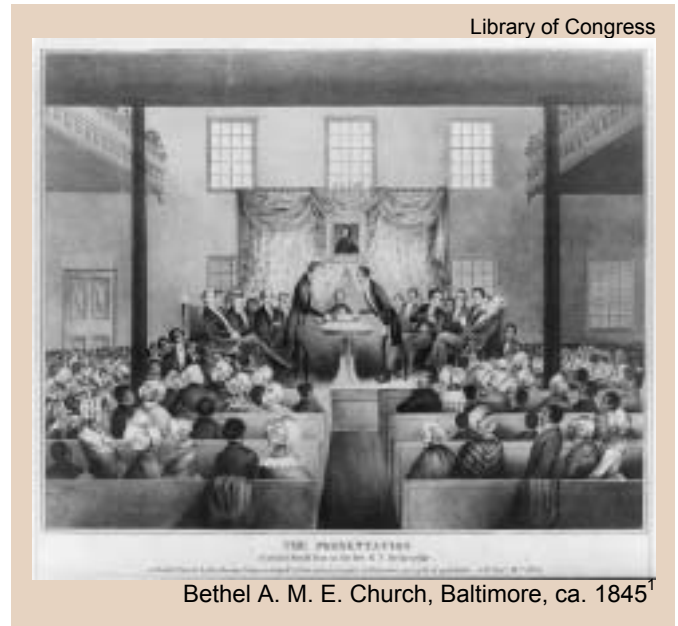


William E. Mathews, Jr.

**AN ADDRESS DELIVERED
IN BALTIMORE
ON THE OCCASION OF
OUR SEMI-CENTENARY**

1866 Excerpts

publ. in *An Apology for African Methodism*, 1867
by Rev. Benjamin Tucker Tanner
Pastor, Bethel A. M. E. Church
[illustrations added; not in *Apology*]



Fifty years ago, over a blacksmith shop, in the city of Philadelphia, our fathers planted the standard of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. To-day we meet in this beautiful sanctuary* for the purpose of dedicating that Banner anew to God, with the earnest prayer that He who was with us then, may yet protect us, and send the principles of our holy faith down to the oncoming host.

It was in the year 1703, June 14th, that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was born, in Lincolnshire, England. John was blessed with the Christian example of a good mother. Susanna Wesley was a woman of superior intellect and piety. It was her custom to commence the duties of each day by calling her family, comprising thirteen children, around the family altar, and there, by singing and prayer, conducted solely by herself, dedicate their lives to God. It will not, therefore, be surprising to know that all her children, who attained to years of responsibility, became shining examples in the Church of God. When John was not yet seven years of age, the house in which his father lived, caught fire. It was midnight, and the entire household wrapped in slumber. The alarm was given, and all the inmates, except John, speedily escaped; he was sleeping in an apartment around which the flames had already wrapped their fiery tongue, and rendered escape impossible. It was a moment big with interest. The Rector (John's father) knelt on the cold ground, and, in the light of his burning home, committed the soul of his child to its Maker. When hope from every breast had departed, John suddenly appeared at the window of his chamber. A peasant, mounting the shoulders of another, rescued him at the very moment the roof fell in.

* Big Bethel, Baltimore. [Footnote in original]

¹ Title: "The Presentation of a Gold Snuff Box to the Rev. R. T. Breckenridge. / In Bethel Church, by Rev. Darius Stokes in behalf of the colored people of Baltimore as a gift of gratitude. A.D. Dec^r 18th 1845." [Illustration added; not in *Apology*]

John, after passing through a collegiate course at the Oxford University, and after a heart struggle of many years groping in the darkness and finding no light, seeking consolation and finding it in none of the established Churches, he, with his brother Charles, and fellow student George Whitfield, planted the seed of Methodism in England, which soon sprang into animated life, and which is now illuminating the world with the glory of its refulgence, and wrapping both hemispheres with its angelic folds!

And it is well that the Wesleys were imbued with this spirit of planting a Church with new life and vigor, for just at this time (1730-40) the established Churches seemed to have been overclouded by a spiritual night. Everywhere temperance, Christian zeal and manly integrity were receding, and giving place to vice and licentiousness in their worst forms. “Indeed,” says a popular writer, “*there was, in fact, a profound infidelity undermining British Christianity.*” There was need, therefore, for just such men, and just such religious enthusiasm as the Wesleys and Whitfield excited. They saw the situation, and endeavored to prove themselves equal to it. The trio set out on their holy mission of carrying “glad tidings of great joy to all mankind.” Their efforts, therefore, were not confined to Church edifices, but to the mines of England they went, and there among the colliers, began that reformation which has proved one of the greatest triumphs of Methodism, and, among the common people in the public grounds, lanes and alleys, they went with their war-shout of

“Come ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore.”²

and thousands of people, who had been precluded by their poverty from attending the established Churches, for the first time listened to a free salvation.

I will not detain you to relate the history of the introduction of Methodism into the United States. . . [T]he spirit of Methodism progressed, until today it stands a power of strength, not asking, but challenging the respect of all. . . .

But alas! American Methodism, like all other objects, no matter how bright and beautiful, has its lights and shades, and of this its dark side we will of necessity have to speak, as it was the abuse of Methodism which compelled our sires to withdraw from the men who permitted their prejudices to get the better of their Christian obligations.³

For this our fathers were compelled, in respect to their own manhood and Christian character, to withdraw from a people holding views so directly antagonistic with the spirit of godliness — and fifty years ago there sat in the city of Philadelphia as august an assembly, actuated by principles as pure and

² Hymn “Come Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy,” lyrics by Joseph Hart, 1759.

³ “the men who permitted their prejudices”: white leaders of the racially mixed St. George’s Methodist Church in Philadelphia, who in 1787 insisted on segregating the black and white members of the church. In response, the black congregants, led by Rev. Richard Allen, formed the first black Methodist congregation, the Bethel Church. From this beginning, Allen organized in 1816 the African Methodist Episcopal (A. M. E.) Church, the first independent African American denomination.

exalted as influenced our first Continental Congress. It was the Convention which formed the first Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

As may be easily imagined this bold act of [Richard] Allen and his compeers to form a Church governed entirely by colored men, met with a great deal of resistance from those whites from whom they had withdrawn; but they soon won the respect of all candid persons. Look at it as you may, you will all be obliged to admit that it was an act which required no little amount of moral courage and determination, as it would need broad brain and able hands to steer safely our little barque which for the first time was to try the waves and battle the billows of an unexplored sea, as it was an experiment which was to test and settle forever the hither perplexed question: whether colored men were capable of grasping and mastering all points in Church policy and settling all the conflicting issues which so frequently arise in Church jurisprudence. We tried and we triumphed! . . .

Battling as we have, the popular prejudices of the masses and being deprived by our independent and isolated position from that outside assistance and Christian help and sympathy which other Churches have enjoyed, we have yet succeeded, and to-day the A. M. E. Church to the student of history furnishes the strongest argument and most conclusive proof of the competency of the race for self-government.

Let those who grumble, let all those who permit their prejudices to get the better of their judgment, study the facts as they exist and then dare say that the A. M. E. Church, is not progressive in spirit and catholic in tone.

During the first ten years of our existence, we had but one Bishop, seventeen ordained preachers, two stations and seven thousand members. The entire amount of money expended throughout the entire connection was but \$11,157.75. Then our houses of worship were often the lofts of work-shops, or if a Church rude and small, and like angels' visits, "few and far between."

But to-day rejoicing in its strength and extending its branches like the green bay tree, our Church has progressed east, west, north and south, until our Banner shelters beneath its sample folds over *two hundred thousand souls!*

And then at the end of the first ten years of our existence there was to be seen no trace of any effort whatever for educational improvement. Neither Sunday School nor Missionary Society had existence amongst us; but to-day how changed the scene! We have now seven Educational Associations connected with our Churches for assisting deserving males and females in securing a finished education. Sixty-six Missionary Societies to aid the glorious work of sending the Gospel to our brethren in the south — one College, Wilberforce, and one Church organ, the "*Christian Recorder*" one of the ablest and most widely circulated papers published by colored men in the country. Our Church property which a few years ago could have been purchased for a few hundred dollars, is now valued at *one million and a half of dollars!* The Church, which started with one Bishop and scarce enough ministers to form a corporal's guard, now

has four Bishops, six hundred regularly ordained ministers, not including local preachers which will swell the number to at least one thousand, and the church which, during its first decade's existence, expended only eleven thousand dollars — now in one single year collects and expends *one hundred thousand*. Surely, “God has chosen the weak things of this world to put to nought the things which are mighty.”

A glorious future beckons us on to labor and to victory, the terrible clash of arms has been brought to a close. Freedom is triumphant, and a race long oppressed has been lifted from the thralldom of its chains, up to freedom and manhood.

These four millions of people, must now be educated and christianized — for you must know that the barbarism of slavery possessed a tendency to heathenize and blot out all signs of manly integrity and Christian virtues, and who better than the A. M. E. Church, can perform this labor? Who more willing than ourselves to go among this woe-smitten and long injured class, and stooping, lift them up to manhood and to God?

The future hangs thick with a most abundant harvest, a harvest of heads to educate, and of hearts to sanctify and bring as willing subjects to the foot of the Cross. Shall we prove equal to the task? This remains to be seen, but judging the future by the past we shall succeed. For it is one of the brightest pages in the history of our Church, that while the Army of the Union, were forcing their victorious passage through the southern land and striking down treason, the missionaries of our Church in the persons of Brown, Lynch, Cain, Handy, Stanford, Steward and others, were following in their wake and establishing the Church and the school house, in many instances in view of the enemies' works. And long before the rebellion had come to a close, these faithful pioneers of the Gospel, had already planted our Church in Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee. Indeed, one of our Bishops (Bishop Wayman,) during the hottest of the conflict, was in the field marshalling his host for one purpose, while General Sherman drilled his men for another.

Already has some seven Conferences been organized in this benighted portion of our land. The people are rapidly coming into our borders and seeking shelter under our protecting care — indeed the entire South, which a few years ago was black with the darkness of its mental night and lost in the depths of its spiritual swamps, is now being radiated with the halo of freedom, Religion and Education.

This then must be the mission of our Church, evangelizing, educating, uplifting these long neglected ones and making them fit heirs of a glorious immortality. But in order to fulfill this grand design and enable our Church to keep pace with the spirit of the age, we need to have a broader and more catholic spirit amongst us, and this reformative must commence in the pulpit. The fountain head must be pure, before the stream can possibly be. We need and *must* have an educated ministry, for depend upon it, the world will expect more of us in the future than it has hitherto. I would therefore insist that all of our

educational establishments be encouraged and supported, for henceforth brain and culture as well as Christian zeal will be the standard by which the ministers of this Church will be measured.

Again we must do away with some of the strange customs we have among us. One of which, is the lining out of hymns during the singing of them. This was very well in days when our people were ignorant, but now that we have entered the new dispensation of light and knowledge, it should be insisted upon that all of our members should procure hymn books and join in the anthems of praise.

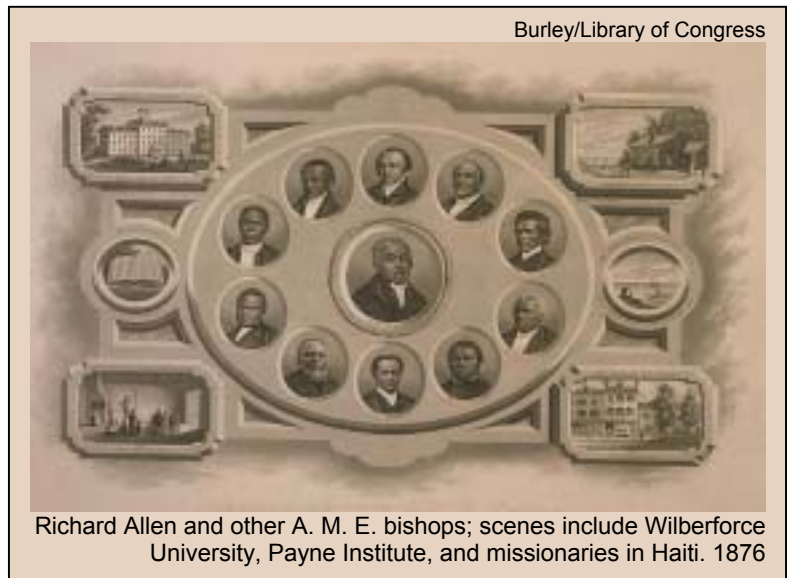
Then there is another strange custom against which I desire to raise my voice, and that is the dividing of the sexes in our *houses of worship* — compelling the wife to sit on *this* side and the husband on *that*. Why separate in the house of God any more than around the family altar? Do let us be consistent. Permit the wife and husband to come to Church with their little ones and sit together, and let us be done with that piece of barbarism of colonizing the children in the galleries and separating a family in a place which, above all others next to their homes, they should be together.

Let us go forward then, in this broad spirit of Christian progression. Relying upon the strong arm and guiding-hand of the God of our fathers and invoking his blessings upon us, we will plant anew our Banner, and girding on our armor we will march forward to reap richer harvests. Then in the spirit of Christian heroism let us

“Take with solemn thankfulness
Our burdens up; nor ask them less,
But count it joy, that even we,
May suffer, serve and wait for thee—
Who’s [*sic*] will be done!”⁴

Nor will we cease our efforts until

around the world our flag shall go to the heights of the Rocky Mountains, until it covers the dark-browed children of the Isles of the sea, Cuba, Hayti and onward, crossing the Atlantic to the shores of Africa, we shall gather in to our embrace the millions of that benighted shore — then shall we receive the “*well done!*” of Heaven, and looking, we shall behold the morning-light throwing its beams upon our tempest-tossed Banner, upon which shall be inscribed in letters of living light — VICTORY.



⁴ From “Thy Will Be Done,” by John Greenleaf Whittier, in Whittier, *Anti-Slavery Poems: Songs of Labor and Reform*, 1850.