

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



Vol 2, No. 10

Telling the full story isn't just about acknowledging the hard parts. It's also about elevating and illuminating stories of black excellence and achievement that have never received their due.

-- Brent Leggs

This church is a community church, and everybody is somebody.

-- Rev. Dwight E. Dillard, pastor
Ward Chapel AME Church, 1978-1988

"Everybody is Somebody": Ward Chapel A.M.E. Church

Members of Montevallo's Ward Chapel A.M.E Church, tucked behind city hall on West Street, are rightly proud of their rich history. Last year the church celebrated 150 years of service to the community. Ward Chapel is Montevallo's oldest historically Black church and one of the fifteen oldest A.M.E. churches in the state.

The Black church in Alabama "was at the heart of the community that blacks developed in slavery and in a segregated, racist society," writes Wilson Fallin in *Uplifting the People*. It was "the central self-help institution within the black community. Soon after the Civil War, blacks left white churches and formed their own congregations. . . Separate churches gave blacks an organization on which to build a stronger community."

Black Christians in Montevallo were eager to start building their own community even before the outbreak of the Civil War. The 1855 minutes of the Alabama Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church South reported that membership of Montevallo Church for 1854 included "twenty-three colored members and eleven colored probationary members." They had withdrawn from what is now the First United Methodist Church of Montevallo.

The church known as Ward Chapel -- named for Bishop Thomas M. D. Ward -- was established in 1872. Its first pastor was the Rev. Jesse Brazier. A grandchild, writing in 1980, recalls him as an "A.M.E. preacher who traveled over the country riding a horse or in a buggy drawn by a horse, preaching in churches or in certain churches every Sunday."

The descendants of Jesse and Rachel Brazier still worship at the church they helped to found. "The Braziers have always been members here at Ward Chapel," says James Salter. "My mother [Polly Salter], my aunt [Onnie Dell Fluker], the rest of the family as well. So we're carrying on the Brazier legacy." Jesse and Rachel Brazier had six children. One of them, Nero, was a fairly prominent figure in town. He was the town miller, and local lore has it that he and his family lived downtown on Main Street.



Ward Chapel sometime after 1992, when the fellowship hall was added.

During the era of the push for civil rights, Ward Chapel contributed its share of community organizers and activists. Leon Harris, Sr, the famously outspoken leader of the local Suburban League, was one. In its heyday in the 1970s, the League worked to expand employment and educational opportunities here in town -- in the newly integrated high school, for example. Other activist members of the League from Ward Chapel include Mr. R. B. Burns, Anna Mayweather, and Ethel Mae Thompson. The League met at local Black churches, among them Montevallo's two downtown churches, Ward Chapel and Shiloh Missionary Baptist on Selma, Road, and kept their congregations informed of what was going on. The League also met at the Prince Hall affiliated lodge hall at 160 Commerce Street, affectionately known as the "Mason Hall."

James Salter reflects on what Ward Chapel meant to him as a boy and still means today. It is known as "an inviting church. Because, when people want to have a funeral and they weren't a member of a church or had gotten out of a church, the first church they would think about would be Ward Chapel." What made Ward Chapel so inviting? "It's the people. There's always been the families that have been a part of Ward Chapel and have always had that attitude, that welcoming attitude." The church has always "served the community trying to help other people. There have been, you know, people who are less fortunate who will always come and know that they could get help from Ward's Chapel."

The vital role played by Ward Chapel in our town is not an untold story within the Black community. But it is exciting to see that the significance of this historic church is gaining wider recognition. The city of Montevallo has taken steps to fund and maintain a plaque honoring the church as a historic site. Ward Chapel A.M.E. Church will soon take its place as a crucial stop on the Montevallo African American Heritage Trail.

Sources: Thanks are due especially to local historian James Salter and UM archivist Carey Heatherly. Much of this information comes from "Highlights and History of Ward Church A.M.E. Church," courtesy of Salter, supplemented by a recorded interview 29 August 2023. He also provided materials relating to the Brazier family and Mason Hall. Photograph courtesy of the University of Montevallo Archives. Submitted by Kathy King and Anitka Stewart on behalf of the Montevallo Legacy Project. Contact us at MontevalloLegacy@gmail.com.