The Records of Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1760-1972

Guide to the Scholarly Resources Microfilm Edition

From the holdings of the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church Historical Museum

Scholarly Resources Inc.
Wilmington, Delaware
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ISBN 0-8420-4225-3
Manufactured in the United States of America
First printing 1999

Distributed on microfilm by:
Scholarly Resources Inc.
104 Greenhill Avenue
Wilmington, DE 19805-1897

Distributed outside the USA

in Japan by:
Far Eastern Booksellers
P.O. Box 72
Kanda, Tokyo 101-91, JAPAN
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Introduction
by Augustus H. Able III

The records of Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church comprise a considerable body of various matter: first, because the church is an old one; second, because the division of its corporate body into distinct, complementary halves, the secular and the spiritual, i.e., the trustees as the controllers and managers of the property over against the corporation and particularly within it, the stewards and leaders of the class system through which the religious dynamism of the church was promoted.

The class system that was adopted in America directly from Wesley's masterful plan for the promotion of his Societies in England succeeded here as well as it did abroad. 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. It fueled American Methodism for its great future, and for the African denomination when it emerged, it was a particularly apt instrument for the A.M.E.'s development.

In keeping, the Bethel records for stewards, leaders, and classes are more numerous than those for the trustees, and as a kind of appendix to them follow the records of a number of activities from benevolent societies to Sunday School. It must be remarked that the corporation whose records are listed in this article along with the records of the stewards and leaders embraced the entire membership of the church in good standing, i.e., those men who had paid their annual "dollar money." The classes were as a matrix within this enveloping body; for the same reason all other non-trustee records are put together in one group as illustrating the totality of the membership in action.

As has just been hinted, in view of the diversity of materials, it has seemed reasonable to present the items not upon a simple chronological thread but to classify related
items together under a few different heads, keeping chronology, however, within each group.

The general plan, as developed under this rationale, is as follows:

1. Books of general record
2. Minutes of the trustees
3. Cash books and ledgers (pertaining to the trustees)
4. Books relating to leaders and classes
   Minutes of the corporation, of the Board of Stewards, of the Official Board, and of the Quarterly Conference
5. Special organizations:
   Benevolent Societies
   Trial Books
   Sunday School
   Ushers' Association
   Christian Endeavor
6. Miscellany
   Pictures and objects interesting for their associations
   Visitors' books
Scope and Content

1. GENERAL RECORDS

There are three record books, two large and one smaller, of the sort manufactured as official church registers. The Historical Record (1760-1784) of the first volume is especially valuable because of the transcription of Richard Allen's autobiography. Also, the sharp distinction between probationary and full membership enforces the felt seriousness of the religious commitment.

The second volume has a well-kept record of marriages (1890-1895), sociologically important because of its notation of employments. Also under baptisms an entry indicates a Baptist-like option for immersion for those desiring it.

Unfortunately these volumes give the impression of expensive books not used fully or consistently.

2. MINUTES OF THE TRUSTEES and CASH BOOKS

The trustees, managing the property of the church, receiving and paying out, cannot vie for interest with their steward counterparts. However, as materials for the kind of sociological-economic studies in vogue today, the Minute Books and Treasurer's Books have their special value. From the beginning these books, with small exception, were well-kept in a clean, sometimes finely expressive hand. It is worthy of note that the first receipt book dates from 1832, the year after Bishop Allen's death. The fledgling church after the passing of its founder stood at the beginning of a new era.

3. CASH BOOKS and LEDGER pertaining to the Trustees

4. BOOKS RELATING TO LEADERS AND CLASSES

Minutes of the Corporation, of the Board of Stewards, of the Official Board, of the Quarterly Conference.
The presence of class books (i.e., lists of classes, their leaders and members) of dates to 1901 seem to show that the class system remained relatively intact at Bethel Church later than in many other churches. In fact, the rise of Christian Endeavor (see Other Activities) after 1902 would seem a substitutionary activity. However, since the conduct of the religious life of the church remained vested in the active membership, the Minutes of the Stewards, Official Board, Quarterly Meeting and of the Corporation show these groups functioning earlier, answering to the same problems, whether the preacher's salary, the Communion wine, or money for the indigent.

5. SPECIAL ORGANIZATIONS and ACTIVITIES

The records of these organizations include much socially suggestive material. For example, the minutes of the two early benevolent societies, one, a burial society (men), the other, for insurance money in sickness (women), present striking attempts at self-help through voluntary organizations.

The minutes of the two "trial books" show attempts to enforce the principles of the Discipline in matters both of sex, and morality and fair dealing upon those who by membership had professed to accept them. A last trial apparently was held in 1895. None of these records show rancor, and no doctrinal points are raised.

That the Sunday School had its rolls is not surprising; the catalogue of its library, on the other hand, shows it in a progressive phase.

The rise of Christian Endeavor coincides with the same development on a huge national scale throughout Protestantism in the early part of this century.

Perhaps the best guide to the special organizations of the church is provided by the Book of Membership: "Classes, Circles, Auxiliaries, Alter Guild, Ushers' Association, etc.," c. 1916.
Not to be overlooked is the assignment of ministers from Bethel Church for each week, 1839-1844, for an impressive indicator of the church's growth through the whole Delaware Valley from the preaching stations steadily extended over the area.

6. MISCELLANY

Certain objects and pictures helping to actualize the life of the church seemed worthy of inclusion: Richard Allen's Bible (although broken and disordered) from which he preached, presented to him in 1802 by Thomas Garrett, in whose family it had descended, a small 17th-century quarto, and the "love feast" tickets, two of them signed by Richard Allen.
Roll Contents

General Records

Roll

1  Record of Bethel AME Church
   Historical Record 1760-1874
   Church Records 1865-1874
   Large record book, Ms. entries

Record of Bethel AME Church
   Historical Record 1890-1895
   Church Records 1880-1891
   Marriages until 1902
   Large record book, Ms. entries

Roll Book of members, marriages and baptisms, Bethel AME Church 1907-1912
   Church record book, Ms. entries

Minutes of the Trustees and Cash Books
Minutes and Financial Book of the Trustees, 1863-1894
   Large leatherbound copybook

Minutes of the Trustees, 1865-1878
   Disbound account book

Minutes of the Trustees, 1878-1891
   Bound account book

Minutes of the Building Committee (of the Trustees) for
   the present (fourth) building of Bethel AME Church,
   1889-1850 copybook.
Roll

2  *Minutes of the Board of Trustees*, 1910-1933
Large copybook

*Minutes of the Trustees*, 1937-1944
Looseleaf notebook

*Trustees of Bethel Church*, 1897-1899
Pages from a broken ledger

**Cash Books and Ledger Pertaining to the Trustees**

*Receipt Book* by the Secretary of Bethel AME Church, 1832-1847
Bound ledger

*Receipt Book* for Bethel and Union AME Churches, 1842-1847
Bound account book

*Finance Cash Book*, 1890-1894
Small ledger

*Treasurer’s Receipts*, 1894-1896
Bound book of printed receipt forms, filled

*Finance Committee’s Book*, 1897-1903
Small hardbound ledger

*Trustees of Bethel Church
Receipts and Expenditures*, 1897-1899
Pages from a broken ledger.
Roll
3  Cash Book, 1909-1927
   Large ledger

   Financial Ledger of the Trustees, 1927-1942
   Large ledger

   Books Relating to Leaders and Classes
   Receipts of the Corporation of Bethel AME Church,
   1846-1851
   Broken ledger

   Minutes of the Official Board, Leaders and Stewards,
   1848-1849
   Bound copybook

   An Account with the Leaders and Trustees, 1851-1858
   Bound account book

4  Class Book, Names and Contributions, 1852-1854
   Bound, alphabetized record book

   Book of Classes and Their Contributors, 1872-1894
   Broken, leatherbound ledger

   Roll of Classes in Bethel Church, 1874-1877
   Small ledger

   Minutes of the Board of Stewards, 1876
   Disbound account book

   Receipts of the Stewards, 1879-1886
   Broken account book

   Minute Book of the Official Board, 1887-1890
   Small copybook
Roll

4  Account Book of the Board of Stewards, 1887-1901
   Account book

   Minute Book of the Official Board, 1890-190
   Large copybook

5  Book of Class Rolls, c. 1890
   Small ledger

   Minutes of the Corporation, 1894-1950
   Large copybook

   Book: listing trustees, stewards, local preachers, class
   leaders, and members, 1901
   Small ledger

   Minutes of the Corporation, Reports from the Trustees,
   1951-1972
   Hardbound blank book

Special Organizations and Activities

   Minutes of the Union Benevolent Sons of Bethel AME
   Church (a burial society) 1826-1844.
   Leatherbound copybook

   Minute and Trial Book, Bethel AME Church, 1822-1835,
   1838-1851.
   Hardcover copybook

   Minute Book, United Daughters of Tapsico Society,
   1837-1847
   Hardbound copybook
Roll

5  Appointment of Ministers from Bethel AME Church, 1839-1844 (for each week to the mission churches)
    Hardbound copybook

Minute Book of Bethel Church, 1859-1865
    (record of trials)
    Hardbound copybook

Name of Scholars in the Sunday School

6  Catalogue of Books in the Sunday School Library, 1864
    Hardbound account book

Sunday School Book, c. 1860
    (names and attendance)
    Bound ledger

Church Sunday School, 1934-1939
    Bound, alphabetized record

Minutes of the Preachers’ Association, Philadelphia Conference, 1897-1901
    Hardbound book

Minutes of the Richard Allen Christian Endeavor, 1902-1910
    Copybook

Book of Membership Rolls: classes, circles, auxiliaries, Altar Guild, ushers, etc.
    Ledger, n.d. c. 1916
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Roll

6  *Minute Book of the Ushers' Association*, 1925-1930
   Hardbound copybook

   *Minutes, Ushers' Association*, 1931-1941
   Hardbound copybook

   /Miscellany/

7  Bible presented to Richard Allen, 1802

   Three "love feast" tickets, 1818 and 1823

   "Free paper" for James Jacoby, 1840

   Program of events in Bethel Church, 1878-1902,
      Souvenir Book

   Solicitor's book, Grand Class Rally, 1892

   Badge, Daughters of Allen, 1902

   Ordination of Bishops Beckett and Ross, 1916
      Printed pamphlet

   Burning of the Mortgage, 1945
   Picture with identifications

   Visitors Books, Registrations
      1901-1909
      1916 Centennial Conference
      1923-1931
Roll
8 Visitors' Books
   1931-1944
   1947-1949
   1960-1970