

**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

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# Contents

Introduction, 1

Scope and Content, 3

Roll Contents, 6

    General Records, 6

    Minutes of the Trustees and Cash Books, 6

    Cash Books and Ledger Pertaining to the Trustees, 7

    Books Relating to Leaders and Classes, 8

    Special Organizations and Activities, 9

    Miscellany, 11



## 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

**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