Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church records

Finding aid prepared by Sarah Leu and Anastasia Matijkiw through the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories using information provided by Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church under the supervision of consulting archivist Margaret Jerrido.

Last updated on September 27, 2016.

Richard Allen Museum Archives
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Summary Information

Repository  Richard Allen Museum Archives

Creator  Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church

Title  Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church records

Call number  01

Date  1816-2016

Extent  50 linear feet

Language  English

Abstract  Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, located at 6th and Lombard Streets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was established as Bethel Church in 1794 by Richard Allen (1760-1830). Allen was a former slave who purchased his freedom in 1783 and preached to African Americans in various Mid-Atlantic states until settling in Philadelphia in 1786, where he became a leader of the city's African American community. Bethel and other black Methodist congregations united in 1816 to organize the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Allen was appointed its first bishop and Bethel Church became Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the mother church of the denomination. As of 2016, Mother Bethel remains a prominent and progressive congregation. Its current church building, dedicated in 1890, still sits on the land purchased by Allen in the 1790s, making it the oldest parcel of real estate in the United States continuously owned by African-Americans. The Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church records, 1816-2016, consist of administrative and financial records; church records, such as baptism and marriage certificates; records and papers from organizations and people associated with Mother Bethel and its activities; publications;
"The story of Mother Bethel cannot be told without first telling the story of the founder, Bishop Richard Allen. According to Allen, he was born on February 14, 1760 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the condition of slavery to a Quaker lawyer, Mr. Benjamin Chew. Chew, who at one point served as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and personal attorney to the Penn Family, was a wealthy landowner who owned property near the Philadelphia water front, at Cliveden (which is now the Germantown section of the city), and farms in Delaware. Allen, whose father was African and whose mother was bi-racial, literally could have been born at any of these Chew properties. What is known for certain is that the family was purchased by a Delaware planter, Mr. Stokley Sturgis, when Allen was seven years old. Later, Allen’s mother was again sold along with three of her six children, leaving Allen, his older brother, and a sister on the Sturgis plantation. There is no record of the fate of Allen’s father after this time.

"Allen later contended that Sturgis was a tender and humane man who was more like a father to his slaves. However, even with a "kind" owner, Allen still held that slavery "was a bitter pill". As he and his brother grew older, they were permitted to attend religious meetings of the Methodist Society. In 1777, at the age of seventeen, Allen was converted to Christianity by the preaching of Freeborn Garretson and joined the Methodist Society. Allen’s conversion was such a powerful experience that later wrote about saying that "all of a sudden my dungeon shook, my chains flew off, and glory to God, I cried. My soul was filled. I cried, enough for me--the Saviour died." Allen and his brother’s new religion led them to work even harder in their assignments on the plantation, as they knew that the prevailing myth of the day was that Christianity made slaves useless.

"Allen's industrious example was so convincing that his owner was convinced that Christianity made slaves better, not worse and he allowed Allen to invite Methodist preachers to hold worship services in the Sturgis home. It was during this time that Sturgis was also converted and joined the Methodist Society. Garretson, like many of the early Methodist preachers, had adopted an anti-slavery stance and he reminded Sturgis that he couldn’t get to Heaven owning slaves. This ultimately led Sturgis into a deal that allowed the Allen brothers buy their freedom. Allen earned 2,000 Continental dollars over the next few years by working extra jobs and hauling salt for the American Army during the Revolutionary War, thus earning his freedom.

"Allen was now free to go and do what his heart truly wanted, to preach the Gospel. He began traveling in 1783 and set about preaching in Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Maryland. He often walked
so much from one place to another that his feet would become severely blistered. In the winter of 1784, Allen attended the "Christmas Conference" of Methodists in America. This historic event was held in Baltimore, Maryland and the Methodist Church established itself as a separate denomination from the Church of England. Allen turned down an invitation by Bishop Francis Asbury to travel with him to preach in the southern states, choosing instead to continue preaching in the northeast.

"Allen's choice would prove to be providential. In 1786, the pastor of St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) in Philadelphia invited Allen to begin preaching a 5am worship service. Allen accepted and as a result, the attendance of Black worshipers at St. George’s began to increase. However, the hostile attitude of the White officers and members also began to increase. Although St. George’s began as a church where Blacks and Whites worshiped together without regard to race, attitudes began to change quickly with the influx of new Black converts.

"Once in Philadelphia, Allen became fast friends with Absalom Jones, who would remain his co-laborer in the Gospel throughout his life. The two men, along with other free Blacks, recognized the need for organization to meet the many unmet needs of their fellow Black citizens. Their conversations led to the founding of the Free African Society (FAS) on April 12, 1787. This mutual aid society provided assistance to the sick, to widows, to orphans, and helped in the burying of the dead for families regardless of religious affiliation. Although a founder, Allen was often at odd with the body due to the heavy Quaker influence which he often found at odds with his Methodist style of worship. However rocky the relationship was, Allen and Jones were both committed to the uplift of their fellow free Blacks.

"Back at St. George’s, Allen’s preaching was drawing so many new Black congregants that the building could no longer accommodate the growing congregation. He met with other Blacks to discuss the possibility of organizing a church of their own, but was met with opposition (with the exception of Absalom Jones, William White, and Darius Jennings). White church elders also rejected Allen’s vision of an independent Black church, preferring a segregated St. George’s. To that end, a new balcony was constructed and upon its completion, Allen and others arrived at church only to be shown the new seating arrangement. In his own words, Allen describes the events of that morning:

"He (the Trustee) told us to go, and we would see where to sit. We expected to take the seats over the ones we formerly occupied below, not knowing any better. We took those seats. Meeting had begun, and they were nearly done singing, and just as we got to the seats, the elder said, 'Let us pray.' We had not been long upon our knees before I heard considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees, H-- M--, having hold of the Rev. Absalom Jones, pulling him off of his knees, and saying, 'You must get up--you must not kneel here.' Mr. Jones replied, 'Wait till prayer is over.' Mr. H-- M-- said, 'No, you must get up now, or I will call for aid and force you away.' Mr. Jones said, 'Wait until prayer is over and I will get up and trouble you no more.' With that he beckoned to one of the other trustees, Mr. L-- S-- to come to his assistance. He came, and went to William White to pull him up. By this time prayer was over, and we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church."

"This exodus led the group of exiles to begin to raise money for their own church. Dr. Benjamin Rush (a signer on the Declaration of Independence) and Robert Ralston were the first to lend financial backing to Richard Allen. Even the first president of the United States, George Washington, contributed financially to the effort. During this time, the group appointed Allen, Absalom Jones, William Grey, and William Wilcher to locate a parcel of land on which to build an African church to worship God in peace. In 1791,
a lot was selected on the corner of Sixth and Lombard Streets. The lot, belonging to Mr. Mark Wilcox, was purchased by Allen, but the congregation soon decided they wanted a different parcel of land on 5th Street, just south of Walnut Street. Allen now had to decide what to do with the property.

"Adding to Allen’s stress of holding a piece of land that the congregation no longer wanted, he was soon faced with a more pressing dilemma. Much to his surprise, the majority voted to affiliate with the newly formed Episcopal Church, the American version of the Church of England. An appointed committee solicited Richard Allen to serve as the church’s first pastor. He declined, however, because he felt that the simplicity of the Methodist faith was more suitable for Black people. Absalom Jones was then offered the position and accepted the calling, later becoming the first African American priest of the Episcopal Church. Jones and the members of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas erected their building. Demonstrating that Allen’s disagreement with the body was not from ill feelings, he participated in the groundbreaking ceremony, removing the first spade of dirt and he prayed that God would bless their endeavors.

"It should be noted that the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793 forced a yearlong postponement of fundraising for both Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in building their respective churches. Both men, along with many members of the FAS worked heroically at the call of Dr. Benjamin Rush serving as nurses to the sick, carrying the infirmed to the hospital set up at Bush Hill, and burying the dead. Later, Black aid workers were maligned in pamphlets by Matthew Carey who alleged that Blacks were taking advantage of sick Whites and stealing from the dead. The published response of Allen and Jones with a pamphlet of their own not only forced Carey to print new versions with a more accurate account of their work, but it was also the first copyright given to Blacks in America.

The First Church

"Allen went to work on building a church and purchased an old blacksmith shop, which he had hauled to the property at 6th and Lombard Streets. Carpenters were employed to retro fit the structure into a place of worship. Allen asked Bishop Francis Asbury to lead the dedication services, which he did on July 29, 1794. Asbury preached the first sermon and dedicated "The Blacksmith Shop Meeting House" as a new place of worship for America’s first Black Methodist Society. The Reverend Dickins, pastor of St. George’s at the time, prayed that the house be called "Bethel" for the gathering of thousands of souls. The name stuck!

"By 1795, Bethel’s congregation numbered 121 and ten years later it was up to 457. In 1799, Allen was ordained to the office of deacon, making him the first ordained Black person in the MEC. Also in 1795, the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society appealed for Richard Allen’s support to assist thirty runaway Jamaican slaves. He provided the church as a place of refuge and aided in the training and integration of the runaways into the black community. The first church continued to provide shelter for runaway slaves.

The Second Church

"By 1805, a larger building and additional land were needed to accommodate the growing membership. The church trustees purchased Allen’s two lots adjoining the church on the north side and two on the south side for a sum of 700 pounds. The second church, a crude rough cast block structure replaced the "Blacksmith Shop Meeting House" that same year. Even with its own building to worship under its own vine and fig tree, Bethel experienced continued discrimination and prejudice from their white Methodist brethren. Ironically, St. George’s sought to require payment in exchange for sending their clergy to preach.
for Bethel and to have Bethel’s land transferred into the Methodist Conference. Allen became even more
dissatisfied as white ministers retreated from their antislavery principles and attempted to thwart the
sovereignty of black congregations.

"From 1794 to 1816, the relationship between Bethel Church and St. George’s was a mixed bag, to
say the least. At times, it was amicable and all got along just fine. At other times, however, it was so
tense that the St. George’s leadership sought to take the books and keys of the church, insisting that the
congregation and all property belonged to them. At times, things were so bad that the members of Bethel
sat in the aisles of the church to prevent the pastors of St. George’s from taking the pulpit to preach. It
was this rocky interaction that led Allen and the officers to amend the articles of incorporation to include
the "African Supplement" in 1807. Rather than set them free, the supplement led to a final showdown
in the Pennsylvania courts. In 1815, St. George’s successfully managed to auction off Bethel, and Allen
was required to buy back his own church for $10,125. A series of rulings in lower courts led to an 1816
hearing before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, where Richard Allen and the members of Bethel were
declared free from MEC control.

"In April of 1816, Allen and 15 representatives from other Black Methodist congregations in Baltimore,
Maryland; Wilmington, Delaware; Salem, New Jersey; and, Attleboro, Pennsylvania convened the
first General Conference at the newly freed Bethel Church in Philadelphia to establish and organize the
African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC).

"At this first conference in 1816, Daniel Coker was first elected bishop. However, he resigned the next
day before being consecrated to the office and Richard Allen was then elected and consecrated the
first bishop of the AMEC. The AMEC soon took into its ranks several thousand members in the city of
Charleston, South Carolina, who led by Morris Brown walked out of White MEC congregations.

"In 1817, Allen and Bethel’s second building hosted approximately 3,000 people of African descent
to protest the formation of the American Colonization Society (ACS). Allen, Absalom Jones, and
businessman James Forten were the key organizers. This even greatly shaped the Black resistance from
that moment until the end of the Civil War against the plan to send all of America’s free Blacks to Africa,
while leaving the enslaved behind. While a few Blacks (including Daniel Coker) followed the ACS, most
refused to have anything to do with it largely because of the outcome of this meeting.

"It was also in the second building that Jarena Lee became the first woman to receive "authorization" to
preach. While attending a worship service at Bethel, the preacher in the pulpit began to struggle with his
message and stopped preaching. It just so happens that the text he used was one that she had recently been
reading. Without permission and with Richard Allen in attendance, she sprang to her feet and began to
preach! She was fearful that Allen would rebuke her and cast her out of membership. However, Allen was
so moved that he gave her official standing (although not the right to full ordination) and she began to
preach throughout the region with his blessing.

"In 1824, Allen sent his brother, Henry and others to Haiti to establish churches and help build up the
free Black nation. In 1830, the first major Black Convention was held at Bethel Church under Allen’s
watchful eye. The AMEC under his leadership continued to spread as new churches were established.

"Bishop Richard Allen passed away at his home at 150 Spruce Street on Saturday, March 26, 1831. It is
said that he was sitting at his front window in a rocking chair. His remains, along with those of Sarah, his
second wife and Bishop Morris Brown, are entombed at Mother Bethel to this day.
"The Bishop was twice married. He married his first wife, Flora, on October 19, 1790. She worked very closely with him during the Bishop’s early years of establishing the church from 1787 to 1799. They attended church school and worked together purchasing land, which was eventually donated to the church or rented out to families. Flora Allen died on March 11, 1801 after a long illness. The couple bore no children. The whereabouts of Flora’s remains are unknown.

"Sarah Bass Allen, Allen’s second wife has been characterized by her contemporaries as "a mother in Israel". It is said that her work enabled Allen and his fellow ministers to carry the spreading of the Gospel. Sarah was said to be a counselor to the young and old, and did much to assist the Bishop in his ministry. Born into slavery in 1764 in Virginia’s Isle of Wight County and brought to Philadelphia at eight years of age, little is known about her early life, except that she obtained her freedom by 1800. Their marriage ceremony was performed by Reverend Ezekiel Cooper of St. George’s Church on August 18, 1801. Richard was born of this union in 1802, followed by James, John, Peter, Sarah, and Ann.

"Sarah’s primary responsibilities included managing the Allen household, collecting rent from their properties, and raising their children. She also supported Allen’s activist causes and assisted him in the work of Bethel. It is said that the initial work of the Missionary Society of the AME Church was born from Sarah’s hands. The work of Bethel included the founding of what would later be called The Sarah Allen Missionary Society. The society’s beginnings found root out of her concern for the unkempt appearance of the ministers at the AME church’s first Annual Conference, which inspired her to organize the Daughters of Conference (officially designated in 1827).

"Upon the return of Bishop Allen’s first traveling preachers, he felt that their physical condition was too "seedy" for an invitation to supper. So, he joined them later that night. When Sarah inquired of their whereabouts, the Bishop related the condition of their clothes. She was quoted as saying "...they had ventilators in their elbows, knees and trousers!" Sarah and other women from the church spent the entire night sewing and repairing the preachers’ clothes. These AME women cared for the ministers by mending garments, providing food and garnering material support for survival. The work of the Daughters of the Conference continued long after Sarah’s death.

"Sarah’s support of Allen reached beyond the ministry and included the hiding, clothing, and of feeding runaway slaves in their home. Mother Sarah Allen lived to be 85 years old. She passed away July 16, 1849.

The Third Church

"After his death, Bethel continued to grow which resulted in the need for a new building 10 years after his passing. The third church, known as the "Red Brick Church", was built at a cost of $18,000.00 in 1841. The structure was made of bricks and stone. Steven Smith, a wealthy prominent citizen and treasurer of the Bethel AME Corporation, made generous contributions towards the construction of the building. The cornerstone was laid on June 2, 1841 with Bishop Morris Brown (Allen’s successor) in attendance.

"Bishop Daniel Payne, in The History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Volume I, described the interior as more elegant than the earlier buildings, which had been built free of ornamentation, like most Methodist churches of that era. The pulpit area was the most impressive feature in the sanctuary. He noted that the pulpit area was the most imposing feature in the sanctuary.

"The building was remodeled in 1870. The congregation worshipped in the "Red Brick Church" for forty-eight years and like its predecessors, served the needs of the community. During the Civil War, the church
was used to recruit Black soldiers into the Union Army. The last services were held on the third Sunday of June, 1889, with Reverend Cornelius Schaffer presiding. The structure was demolished August 7, 1889 to make way for the fourth church. Members worshipped in Horticultural Hall, located on Broad Street until the completion of the new church.

The Fourth Church

"In preparation for the construction of the fourth church, the trustees were authorized to purchase Reverend Josiah Eddy’s property, located on the Southeast corner of Sixth and Alfred (now Addison) Streets, for a sum of $2,150. Reverend Eddy was a member of Bethel for many years and served as an assistant minister. Ground breaking for the fourth church occurred on August 24th at 9:15 AM with Bishop Henry McNeil Turner, Pastor C.T. Schaffer, officers, members and many visitors in attendance. On Thursday, November 7, 1889 at 2:00 PM, Bishops Henry McNeil Turner and Alexander W. Wayman, Pastor Schaffer, the Presiding Elder, many ministers, officers of the church and a throng of people witnessed the laying of the cornerstone.

"The new church was dedicated on Sunday, October 26, 1890. The bishops and ministers assembled at the parsonage and walked to the church, where the Trustees presented the keys to the bishops. The church hosted programs with prominent citizens and participating organizations. The festivities concluded on Thursday, November 21, 1890 with a concert of various choirs from around the city. The constitution and by-laws have been amended several times since 1796. On March 5, 1953, the last two added "Mother" to the name of the Bethel and permitted women to participate in the business of the Corporation. A new chapter was written in the history of Mother Bethel with the election of Mrs. Willie V. Simpkins as a trustee on April 8, 1957.

"Through the years, Mother Bethel has heeded the call of a downtrodden people. From the rostrum of Bethel were heard the many voices of prominent citizens and abolitionists of the period, pleading for justice and denouncing slavery. Noted persons to speak at Mother Bethel included such legendary figures as Lucretia Mott, Fredrick Douglass, William Still, Alfred Love, Jabaz P. Campbell, James Forten, and Octavius Catto.

"Large sums of money were collected to support the efforts of the Underground Railroad, which was a system of support to runaway slaves escaping from the south. In 1863, after the Emancipation Proclamation, Mother Bethel received and helped many former slaves who arrived in Philadelphia. In like manner, members of Mother Bethel again aided in assisting Blacks from the south (most notably South Carolina) in the early 20th century during the Great Migration as southerners came north in search of industrial work. During the Great Depression, Mother Bethel aided in the feeding and clothing many who were out of jobs and money.

"Beginning with the purchase of a parcel of land in 1791, more than two centuries and four buildings later, Mother Bethel continues to serve as an active participant on the world stage, advancing the spiritual, social, and civic causes germane to African Americans and others."

Bibliography:

Scope and Contents

The Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church records, 1816-2016, consist of administrative and financial records; church records, such as baptism and marriage certificates; records and papers from organizations and people associated with Mother Bethel and its activities; publications; African Methodist Episcopal Church conference records; funeral programs; photographs, audio, and audiovisual materials; scrapbooks and memorabilia; materials related to anniversary celebrations; and other materials. A more detailed finding aid is available on-site and online: https://www.motherbethel.org/cfiles/Archive_Finding_Aid.pdf.

An overview of the series arrangement for the collection is listed below.

- Series I. Mother Bethel
- Series II. Administration
- Series III. Founder's Day
- Series IV. Organizations
- Series V. Prominent individuals
- Series VI. Bishops
- Series VII. Conferences
- Series VIII. Publications
- Series IX. Certificates
- Series X. Pastorates of Mother Bethel
- Series XI. Colleges and seminaries
- Series XII. Funeral programs
- Series XIII. Photographs
- Series XIV. St. George's United Methodist Church
- Series XV. St. Thomas Episcopal Church
- Series XVI. Scrapbooks
- Series XVII. Memorabilia
- Series XVIII. Miscellaneous
- Series XIX. Audiovisual
- Series XX. Bicentennial
- Series XXI. Books

Although mentioned in the series listing above and in other descriptive portions of this finding aid, the objects, artifacts, and books associated with this collection were not included in the linear footage measurement for the collection.

Some early records in this collection may be stored off-site, but microfilmed versions are available in the Richard Allen Museum Archives.
Administrative Information

Richard Allen Museum Archives
Finding aid prepared by Sarah Leu and Anastasia Matijkiw through the Historical Society of Pennsylvania’s Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories using information provided by Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church under the supervision of consulting archivist Margaret Jerrido.

Sponsor

This preliminary finding aid was created as part of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories. The HCI-PSAR project was made possible by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Access Restrictions

Contact Richard Allen Museum Archives for information about accessing this collection.

Processing Information Note

Summary descriptive information on this collection was compiled in 2014-2016 as part of a project conducted by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania to make better known and more accessible the largely hidden collections of small, primarily volunteer run repositories in the Philadelphia area. The Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories (HCI-PSAR) was funded by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

This is a preliminary finding aid. No physical processing, rehousing, reorganizing, or folder listing was accomplished during the HCI-PSAR project.

In some cases, more detailed inventories or finding aids may be available on-site at the repository where this collection is held; please contact Richard Allen Museum Archives directly for more information.

Controlled Access Headings

Corporate Name(s)

- African Methodist Episcopal Church
• Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (Philadelphia, Pa.)

Geographic Name(s)

• Philadelphia (Pa.)

Subject(s)

• African American churches
• African Americans
• Church work
• Methodism
• Methodists
Collection Inventory

Series I.  Mother Bethel, 1816-2014 (bulk 1890s-2014).

Scope and Contents Note

Founded by Richard Allen, Mother Bethel is the first church of African Methodism. Until 1816 when the independent African Methodist Episcopal denomination was organized, Mother Bethel was under the supervision of St. George's white Methodists, who considered themselves as THE Methodists, decreed that if Richard Allen and his followers called themselves "Methodists," they must follow St. George's discipline.

The records in this series comprise a considerable body of various matter: first, because the Church is an old one; second, because of the division of its corporate body into distinct, complimentary halves, the secular and the spiritual, i.e. the Trustees as controllers and managers of the property, the Stewards and leaders of the Class System through which the religious dynamism of the Church is promoted.

The Class System was adopted in America directly from John Wesley's plan for the promotion of his Methodist societies in England. It emphasized lay participation, bound members to each other by frequent meetings in small groups, instructed them in the religious life, gave them fellowship, put them to common tasks and developed leadership.

At Mother Bethel, members are assigned to small units, called "classes," with leaders who keep up with their individual welfare and reports to the pastor when his services are needed. Class meetings are held weekly, with prayer and praise services. Once a month, at the class meeting preceding Communion Sunday, a "love feast" is held to affirm love and fellowship with one another, and to reaffirm the Christian way of life.

Several materials in this series, especially 19th century and early 20th century records, are available on microfilm.

For information about prominent members of Mother Bethel, see also Series V. Prominent individuals.
Subseries A..  Bicentennial.

Subseries B..  Centennial.

Subseries C..  Church directory.

Subseries D..  Classes.

Subseries E..  Correspondence.

Subseries F..  Financial.

Subseries G..  History.

Subseries H..  Members.

Subseries I..  Membership.

Subseries J..  Minutes.

Subseries K..  Miscellaneous.

Subseries L..  Reports.

Subseries M..  Restoration.

Subseries N..  Roll books.

Subseries O..  Visitors logs.

Series II..  Administration, 1853-2014.

Scope and Contents Note
and lawyer Robert Ralston. The Corporation functions today under rules that have been amended several times since 1796, and has been a source of contention over the years because some of the rules of its constitution are in conflict with those of the Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination.

The Board of Trustees and the Board of Stewards are the most important bodies in the governmental structure of the church. The Board of Trustees is responsible for the temporal affairs of the church, and the Board of Stewards, the spiritual affairs. The Stewards serve as the pastor's cabinet, and are concerned with his welfare.

The Official Board is composed of the Board of Trustees and Stewards, Class Leaders, and presidents of all organizations in the church. It meets regularly to ascertain the spiritual and financial status of the church and its membership.

Several materials in this series, especially 19th century and early 20th century records, are available on microfilm.

Subseries A.. Corporation.

Subseries B.. Board of Stewards.

Subseries C.. Board of Trustees.

Subseries D.. Official Board.


Scope and Contents Note

Founder's Day is a major celebration held annually in February on the Connectional, District, and Local levels of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Although the first Mother Bethel Church was
dedicated in 1794, it is generally agreed that the concept of an independent Black Church was born in 1787 when Richard Allen and his followers walked out of St. George's in protest against discrimination.

Subseries A..  Connectional.

Subseries B..  District.

Subseries C..  Conference.

Subseries D..  Local.

Subseries E..  Mother Bethel.


Scope and Contents Note

This series consists of materials from several organizations associated with the church, including the Allen Christian Endeavor League, the second African American Masonic Lodge in the United States, and the church's Historical Commission.

The Allen Christian Endeavor League was adopted by the 1896 General Conference as its official young people's society. The goals were training in the ideals of Christianity and moral leadership. In 1935 the League was combined with the Sunday School Union to form the Department of Religious Education of the AME Church. The second African American Masonic Lodge in the United States, and the first in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, was organized at Mother Bethel in 1797 by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen. Prince Hall, the father of Black Masonry, who had founded the first Lodge in Boston, officiated.

The Historical Commission was established in 1912 as an extension of the "Allen Guards," who took care of the crypt where the remains of Richard Allen, Sarah Allen, and Morris Brown were interred. Today the Commission is concerned with preserving and cataloging artifacts and manuscript materials,
education through tours, lectures and literature development, and research through the dissemination of information.
Subseries A.  Christian Education Department.

Subseries B.  Christian Endeavor League.

Subseries C.  Choirs.

Subseries D.  Credit Union.

Subseries E.  Elizabeth Rawles.

Subseries F.  Historical Commission.

Subseries G.  Host and hostesses.

Subseries H.  Junior Stewardess Board.

Subseries I.  Keepers of the Shrine.

Subseries J.  Kings, Daughters, and Sons of Bethel AME.

Subseries K.  Lamplighters.

Subseries L.  Lay.

Subseries M.  Masons.

Subseries N.  Men's Day.

Subseries O.  Nurses.

Subseries P.  Other.

Subseries Q.  The Patriotic League of Mother Bethel.
Some materials in this series are photocopies of original materials that relate to individuals who lived during the 18th and 19th centuries.


Scope and Contents Note

Bishops are elected by the General Conference and preside over Episcopal Districts. Their tenure is for life; however, mandatory retirement is required at age 74.

Subseries A.. Individuals.


Subseries C.. Conferences (Council, Retreat, etc.).

Subseries D.. Bishop's wives.


Scope and Contents Note

Conferences are the life-line of perpetuity of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. They often trace leadership patterns of those who ascend to higher office in the denomination, both clergy and lay.

Conferences are important meetings for the discussion of denominational matters. They also provide an opportunity for African Americans to deal with secular concerns such as the educational status of Blacks, and race relations locally and nationally.

Some of the 19th century records are available on microfilm.
Subseries A..  General.

Subseries B..  District.

Subseries C..  Quarterly.

Subseries D..  Annual.

Subseries E..  Other.

Sub-series 1..  Philadelphia.

Sub-series 2..  Other states.


Scope and Contents Note

The denominational publications, particularly *The Christian Recorder*, *The AME Church Review*, and *The Voice of Missions* reflect the thinking of church scholars, and others, at critical periods in the history of the Church and the nation. *The AME Church Review* contains essays by notable personalities; *The Voice of Missions* tracks the work of the Missionary Department both at home and abroad; *The Christian Recorder* gives a broad perspective of happenings in the AME Church as well as contemporary issues. Mother Bethel's valuable collection of copies of *The Christian Recorder*, 1854-1902, are widely used by Black History researchers because they reflect the thinking of Black leaders before and after the Civil War, and was the only vehicle through which they could speak.

In addition to issues of periodicals, this series also contains programs, newsletters, newspaper clippings, and other printed matter. Note: All years for some publications may not be complete. Some related printed matter can be found in Series IV. Organizations.

Subseries B.. AME Discipline Proposed Legislation, circa 1980s.

Subseries C.. The Anvil (Monthly news of the AME Church), 1977.

Subseries D.. Big Bethel AME Church (114th anniversary program), 1979.


Subseries G.. Clippings, 1885-1990s.

Subseries H.. Division of Christian Education.


Subseries P.. Messenger.

Subseries Q.. Miscellaneous (includes only programs/events not related to Mother Bethel).
during the pastorate of the Reverend Robert J. Williams (1916-1920) sent letters to Black churches in the southern states listing reasons "Why Negroes Should Come North."

**Subseries A.. Marriage, 1913-1950s.**

**Subseries B.. Baptismal.**

**Subseries C.. Exhorter's license, 1908.**

**Subseries D.. Letters of transfer, 1915-1989.**

**Subseries E.. Manumission papers, James Jacoby, 1840.**

**Subseries F.. Oath of Allegiance to the United States, Rebecca Jane Richardson, 1940.**

**Subseries G.. Other.**

**Series X.. Pastorates of Mother Bethel (papers).**

**Scope and Contents Note**

Related materials can be found in Series XIII. Photographs.
Series XI. Colleges and seminaries.

Series XII. Funeral programs, 1930-2000s.

Scope and Contents Note

Funeral programs of the Mother Bethel give an interesting profile of ages, occupations, and family ties of the congregation. It is evident that longevity, large family units, and "southern roots" predominate. Photographs of the deceased are on many of the programs.

The programs are arranged alphabetically by surname of the deceased. An inventory of the programs is included a more detailed finding aid, available on-site and online: https://www.motherbethel.org/cfiles/Archive_Finding_Aid.pdf.

Series XIV.. St. George's United Methodist Church.

Series XV.. St. Thomas Episcopal Church.


Series XVII.. Memorabilia.

Series XVIII.. Miscellaneous.


Scope and Contents Note

In addition to other audio and audiovisual items in this series, there are oral histories, 2014, and paperwork related to those oral histories, including lists of questions asked to the interviewees, information about the interviewees, and other materials.
Series XX.. Bicentennial.


Scope and Contents Note

This series includes surviving copies of books from the Mother Bethel Sunday School Library of the early 1900s. There are several elegant pulpit Bibles in the collection. Although the books are included in this description, their measurements (about 70 record cartons) were not included in the linear footage measurement for the collection.

A listing of books can be found in a more detailed finding aid available on-site and online: https://www.motherbethel.org/cfiles/Archive_Finding_Aid.pdf.

Subseries A.. Bibles.

Subseries B.. Disciplines.

Subseries C.. General.

Subseries D.. Hymnals.