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Growth and Independence of Methodist Congregations in Blacksburg, Virginia

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A note from the author: While doing research for one of my classes at Duke Divinity School, I was examining Methodist church records on deposit in the Special Collections of Newman Library at Virginia Tech. These records have a mass of information about the early history of Methodism in Blacksburg, including the membership rolls of the church, dating back to the late 1850s. In addition to a chronological listing of members, there are class lists, baptismal records, and wedding records. As I looked through these records, I noticed that several members baptized or married in the late 1850s and early 1860s had the notation "colored" beside their names. Between 1862 and 1864, twenty-three white probationers and nineteen African-American probationers were listed. At that time, the Methodist denomination required a six-month probationary period of its prospective members before they were granted full membership in the church. In fact, whole class lists of African-Americans were recorded; of the five classes meeting at the church, two were wholly African-American. In 1860, Blacksburg Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS)[1] had 142 members; forty-eight of those members were African-American. In less than fifteen years, however, all 180 members of the church were white. The African-American members of Blacksburg MECS had disappeared from the membership and class rolls.[2] Where did they go? Why did they leave?

This study of Methodism in Blacksburg and the relationship between white and African-American Methodist congregations in the town will discuss three major areas of interest: 1) the introduction of Methodism into Blacksburg, as well as some relevant features of the physical, cultural, and economic setting of the area; 2) the develop-

ment of white and African-American Methodist congregations in America and the South; 3) the growth and ultimate separation of Methodist congregations in Virginia and in Blacksburg.

Beginnings of Methodism in Blacksburg

Methodism Comes to Blacksburg

The laity first brought the Methodist Episcopal Church to Blacksburg. Joseph McDonald was a Blacksburg farmer and merchant who lived near present-day Price's Fork. While in Philadelphia on business just before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, McDonald heard Francis Asbury preach. Asbury had been sent to America by John Wesley, Methodist founder, in the late 1760s to supervise the work of Methodist preachers. After the service, McDonald asked Asbury to come to Blacksburg to preach. Asbury promised, at the very least, to send a circuit rider, but the beginning of the Revolutionary war interrupted his efforts. So, after the second annual conference in 1785, at the farm named Green Hill in North Carolina, circuit rider Jeremiah Lambert was dispatched to Blacksburg and the western frontier. When Lambert arrived in Blacksburg, he found that McDonald had already organized a Methodist class meeting. Early visits by circuit riders were hosted by the McDonalds in their home or in the field at their farm.[3]

Methodism was popular in Blacksburg during those early days, attracting many of the village's leaders, including the family of William Black, for whom the town is named. When the original plan for Blacksburg was laid out in 1798, a lot was set aside for the Methodist Church – the lot where the Whisner Building of Blacksburg United Methodist Church stands today. For the next thirty to forty years, it was the only church building in the community, and was shared with the Presbyterians. After the Methodist Church had outgrown two different log structures, a brick church was built in 1846, and the Presbyterians constructed their own new building at about that same time.

Records from the eighteenth century are lost, but, according to the Recording Steward's Record from 1859-1880, several members of the Preston family, a prominent family in Blacksburg history, were members of the Methodist congregation. Mary Hart Preston, wife of Robert Taylor Preston and daughter-in-law of Governor James Patton

Preston, was an active and important member of the congregation for several decades before and after the Civil War. She appears in the Recording Steward's records frequently and, along with one of her daughters, Virginia Preston Means, is memorialized in a very large stained glass window in the Whisner Building of the present-day Blacksburg United Methodist Church. While Robert Taylor Preston's name does not appear in the Recording Steward's Record as frequently, he is mentioned several times, once as "General Preston" and at another time as "Colonel Preston." He was made a trustee of the local Methodist college when it began to operate under the name Preston and Olin Institute (see below). Waller R. Preston, son of William Ballard Preston, joined the Church in March of 1864. One James P. Preston is also listed as a Methodist member, who made contributions to various funds. It is not possible to tell from the Recording Steward's Record whether this James P. Preston is the son of Robert Taylor Preston or of William Ballard Preston, since both men had sons of about the same age named James P. and other offspring who were members of the Methodist congregation. Another interesting reference to the Preston name is listed in September 1863 when "Sarah Preston" is named as witness to the baptism of "James W. Preston (colored)." Though the record does not indicate whether James Preston was slave or free, it is reasonable to assume that he or his ancestors had taken their surname from their owners since that was the common practice of the day.[4]

Early Blacksburg: An Upper South, Mountain Community

For most of its life, Blacksburg was a small farming village in the mountains. The economy of Blacksburg, from its beginnings in the late eighteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, was based on agriculture and mining. The people raised hogs and cattle, along with crops such as corn, wheat, rye, flax, and hemp. Corn was the most popular grain because it could be eaten, milled for flour or meal, or made into whiskey. Hemp was also a cash crop because the sailing and freight industries used large quantities of it to make rope. Though some area families such as the Prestons, Kents, and Cloyds were large landowners possessing dozens of slaves, most of the area's farming was very small-scale and oriented toward local markets. From the mid

nineteenth century onward, however, significant economic activity in the area surrounding Blacksburg centered around mining for coal, iron, and other minerals.[5]

Another notable nineteenth century economic change came in 1851 when the leaders of Blacksburg's MECS and town leaders established the Olin and Preston Institute. Two years later the school was officially made the men's college of the Baltimore Conference of the MECS. The college underwent a name change – becoming Preston and Olin Institute – and operated sporadically until 1872. William Ballard Preston and Robert Taylor Preston both served as members of the college's board until financial difficulties rendered independent operation impossible. In 1872, the local government authorities pledged a bond issue of $20,000 to persuade the Commonwealth to take ownership under the Morrill Act, federal legislation calling for each state to establish a land-grant university. The school was renamed Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College, although the Blacksburg Methodists, especially the Preston and Black families, continued to be involved in its governance.

According to the 1830 census, 12,306 people were living in Montgomery County, an area considerably larger than the Montgomery County of today. It is not possible to determine how many were considered residents of Blacksburg, but an important fact about the population is that it was overwhelmingly (83%) white. There were 2,082 African-Americans in the county, and most of them were slaves. Only 56 free people of color lived in the county, and 38 of them were under the age of 24.[6] The number of African-Americans in the area increased after the Civil War, when mining became a larger part of the local economy. However, this population ratio was still very small compared to some eastern Virginia counties, where the black-to-white ratio was two to one. This smaller population ratio in Blacksburg likely impacted the way town leaders exercised and preserved power through political and social institutions.

One event in the history of Virginia had a deep and long-lasting impact on race relations in the Blacksburg locale despite the low percentage of slaves in the area. This event reverberated throughout the Commonwealth and across the South. In 1831, Nat Turner, a slave and self-proclaimed preacher from Southampton County, Virginia, led a slave rebellion that resulted in the deaths of about 60 whites and

more than 100 blacks. Grossly exaggerated news reports spread rapidly, and legislatures across the South reacted by passing a number of harsh, repressive "Black Codes." Two of these codes are significant here. The first prohibited slave assemblies for worship unless they were under the supervision of a white preacher. The second augmented federal fugitive slave laws, limiting the travel of African-Americans, both slave and free. In fact, free African-Americans from the North could not enter Upper South states such as Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware.[7] Figure 1, which depicts only the violence committed by blacks against whites and ignores the African-American deaths at the hands of white mobs, illustrates the fear that gripped white Southerners. Given the white-to-black population ratio mentioned above, there was scant likelihood that African-Americans in western Virginia would stage a violent uprising. Still, Blacksburg's political leaders, headed by William Ballard Preston in the General Assembly, moved to limit the further spread of slavery into southwestern Virginia.[8] Presumably, western Virginia legislators hoped such action could fur-

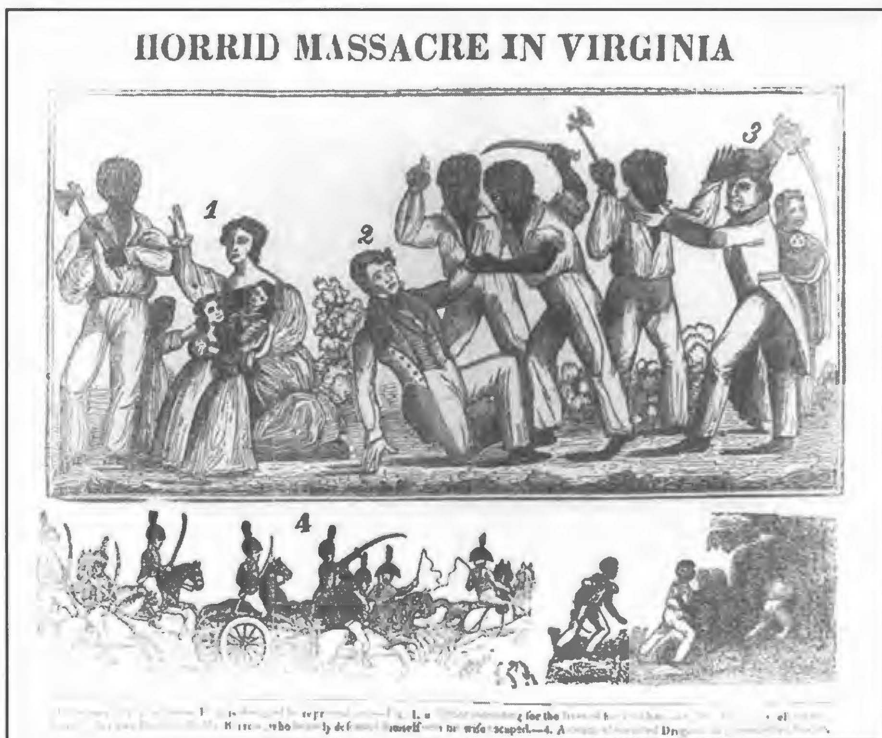

Figure 1. Press depictions of the Nat Turner rebellion.

ther solidify their political base of yeomen farmers and skilled artisans as well as guard their expressed position against slave-holding and/or industrial interests in Tidewater.[9] The threat of violence in the western region was virtually non-existent, but the fear was very real.

Early Development of American Methodist Churches

American Methodist Episcopal Churches

The Methodist Episcopal Church, with an emphasis on charismatic preaching and democratic polity, appealed to a broad spectrum of worshipers. However, in 1844 it fell prey to the same forces that would eventually split the country as irreconcilable differences over slavery led to denominational division. Despite both John Wesley's stance against slavery and explicit statements in Methodist doctrine against slave-holding, Southern Methodists felt slavery was consistent with Scriptural Christianity. The newly-formed Methodist Episcopal Church, South dedicated itself to a Scriptural defense of slavery, even while anti-slavery doctrines remained on its books.

In *The Story of American Methodism*, historian Frederick Norwood documents an observable pattern of division within Methodist churches.[10] More recently, Richard Heitzenrater and other historians have accepted Norwood's premise to explain the divisions that have marked various stages in the development of American Methodism. The pattern of division observed by Norwood is that early churches began as integrated congregations with a shared worship. As a congregation grew, ideological and theological separation within worship and church activities sometimes began. In other words, a type of "segregation" might develop inside a congregation. The minority group would then meet at a separate time and, eventually, in a separate place, sometimes driven out of the shared building and sometimes leaving of its own will. With few bonds still tying the minority to the majority, an independent organization developed. Eventually a regional denomination resulted, where there was affiliation with other, similar congregations. Examples of this pattern of separation taken from Methodist history include the establishment of two denominations – the Wesleyan Church and the Free Methodist Church. The earliest example of the pattern, however, is especially relevant to this study:

Figure 2. Bishop Richard Allen.

the division based on race that led to the establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church.

African-American Methodist Episcopal Churches

Methodism in the eighteenth century grew quickly. A number of Methodist "preaching houses" were built in Philadelphia, including St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church. St. George's held integrated worship services and counted among its members licensed African-American preachers and exhorters, including Richard Allen (Figure 2). In 1787, the white trustees decided to set aside the balcony of St. George's for African-American worshipers; they were no longer welcome to sit on the main floor of the church. Allen and other African-American members found this segregation intolerable. One Sunday as they knelt in prayer on the main floor of the church during the worship service, white ushers attempted to forcibly move them to the balcony. Instead, Allen and the African-Americans of St. George's walked out. They began the Free African Society and soon bought an old blacksmith shop which they renovated as a separate place to meet (Figure 3). This chapel was constructed by the African-American Methodists at their own expense, and worship there was led by African-American preachers and exhorters. Although exercising autonomy in teaching, nurture, and worship, the Free African Society was still technically under the control of the trustees and pastor of St. George's.

After repeated attempts by white church leaders to exercise control, the Free African Society organized as Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, popularly known as Mother Bethel Church. The experience of the Bethel AME Church was repeated, in various though not so dramatic ways, in many other congregations throughout the mid-Atlantic and Northeast. In 1816 Richard Allen and the leaders of other African-American Methodist congregations in Philadelphia and

Figure 3. Blacksmith shop renovated to be first Free African Society meetinghouse.

New York met to organize the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) as a denomination. The new denomination followed Methodist Episcopal organizational structures with annual conferences, bishops, and itinerant pastors. Its members professed belief in the Methodist doctrines and theology given to American Methodism by John Wesley. Richard Allen was elected the first bishop.[11]

Following its formation in 1816, the AME Church sent missionaries into the South. Their work was limited mostly to port cities such as Norfolk, Charleston, and New Orleans, where larger populations of free African-Americans lived.[12] The missions were not successful for several reasons. First, slaves were usually forced to attend the churches attended by their owners. Methodist and non-Methodist whites in these areas did not like the self-help and social uplift message preached by AME missionaries; slave-owners wanted control of the Gospel message preached to their slaves. Second, southern whites were comfortable with the hierarchy and racial roles of their society and did not want them upset by northern missionaries. Third, the

political and legal measures passed following the Nat Turner rebellion impeded any attempts to establish separate churches. By the 1830s the AME Church had withdrawn almost entirely from active mission efforts in the South.

The Pattern of Separation in Blacksburg

The Virginia Annual Conference of the AME Church

In the period just before and during the Civil War, most African-American congregations in Virginia had achieved the level of separate meeting times and places but not as independent organizations. Noted historian Luther P. Jackson notes,

> In Virginia, separate Methodist churches were eventually set up for the blacks in certain cities, but in each case this was due to overcrowded conditions in the white church while after separation the parent body maintained complete control."[13]

One such church was St. John AME Church in Norfolk, considered the mother church of the AME in Virginia. It began as the St. John Chapel of the white congregation at Butte Street MECS, and was welcomed into the AME in the 1860s.

During the war years, the AME Church was able to gain a strong foothold by following Union armies into South Carolina and Virginia. Doing so, AME missionaries saw themselves as obeying Providence and as "gathering in the Methodists who were as sheep without shepherds" in their work throughout the South.[14] Even before the war was over, missionaries in Charleston and other cities were winning over large numbers of African-American congregants from MECS churches where they had outnumbered white congregants two or three to one, yet had no say in church governance or worship. In 1863, the congregation worshiping at St. John Chapel in Norfolk was welcomed into the Baltimore Annual Conference of the AME Church. Within three years other AME churches in Norfolk, Portsmouth, Petersburg, and Richmond had been added.[15] The work of AME pastors and bishops was so successful that, in May 1867, the Virginia Annual Conference of the AME Church was organized with thirty-five hundred members. One of its first orders of business was a resolution instructing the bishop to "write an address to all colored Methodists in Virginia, defining our position and stating points of agreement and disagreement,

and urging all to unite in one common fold."[16] The goal of the AME Virginia Conference was nothing less than winning over the entire African-American membership of the MECS to the AME Church.

As this description indicates, the missionaries of the AME Church were not really evangelists as much as community organizers. Historian Harry Richardson recounts:

> Many of the persons who joined the A.M.E.'s had already been converted by M.E. preachers. They were dissatisfied in the M.E. Church, and joined the A.M.E.'s in protest or retaliation. This also applies to the black sections of congregations as well as to [individual] persons. At times, whole groups would leave the white churches and come to the black. Thus, with the A.M.E. evangelists, the emphasis was as much on organizing new churches as it was on preaching and trying to reach the unconverted.[17]

Their method of evangelization did not rely on conversions, but focused instead on setting up independent African-American churches recruited from the congregations of the MECS.

African-American members of the MECS transferred to the AME Church for many reasons. Some were encouraged to join the AME Church by ministers of the MECS, who thought it would be better than having African-American members affiliate with the Yankee-controlled Methodist Episcopal Church.[18] Perhaps most important, though, former slaves sought to exercise their newly won freedom by choosing where to worship, away from the humiliating practices of slavery and the condescension of whites, thereby demonstrating the control they now had over their lives.[19] Consequently, the primary work of missionaries of the AME Church following the Civil War was in organizing already-existing African-American Methodist congregations and meetings into independent AME churches.

Separation at Blacksburg MECS

Very few systematic records exist that describe the earliest preaching meetings in Blacksburg. Moreover, the historical record is unclear about the racial make up of these very early classes and congregations in Blacksburg, but it seems entirely possible the meetings were racially mixed (Figure 4). As stated above, the population of free African-Americans in Blacksburg during the late eighteenth century was

Figure 4. early Methodist class meeting which appears to show a racially mixed congregation.

small, as it was in much of the South, and in other Southern areas free African-Americans attended Methodist preaching events. It also seems reasonable to assume that prominent and wealthy families of the community, such as the Prestons and the Blacks, owned slaves who would attend preaching events.

This practice would be consistent with the pattern found in the rest of the Upper South, as historian William Montgomery writes:

> The style of evangelical preaching, especially that of the Methodists, as well as the gospel itself, attracted large numbers of slaves, especially in the Upper South.... Whites and blacks worshiped together, testified about conversion experiences, and enjoyed communion of Christian brethren.[20]

Montgomery also suggests that Methodist preachers would attract African-American followers because

> Methodist theology did not draw invidious distinctions between whites and blacks; on the contrary it held that God was no respecter of man's earthly condition and that He loved the poor and the despised as much as the rich and privileged.[21]

In short, though the historical record is unclear about African-American or slave presence in Blacksburg Methodist meetings during the

late 1700s, they would most likely have been present for preaching by the itinerant pastor, even if they were not participating in class meetings.

By the mid-nineteenth century, events in the entire country were building rapidly toward a drastic change. Methodists, along with most other American religious groups, were debating the harshly repressive measures prompted by the Nat Turner uprising as well as the legal, economic, and theological justifications for the institution of slavery. Across the South, white masters became more intentional about Christianizing their slaves in order to exercise greater control. Historian Montgomery reports:

> Most often, slaves... were segregated in the sanctuary, but they heard the same sermon, sang the same hymns, were bound by the same code of ethics.... By taking greater responsibility for bringing the Word of God to the slaves, [the masters] could determine exactly what that gospel contained.[22]

Slave owners feared the message that might be preached to their slaves by a traveling evangelist. In the hands of white masters, the Gospel was not a tool of liberation, but a weapon of repression.

The Blacksburg Methodists, too, were facing drastic change, and this change can be documented through a careful study of the Recording Steward's minutes of local quarterly conferences, the main business meetings of the congregation. Another Methodist church building (Figure 5) was built in 1846; it was the largest and grandest building in town. A year later the Presbyterians in Blacksburg also built a new church building. The Presbyterian building still stands on the corner of Main and Lee streets. Blacksburg Presbyterian Church history records that the building was built almost entirely with slave labor.[23] It seems likely this was the case for the Methodist church building as well.

The new Methodist building in Blacksburg was completed just two years after the issue of slavery finally divided Methodism along regional lines. So, when a new brick Methodist Episcopal Church building was constructed in Blacksburg in 1846, it had, quoting from a 1948 history written for the town's sesquicentennial, "a gallery to accommodate Negro slaves who accompanied their masters to church in that day."[24] Separation within the congregation was the order of

Figure 5. 1846 Methodist Church building.

the day at Blacksburg MECS. This separation was surely more than a physical separation and probably reflected broader social practices at the time, which hardened racial lines and more clearly defined racial roles. Though the Blacksburg MECS remained a racially mixed congregation, the pattern of separation described by Norwood was continuing to develop.

The local Methodists were also involved in debates about the role of African-Americans and the Scriptural defense of slavery. In 1860, only a few months before the beginning of the Civil War, the Church at Blacksburg made a strong and very public statement against the anti-slavery doctrines of the Methodist denomination. Dr. Harvey Black, a noted physician, town leader, and later the head of a Confederate Army field hospital, persuaded the quarterly conference of the Blacksburg Church to approve a resolution demanding that the Baltimore Conference and the General Conference of the MECS strike anti-slavery doctrines from the *Book of Discipline.*[25] White church leaders were leaving behind the interracial revivals of the eighteenth century. The action of the local quarterly conference, under the leadership of

Dr. Black, makes it apparent that the white leaders of the Blacksburg MECS not only accepted the secondary status of African-Americans in the church, but also were party to attempts to perpetuate it. On the eve of the Civil War, then, it seems the white leaders of Blacksburg MECS were using the church to reinforce their view of political and social order.

Also, sometime in the late 1850s, African-American Methodists apparently began meeting separately from the white church. Ms. Jacqueline Eaves, the historian of St. Paul AME Church in Blacksburg, has indicated that St. Paul traces its history to "the Methodist Church" established in 1857.[26] The earliest minutes of the Blacksburg MECS date to 1858/59 and do not mention a separate African-American congregation. Further, in 1858, the Steward recorded class rosters designated "colored," and some of the newly baptized were similarly labeled. AME records or minutes from a separate African-American congregation during this period cannot be located, so there is no firm historical record for the 1857 date. Still, while it is impossible to state certainly that a separate African-American Methodist congregation existed in Blacksburg, it is equally impossible to state that one did not exist.

The oral history of St. Paul is firmly entrenched, and 1857 seems a reasonable date for a congregation of African-American Methodists to begin meeting separately from the white congregation, though such separation would not yet have been total. Racially separate congregations would still have been under the control of the white trustees at Blacksburg MECS. Virginia law, after the Nat Turner uprising, demanded that African-American congregations be supervised by white preachers, and Methodist practice at the time was for African-American classes to be led by white leaders. Thus, even if African-American Methodists in Blacksburg were meeting separately just prior to the Civil War, they almost certainly continued to be under the affiliation and supervision of the pastor at the Blacksburg MECS.

The membership rolls of the Blacksburg MECS support this possibility, as African-Americans continued to be baptized, married, and listed in classes at the Church through the Civil War. Six African-American probationary members were enrolled at the Blacksburg MECS on September 30, 1860, under the supervision of John B. Helm, a white Church member, a trustee, and a leader for one of the African-

American classes. Between October 28, 1862, and September 6, 1863, twenty-eight African-Americans were baptized at Blacksburg MECS; of those, eight enrolled on October 28 and six were later received into membership. In 1865 three separate baptism ceremonies were held, in June, July, and December; a total of twenty "colored" were baptised.[27] Several marriages clearly marked "colored" are also recorded and witnessed by prominent church leaders. The last such notation appears

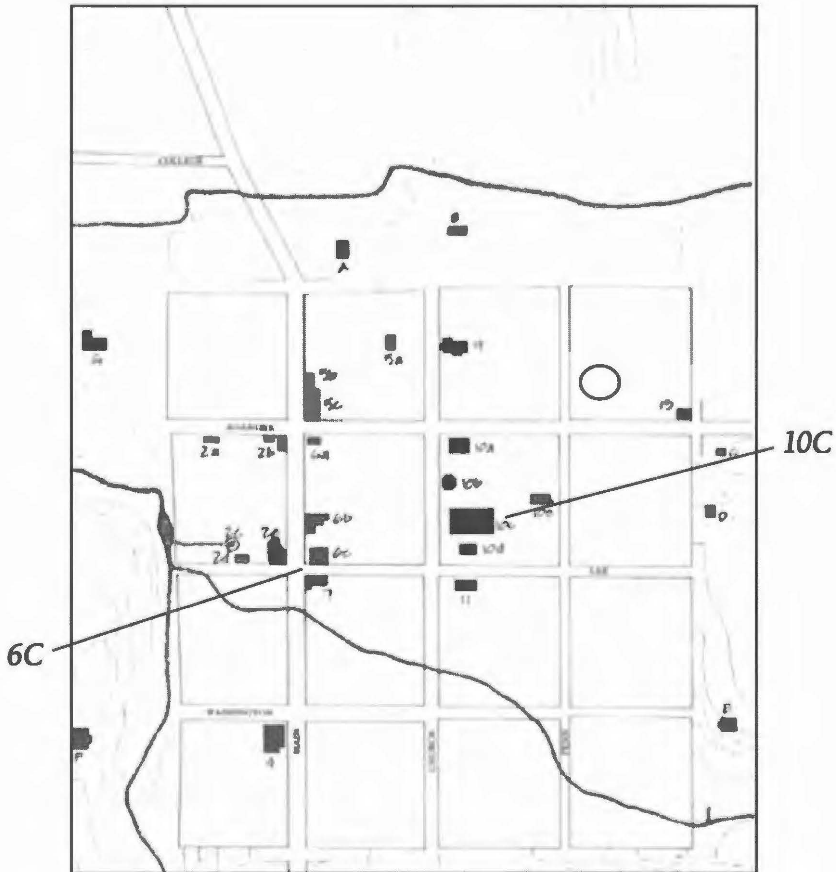

Figure 6. This map shows Blacksburg in the 1840s. The Methodist church is the large building on Church Street (labeled 10C), and the building of the Presbyterian Church is one block away on the corner of Main Street and Lee Street (labeled 6C). No African-American church building on Penn Street is shown to exist (empty circle).
(from Donna Dunay et al., Blacksburg: Understanding a Virginia Town: Town Architecture *[Penn Washington, 1986]).*

on two weddings in 1874.[28] Still, the names of people who are identifiably African-American are not found on any of the alphabetized comprehensive membership lists from this period, indicating that, while Blacksburg MECS ministered to the African-American community, it in no way considered free African-Americans or slaves to be equal and fully participating members of the Church. Separate class rosters may indicate that African-American Methodists were meeting at a *separate time* from the white congregation.

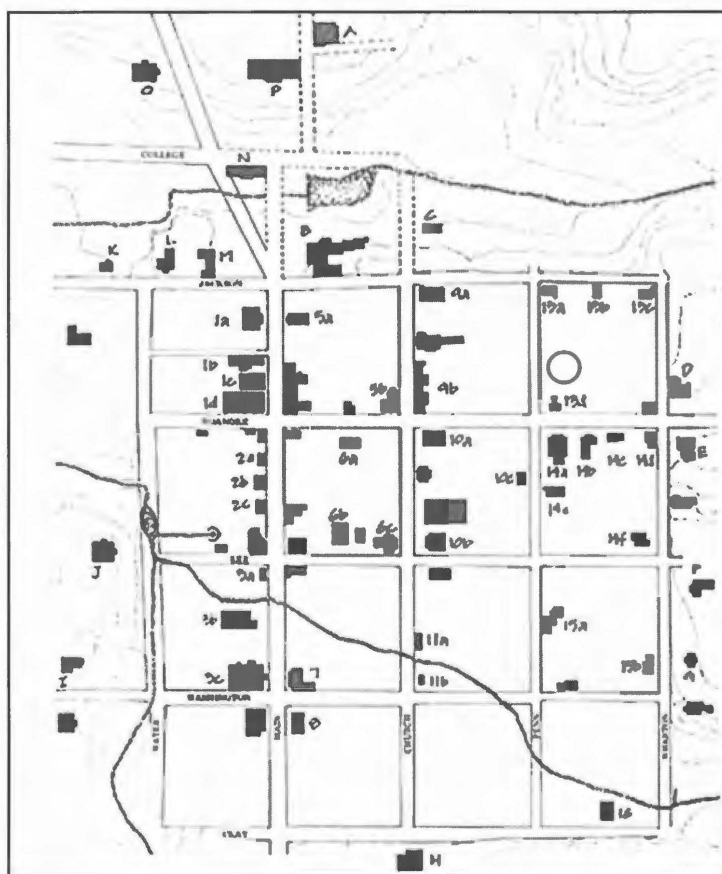

Figure 7. Blacksburg, 1870s. The Methodist and Presbyterian churches are shown in the same locations as in the 1840 map. No building is yet shown on the Penn Street property (circle) (from Donna Dunay et al., Blacksburg: Understanding a Virginia Town: Town Architecture *[Penn Washington, 1986]).*

What about meeting in a *separate place?* Oral histories at St. Paul indicate that the African-American congregation in Blacksburg has "always" met at the present location on Penn Street. However, the map presented in Figure 7 shows an architectural survey of the town from the 1870s; the Penn Street building for St. Paul's is still not shown. Additionally, quarterly conference minutes from the Blacksburg MECS on two different dates in 1867 contain references that indicate the two congregations may have been separate but not yet entirely independent in the late 1850s. On August 13, 1867, a notation in the minutes refers to "colored members withdrawn."[29] The minutes for the local conference in December of the same year indicate that the trustees were instructed to develop a plan to share their church building with the AME congregation and "the arrangement [will] expire by September, 1868 at the furtherest."[30] If the MECS church building was being shared in 1867, it seems unlikely that the African-American congregation was meeting in a separate place ten years earlier. Finally, property records and reports in the AME denominational journal, *The Christian Recorder*, indicate the purchase of a lot at a later date, after the affiliation of the congregation with the AME Church. Perhaps the African-American congregation met at the Penn Street location in a brush arbor or a private home, which would not have been uncommon for African-American congregations. However, no existing evidence points to a separate dedicated meeting place, owned either by the African-American congregation or the trustees of Blacksburg MECS. Although African-American members of the Blacksburg MECS likely were meeting separately beginning as early as 1857, they were still supervised by the white trustees and ministered to by the white pastor of Blacksburg MECS.

Affiliation of Blacksburg AME Church

While the beginning date for a separate African-American Methodist congregation in Blacksburg is unclear, the first date for involvement by the AME Church in Blacksburg is documented in June 1867. Rev. John Wesley Diggs, an itinerant pastor for AME churches in the Roanoke Valley, mentioned Blacksburg in his letter to *The Christian Recorder*. "I also heard of others at Blacksburg, about thirty-six miles from here," Diggs wrote: "I went there and gathered forty...."[31] This

report indicates that the gathering in Blacksburg was not a regular AME meeting, but one that Rev. Diggs was visiting for the first time. The forty people he found were probably part of the fifty-six African-American members on the 1866 "Roll of Members, Colored" of Blacksburg MECS.[32] This situation was ideal for the AME method of evangelizing, taking the African-American congregation from Blacksburg MECS and then reorganizing it as an AME congregation. Rev. Diggs apparently did his work organizing the ready-made gathering because, as explained above, in December 1867 the Blacksburg MECS trustees were instructed to develop a plan to "accommodate the African M.E. Church."[33] The actions of Rev. Diggs and Blacksburg's African-American Methodists followed exactly the AME model demonstrated elsewhere in Virginia and in the South.

These notations in the quarterly conference minutes seem to suggest that the whites at Blacksburg MECS were in agreement with the exodus of African-Americans from their congregation. If so, the white church leaders at the Blacksburg MECS were acting in accordance with resolutions passed by the Baltimore Annual Conference of the MECS and the General Conference of the MECS. The Baltimore Conference, meeting in 1866, passed a resolution declaring that the conference "has always taken a deep interest in the welfare of the colored people within our bounds." and "we will not cease our efforts to benefit the colored people."[34] While these could be interpreted as fairly meaningless platitudes, they were apparently taken in earnest in Blacksburg. The paternalistic tone of the resolution was probably also reflected at Blacksburg as the white trustees sought to help set up the new AME church. Whites could have welcomed the exit of African-Americans because they viewed former slaves as "uppity" as a result of their freedom. That was certainly the case in other parts of the South. The pastor who supervised this final exit of African-Americans from the white congregation was the Rev. Peter H. Whisner, for whom Blacksburg MECS was renamed in 1906 when the building pictured in Figure 8 was constructed.

This discussion thus returns to the question posed at the beginning. Why did the African-Americans leave? The exit seems to have been both a push and a pull, though in the absence of letters or diaries indicating motives, any conclusions drawn are conjecture based on regional and denominational patterns. The African-American Meth-

Figure 8. The Methodist church building constructed in 1906 and named after the Reverend Peter Whisner.

odists in Blacksburg, and African-Americans generally, were probably eager to express their freedom in an independent church that was not under white control or supervision. Whites, on the other hand, were likely relieved to have them leave because free blacks in the congregation only served as reminders of all that had changed and all that had been lost.[35]

Throughout the South, Norwood's pattern of separation played out as local congregations and the leadership of the MECS and the AME Church fought over who owned and controlled the chapels where black congregations met and worshiped. The demise of slavery brought loss of social control, so white congregations tried to exercise control of the church, especially through property issues. The property question continued to create problems for the AME Church and the MECS for decades. The 1870 General Conference of the MECS went so far as to form the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church as a deep South

rival to the AME. As distrust between white Methodist and AME leaders grew, AME members felt snubbed and misled while whites felt their former African-American members were being politicized and corrupted. The independence that African-Americans in the AME church exercised, free of white control, could be perceived as threatening to those whites wanting to maintain control and the antebellum social order by means of the church.

Significantly, property issues that emerged elsewhere in the South did not create animosity in Blacksburg. In Blacksburg, since another chapel was not available for the African-American congregation, all continued sharing the building, even after the African-American Methodists had joined the AME in 1867. The spirit of cooperation that existed could be for two distinct, though not exclusive, reasons. On one hand, white church leaders may have been living out their faith and following the instructions of the 1866 MECS General Conference. This cooperation would still have reflected the racial morés of the time, manifest in paternalistic attitudes and actions. On the other hand, the leaders of the Blacksburg MECS – who were also the village's political and social leaders – might still have been using the church as a means of enforcing social control over the African-American community. As long as the Blacksburg AME Church met in the same building as the Blacksburg MECS, the AME congregants were beholden to the white trustees and were not truly independent. While no record shows mistreatment of AME Church members at Blacksburg, it seems reasonable to assume that the old social order was still being reinforced through the white church and the trustees until the acquisition of a lot in the 1870s. As mentioned above, in the absence of letters or journals in which white leaders or former slaves revealed thoughts or particular actions, it is difficult to judge motive with certainty. In either case, the African-Americans still worshiped in a place where they had worshiped as slaves and they were still dependent upon their former masters for a place to meet.

Despite the hardship of having no separate place to meet, the Blacksburg AME Church grew. In December 1868, Bishop Alexander Wayman wrote a letter to *The Christian Recorder* reporting on activity in the Virginia Conference. Clearly, the Blacksburg AME Church had been sent a pastor who finally finished the task of organizing, because Wayman reports: "Brother Diggs, at Salem; Williams at

Wytheville, and Dericks [Derrick], at Blacksburg, have had great success in their work this year. When they went they had neither church nor people, but now they have both."[36] Because of the reference to people and church, Bishop Wayman's reference to "church" may mean a building that was owned and controlled by trustees of the African-American Methodists. Still, the property was probably not the present Penn Street location, as the 1870s survey mentioned above does not indicate such property. In 1869, Bishop Wayman wrote *The Christian Recorder* again, this time about a visit to Blacksburg:

> Friday morning I took leave of Salem for Blacksburg. Rev. William B. Derrick met me at the depot in Christiansburg, with Colonel Preston's fine pair of horses and a Jersey wagon, and took me to Blacksburg where I spent the Sabbath. ... Brother Derrick has a fine congregation and a large day school of sixty-five scholars, and no man stands higher in the community than he, for anything he wishes he can get.[37]

Bishop Wayman makes it obvious the white trustees and leaders of Blacksburg MECS cooperated with the AME pastor. This may have been a conscious attempt to control what happened in the African-American church or an honest attempt to live out the Christian faith and the 1866 commitments of the General Conference. Historian Montgomery writes: "Regardless of their motives or their perception of the freedmen's religious condition, many whites remained paternalistically involved in the spiritual affairs of blacks who shared their world."[38] On the other hand, the pastors of the AME Church in Blacksburg, well-educated and dedicated to uplifting the African-American community, may have accomplished one of the primary goals of AME Bishop Daniel Payne – the dispelling of prejudice and hatred on the part of whites.[39] The AME Church grew and prospered with, or in spite of, the paternal guidance and oversight of such white leaders of the community as Colonel Preston. Without a clearer historical record, the exact situation is difficult to determine from a present-day perspective.

In any case, by 1869, just two years after official organization, a flourishing AME congregation existed in the Blacksburg African-American community. Less than 10 years after it was organized, the AME Church in Blacksburg was on its own, without the conflicts over property that characterized many other MECS-AME splits in the South

Figure 9. St. Paul AME Church still stands on the lot purchased in the 1870s. Though it is now covered with stucco, the original wood siding is apparently still contained within the structure.

(Figure 9). It had more than doubled its membership to ninety-five and in 1875 the Blacksburg AME Church finally achieved total independence when Rev. Jeremiah Cuffey arranged the purchase of a lot, as reported in the memoirs of long-time pastor and AME leader Rev. Israel Butt.[40] A later deed, dated 1882 (the original was lost in a fire at the Montgomery County Courthouse), confirms that this property was independently controlled by trustees of the AME Church in Blacksburg.

Conclusion

The historical record is not clear on the division of the biracial congregation at the Blacksburg Methodist Episcopal Church, South into two racially separate congregations. The first meetings of Methodists in Blacksburg probably were of mixed race and socioeconomic status. As the region developed and more people moved into the area, the congregation continued to have both white and African-American members. However, during the years immediately after the Civil War,

the African-American members of the Blacksburg church left that church and formed what was to become St. Paul AME Church. The facts from Blacksburg Church records and African Methodist Episcopal records, seen in the light of the contemporary situation elsewhere in the South and reflected by local conference minutes, suggest that the African-American Methodist church began as a separate congregation of the Blacksburg MECS, not as an AME church. Thus, the evangelization of African-Americans in Blacksburg followed the standard AME form evident in port cities and coastal areas.

The oral tradition of St. Paul AME and the written records of Blacksburg MECS (and its successor, Blacksburg United Methodist Church) differ as to details of the separation of the two congregations. The preponderance of the evidence seems to support a later date of organization than the oral traditions of St. Paul's would indicate. However, the most important details show that the separation was an amicable one, unlike the separation of similar congregations in other parts of the South, though the reasons for this amicable split are unclear. The division was consistent with the policy position articulated by the MECS in the 1866 General Conference. African-Americans were, most likely, eager to express their newly-won freedom in forming their own congregation. For AME denominational leaders, the mission effort in Blacksburg followed the preferred form, as missionaries reorganized an MECS congregation, avoided the property question, and eventually bought their own land.

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Early in his research for this study, the author read a history posted on the church website, *Church and Community: A History of the Blacksburg United Methodist Church,* edited and adapted by Dr. James Shockley in 1996. It was taken from two earlier texts: memoirs of Miss Ellen McDonald written before her death in 1927 (great-granddaughter of founders of the Church), and an essay by Dr. Leland Burdine Tate written for the 1976 national bicentennial (Dr. Tate's family were also long-time members). Further research in Church records in Special Collections at the Virginia Tech library brought to light this remarkable story about whites and African Americans in Reconstruction-era Blacksburg. Also helpful in this study was C. A. Turner, Jr., *Methodism in Blacksburg, 1798-1948.*

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

Endnotes

1. The term "episcopal" comes from the Greek word for bishop (*episkipos*). The use of this term in the name of these churches, Methodist Episcopal Church, South and African Methodist Episcopal Church, does not indicate affiliation with the Protestant Episcopal Church in America or the Church of England.

Rather, "episcopal" describes the churches as organizations whose polity and mission is overseen by bishops.

2. Recording Steward's Book, 1859-1880, Records of Whisner Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, South, by various recording stewards, Special Collections, Newman Library, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, and Record of Baptisms, Marriages, Probationers, Members, Classes, Blacksburg Station, Montgomery County, Virginia, 1857-1870, by various recording stewards, Records of Whisner Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, South (Special Collections, Newman Library, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg).
3. McDonald, Ellen, "Contributions to the History of Methodism in Blacksburg and Vicinity," typewritten manuscript of personal and family memories, undated, pp. 2-3. (Special Collections, Newman Library, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg).
4. Record of Baptisms, Marriages, Probationers, Members, Classes and Recording Steward's Book for Whisner Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, South, pp. 1 ff.
5. *A Special Place for 200 Years: A History of Blacksburg, Virginia*, ed. Clara Cox (Blacksburg, Virginia: The Town of Blacksburg, 1998), accessed 29 October 2004); available from Special Collections, Newman Library, Virginia Tech at http://spec.lib.vt.edu/bicent/recoll/histbook/specplac.htm
6. *5th Census: or, Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States As Corrected at the Department of State*, 1830, pp. 88-9.
7. Luther P. Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia from 1760 to 1860," *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 16, no. 2 (April 1931), pp. 173, 204; William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), p. 28; Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation: The Story of Methodism as It Developed Among Blacks in America* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1976), pp. 90, 98.
8. For a more detailed discussion of William Ballard Preston's efforts to limit slavery, see Peter Wallenstein, "William Ballard Preston and the Politics of Slavery 1832-1862," *The Smithfield Review*, Vol 1 (1997), pp. 63 *ff*.
9. *A Special Place*.
10. Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 169.
11. Ibid., pp. 169-71.
12. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 28; Richardson, *Dark Salvation*, p. 90.
13. Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro," p. 200.
14. Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), p. 51.
15. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine*, p. 67; Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro," pp. 226-7; Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land*, pp. 48-9, 66, 74.
16. Israel L. Butt, *History of African Methodism in Virginia or Forty Years in the Old Dominion* [book on-line] (Hampton, Virginia: Hampton Institute Press, 1908,

accessed 3 November 2004) available from Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina, at http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/butt/menu.html; internet.

17. Richardson, *Dark Salvation*, p. 99.
18. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land*, p. 94.
19. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine*, p. 54.
20. Ibid., pp. 19, 22.
21. Ibid., p. 9.
22. Ibid., pp. 30-1.
23. In the late 1990s, after thoroughly researching the building, the owners of the building at that time posted a bronze plaque dedicated to "Jake Deverle, Slave Mason, 1848" on an interior wall. Today it can be seen just to the left of the entry as customers exit the restaurant that now occupies the building. Also, interview with former pastor.
24. Turner, C.A. Jr., *Methodism in Blacksburg, 1798-1948*. Pamphlet written by the pastor and published for the sesquicentennial of Blacksburg, 1948 (Special Collections, Newman Library, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg), p. 6.
25. Recording Steward's Record, Whisner Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, South., p. 38.
26. Jacqueline Eaves, interview by author, Blacksburg, Virginia, 29 October 2004; Julie Schwab, "Warm Thanks," *The Roanoke Times*, 28 November 1996, sec. NRV, pp. 1-2; Elizabeth Obenshain, "St. Paul: Small in size, but big part of members' lives," *The Roanoke Times & World-News*, 25 December 1994, sec. NRV, p. 4.
27. Record of Baptisms, Marriages, Probationers, Members, Classes. There are no page numbers in this record book, but the book itself is divided into sections and each section is chronological. The 1865 baptisms appear in the "Record of Baptisms."
28. Ibid., "Record of Marriages."
29. Recording Steward's Book, Whisner Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, South, p. 92.
30. Ibid., p. 97.
31. John Wesley Diggs, *The Christian Recorder*, 22 June 1867.
32. Record of Baptisms, Marriages, Probationers, Members, Classes, "Record of the Classes Severally."
33. Recording Steward's Book, p. 97.
34. *Annual Register of the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Baltimore, Maryland: Lucas & Son, 1866), p. 21.
35. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine*, p. 109.
36. A. W. Wayman, "Letter from Bishop Wayman," *The Christian Recorder*, 12 December 1868.
37. A. W. Wayman, "Letter from Bishop Wayman," *The Christian Recorder*, 25 September 1869.
38. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine*, p. 110.
39. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land*, p. 15.
40. Butt, *History of African Methodism*..