

Historical Scrapbook Article: The Lee Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church

4/3/2021

The Lee Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church observed its one hundredth anniversary in June 1988. It is located at 913 Beaver Street. The name of the Lee Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church came from both its denomination and one of the denomination's early bishops.

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The African Methodist Episcopal Church started in a meeting, in November 1787, of the African American people belonging to the Methodist Society in Philadelphia. In 1793, with the support of others in the group, Richard Allen constructed, at his own expense and on his own property, a house of worship which became known as the African Methodist Meeting House. This was the Bethel Church at 6th and Lombard Streets in Philadelphia. It was the first Methodist chapel built for the exclusive use of African Americans.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church was formally established as an independent denomination at a conference in April 1816, which was called by the Philadelphia church and attended by delegates from Philadelphia, Baltimore and other localities. Richard Allen was the first bishop.

Allen's parents and their four children were sold as slaves into Delaware near Dover shortly after his birth. He was awakened as a result of the preaching of Freeborn Garrettson. Richard left his master, Stokely, after purchasing his and his brother's freedom, and began to preach, first in Delaware, then into New Jersey, and in 1786, he returned to Philadelphia. He died in Philadelphia on March 26, 1831. His body lies in the Allen Museum in the Bethel Church in Philadelphia. His wife, Sarah, died July 16, 1849.

From the beginning, in addition to its other works and programs, the African Methodist Episcopal Church has fostered education for African Americans. The denomination has founded and owns 15 colleges and seminaries, including two in Texas. They are Paul Quinn College in Waco and Abington School of Religion in Dallas.

The Lee Chapel Church is named for Bishop Benjamin Franklin Lee, who was the twentieth bishop in the AME Church and served for 34 years.

Bishop Lee was consecrated as a bishop in 1892 in Philadelphia. He served as secretary of the Bishops' Council from 1906 to 1908 and was senior bishop from 1916 until 1924. He had been converted in 1865 and was licensed to preach in 1868. He was ordained a deacon in 1870 and an elder in 1872. In 1876, he succeeded Bishop Daniel A. Payne as President of Wilberforce University, where he had been educated, serving until 1884.

Bishop Lee was editor of the Christian Recorder from 1884 to 1892. He also was the author of "Wesley, the Worker" and "Cause of Success for Methodism."

Bishop Lee was born on September 18, 1841 at Gouldtown, New Jersey and he married Mary E. Ashe on December 30, 1872. He died in 1926.

The Lee Chapel AME Church was organized in 1888 by George E. Smith, an early Methodist pastor and educator in Brownwood, who also served as the first pastor. Services were conducted in Mt. Zion Baptist Church, located on Tannehill Street in the vicinity of the Santa Fe Railroad Shop, and were later conducted in a brush arbor in front of Mr. Smith's residence.

George Edward Smith, usually called George E. Smith, was the organizer of the Lee Chapel AME Church. He was one of the outstanding men of early Brownwood.

In 1883 or 1885, he moved to Brownwood, where he passed the teacher's examination and organized the first school for African Americans in the city. He served as its principal and teacher until 1890. He previously had served in San Angelo as a trustee of Public School District No. 1.

He was ordained a deacon and elder in the AME Church in 1881. He served under four bishops of the denomination. In addition to organizing and pasturing the Lee Chapel Church, he served as a pastor in Ballinger, Coleman, Menard and Fort Stockton.

He also worked for the betterment of the African American community. He built homes in the newly established Bailey Addition to Brownwood in 1890, and encouraged African Americans to settle in the addition, then a wilderness. He helped with funding and sold the houses at a low price. He was instrumental in securing city water for this neighborhood. This project was completed the day after he died, August 9, 1913. Approximately 25 years after his death, the citizens of Brownwood, with the cooperation of the U.S. Federal Housing Authority, named in his honor, the George Smith Housing Project, located in the area of Hendrick, Bailey and Cordell Streets.

These were accomplishments of a man who was born a slave in Richmond, Virginia in 1845. In about 1861, he escaped to Washington, D.C., where he was held as contraband of war. He joined the Ninth Cavalry of the U.S. Army and participated in the Native American Wars in the Southwest and Midwest. This division was called Buffalo soldiers. It was totally an African American unit except for the commander, who was Anglo. He was honorably discharged in 1879 at Fort Concho, near San Angelo, Texas.

Mr. Smith married Virginia Love on October 28, 1888. They were the parents of fourteen children.

The Brown County Historical Commission has obtained a historical marker for this building.

This article originally appeared on Brownwood Bulletin: [Historical Scrapbook Article: The Lee Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church](#)