

EARLY HISTORY OF GREATER ST. MATTHEW A.M.E. CHURCH LORAIN, OHIO

Population growth soared at the turn of the century, in the City of Lorain. Black families were among the new settlers, many of them arriving to work at the steel mill. The one frustration the people faced was when Sundays came there was no place for them to worship.

Prior to leaving their former homes, some of these people had been affiliated with an African Methodist Episcopal Church, and desired to continue in the same denomination.

It was in the summer of 1905 that William Brantford, opened his home at 2422 Oakdale Avenue, to 30 persons eager to establish an A.M.E. Church in Lorain.

The families attending the meeting were those of Mr. Riley Thompson, Mr. A. L. McKinney, Mr. Hurndon Bates, Mr. Thomas H. Stevens, Mr. William Brantford, and Mr. Jordan Cain Sr.

Mrs. Emma Bates, the wife of Hurndon Bates suggested the church be named St. Matthew, and all agreed.

The five founding families are:

WILLIAM AND JULIA BRANTFORD, who left Amherstburg, Ontario, Canada, to make their home in Lorain in 1903. They had 11 children, most of whom were born in Amherstburg. The children were Henry, John, Carrie, Bessie, Aftorn, Roy, Ernest, William Jr., Olive, Cora and Della. The family lived on W. 22nd Street prior to purchasing a home at 2422 Oakdale Ave. Henry was the first born and Olive was the youngest. She was a faithful church worker until her death in Nov. 1979, as were her brothers, Ernest, a choir member and church trustee, and Roy, a choir member and church steward.

JORDAN AND ANNABELLE CAIN. Mr. Cain was a stationery engineer for the B&O Railroad. He was a native of Tennessee and first came to Lorain in 1898. He left for a brief period and returned to make his home here at 2258 Oakdale Ave., where he and his wife lived until their death. The couple had five children: Annabelle, Pauline, Helen, Jordan Jr. and Naomi. Mrs. Cain was a native of Virginia. Their son, Jordan Jr. is still active at the church.

PLEAS LOUIS AND MARTHA ANN MCKINNEY, settled in Lorain in the late 1890s. Their daughter, the late Mrs. Dorothy McKinney Burns, often spoke of her fond childhood memories of St. Matthew Church. She remembered the wooden chairs in the upstairs building which were often used to stretch out the sleeping children. And the potbelly stove that heated the room.

T.H. STEVENS, was well known (late 1800s and early 1900s) in the black community. The family homestead was located on the corners of 21st Street & Elyria Avenue. The property was mostly unfarmed farmland, and Mr. Stevens would make it available to the church for picnics and Fourth of July celebrations. This was one

of the few available gathering places for blacks to convene other than the church. The T.H. Stevens Scholarship was established at St. Matthew Church in 1989 through a generous donation from Stevens's grandson, Eugene Robinson.

HURNDON AND EMMA TATES, came to Lorain from Cadiz, Ohio. He was commissioned by the City of Lorain to supervise the paving of streets in the downtown business district. The couple had 13 children, several died in infancy. Some who lived to adulthood were: Nellie Poet, Hurndon Jr., Lucille Randleman, Caroline Thompson, Robert Bates, Ray Bates, and Laura Farris. Their youngest daughter, Louisa Bates Jackson survives and lives in Columbus, Ohio. Mr. Bates owned and operated a delivery service and employment bureau in Lorain. His last business, a second hand store, was located at the corners of E. 22nd Street and Elyria Avenue.

RILEY AND PRISCILLA THOMPSON, came to Lorain from Elyria. They had seven children: Willard, Martha, Anna, Lewis, Irving, Eva, and Artemus. Mr. Thompson was faithful to the church in assisting in numerous remodeling projects at the church. Their daughter, Anna played the piano for many of the church choirs until her death Feb. 25, 1979. Their son, Willard played in the church band that offered the music during Sunday School services.

The first two sermons delivered to the congregation were by the Rev. John F. Weeks of Cleveland, Ohio. The Presiding Elder, Rev. Gilmore, also of Cleveland, then appointed Rev. Gus Simons to take charge of the congregation.

Other ministers who followed were: Revs. Benjamin Lee, J.G. Turner, G. W. Cotton, G. L. Hicks, G. W. Green, J.A. Fert, G. H. Williams, H. H. Uptogrove, Charles H. Young, J. A. Simons, William Wright, S. C. McMillian, M. C. Pollock, Rev. Whitfield, Rev. Henri, F. H. Goler, F.D. Barnes, S. Wilcox, William Barksdale, Chester Scott, F. H. Shipes, Charles Butcher, Milton Addison, Richard Patterson, Rev. J. Lassiter, Harold Smith and Samuel M. Butler.

As the members grew in numbers, the congregation was forced to use the upstairs of a building at the corners of Lexington Avenue and 21st Street. Some who remember the building said there was a meat market on the lower level. It was while in these quarters, that soon became cramped, that the decision was made to construct a building of their own to worship in.

The men dug the basement by hand, for the building that was to be St. Matthew A.M.E. Church, located at 407 W. 21st Street. The site was adjacent to the building where they had held services upstairs.

By 1907, the building was complete and the members were well pleased with their efforts. The

church membership began to flourish. There were no stained glass windows, but the frosted panes in the sanctuary afforded the congregation the necessary privacy. The basement was used for various functions, such as dinners, teas, and musicals.

By the 1930s, the younger members had encouraged their peers to share in the Allen Christian Endeavor League meetings at the church. The attendance was usually in large numbers. In fact, this is where many of the young adults met and in later years married.

The numerous auxiliaries — Missionaries, Stewardess, ACEL, Senior Choir, Youth Choir, Stewards and Trustees — took their responsibilities seriously. The spiritual commitment of the congregation was cause for a growing church.

St. Matthew's Church became known in the community for outreach ministry, and the elaborate tea's, dinners, youth and adult plays and programs. The church began to thrive.

Women would prepare the family's Sunday dinners on Saturday, so they could attend both the morning and evening services on Sunday. Wednesday night was Prayer Meeting, and what a blessed time this was for those desiring to openly witness for the Lord. It was a historical period when people were not concerned about how late church services and Prayer Meetings lasted.

The parsonage was attached to the church structure, and the pastors and those who had wives would often entertain church members. The invitation was reversed as members would have the minister and spouse for Sunday dinner. On these occasions conversation centered around the church and future growth.



There were District meetings for the Missionary, and Lay Organization. Delegates from the church attended the Annual Conference, and this kept St. Matthew Church devoted to the church doctrine and practices developed Bishop Richard Allen, the founding father of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The first Stewards at St. Matthew A.M.E. Church were: William Brantford, Hurndon Bates and T. H. Stevens.

The first pianist was Mrs. Eva Dobson.

Superintendents of the Sunday School have been Mr. Claude Harris, a long and faithful Sunday School Superintendent in the early 1930s; Mr. Ernie Brantford, Mrs. Mary Stevens, Mr. Gerald Brantford, and Mr. Leland Wilkes.

Sunday School Teachers were Mrs. Susie Robinson, Mrs. Florence Young, Dr. Stevens, Mrs. Nellie McKinney, Mrs. Lula Blakely, Mrs. Lois Wheeler, Mrs. Lelia Brown, Mrs. Minerva Robertson, Miss Mary Stevens, Mr. Leland Wilkes, Mrs. Olive Williams, and Rev. Bond.

Others deserving of recognition for their steadfast commitment to the church were: Mrs. Pearl Barney who served as chairman of Stewardess Board No. 2 for 15 years, and also served as a Class Leader until her death.

Devoted stewardesses until their deaths were: Mrs. Lela Jones and her sister, Mrs. Lonnie Bell Myricks.

The late Mr. Clyde Calhoun served seven years as treasurer of the Trustee Board.

Mrs. Ida Ainsworth who served as a Trustee for 50 years, was the first woman to serve in that capacity.

Julius Johnson, a long time member served for many years on the Trustee Board until his death.

Mrs. Lula Blakely served as the Church Clerk for 20 years or more, and was secretary to Presiding Elder Mack for 14 years, a position that served 20 churches.



The late Mr. Nathan Turner Sr. served on the Steward Board and as the Pastor's Steward.

Mrs. Geraldine Hood served as assistant church clerk for many years. She also represented the church as a delegate to Annual Conference, General Conference, Layman Connectional Conferences, and was North Ohio Lay Secretary and financial secretary for 18 years.

Ushers have been Mr. Gerald Brantford, Miss Shirley Brantford, Mr. Myron Brantford, Mr. Leland Wilkes, Mr. Theodore Ashford, Mr. Lloyd Huff, Mrs. Olive Williams, Mrs. Delores James, Mrs. Lillie Morris, Mr. Carl Taylor.

A Mortgage Burning Ceremony for the old church was held in October 1939, under the leadership of the Rev. Pollock.

The church name was changed to Greater St. Matthew A.M.E. Church during Rev. Wilcox's reign, and at which time the church and parsonage were remodeled.

The original building fund was started by the late Mr. Porter Woods in the late 1930s and received little attention until Rev. Charles Butcher showed concerns for the growing church. It was under Rev. Butcher's leadership that the lots were purchased on Marshall Avenue and 24th Street for a new church. Rev. Richard Patterson kept the building fund in the forefront and a generous amount of funds raised.

Mr. James Byrd and Mr. George Wofford, both were trustees, pursued the construction of the new church. The two arranged a meeting with Mr. Clifford Black and the Case Construction Company. After a series of meetings, an application was made for a loan of \$68,000. Mrs. Dorothy Byrd and a group of other members raised \$4,000 in a matter of three weeks to offset the shortage needed to acquire the loan. Mr. Charles Hardy and Mr. Eli Ainsworth worked untiringly cooking dinners to raise money for the building project. Mr. Austin Horton chaired the committee that canvassed the church membership for pledges.

In October 1971, the Rev. Donald Jacobs, of Cleveland, officiated in the ground breaking ceremony for the new church, assisted by the Rev. H. L. Smith, the church pastor. On April 23, 1972, the doors of the new church opened to an excited congregation. The cornerstone ceremony had taken place in February of 1972 by St. John A.F. & A.M. Grand Lodge Masons, with the Rev. S.M. Butler in charge.

Endeavors are being made to chronicle all church history, to include names and events that have taken place during the last 30 years. It is necessary that the information is accurate as possible, which takes time in researching.

**Pastors that have served Greater St. Matthew A.M.E. Church
1905 – 1997**

****Rev. John F. Weeks, preached the first two sermons**

1. Rev. Gus Simmons
2. Rev. Benjamin Lee
3. Rev. J.G. Turner
4. Rev. George W. Cotton
5. Rev. G.L. Hicks
6. Rev. G.W. Green
7. Rev. J.A. Fert
8. Rev. G.H. Williams
9. Rev. H.H. Uptogrove
10. Rev. Charles H. Young
11. Rev. J.A. Simmons
12. Rev. William Wright
13. Rev. S.C. McMillian
14. Rev. M.C. Pollock
15. Rev. Whitfield
16. Rev. Henri
17. Rev. F.D. Barnes
18. Rev. Sheffield f. Wilcox
19. Rev. William Barksdale
20. Rev. Chester Scott
21. Rev. F.H. Shipes
22. Rev. Charles Butcher
23. Rev. Milton Addison
24. Rev. Richard Patterson
25. Rev. J. Lassiter
26. Rev. Harold Smith
27. Rev. Samuel M. Butler
28. Rev. Thomas McCray
29. Rev. R. Edgar Brown
30. Rev. Gerald Patterson
31. Rev. Eric L. Brown

**Congratulations
on 92 years of
service to our
community.**

**Best Wishes
from our
Officers & Staff**

