation for contract labor that worked to force African Americans back into the fields on white-owned farms and plantations. However, Lovett offers a window into the Black agency yielded by the 1870 State Colored Men's Convention as Black leaders from

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<sup>262</sup> William Edward Hardy, "Farewell to All Radicals": Redeeming Tennessee, 1869-1870" (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2013), 2.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>264</sup> Bobby L. Lovett, *The African-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 214.

across the state used their positions to petition “the [U.S.] Congress, The Tennessee General Assembly, and the governor about the problems of white-on-black violence, limited access to public education, and persistent threats to freedmen’s rights.”<sup>265</sup>

In his book *Reconstruction: American’s Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, Eric Foner details the battle between political parties and, more importantly, the fight between federal power versus individual states’ rights during the Reconstruction era. He states that by 1869 and 1870, U.S. Congress “stood poised between retreating from Reconstruction and pressing further with its Southern policy.”<sup>266</sup> However, “The Ku Klux Klan’s campaign of terror overcame Republican’s growing reluctance to intervene in Southern affairs.”<sup>267</sup> Therefore, in 1870 and 1871, Congress passed a series of laws called the Enforcement Acts, which gave the federal government the power to intervene in individual states’ affairs when dealing with racial oppression in voting, and especially racial violence. Specifically, the “Ku Klux Klan Act of April 1871...designated certain crimes committed by individuals as offenses punishable under federal law.”<sup>268</sup> Therefore, by 1870, as most Southern states fell back into Democratic control, the federal government’s Republican majority created increased political tension between federal and state interactions.

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 215. For additional information about the rise of Republican rule in Tennessee at the end of the Civil War, see also Bobby L. Lovett, “The Negro in Tennessee, 1861-1865: A Socio-Military History of the Civil War Era” (Ph.D. diss., University of Arkansas, 1978). For additional information about the demise of the Republican party during Reconstruction in Tennessee, see Lester C. Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee 1791-1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981).

<sup>266</sup> Foner, 454.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

Democrat-supporting journalists in Tennessee were quick to print any news in opposition to the new “KKK” law by condemning the power of the Radicals. In December 1870, the *Public Ledger* in Memphis republished a story from Murfreesboro under the headline “A Ku-Klux Trial.” The story states, “The Murfreesboro public has been entertained during the past week with the first trial under the Ku-Klux law.”<sup>269</sup> The newspaper recounts the trial in which a Black man, Charlie Wendel, and three other unnamed men were accused of dressing as Klansman, including draping their horses with sheets and “made a raid” against several African American citizens in Murfreesboro. The courts acquitted Wendel since the incident occurred several days before the passing of a new “Ku Klux law” in Tennessee, and therefore “could not have been a crime.”<sup>270</sup> The article gives several literary jabs by calling Wendel “the Radical and the [Black] Ku-Klux” before concluding, “It shows who are concerned in getting up the ‘Ku-Klux outrages’ in this State, about which the Radicals make so much fuss.”<sup>271</sup> This article is but one example of how white journalists used the local press to retaliate against Radical rule and support the Klan’s racial suppression.

A robust test of federal intervention in local affairs occurred in March 1871 when two Black men allegedly shot and killed a white constable, Pat Inman, near Murfreesboro. The first newspaper article written about the affair alleged that the two Black men, Wiley and Bill Kimbro, were known to have bad reputations and that after the murder, they dressed Inman in attire to make him appear as a Klansman. The newspaper

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<sup>269</sup> *Public Ledger* (Memphis, Tennessee) December 7, 1870. Accessed November 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

further alleged that Inman was a “Union man” and not part of the KKK. However, subsequent newspaper stories presented evidence contradicting these allegations and that, indeed, Inman was part of the local Klan and had been harassing the Black men for some time before the night of the incident. For safety, Wiley and Bill Kimbro rushed to the United States Commissioner’s office in Nashville seeking protection. Within hours, federal troops were called out to investigate the affair and arrested both the white landowner, Mr. Berong, as well as the Rutherford County Sheriff, Edward Arnold. Berong and Arnold were held on bail in Nashville on charges of conspiracy and “going in disguise . . . with the intent to injure, oppress, threaten and intimidate.”<sup>272</sup> Without further research in federal files, nothing is known of the subsequent trial of Berong and Arnold as no further stories appear in the historical newspapers. Arnold remained in office as sheriff of Rutherford County for several years after this incident.<sup>273</sup>

The murder of Joe Copeland was the first of a series of lynchings in Murfreesboro and marked a new chapter in racial violence in this mid-state community. Between 1869 and 1887, there were nine recorded lynchings in Rutherford County, most occurring in Murfreesboro or close to the city limits. Of these nine occurrences, eight involved African American men as victims, while one involved the lynching of a white man who shot and killed a white constable. In their book, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*, authors Steward E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck use historical analysis to test hypothesis in the study of lynching in Southern states. By analyzing

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<sup>272</sup> *The Tennessean* (Nashville) March 10, 1871. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>273</sup> Edward Arnold served as Sheriff of Rutherford County from April 1870 until September 1872 and again from September 1876 until September 1880. See Barry Lamb, *Rutherford County Officers, 1804-1994* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: private, 2017).

lynching statistics gathered by the NAACP, Tuskegee University, and the *Chicago Tribune*, along with their own contributions, Tolnay and Beck concluded that failed post-Civil War politics and significant economic decline starting in the 1870s opened the door for the lynching saga to take shape for future decades in American history.<sup>274</sup>

According to Tolnay and Beck, the *Chicago Tribune* was the first organization to begin recording lynching statistics in America in 1882.<sup>275</sup> Therefore, there are no comprehensive statistical records available for lynchings that occurred before this date. Tolnay and Beck's data compilations include 214 confirmed lynchings in Tennessee. However, because of the date restraints of their study, they only include two of the ten lynchings that occurred in Rutherford County. Some quick statistical analysis of their data for Tennessee reveals that the majority of lynchings in the state took place in 1892, which was the same peak year for lynchings in the nation. Of the 214 lynchings in Tennessee, 205 of the victims were males and eight were females, while 175 victims were black and 36 were white (and two unknown). The majority of lynchings took place in West Tennessee (97 victims), followed by Middle Tennessee (80 victims), and the least in East Tennessee (33 victims).<sup>276</sup> It is interesting to note that the height of lynching in

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<sup>274</sup> See Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995). Tolnay and Beck are quick to credit Arthur F. Raper, an earlier historian who researched the link between lethal mob violence in relation to failed cotton prices; See Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933). Tolnay and Beck also credit historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage for his research into the connections between lynching and the economy in Georgia and Virginia; See W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

<sup>275</sup> Tolnay and Beck, 259.

<sup>276</sup> Lynching statistics for Tennessee gleaned from the data compiled by Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck; additional analysis was completed by the author of this dissertation. For more recent research and statistical analysis on lynching in Tennessee, see Carrie A. Russell, "Reckoning with a Violent and Lawless Past: A Study of Race, Violence and Reconciliation in Tennessee" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 2010).

Rutherford County took place more than a decade before the peak in the national trend in lynching in 1892. However, as historian Michael Pfeifer has pointed out, there is a dire need for continuing research on more focused geographic regions and atrocities that occurred before 1882 to enlighten the historiography of lynching and racial violence in America.<sup>277</sup>

According to the statistical analysis presented by Tolnay and Beck, the most frequent allegations against African American lynching victims in the South were murder and non-sexual assault (47.1%), while the second most common allegations involved some type of sexual violation, including rape (33.6%).<sup>278</sup> Historian Philip Dray furthered this historiographical inquiry by reviewing the personal research of Ida B. Wells, one of the most famous and adamant anti-lynching advocates in American history. Dray states that “Wells was one of the first people in America to perceive that the talk of chivalry and beastlike blacks ravaging white girls was largely fallacious, and that such ideas were being used to help maintain a permanent hysteria to legitimize lynching.”<sup>279</sup> Historian Michael Pfeifer concurs with this revelation and offers that “Southern editors argued incessantly, for instance, that the criminal justice system did not afford sufficiently rapid and harsh punishment for rape allegedly committed by African American men upon white women and that lynchers thus felt compelled to act to protect white communities.”<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> See Michael J. Pfeifer, “At the Hands of Parties Unknown? The State of the Field of Lynching Scholarship,” *The Journal of American History* (December 2014): 832-846. Accessed August 8, 2019. <https://academic.oup.com/jah/article-abstract/101/3/832/796400>.

<sup>278</sup> Tolnay and Beck, 48.

<sup>279</sup> Dray, 64.

<sup>280</sup> Michael Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 116.

Therefore, the sheer fear of Black sexual deviance against “pure” white women was enough to unite white society to support racial lynchings and maintain white social supremacy at all costs.

While the first recorded lynching in Murfreesboro was under the allegation of horse theft, the majority of the lynchings in Rutherford County involved the allegation of Black men “ravishing” white women. On May 31, 1873, the three leading newspapers in Nashville ran a story outlining “An Atrocious Crime” in which a Black man named Joe Woods, who resided close to Murfreesboro, allegedly attacked and raped a white woman by the name of Mrs. Elizabeth Hampton. Mrs. Hampton was a widow who lived with her three young children as tenants on the farm of a white man, Richard Nance. The newspapers alleged that Woods, who previously occupied the same cabin on the Nance place prior to the Hamptons moving there, attacked Mrs. Hampton with an ax, fracturing her skull while her three young children were asleep. Mrs. Hampton supposedly implicated Woods as her assailant before she passed away a few days later. Woods was apprehended and confined in the Murfreesboro jail. On the night of June 14, a mob of roughly fifty white men took Woods and hung him from a tree two miles outside of town.<sup>281</sup> In July of 1873, the Rutherford County Court appropriated \$5 to pay W. H. Brumbach “for holding an inquest on the body of Jo. Woods (deceased), colored.”<sup>282</sup> The following month, the Rutherford County Courts approved paying \$5.00 to Ed Lyon “for

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<sup>281</sup> *Nashville Union and American*, May 31, 1873. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com; *The Tennessean*, May 31, 1873. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com; *Republican Banner* (Nashville, Tennessee), May 31, 1873. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com; *The Tennessean*, June 17, 1873. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>282</sup> Rutherford County Daily Court Minute Book GG, 288. Rutherford County Archives.

hauling Jo. Woods (colored) to the graveyard and burying him. Jo. Woods was the [Black man] hung by unknown parties near the Salem Bridge.”<sup>283</sup>

A short excerpt in the August 13, 1874, edition of *The Murfreesboro Monitor* newspaper highlights the next recorded lynching near Murfreesboro. According to this report, “A masked party called on the cabin of Sam Peebles, on the place of Dr. L. Davis, about five miles south of Smyrna.”<sup>284</sup> The newspaper alleges that a mob accosted and murdered Peebles. The newspaper reported: “After taking him some distance in the woods they tied his elbows together with a cord passed behind, then fired six balls into his body and left.”<sup>285</sup> The story concludes by stating that there were no known reasons behind this lynching.

On August 13, 1875, *The Wheeling Daily Register* in West Virginia printed a story about another recorded lynching near Murfreesboro. According to the story, a mob of seventy-five to one hundred men took Jesse Woodson and hung him from the same tree used for the lynching of Joe Woods. Woodson had previously been arrested for the murder of a woman named Mrs. Jarrett on May 12, 1875, and imprisoned in Nashville to await his trial. He was brought back to Murfreesboro on the day of the lynching. On August 14, *The Tennessean* ran an editorial condemning the lynching in Murfreesboro and laying the blame on the authorities, stating that it was the job of the “regular constituted officers” to do their duty of “preventing this disgraceful mob violence.”<sup>286</sup> On

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid, 298.

<sup>284</sup> *The Murfreesboro Monitor*, August 13, 1874. Accessed December 15, 2023. Newspapers.com.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> *The Tennessean* (Nashville), August 14, 1875. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

August 18, the *Press and Messenger* in Knoxville ran a similar editorial stating that the “lynching of Woodson is utterly unjustifiable.”<sup>287</sup> The editor wondered if the lynching was partially in retaliation for the local judge having moved Woodson to Nashville to keep him safe. They concluded, “It is a dark chapter in the history of the town. It is vain for newspapers to talk of law and order, while communities tolerate such outrages.”<sup>288</sup>

By September 2, 1875, the Woodson story was national news as newspapers in the western part of the United States ran their versions of the atrocity. The *Helena Weekly Herald* in Montana printed, “Hangman’s Day, August 13, was well signaled.”<sup>289</sup> In addition to Woodson, they referenced three concurring lynchings in Tennessee that day (one each in Knoxville, Tazewell, and Rogersville), calling it “a fine list for that State.”<sup>290</sup>

The next recorded lynching that took place in Murfreesboro transpired in December 1877 when a mob lynched an alleged Black murderer named Henry “Boot” Alexander. On December 16, 1877, the *Chicago Tribune* printed one of the most vivid accounts detailing how Alexander was wanted for the murder of a white man named Daughy. Alexander had been allegedly trespassing through the property of Daughy for some time when one day Daughy decided to threaten the Black man. Alexander responded by pulling a revolver and fatally shooting Daughy while Daughy’s wife and children witnessed the incident. Alexander ran but was captured in an adjacent county, brought back to the Murfreesboro jail, and taken that same night by a mob. However,

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<sup>287</sup> *Press and Messenger* (Knoxville, Tennessee), August 18, 1875. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>289</sup> *Helena Weekly Herald* (Montana), September 2, 1875. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*

during this first attempted lynching, Alexander was able to escape. He was recaptured a few days later in the southern part of the county (the town of Christiana) while trying to steal a horse.<sup>291</sup> The newspaper reported that “the Attorney General and Sheriff with a posse remained at the jail until 11 pm.”<sup>292</sup> However, they then retired for the night, leaving just six men to guard their prisoner. Shortly thereafter, approximately sixty mounted and well-armed men circled the jail and removed Alexander. His body was found the following morning, two miles from Murfreesboro, hanging from a tree and riddled with bullets.<sup>293</sup> On Monday, December 17, 1877, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* ran the headline “Drunken Mob Vengeance” and concluded, “The verdict of death at the hands of unknown persons was returned.”<sup>294</sup>

Less than a year later, in September 1878, a white mob lynched a white man (the only white man ever recorded to have been lynched in Rutherford County) named Pinkney Bell. Bell was being held in the Murfreesboro jail for the murder of Constable Abner Dement. On the night of September 10, roughly 100 mounted and armed men took Bell from the jail and lynched him. Sheriff Edward Arnold allegedly wanted to remove Bell to Nashville but was afraid that the mob was watching the turnpike to that city. Therefore, Arnold took the inmate to Shelbyville. When the jailer in Shelbyville refused to take Bell, Arnold brought him back to Murfreesboro, having arrived back in the town about two hours before the mob’s assault.<sup>295</sup> The next day, *The Tennessean* published an

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<sup>291</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, December 16, 1877. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>294</sup> *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 17, 1877. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>295</sup> *The Tennessean* (Nashville), September 10, 1878. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com

editorial stating, “We must have law and order in Tennessee.”<sup>296</sup> The mob had released another white inmate, Richard Arnold (no known relation to Sheriff Arnold in this story), as they took Bell. On September 12, Governor James D. Porter issued an Executive Proclamation stating that he was offering a \$100 reward for the arrest of Richard Arnold, along with \$50 for the arrest of any of the mob that assaulted the jailer, and a \$100 reward for the arrest and conviction of any of the mob that murdered Bell.<sup>297</sup>

Within two weeks of the Bell lynching, “Mob law in Murfreesboro, Tenn” was active again according to a headline in the *New York Times*.<sup>298</sup> The *Times* published a story stating that once again, a mob of fifty men stormed the jail demanding the release of a Black man, James Russell. The Sheriff detained Russell for the alleged assault of a white woman, Mrs. Jackson. “Russell met his death on the same tree on which four murderers and criminal assailants of women have met an ignominious death at the hands of mobs.”<sup>299</sup> The article concluded: “The general opinion is that Russell was not guilty, as Mrs. Jackson is said not to bear a good reputation, and that the evidence of Russell’s crime was weak.”<sup>300</sup>

White northern newspapers took the time to condemn the lynching when, on October 5, 1878, a newspaper in Buffalo, New York, ran the headline “Concerning Lynching.”<sup>301</sup> The editors expressed their opinion by stating, “Referring recently to the

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<sup>296</sup> *The Tennessean* (Nashville), September 11, 1878. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>297</sup> *The Tennessean* (Nashville), September 12, 1878. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>298</sup> *The New York Times*, September 27, 1878. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>301</sup> *Buffalo Morning Express and Illustrated Buffalo Express* (New York), October 5, 1878. Accessed November 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

lynching of Jas. Russell, a colored man near Murfreesboro, Tenn., we said that lynching in the South was rather more common than common schools or church-going. And people talk of Southern civilization! The first step toward civilization in that region must be the banishment of ‘Judge Lynch.’”<sup>302</sup> By December 1878, Governor Porter was once again issuing reward money for the arrest and conviction of any of the mob who lynched Pinkney Bell and now James Russell.<sup>303</sup>

The next recorded lynching in Rutherford County occurred in 1881 when, on July 20 of that year, the *Freedom Press* ran the headlines “Capture of Monster Turner, col.”<sup>304</sup> The newspaper detailed the account of the capture of an African American man named Houston Turner. A small group of men, many of them African American according to the newspaper, tracked and captured Turner under the accusation of raping a white woman near Smyrna in Rutherford County. In the same newspaper were various conflicting snippets referencing the incident and the outcome. One line read, “The suicide of Houston Turner, col., will be inquired into by the grand jury next week, without any resolutions of sympathy for the deceased” while on the same page, another snippet reads “The small box-wood tree upon which Houston Turner was hanged in Court-square is still an object of curiosity, and is visited and commented upon by nearly every one coming to the city.”<sup>305</sup> However, another line in the same paper stated, “It is rumored that the remains of Houston Turner were seen at a home of the South side of the Square last

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> *The Morristown Gazette* (Tennessee), December 18, 1878. Accessed November 15, 2019.

<sup>304</sup> *Freedom Press* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee), July 20, 1881. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

Monday night undergoing process of ‘embalming’ for shipment to New York. We learn that they will be on exhibition ‘privately’ to-morrow evening after which time they will be shipped to New York.”<sup>306</sup> It is, therefore, obvious that the white journalists, in this instance, were once again justifying the charges and outcome while adding to the “spectacle” of the entire event. It is also important to note, if true, African Americans took an active part in this lynching.

The last recorded 19<sup>th</sup> century lynching in Rutherford County transpired in 1887 in the town of Fosterville, a small town on the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railway at the Rutherford-Bedford County line. On July 22, a local blacksmith and a railroad worker, both white, were alleged accomplices along with a Black man, Dick Hoover, in the rape of a young African American girl. Within two days, a posse composed of the county sheriff, one deputy, and one marshal took the train to Fosterville to apprehend the criminals. Of the two white men, the posse arrested one without incident, while the other was shot and killed when he tried to fire a pistol. On July 24, it was reported that Dick Hoover “was surrounded at noon today... by a body of [Black] men and riddled with bullets.”<sup>307</sup> If the allegations in this story are all true, future research may reveal how this “Black on Black” lynching, that is, a Black victim lynched by a Black mob, fits into the historiographical study of such events.

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> *Chattanooga Daily Times*, Monday July 25, 1887. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

## THE “LEGAL” EXECUTION OF JOHN HALL AND BURRELL SMITH

A question arises within the contemporary historiography of lynching studies as to the definition “lynching.” Stewart Tolney and E. M. Beck used the definition that initially derived from the NAACP, “which required that (1) there must be evidence that a person was killed; (2) the person must have met death illegally; (3) a group of three or more persons must have participated in the killing; and (4) the group must have acted under the pretext of service to justice or tradition.”<sup>308</sup> However, in the book *Lynching in America: A History in Documents*, historian Christopher Waldrep is quick to argue that “the word ‘lynching’ cannot be defined.”<sup>309</sup> He continues, “That is its most important characteristic: it is a rhetorical dagger ready to be picked up and deployed by a host of actors in a variety of circumstances.”<sup>310</sup> In a subsequent book written by Waldrep, *African Americans Confront Lynching: Strategies of Resistance from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era*, the author continues his argument by stating that “almost any act of violence can potentially be a ‘lynching.’”<sup>311</sup> Waldrep defines “lynching” as a racially driven death at the hands of a mob acting outside of the law. The recorded history of a hanging of a Black victim, actually two Black men in Murfreesboro, exemplifies the historiographical debate over the word “lynching” because although the two “victims” were hung as part of legal proceedings, the event contained all the elements of a spectacle lynching.

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<sup>308</sup> Tolney and Beck, 260.

<sup>309</sup> Waldrep, xvii.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> Christopher Waldrep, *African Americans Confront Lynching: Strategies of Resistance from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), xiii.

On Friday, February 20, 1880, Murfreesboro witnessed a legal execution by hanging of two African American men, John Hall and Burrell Smith, who received the ultimate sentence for the murder of a white shopkeeper named Major H. S. Pugh. However, the story of Hall and Smith opens many caveats into a complex history of racial injustice that was taking place in Murfreesboro at this time. The *Tennessean* newspaper in Nashville printed an extensive exposé of the Hall and Smith narrative, giving extensive details of the events surrounding and leading up to the execution.

The story of Hall and Smith began in early 1879 when a band of criminals began burglarizing stores and burning warehouses in and around Murfreesboro. On the night of May 16, 1879, Major Pugh stepped outside to investigate his store after being awakened by his barking dogs. Pugh's movements alarmed Hall and Burrell who allegedly fired a pistol in his direction. The bullet passed through Pugh's abdomen, and he died the following evening from his infliction. Sheriff Edward Arnold, who had been investigating a rash of recent robberies and arsons, tracked several leads, which led him to the arrest of Hall and Smith on the evening of May 24. Sheriff Arnold reportedly thwarted at least two potential lynchings of the inmates on two separate occasions in the days that followed. Several leading citizens of the town pleaded with Governor Albert S. Marks to uphold justice in Murfreesboro; to this end, the Governor made a speech on the steps of the Rutherford County courthouse on the evening of May 26, encouraging the locals to uphold the law and promised a speedy trial.

The Rutherford County Criminal Court arraigned Smith and Hall in a case that lasted from June 30 to July 3. A jury convicted both for murder and sentenced them to

execution on August 8, 1879. However, after an appeal to the State Supreme Court, which upheld the lower court ruling, Smith and Hall's execution was re-slated for February 20, 1880. At this point the story turns more gruesome as county officials allowed the execution to be carried out on private property adjacent to the city limits. The property owner, Mr. Kerr, built a grandstand near the gallows, charged for premium seating, and sold barbeque and drinks. Roughly 10,000 people attended the public execution.<sup>312</sup>

Allegedly, Smith and Hall made an agreement with several local doctors as to the treatment of their bodies, postmortem. Minutes after Hall and Smith were declared dead, the doctors had the bodies cut down from the gallows and moved to a nearby store where an operating room, of sorts, had been established for postmortem experiments to try and resuscitate the dead. The doctors removed the victim's clothes, wrapped them in hot, wet towels and then introduced electricity to numerous parts of the body to study the contractions of the muscles. After about thirty minutes, the experiments were stopped having been called "successful" and the bodies were "retained for dissection."<sup>313</sup> The story of Smith and Hall became part of local lore and found repeated mentions in local newspapers for over 100 years.

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<sup>312</sup> *The Tennessean* (Nashville), February 21, 1880. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

<sup>313</sup> *The Tennessean* (Nashville), February 21, 1880. Accessed October 15, 2019. Newspapers.com.

## CONCLUSION

In 1999, antique dealer James Allen edited and published a collection of lynching photographs and postcards titled *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, which became a best-selling book and sparked one of the most heated debates in recent history over the issue of public memory surrounding race-based atrocities in American history, specifically the vigilante murder of predominantly Black victims by predominantly white mobs.<sup>314</sup> Allen's work has done more to propel the historiography of lynching in America than any single work in the prior century, not to say there were not some foundational works already present.<sup>315</sup> The history of lynching in Rutherford County somewhat conforms to the broader history in terms of statistical analysis, but also provides a micro-study into how Tennessee's politics and upper-South economy slightly altered the chronology of racial atrocities in this region, leading to a crescendo of local racial violence in the decade before the national height of race-based lynchings.

The Murfreesboro riot of 1868 seemingly fostered an era of racial violence against the new Black communities forming in Rutherford County. Between 1869 and 1887, Rutherford County witnessed nine documented lynchings, consistent with the unsuppressed Klan rule in the region.<sup>316</sup> Most of these lynchings occurred in the 1870s. However, these events did not seem to deter the construction of Black institutions as

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<sup>314</sup> James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (New York: Twin Palms Publishers, 1999).

<sup>315</sup> See the following: Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1933); Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Under the Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>316</sup> This statistic does not include a tenth recorded lynching, that of George Johnson in 1908, since this last event took place outside of the time frame of this study.

African Americans established numerous Black churches in Murfreesboro and the county. Yet, without any recorded sermons or speeches surviving from Rutherford County's first post-war Black leaders, it is hard to gauge the voice of Black leadership in thwarting white violence. It is quite possible that the era of lynching was enough to force the Civil War-era Black leaders from the Murfreesboro pulpits. John Clayborn moved to Shelbyville by 1873, where he served as pastor and was highly influential with both Turner School (named for Bishop Henry McNeal Turner) in that city and Central Tennessee College (the founding school for Meharry Medical College) in Nashville. Braxton James relocated to Lebanon by 1877, serving as a pastor until his death in 1885. It is unclear whether these two foundational leaders moved on their own accord or were re-stationed by their denominations. Yet, the passage of time between 1860 and 1890 reveals the dedication to Black institution building as reflected in the legacy of Black church congregations, as revealed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4 – LEGACIES OF BLACK INSTITUTION BUILDING ON THE LANDSCAPE

In 2003, the outgoing president of the National Council of Public History, Dr. Rebecca Conard, challenged the editorial board of *The Public Historian* to introspectively reflect and define what sets public history apart from other fields of history. At the time, Conard stated that “the recent attention public history has received as a vital component of graduate education in history makes it imperative that public historians take a deeper interest in what sets this field apart from all the other fields of history.”<sup>317</sup> Conard was an active participant at the First National Symposium on Public History, held in Montecito, California, in 1979, before starting a cultural resources management firm in Iowa. When she later became a college professor, Conard worked to cast aside notions that “sufficient training in public history need consist only of the usual methods and content courses on the one hand and some ‘real world’ work experience on the other.”<sup>318</sup> Conard was not satisfied with the notion that public history simply meant a blending of traditional history with theoretical education in a specific field of public history such as historic preservation or archival management. Instead, Conard argued that what sets public history apart from traditional modes of historical inquiry was the intrinsic “fourth dimension” of history: practice. The transient application of historical theory and even pedagogy outside of academia is what propels the historian into the profession of public

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<sup>317</sup> Rebecca Conard, “Public History as Reflective Practice: An Introduction,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2006, 9.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

historian. Therefore, this constant introspection of practical application defines the true nature of being a public historian.

This last chapter explores that intrinsic fourth dimension of public history by detailing two projects in Rutherford County that highlight how traditional history plays into the practical application of fieldwork and case studies. More importantly, this chapter details how public historians must often rely on community partners to engage their audience directly while seeking help to document and interpret a community's lasting legacies. The first project surveyed extant African American church buildings for possible inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. The second project documented rural cemeteries in the county with particular emphasis on locating African American burial sites. I was actively involved in these projects, which propelled my dissertation research as we looked for lasting legacies of Black institution building on the landscape. These two projects offer case studies as models for similar endeavors to record sites of significance throughout the South.

### **LASTING LEGACIES ON THE LANDSCAPE – HISTORIC BLACK CHURCHES**

Serving as my Ph.D. residency project, the purpose of the historic Black church survey was to assist the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation in locating extant structures for potential inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. In addition to individual nominations, several of these properties were already assessed between 1995 to 2000 as part of a National Register of Historic Places multiple property

nomination titled “Historic Rural African-American Churches in Tennessee, 1850-1970,” written by Center for Historic Preservation Director Carroll Van West.

In addition to potential National Register inclusion, this project updated data “layers” to several previous surveys conducted in the county, namely the Rutherford County Historic Property Survey and the Tennessee Rural African American Church Project, the latter being a program administered by the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation. Additionally, I am serving on a committee revisiting and revising Rutherford County’s twenty-year growth plan. The Rutherford County Planning Department is spearheading this project. My layer of data contributes to the “history and cultural heritage” aspects of the new report currently under development and will advise county officials and community developers on sites of potential historical significance. Lastly, this project allowed me to explore theories of “shared authority” as I learned much about the history of Black church buildings from my leading community partner, Ms. Mary Watkins, along with other community members.

Ms. Mary Watkins is a retired teacher, local African American community leader, and president of the African American Heritage Society of Rutherford County (AAHSRC). Having lived in numerous parts of the county throughout her life, Ms. Watkins knows the locations of most of the rural historic Black churches. We further consulted with additional members of AAHSRC, an organization that works to preserve, protect, and promote local Black history and culture. We also consulted with members of “Wisdom of the Elders,” a community group hosted by Patterson Park Community

Center that meets weekly to engage the community in collecting and preserving local African American heritage.

For this project, we limited our search criteria to include only extant African American church buildings that were at least fifty years old (constructed before 1974), and in continuous use by African American congregations. These criteria by necessity negated a few examples in the county where historic Black congregations meet in historic white church buildings, or visa-versa. In subsequent consultation with Ms. Watkins and based on research in the County Archives and AAHSRC files, I settled upon roughly thirty buildings to further explore. I spent time early in the project “truing the sites” by driving to their locations to verify their current usage, while also verifying a few dated cornerstones for building constructed close to our cut-off date for inclusion. This indeed eliminated several churches constructed in the latter half of the 1970s, as well as an additional few that were enveloped by modern additions. Ultimately, I ended up surveying eighteen buildings, plus the foundation of one non-extant historical church. Only one historic African American church from the survey (Allen Chapel AME) is currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>319</sup>

Although I have supervised two similar projects, namely the Rutherford County Historic Cemetery Survey and the Rutherford County Historic Structures Survey, I always neglect the amount of preliminary office work required to prepare for actual fieldwork. After ‘truing the sites’ in preparation for the residency, I spent the first couple

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<sup>319</sup> Carroll Van West, “Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1993), Section 8.

of months compiling historical research from numerous primary and secondary sources, in addition to working with Ms. Watkins to track down contact information for pastors and church officials. I gathered my research into individual church files to be incorporated into the vertical research files at the Rutherford County Archives. However, contacting pastors was indeed the most time-consuming part of the entire residency experience since church pastors generally tend to be long on work and short on time. Another issue we encountered is that most rural churches do not employ office administrators, which is easily understandable. Additionally, the churches tend to not have voicemail or voice recordings of any capacity. Therefore, gaining permission to access church properties took several months of coordinated effort with mixed results.

Several months into the project, and with limited contact with church pastors in general, I knew it was time to press forward with the fieldwork component of the project to meet our deadlines. To this capacity, I recruited Ms. Watkins to ride along on my journeys to document the buildings throughout the county, which took numerous visits over several months. As I had guessed, Mary Watkins proved time and again to be the most important community partner – a real community asset – to merge my academic research with practical fieldwork. Ms. Watkins taught me the history, as she knew it, of historic Black people, places, and interactions as we drove the country roads from one destination to the next. Although I worked tirelessly with Ms. Watkins in the months prior to contact pastors and church elders, there were several churches that we decided to visit without prior communication. Yet, it never failed as we drove up to the next location that Ms. Watkins would remember someone she could call – a distant cousin, an old friend, a recent acquaintance – to learn additional knowledge about a particular church. Therefore,

some of the communication between ourselves and church pastors and congregants took place in the field and usually upon arrival to our destination. Indeed, conducting a fieldwork project in rural African American communities requires networking with specific community leaders and local advocates of Black history.



Figure 16. Photograph of Ms. Mary Watkins, president of the African American Heritage Society of Rutherford County, helping to survey the Key Memorial United Methodist Church in Murfreesboro, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

On location, the fieldwork experience was straightforward historic preservation survey work. I took photographs and gathered information for each structure. I also used an iPad to drop digital coordinates for all sites; the Rutherford County GIS department uploaded all coordinates to a new web-map interface. I also worked with the GIS department to combine these digital “dots” with photographs, which we incorporated into

a cultural history overlay of GIS data for other county departments. The survey is presented in the next section.

## **RUTHERFORD COUNTY AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH SURVEY**

Allen Chapel African American Episcopal Church

224 South Maney Avenue, Murfreesboro

Construction date: 1889

National Register Status: Listed

### Brief description:

Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church is currently the only African American church building in Rutherford County listed on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>320</sup> The original 1889 section of the church is a one-story brick building on a brick foundation with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof. The facade consists of a centered double-door entry flanked on each side by single tall narrow double hung windows. A porch and one-story portico were added to the entrance of the church circa 1940. The north and south elevations are symmetrical and consist of four bays of double-hung, tall narrow windows divided by five brick buttresses. The congregation expanded the church in the early 2000s with additions to the west and south elevations of the original building. However, the congregation was careful to retain much of the historical integrity of the original church.

### Brief history:

While oral tradition indicates that African American Methodists were congregating in Murfreesboro before the Civil War, Rev. John Claiborne officially established Allen Chapel A.M.E in 1866. The congregation initially met in a building located at the corner of State Street and Spring Street before moving to a second building on South Academy Street. The congregation made their third and final move to South Academy Street in 1889. At this location, church members dug the basement, laid the foundation, and constructed the 1889 building, which speaks to the determination of this congregation to establish a church with their own hands and on their own land. The church is located directly east and adjacent to the Old City Cemetery.

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<sup>320</sup> Carroll Van West, "Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1993), Section 8.



Figure 17. Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

Beech Grove Missionary Baptist Church & Cemetery  
 1057 Allisona Road, Eagleville  
 Construction date: 1947  
 National Register Status: not listed (possibly eligible)

**Brief description:**

The Beech Grove Missionary Baptist Church was constructed in 1947 as a single-story building with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof. The original building contains a full basement that originally served as the Beech Grove School, a county segregated school, from 1947 to 1953. The basement is accessed by single doors located on each side of the church main entrance. The original section of the building is covered in stucco. Alterations to the original building include an L-shaped concrete block addition to the rear, as well as a wood-panel enclosed vestibule on the front elevation. The church cemetery is located to the rear of the building. Further analysis and investigation as to the date of construction for the front addition will help determine potential National Register eligibility.

**Brief history:**

Located on Allisona Road in Eagleville, the Beech Grove Missionary Baptist Church congregation was organized sometime during the 1860s. The members gained permission

to build their first structure on the property of Chelsy Williams, a local white farmer. After this first structure burned, the congregants worshipped under a brush harbor on the same site, located on the north side of Allisona Road. In the 1880s, Williams gave the congregants a tract of land to build a new church, which was located on the south side of Allisona Road at a place called "Wallace Hill." This second structure burned on April 12, 1946. A new church was constructed on the same site in 1947. Of interest is that fact that the Rutherford County Board of Education funded part of the construction of the new building since the basement served as the Beech Grove School for African American children from 1947 to 1953.



Figure 18. Beech Grove Missionary Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

Cedar Grove Missionary Baptist Church  
 2497 John Windrow Road, Eagleville  
 Construction date: 1959-1961  
 National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

Located northeast of Eagleville, the Cedar Grove Missionary Baptist congregation constructed their one-story rectangle concrete block church between 1959 to 1961. The building has a front-gable asphalt shingle roof with a cupola resting on the roof ridgeline. A tall steeple adorns the cupola. The front of the building consists of an enclosed vestibule with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof. The façade is covered in stone veneer to the pediment. An extended covered walkway extends from the façade, sheltering the double-door entrance. A concrete block T-shape addition was added to the rear of the building sometime after 1972 and serves as a fellowship hall.

**Brief history:**

Originally called “Cave Chapel,” the Cedar Grove Missionary Baptist congregation was organized in a cave on Ghee Road following the Civil War. Sometime before 1872, the congregation relocated to the corner of Rocky Glade Road and John Windrow Road, but there is no record of when they moved or information pertaining to the construction of their first church building. The congregants built a new church building in 1872 and changed their name to Cedar Grove M. B. Church. The extant Cedar Grove African American school building (constructed in 1952) is located on a lot just north of the church. The historic church cemetery (a.k.a. Windrow African American Cemetery) is located 0.5 miles northwest of the church on the west side of John Windrow Road.



Figure 19. Cedar Grove Missionary Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

**Cherry Grove Missionary Baptist Church**

4078 Yeargan Road, Murfreesboro

Construction date: 1973

National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

The 1973 church building on the grounds of the Cherry Grove Missionary Baptist Church is potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. This is a single-story brick rectangle building with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof with a bell cupola. A porch and one-story portico adorn the double-door entrance on the facade of the building.

Two rectangular additions were added to the rear (north elevation) of the church building between 1991 to 1992, forming an irregular “T” shape.

**Brief history:**

The Cherry Grove Missionary Baptist congregation originally started circa 1863 as the Ash Grove Church, located on the “Turner Farm” in the vicinity of the Salem community. After a series of relocations, the congregation purchased land from T. O. Lillard on Yeargan Road in 1905 and changed their name to Cherry Grove Church. The congregation razed the circa 1905 church structure to construct a new church building in 1973. In 2012, due to the growth of the membership, the congregation oversaw the construction of a larger church building on their property. The 1973 building now serving as a fellowship hall.



Figure 20. Cherry Grove Missionary Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

**Ebenezer Primitive Baptist Church**  
 4122 Old Nashville Highway, Murfreesboro  
 Construction date: circa 1885  
 National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

Originally constructed circa 1884, the Ebenezer Primitive Baptist Church building was moved and rebuilt at its current location in 1932. The church is a one-story rectangle weatherboard covered building with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof with a bell cupola. The double-door entrance is located on the façade, which is adorned with a porch and

one-story portico. A T-shape addition was added to the original building in the latter part of the 1900s.

**Brief history:**

Ebenezer Primitive Baptist Church was founded circa 1884 in an African American residential area called the “Cedars,” which was part of the larger Cemetery Community that formed adjacent to the Stones River National Cemetery after the Civil War. The congregants built the church to the south of the cemetery and adjacent to Van Cleve Lane. When the Federal Government acquired land through eminent domain to form Stones River National Battlefield, oral history states that the Ebenezer congregation dismantled their church, moved it on wagons, and reconstructed the building on a newly purchased lot north of the cemetery on Old Nashville Highway. This occurred in 1932 as the congregation was one of the last groups to leave the Cedars.



Figure 21. Ebenezer Primitive Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

Emery United Methodist Church  
2989 Emery Road, Murfreesboro  
Construction date: 1937  
National Register Status: Not eligible

**Brief description:**

The Emery United Methodist Church was originally constructed in 1937 as a wood-framed rectangle building covered in weatherboard. A bell cupola rests on the ridgeline of the front-gable asphalt shingle roof. A small steeple and cross emblem extend from the top of the cupola. Several additions were added to the church at undetermined dates in the 1900s including two L-shape extensions on the rear (west) and side (south) elevations. An enclosed vestibule, with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof, was added to the façade (east elevation). A one-story portico extends from the vestibule coving the concrete steps leading to a double-door entrance. After the building received extensive storm damaged in 2003, the entire exterior of the church was layered with brick. Due to these post-1973 alterations, Emery United Methodist Church is most likely not eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. However, the church is included on this survey due to its importance showing the resilience of the Emery United Methodist congregation in carving and maintaining their space on the landscape since 1869.

**Brief history:**

The Emery United Methodist congregation constructed their first church on Emery Road in 1869. Originally known as Emery Chapel, the name was later changed to Emery United Methodist Church. After the original building burned, the congregation built a new church in 1898 on the same lot. When the 1898 building was severely damaged during a storm, the congregation built a new church in 1937. Disaster struck again in 2003 when the 1937 building was damaged by a nearby tornado. This time, the congregation salvaged the 1937 building. The congregation dedicated their newly remodeled church in 2005.



Figure 22. Emery United Methodist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

### First Baptist Church

738 East Castle Street, Murfreesboro

Construction date: 1954

National Register Status: Not listed

#### Brief description:

The original 1954 section of the First Baptist Church on East Castle Street is a single-story, rectangle brick building with a front-gable metal roof. A square brick addition with a flat roof was attached to the east elevation of the building in 1975 incorporating classrooms and a pastor's study. A new and much larger brick rectangle addition was constructed in 2003 and connected to the original building on the rear of the west elevation by a covered entrance and hallway. The 2003 addition contains a larger modern sanctuary, while the original building is used as a secondary sanctuary and for other purposes.

#### Brief history:

The First Baptist African American congregation was established before the Civil War in association with the (white) First Baptist Church. In 1866, the Black congregants acquired use of the old (white) First Baptist Church building and organized an autonomous church. This building was located three blocks southeast of the Murfreesboro square on the corner of East Sevier Street and State Street. Due to the damages from the Civil War, the congregants constructed a new building on their lot in 1889. The newer building served the members of First Baptist Church until the 1950s when the City of Murfreesboro redevelop a large area of properties to the south and west of the square as part of the Broad Street urban renewal project. Therefore in 1954, the

First Baptist Church congregation purchased a lot and built a new church at their current location on East Castle Street.



Figure 23. First Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

Grace Missionary Baptist Church  
127 Nora Peebles Lane, Smyrna  
Construction date: 1964  
National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

Grace Missionary Baptist Church was constructed in 1964. The main sanctuary is a single-story, brick rectangle building with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof. A bell cupola rests on the roof ridgeline. A steeple extends from the top of the cupola. The façade consists of a double-door entrance into an enclosed brick vestibule with front-gable asphalt shingle roof. A one-story brick rectangle addition extends from the south elevation of the sanctuary and is original to the building.

**Brief history:**

Located at the end of Nora Peebles Lane in Smyrna, Grace Missionary Baptist Church was founded in 1964 under the leadership of Reverend Joe Gibson and deacons Walter Malone and Joe Harris Malone.



Figure 24. Grace Missionary Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

**Hickory Grove Missionary Baptist Church**

5209 West Jefferson Pike, Murfreesboro

Construction date: circa 1940s

National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

While little is known about the prior church building, the current main sanctuary of Hickory Grove Missionary Baptist Church was constructed in the 1940s. This original structure, oriented roughly east-west, is a rectangle building constructed from concrete blocks painted white with a front-gable metal roof. The original facade of the building retains its porch and one-story portico extending from the double-door entrance. This porch is supported by two bungalow-style columns. A north/south oriented L-wing addition was added to the north rear elevation of the main sanctuary most likely post-1970. Since 2000, the congregation has enlarged the building with several additions. A rectangle addition running parallel to the original sanctuary was added to the south elevation forming an almost “H” shaped roofline. Additions were also added to the original L-wing section at the rear (north) elevation of the building. The church does retain some older artistic stained-glass windows of unknown date or origin. Although the

original church building received modern additions, the church may contain enough of its historical integrity to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

**Brief history:**

According to oral tradition, the Hickory Grove congregation began in the years following the Civil War as formerly enslaved African Americans moved off the farms and plantations in the vicinity of Smyrna and Jefferson to establish their own community. The Hickory Grove Missionary Baptist Church, along with the Hickory Grove School (closed 1955) and Hickory Grove Cemetery (located just north of the church) became the main Black institutions in the community. The Hickory Grove congregation purchased their current lot in 1889. The original section of the current church was constructed in the 1940s after the 1889 church burned.



Figure 25. Hickory Grove Missionary Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

**Key Memorial United Methodist Church**

806 East State Street

Construction date: 1967

National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

The Key Memorial U.M. congregation moved to East State Street in 1967 and constructed this one-story rectangle brick building with its unique concave front gable asphalt shingle roof. While the main sanctuary is oriented east-west, the main single-door entrance is located on the west side elevation of the building. The east and west elevations contain three bays of twin, double hung tall narrow windows. Two square brick sections of the building extend off the rear of the sanctuary. These flat-roofed sections were constructed at that same time as the main sanctuary. The smaller section

attached to the southwest corner of the sanctuary contains the pastor's study. The larger section attached to the southeast corner of the sanctuary contains a fellowship hall, classrooms, kitchen, and restrooms.

**Brief history:**

One of the oldest African American congregations in Murfreesboro, Key United Methodist Church was first founded as James Chapel at the corner of East College Street and North Highland Avenue in 1866. After their church burned in 1967, the Key United congregation sold their lot and purchased a new lot on State Street upon which to build a new church. This move placed the new church in a predominantly historic African American residential section of Murfreesboro and in the same vicinity of other African American churches including First Baptist Church and Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist Church.



Figure 26. Key Memorial United Methodist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

Little Bethel Missionary Baptist Church (foundation of original church) and cemetery

762 Holly Grove Road, Lascassas

Construction date: circa 1875

National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

In the woods to the south of the current Bethel Missionary Baptist Church are the front concrete steps and remaining log foundation of a prior "Little" Bethel Missionary Baptist Church building constructed circa 1880s. The congregation continued to use this building

until they built a newer church closer to Holly Grove Road between 1956 to 1958. The isolation of the church in the woods, a quarter mile from the nearest main road, speaks to the space carved out by the local African American residents as a place of sanctuary and safety. An early 1900s Rosenwald school, known as Bethel School, accompanied the church in the woods until the school burned in 1953. The United Sons of Relief Lodge, an African American social and benevolent association, established a cemetery close to the church starting in the early 1900s. The cemetery is now maintained by Bethel Church.

Brief history:

Oral history indicates that congregants of the future Bethel Missionary Baptist Church began meeting in the 1860s. The church was formally organized by the first pastor, Reverend Neal Crutcher, circa 1875. Rev. Crutcher served with the 111<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Troops (USCT) during the Civil War. Rev. Crutcher oversaw the construction of the first church building on a lot located roughly one mile northeast of the current location. The first structure was constructed on the property of Richard Crawford, and it was therefore known as “Crawford Church and School.” The Bethel congregation acquired their own property on Holly Grove Road by the 1880s and constructed Little Bethel Missionary Baptist Church. Additional land was donated by the United Sons of Relief for the construction of a Rosenwald school. When the Bethel School burned in 1953, the students met in the church until a new school was constructed in 1955. The Bethel Missionary Baptist congregation built a new church building on their lot, but adjacent to Holly Grove Road, in 1956. The older church building in the woods fell into disrepair until it was finally dismantled. The congregation added a stone memorial at the site of the original Little Bethel Missionary Baptist Church as a memorial to the importance of this historical space carved by African American for their community.



Figure 27. Little Bethel Missionary Baptist Church Memorial, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

Mt. View Missionary Baptist Church  
 3340 Enon Springs Road West, Smyrna  
 Construction date: 1970  
 National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

The Mt. View Missionary Baptist Church is a single-story rectangular brick building with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof. The south façade, facing Enon Springs Road, features an enclosed vestibule with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof. The double-door entrance is located east side of the vestibule. A small awning projects from the front of the building covering a cross emblem and church signs attached to the building. A small brick L-wing addition was added to the building in 1974 housing a classroom and kitchen.

**Brief history:**

Mt. View Missionary Baptist Church was founded in 1870 when the congregation built a log structure on the north side of Rocky Fork Road southwest of the town of Smyrna. This first church served a dual role to accommodate the Mt. View African American School, which operated from 1870 to 1918. A new wood-framed church building was constructed in 1912 on adjacent land to serve the growing congregation. In 1967, this building was moved to the current church lot due to the construction of Interstate-24. The

congregation built the current brick church building in 1970 to replace their older wooden building.



Figure 28. Mt. View Missionary Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church  
 228 North Maple Street, Murfreesboro  
 Construction date: 1884  
 National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

The Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church was constructed in 1884 as a single-story, rectangle brick building on a stone foundation. The building has a gable asphalt shingle roof. The front façade of the building, facing west towards North Maple Street, contains a single-side tower. A centered stairway with wrought iron handrails leads to the double door entrance into an enclosed brick vestibule. The north elevation retains its original four bays of tall narrow pointed-arch windows divided by five brick buttresses. The congregation added a one-story rectangle brick addition to the south elevation of the building sometime before 1940. A stucco-covered annex was added to the rear (east) elevation of the church during the 1940s containing restrooms, a kitchen, dining room, and classrooms. The building was severally damaged by a tornado in 1968 that toppled the top of the tower and large sections of the roof. As a result, the congregation rebuilt the church, shortening the tower, and painting the building gray.

**Brief history:**

Located at the corner of North Maple Street and East Lytle Street in historic downtown Murfreesboro, the Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church building is one of the oldest African American church buildings in the city. According to the church history, a small group of congregants left the First Baptist Church in 1872 during a session of the National Baptist Convention, which took place in Murfreesboro. This group first rented on old frame building located on the lower end of Maple Street. However, they purchased the current property in 1884 on which to construct a new church.



Figure 29. Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

**Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist Church**  
 510 Mason Court, Murfreesboro  
 Construction date: 1954  
 National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

The Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist congregation purchased a lot on Mason Court and constructed their rectangle concrete block and brick church building with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof in 1954. The front elevation of the church faces east and consists of concrete steps leading to a porch and one-story portico (added in the late 1980s). The double-door entrance leads into a front-gable enclosed brick vestibule. The façade of the building is covered in brick while the remaining sections of the building are concrete block. A rectangle L-addition was added to the rear (west) and south elevations of the building prior to the 1980s.

Brief history:

Located at 510 Mason Court in Murfreesboro, the Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist Church is one of the oldest African American congregations in the city. It is possible that a Reverend Rober Bond organized this congregation during the Civil War. At this time, Rev. Bond was listed as the pastor of the “Old Baptist” African American Church, which was located in an old framed house near the train depot. In 1884, the congregation purchased a lot located at 117 East State Street and constructed a new church building. In 1953, the Murfreesboro Housing Authority condemned this property as part of the larger “Bottoms” urban renewal project that literally paved the way for the Broad Street commercial district. In 1954, the congregation received \$15,000 for the building and lot on East State Street. The church trustees purchased their current lot on Mason Court and oversaw the construction of a new brick church. The new church was located in a predominantly African-American residential section of Murfreesboro and in proximity to several other African American churches including First Baptist Church.



Figure 30. Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

Mt. Zion Rucker Missionary Baptist Church  
4806 Rucker Christiana Road, Christiana  
Construction date: unknown  
National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

Mt. Zion Rucker Missionary Baptist Church is a weatherboard covered rectangle building with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof. The building was extensively renovated after 1980 (possibly 1985). Additions to the façade include a porch and one-story portico leading to a double-door entrance into an enclosed weatherboard covered vestibule with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof. An L-shape addition was added to the rear elevation of the building. Due to these post-1973 additions, Mt. Zion Rucker Missionary Baptist Church is most likely not eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. However, the church is included on this survey due to its importance showing the resilience of the congregation in carving and maintaining their space on the landscape since 1884.

**Brief history:**

Very little historical information is available to document the history of Mt. Zion Rucker Missionary Baptist Church. The congregation purchased the current lot on Rucker Christiana Road in 1884. It is not certain if the main sanctuary of the current building is original from that time or constructed at a later date.



Figure 31. Mt. Zion Rucker Missionary Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

Prosperity Missionary Baptist Church  
1735 Mount Herman Road, Murfreesboro  
Construction date: 1966  
National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

The Prosperity Missionary Baptist congregation constructed their 1966 church on the same lot they owned since 1892. The church is a rectangle concrete block building with a brick façade and a front-gable asphalt shingle roof. Concrete steps lead to a double-door entrance under a one-story porch supported by two plain columns. An L-shape addition was added to the back of the building sometime after 1966.

**Brief history:**

Located on Mt. Herman Road in the Dilton Community, it is believed that the Prosperity Missionary Baptist Church congregation was formed between 1860-1865. The first church was located on “the old Haynes Place,” which was located due east of the current church site. The congregation acquired their current location in 1892 and constructed a new church building around that time. Not much is known about this first structure on the new site, but the congregation built a new church on the same site in 1966. This building served as the main sanctuary until the congregation built a newer church on their property in 1999. The 1966 building may be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.



Figure 32. Prosperity Missionary Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

St. James C.M.E. Church  
140 Stones River Road, LaVergne  
Construction date: 1921  
National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

Located on Stones River Road in LaVergne, the St. James Christian Methodist Episcopal Church is a rectangle weatherboard covered building with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof. The main entrance is on the west elevation consisting of modern concrete steps and handicap ramp leading to double-doors. A smaller rectangle addition with a side-gable asphalt shingle roof was added to the rear (west) elevation in the 1950s thereby creating a T-shape structure. The newer addition contains restrooms, pastoral study, and kitchen.

**Brief history:**

The St. James C.M.E. congregation was founded in 1870 under the leadership of Reverend Columbus Walker. Walker worked for the Lee Mullins family, who donated the land where the church resides. The first building, a log structure, was destroyed by a tornado in the early part of the twentieth century. The current building was constructed in 1921 under the leadership of Reverend D. R. Giles.



Figure 33. St. James C.M.E. Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

Stones River United Methodist Church  
 3913 Old Nashville Highway, Murfreesboro  
 Construction date: circa 1900  
 National Register Status: Not listed

**Brief description:**

Stones River United Methodist Church is located on Old Nashville Highway in close proximity to Stones River National Battlefield and located within the historic Cemetery African American community. The Stones River congregants constructed their rectangle weatherboard building on rock pillars circa 1900. The building has a front-gable asphalt shingle roof. An enclosed vestibule with double-doors was added as the entrance for the church sometime before 1940. Several additions were made to the original building over the years. A choir room was added to the building in 1940. A restroom was added in 1968. A fellowship hall was added in the 1980s. A pastor's study and handicap ramp were added in the 1990s. Exterior siding was updated at this time as well. Stones River United Methodist Church may not be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places due to modern additions and alterations, but the building needs to be acknowledged for African American resiliency within the historic African American Cemetery Community.

**Brief history:**

Oral tradition states that the Stones River United Methodist congregation organized before the Civil War. Sometime after the war, the congregants built a brush harbor on land donated to them by Mrs. Sallie Fleming, which is the same lot where the church is currently located. Mrs. Fleming officially deeded the property to the church trustees in 1914.



Figure 34. Stones River United Methodist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

Walnut Grove Missionary Baptist Church  
2430 Twin Oaks Drive, Murfreesboro  
Construction date: 1954  
National Register Status: not listed

**Brief description:**

The original section of the current Walnut Grove Missionary Baptist Church was constructed in 1954 as a rectangle wooden building with a front-gable asphalt shingle roof with a bell cupola. The congregation added an enclosed vestibule on the front elevation and an L-shape addition on the rear elevation at an undisclosed date. The entire building is constructed of wood and covered in aluminum siding. The building has a front-gable asphalt shingle roof.

**Brief history:**

The first Walnut Grove church building was constructed in 1875, although it is believed that the congregation began meetings before this time. That first structure was located on their current lot, beside the location of the current church building. The first church building served the congregation until it was replaced in 1954 with the current structure and the older one was removed.



Figure 35. Walnut Grove Missionary Baptist Church, 2023. Source: photograph by author.

Over the course of eight months, Ms. Watkins and I documented eighteen church buildings constructed between 1884 and 1973. Only four extant structures were constructed before the early 1900s: Allen Chapel AME, Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist, Mt. Zion Rucker Missionary Baptist, and Stones River United Methodist. Therefore, these

four historic Black churches represent the last legacies of Black institution building in terms of continued congregational usage from the Reconstruction and Nadir eras. Of the remaining surveyed churches, eight were constructed between 1921 and 1954, while the remaining six were constructed between 1960 and 1973. It should be noted that all churches in the survey exhibit modern additions that enlarged their capacities and offered additional sacred and secular spaces. As Carroll Van West summarized, “As African American communities stabilized and churches became resilient institutions, congregations built scores of new buildings that were larger and that often included additional space for community gatherings (rooms called fellowship centers and community halls).”<sup>321</sup>

The fact that two-thirds of the churches in the survey were constructed on the same land acquired by their congregations between 1860 and 1890 must not be overlooked. This revelation is the most important concept to understanding African American space making. Despite fires and natural disasters, and often displaying modern additions and alterations, these Black churches are beacons on the landscape for scholars trying to understand the significance of space – when, where, and on whose terms – in understanding African American resiliency and agency on the cultural landscape.

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<sup>321</sup> Carroll Van West, “Sacred Spaces of Faith, Community, and Resistance: Rural African American Churches in Jim Crow Tennessee,” in *“We Shall Independent Be” African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, ed. Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 448.

## WHY BLACK CEMETERIES MATTER

While African Americans were segregated in life, social exclusions and racial atrocities did not stop at death. Although historic cemeteries of all types are under attack from residential and industrial development, Black cemeteries are even more vulnerable because, generally, they tend to be less documented, typically lack an overabundance of grandiose tombstones, or have fieldstones in lieu of headstones thereby making them less distinguishable from their surroundings. General disregard of Black cemeteries by government and local officials is also evident both historically and in contemporary accounts. However, as one scholar recently noted, “Historic African American cemeteries often represent the last grasp of a rich history, a history that is often scarcely recorded elsewhere. If black lives are to matter in life, then they also must matter after life.”<sup>322</sup> Therefore, the advocacy to protect African American cemeteries must center on the argument that Black cemeteries do matter because they represent material culture and social constructs that are genuinely unique to African Americans.

The “Black Lives Matter” movement, which began in 2013 as a political and social movement to combat racially motivated violence against Black persons, has now become a universal slogan for analyzing a broad spectrum of social and cultural attacks against African Americans. Walter Hood argues in the introduction of the recently

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<sup>322</sup> Christopher Petrella, “Gentrification is erasing black cemeteries and, with it, black history,” *The Guardian (UK)*, April 27, 2019. Accessed January 27, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/27/gentrification-is-erasing-black-cemeteries-and-with-it-black-history>.

published book, *Black Landscapes Matter*, that “Black landscapes matter because they are prophetic. They tell the truth of the struggles and the victories of African Americans in North America.”<sup>323</sup> He continues by stating that “. . . it is possible to see reliance, faith, optimism, and invention in the places and landscapes that African Americans made and occupy, but mostly these actions and places go forgotten.”<sup>324</sup> But in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, scholars and local activists are lobbying for better preservation and awareness of historic Black cemeteries.

In 2015, *The Nation* published an article by journalist and scholar Seth Freed Wessler titled “Black Deaths Matter: What cemeteries reveal about generations of racial inequity.”<sup>325</sup> Wessler brings awareness to the fact that in St. Louis County, Missouri, the same area where the Black Lives Matter movement began, three commercially founded historic Black cemeteries exist in varying states of neglect. In contrast, the large and primarily white commercial cemeteries in the area are better maintained. He points to the universal disparities that seem to plague a vast majority of historic Black cemeteries, including a lack of resources tied to racial inequality, a lack of respect from broader society, and changing demographics fueled both by gentrification and Black migration. While noting that today’s commercial cemeteries are more integrated than in the past, Wessler concludes by stating, “In death, black victims of American violence, even in one

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<sup>323</sup> Walter Hood and Grace Mitchell Tada, eds., *Black Landscapes Matter* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 1.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>325</sup> Seth Freed Wessler, “Black Deaths Matter: What cemeteries reveal about generations of racial inequity,” *The Nation*, November 2, 2015. Accessed February 13, 2021.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/black-deaths-matter/>.

of America's most segregated places, can rest beside white bodies. Their grandparents, however, lie buried under weeds and trash."<sup>326</sup>

While it is relatively easy to bring awareness to the overall neglect of historic Black cemeteries, it is more important to bring awareness to the understanding of why these places are culturally and historically significant. To truly get at the foundation of what makes Black cemeteries unique, one must first look at the African cultural and spiritual elements transported through the trans-Atlantic slave trade and creolized into African American death and burial practices. However, there is a lengthy scholarly debate about what constitutes "true" African cultural legacies in North America. Throughout the 20th century, Black and white writers, historians, anthropologists, and other scholars presented works to promote and bring voice to the legacies of African cultural, religious, and social implications that transform and shape African American life. While the earliest of these pivotal works by such authors as W.E.B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, and E. Franklin Frazier laid the groundwork for a better understanding of Black America, mid-century writers tried to tighten the connections between the African American past and the African continent.<sup>327</sup> What happened, in essence, was one of the most significant historiographical debates of all times that still resonates today.

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Works reviewed for this dissertation include the following: W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago, Illinois: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963); Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1941); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, 1954); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible" Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, DC: Associated Press, 1921).

At the heart of this debate lay two main questions: Can all African ancestral peoples be lumped into one primary homogeneous grouping with summarized religious and social traits categorized as “traditional African culture?” Secondly, did any traditional African religious, cultural, or social traits survive intact in the transportation and melding of African and European cultures that later evolved into the institution of North American enslavement? In 2012, historian Jason Young published an article titled “African Religions in the Early South,” detailing disparities in African American religious historiography by some famed historians of African American slave culture and religion, including Albert J. Raboteau, Stanley Elkins, and Kenneth Stampp. Young’s first argument is that “the notion of African cultural loss in the United States under slavery has enjoyed a remarkably long life in American slave historiography.”<sup>328</sup> Young cites Raboteau, who assumed that “the gods of Africa gave way to the God of Christianity.”<sup>329</sup> Young also points out Elkins, who concluded that “beginning at the point of initial enslavement and transport from Africa . . . much of the slave’s ‘past had been annihilated; nearly every prior connection had been severed.’”<sup>330</sup>

To juxtapose his first argument, Young then presents the second half of the debate, “In direct opposition to these claims, another historiographical tradition asserted the primacy of African culture and religion in the development of Black culture in the United States and elsewhere.”<sup>331</sup> For this, Young reflects on the book, *The Myth of the Negro*

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<sup>328</sup> Jason Young, “African Religions in the Early South,” *Journal of Southern Religion* 14 (2012). Accessed April 17, 2021. <http://jsr.fsu.edu/issues/vol14/young.html>.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

*Past*, published in 1941 by Melville Herskovits, because “in it, Herskovits argued for the substantial, significant, and continued influence of Africa in the histories, lives and cultures of Blacks throughout the Americas.”<sup>332</sup> Young declares that Herskovits’ work became a rallying cry for new scholarship that resonated with the idea that “African religion was the source of African American identity.” To these observations, Young concludes by stating:

On both sides of the debate, the central questions have been whether or not and to what extent African American cultures are authentically African; and whether or not and to what extent Black people in the United States have retained (one might say, performed) an authentic memory of their past. In order to enter the fray, one must engage the debate on its own terms and by presuming, on the one hand, that pasts are such as can be identified in their authenticity and, on the other, that the special task of an anthropology of peoples of African descent consists of providing the evidence, both theoretical and methodological, necessary to debate the roll of African pasts in Black American slave culture.<sup>333</sup>

Despite the historiographical debate, there are known consistencies between African burial practices and those found historically in African American Southern culture. Notable characteristics include a cultural awareness of the spiritual world, particular funerary rituals and rites, the concept of “second burials,” and the material adornment of graves. In 1954, Geoffrey Parrinder published *African Traditional Religion* to present his research on African religious customs on death and dying after living and conducting research on the African continent for twenty years. He presents the idea, “To Africans, the spiritual world is so real and near, its forces intertwining and inspiring the visible world that, whether pagan or Christian, man has to reckon with ‘things invisible to

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

mortal site.”<sup>334</sup> Moreover, he states, “All Africans believe in the ancestors, as ever-living and watchful.”<sup>335</sup> While Parrinder acknowledges the untold number of individual African tribes and cultural groupings, he states that “. . . in religious beliefs there is great similarity between many parts of the continent that cuts across racial origins perhaps because of contacts over the centuries.”<sup>336</sup>

Parrinder presents generalized observations about African funeral and burial practices. He states that these ceremonies were long and drawn out in order for the living to “introduce” the dead to the spirit world, and in turn, the spirit of the deceased would not come back to haunt the family. Due to a concern for the quick decay of the body in hot climates, the initial burial would happen within a short period. However, once the family had time to properly prepare the resources and economic outlay, a “second burial” was given at the grave in grand style as both feast and ceremony for the living, but also to introduce the deceased into the realm of the ancestors.<sup>337</sup> Parrinder concludes, “The time spent on ritual connected with the dead is considerable, and shows the profundity of African belief in the spiritual world, and in the importance of the ancestors. The dead are felt to be ever near, and no people have a greater consciousness than Africans of the reality of the watching ‘cloud of witnesses.’”<sup>338</sup>

Writing two decades later, Albert Raboteau arrived at similar assessments in *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* when he states,

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<sup>334</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1954), 10.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-100.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

There were, and are, too many significant differences among the religions of various West African peoples, not to mention local variations within any single people, to permit putting them all into a single category. However, similar modes of perception, shared basic principles, and common patterns of ritual were widespread among different West African religions. Beneath the diversity, enough fundamental similarity did exist to allow a general description of the religious heritage of African slaves.<sup>339</sup>

Therefore, by the time African religious principles arrived in North America, a general cultural melding had occurred, thereby blending religious practices into more generalized cultural traits collectively absorbed by future generations of enslaved African Americans as revealed in North American slave studies.

By the mid-1800s, with slave codes and practices firmly established in the American South, the slave funeral became a delicate affair that shaped attitudes of Black agency and white dominance. Whites feared the mass meetings of enslaved persons over concerns for potential slave uprisings, and laws were typically in place to divert potential large gatherings. However, as Eugene Genovese points out in *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, “But never did the white reaction succeed in suppressing big slave funerals. Too many planters considered the repressive regulations inhuman, and others noted that they either could not be enforced or would so embitter the slaves as to increase, rather than decrease, the threat of violent resistance.”<sup>340</sup> Genovese calls attention to the resourcefulness of Black agency when he notes, “In one way or another, however, the whites missed the point. The significance of proper funerals for the slave

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<sup>339</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 7.

<sup>340</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 194-195.

lay, not in the peripheral of real danger of conspiracy, but in the extent to which they allowed the participants to feel themselves a human community unto themselves.”<sup>341</sup> Ira Berlin, in *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, offers a good conclusion on how the enslaved offered respect for the deceased while fostering “community” for the living. Berlin states, “Combining remembered African customs with the special circumstances of northern life, Black men and women formulated funerary practices that provided the dead with appropriate respect and gave the living a chance to join together.”<sup>342</sup>

Slave funerals were typically held at night with enslaved family members and friends from adjacent plantations joining the events. As Raboteau reflects, “The procession from the quarters to the grave site lit by pine-knot torches, the ‘wild’ mournful strains of the hymns, the prayers of the slave preacher, the graves marked with posts and, as in Africa, decorated with the broken belongings of the deceased.”<sup>343</sup> Genovese continues,

A slave funeral became a pageant, a major event, a community effort at once solemn and spirited. The slaves preferred to have a service, but they would not readily do without a display. In this way they carried on West African tradition, according to which a proper funeral would put the departed spirit to rest and would guarantee against the return of the stirring ghost – a view held by some rural southern Blacks during the twentieth century. Funerals thus served as a conduit for the departed’s entrance into the spirit world.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>342</sup> Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 62.

<sup>343</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, paperback ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 230.

<sup>344</sup> Genovese, 197.

Genovese and other historians make note of the “second burial” custom.

Genovese states, “As among the West African peoples for whom a ‘second burial’ – that is, a memorial at which all are gathered – is *de rigueur*, so it became among the slaves and freedmen, especially in the extreme Southeast.”<sup>345</sup> In her book, *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*, Mechal Sobel states that “rich African traditions of the first and second funerals were merged with white traditions . . . the black Baptist excitement, shout, and vision travel found their place in the second funeral, orchestrated by the central figures, the funeral orator or preacher.”<sup>346</sup> In the book *Africanisms in American Culture*, contributor Robert Hall notes, “Some slaves in the lower South made a semantic distinction between ‘burying’ and ‘preaching the funeral.’”<sup>347</sup> He continues, “The possibility, conceptually available in many African societies from which slaves were extracted, of distinguishing between burial and ‘second burial’ or ‘preaching the funeral’ is important to an understanding of how Africans adapted to the restrictions on funeral attendance in the Old South.”<sup>348</sup> While the concept of initially burying the body was out of physical necessity, the actual funeral was a time to celebrate, a time for festival, and very much a “public phenomenon.”<sup>349</sup>

One of the most vital African American burial practices with direct ties to African tradition is the decoration of gravemounds with personal items and other material culture.

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<sup>345</sup> Genovese, 198.

<sup>346</sup> Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 198.

<sup>347</sup> Robert L. Hall, “African Religious Retentions in Florida,” in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990), 240.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*

In this reference, Berlin states, “Evoking practices of African memory, gifts were left for the dead, who were sometimes decorated with beads, amulets, and other talismans.”<sup>350</sup>

Sobel adds that “at the grave, the African pattern of breaking pots was often followed” and asserts that “for Africans, it symbolized the loss in death and the freeing of the man’s spirit to leave his possessions and to find unity.”<sup>351</sup> In speaking of this African American cultural legacy, Karla Holloway offers this summation in her book *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories*:

Although the century’s years and its passing customs can only occasionally be discerned in the gravesites of African Americans, there were still, at the end of the twentieth century, some southern black burial grounds where one could find plots decorated with the remnants of broken dishes, glassware, bedframes, and shells – echoes of early traditions in West Africa and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century enslaved Africans in America. The families of the deceased had nurtured a belief in the spiritual lives of their loved ones and, through the use of such decorative graveyard arts, broke the connection between the two worlds, eased the soul’s transition from one world to the next, and gave the traveling soul a place to rest.<sup>352</sup>

Specific to the use of shells to adorn the graves, Robert Thompson, in his contribution to the book *Africanisms in American Culture*, states, “A white conch shell renders time and cosmos in exquisite spatial miniature but also indicates ‘the white,’ the world of the ancestors beneath or beyond the sea.”<sup>353</sup> Thus, the material culture presented at African American gravesites portrays legacies to African traditional cultures and helps to render Black cemeteries as unique elements of an African American cultural landscape.

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<sup>350</sup> Berlin, 63.

<sup>351</sup> Sobel, 198.

<sup>352</sup> Karla FC Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press: 2003), 209-210.

<sup>353</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, “Kongo Influences on African-American Artistic Culture” in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990), 167.

In an article titled “The City of the Dead: The Place of Cultural Identity and Environmental Sustainability in the African-American Cemetery,” doctoral candidate Diane Jones brings awareness on how to read and understand the landscape of historic Black cemeteries. Although her study focuses on the Mount Auburn Cemetery in Baltimore, Maryland, her findings resonate universally. Jones argues that “African-American expression of form [in Black cemeteries] is marked by improvisation and often superficial, chaotic appearance.”<sup>354</sup> She continues, “This expression of form contributes to the sustainability and preservation of a uniquely diverse urban landscape creating an attitude and perspective about place.”<sup>355</sup> Jones concludes by asserting that Black Americans consciously and uniquely altered spatial elements to connect the living with the dead, “The African-American cultural overlay provides a lens to not only state the existence of a hidden African-American life, but more importantly to disrupt the continuum between life and death by beginning to comprehend the complexity of constructed landscapes that purposefully omit as much as they explain.”<sup>356</sup>

One of the more recent, concise scholarly studies on historic African American cemeteries comes from Lynn Rainville’s book, *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*. Rainville has an extensive background in cemetery studies and preservation built upon her academic training in anthropology and archeology. She states that her work is “an opportunity to bring the past lives of ordinary

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<sup>354</sup> Diane Jones, “The City of the Dead: The Place of Cultural Identity and Environmental Sustainability in the African-American Cemetery,” *Landscape Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2011), 226-240. Accessed February 13, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43324376?seq=1>.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

and exceptional African Americans into public and scholarly discourse.”<sup>357</sup> She continues, “Their achievements and disappointments must be incorporated into local histories, and in turn they will help us to assess the impact of these families and communities on broader trends in American history.”<sup>358</sup> Reading as part personal narrative and part scholarly field guide, *Hidden History* presents Rainville’s discovery and analysis of over 150 historic Black cemeteries in central Virginia. Rainville focuses on proper ways to locate, record, and preserve cemeteries. Although centered on one particular region, her findings bring a universal understanding and awareness to Black cemetery studies, especially in the South.

Rainville points out that many historic Black cemeteries are not well documented and are often “discovered” by accident during construction and similar projects. They are often neglected and overgrown, thereby blending in with their surroundings. It is very common for slave cemeteries and early postbellum Black cemeteries to be entirely void of traditional tombstones, instead relying on uninscribed fieldstones. Rainville explains that this was common for numerous reasons, including laws prohibiting slave owners from teaching the enslaved how to read and write. There is also strong evidence that enslaved African Americans relied on oral tradition to remember and recite to the younger generations the final resting places of their ancestors. In addition to plantation-linked Black burial sites, Rainville points out that most post-emancipation cemeteries were found in unison with the first post-war Black churches. This connection is important

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<sup>357</sup> Lynn Rainville, *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), xiv.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*

since historians assert that historic African American churches, schools, and cemeteries became the nuclei of early African American community formation during Reconstruction and the Nadir eras.<sup>359</sup> However, while buildings tend to disappear from the landscape over time, the cemeteries remain, and as Rainville states, “A cemetery is often the only record we have of the lost community it memorializes.”<sup>360</sup>

Rainville offers sound suggestions for locating both enslaved cemeteries and post-Civil War (especially 20th century) African American cemeteries. To locate enslaved cemeteries, she suggests looking on historic maps for the names of large property owners. Sometimes, the enslaved were buried in a portion of the white family burial ground or adjacent to it; oftentimes, there was a separate burial ground just for the enslaved elsewhere on the property. While white landowners typically located family cemeteries within 100 yards of the main historic homesite, slave cemeteries were typically located on unproductive parts of the landscape, including rocky areas and on steep slopes. Rainville states, “Nineteenth-century descriptions of slave cemeteries support the conclusion that either enslaved people deliberately chose wooded areas or their owners limited them to these areas because they were not ideal for crops.”<sup>361</sup> Finally, a vast majority of historic cemeteries (Black or white) were covered in Periwinkle, also known as vinca or “cemetery vine,” since this groundcover prevented the growth of weeds.

In Rainville’s third chapter, titled “Accidental Museum: Gravestone Designs,” she highlights how to investigate and understand historic grave markers. She notes that only

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<sup>359</sup> See West, “Sacred Spaces of Faith, Community, and Resistance.”

<sup>360</sup> Rainville, 11.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

four main types of markers found in most American cemeteries. These would consist of headstones and footstones most prevalently. Some graves, either individual or groupings, are surrounded by borders such as plot markers, corner posts, small fences, or even brick or stone to accentuate the burial plots. The fourth type of markers are large family markers used in lieu of individual headstones. Materials used to make headstones are often universal to all cemeteries and varied over time, but typically include various stone, wood, or metal. Rainville notes that 1800s writings often document wooden tombstones, wooden tombstones, which obviously do not stand the test of time and are typically not found today.<sup>362</sup>

Rainville offers advice on how to “read” tombstones typically associated with historic Black cemeteries, “In African American cemeteries, gravestones range from the standardized marker most often found in contemporary urban cemeteries to the unmodified fieldstones often found in slave cemeteries and often feature hand-crafted and unusual designs.”<sup>363</sup> She points out that the size of markers can correlate to the wealth or status of the interred. However, she also notes that smaller tombstones were associated with both poorer families and children; therefore it is important to pay attention to the organization and context of all the burials in a cemetery. Rainville asserts that non-native plantings such as yuccas, smaller variant trees such as dogwoods, or dandelions became familiar replacements for headstones particular to African American graves. She states, “Today, many of the African American cemetery landscapes that I studied are characterized by profuse plantings including yucca, daffodils, periwinkle, cedar trees, and

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<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

clusters of perennials.”<sup>364</sup> While she noticed a few “vernacular” concrete tombstones, she far more often noticed the permanence of small, metal funeral home markers left on the graves. Lastly, Rainville observed that historic Black cemeteries contain a high percentage of depressions, marking the location of grave shafts. Since wooden coffins decay and metal coffins sink without the use of concrete vaults, this points to the generalization that Black families often did not have the same time and resources to partake in the “beautification movement” that was customary in Euro-American cemeteries. Thus, Rainville’s study provides guidance in locating and identifying the nuances particular to African American burial practices.

### **RUTHERFORD COUNTY AFRICAN AMERICAN CEMETERY SURVEY**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, members of the Rutherford County Historical Society based in Murfreesboro initiated a project to locate, map, and record all cemeteries in the county. Using topographical maps, property records, and information from living relatives, the members marked the location of each cemetery on then-contemporary road maps, using a numbering system to delineate between their findings. Once located, the members transcribed the names and dates of all legible tombstones in the cemeteries. They published their findings in 1975 in three volumes. In 2005, Rutherford County Genealogist Susan Daniel reformatted and re-edited the survey and published it again in a

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<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 49.

single-volume book titled *Cemeteries and Graveyards of Rutherford County, Tennessee*.<sup>365</sup>

One noticeable omission from the original survey was a neglect to record historic African American cemeteries. Daniel's book only includes twelve segregated Black cemeteries. It should be noted, however, that African American names were included in the original survey if those persons were interred alongside white individuals or if the cemetery had historic "white" and "Black" sections. In 2009, members of the Bradley Academy Historical Association (BAHA), a non-profit organization founded in the 1990s to save and refurbish an old 1918 African American elementary school building located in Murfreesboro, began researching locations of Black cemeteries. The BAHA members were concerned and interested in continuing the county cemetery survey to include as many historic Black cemeteries as possible. Around the same time, several departments of Rutherford County Government saw the need to update the original 1970s survey by geo-referencing the locations of all burial sites in the county and making this information available on the internet for better access. In this way, cemetery locations could become a new "layer" of geospatial data as the county develops into the future.

With all the best intentions, the project started slowly due to staff and time constraints on the part of county government employees. For the first several years, the Rutherford County GIS department made initial progress by refining their techniques for

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<sup>365</sup> See *Rutherford County, Tennessee, Cemetery Records*, vols. 1 – 3 (Murfreesboro: Stones River Chapter of Sons of the American Revolution and the Rutherford County Historical Society, 1975). See also Susan G. Daniel, *Cemeteries and Graveyards of Rutherford County Tennessee* (Murfreesboro: Rutherford County Historical Society, 2005).

capturing electronic data in the field. Additionally, BAHA sent letters to the African American churches in the county to spread awareness about the project. Since tombstones were never recorded for the Black cemeteries, volunteers started visiting select cemeteries and provided lists back to RCA.

Despite these initial efforts, it became clear that further outside assistance was needed. Therefore, in 2014, the Rutherford County Government contacted Dr. Carroll Van West at the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University. In addition to his expertise and resources, Dr. West assigned one dedicated Ph.D. student to the project for roughly two years. The Rutherford County GIS department hired one GIS-tech position to work alongside the student-historian to capture the digital data and coordinate the web-mapping for the project. Although the “Rutherford County Historic Cemetery Survey Project” will never truly be complete as more cemeteries are seemingly re-discovered during development projects every year, the two-year boost afforded by this outside partnership firmly planted the project, which now provides digital access to the location and information for over 920 cemeteries in the county.<sup>366</sup>

While recording all burial sites within the county became the overarching goal of the project, the most crucial aspect was locating the cemeteries missed in prior surveys. Historic Black cemeteries and burial sites therefore became a central focus. Similar to Rainville’s work, the Rutherford County team relied on a series of historical and contemporary maps, aerial photography, and various archival documents to locate

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<sup>366</sup> See the Rutherford County Historic Cemetery Survey at <http://rutherfordcountyttn.gov/archives/projects.htm>.

potential burial sites. Like Rainville, the Rutherford County team found that only a small percentage of the historic Black burial sites were represented on any contemporary maps. However, through a marketing campaign consisting of press releases, newspaper articles, web marketing, letters to property owners, and other means to inform the general public about the project, RCA received numerous phone calls and emails alerting the team to potential sites. The team recorded the locations of roughly 200 historic Black cemeteries, which now complement the original 1970s survey. The African American Heritage Society of Rutherford County hopes to produce a new book containing the locations of these sites along with listings of the interred at each site to supplement the survey book published in 2005.

As a suburb of Nashville, Rutherford County is one of the fastest developing counties in the region. Recent construction projects, both for residential and commercial development, as well as road expansion, have significantly impacted the county's historic cemeteries. In prior years, government officials and developers routinely relocated cemeteries lying in project areas. During the 1960s, for example, the Tennessee Valley Authority, in partnership with the Corps of Engineers, moved dozens of family cemeteries in the northern part of the county as part of the Percy Priest Lake project. A large historic Black cemetery in the county known as the Reed-Woods Cemetery, containing ninety-five graves, was moved in the early 1980s as part of the Nissan Automotive Factory project. However, it appears that developers are now more willing to work around historic cemeteries and incorporate the sites as "greenspace," especially when developing new subdivision. An example of this is the King Family Cemetery located just north of Stones River National Battlefield. Once located on the back of the

King farm in a heavily wooded area, developers preserved the cemetery by removing encroaching trees and vegetation, building a retention wall, and even installed a small parking lot for visitors (Figure 36).

Like the King cemetery, several other historic Black cemeteries that were once located in remote wooded areas have become focal points of roadside viewsheds. An example of this is the Hickory Grove Cemetery in Smyrna. Once located in a heavily wooded area, which masked the cemetery from a busy road and intersection, this cemetery recently lost its forested barrier due to a road widening project. Hickory Grove Cemetery is now clearly visible to all who drive this stretch of road (Figures 37 and 38).



Figure 36. The King Family Cemetery is now surrounded by a subdivision, although the developer did add a parking lot for potential visitors to the site. Source: photograph by author, 2022.



Figure 37. Once buffered by a heavily wooded area, the Hickory Grove Cemetery is now visible from the road as seen in the upper left of this photograph. Source: photograph by author, 2022.



Figure 38. Graves adorned with white rocks, Hickory Grove Cemetery. Source: photograph by author, 2022.

Meanwhile, some cemeteries located by the Rutherford County team were “hiding” in plain sight. The team received a lead on an old African American cemetery that was once located on a family farm. This farm became a busy site of development in the 1980s and 1990s due to its location just south of Murfreesboro on a busy highway. After the team searched rigorously behind gas stations and commercial buildings for weeks to no avail, they were convinced that the cemetery was either moved or paved over. However, the team received a call by coincidence from a receptionist at the local Dodge automobile dealership to inquire why there was a cemetery located in the middle of their parking lot. The team caught a break, and the Hatchet Family Cemetery was digitally marked and recorded (Figure 39).



Figure 39. Hatchet Family Cemetery located in the middle of the Dodge Dealership parking lot, South Church Street, Murfreesboro. Source: photograph by author, 2015.

While documenting the Black cemeteries, the Rutherford County team witnessed many of the same material cultural elements found in Rainville's study and echoed throughout the historiographical analysis. Many rural cemeteries lacked any or sometimes just contained a few tombstones, although fieldstones were often prevalent at these sites. These cemeteries also tended to have thicker concentrations of vinca, and depressions often abounded. These elements usually indicated that the cemeteries received less maintenance or "beautification" over the years. However, this could also indicate a closer tie to nature as discussed in the scholarly analysis. One good example fitting these distinctions is the Mars Hill Cemetery in Eagleville. This cemetery is separated into two distinct sections, one for white burials and the other for African Americans. The white section has numerous intricately carved tombstones dating from the mid to late-1800s, while the Black section of the cemetery is entirely void of any tombstones, although a few metal funeral home markers were still present. The entire cemetery had a heavy concentration of vinca, and the African American section contained distinct and prominent depressions marking the graves (see Figure 40).



Figure 40. The African American section of Mars Hill Cemetery located in Eagleville. Note the lack of headstones and the thick covering of vinca. Source: photograph by author, 2015.

One feature that was truly unique to Black cemeteries in the Rutherford County survey was the presentation of material culture adorning graves in the same fashion mentioned by Rainville and similar scholarship. Of interest is the continuation of this tradition on recent graves and in more contemporary cemeteries, such as the Randolph Family Cemetery in the eastern part of the county, where shoes and similar items were seen on headstones (see Figure 41). Another African American cemetery in Rutherford County showing strong symbols of Black burial customs is the Mutual Aid Society



Figure 41. Randolph Family Cemetery depicting personal items left on the grave.  
Source: photograph by author, 2015.

Cemetery in Smyrna. Founded in 1905 as a benevolent society cemetery for the burial of Black community members, the cemetery today is landlocked between residential developments and a major highway. Yet, surrounded by thick vegetation, most residents are unaware of the cemetery in their vicinity. Of all the historic Black cemeteries visited by the Rutherford County team, this cemetery reflected the most concentrated portrayals of African American cultural practices, including the extensive use of non-native plantings, examples of metal funeral home markers incorporated into vernacular applications and displays, the use of vernacular tombstones, and the decorating of graves with personal items and other forms of material culture (see Figures 42-45). While the benevolent society that formed the cemetery over 100 years ago dissolved in the latter

half of the 20th century, a new organization has gained legal title to the property, thereby perpetuating its care and continued use.<sup>367</sup>



Figure 42. Decorated grave at the Smyrna Mutual Aid Cemetery. Source: photograph by author, 2022.

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<sup>367</sup> For research on African American benevolent society cemeteries in Tennessee see Leigh Ann Gardner, *To Care for the Sick and Bury the Dead: African American Lodges and Cemeteries in Tennessee* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2022).



Figure 43. Vernacular adornment of grave at Smyrna Mutual Aid Cemetery.  
Source: photograph by author, 2022.



Figure 44. Metal funeral home marker incorporated into concrete headstone at Smyrna Mutual Aid Cemetery. Source: photograph by author, 2022.



Figure 45. Non-native plantings and vernacular headstone at Smyrna Mutual Aid Cemetery. Source: photograph by author, 2022.

One of the largest African American cemeteries in Rutherford County is the Benevolent Cemetery located on South Church Street in Murfreesboro (see Figures 46 and 47). Members of the Benevolent Lodge No.11, a local chapter of the state chartered Colored Benevolent Society, purchased this eight-acre plot in 1897 for the establishment of a cemetery. The last living lodge member, Mary Goodman, deeded the cemetery to Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church in 1988. The last burial occurred in 2002, although the cemetery is still considered active. The location of the cemetery, roughly one mile south of the historic city limits when established, reflects the commonality of African American space making on the fringes of townships due to forced segregation.<sup>368</sup>



Figure 46. Benevolent Cemetery on South Church Street in Murfreesboro. Photograph by author, 2021.

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<sup>368</sup> John Lodi and Savannah Grandey Knies, "Benevolent Cemetery," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Tennessee Historical Commission, 2022).



Figure 47. Aerial photograph of Benevolent Cemetery showing the vast size of the cemetery, which is today wedged between two commercial complexes. Notice the rows of depressions marking the locations of the over 1,600 burials. Also notice the general lack of extant tombstones, some of which have fallen over in prior decades. Photograph provided by Rutherford County Government GIS Department, from pictometry viewer, 2019 imagery.

While the Benevolent Cemetery was under continuous operation, the perpetual care and preservation of the cemetery remained elusive over the past forty years. In 2017, several members of Allen Chapel Church began removing trees and undergrowth from the cemetery while bringing awareness to their preservation efforts. In 2019, Leah Cothorn, a retired certified archivist, began cataloging the names of those interred at Benevolent Cemetery based on primary source analysis, a project which recorded over 1,600 names. In 2020, Dr. West led a team of MTSU graduate students to research and interpret a wide range of historical persons interred in the cemetery. In 2021, the African American Heritage Society of Rutherford County unveiled a state historical marker at Benevolent Cemetery. Under the guidance of Dr. West and with assistance from Savannah Grandey Knies, Field Coordinator at the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, I was honored to draft the Benevolent Cemetery National Register of Historic Places nomination, which was officially listed in 2022. All of these efforts will

propel the importance of preserving and interpreting similar sites of historical Black space making and serve as a model for other communities throughout the Southeast.

## CONCLUSION

Locations of historic African American churches, schools, and cemeteries are so crucial to interpreting Black spaces on the landscape. One of the best analyses of African American space making is provided by Carroll Van West in his chapter, “Sacred Spaces of Faith, Community, and Resistance: Rural African American Churches in Jim Crow Tennessee.”<sup>369</sup> As director of the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University, West uses this chapter to present historical scholarship on Black institution building while detailing the project he lead starting in 1997 to identify and document rural African American churches across the state. West offers these comments on the general synthesis of Black institution making:

As protective safe havens; as the grounds of community; as the grounds for adjacent cemeteries that documented the size, the diversity, and the growth of community; as complex institutions that provided social and cultural services when few, if any, public buildings were available; and as cultural memory palaces that nurtured pride, accomplishment, and promise for a better future, rural African-American churches and their surrounding environs represent the most sacred, and oftentimes secular, spaces of African American institution building in the Jim Crow South.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Carroll Van West, “Sacred Spaces of Faith, Community, and Resistance: Rural African American Churches in Jim Crow Tennessee,” in *“We Shall Independent Be” African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, ed. Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 439.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, 440.

The state-wide African American church survey currently documents over 400 buildings and congregational histories in almost every county in Tennessee. Specific to the findings from this survey, West reflects:

The Tennessee survey identified some buildings with distinctive styles (typically either Gothic Revival or Classical Revival from 1880 to 1940 and then Colonial Revival after that), but most churches are largely one-story, unadorned gable-front buildings, with wings for classrooms and /or community rooms attached to the rear of the sanctuary. Their function and place – not style – within the larger space of African American institution building are what gave them distinction and primacy within the rural built environment.<sup>371</sup>

West's synopsis of the state-wide survey concurs with what we witnessed in the Rutherford County survey where most of the churches were constructed as rectangle sanctuaries with later additions to accommodate expanding services. Overall, the Rutherford County African American church survey yielded important spatial analysis of the legacies of Black institution building, and therefore historic Black community formation, in Rutherford County. Localized studies on the placement and construction of early Black churches in the rural South will add to the historiography and begin to answer questions of how specific spaces and structures gave agency to African Americans and fueled their desire for social change.

Historic African American cemeteries must be understood for what they are and not compared to their European-American counterparts. Black cemeteries were not merely byproducts of death; they must be understood as spiritual places selected by African American ancestors for themselves and future generations. They must also be

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 443.

seen as constructed spaces where enslaved and later emancipated persons showed resilience and agency tied to specific landscapes, a place they claimed as their own with or without legal title. West had this to say when reflecting on the importance of Black cemeteries while conducting the Tennessee African American church survey:

Historic cemeteries surrounded approximately one-fourth of the rural African American churches in Tennessee. . . . Many have been in use since the 1860s and 1870s and most predate the actual church buildings, therefore representing the oldest institutions in their respective communities. What they lack in large, ornate headstones – the easiest way to distinguish a rural white cemetery from a rural black cemetery – they compensate for with clear African American patterns, from the older African tradition of burying a loved one with broken pottery and other items on the grave to more modern treatment of low concrete vaults over the graves.<sup>372</sup>

Again, the findings in Rutherford County concur with broader regional and national African American burial trends. The majority of the Black churches in our survey were either adjoined with a church cemetery on the same lot, or an associated cemetery within one mile of the church location. Our findings from the Rutherford County African American cemetery survey reflect that sometimes the cemeteries are the only Black institution remaining when Black community buildings disappear from the landscape.

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<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 447.

## CONCLUSION

By 1890, five historic African American churches were firmly rooted on the townscape in Murfreesboro. Additionally, over thirty African American rural churches joined the urban churches serving as beacons of community throughout Rutherford County. However, the seeming success of carving defined spaces on the landscape was met with suppressive hostility and violence. The first generation of newly emancipated African Americans acquired land on their own accord and built institutions with their own hands. And when necessary, they sought white benevolence on their own terms to meet their goals. Yet, as generations of post-Civil War Black Americans fought for equality, they did so under the continual threats of white supremacy.

Following emancipation, African Americans throughout Rutherford County established autonomous communities. While urban centers like Murfreesboro offered added advantages due to federal wartime occupation and increased comradery offered by the denser population, the Rutherford County African American church and cemetery surveys detail locations of Black institution building all throughout the county, even in the most remote rural areas. A map titled “Road Conditions of Rutherford County” from 1935-1936 reveals the locations of schools from that time period. This map thereby directs the scholar’s attention to the locations of historic Black community formation and reveals the broad displacement of Black institution building in the county (see Figure 48).

By the early 1900s, the city block where John Clayborne acquired land in Murfreesboro to start a church became a center of African American spiritual awakening.



locally known as “Sixth Ward” and “The Bottoms” (see Figure 49). Meanwhile the Key Memorial Methodist Church became a literal corner boundary for yet a third historic African American community on the northeast edge of town known as “Third Ward” (see Figure 50).

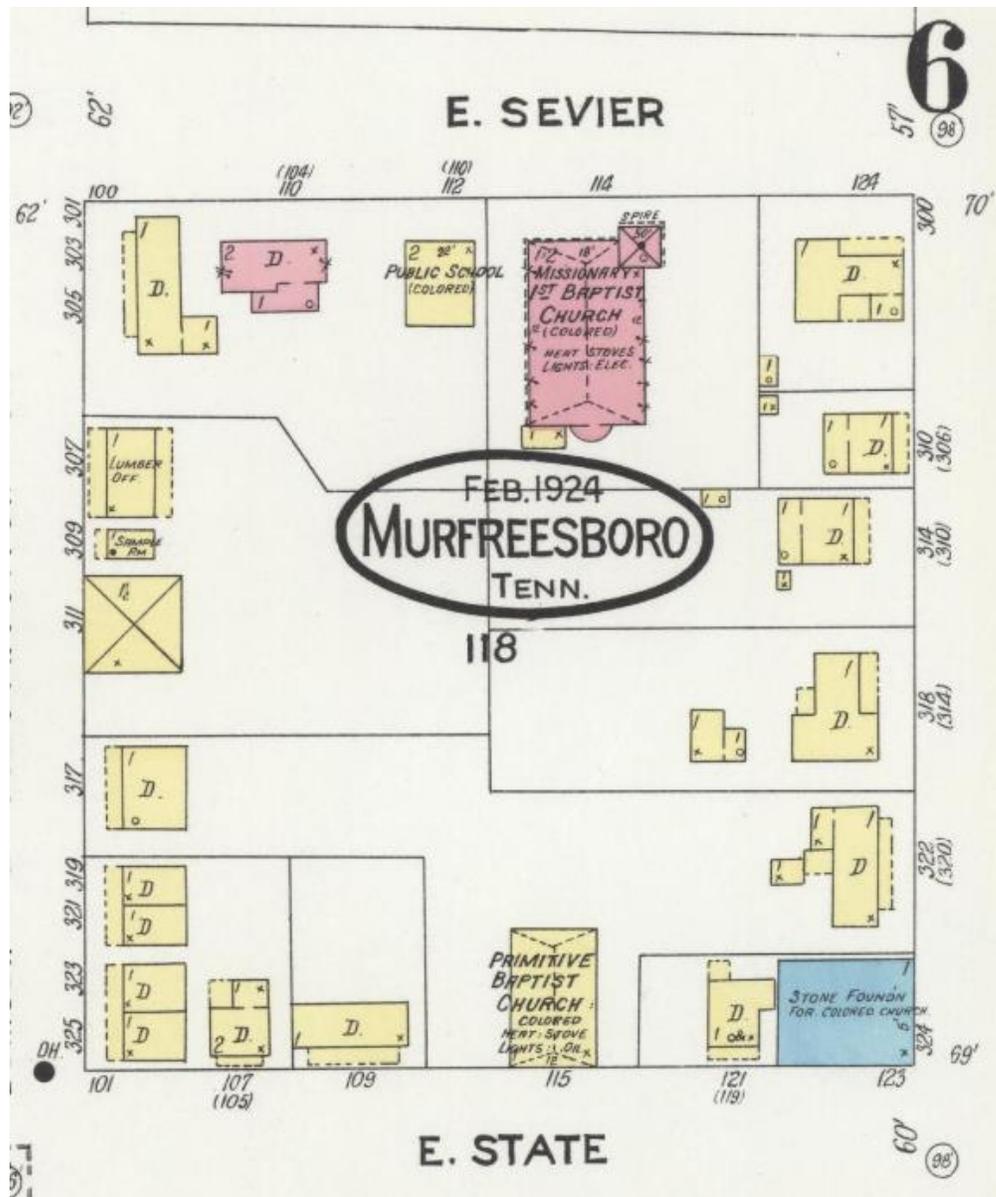


Figure 49. Portion of Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1924. First Baptist Church and (Mt. Zion) Primitive Baptist Church are notated on this map. The “Stone Foundation For Colored Church,” noted on the bottom right, was an earlier location for Allen Chapel AME Church. The building later served as an African American Church of Christ from 1897 until it burned circa 1914. Source: Library of Congress.

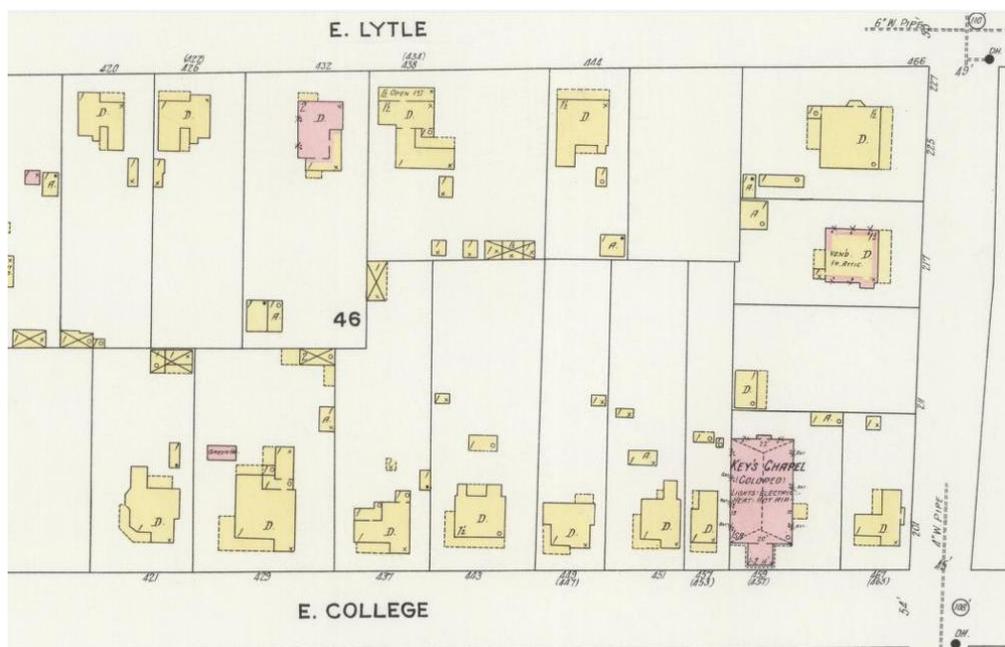


Figure 50. Portion of Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 1924, detailing the original location of Key Memorial United Methodist Church on the corner of East College Street and North Highland Avenue. Source: Library of Congress.

However, the 1950s and 1960s brought a new wave of systematic racism in the guise of urban renewal and a battle against forced integration that once again brought challenges to long established Black institutions.

By the early 1950s, Murfreesboro's government officials and city leaders pushed an agenda to rid the city of what they considered "urban blight" by taking advantage of Federal funding for urban renewal. On January 19, 1953, the *Daily News Journal* ran a story under the headlines "Final Approval Received for Slum Clearance" detailing the \$2 million Federal grant to the Murfreesboro City Council to redevelop fifty-five acres southwest of the town square known as "The Bottoms."<sup>373</sup> Taking the name "The Broad Street Project," this urban renewal initiative was carried out in two phases. Phase one re-

<sup>373</sup> *Daily News Journal*, January 19, 1953. Accessed January 15, 2024. Newspapers.com.



Lying on the edge of The Bottoms community, the historic city block containing First Baptist Church and Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist Church fell victim to the bulldozers. Pushed out through court proceedings referred to as “eminent domain,” the congregations were forced to move deeper into the Black communities they served. Both congregations rebuilt their churches in 1954 on newly purchased lots in Sixth Ward. First Baptist relocated to East Castle Street while Mt. Zion Primitive moved to Mason Court. The old city block where some of Murfreesboro’s first Black institutions were constructed became a city parking lot (Figure 52).



Figure 52. Looking southeast from the corner of South Church Street and East Sevier Street at the parking lot where several historic Black churches once stood before the Broad Street urban renewal project of the 1950s. Source: photograph by author, 2024.

Meanwhile, the Key Memorial congregation remained on their original post-Civil War lot in Third Ward until 1963. However, disaster struck on the night of June 8 of that

year when both the parsonage and the church building succumbed to suspicious fires. *The Tennessean* in Nashville ran a story the next day under the headline “Fire Destroys [Black] Church.”<sup>375</sup> After detailing the destruction of the buildings, the article was quick to note, “Pastor of the church is the Rev. Paul Y. Marchbanks, father of the only [Black] student enrolled in Murfreesboro Central High School.”<sup>376</sup> After this incident, which was never fully investigated, the congregation sold their lot and joined the other historic African American congregations by purchasing a lot and rebuilding their church in Sixth Ward. It should be noted that Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church is the only historic African American congregation in Murfreesboro and the entirety of Rutherford County that still resides in its original building on its original lot.

For the past four years, Ms. Mary Watkins and the African American Heritage Society of Rutherford County (AAHSRC) have worked hard to mark sites of historical Black significance on the landscape in Rutherford County. In November 2021, members of AAHSRC dedicated a state historical marker at Benevolent Cemetery, the largest historic African American cemetery in Rutherford County, dating from 1897. In 2022, AAHSRC dedicated a state historical marker at Key Memorial United Methodist Church. Most recently, on January 13, 2024, AAHSRC led the dedication for the “slave market” monument installed on the lawn of the historic courthouse in Murfreesboro (see Figure 53). The marker is engraved with the following memorial:

In remembrance of the African American men, women, and children who were auctioned as slaves at the Market House and on the Rutherford County Courthouse steps on the square in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The African

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<sup>375</sup> *The Tennessean* (Nashville), June 9, 1963. Accessed January 15, 2024. Newspapers.com.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*

American Heritage Society of Rutherford County is committed to lighting the pathway of our ancestors and sharing our rich heritage and history for future generations.

Indeed, Ms. Watkins and the members of AAHSRC need to be commended for their dedication to bringing awareness by marking sites where earlier generations of African Americans fought to build Black institutions in Rutherford County.



Figure 53. Dedication of the “Slave Market” memorial on the square in Murfreesboro, January 13, 2024. Source: photograph by author.

Despite my twenty-five years of practicing public history with a strong emphasis on African American history, the most important concept that I will take with me from the Ph.D. program is a statement that Dr. West said one night in class, “Leave your perspectives at home!” Dr. West was referencing the fact that as public historians conduct fieldwork and engage community partners, we must cast aside our personal opinions and academic perspectives. We do not engage communities to try to teach them everything we know from academia. Instead, we enter communities to learn from the communities.

Through years of historical research and analysis, historians often build assumptions and inaccurate hypothesis about their subject matter. They often think they know more about the history of their study group than direct descendants of the group. The public historian must remember that they are in the field to learn from their community partners and to interact in community-centered exercises that will give as much to the community as it does to the public historian.

Historic Black cemeteries are important. They are material testimony to Black cultural history and identity. Sometimes hidden and sometimes in plain sight, Black cemeteries are billboards of agency showing the areas where African Americans held their ground and showed their resiliency. Two major recent initiatives speak to the importance and significance of locating and preserving historic Black cemeteries. In 2016, Sandra Arnold, who was then serving as a graduate fellow at Brown University, started the “Periwinkle Initiative,” a national database to record the burial sites of African Americans. As she relates,

Standard measures for tracing family histories and life in the United States do not account for the lived experience of people of color. Unlike even the poorest whites, enslaved Americans were not guaranteed marriage licenses, or birth and death certificates by the state. Therefore, their gravesites stand as material testaments to the hundreds of thousands of individuals who lived and died during and after slavery.<sup>377</sup>

The second major initiative is the African American Burial Grounds Network Act recently passed by the United States Congress. The new law gives the National Park

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<sup>377</sup> Sandra A. Arnold, *Memory & Landmarks: Report of the Burial Database Project of Enslaved Americans*, published online by the Periwinkle Humanities Initiative, January 21, 2017, accessed February 13, 2021. <https://issuu.com/periwinkleinitiative/docs/flipbook>.

Service the authority to develop a national database of historic Black burial sites. This Act will eventually provide funding through grants to assist with research and restoration of these historic institutions.

In addition to historic Black cemeteries, the importance of historic Black churches on the cultural landscape cannot be overstressed. These structures were beacons of hope, centers of community, and sanctuaries of safety for a gathering of people who worked against the tide of racial suppression to forge new lives and fight for change. As West concludes, “Most writers who chronicled the South 100 years ago never noted these little worlds within the bigger world of the Jim Crow South – a blind spot that still remains for too many today.”<sup>378</sup> It is hoped that the research and analysis presented in this dissertation will propel the desire for similar work in other locations throughout the South. Historians must pay attention to the significance of space in considering the significance of Black churches and cemeteries in community formation and institution building in the 19<sup>th</sup> century rural South. It is time to add these “little worlds” to the historical record to attest for Black agency and to bring awareness to the spaces carved by generations of Black Americans.

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<sup>378</sup> West, 440.

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