

SHILOH BAPTIST CHURCH (OLD SITE)

I could not begin to express my new born hopes for I felt already like I was certain of my freedom now. I did not know what to say for I was dumb with joy and could only thank God and laugh.

—Fredericksburg slave John Washington
reflecting on his escape across the river to the Union camps at Falmouth

Background

Located at 801 Sophia Street, Shiloh Baptist Church was sold to its black congregation by the resident white church for a sum of \$500. Shortly after gaining its independence, the African American congregation flourished, building a large membership of both free and slave members. After the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, the congregation appointed its first black pastor, Reverend George Dixon. When the Civil War ended, members who had fled north to escape the fighting returned and the church once again thrived. Today there are two Shiloh Baptist Churches in the Fredericksburg area (Old Site and New Site). During the Civil War, the original Shiloh Church served as a hospital for Union soldiers.

Church Origin

As presented in the previous chapter, Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site) evolved from the integrated Fredericksburg Baptist Church. The original congregation included both white and black members, and by the 1840s over 75 percent of the eight-hundred-member assembly was black. Not surprisingly, the archived transcripts recalling the division of the church and the sale of its building to the African American membership differ greatly in tone between the two races. This is completely understandable, given the time in American history when they were recorded. Although both churches share a historical bond today, this was not always the case during the racial strife of the pre-civil rights period.

In the late 1800s, the white congregation of Fredericksburg Baptist Church acknowledged the racial tensions leading up to the separation, but presented the split

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Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site). *Courtesy Dawn S. Bowen, PhD.*

as a magnanimous gesture on their part. The African American records, on the other hand, negatively recall the terms of dismissal and financial debates that occurred over the property. Therefore, as the white members' point of view has been outlined in the previous section, the following recollections present the other side of the story, as written by the black congregation.

After growing in numbers for several decades, the Baptists recognized an escalating problem with the space limitations in the old building used as the first Baptist Meeting House. Both white and black members initiated a pledge drive to gain the finances that were necessary to construct a much larger sanctuary. Despite their limited resources when compared to their white counterparts, the African American population subscribed the impressive amount of \$1,100 in financial support. As written in the congregation's minutes dated September 28, 1855, the church's "colored brethren and sisters" pledged the sum to assist in the "construction of a new building."

At the time it is said that there were at least 625 African American members at Fredericksburg Baptist Church. This included John Washington, who escaped the bonds of slavery after crossing the Rappahannock River and entering the Union army's encampment, which was located at Falmouth. He then proceeded to Washington, D.C., where many other members of his church had fled and established a new Shiloh Baptist Church in the nation's capital. After the war, he wrote and published a fascinating collection of memoirs detailing his escape in 1862.

Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site)



Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site)
today. *Courtesy Shiloh Baptist Church.*

Despite worshipping together for years, tensions between the two races heightened in 1854, nearly ten years before the War Between the States would erupt over states' rights and the institution of slavery. It was at this time that the groups began to worship separately, with the black members meeting on Sunday afternoons as opposed to the mornings. Eventually the idea of building a newer church "in town" for the white congregational members and leaving the riverside building in the hands of the black members was approved. In September of 1855, the church secretary recorded, "It has always been our intention to give up our old house of worship to the colored portion of our church." This decision came on the heels of the pledge drive in which the African Americans had vowed to provide a large gift.

A feud ignited over what financial obligations were to be fulfilled. The white committee members insisted that no property would be officially transferred until the beneficiaries fulfilled their "moral obligation" to make good on all pledges up to the proposed sum of \$1,100. After much discussion, a compromise of \$500 (\$400, according to Fredericksburg Baptist Church accounts) was reached between the two parties. According to the church minutes taken on February 3, 1856:

Resolved, that we shall still consider our coloured brethren as part of our church and feel it to be our duty as well as pleasure to aid them in any way we can to build up the cause

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of our divine master and to secure to them the peaceable occupancy of the house they now worship, with all the privileges as a branch of our church which the laws of our state extend to them.

As was often the case during this period, the Caucasian majority frequently took a paternalistic approach to its African American neighbors who were less rooted in recognition of equality and more rooted in the moral obligation to assist those souls held in bondage. Additionally, whites often perceived blacks, especially slaves, to be both ignorant and living in a state of irreligion. In their minds, even slave owners were answering the call to “go forth and make disciples of all nations,” which included those who they ironically deprived of the ability to read and write. In essence, the denial of an education in any form prevented blacks from getting out from under the intellectual shadow of the white population.

Racism obviously posed a conflict of conscience for many practicing Christians, as the very same people offering spiritual nurturing to their “coloured brethren” were often slave owners themselves. This represented a paradoxical relationship that existed between devout believers and their servants. The majority of whites appeared to have been benevolent at best about racial equality. Many citizens, even those who opposed the institution of slavery, still did not consider the black population to be equal. To some, the path to freedom for blacks meant colonization. To others, slavery had been ordained by their personal interpretations of Biblical scripture.

However, white supremacy was not embraced by all of Fredericksburg’s citizens. A local Presbyterian woman named Mary B.M. Blackford recorded the hypocrisy that she witnessed during worship as well as one minister’s efforts to seek colonization for freed blacks. She wrote:

[Slave traders] have been using the town jail for their purpose, though it is expressly contrary to law, there being no one possessed of moral courage enough to go forward to have this abuse corrected. The town jail faces the Presbyterian Church and I have sat there during the preaching and looked out at the innocent prisoners peeping through the iron bars, and have thought that they were kept there for the crime of designing to be free and to return to those God commanded them to protect and care for. The words would occur to me as I looked around on the worshippers in the Church, “Is not this the fast that I have chosen, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke.”

At the time when my heart was weighed down by watching each day the progress made in building the brick wall that was around the negro jail spoken of above where guiltless prisoners were to be immured, and I looked around in vain for a remedy. (My dear husband did all he could do to stop it.) I was called to the door to see a plain looking country gentleman who wished to see Mr. Blackford on business. I told him Mr. B. would soon be at home and asked him to be seated. On entering into conversation with him, I discovered he had been directed by the good and holy man Father Kobler (a Methodist Preacher) to get advice from my husband as to the steps necessary to be taken to procure

Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site)



*Right: Conception
of original building.
Courtesy Shiloh Baptist
Church.*

*Below: African Baptist
and white Baptist
churches. Courtesy U.S.
National Park Service.*



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Colored Male Membership continued			
Names	Baptized	Ref. to M. S. Ch. Rec.	Entered
Thomas Williams			Nov. 1853
John Williams			Nov. 1853
Robert Jackson	1853		May 4, 1854
Frederick Jackson	1853		May 4, 1854
Matthew Parker	1853		May 4, 1854
Patrick Lewis	1853		May 4, 1854
James Lewis	1853		May 4, 1854
Thos. Pacey	1853		May 4, 1854
John Thomas	1853		May 4, 1854
Philippus Bankhead	1853		May 4, 1854
Charles Butler	1853		May 4, 1854
Dennis Watson	1853		May 4, 1854
Andrew Payne	1853		May 4, 1854
David Lewis	1853		May 4, 1854
Patrick Samuel	1853		May 4, 1854
Charles Gray	1853		May 4, 1854
William Kington	1853		May 4, 1854
William Payne	1853		May 4, 1854
James Garner	1854		May 4, 1854
Jack Hawkins	1854		May 4, 1854
Abram Howard	1854		May 4, 1854
John Taylor	1854		Oct. 1854
Henry Howard	1854		Nov. 1854
Griffin Saunders	1854		Dec. 1854
James Miller	1854		Dec. 1854
Washington Thomas	1855		July 1856
Marshall W. Brown	1855		May 4, 1856

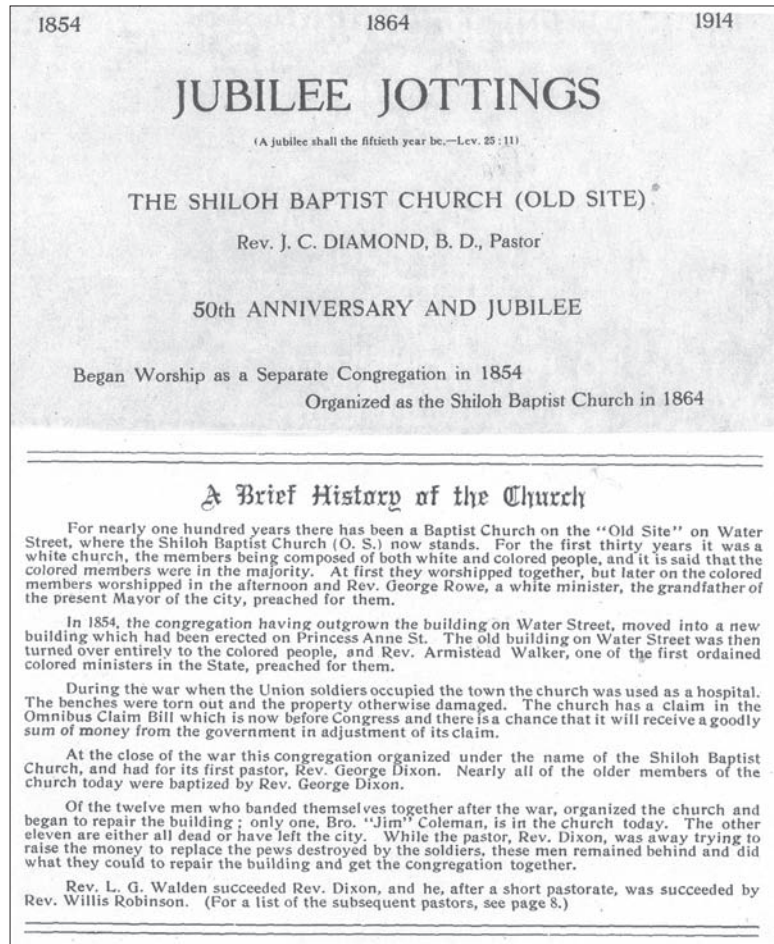
African member dismissal rolls.
Courtesy Shiloh Baptist Church.

a passage to Liberia for a young woman, the only Slave he possessed. He told that he was about to remove with his family to Illinois, and he wished to give her her freedom and every advantage. He could have gotten, he told me, four hundred dollars for her in the neighborhood.

This act of disinterestedness cheered me; it was the green spot in the moral desert I had been wandering through. I thank God for showing me just then that there were some who felt for the oppressed; it cheered and refreshed my spirits, and I can better bear to witness the progress of the jail, though I trust I shall never be hardened to such sights. The young woman who was liberated by the gentleman...was sent to town to the care of the Female Colonization Society, and was sent to Liberia by them under the protection of some missionaries who were going to that place. Along with her we sent another freed girl manumitted by Mr. Morton.

Those who endured the pains of the institution of slavery firsthand best presented the deplorable treatment of African Americans held for forced labor. In 1850, a convention of fugitive slaves was held in New York City. One of the country's most outspoken publications on the subject was the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*. On September 28 of that year, the

Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site)



Shiloh Baptist Church
anniversary program.
Courtesy U.S. National
Park Service.

Bugle printed a piece to coincide with the convention entitled "Letters to the American Slaves." It stated:

So galling was our bondage, that to escape from it, we suffered the loss of all things, and braved every peril, and endured every hardship. Some of us left parents, some wives, some children. Some of us were wounded with guns and dogs, as we fled. Some of us secreted ourselves in the suffocating holds of ships. Nothing was so dreadful to us as slavery.

Frustrated by the notion of being designated as secondary citizens worshipping at a "branch," the black members of Fredericksburg Baptist petitioned for more independence. In March, the following declaration resolved the matter:

Whereas the colored portion of our church have applied to us for the privilege of being constituted into a separate church, and having requested us to appoint a committee to draft a constitution for that purpose, therefore, resolved that we will grant this request on the

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condition that the coloured brethren pledge themselves by a resolution of their body to make good to us the balance of the subscription made by them towards paying for our new house of worship, say the balance of five hundred dollars.

Upon paying the additional sum of \$500, the deed to the church was transferred. The original membership rolls on file at the Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site) outline the legacy of the African American congregation. In the first column are listed the names of each individual who was received into membership in November and December of 1853. The second column records the date on which each member was baptized into the faith. The third column shows the month and year when each member was received by letter as a transfer from another church. The fourth column (mostly empty) presents the month and year that each member was reinstated into the church after being previously removed from membership. The fifth column is the most striking, as it lists the date of “May 4, 1856” over and over as the day on which all of the church’s black members were dismissed. This date is significant, as it represents the official split between the races. As the white side of the church “took” the identity of the previously integrated house of worship, the black members were “dismissed” from the official Baptist records. This in turn enabled the newly formed African American Baptist congregation to be received into the denomination as a separate body from that of its predecessors. Both churches were then required to draft new constitutions.

Despite reaching an agreement over the split, another debate developed regarding the legal requirement of a white pastor shepherding the African American church. This concern was addressed in multiple meetings that were recorded. Minutes taken by the white congregation on February of 1856 stated:

Whereas we desire the coloured portion of our church to enjoy the privilege of regular public worship in the house we formerly occupied, therefore, resolved, that the esteemed Brother Elder George Rowe, who has for several months been laboring among them with much acceptance, be requested to continue these labors, and to administer the ordinances of the gospel among them, and also, in conjunction with our pastor, to attend to the order and discipline of the church so long as it may be mutually agreeable to the parties concerned, the coloured brethren being expected to make him such compensation for his services as he and they may agree upon.

George Rowe was an elder in the church and owned seven slaves himself. He had established a familiar rapport with the “coloured congregation” and was well versed in the study and preaching of Biblical scripture. By 1858, Shiloh Baptist Church was blossoming and its numbers continued to increase. Rowe remained in the position of congregational “overseer” until President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation took effect. At that time, a longtime and active member of the church named George Dixon was appointed as the first African American pastor.

Unfortunately, a short time later, the entire town was devastated by the battle that raged upon the arrival of the Federal army. This prompted over three hundred members,

Dixon included, to flee north to Washington, where they established a daughter church in a large horse stable christened Shiloh Baptist of Washington, D.C. This church is still in operation today. Those who remained in Fredericksburg met sporadically in homes and an old warehouse on Fifteenth Street. Unfortunately, the church building was counted among the structural casualties of the Battle of Fredericksburg.

The War and Reconstruction

Many of the black churches in the South were abandoned throughout the course of the Civil War. As towns across Virginia switched possession repeatedly between the defending Confederate forces and invading Union troops, black citizens often found themselves caught in the middle. As slaves, they were either hiding from the posses hired by local plantation owners to gather them up, or attempting to make their escape to the North. Aid in this venture was sometimes provided by the occupying Federal troops. At other times, the refugees were looked down upon as an unwanted burden to soldiers on the march. Armies that were barely able to take care of themselves did not welcome the additional responsibilities of caring for contraband.

Therefore it is difficult, if not nearly impossible, to find members' credible, firsthand accounts of Fredericksburg's nearby engagements. Simply stated, the majority of the congregational members were absent at the time that these events occurred. Perhaps the best recollections of their experiences during the engagement come from the post-Reconstruction era testimonies of witnesses for the Court of Claims investigations conducted by the United States government in 1904. Military accounts seldom refer specifically to the African Baptist church, and most postwar recollections are either vague or incomplete. During the war, when the Union forces occupied the town, their meetinghouse was used as a stable, a barracks and later a field hospital. As a result, the benches were torn out and the walls and flooring were extensively damaged. The exterior also suffered damage during the initial bombardment and subsequent mêlée.

After the conflict ended, the church was reorganized under the name Shiloh Baptist and was officiated by the returning pastor, Reverend George Dixon. He was a former slave of Mrs. Meade Thornton of Caroline County who had purchased his freedom in 1856. In addition to preaching in Spotsylvania, the July 26, 1890 edition of the *Star* listed in the "Colored Churches" history section that Reverend Dixon was also preaching at another church that he helped to organize in Caroline at the time.

Another black preacher, the Reverend J.E. Brown, was also listed in the same paper as a "pastor of the 'old site' church." It reported that he was born in Bedford County and had been a slave of Colonel Robert C. Allen. The article went on to outline the path that Brown took then toward becoming an ordained minister. It stated:

He soon afterwards entered the ministry, and after seven years work in this calling he retired, and entered the Richmond Theological Seminary, where he graduated, and re-entered the ministry and accepted the pastoral charge of a church in Chesterfield, where

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Shiloh Baptist Church (circa 1920s). *Courtesy Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site).*



“Colored” teamsters in the Union army. *Courtesy National Archives.*

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he remained for fifteen years, when he accepted a call to the church here, in 1887, which has greatly prospered under his ministry, the membership now numbering 404.

The article went on to add that he had baptized, during his ministry, over one thousand people and that both whites and blacks respected him—an interesting distinction to mention that certainly speaks to the times. It appears that singling someone out for being accepted by both races was an accolade.

Returning to the months immediately following the war, one of the first goals of the newly established Shiloh congregation was to join its white peers in submitting a claim, using the Omnibus Claim Bill, which enabled Southerners to petition for financial reimbursement for damage inflicted on their properties due to the actions of the Federal army. As outlined in the previous chapter, this involved a long and meticulous process, which involved detailed witness testimonies and cross-examinations.

The testimony of four gentlemen, including the Reverend George L. Dixon from Shiloh Baptist Church, outlined eyewitness accounts of the experiences of the church during the battle and its aftermath. *THE COURT OF CLAIMS of Trustees of Shiloh (old site) Baptist Church of Fredericksburg Va., v. The United States* (Case No. 11781 Cong.) presented the deposition taken on July 29, 1904. The claim was for a sum of \$3,000, including reimbursement for \$900 worth of repair costs that had already been incurred by the church. The Statement of Case read:

This is a claim for use of and damage to the church building of Shiloh (old site) Baptist Church, of Fredericksburg, Virginia, by the military forces of the United States during the late civil war, stated at \$3000.00. The claim was referred to the court February 28, 1905, by resolution of the United States Senate under act of Congress approved March 3, 1887, known as the Tucker Act.

The Abstract of Evidence recorded the testimonies of Shiloh's representatives. The first witness to take the stand was a longtime church member named George Triplett who presented his firsthand knowledge of the Union soldiers' conduct and resultant damage. Unlike many of his comrades, Triplett "stuck it out" and remained in the area as the fighting raged on around him. He stated:

The Union Army occupied the church December, 1862. At that time they used the basement to put their horses in and the upper part was used for the soldiers to stay in. They then occupied it for sometime while Grant was operating in the Wilderness, using it for a hospital. During this occupation they took out all the windows and all the pews, and knocked out the pillars, and by taking out the pillars the corner of the building afterward fell out. They also took the seats out of the gallery and the steps leading up to the same. They also knocked the side off the gallery; the ceiling was all knocked down and we had to have it plastered. Burnside's troops occupied the building in 1862, and the second time it was Grant's troops.

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Triplett's associate, Thomas Dennis, gave a much more detailed summary of the Federal army's presence at the church. Although he wasn't a member of the congregation, his witness of the events surrounding the damaging of the building that stood a few blocks from his home proved to be valuable testimony. Due to his location in town, one may assume that Mr. Dennis was a white citizen who may have been able to observe the events both prior to and shortly after the occupation ended. Upon inspection of Shiloh Baptist Old Site's handwritten membership rolls, as well as the U.S. Census of free inhabitants of 1860, no "Dennis" appeared in any form, reinforcing the notion that no family member attended the church either. Therefore, the witness must have been called as an unbiased outsider. He testified:

The Union troops used the building for a hospital and put their horses in the basement. They used the building when Hooker was here and then they used it for some four or five months when Grant was here. They tore up the floors, knocked out the windows, took the pews and almost destroyed the inside of the church. They also took out some of the pillars under the basement part, which later caused one end to fall out of the building and the church had to be rebuilt.

Each church in this book was found to exhibit loyalty to the Union in the Summary Statement of each case, but Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site) may be the only one that truly deserved that distinction. Clearly, the white congregation would have most likely supported the Confederacy, as so many of its clergy and loved ones were serving in the field. An African church, however, no matter how peacefully it was coexisting with white society, would not have been as enthusiastic in supporting a cause that intended to preserve the institution of bondage over its membership. Additionally, as a colored congregation, many of the members fled north following the initial occupation of the town. Any support of the wartime effort would have most likely been as Federal wagon teamsters, stretcher bearers and even soldiers in the "Negro regiments."

Ironically, it was the African Baptist church that received only 50 percent of the monies petitioned (\$1,500) from the government, while many of the neighboring white churches received close to the full amount claimed. This proved to be just one more example of the many civil rights hardships that confronted black Southerners for another one hundred years. Despite winning their freedom, African Americans were called upon to meet additional challenges, as Jim Crow laws and segregation stifled their independence and equality in the post-Civil War South.

One site that testifies to the sacrifice for racial equality is the cemetery, where those who fell so that other men could be free were laid to rest. On Memorial Day 2006, the Reverend Lawrence A. Davies, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site), gave a powerful address at the Fredericksburg National Cemetery. In it he stated the significance of this special resting place for both black and white descendants:

Fredericksburg National Cemetery was created immediately after the Civil War, between 1866 and 1868. Not surprisingly, it was Fredericksburg's African American

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population—the newly freed slaves—that first embraced this hallowed ground. As early as the mid and late 1860s, African Americans journeyed to Fredericksburg to decorate the graves of the Union dead with flowers. Former slaves came by the hundreds from places as far away as Washington, D.C., and Richmond. They came to pay homage to those who had made the supreme sacrifice in order that they may be free.

For black citizens, Fredericksburg National Cemetery was a tangible reminder of their newfound liberty. For that reason, their ceremonies contained an element of joy that whites could not understand. A Northern veteran noted with some perplexity that Memorial Day was regarded as a gala day by African Americans. He could not understand the former slaves' joy because he had not experienced their bondage. He took freedom for granted.

The reverend also reflected on the annual pilgrimages to the cemetery that were made by many members of the African American community from all over the country. He recalled how they came together at his church and formed a long procession line that marched up Lafayette Boulevard to the center of the cemetery. Often a band dressed in black and playing traditional music for the occasion accompanied them. In 1871, when Union veterans first began to arrive in Fredericksburg hoping to pay homage to their fallen comrades, they were shunned by the local white Confederate sympathizers, but embraced by the African American contingent.

The editor of the *Fredericksburg Ledger* expressed the view of the town's white citizens in those early days following the end of the war. He wrote:

How does the case differ here? Who are these "heroes" whose graves you invite into this community, white and black, unitedly, to "honor"? Are they not some of them, the men who bombarded and destroyed one half of Fredericksburg, who sacked our houses, who profaned and polluted our homes and firesides and most sacred relics of the past, who robbed us, and even destroyed what they could not steal, who desecrated our alters and our churches, in which we had worshipped since childhood? Did they not overwhelm us at last by more "brute force of numbers" after the Confederates, man for man, had whipped and destroyed them two to one? All these things are history and will not be denied by any but the ignorant or the depraved.

Fortunately, as the years of the Civil War began to fade further and further into the past, relations between the North's and South's veterans began to mend. As a result, the hallowed grounds that surround the city became more than just historical markers. They became memorials to the seeds of reconciliation that were sown. Even more symbolic was the fact that the land, where brother was pitted against brother, had become a tangible reminder of the cost endured for liberty and freedom for all Americans. No one appreciated this sacrifice more than the members of Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site), whose tale of perseverance and courage in the face of adversity has been shared and admired for generations.

Today

At the dawning of the twenty-first century, Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site) continues to thrive in the Fredericksburg community. Over the last decade, many structural repairs and additions have been made to the historic building that still stands near the river on Sophia Street. In 2003, the entire top of the 1890 building was removed, including the ceiling and the roof. A new roof was built, allowing for a higher ceiling in the sanctuary, thus providing a more spacious feeling, especially in the balcony, which was originally used by blacks only in the integrated Baptist meetinghouse. In 2004, the church celebrated its 200th anniversary and commemorated the event by refurbishing the classic 1925 pipe organ that is still in service today.