

Bethel African Methodist  
Episcopal Church,  
circa 1879

## — HISTORY OF THE ARCHITECTURE —

**1817:** Held first services in a tavern on E. King St.

**1821:** Dedicated original house of worship, southeast corner Strawberry St. and North St.

**April 1879:** Arson caused heavy damage to original house of worship.

**November 1879:** Dedicated red brick American Vernacular house of worship.

**1955:** Overlaid red brick exterior with form stone.

**1989:** Purchased former Strawberry St. school, designed by C. Emlen Urban; now home of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church Cultural Center.



Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church Cultural Center



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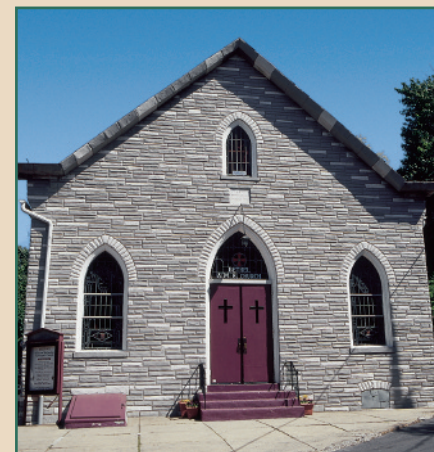
For more information about Lancaster County Heritage, contact:

Lancaster County Planning Commission  
50 North Duke Street, P.O. Box 83480  
Lancaster, PA 17608-3480  
717-299-8333

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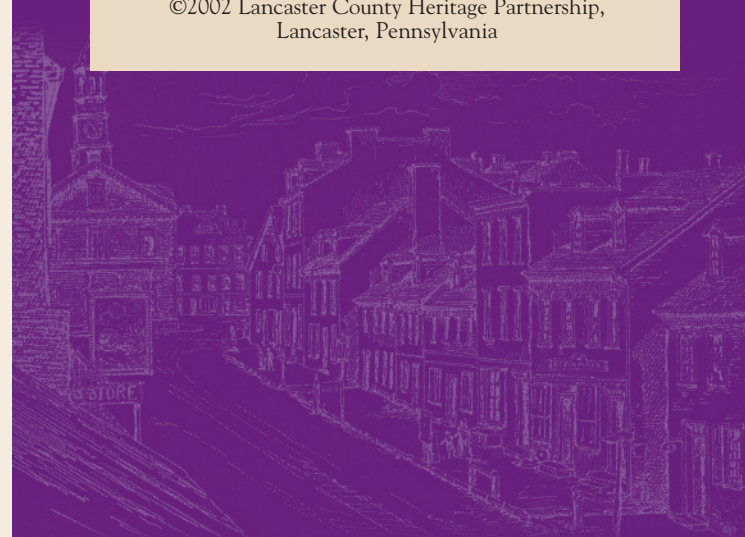
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*Bethel African  
Methodist  
Episcopal Church*

512 East Strawberry St., Lancaster, PA 17602  
717-393-8379

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## STORY OF THE PEOPLE AND NEIGHBORHOOD

On June 10, 1817, fifty free people of color gathered at the home of James and Elizabeth Clendenin to strategize how they might establish a separate house of worship for Africans in Lancaster. This group of founders identified two committees: 1) three men of color--Clendenin, Edward Burgess, and Jeremiah Bular--to speak on their behalf and 2) six white men from nearby Episcopal and Lutheran churches whom Clendenin, Burgess, and Bular would approach for advice. Within days, the two committees met and adopted four resolutions of support.

Oral tradition tells us the African church first gathered for worship in a tavern on E. King St. At the time, Burgess lived and worked at Slaymakers, a public house on E. King St. It seems reasonable to conclude the site may have been the first home of the African church. By 1821 the small community had saved enough money to purchase land and build its original house of worship in the Lancaster neighborhood once called Adamstown and Mussertown (now known as Churchtowne). The Rev. Christian Endress, Trinity Lutheran Church, preached a dedicatory sermon on February 11, 1821.

For most of their first fifty years, the people of Bethel, originally called St. James African Methodist Church, took great personal risks to assist those escaping slavery. Several



Lydia Hamilton Smith,  
1813-1884

African Methodist Episcopal preachers and Bethel pastors--Rev. Joshua P.B. Eddy, Rev. Thomas Henry, and Rev. Robert Boston--were connected to the Underground Railroad. A church women's organization known as the Tent Sisters made new clothing, distributing it to those seeking safe haven. The lumber merchants and Underground Railroad conductors, Rev. Stephen Smith and William Whipper, had close ties to the congregation. So did the abolitionist Congressman, Thaddeus Stevens, and

his confidante and friend, Lydia Hamilton Smith.

Although the years before the Civil War were terrible times for many Africans in America, the free community in Lancaster managed to pass several important milestones. On March 27, 1848, the trustees incorporated the church as "The African Methodist Episcopal Church of the City of Lancaster." A year later, George James, a Bethel trustee, successfully petitioned the Board of Lancaster Common Schools to pay \$150 toward construction of a Sunday school house. The Board agreed because James proposed using the structure as an African public school on weekdays.

Fifteen years later as Fort Sumter was bombarded, men of the Bethel community formed a regiment at the church. They marched to the courthouse where they were rebuffed by local authorities unwilling to provide guns to Africans. Several years into the war, the Union Army finally accepted African soldiers, and members of Bethel fought and died with the Massachusetts 54th and 55th Volunteers. The remains of African Civil War veterans rest in Bethel's cemetery.

On April 26, 1870, members of Bethel organized a celebration to commemorate the ratification of the 15th amendment to the Constitution. Local dignitaries and residents gathered at the church for a service officiated by the Rev. Boston and featuring James P. Wickersham, principal of the State Normal School at Millersville. A large parade, rejoicing in the African right to vote, was led by delegations from Lancaster City, several nearby townships, and the Stevens Drum Corps.

An April 1879 arson attack on the Bethel house of worship was an unwelcome reminder of the price of freedom for Lancaster's African community. Two men were seen running from the scene. The Shiffler Fire Company, once sponsored by Thaddeus Stevens and employing the two sons of Lydia



William Whipper

Hamilton Smith, responded immediately and the building remained structurally intact. Church members managed to salvage the Sunday school library, a sofa, and the pulpit chairs.

The trustees hired William Wohlsen, one of the progenitors of Wohlsen Construction Company, to rebuild their house of worship. Seven months later, they held a dedication service for "a neat and substantial brick building." This house of worship, now overlaid with form stone, has served the people of Bethel for more than a century.

Records from the early 1900s paint a multi ethnic picture of the neighborhood. In her reminiscences of the time, church member, Maude Wilson Ball, tells about the congregation's strawberry festivals, children's projects, and once-a-year treks to the West Chestnut St. cemetery where Thaddeus Stevens was buried.

In September 1989 the congregation purchased an adjoining property, transforming it into Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church Cultural Center. Today, it helps to define Churchtowne, a vibrant southeast Lancaster community of homes and businesses with several dozen houses of worship.

Following in the steps of their forebears, the congregation founded Bethel Harambee Historical Services. Reservations are required for Living the Experience, an interactive spiritual journey to the times of the Underground Railroad. The company also operates the Leroy Hopkins and Mary Taft Hopkins Study Center. This center collects and maintains the history of Africans who have lived in Lancaster County from the 1600s until today.

**Earliest Known Record: 1817**  
founding meeting, Elizabeth and  
James Clendenin home  
**Current House of Worship: American**  
Vernacular, completed 1821, rebuilt  
after 1879 arson fire