

Bethany AME Church

A Brief History



Bethany AME Church – May 2022

Bethany AME Church is located at 8898 Ashton Rd, in the Northeast Philadelphia neighborhood of Holme Circle, about a mile up Welsh Rd from the village of Holmesburg. The Church is first recorded at the 1824 Philadelphia Annual Conference of the AME Church, with a membership of 20. It is identified as “Hornesburg” (ie, Holmesburg), in the Philadelphia District, Bristol Circuit.

“In this year (1824) the membership of the Philadelphia District was, for Philadelphia Station and Circuit, 3,000, and Hamilton Village [West Philadelphia], 27. Bristol Circuit, Bucks County, Pa., reported a membership of 438, distributed among the following points Frankford, 55 ; Hornesburg, 20; Bridgeport, 50; Attleborough, 105; Newton, 30; Newhope, 50; Whitmarsh, 15; West Chester, 50; Conkerd, 18; Valley, 35; Mountain, 10.”

Source: History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, D Payne, 1891, pg 44.

<https://archive.org/details/historyofafrican00payn/page/n69/mode/1up>

The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME Church) was formed in Philadelphia in 1816 when Rev Richard Allen of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (founded 1794) called together five independent black Methodist congregations from Philadelphia, Baltimore, Wilmington, Attleborough (Langhorne, PA), and Salem, NJ ([pg 13](#)). The next recorded meeting at Philadelphia following the 1816 Convention was the 1818 Conference ([pg 26](#)), which included Frankford (28 members), Bridgeport (Bensalem, 6 members), and Attleborough (41 members). Frankford, later known as Campbell AME, was sometimes known as “2nd Bethel”, signifying its position as the second AME Church in Philadelphia. The 1822 Philadelphia Conference ([pg 33](#)) also included Frankford (25), Bridgeport (29) and Attleborough (41). Frankford is listed as the “Bristol Circuit in Frankford”. The 1824 Philadelphia Conference lists Frankford (55), Holmesburg (20), Bridgeport (50), and Attleborough (101), all in the Bristol Circuit. Since Frankford and Holmesburg were/are relatively close, about 3 miles up the Frankford-Bristol Road, it may be that the colored congregation in Holmesburg was included in the Bristol Circuit in 1822 but were not officially represented at the 1822 Conference.

A deed dated October 11, 1810 (Phila Deed Book MR, vol 16, pg 534; recorded December 20, 1817), has David Marple conveying a ½ acre lot in Lower Dublin Township, Philadelphia County, to George Breck “in Trust nevertheless to and for the only proper use and behoof of the people of Color who are descendants of the African Race who do or may hereafter reside in the said Township of Lower Dublin and county aforesaid to and for the use or purpose of Burying Ground or place of Burial for the said people of Color and wherein hereafter they may erect or build the House or Church of Devine Worship for their selves and in Trust further that the said George Breck or his Heirs Executors or administrators shall and do hereafter when thereunto required by the said People of Color at their cost execute and deliver unto person or persons by them appointed a Devaluation of the Trust above set forth and to and for no other Trust use intent or purpose whatsoever “

The 1810 half-acre lot is the site of current Bethany AME Church and Cemetery and has been since at least about 1837 when the earliest portion of the church is thought to have been built.* It seems likely that the lot was already being used as a burial ground by “people of Color” by 1810. Why else would that particular piece of land be set aside as a burial ground specifically for them? (Neither David Marple, grantor, nor George Breck, grantee, both white and non-Quakers, appear to have been active abolitionists.)

* Note: Jabez Pitt Campbell (1815-1891), 8th Bishop of the AME Church, in the *Encyclopedia of African American Religions*, 1993, page 144: “He made his home with his mother in Philadelphia and joined the Bethel AME Church in 1833. He began studying in the early mornings, before work, eager for a thorough education. He preached his first sermon in Bethany AME Church in Holmesburg, Pennsylvania, in September 1838.”

The 1810 deed was not recorded until December 20, 1817. Bethany AME has traditionally held that the church was established in 1817, which likely refers to the deed recording date. This suggests that “the said People of Color at their cost execute[d] and deliver[ed] unto person or persons by them appointed a Devaluation of the Trust” and that the Devaluation of the Trust and transfer of title to “the people of Color who are descendants of the African Race who do or may hereafter reside in the said Township of Lower Dublin” effectively took place on the 1817 deed recording date.

By about 1800, African Americans were residing and owning land at the location later known variously as Harrisburg, Ashtonville, and Guinea Hill, about a mile up the Welsh Road from the village of Holmesburg. Elijah Moore, purchased an acre lot here in 1804 (Phila Deed Bk LRB, v147, p384). The 1810 half-acre colored burial ground lot would be located about ¼ mile up Ashton Road from Moore’s 1804 lot. Martha Moore, “widow of Elijah Moore”, died in 1867 at the age of 87 years. The Place of Burial on the Death Certificate is the “Methodist Church of Colored People near Holmesburg”.

See <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/236519038/martha-moore>

The 1810 Lower Dublin Township census shows 4 colored heads-of-households with 20 total occupants, including Elijah Moore, residing in close proximity. The 1820 census shows 5 colored heads-of-households with 30 total occupants. Given that the AME congregation at Holmesburg was listed as a member of the Philadelphia District AME Church in 1824 and was likely active well before that, an 1817 formation date for the church is reasonable, although perhaps not as an official AME Church member at that early date.

Unfortunately, Bethany AME Church and Cemetery records have apparently been lost. One of the few sources giving some information on the Church’s history is *The Encyclopedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, compiled by R.R. Wright, 1947, pg 391.

“HOLMESBURG, PENNA., BETHANY AME CHURCH. About 1830, a lot was given to the colored settlement known then as Harrisburg Hill, by L. Doublin [Lower Dublin] Township, Pennsylvania, for a burial ground. In 1838, a church was erected in which Rev. Jabez P. Campbell preached his first sermon. This was a circuit embracing, Frankford, Pennsylvania; Byberry; Bridgewater and Salem, Danhorn [Langhorne; old Attleborough], Pennsylvania. In 1858 the church, being out of debt was dedicated by Bishop Payne. In 1863, Rev. Richard Robinson, a returned missionary from Haiti preached ; he was afterward killed in a street car accident. Active and progressive Sunday school superintendents kept the interest of this church alive for years, some of them were : Prof. Norman Newsome, Catherine E. James, Phoebe Vandergrift, Wm. J. Chase, Jr. Later on the Philadelphia Conference sent ministerial assistance. The MMS. Beckett memorial, was organized in 1905. The founders were: Elijah Moore, John Williams, Peter Ricketts, John Miles, Amos Freeman, William Chase, Rachel Williams, Keziah Chase, Thomas Williams, William Edwards. Mary Robinson, Thomas Briscoe, George Freeman, Elias Chase. Present officers: Georgiana Robinson, Rachel Stout, Malvine E. Garlick, Pearl Bust, Richard Stout. Louise Jackson, Richard Burton, Alma Jackson, Mary S. Chase Beckett. Rev. H. H. Cooper, Jr., is pastor.”

Source: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015053038314&seq=395&q1=bethany>

No document or other source has been found giving 1830 as an approximate date for the burial ground lot being “given to the colored settlement” at Harrisburg Hill. No mention is made in the article of the 1810 deed. Perhaps the article’s 1830 date might more accurately be 1810.

The “circuit embracing, Frankford”, etc, is particularly noteworthy since it includes “Byberry”, which is not thought to have had an AME congregation. However, the residence and farm of renowned abolitionist Robert Purvis was located in Byberry, about 4 miles from Harrisburg. Purvis has been called the “President of the Underground Railroad”. His Byberry home was a major station on the Underground Railroad in the mid-1800s. Perhaps AME circuit preachers stopped at Purvis’s Byberry farm.

See https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/legacy_files/migrated/legaciespurvis.pdf

The list of Bethany AME’s “founders” is also of particular interest. Elijah Moore heads the list. His prominence is not surprising given his ownership of land close to the 1810 burying ground lot. Others are not as well documented. The absence of Church and Cemetery records makes it difficult to understand or corroborate what was considered the “founding” date. If the church was “founded” about 1820 as indicated by its official membership in AME Church in 1824, only Moore (1780-c1866), John Williams (1797-1869), and possibly George Freeman (1798-??) would have been old enough to have been involved. If the “founding” was the date the earliest church was erected, 1837/38, then Amos Freeman (1819-1906), William Chase (1810-1893), and his wife Keziah Chase (1808-1893) and perhaps others would have participated. It is thought that William Chase was the builder in 1837/38. His son Elias Chase (1834-1918) was clearly not old enough. Elias, a well-known master carpenter, is thought to have extensively renovated the church circa 1860.

The “founders” list may more accurately be considered a list of prominent members in the evolution of the church. The 1860 Census (below) showing the Black (B) population in Philadelphia’s 23rd Ward, 10th District, pages 48-50, clearly understood as Harrisburg, includes many names in the 1947 *Encyclopedia of the AME Church* article “founders” list, from Elijah Moore to Elias Chase. Of course, not all Bethany AME Church members lived at the Harrisburg settlement.

When did the church become known as Bethany AME? Again, without church records that is difficult to determine. To make matters worse, with the widening of Ashton Road in 1947, many of the burials over almost 150 years were disinterred and reportedly placed in an unmarked common grave on the southwest side of the church. Gravestones were also removed and lost. Bethany AME Church’s past has seemingly been almost entirely obliterated.

Fortunately, death certificates (scans or microfilms of the originals) indicating the Place of Burial as required by the State of Pennsylvania do exist and are accessible via the internet - a somewhat needle-in-a-haystack search. Death certificates or registrations for about 80 individuals buried at what appears to be Bethany AME Church Cemetery have been found and are tabulated online at the *Find a Grave* website at <https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/2438185/bethany-african-methodist-episcopal-church-cemetery>.

The earliest death certificate with “Bethany” listed is for Thomas Williams (1843-1911), buried May 7, 1911, with Place of Burial “Bethany Cem”. See <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/236569785/thomas-williams>. Williams also appears to have served in Company H, 45th U.S. Colored Infantry during the Civil War.

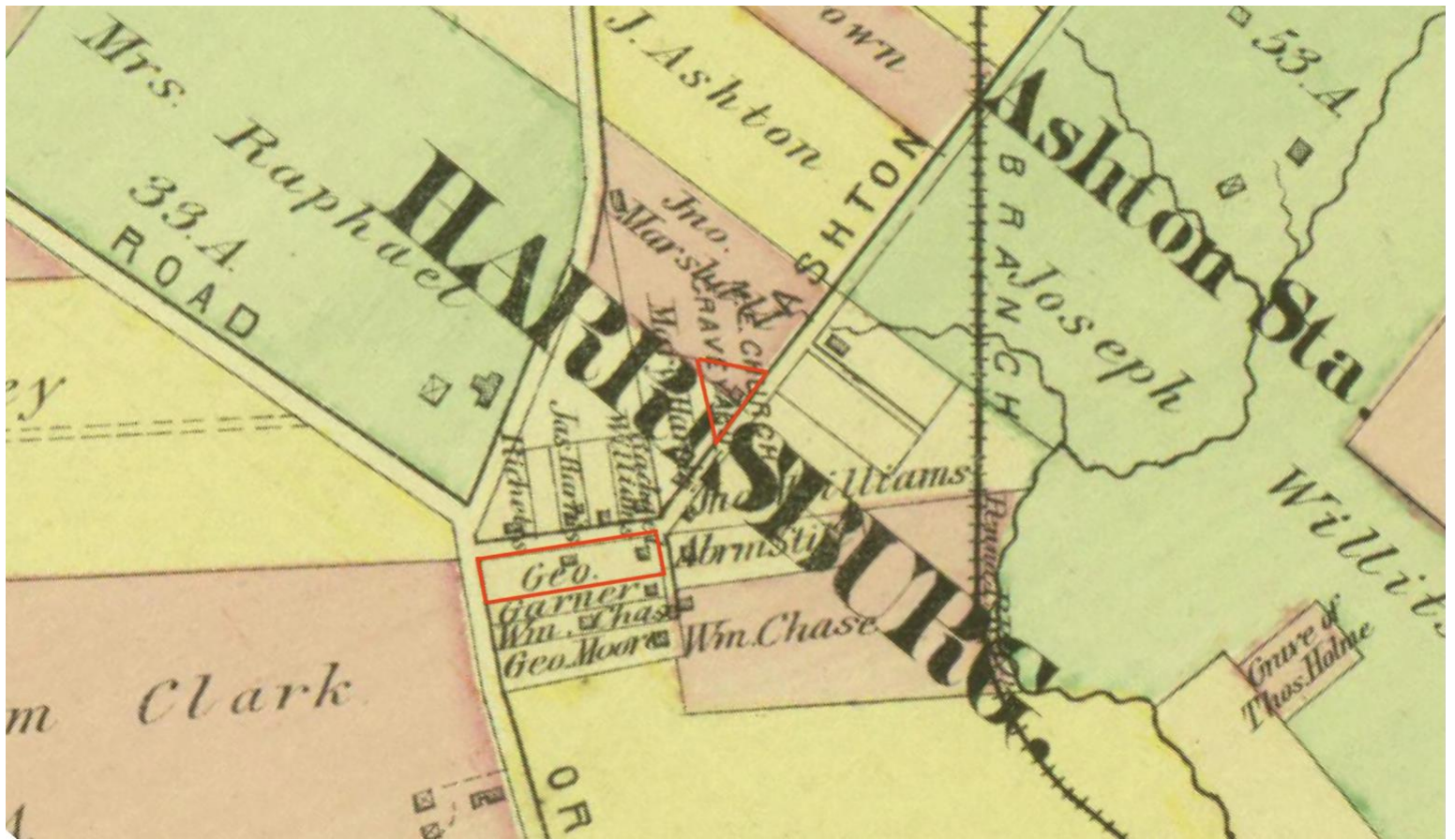
Working with maps, deeds, census records, and death certificates we have a limited documented history of Bethany AME Church and the African American community it served. Unfortunately, due to the history of racism in our society, there is nothing unusual regarding limited histories of Black communities.

Fred Moore January 2025

365	371	Jay Ashton	40	M	B	Day Labourer			
		Wannah	30	F					
		Francis	11	F					
		Marriet	8	F					
		Thomas	4	M					
		Jacy	1/2	F					
366	372	Maria Bicketts	47	F	B		500		Delaware
		William	23	M	B	Day Labourer			
		Elizabeth	22	F	B				Penn ^a

Dwelling-house— number of lot and number of street	Family numbered and name of head of family	The name of every person whose usual place of abode on the first day of June, 1860, was in this family.	Description			Profession, Occupation, or Trade of each person, male and female, over 15 years of age.	VALUE OF ESTATE OWNED.		Place of Birth, Naming the State, Territory, or Country.
			Age	Sex	White, Black, or Color		Value of Real Estate.	Value of Personal Estate.	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
		Peter Bicketts	47	M	B				Delaware
		Mary Tilsman	9	F	B				Penn ^a
367	373	Aug. Parnor	25	M	B	Day Labourer			
		Ann W.	22	F	B				
		Mary A.	4	F	B				
		Charles	1	M	B				
368	374	Jos. Warner	54	M	B	Day Labourer	1200		Conn ^t
		Mary	55	F	B				
		Charles	5	M	B				
		Elara Kennard	3	F	B				
369	375	Hardy Edwards	70	M	B	Day Labourer			North Carolina
		Elizabeth	67	F	B				Penn ^a
370	376	Elija Moore	80	F	B	Day Labourer	400		
		Martha	79	F	B				
371	377	Geo. Moore	54	M	B	Day Labourer	900		
		Franca	52	F	B				
372	378	Wm. Chase	54	M	B	Day Labourer	1200		
		Kessia	55	F	B				
	379	Abram Hill	43	M	B	Day Labourer			New Jersey
		Cardine	35	F	B				Penn ^a
		Lydia	4	F	B				
		Maria	6	F	B				
373	380	Geo. S. Freeman	62	M	B	Day Labourer	600		
		Rebecca	51	F	B				Maryland
		Mary J.	9	F	B				Penn ^a
		Anne	7	F	B				
374	381	George Freeman	22	M	B	Day Labourer			
		Rebecca	28	F	B				
		Mary J.	5	F	B				
		Henry	3	M	B				
		John	2	M	B				
		Phillis Pason	50	F	B				New York
375	382	James Howard	40	M	B	Farm Labourer	400		Penn ^a
		Lydia	53	F	B				
		Isaac	13	M	B				
		Lylina Hains	85	F	B				
376	383	Elias Chase	25	M	B	Carpenter	1000		
		Malvina	26	F	B				
		William	1	M	B				
377	384	John Williams	60	M	B	Day Labourer			
378	385	John Williams Jr.	24	M	B	Farmer	1200		Penn ^a
		Edenor	28	F	B				
		Richard Smith	11	M	B				
		Francis	9	M	B				
		James	7	M	B				
		John	2	M	B				
379	386	John Francis	45	M	B	Writer			
		Emilini	31	F	B				
		Annie	10	F	B				
380	387	Joseph Hoke	26	M	B	Farmer			New Jersey
		Mary	26	F	B				
		Alice	6	F	B				
		Mary	2	F	B				

1860 Census 23rd Ward, 10th District, Philadelphia, pages 48-50, showing the Black (B) population at Harrisburg.



Detail of the 1876 Hopkins Map, Philadelphia 23rd Ward, Plate L, showing Harrisburg. Bethany AME Church & Cemetery is identified as M.E. Church Graveyard (red triangle). The location of Elijah Moore's 1804 1-acre lot (red rectangle) is at the bend in Ashton Road (now Old Ashton Road). The lane running between the properties of George Garner and Abrahm Still was known as Moore's Lane. Also seen is the 1695 Grave of Thomas Holme, William Penn's Surveyor General.



A current aerial of Holme Circle showing Bethany AME Church & Cemetery (red triangle) and the location of Elijah Moore's 1804 1-acre lot (red rectangle) bordered by Old Ashton Road. The portion of Joey Drive intersecting Holme Ave was Moore's Lane, originally extending to Ashton Road as seen on the 1876 Map. Also shown is the location of the Grave of Thomas Holme.