

THE SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH: AN ACCOUNT OF THE PAST

by: Dr. Robert Jenkins

The history of Christianity among black Americans is as old as the history of blacks in America. Almost immediately after their arrival on the Atlantic Coast in 1619 African slaves were introduced to a variety of Christian faiths. In part, the introduction to Christianity was inspired by a slaveholding class committed to the missionary zeal of spreading their own religion. Devout in their acceptance of most Christian principles, some slaveholders went dutifully about the process of converting a race of people whose religious beliefs included the worship of numerous and unusual deities.

Many slaveholders, however, were neither genuinely concerned about the souls of their slave nor spreading the gospel. For some of them, Christianizing their slaves helped to rationalize their own moral qualms about human bondage: Christianity was viewed as only one benefit of the higher civilization which the heathen Africans received under the blessings of American slavery. Still others looked more to the practical role which Christianity could play in the master and slave relationship. Teaching the slaves from select portions of the Christian Bible served a useful purpose if emphasis was placed on those verses pertaining to the obedience of servants to masters or doing the masters' will. Exposing slaves to potentially subversive tenets of Christianity such as the brotherhood of all mankind could not be sanctioned, for the success and security of the system depended on hardworking, submissive, docile, and obedient workers.

Few slaves were deluded by the conspicuous efforts to use religion for selfish ends. It has long been proved that intractable, aggressive, and rebellious behaviors were as common expressions of slave conduct as those qualities which master sought to instill through Christian teaching. Nevertheless, blacks readily accepted Christianity. Indeed, for many of them it became the most significant and powerful force in their lives, for it held out the promise of eventual escape from the despair and brutalities of their daily existence. There is penetrating illumination on the meaning and role of religion for the slaves in the remarks made by one early twentieth-century black writer when he wrote:

Far from his native land and customs, despised by those among whom he loved, experiencing the pangs of separation of loved ones on the auction block, knowing the hard task master, feeling the lash, the Negro seized Christianity, the religion of compensations in the life to come for the ills suffered in the present existence, the religion which implied the hope that in the next world there would be a reversal of conditions, of rich man and poor man, of proud and meek, of master and slave.

In general, slaves adopted the religious preference of their masters. While several Protestant denominations were strong throughout the South the two largest were the Methodists and the Baptists. Hence, they both commanded a large following from the slave population. In many respects the existence of the present Second Baptist Church of Starkville sprang from this early tradition.

The roots of "Second Baptist" date back to the year 1839. In late July of that year, a small group of white Baptists convened in the town's new Presbyterian Church where they organized the First Baptist Church of Starkville. From the outset, however, blacks from the surrounding area played a role in the new Protestant body. One of the original thirteen charter members was a slave named Epsey, a bondsman of Major John Thompson, the county's largest and most prominent planter. Epsey's role in the founding of the church was not an unusual one. Mississippi law limited the rights of slaves to establish their own churches prohibiting more than four slaves to assemble at any time. Such statutes were influenced by the fear of vastly outnumbered whites in the state that large unsupervised slave gatherings might lead to plots of servile insurrections. Vigilance was a necessity even in houses of worship. Thus, the customary practice for black churchgoers throughout the state was to acquire membership in and attend the regular Sunday services of the white churches.

As was the case with Starkville itself prior to the Civil War, the size of the First Baptist congregation grew slowly. In 1847, five years after a permanent structure had been raised, church membership only totaled ninety worshippers. Twenty-four of this total however, were black. By 1861 there were one-hundred and fifty names on the church's roll, forty-five of whom were slaves and free blacks. Clearly, the black worshippers constituted a sizeable portion of the congregation.

While slaves attended church with their masters and listened to the same sermon from the same preacher and text, there was little or no intermingling between the races. Segregation was a distinct feature within the church itself as the black members were required to sit in the separate upstairs galleries provided for them. But segregated seating was only one of several proscriptions which accorded the black members inferior status. Although it is likely there were some exceptions, as a rule blacks who wanted to preach were denied the opportunity to offer sermons before the congregation. It was possible for pious and devoted black churchmen to attain deacon status but this too had its racial distinctions—such persons being designated as deacons of “the colored portions of the Board of Deacons.” It is unlikely, however, that black deacons were men of real authority or responsibility within the church. If they were allowed to exert any influence at all, it probably did not go beyond unofficial matters relating directly to the black membership. To be sure, slaves and free blacks were welcomed and received into the fellowship of the church on the same basis as white members, but it appears that they were never accepted as more than second-class, non-voting members of the congregation.

By 1855 the Starkville Church was employing a new policy regarding its black worshippers. The previous year the church had agreed to set aside the second Sunday evening of each month for the regular worship of its black members. The change in the practice was influenced by a recommendation of the Mississippi Baptist Convention to its member churches, the intent being in part to simplify the worship services for the benefit of the uneducated slaves. Under the arrangement, some whites were required to attend in order to comply with state law, and the regular white minister continued to deliver the monthly sermons. Those sermons, recalled one elderly former slave who frequently attended similar services in Starkville, were generally infused with messages of “special injunction” that slaves be obedient to their masters or risk the opportunity of not going to “negro heaven or kitchen heaven.” Despite the indoctrination tactics, the new arrangement appears to have worked reasonably well for the black members. Although they remained powerless in influencing the significant affairs of the church, they did acquire the right to decide upon accepting new worshippers to their services and availed themselves of the opportunity to actively participate in Sunday Services.

It was not until after the Civil War that black Starkvillians were able to establish a truly separate Baptist Church, free of white control and influence. For two years following the end of that bloody conflict, they continued to worship as a part of the white Baptist Church. The arrangement ended in June of 1867 when one of the white members suggested that the black congregation be formally dismissed to form their own church. The former slaves were not reluctant to sever the ties, for throughout the state the more than 400,000 freedmen were asserting themselves and their newly won freedom by establishing their own institutions. In almost every community where the resources were available, establishing churches became one of the first and most important of their endeavors.

Forty-five black members were dismissed by letter to organize the new congregation. It was decided that the name of the new church would be The Second Baptist Church Colored, of Starkville rather than First African Baptist as was suggested by several white Baptist leaders. Exactly why that choice in names was made over the suggestions of the white leaders is not known. A possible explanation is that the decision was influenced by the need of the freedmen to further express their status as free people. Whatever the reason, establishing their church would not be as easy as deciding upon a name.

With few resources at their disposal, the immediate establishment of a house of worship for the Black Baptists was virtually impossible. According to the terms of separation, the black Baptist would be allowed continual use of the First Baptist building until they were able to construct their own separate church. It is probable that this arrangement was adhered to but only for a brief period of time, perhaps no longer than several months.

The situation in which black Baptists found themselves was not unlike that which another black denomination, the Methodist, shared. The similarity of their predicaments prompted the two denominations to enter into a somewhat unusual arrangement in which they agreed to organize a union church. Nelson Drake, an unordained Methodist minister and David Higgins, a former deacon of the First Baptist Church who had recently directed his energies into the ministry, were the leaders of this cooperative Christian venture. For approximately two years the two denominations worshipped together as a Union Church, holding their Sunday meetings under a brush arbor on the site which eventually became the town's public cemetery for Afro-Americans. The Union Church was an expedient arrangement, but it apparently worked well, not only in fulfilling the spiritual needs of the Baptists and Methodists but also those of other religious groups. Before the church was disbanded in 1869, the brush arbor became the center of fellowship for all of the county's black religious sects. Worshipping in true brotherhood and emphasizing neither class nor denominational distinctions, the meetings resounded well into the night with the singing of hymns and old plantation songs, and preaching.

One of the major reasons why the Union Church was formally disbanded was the arrival in town of a properly ordained Methodist preacher. The Missionary Society of the Northern Methodist Church sent the Reverend Mack McLacklin to Starkville in 1869 to attend to both the spiritual and educational needs of the freedmen in the county. The white teacher-preacher immediately took the Methodists from the brush arbor and

began to instruct them in an old barn near the present intersections of Washington and Gillespie streets. The dilapidated structure, previously used to house cows, sheep, and pigs, was badly infested by vermin of various sorts which made it uncomfortable and unsanitary for worshippers and students alike. After one year in the old barn, a permanent site was secured on the corner of Louisville and Greensboro streets for Starkville's black Methodists. The structure that was eventually raised on the lot became the Griffin Chapel Methodist Church, named in honor of the Reverend Ira B. Griffin, the architect, builder, and an early pastor of the church.

Exactly what immediate impact the abandonment of the Union Church and the old brush arbor had on Starkville's Black Baptists is not known. Extant data support the premise that the Baptists were also being taught and preached to by Rev. McLacklin when the Methodists moved into the former animal shelter and into their first building on Louisville Street. As is the case with much of the early history of the Second Baptist Church, however, the evidence is far from conclusive and one can do little beyond speculating.

Substantiating the date when members of the Second Baptist Church constructed their first separate building is equally as difficult. Some evidence points to a much earlier date than the frequently designated year of 1880. According to one account in an early edition of the Starkville **Daily News** it was the early years of the 1870's when the church was formally organized and raised its first temporary structure on the east side of Louisville Street, south of Greensboro Street. Several other sources, derived essentially from the personal interviews conducted by the federal government under the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.), gives further support to the early 1870's period. The year 1871 is the most frequently cited in these sources and is suggested in this history as the approximate date of the formal organization and construction of the church.

Apparently most of the black Baptists who had been formally dismissed by the First Baptist Church in 1867 had little to do with the permanent establishment of the Second Baptist Church. Led by George Washington Chiles, the original charter members of the Second Baptist Church consisted of only seven members. Besides Chiles the founding fathers included R. G. Mooty, Bill Rush, Alex Harrington, J. R. Johnson, Sonny Patterson, and a man identified only by the name of Bookety (probably P. Booker). Bill Rush is the only name listed among the charter members who had been formally dismissed from the parent church in 1867. One can only surmise that most of the blacks of the First Baptist congregation in 1867 were no longer residents of the area, had affiliated with other denominations in the county, or became members of another Baptist congregation being formed about the time near Sand Creek.

The driving force behind the founding of the church was George Washington Chiles. Affectionately known among Starkvillians, black and white, as "Wash", Chiles was a pillar in the black community, respected and admired by all who knew him. Chiles had come to Starkville in 1848 at the age of eight as the slave of G.H. Chiles and went to work as a houseboy in one of the town's hotels. During the Civil War he accompanied his master on the battlefield as a personal servant and proved invaluable in helping him and other Confederate soldiers survive the conflict. The service to his master was the basis of a life-long friendship between the two. When the war ended in 1865, "Wash" returned to Starkville, married, raised a large family, prospered, and lived an exemplary life committed to uplifting his race and the black Baptist Church. Until his death in 1929, Chiles was a leader in the Church serving unswervingly as a deacon and loyal worker in every area called upon for his knowledge and experience. His name is almost synonymous with the early history of the Second Baptist Church.

Except for their determination to build a successful and enduring house of worship, little is known about the other early leaders and ministers of the church during the 1870's. Indeed, exactly who served the church as its first minister is not conclusively known. There is some evidence that a white man, a Reverend Redus, might have served in that capacity but it cannot be substantiated. Such a possibility however, is not remote. During Reconstruction following the Civil War many whites took a genuine interest in the spiritual needs of the freedmen and perhaps with no regularly ordained minister to lead the new church, Starkville's black Baptists might have turned to a white minister as its spiritual leader. Redus might have been succeeded by a man named Rice, but this, too, cannot be proved. How long Rice's tenure might have been or what his racial origin was is open for speculation, for what knowledge there is of this man does not go beyond him being named as one of the early pastors in the old WPA church histories.

Beginning in the 1880's a much clearer history of "Second Baptists" starts to unfold. About the year 1880 the pastorate was taken over by the Reverend Charlie Gumm. The administration of Rev. Gumm lasted approximately five years and marked the beginning of a period of considerable growth and development for the church. The Sunday School, one of the church's most important auxiliaries, was well established, catering to the avid quest of spiritual knowledge for young and old alike. Church membership by this period increased well beyond the small numbers of deacons and their families which comprised the original congregation. By 1885 when J.H. Nichols succeeded Gumm as pastor, the prosperity and growth of the church warranted the construction of a new and enlarged edifice.

Under Nichols' ministry the small frame building was torn down and replaced by a larger structure. A parsonage was also built on the lot. Chandaliers replaced the old single oil lamps in the church and adorning the top of the structure was a new bell. Donated by Sallie Graves, the gift of the bell was an indication that some

people in the white community continued to have an interest in the religious aspirations of the black Baptists. Indeed, throughout much of the period of the church's early history the white First Baptist Church frequently invited Second Baptist as guests to special services. On occasions, black ministers would be allowed to speak to the congregation, but in conformity to both the historical and accepted practices of the period, blacks were confined to the segregated seating in the balcony.

As notable a monument the new church building was in advancing Christianity in the community it was only one of numerous contributions made under Nichols' strong leadership. The Sunday School continued its rapid rate of progress and the church moved vigorously into Missionary work. Zealous activities in these areas were natural consequences of Nichols' interests. A school teacher before moving into the ministry, Nichols was also strongly committed to Missionary work serving at one time as the State Missionary for the General Baptist State Convention. In this capacity, he had traveled throughout the state organizing churches and Sunday Schools, and baptizing hundreds of converts. At Second Baptist, one of the first auxiliaries which he organized was the Women's Missionary Society.

Active work continued in these auxiliaries of the church under Reverends J. W. Ezell and Richard Moody. Both Ezell and Moody had been utilized as Missionaries and Sunday School officials by the General Baptist Association and the Mt. Olivet Association prior to becoming preachers. Known throughout the state for their endeavors in these two significant Christian areas, and for their yeoman service in Mississippi's two largest black Baptist organizations, Ezell and Moody brought recognition and prestige for Second Baptist Church in the state's Baptist community.

Moody was perhaps the first Starkville-born Afro-American to preside over the church. Born on the eve of the Civil War on September 1, 1860, Moody was converted and baptized into the fellowship of Second Baptist Church at the age of nineteen. For many years he taught school in the county and eventually became principal of one of the town's public schools for Afro-Americans. A man of varied interests and talents, Moody briefly edited a small newspaper in the town called the **Starkville Echo** which served the black community. In 1893 he was licensed to preach and after being officially ordained in 1895, turned much of his energy to the work of Christ. In 1896 at the age of thirty-five, the black Baptists of Starkville called upon their youthful but prominent minister to serve as their pastor. Described as a man of fearless convictions who lived the "God-life," Moody was a progressive minister instrumental in bringing many converts to Christ and the Second Baptist Church.

When the Reverend N. C. Wicks assumed the position of minister in 1900, the Second Baptist Church was already the most successful and flourishing black Baptist congregation in the county. Nine years of steady progress, however, continued under his able administration. The size of the congregation grew at a slow but steady pace; by 1907 the church had 173 active members on its rolls. Considerable attention was focused on beautifying and modernizing the frame structure on Louisville Street. Electric lights were installed, a tower constructed, and new pews were built to make the Sunday services more comfortable for the worshippers. The addition of a baptistry precluded the necessity of having to conduct the sacred baptism in unsanitary and often dangerous nearby ponds. Under the leadership of Mrs. A.L. Montgomery the Women's Missionary Society was enlarged and its work expanded to include relief activities for many of the area's poor and destitute families. The Second Baptist Church's tradition of concern and aide to Starkville's less fortunate has continued unabated to the present day.

It was also during the pastorate of Rev. Wicks that the church added as one of its most vital auxiliaries, the Senior Choir. Organized in 1902 its first director and organist was Mrs. Sallie McNiece. In the years that followed, the strong foundation laid by McNieces' musical leadership would be strengthened by Anna Montgomery, Mayteen Drungole, Sanford Bishop, Eva L. Harris, C. M. Drungole, W. E. Henderson and Mary E. Jefferson. The reputation established by the Second Baptist singers went well beyond the town's limits, and throughout the years there has been a constant demand for their appearance in special services of other nearby churches.

At the turn of the century, the church's founding fathers, deacons G. W. Chiles, Sonny Patterson, P. Booker and the recently ordained Ben Crenshaw, were aging but continued to provide devoted and experience leadership. Respected by the entire community for their piety and good works, these men functioned as vital forces in the life and advancement of the church. Their deaths, of course, would leave voids in both the church and community in which they served and lived. The tradition of capable leadership which they started, however, would be maintained by the likes of deacons such as the late T. H. Bishop, Jack Winston, Mose Seals, Charley Alexander, W. D. Ward, Jim Curry, Ceasar Harris, Ferninand Barry, George Boyd, Morris Latham, Roosevelt Burnside, Isaish Harris, Houston McKell, Will Edwards and George Evans. These men have been ably assisted by their wives who not only served as Deaconesses but in other vital areas of the church as well.

From 1912 to 1918 the church was under the ministry of Reverend Tobe Hutchins. Basic improvement of the church and its facilities was achieved, and the parsonage was expanded and remodeled under the leadership

of Deaconess Mollie Bishop and the Women's Missionary Society. Soon after Hutchins' administration began, Robert Wier became Superintendent of the Sunday School, an office which he would ably hold for nineteen years. Wier also served as Church Clerk, a tenure which lasted for more than twenty-two years. The Baptist Young People's Union (B.Y.P.U.), now Baptist Training Union, also became a major component of church activities.

Concern for the youth of the church had always been a priority of Second Baptist Church, but it was pursued with renewed vigor during this period. One present member of the church remembers the ministry of Rev. Hutchins and the interest shown in the welfare of the young people. The youth, she maintains, were not limited to just the programs of the Sunday School and B.Y.P.U. but had the opportunity to participate in virtually all activities of the church. Children were made to feel that they were an integral part of the church and were greatly involved in fund-raising efforts, particularly during the Easter period when they canvassed the community filling their "Gleamies" with dimes to augment funds for a variety of church services. Children's days and Easter Sundays were days which the youth looked to with much enthusiasm because it gave them a chance to display their ability at speechmaking and their knowledge of the Bible. Many of the Social outlets for them were channeled through B.Y.P.U. sponsored programs and a church organization called the "Willie Boys Club." There were frequent church-sponsored barbeques and picnics which the Deacons called "feasts in the wilderness", hayrides, and an assortment of games available on the church grounds to fill the leisure time of the young people. According to Mrs. Theresa Ervin, there were so many activities open to the young that there was little opportunity for mischief. As children, she remarked, "church was just a pleasure to us," and it "influenced our lives in many, many ways."

Between the years 1918 and 1950 the Second Baptist Church continued its development toward maturity. Much attention was still being focused on improving the church's facilities, and new auxiliaries such as the Usher Board and the Youth Choir were organized. During the period the ministry changed hands nine times apparently with little adverse effect on the church or its activities. Following Rev. Hutchins as pastor were J. T. Brown, Elijah Miller, Reverends Washington, Cahen, Walker, O. W. Lenoir, E. M. Weddington, E. M. Wicks, and W. E. Fuller. Reverends Lenoir, Weddington, and Wicks served the longest tenure among these pastors with terms of four, seven, and sixteen years respectively.

The years in which these men led the church were difficult ones for the nation as a whole. During the period the country brought home young men from one World War, fought another and endured as well through the greatest economic upheaval in its history - The Great Depression of the 1930's. Like communities everywhere, these crises also had their impact on Starkville's black community. The Baptist Church played a significant role in consoling the grief-stricken families and friends of the young men who failed to return from the battlefields and contributed what it could to relieve the sufferings of the poor. Throughout the ordeals of the era, related Mrs. Pattie Self, "the church, as a whole, turned to prayer" and looked to the power of God for strength and deliverance from the tribulations.

In 1948, during the pastorship of W. E. Fuller, the congregation made a decision to construct a new church. In the years since its founding, the size of the congregation had grown so large that the building would no longer accommodate the members comfortably. The Deacons were authorized to locate an appropriate lot, and the church embarked upon a vigorous fund-raising program to finance the building. Due largely to the efforts of Robert Wier, an appropriate site was located and secured on the corner of Yeates and Gillespie Streets.

Under the ministry of Rev. J. H. Robinson, the beginnings of the work on the new building commenced on June 5, 1955, with a ground-breaking ceremony. By the following month, enough funds had been secured to start constructing, and the work began on July 18, 1955. A Dedication Service was held on June 24, 1956, to mark the completion and official opening of the building.

The new church home was a handsome structure equalled by few other churches in the area. But it was more than just another building. In many respects the new edifice was "a monument to the faith and devotion of its members." For more than seven years, the members had struggled to acquire the necessary funds for the new building. The numerous and various fund-raising activities, the solicitation of gifts from friends of the church across the state, the generosity of the congregation itself, and the many hours of prayer had required the full cooperation of the entire church in order to achieve success.

This spirit of cooperation and sense of purpose continued throughout the entire building process, for most of the actual work was done by members of the church. The Building Committee consisting of Ceasar Harris, Houston McKell, W. D. Ward, Ernest Jones, Jr., Morris Latham, Ray Y. Self, Willie Edwards, George Evans, Ferninand Barry, Jessie Bishop, W. C. Henderson, Mrs. Willie E. Daily, Robert Wier, and G. C. Howard obtained the supplies and materials and laid the foundation. The chief brick mason was Brown Lee Howard while Joe Boyd and Homer Gibson installed the plumbing and electrical systems. Ceasar Harris did yeoman work designing and supervising the construction of the building. Jessie Bishop, Fred Henderson, Will Edwards, Roosevelt Burnside, and Bob Chiles assisted Harris donating their time and expertise as carpenters. Walter Ward headed up the paint crew. Ferninand Barry utilized his talents in tinsmithing to fashion a large copper hand to point heavensward to adorn the top of the building. The Women of the congregation, led by Mayde

Hayes and Mildred Williams, worked faithfully with the Building Committee coordinating the color schemes and putting the final touches on the interior. The result of their efforts, according to George Evans, was an \$85,000 structure that cost approximately \$40,000 to build. Through it all, Second Baptist grew closer together as a church and embarked upon a new era in its history, a new awakening in its quest to build an enduring monument to God and the spreading of his Holy word.

When the congregation moved into the new building in 1956 Reverend J. H. Robinson had been serving as minister for approximately two years. Succeeding another Robinson, the Rev. L. E. Robinson who had presided over the church from 1950-53, Rev. J. H. Robinson's tenure would last longer than that of any pastor in the church's history, a period of more than eighteen years. There was, perhaps, no better man in the whole state to lead the church at this stage of the church's history. An experienced and dedicated churchman with nearly 25 years in the ministry at the time, Robinson's administration was characterized by a quiet but steady resolve in leading a mature congregation to even greater heights. Under his leadership, the church continued to grow totaling more than members when he retired in 1972. Robinson remains an active member of the church, his wisdom and many years of experience being utilized in a wide range of church matters.

The tradition of sound and progressive leadership initiated under the earliest spiritual leaders of the church has been maintained through the administrations of Arthur Townsend and W. Clifford Seay. Seay, the current pastor, succeeded Townsend in 1979 after a pastorship which lasted seven years. Intelligent, resourceful, and flexible, both Townsend and Seay have exhibited the qualities which have aided the congregation in meeting and adapting to the many modern day social, economic, and political changes affecting Starkville's black community. A testimonial to their leadership has been their ability to mesh the necessity of an expanded role and responsibility of the ministry with traditional church values.

After more than a century of existence, the Second Baptist Church of Starkville is playing as much of a role in satisfying the spiritual needs of the black Baptist community as it ever has. Its membership today totals more than 400 worshippers with 800 on the church roll, a testimonial to the success of black Baptists in Starkville in building a lasting shrine to conduct the business of the Lord. For the downtrodden, for the lowly at heart, to all who seek the knowledge of Christ and the blessings of salvation, the Second Baptist Church of Starkville is committed to never closing its doors.

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