

St. Francis Baptist Temple and the Civil Rights Movement in St. Joseph, Missouri



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The History of the St. Francis Baptist Temple

During the territorial period, Missouri was called the "Catholic Land." There were about 12,000 inhabitants including Negro slaves in the territory, and no Evangelical Christian churches had been organized. Laws had been passed by Roman Catholics which prohibited any religious services except the masses of priests of the Roman Church.

The Dillon Creek Baptist Church was organized and conducted in a 20 x 30-foot cabin, erected near the Buchanan-Andrew County line earlier than 1844. It stood on the river bluffs between St. Joseph and Amazonia on K Highway. It was the first building owned by the Baptist congregation in this area. This small church was sacrificed for the establishment of the first church organized by Baptists in St. Joseph which was known as an arm of the Dillon Creek Baptist Church of Christ, with a membership composed of whites and a small number of Negroes.

In 1845, members of Dillon Creek Baptist Church signed a petition and requested dismissal from the church, in order to organize a Baptist church in St. Joseph. On March 22, 1845, First Baptist Church was formed and a constitution signed.

The following are excerpts from the first record book of the First Baptist Church, under the pastorate of the Rev William Harrison Williams:

On February 2, 1861 Brother Donald, Committee Chairman, visited the black members and made the following verbal report: Order quiet and good feelings prevailed. Four candidates were recommended for baptism and were unanimous in recommending the ordination of the black brother, a slave belonging to Brother R. W. Donald.

May 3, 1862, on motion, Adam Demit a black brother was licensed to exercise his gifts among the black brethren and sisters.

Not long after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, on December 5, 1863, Elder Dulin stated that the black members of this church wished to withdraw and form an independent organization of their own. Brother Dulin then submitted the following resolutions: Resolved that Adam Demit, David Montgomery, Weeley McKee, and all other black members of this church be granted letters of dismissal to constitute themselves as the First African Baptist Church of St. Joseph. Resolved that a committee consisting of the Pastor, Deacon, Treasurer and Clerk of this church be appointed as council to meet with the black brethren and sisters to-morrow afternoon at half-past three o'clock to constitute them into a church and ordain their pastor. On a motion, the above resolutions were unanimously approved.

December 6, 1863, Adam Demit was ordained a minister and the First African Baptist Church was organized. He and others were dismissed by letter from the First Baptist Church.

W. W. STEWARD
1872-1889

First African Baptist Church was located on Francis Street between 10th & 11th St. In 1872 the church had a membership of 350 and The Rev. W. W. Steward became its first pastor. The property was valued at \$1,200. The church was incorporated in 1889, and the trustees were: Richard Montgomery, Rebecca Parr, Tobias Cole, Charles Williams, Henry Peterson and Gentry Carpenter. The Trustee Board became the governing body of the church, pertaining to all business affairs—real estate, building and repairs, etc.

The congregation that became St. Francis Baptist Temple has played a central role in the life of the African American community of St. Joseph for more than 150 years. On December 6, 1863, Adam Demit, a Black member of the First Baptist Church was ordained as a minister, creating the First African Baptist Church.¹ This new congregation met in a building located on Francis Street between 10th and 11th streets. By 1872 there were 350 members.²

Rev. William W. Steward (Stewart) was the first pastor of the church. Little information is known about him. He is listed in the 1882 City Directory as the pastor of the African Baptist Church, living at 713 South 4th Street.³

In 1891, the church was under the leadership of Rev. Emmett L. Cohron.⁴ Rev. Cohron was born in Marion, Alabama. He moved to Lawrence, Kansas in about 1887 and served as the pastor of the 2nd Baptist Church.⁵ His first wife died at their home there on Sept. 7, 1889.⁶ He ran for the Board of Education there in 1890 and lost by only 20 votes.⁷ Rev. Cohron married for the second time on Oct. 23, 1890, to Elizabeth Salisbury.⁸ He and his family moved to St. Joseph in 1891⁹ and he was soon a well-known figure in the city. In May 1895, accompanied convicted rapist Joe Burries to the gallows in one of St. Joseph's few legal executions.¹⁰ His children attended Bartlett High School, the only high school in the city open to African Americans. In 1908 he delivered the baccalaureate sermon for the school; that year his daughter Oneta was tied for salutatorian.¹¹

During the 23 years of Rev. Cohron's pastorate, changes were made to modernize and establish the church. A substantial new building was built in 1889 and the name was changed to Francis Street Baptist Church.¹² During this period, the church emerged as a powerful voice for social change and justice, a voice it continues to exercise. In January 1902, Silome Yates, the president of the National Association of Colored Women gave a lecture at the church on the topic, "Woman as a Factor in the Solution of Race Problems."¹³ In February 1911 a large group from the Black community gathered at the church to discuss the need to create an industrial home for Black girls in order to care for and rehabilitate juvenile offenders.¹⁴ The church played host to N.C.

¹ "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years," pg. 3.

² "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years," pg. 4.

³ The house no longer stands, this area is now the location of several manufacturers.

⁴ Emmett M. Cohron (1858-Nov. 25, 1922).

⁵ Also known as Ninth Street Baptist Church.

⁶ "Died," *Evening Tribune* (Lawrence, KS), Sept. 7, 1889.

⁷ "The Election," *Lawrence Daily Journal*, April 2, 1890.

⁸ State of Kansas, Marriage License.

⁹ "Rev. E.M. Cohron Leaves," *Lawrence Daily Gazette*, July 27, 1891; "A Pastorate Closed," *Lawrence Daily Journal*, July 27, 1891.

¹⁰ "The Drop Fell at 11 O'Clock," *St. Joseph Weekly News*, May 17, 1895.

¹¹ "12 Graduate from the Bartlett H.S.," *St. Joseph Gazette*, June 1, 1908.

¹² "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years," pg. 4.

¹³ "New Society is Organized," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Jan. 19, 1902.

¹⁴ *St. Joseph News Press*, Feb. 1, 1911.

Bruce¹⁵ in September 1911; Bruce was the head of the Dalton School, an institution designed to provide agricultural and domestic service training for Blacks.¹⁶

Rev. Cohron left St. Joseph in 1912 to become pastor of the First Colored Baptist Church in Boley, Oklahoma.¹⁷ He ultimately moved to Denver where he died. His body was brought back to St. Joseph and he was buried with other members of his family in Ashland Cemetery.¹⁸



Francis Street Baptist Church, photo taken in the late 1910s

Photo Credit: "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years,"

Greene L. Prince became pastor in 1912 and served for 13 years. He was born in Princeville, Texas to Sallie Clark and Samuel Prince. He was a public-school teacher for 29 years before entering the ministry. Before coming to St. Joseph, he was pastor in churches in Oklahoma City and in Kansas City.¹⁹

¹⁵ Mr. Bruce had been the principal of Bartlett High School in St. Joseph.

¹⁶ Reading the account of Bruce's speech is disquieting. He stated: "Our people seem to find themselves better when at work with their hands and when they are trained in connection with the soil. City attractions often have deluded our people and the large sums spent for book-learning merely have been worse than wasted. The negro must at last work his own way to usefulness and respectability out on farms and in other productive pursuits, away from city life." "Work on Farm Negro's Future," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Sept. 4, 1911.

¹⁷ "Negro Preacher Gets Call," *St. Joseph News Press*, Aug. 17, 1912.

¹⁸ The location of his burial is uncertain, his obituary in the *St. Joseph Gazette* has him in Ashland Cemetery in St. Joseph; however, there is a stone for him in Denver next to his second wife. "Former Negro Pastor Here Dead," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Nov. 3, 1922.

¹⁹ "Rev. G.L. Prince Going to Pastorate in Denver," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1923.



Rev. Green L. Prince

Rev. Prince was a major force in the quest for civil rights.²⁰ In December 1912, Kathryn Johnson, representing the N.A.A.C.P. chapter of Kansas City gave a talk at Saint Francis Baptist Church to introduce the work and mission of the organization.²¹ Over the next few years, the church was the site of several talks associated with the emerging civil rights movement.²² On January 1, 1915, the church was the site for a celebration in commemoration of the 52nd anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, sponsored by the Negro Business Men's League.²³ Four hundred individuals attended the event.²⁴ The local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. was organized in January 1915. Rev. Prince was the president; B.F. Perry, Vice-President; William F. Neil,²⁵

²⁰ "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years," pg. 4.

²¹ *St. Joseph News Press*, Dec. 12, 1912.

²² *St. Joseph Gazette*, Feb. 12, 1914; "Negro Will Deliver Address," *St. Joseph News Press*, May 9, 1914; "To Speak Here for Negro Race," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Jan. 18, 1915; "On Race Problems," *St. Joseph News Press*, Jan. 19, 1915.

²³ "Fifty-Second Anniversary," *St. Joseph News Press*, Dec. 31, 1914.

²⁴ "Negroes Celebrate Emancipation Day," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Jan. 2, 1915.

²⁵ William Fred Neil (Sept. 29, 1876-Oct. 26, 1940).

secretary. The Directors were Mrs. R.L. Scott,²⁶ Prof. J.H. Sims,²⁷ Mathew Hill,²⁸ M.N. Goodson, Mrs. W.M. Webster, I.F. Ramsey,²⁹ J.D. Jones, John Franklin, and W.H. Whitsey.³⁰ In November 1915, memorial services for Booker T. Washington were held at the church.³¹

A large meeting was held at the church in March 1917 to protest a Jim Crow law that was under consideration by the Missouri State legislature. A committee was formed to organize the protest against the law.³² In July of that same year, a crowd packed the church to protest the race riots in East St. Louis. They sent telegrams "setting forth their cause and their rights to protection on the part of the government" to President Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. Rev. Prince was one of the signatories on those telegrams.³³ They vigorously denounced the violence against Blacks; however, they took pains not to rock the boat in St. Joseph. According to the *Gazette*, "Dr. Crossland³⁴ declared that there was no alarm to be felt by the negroes here, as this was the best city in the country as regards the tolerance and consideration shown by the whites."³⁵

The St. Joseph African American community was quite active in politics, generally supporting the Republican party. Organizers frequently held meetings at St. Francis Baptist Temple with the goal of energizing and educating their community.³⁶ On January 1, 1918, Judge William Harrison, a well-known African American attorney from Oklahoma City spoke at the church about the role that Blacks have played in the protection of democracy throughout the history of the United States. Harrison exhorted his listeners, "If you don't insist on being counted in this fight nobody counts you. The world will take you at your own price – and it has a right to do so. Put a 100 percent value on yourselves!"³⁷ In November 1919 the Colored League of Women Voters held a meeting at the church where Mrs. M.F. Cook from Kansas City spoke on "The Colored Woman and the Ballot."³⁸ The next year, Rev. Prince's wife, Laura,³⁹ as president of the Colored Women's Republican Club held a meeting designed to educate Blacks on the issues of the upcoming election.⁴⁰

²⁶ Ida Morris Scott, (Oct. 31, 1858-April 12, 1955) married to Robert Lee Scott.

²⁷ When Mrs. J. Silome Yates, the president of the National Association of colored Women, visited the city in 1902, she stayed with Prof. J.H. Sims who had been her pupil in Jefferson City. "New Society is Organized," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Jan. 19, 1902. He was a teacher in the public school system in St. Joseph.

²⁸ Mathew M. Hill (April 30, 1874-Jan. 21, 1932).

²⁹ The proprietor of Ramsey's Funeral Home and a leading figure in the Black community.

³⁰ "On Race Problems," *St. Joseph News Press*, Jan. 19, 1915.

³¹ "Booker T. Washington Memorial Here Sunday," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Nov. 16, 1915; "To Memorialize Washington," *St. Joseph News Press*, Nov. 20, 1915.

³² "Negroes to Protest 'Jim Crow' Measure," *St. Joseph Gazette*, March 12, 1917.

³³ "Send Messages on Killing of Negroes," *St. Joseph Gazette*, July 10, 1917.

³⁴ Dr. John Russel Asbra Crossland (April 24, 1864-Sept. 12, 1950). Crossland was a well-respected physician and political figure. He served as the U.S. ambassador to Liberia in 1902 and was appointed Special Expert in the Veterans' Bureau charged with looking after the interests of Black soldiers and sailors after WWI.

³⁵ "Race Riot Condemned by St. Joseph Negroes," *St. Joseph Gazette*, July 9, 1917.

³⁶ "G.O.P. Meetings," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Oct. 28, 1920.

³⁷ "Appeals to Negroes to Show Patriotism," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Jan. 2, 1918; "They Saved Teddy," *St. Joseph Observer*, Jan. 5, 1918.

³⁸ *St. Joseph News Press*, Nov. 15, 1919.

³⁹ Laura F. Williams Prince (July 31, 1877-Feb. 20, 1939). Born in New Orleans. Married Greene in 1897.

⁴⁰ *St. Joseph News Press*, Oct. 2, 1920.

In 1924, Rev. Prince accepted a call to be pastor at Zion Baptist Church in Denver.⁴¹ From there he took a position in Galveston, Texas. In 1944 he was President of the Mary Allen College in Crockett, Texas and he established the G.L. Prince hospital in that city.

Following the short-lived pastorate of T.M. Bedford⁴² from 1925-1926; the reins of leadership passed to Rev. Custer Plato Morrow.⁴³ Rev. Morrow was born in Waxahachie, Texas to Rev. John D. Morrow and Celeste Dickens. He attended school in Dallas, Texas and earned his college degree before being ordained as a minister. Before accepting the call to come to St. Joseph he had served in Larned, Ottawa, Emporia, Abeline, and Atchison, KS.⁴⁴



Rev. Morrow's pastorate was a period of great change. In 1926, the city of St. Joseph decided to annex and demolish a great number of structures in order to clear the space for what is

⁴¹ "Rev. G.L. Prince Going to Pastorate in Denver," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1923.

⁴² Rev. Bedford is a somewhat mysterious figure. The 1926 City Directory lists him as Patrick Bedford, residing at 404 S. 17th St. It is possible that he is the Dr. P.A. Bedford who founded the San Joaquin Missionary Baptist Association in California. Rev. Bedford merits additional research.

⁴³ Custer Plato Morrow (March 2, 1886-May 17, 1949).

⁴⁴ "Death Ends Minister's Long Service," *St. Joseph News Press*, May 17, 1949.

now known as City Center Park. The Francis Street Baptist Church was one of the buildings to face the wrecking ball.⁴⁵ In 1927, the congregation purchased property at 17th and Angelique Streets and renamed itself as Saint Francis Baptist Temple. They built an impressive brick structure at a cost of \$80,000 (the debt was fully paid off in 1946).⁴⁶ The new church opened on April 8, 1928.⁴⁷



Important issues continued to be of concern to the church. In March 1926, the N.A.A.C.P. held a meeting at the church to support the anti-lynching bill of Senator McKinley of Illinois.⁴⁸ The church served as a base of operations for the N.A.A.C.P. in St. Joseph as that organization sought to increase its membership through recruitment in the Black churches.⁴⁹ On June 9, 1927, the Mayor of St. Joseph, Louis V. Stigall spoke at Francis Street Baptist Church in support of the work of the N.A.A.C.P.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years," pg. 5.

⁴⁶ "Death Ends Minister's Long Service," *St. Joseph News Press*, May 17, 1949.

⁴⁷ "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years," pg. 5.

⁴⁸ "Favor Measure Against Lynching," *St. Joseph Gazette*, March 8, 1926.

⁴⁹ "Negro Drive Next Week," *St. Joseph News Press*, Sept. 18, 1926; "Negroes Having 'Drive,'" *St. Joseph Gazette*, May 4, 1927.

⁵⁰ "Stigall Will Speak," *St. Joseph Gazette*, June 9, 1927.