

# Looking back

## Blacks frequently worshipped through 'invisible institution'

By Richard C. Brown  
Contributing Writer

The first Africans arrived in what is now the United States early in the 1600s. For a century and a half, however, slaves and free blacks in the English colonies were slow to accept Christianity.

Differences in language and culture, the immense barriers erected by slavery and the reluctance of many masters to expose their slaves to a religion teaching that all men are brothers hindered the transmission of Christian belief to black people.



This drawing depicts a meeting of the "invisible church."

William Davie, a Virginian writing in the 1750s, declared that masters had sadly neglected the spiritual welfare of their slaves. Blacks, half the local population by his estimate, "were essentially without any religion" he wrote.

Nevertheless, knowledge of the Christian God and of Jesus gradually spread among blacks, in both the north and the south. Church records in Massachusetts and Virginia show that thousands of free blacks and slaves were Christians by the time of the American Revolution. Meanwhile, blacks accompanied Christo-

pher Gist, Daniel Boone and other explorers of the lands west of the Alleghenies and came with the earliest settlers to this region.

Increasing numbers of these blacks, or their descendants, became church members during the first half of the 1800s. In that long-ago time, Christian religious services were racially integrated with whites and blacks, whether slave or free, worshipping together.

The situation in Danville was typical of Kentucky. A roll kept by David A. Russel, Clerk of the Session, showed that 92 blacks had joined the Presbyterian Church between 1825 and 1845. Nine years later, in an annual report to the Transylvania Presbytery, the Danville church listed 331 members, 58 of them "colored." The Baptist church on Broadway likewise showed a racially-mixed membership. A total of 123 blacks served in that church from 1823 until the early 1840s.

By custom, black members of racially-mixed congregations in the early 1800s sat in the rear or in the balconies of the churches they attended. Seldom were they allowed a voice in church decisions or invited to take part in social affairs, except as cooks or servants. As their knowledge of Christian doctrine grew along with their confidence, blacks understandably wanted to take control of their own religious organizations.

With the approval of the Broadway church, black Baptists organized a separate congregation in August 1846. The group known as the African or Green Street Church met in a succession of homes and other buildings during the next decade. Rev. Jordan Meaux was an early pastor of the congregation. So, too, was Elissah Henry Green, ordained March 24, 1850, after a committee of the Broadway church heard his account of his religious experiences.



This drawing depicts a midnight slave funeral.

Early in the 1840s, blacks took over the little church abandoned after a larger church was built by the racially-mixed Presbyterian congregation. However, these black Presbyterians failed to achieve an ordained pastor of their own race. Instead, they received permission to hold services supervised by a committee of three black members. The Session ordered this committee to see that services "be not protracted to a late hour and be conducted with order and decorum."

Still, by even the most generous count, there were no more than a few hundred black church members in Boyle County as the Civil War began. These made up only a small portion of the county's black population, which consisted of 435 free blacks and 3,279 slaves in 1860. Most of these had never seen the inside of a church.

As one former slave remembered, "We had no church but the Bible was read to us on Sunday afternoons by some of the white folks."

'Steal Away — Steal Away to Jesus' is said to have been a singing summons to an out-of-the-way spot where groups of unsupervised blacks could demonstrate what Christianity meant to them

For many whites, however, black acceptance of Christianity in the antebellum south was a cause for apprehension. Southerners knew that Christian faith had contributed to major slave revolts led by Gabriel Prosser in Richmond, by Daniel Vesey in Charleston, and by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia.

On a less dangerous level, the black belief in Jesus as a liberating Messiah often deafened them to the injunction, "Servants, obey your masters. ... Do not steal or lie, for this is very wrong." Most exasperating, blacks ignored the commandment against stealing when they remembered that they themselves were stolen goods. For all these reasons, it is little wonder that unsupervised gatherings of blacks were regarded with suspicion.

As a result, religious services for only blacks frequently took place in secret. Historians of religion have named this network of secret services an "invisible institution." If the invisible institution had a theme song it was the spiritual "Steal Away — Steal Away to Jesus." This spiritual is said to have been a singing summons to an out-of-the-way spot where groups of unsupervised blacks could demonstrate what Christianity meant to them.

But "Steal Away" was only one of many songs sung by slaves while at work, at play or at worship. Drawing from the Bible, Protestant hymns, sermons they had heard, Old

Testament stories, New Testament gospel and African styles of singing and dancing, American slaves created a music that expressed their faith. This music has been an important part of religious services in black churches down to the present day.

And yet, the religious services of the invisible institution were much more than singing societies. As the historian John W. Blassingame has described them: "They served as meeting places for friends and sweethearts; furnished avenues for exercising responsibility and leadership; and offered opportunities for socializing and releasing pent-up emotions..."

Another historian, Albert J. Raboteau, has written, "When missionaries from the free black churches of the north same south in the wake of Union armies, they found a significant community of Christians among the ex-slaves."

Moreover, Raboteau wrote, "They found ex-slaves who knew not only the tenets of Christianity but also some of the finer points of doctrine and church policy." He concluded that this extensive religious life among the recently-freed blacks was the work of "the invisible institution — the folk religion of the slave community."

Dr. Richard C. Brown, a retired history professor, is the author of "The History of Danville and Boyle County, Kentucky 1774-1992."

# Looking back

## Black churches exploded in number in Danville

**During Rev. John Edmond Wood's pastorate of the Green Street Church from 1898 until his death in 1929, the church moved to the corner of Second and Walnut streets where a larger and finer Baptist church was built**

*Editor's note: This is the second article of a four-part series on black churches in Boyle County.*

**By Richard C. Brown  
Contributing Writer**

**W**hen slavery ended in Kentucky, Danville's Green Street Baptist Church was one of 17 independent black churches in the state.

In 1866, the Rev. Isaac Slaughter began 26 years as pastor to the congregation, earning his reputation as "a great Bible student and fearless defender of the faith."

During the first year of his pastorate, a small group from the Green Street Church helped organize the First Baptist Church of Perryville so as to serve members living in the western Boyle County town. The Rev. Harry Hocker was named the first pastor of the new church.

For several reasons Baptists led the way in the explosive growth of black churches in Kentucky following the Civil War. Baptist doctrine was simple and easily understood by thousands of potential members among former slaves. Outdoor mass baptisms had dramatic appeal for converts. Independent congregational organization and control was well-suited to Kentucky's rural society. Nevertheless, in spite of the emphasis on independent congregations, experienced Baptist leaders were aware of benefits from regional organization.

As a result, the General Association of Colored Baptists in Kentucky was formed at a Lexington meeting, providing visible evidence of growth in less than five years.

**T**wo years later, the Green Street Church hosted the General Association meeting in Danville, with messengers from nearly 100 black Baptist churches attending. At the Danville meeting, plans were laid for a black university that later become Simmons College in Louisville. Moreover, Baptist leaders at the meeting arranged for a newspaper, destined to become the official organ of the General Association of Colored Baptists in Kentucky.

The Association met in Danville four times between 1870 and 1946. The Rev. John Edmond Wood of Danville served as the Association's president between 1917 and 1925. He had become pastor of the Green Street Church in 1898 but he led the move to the corner of Second and Walnut streets where a larger and finer Baptist church was built.

Rev. Wood also published a newspaper for local Baptists, calling it, "The Torch Light." During his pastorate, which ended with his death in 1929, a New Mission Baptist Church on Second Street and the Bethel Baptist Church on Cowan Street were built. A street in Housing Authority of Danville apartments off South Second Street has been named after J.E. Wood.

Methodists were not far behind Baptists in building black churches in Kentucky following the Civil War. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church led in this expansion.



**This group gathered in front of the St. James AME Church on Walnut Street in the late 1920s. Lucy Jones**

**Stephens owns the photo. The church was established in Danville as early as in 1867.**

**I**t became a separate Methodist denomination under the guidance of Bishop Richard Allen of Philadelphia in 1816. Bishop William Paul Quinn brought AME work to Kentucky about 1838, and established Quinn Chapel in Louisville as the mother church. In 1868, a Kentucky Conference of AME churches was organized. The present St. James AME Church in Danville dates from 1867 and eventually became a member of this conference. For many years there was another black Methodist church at 218 E. Walnut St., near Stanford Avenue.

In 1869, black members of the Christian Church organized a congregation separate from the parent church at Fourth and Walnut. For many years these black Christians worshipped in a church they built on Green Street, a block west of Fourth. In 1922, however, they sold their Green Street property to the Church of God. After attempting to build a church on Main Street, they bought the New Mission Baptist Church and renamed it Second Street Christian Church.

These black churches were built within the segregated black settlements in Danville. They struggled against tremendous odds but by the beginning of the 20th century they were the heart and soul of those communities. The failure of political Reconstruction in the late 19th century stripped blacks of control over every institution except their churches.

Meanwhile, a building boom was taking place in the county's small black communities. To maintain their labor supply following emancipation, some Boyle county farmers donated or sold to freed people 10 to 20 acres on the fringes of their farms. These tracts became tiny, individual farms or were laid out in small lots forming a segregated rural community.

While most of these rural hamlets have disappeared or have

changed in nature, their names are still remembered. Clifton, Stoney Point, Wilsonville, Needmore and Little Needmore are among them.

Oscar Butler, who spent summers with his grandmother in Little Needmore, knew the origins of these communities. "I think that the reason we were able to have communities (like Little Needmore) was because farmers around there, since slavery was illegal, sold small tracts of land so they could have help to take care of their farming needs and perform services that were required," he said.

**R**esidents in each of these little towns built a church that was a religious and social center for the community. The Christian Hill Baptist Church, which residents of Little Needmore attended, had a minister who came every other Sunday. He would stay with different families, who were responsible for feeding him.

Apparently this church was poorly built because one member of the congregation recalled, "Shortly after they'd start shouting in it, it would start falling apart and they had to use guy wires to hold it together."

In Needmore, on Perryville Road, the Baptist church was on a hill. At one time Jim Adams was a preacher there and Mrs. Adams was midwife to the community.

The Wilsonville community near Parksville had an AME Church and Frank Bruce remembers, "On Sunday we'd have about three church services, and I'd attend all three of them."

*Dr. Richard C. Brown, a retired history professor, is the author of "The History of Danville and Boyle County, Kentucky 1774-1992."*

# Looking back

## Cities have drawn members away from black churches

*Editor's note: This is the third article of a four-part series on black churches in Boyle County.*

By Richard C. Brown  
Contributing Writer

Danville's city directories offer insight into the people and the institutions of the city during the years they were published.

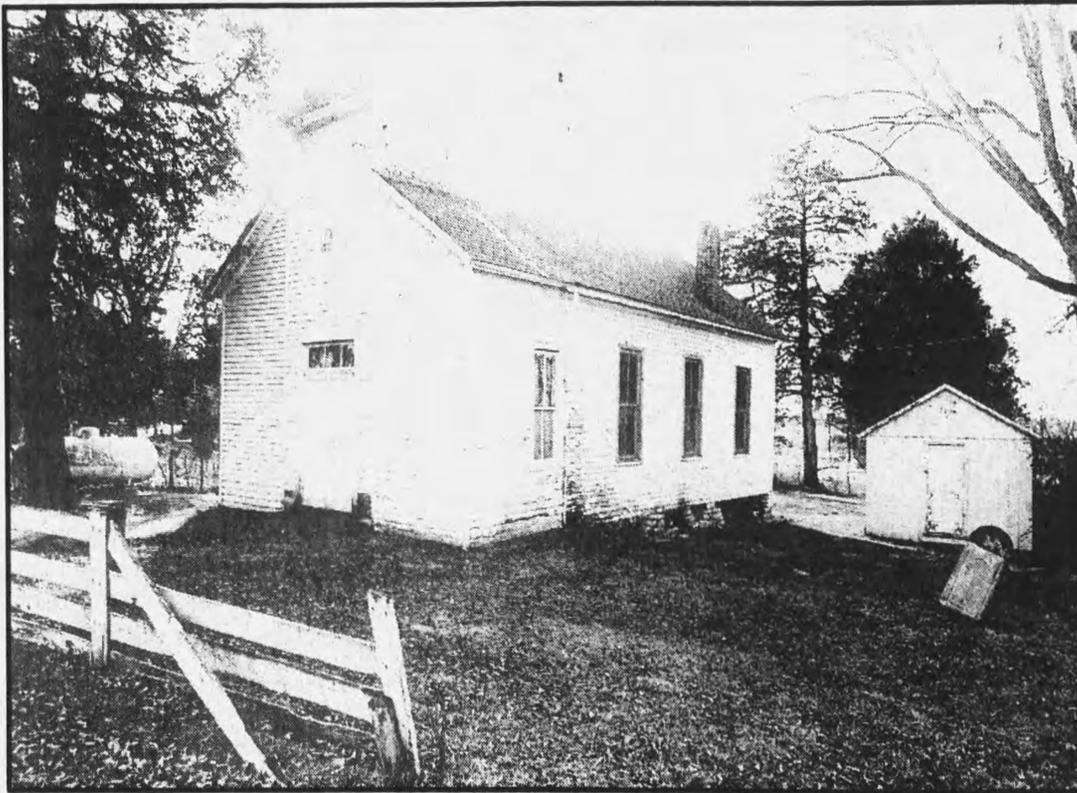
For example, the earliest known Danville city directory — that of 1897 — lists in alphabetical order the names of approximately 1,600 persons over 18 years of age. About 40 percent of these names are followed by the identification "col" indicating that the person was black.

Banks, schools, secret societies and churches are among institutions identified in the 1897 directory. Of the 14 churches listed, seven are described as "col," which is evidence of the ratio of blacks in Danville's population near the turn of the century. Among the seven were the Baptist church on Green Street, soon to move to the corner of Second and Walnut, and the New Mission Baptist church on Second Street.

There were also two black Methodist churches in Danville in 1897. St. James AME church, built five years before at 124 E. Walnut, was well established at that time under the leadership of Pastor G.H. Burks. The other, a block east of St. James on Walnut Street, has since disappeared.

The two black Presbyterian churches listed in the 1897 Danville city directory have likewise disappeared. "Walnut, near South Fourth" is the address given for one of these. The other, a Cumberland Presbyterian church, occupied a site at Main near Fifth. Also in 1897, a black Christian church stood on Green Street west of Fourth, where the Robinson, Christopher and Hughes building now is located.

During the early years of the 20th century, some black churches in Boyle County had become stabilized after a half century of struggle. Whether inside or outside the city, whites accepted these black churches, even if somewhat grudgingly. By this time, white churches in Danville were losing nearly all their black members, who preferred to join congregations in which their race predominated. Few whites joined black congrega-



Staff Photo by Emily Morse

Above, Clifton Baptist Church on Clifton Road is led by Rev. James A. Landrum Sr. The church, which celebrated its centennial in 1986, has six members. At left, deacons assembled at the Clifton Baptist Church on Clifton Road in the 1950s. James Madison Tarrance, second from right on the middle row, owns the photo. The man at far right on the second row is a Trumbo. The others are not identified. Anyone who can identify them should contact The Advocate.



### During Rev. P.A. Carter's tenure at the First Baptist Church, a disastrous fire struck on the morning of Dec. 26, 1946. A new church was erected on the same site at Second and Walnut streets in the spring of 1967

tions. As a result, congregations stabilized on a racially-segregated basis.

In the largest black Baptist church, the length of pastors' service contributed to its stability. Rev. J.E. Wood served the First Baptist Church at Second and Walnut between 1898 and 1929. Four years later, Rev. P.A. Carter began a pastorate lasting 40 years at that church. During Rev. Carter's tenure, a disastrous fire struck the church on the morning of Dec. 26, 1946. The physical structure failed to

survive, but the congregation remained strong and stable, enabling a new church to be erected on the same site in the spring of 1967.

Thirty pastors have served at St. James between 1897 and the present. Their pastorates have averaged fewer than four years in length, although Rev. Everhart Walker was the pastor there for about 12 years. During part of his tenure in the 1980s, he served as ruling elder of the district. Another distinguished pastor, Rev. Spillman, also served as

a ruling elder in the early 1930s. At about the same time, St. James acquired a manse at 151 E. Green St. as a means of stabilization. Rev. William Young lived there in 1931 and subsequent black Methodist clergy have occupied it.

The congregation of what is now the Second Street Christian Church worshipped under the guidance of at least 20 different shepherds before achieving stability during the pastorate of Rev. Finis E. Walkup from 1961 until his death in 1986. With Rev. Walkup's leadership, the congregation made many changes in the physical facilities of their church and in the parsonage donated by Rev. Allen Ross in the 1940s.

Outside Danville, the black First Baptist Church in Perryville developed enough stability to enable it to recently celebrate its 125th anniversary. However, Wilson Chapel AME in Wilsonville, packed decades ago at Wednesday and Sunday



Staff Photo by Emily Morse

This grave marker is in the cemetery behind the church.

services with its 110 members, now has a congregation of only 10.

"We were a very vital and important church in our denomination with 17 members going on to become AME ministers," according to Ella Mae Marshall, one of Wilson Chapel's 10 members.

Still, Wilson Chapel has survived longer than other black churches in the rural hamlets of Boyle County. They have been completely abandoned or hold only occasional "reunion services."

The Clifton Baptist Church hangs on stubbornly under the leadership of Rev. James A. Landrum Sr. The congregation, now only six in number, celebrated its centennial in 1986.

Oscar Butler, who knew the origins of these rural hamlets, also knew why their population and their church congregations dwindled. "As the years have gone by there was no work for the younger people and they migrated to the larger cities — Danville, Lexington, Cincinnati, you name it and you'll find some of our Needmore people in these towns," he said.

Kentucky preservationists are concerned about the abandonment of these community types. "Segregated rural hamlets and urban neighborhoods have long been threatened both culturally and physically by various forces," they say.

The physical and genealogical history of these rural neighborhoods "should be thoroughly documented before they disappear altogether, leaving us a less realistic understanding of the past," preservationists claim.

Actually, the abandonment of these rural communities at first strengthened the black churches in Danville. As black Baptists or Methodists moved to town, they joined existing congregations of their faith. Nevertheless, even the Danville black churches are no longer as stable nor as numerous as they once were. Congregations in some cases have shrunk in size. The number of black churches in Danville now is only five compared to seven in 1897.

Dr. Richard C. Brown, a retired history professor, is the author of "The History of Danville and Boyle County, Kentucky 1774-1992."

# Looking back

## Black churches offered comfort, education and leadership roles

*Editor's note: This is the last article of a four-part series on black churches in Boyle County.*

**By Richard C. Brown  
Contributing Writer**

Considering the circumstances that blacks had to overcome, the creation of black churches in Boyle County was a remarkable achievement.

In 1870, there were 3,679 blacks in the county, most of them uneducated, illiterate and only five years removed from slavery.

Yet, within 30 years these men and women and others like them, organized eight churches in Danville and at least 11 more in the county outside the city.

Increases in the black population of Boyle County enabled these churches to expand and to offer a variety of activities. In the 20 years between 1870 and 1890, the county's black population increased from 3,679 to 4,809, which was the largest number of black residents ever in Boyle County.

Though mostly poor, black church members started schools before the state began public education for black children. They honored and supported their pastors, sometimes giving a chicken or a ham at holiday time to flesh out an inadequate salary. They proudly gave what money and labor they could to build their churches.

Still, neither the county nor its black churches could escape the impact of the exodus



Staff Photos by Jim Aldridge

of black citizens from rural to urban areas in Kentucky and the north. By 1920, only 3,190 blacks lived Boyle County, 1,619 fewer than had lived there 30 years before. The decline in black population continued until the census of 1990 counted 2,444 black residents of Boyle County — less than 10 percent of the county's 25,641 total.

As the pool of potential black church members shrank, so did the number of black churches in Boyle County. Today there are only seven: three Baptist, two AME, one Christian and one Church of God of America, Inc.

The First Baptist Church at 200 W. Walnut St. reports a congregation of 875 members, and 400 to 450 regularly attend. The Rev. Dr. Richard E. Hill, who is in his 19th year as pastor there, said the annual budget is more than \$75,000.

Bethel Baptist Church on Cowan Street appears to have an uncertain future. Founded by E.B. Coleman in 1925, the original church was rebuilt in 1962 during the pastorate of Rev. Reuben Brantley. Services still are held at the church but Rev. J.L. Buckner, the current pastor, has been handicapped by advanced age and ill health.

Clifton Baptist Church, led by Rev. James A. Landrum Sr., celebrated its centennial in 1986 by only has six members.

On the other hand, the First Baptist Church in Perryville appears secure as it prepares to celebrate its 125th anniversary. Its pastor, Rev. Willie F. Newby Jr., comes from Louisville to conduct services each Sunday. During the five years he has served the church, membership has increased and the church has become involved in local, state and national organizations.

The black Christian Church on Second Street has a new minister. Rev. Ben Carter has been there less than a year. During that time, however, seven new members have joined the church and Rev. Carter expects to increase membership by building on the spirit of the congregation already there.

Rev. Wink Sweat has been pastor at St. James AME Church, 124 E. Walnut, for four years. His church has 315 members on its rolls but no more than 100 are active and fewer than that contribute to the church's \$73,000 annual budget. St. James has lacked a full-time pastor for many years so Rev. Sweat works for the state transportation department as did his predecessor Rev. Everhart Walker.

Ralph Smith, an active young member of St. James, is preparing to be a minister in the AME faith. Both he and Rev. Sweat help out at the Wilson Chapel AME where the membership has dwindled to 10.

Not the largest, but in many ways the most vigorous black church in Danville, is The Church of God of America, Inc., 449 W. Martin Luther King Blvd. A Pentecostal church, it has grown from what has been called the most significant religious



At top, Elder Larry Weathers Sr. preaches at The Church of God of America, Inc., on West Martin Luther King Boulevard. In the photos behind him, from left to right, are: "Mother" Brown of Pulaski County, who founded this branch of the Pentecostal church in 1919; Weathers, who has led the church since 1978; and Bishop A.R. Smith, who was the general overseer when the church was built in 1950. Above, Betty Stanford, sways to the music. At right, Larry Weathers Jr. plays the trombone.

At far left, the young boy sitting on the pew is a nephew of Tammy Taylor. The church's membership is not recorded, but one night of a recent revival attracted 43 people. This church may not be Danville's largest, but its music and testimony during services make it one of the liveliest.

influence of the 20th century.

The local church is one in a Kentucky and West Virginia circuit founded in 1919 by "Mother" Brown of Pulaski County. The Danville congregation worships in a church built in 1950 under Bishop A.R. Smith, general overseer of the Church of God of America. Elder Larry Weathers Sr. became local leader when Bishop Smith died in 1978. The church's membership is unrecorded, but 43 men, women and children prayed, witnessed, and danced during the first night of a recent week-long revival at the church.

Those who write about the future of black churches deal mainly with churches in the cities where 80 percent of blacks live. They are the most heavily urbanized ethnic group in the United States. Predictions by these experts on the future of the black religious experience has relevance to Danville and Boyle County in only one or two cases.

One prediction has it that the percentage of blacks among Catholics in the United States will increase because of immigration from Mexico, Cuba, Haiti and other countries in Central and South America. Already about 5 percent of the families and individuals belonging to SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Danville are black. Nearly all these, however, are descendants of old Washington or Marion County families and seem unlikely

to increase the percentage of blacks at SS. Peter and Paul, currently the most racially-mixed congregation in Danville.

E. Franklin Frazier, an educator and author, writing in the 1930s through the 1950s, saw black churches as stumbling blocks to assimilation into the American mainstream. He favored racially-mixed congregations, a development more apparent in larger cities than Danville.

"Black Metropolis," by St. Clair Drake and Horace Clayton, sees the black churches as giving masses of people the opportunity for power, control, applause and acclaim. The book observes that blacks do not receive these opportunities in the larger society. This seems to have been true of Danville's black churches in the past, is true of two or three of them at present, and may continue to be true in the future.

Whatever the future of black churches in Boyle County, no one can change what they have been in the past. They were teachers and defenders of the Christian faith for thousands of people, comforters in times of oppression, sources of cries for social justice and creators and carriers of black culture.

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