

# Research Publication

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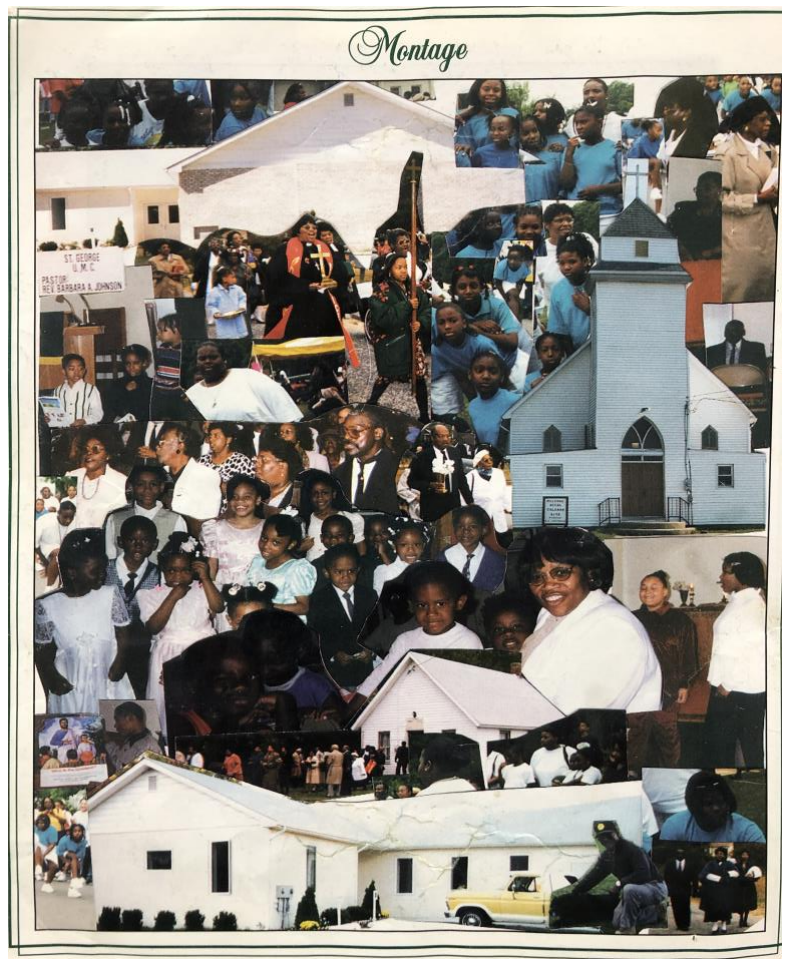
By Bill Leary

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THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
of  
KENT COUNTY

## Historic African American Churches of Kent County



Montage of St. George United Methodist church showing transition from the original 1881 church to the new church, dedicated in 1997.

Legacy Day 2019 honored African American churches of Kent County by documenting briefly the history of the 24 earliest churches, all of which were founded at least 125 years ago.<sup>i</sup> Eleven of these churches were founded by free blacks before the emancipation of their brethren in 1864. Eight others were founded in the hopeful days following the end of the Civil War when the national government was controlled by Republican politicians who defended black rights, such as President Ulysses S. Grant, Senator Charles Sumner (after whom Sumner Hall was named), and Maryland Representative Henry Winter Davis. Fifteen still hold services.

All of the churches founded by Kent Country African Americans in the nineteenth century belonged to a branch of the Methodist church. All but six of the churches discussed here were founded as Methodist Episcopal churches, which became United Methodist in 1965. The remainder includes four African Methodist

Episcopal (A.M.E.) churches, one Union American Methodist Episcopal church, and one African Union Methodist Protestant church.

The appeal of Methodism to 19<sup>th</sup> century African Americans, both free and enslaved, is understandable. No other religious group treated African Americans better. Early Methodists worked hard to make black converts and spoke out clearly against slavery. By stressing the conversion experience more than formal religious instruction, Methodism made itself more accessible to the poor and illiterate, both black and white. In the beginning, blacks and whites often worshipped together but not without racial discrimination. African Americans were restricted to the back of the church or the gallery during regular worship and had to sit behind the speaker's platform at camp meetings. And there were virtually no black preachers; one exception was "Black Harry" Hozier, a celebrated orator who probably preached in Kent County

These and other forms of discrimination soon produced efforts to establish independent black Methodist churches. The first truly independent black denomination, the Union Church of Africans, was founded in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1813 by Peter Spencer, who was born a slave in Kent County in 1782. In the mid-1860's Spencer's church split into two rival denominations, the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Union Methodist Protestant Church. The most successful move for independence, headed by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, led to the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in 1816.

Even those black Methodists who remained within the Methodist Episcopal Church (like most in Kent County) began to push for more control over their own affairs, particularly in the appointment of pastors. In 1864 this agitation led to the formation of the Delaware Annual Conference, which comprised all African American churches in New York City, Philadelphia, New Jersey, Delaware, and the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia; it was not fully integrated into the United Methodist Church until

1965. This move also satisfied the desire of many whites for greater segregation in the affairs of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Rev. Patricia Bryant Harris (the first African American graduate of Chestertown High School in 1963) summed up the contradictory legacy of the Delaware Conference in this way: "The old Delaware Conference remains a source of pride for African American United Methodists, yet it also marked an era of shame for the church."

The African American churches of Kent County served the spiritual needs of their members throughout the hardships and not infrequent horrors of slavery, segregation, poverty and war. They provided refuge in a hostile, white world, but they did much more. They furnished opportunities for the development of leadership skills that extended outside the church. Two early trustees of Janes Church, for example, William H. Perkins and James Jones were outstanding political, social, and economic leaders of the African American community of Chestertown. The political and social role of the church was reflected in the 1884 Minutes of the Delaware Conference reporting on the crusade against King Alcohol, "the enemy of loving homes, pure character, national peace, and human happiness." A temperance law passed in Kent County in 1884, and "it was done by the vote of the colored people."

Churches were instrumental in early efforts to educate black children. Five schools founded in 1865 by the Baltimore Association for the Moral and Educational Improvement of the Colored People were located in or associated with black churches: John Wesley in Millington, Fountain, Janes, Emmanuel, and Holy Trinity. Sponsoring such schools clearly took courage; in late 1865 John Wesley and Holy Trinity were burned to the ground by whites opposed to their support of schools. Churches also cooperated with fraternal organizations, such as Mt. Hope Lodge No. 2, Order of Truth and Light (across the street from Aaron Chapel) or the Embarrassed Relief Association of

Coleman's Corner, several of whose directors were trustees at Union. The church was the essential institution in 19<sup>th</sup> century African American communities of Kent County, and it retains a vital role today.<sup>ii</sup>

The 24 historic black churches are located in a fairly uniform pattern throughout Kent County. Two of the largest churches, one United Methodist (Janes) and one African Methodist Episcopal (Bethel), are located in Chestertown while the second oldest church (Joshua Chapel) is about five miles away in Morgnec. Of the remaining 21 churches, seven are located in the county's northeast quadrant bounded by Cecil County to the north, Queen Anne's County to the south and Delaware to the east. Seven churches were founded in the Worton area north and west of Chestertown. The remaining seven churches sprang up in the area west and south of Chestertown.

## **Historic Churches Still Holding Services**

Of the 15 churches still holding services, six meet in the original, often modified, nineteenth century sanctuary: Asbury/John Wesley, Asbury, New Christian Chapel of Love, Union, Wesley Chapel of Love, and Mt. Pleasant. Several of the remaining nine churches have been rebuilt more than once. The histories that follow of the 15 churches that continue to hold services are organized geographically, beginning with the two Chestertown churches, followed by three in the northeast quadrant of Kent County, five in the Worton area and five in the southeastern part of the county.

### **Janes United Methodist Church Chestertown**

More than three decades before Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, free blacks in Chestertown had organized the first African American house of worship in Kent County. In March 1828 Thomas Cuff, one of Chestertown's

leading free black entrepreneurs, purchased a lot at the lower end of Princess Street (now Queen Street) "upon which the African Methodist meeting house now stands." On April 28, 1831, Cuff transferred the land and meeting house to the "trustees of Zion Methodist Episcopal Church."

The congregation of Zion soon outgrew its original home, and a substantial two-story frame structure was built in 1866 "on the brow of the hill" next to the original meeting house, which became the church parsonage. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the parsonage was moved to 222 Calvert Street and converted into a private residence. The fourth session of the Delaware Annual Conference was convened at the new Zion in July 1867 by Bishop Edmund S. Janes; in his honor the church was renamed Janes Methodist Episcopal.

Janes flourished in the decades following the Civil War under the leadership of trustees such as James Jones, a successful grocer, butcher, tavern-owner, and money lender. William Perkins, another trustee, was perhaps the most successful black entrepreneur in 19<sup>th</sup> century Chestertown. According to minutes of the Delaware Annual Conference, in 1883 Janes reported a membership of 275 and a Sunday School of 180 students. In 1885 Janes was "in a very fine and prosperous condition" with 125 conversions recorded for the year.

Despite the economic hard times of the 1890s and the ravages of Jim Crow, the members of Janes continued to support their church into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially under the leadership of Rev. John R. Holland who was pastor from 1904 to 1915. In 1914 plans were made to build a third Janes Church in the heart of Chestertown at the intersection of Cross and Cannon Streets. The cornerstone was laid on March 8, 1914, just a week before a fire destroyed much of the downtown, including the existing Janes Church. Everything was destroyed except a thousand-pound bell named "Big George." It was installed in the steeple of the new brick Janes, dedicated on November 8, 1914, and can still be



heard for miles away.



The third iteration of Janes United Methodist church, built in 1914.

Throughout its existence, Janes has been a center of community activity as well as traditional church functions. In more recent times, it served as the meeting place for organizations such as the NAACP, Vista, and the Chestertown Hospital Auxiliary. It also has hosted after-school tutorial programs and supported the distribution of food and clothing to Kent County's neediest citizens. It remains true to its rich historical heritage as a vital center of Chestertown's African-American community. The current pastor of Janes United Methodist is Rev. Emanuel Johnson.

### **Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church Chestertown**

Kent County land records include two deeds in 1878 for the purchase of land at the corner of Kent and Calvert Streets by Bethel trustees Alexander Scott, Thomas Rigby, William Floyd, David Blake, and Joseph Berry. According to one deed, dated November 22, 1878, the trustees purchased the land for \$140.00. A second deed, dated December 3, 1878, confirms an earlier purchase of the same land with frontage of 40' on Calvert Street and 45' on Kent Street. There are other indicators that Bethel's congregation and church predated 1878. The same

trustees incorporated Bethel on December 19, 1877, pursuant to instructions given at "a meeting held at the church on July, 17, 1877." Also present at that meeting in addition to the trustees were pastor William H. Chambers, William Allen, E.C. Tilghman, Jonathan Gould, and Henry Hutchins. The church history indicates that pastors served at Bethel as early as 1872.

On December 2, 1901, Bethel trustees Edward Matthews, Charles Blake, Charles Frisby, Henry Murray, J.W. Broadway, Horace Johnson, and Thomas Rigby purchased land on the north side of College Avenue for \$500.00. That land became the site of a new Bethel A.M.E. church built in 1910 to replace the original church that had burned a few years earlier. That structure was greatly renovated in 2002 under the leadership of Rev. Frederick W. Jones, Jr., to include a new sanctuary, a fellowship hall seating 314, and a commercial kitchen.



Frederick Jones, Sr. (left) and Frederick Jones, Jr., who served Bethel African Methodist Episcopal church as pastor for 16 and 24 years, respectively.

The more recent history of Bethel has featured the ministries of one extended family beginning with Rev. Frederick G. Jones, Sr., who served from 1953

to 1969. Jones was a celebrated community leader who helped found the Kent County NAACP, led the effort to desegregate Kent County schools, and opened Bethel to the Freedom Riders when they came to Chestertown in 1962. His son, Frederick W. Jones, Jr., served for 24 years, longer than any other pastor of Bethel.

Frederick Jones, Jr., was replaced in 2008 by his nephew Rev. Robert N. (Bobby) Brown, Jr., now serving his 11<sup>th</sup> year as pastor of Bethel. Having the motto “Not Just a Church in the Community but God’s Church for the Community” he strives to maintain the legacy established by his grandfather through active voter registration, community unification and outreach, and a vibrant approach to intergenerational ministry. The family tradition of ministering extends beyond Bethel to include Brown’s cousin Rev. Ellsworth Tolliver, the pastor at Boardley Chapel A.M.E. church in Pondtown, and another cousin, Rev. Monique Upshur Davis, the pastor at Mt. Olive A.M.E. church.

### **Asbury-John Wesley United Methodist Church Millington**

The congregation of John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church began meeting as early as 1855, apparently under the supervision of white Methodists at Asbury Church in Millington, who may have provided the first meeting house and assigned the first preacher, Robert Frazier. The ground on which the congregation would build a new independent church at the eastern end of Millington was purchased by trustees of the church in 1863. The deed for the property purchased in 1863 was not processed until December 18, 1877, when the trustees were listed as Moses Caulk, Joseph Jeffers, Joshua Little, Charles Wilmore, James H. Gould, Zion Potts, Samuel Hines, Asbury Warner and Alexander Jackson.

On September 27, 1865, John Wesley opened one of the first schools for black children in Kent County with the assistance of the Baltimore Association for the Moral and Educational

Improvement of the Colored People. Seventy-four students were reported to be enrolled at a cost of \$56.15. Less than a month later, on October 21, local whites burned the church to the ground because it was being used to educate African American children. Sometime between 1865 and 1877 a new church was built because the Lake, Griffing, and Stevenson Atlas of 1877 shows a “colored” church, school, and parsonage at the eastern end of Cypress Street.

John Wesley was accepted formally into the Methodist Episcopal Church by the Delaware Conference in 1866 and made part of a charge that included Methodist Episcopal churches at Olivet Hill, Sassafras, Morgnec, and Chesterville. It served as the community center of the vibrant black community of Sandfield located at the south-eastern end of Millington. One of the leaders of that community was Moses Caulk, a successful blacksmith who was enslaved the first 25 years of his life but owned \$700 in assets according to the 1860 Census. Other early Sandfield family names included Dudley, Gould, Washington, Green, and Primrose.

One of the first five Kent County public schools for black children opened in 1873 adjacent to John Wesley, which provided the land and probably the school house. This school was replaced in about 1893 by the Sandfield Public School located on the east side of West Street in Sandfield. It continued in use as a school and community center until 1958 when John Wesley purchased it for use as a church hall. John Wesley was remodeled in 1922 and again in 1964 to add a church hall. In 2014 John Wesley United Methodist merged with Asbury United Methodist in Chesterville to create Asbury-John Wesley United Methodist. A large cemetery can be found to the east and south of the church. The current pastor is Rev. Wayne Thompson, Jr.



## **Graves Chapel Union American Methodist Episcopal Church, Millington**

Graves Chapel is the only church in Kent County affiliated with the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church. The UAME Church was formally organized as a separate denomination in 1865 by some congregations of the African Union Church founded by Peter Spencer in 1813. The original Graves Chapel was built in 1877 where the cemetery is now located across the street from the present church. According to oral church history its founder was Henry Graves, a Civil War veteran of Co. A of the 6<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry. It was destroyed by a natural disaster and replaced by a new church built in 1967. A little pit of stones and the original pump mark the spot of the 1877 church. The second church was leveled by a tornado in 1989 and replaced by the current church, built in 1992 under the leadership of Reverend Paul Raffin. The current pastor is Reverend Shelia Lomax, who describes Graves Chapel as “a holy church, a sanctified church, a soul winning church here to glorify God.”

## **Wesley Chapel of Love United Methodist Church, Sassafras**

Wesley Chapel of Love arose from a combination of John Wesley United Methodist, Olivet Hill United Methodist, and Johnson’s Chapel United Methodist in Cecil County. John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church (the physical home of Wesley Chapel) dates from some time prior to May 16, 1889, when the church trustees purchased land to expand the “colored cemetery” for the benefit of “members of the Methodist Episcopal Church at Sassafras.” The trustees at that time were Philip Dixon, Leander Christie, William Handy, James Pennock, Charles Pennock, Washington Basie, Frank Riley, Thomas Neal, and Oliver Singer. In January 1893 many of the same men filed papers to incorporate John Wesley.



Tombstone of a Civil War veteran in the cemetery at Wesley Chapel of Love United Methodist church.

The merger of John Wesley with the two other churches mentioned above took place in 2004 under the leadership of the Reverend Alice Hutchins. Her successor, Pastor Ashley L. Jones, a native of Kent County, led many projects to refurbish the church and church hall. Several ministries have prospered at Wesley Chapel including the Anointed Voices Choir, the Evangelism Committee, and the Youth and Young Adult Committee. The adjacent cemetery includes at least one gravestone of a black Civil War veteran. The current pastor at Wesley Chapel is Rev. Alfred Handy.

## **Mt. Pisgah United Methodist Church Melitota**

The original meeting house of what became Mt. Pisgah dates back to at least 1860 when it appears on the Martenet Map of 1860. It was located between Melitota and Hanesville behind what is now the Mt. Pisgah cemetery. The Stevenson Atlas of 1877 shows a “colored” church and school at the

same location. Sometime between 1877 and 1882 a major fire destroyed both the church and school.

On December 13, 1882, church trustees purchased land on L Road for \$40 where they completed construction of a new church in 1889. The trustees were Jacob Freeman, Simon J. Freeman, George W. Seeney, Stephen Johnson, Isaac Johnson, Charles H. Woodland, Moses Rasin, Henry Garrettson, and Samuel A. Thompson. The new church was named Mt. Pisgah after the biblical reference to the spot where Moses first viewed the Promised Land. On January 21, 1890, Minister Charles A. Horsey and the church trustees incorporated Mt. Pisgah Methodist Episcopal Church.

Disaster struck again in September 1982 when fire of a suspicious nature destroyed the 93 year-old church. The only items salvaged were the altar cross, church bell, and candleholders. Worship continued at Mt. Pleasant in Fairlee until a third Mt. Pisgah held its first services in 1987. On July 13, 2003, over 150 people attended dedication services for the newly renovated Mt. Pisgah United Methodist Church. The current pastor is Rev. Bethsheila Hunley.

### **The New Christian Chapel of Love, Formerly Fountain United Methodist Church Big Woods**

According to its cornerstone, Fountain Methodist Episcopal Church was built in 1888. A mortgage of \$400 was taken out by the trustees of Fountain on January 22, 1889, from the Board of Church Extension of the Methodist Episcopal Church: Perry Hynson, Lewis Wright, William T. Redding, Jonathan Bright, William Bright, Samuel Hackett, and Samuel Tillison. The Maryland Historic Trust described this church, which now calls itself the New Christian Chapel of Love, as having “an interesting and unusual plan, far more ambitious than other vernacular Gothic Revival churches in this

area.”



Blue Ribbon choir of Fountain United Methodist Church

There are several indicators that the black congregation of Fountain organized much earlier than 1888. The Baltimore Association for the Educational and Moral Improvement of the Colored People opened a school at Fountain on October 1, 1865. On August 13, 1868, trustees of the Fountain School House (Thomas Wright, Wilson Wright, Isaac Cork, Benjamin Wallis, and Isaac Sampson) purchased land for the purpose of erecting a school house adjacent to the Fountain meeting house. The Lake, Griffing, and Stevenson Atlas of 1877 shows a “colored” church building, a school, and about 20 houses in the present Big Woods area. The church building originally housed a white congregation that abandoned it in 1882; it was used by the black worshippers of Big Woods until the erection of the present church in 1888.

On September 14, 1877, Sewell and Martha Hepbron sold land to the trustees of Fountain for “the purpose of a burial ground and for no other use whatsoever.” The land purchased by trustees Nicholas Richardson, Thomas Wright, Wilson Wright, George Rasin, Ezekial Blake, and Joseph Redden was described as adjacent to “the present Meeting House.” The white cemetery is still located on the west side of the church and the black cemetery is on the east side of the church.



In 1993 and 1994, under the leadership of Rev. George Anderson, efforts were made to merge Fountain, Union, and Mt. Zion United Methodist Churches into one church. The merger did not last – Union withdrew in 2002 – but Fountain changed its name to the New Christian Chapel of Love and hosts many former members of Mt. Zion. The current pastor of the New Christian Chapel of Love is Rev. Bernadette Wright.

### **Mt. Olive African Methodist Episcopal Church Butlertown**

According to a church history written in 1985, Mt. Olive was “conceived in the minds of the people at Butlertown in or near the year 1893.” Land was purchased in 1898 by Mt. Olive trustees Nathaniel Tilghman, Cyrus Worrell, James Butler, Alexander A. Butler, William Butler, Perry Rosier, Jefferson Freeman, Joseph Burgan, and Edward Wilson. A church was built, probably in 1898, under the guidance of “Uncle Samuel Butler.” However, since the community of Butlertown was founded by free blacks prior to the Civil War it is likely there would have been an African American church or meeting house in Butlertown much earlier than 1893.

Mt. Olive has grown over the years under the leadership of 23 pastors who provided love, guidance, leadership, understanding, and dedication. When the Rev. John T. Chambers was appointed pastor in 1966 he reorganized the entire church. He was especially proud of the Celestial Choir and the Booster Chorus, a group of young women, who contributed to the church community through their singing and praying.

Under the leadership of Rev. Chambers plans were developed for the construction of a new church across the road from the existing church on two acres purchased in 1966. The trustees active in securing a mortgage and building the new church were Cleveland Freeman, Clyde Freeman, Leroy Thompson, Caddie Brown, Gertrude Hynson, Oliver Homely, James Walker, Otha Griffin, Wendell

Freeman, Joseph Blake, and Morris Walker, Sr. Rev. Chambers presided over the dedication ceremonies for the new church on August 16, 1970. Progress continued under Rev. Frederick W. Jones, Jr., who provided outstanding program coordination and helped bring to fruition the mortgage-burning festivities that were held in July 1985.

A parsonage was built during the ministry of Rev. Cordell E. Hunter, Sr., appointed pastor in 1984, and a new Church and Life Center to hold social events was dedicated on May 8, 2004. Under the leadership of Rev. Hunter, president of the Kent County NAACP for 12 years, Mt. Olive became an advocate for social justice, fair employment opportunities, and equal rights for all citizens of Kent County. The Rev. Monique Upshur Davis was appointed on March 23, 2019, to serve as the first woman pastor of Mt. Olive.

### **St. George United Methodist Church Worton Point**



Sunday School attendees from the Still Pond/Coleman Charge, including Mt. Zion, Fountain, Union, and St. George United Methodist churches

Located at 11730 St. James-Newtown Road, near Worton Point, St. George is part of a charge that includes churches in Coleman, Big Woods, and Still Pond. A united service is held on the first Sunday of each month, rotating among the churches. A mass choir from all the churches participates in that



service. The current pastor at St. George is Rev. Alfred Handy.

According to Mrs. Irene Moore, the original church dates to 1881. Mrs. Moore has lived in the Worton Point area since she came, at the age of four, to live with her aunt and uncle, after the death of her mother. She is now 82 years old. Mrs. Moore sings with the New Gospelites, a group that will celebrate its 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary in September 2019. They sing a cappella and have sung at churches and venues throughout the area. Karen Somerville, another celebrated singer nurtured by St. George, who is also a local historian, believes the church was built on property purchased from or donated by William Stephens.

The church is next to and now owns a one-room African American school house. On August 28, 1889, the trustees of St. George purchased land, which may have been the land they transferred a year later to the Board of County School Commissioners “in consideration of its use for school purposes.” The trustees for this transaction were Emory Dorsey, John H. Phillips, Benjamin Cooper, James H. Hynson, George C. Hynson, George W. Wilson, Moses A. Barroll, Alfred C. Anderson, and Perry Barroll. The school continued in use from 1890 to 1958 when it was purchased by the church.

Services were held in the school house beginning in 1976, when the old church became unusable, and throughout the time that the new church was being built. The current church building is a single-story, concrete block structure and was built by members of the congregation between 1984, when ground was broken, and 1997, when the building was dedicated. At the time of the groundbreaking, Rev. Lorenzo Murdaugh was the pastor.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century most of the men in the area worked at Andelot Farms, known then as the Maxwell Farm, according to Karen Somerville. The Maxwell family owned the Maxwell Automobile Co. Karen Somerville also stated that the farm was originally the Gale Plantation, and most of the

residents of Worton Point and many members of St. George are descended from Gale slaves.

### **Union United Methodist Church Colemans Corner**



Union United Methodist church, built in 1887, before extensive remodeling in 2006.

The first official record of Union Methodist Episcopal Church, dated August 16, 1881, documents the transfer of the land on which the church still sits to trustees of Union: James Holly, Perry Brown, Daniel Gilbert, James H. Cotton, George W. Cotton, Perry Reason (or Rasin), and John H. Murphy. The deed makes clear that the property had been purchased years earlier from Stansbury Holly (or Holley), an early leader of the free black community in Colemans Corner. Holly had purchased the land for \$110 on December 18, 1858. Union historian Carolyn Brooks makes a persuasive case that the church trustees probably acquired a portion of that land and began holding worship services in 1865 or 1866, shortly after emancipation.

Mrs. Mary Chaney wrote a brief history in 1936 describing Union in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: “At that time our congregation worshipped in a very small building, unattractive and very uncomfortable in some ways. With a few kerosene lights, it was used during the week for school and for worship on Sunday. But it remained for the Rev. J.H. Mason to sing, preach, pray and to work the congregation out of this small building into the one we now worship in today,” which was built in 1887.

The Holly and Cotton families were instrumental in starting and sustaining the black church in Coleman. Both had relatively substantial landholdings, and they took a cue from their wealthy white neighbors in seeking to preserve and expand their property. The male Cotton’s frequently married female Hollys, and vice-versa. This union of families gave birth to Rev. Wesley F. Cotton, a nephew of Stansbury Holly, who became an important figure in the Delaware Conference.

The first church parsonage was purchased in 1902 for the then handsome price of \$630, which required the church trustees to borrow \$230 from the Embarrassed Relief Association of Coleman’s, a self-help organization founded in 1898 by several trustees of Union, among others. Carolyn Brooks remembers annual camp meetings attended by church members, including descendants of the Holleys and the Cottons, with “people camping out on the grounds, sleeping in their cars and on the ground, and then waking up the next morning and starting all over again.”

In July 1993 and later in 1994, Union members decided to merge with Fountain United Methodist in Big Woods and Mt. Zion in Still Pond to form the New Christian Chapel of Love. The merger was controversial from the beginning, and on December 29, 2002, the trustees voted to become once again Union United Methodist Church. The church underwent extensive remodeling in 2006. Its smaller membership works hard to renew and rebuild the church to where it used to be and to take it to a

higher level. The current pastor of Union is Rev. Vernetter Pinder.

## **Emmanuel United Methodist Church Pomona**



The third (or perhaps 4<sup>th</sup>) iteration of Emmanuel United Methodist church, built in 1972.

The congregation of Emmanuel can trace its origins back at least 170 years to December 5, 1849, when a deed in the Kent County land records documents the purchase of two acres, including a meeting house “which shall be kept (and repaired and rebuilt if necessary) as a place of worship.” The purchasers were trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church who were leaders of some 26 free black families living in Pomona or Johnstontown in 1850: Joseph Dublin, Samuel Derry, Edward Johnson, James Reese, and William Graves. Like most early Methodist churches, services probably were held for the first several years in a private home, called a meeting house.

According to church records, a more traditional church building was dedicated in 1873, under the leadership of Rev. L. Y. Cox. On January 14, 1882, land to be used for constructing a parsonage was purchased by “trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church of the Edesville Circuit, Delaware Conference”: Samuel Derry, Edwin



Johnson, George Ringgold, John W. Johnson, George Graves, John Bordley, James Houston, and William Graves.

Emmanuel supported early efforts to educate African American children. The Baltimore Society for the Moral and Educational Improvement of the Colored People opened a school for blacks on Quaker Neck on November 1, 1865, that initially enrolled 18 male and 22 female students. Classes likely were held at a building nearby at the end of Church Lane. On January 19, 1875, trustees were appointed for the first public “colored school” on Quaker Neck: George Elias, Samuel Derry, and G. W. Johnson (the first two were members of Emmanuel’s Board of Trustees). Members of Emmanuel also helped found a mutual aid society, the Sons and Daughters of Relief, incorporated in 1905 “for beneficial and moral purposes and the aid and assistance of those who may become members.” Its Board of Directors included many family names associated with Emmanuel: John T. Barrett, John W. Elias, William H. Johnson, Philip Lively, George P. Lindsay, and William Derry.

Under the leadership of Rev. W.T.B. Devron a new church was completed in 1921. The 1873 structure continued in use as a church hall and Sunday school until 1972. In that year, under the leadership of Rev. Gary L. Meekins a third (or perhaps 4<sup>th</sup>) Emmanuel church was built, with its first service held on October 29, 1972. Just 12 years later a mortgage burning ceremony was held to celebrate payment of the final mortgage payment. But, as its church history states, “the history of Emmanuel is not just a series of events which occurred down through the years, but also includes the people responsible for making these things happen. Emmanuel’s history is the story of great people and great leaders.” The current pastor of Emmanuel is Rev. Emanuel Johnson.

## **Aaron Chapel United Methodist Church Rock Hall**

In 1854 the white Methodist Church in Rock Hall outgrew its small chapel, which it transferred to the free black community of Rock Hall. In December 1868 land on the east side of the road leading to Skinner’s Neck was sold to the trustees of the “Colored Methodist Episcopal Church”: Hank Harris, Felix Berryman, William James, William Graves, Robert Willson, Daniel Butler, and Adam Anderson. The little chapel, which also was used as a school, burned down around 1885.

Aaron Chapel was incorporated on March 13, 1886, by trustees Felix Berryman, Perry Susker, William Graves, Benjamin Hynson, Louis H. Ward, Samuel Scott, John Hawkins, Joseph H. Price, and Abraham Harris. The decision to incorporate was made “at a meeting held near Rock Hall by the colored congregation” (apparently not at the church). The new church, which is still standing, probably was built shortly thereafter since the trustees took out a mortgage of \$150 from the Church Extension Board of Philadelphia in June 1888. In 1909 the church was reincorporated by trustees J.W. Bond, John Murry, Henry Tilghman, Samuel Scott, David Warren, Louis H. Ward, William Johnson, Henry West, Isaac Harris, and Oliver Scott.

Aaron Chapel members played a vital role in founding a “beneficial society” in 1878 called Mt. Hope Lodge No. 2, Order of Truth and Light. According to its incorporation document of 1880, the society’s purpose was the “advancement of the condition of our race and the care and assistance of the sick and distressed.” The lodge meeting hall, located across the road from Aaron Chapel, served as the church meeting hall for over a century.

Under the leadership of Rev. Ronald J. Norris in the 1970s the parsonage was built, the church was paneled and an annex was added. By 2009, however, the church was in desperate need of repairs. In that time of need, according to a church history, “God sent five men, whom we did not know,

to restore and save Aaron Chapel Church.” The restoration was completed in 2012 under the leadership of Rev. Arthur George. The current pastor is Rev. Bethsheila Hunley.

### **Asbury United Methodist Church Georgetown**



Asbury United Methodist church of Georgetown, dedicated in 1879.

The Census of 1860 shows 99 free African Americans living in 24 households in what Kent County land records described as “the colored village of Georgetown.” According to a centennial book published by Asbury United Methodist Church, those first residents of Georgetown began holding church services as early as 1863 in the old East Georgetown School for Colored Youth.

Under the leadership of Rev. Asbury Grinnage, the congregation raised enough money to purchase land and construction materials for a church building. On August 22, 1874, John and Harriet Blake sold 1.5 acres for \$80.00 “for a burial ground and to build a church thereon” to church trustees George Jones, Philip H. Thompson, Jacob Cooper, Jeremiah Wilson, George Moore, Louis Henry, and William Brown, whose descendants are still proud members of the church. Asbury

Methodist Episcopal Church (named in honor of its first pastor) was dedicated in 1879 and continues to hold services in the original but much modified structure today.

Asbury members played a vital role in early efforts to educate African American children. On April 10, 1869, Philip Thompson and Jeremiah Wilson, two Asbury trustees, sold land “for the purpose of erecting or allowing to be erected thereon a School House for the use, benefit, and education of the Colored People” in East Georgetown. On January 19, 1875, the Kent County School Commission authorized establishment of a “colored” public school in West Georgetown and named Louis Henry, George Jones, and Garrison Phillips as trustees (the first two also were trustees of Asbury).

In the early 1930s the old West Georgetown School, formerly used by a fraternal order as a lodge hall, was converted into the church hall. Asbury Hall burned down in 1970 but was rebuilt by Asbury members. Asbury has remained a vital center of community life for nearly 150 years, partly because the cohesive, tightly knit community of Georgetown has survived relatively intact until the present day, unlike many early African American settlements. As late as 1980 there were more than 60 black homes in Georgetown, and 45 black families still make their home there. The current pastor of Asbury is Rev. Bethsheila Hunley.

### **Holy Trinity African Methodist Episcopal Church, Edesville**

The first Holy Trinity A.M.E. Church was built in 1885 according to its cornerstone. However, there is strong evidence that the African American community of Edesville was holding worship services in an earlier church or meeting house at least 20 years earlier. The Kent News reported on November 18, 1865, that “Governor Bradford has offered a \$500 reward for arrest and conviction of incendiaries who destroyed the colored Methodist Church in Millington and the church at Edesville



November 8, in both of which schools were held for Negro children.” The school in Edesville had opened on October 1, 1865, under the auspices of the Baltimore Association for the Moral and Educational Improvement of the Colored People. On January 6, 1866, the Kent News published a letter from the president of the county school board reporting that “the fire in Edesville was clearly the work of drunken incendiaries hovering around the election polls.” Clearly, the prospect of educating African Americans was threatening to some whites in Kent County.

A leading early member of Holy Trinity was Daniel Johnson, who was born enslaved in Anne Arundel County in 1852 and married Mary Louise Bentley of the Rock Hall area in 1881. They had 22 children and settled in Edesville where Johnson became a leader at Holy Trinity and in the local African American community. One of Johnson’s many descendants was the distinguished educator Rev. Clarence Hawkins.

The church built in 1885 was a two-story structure with the sanctuary on the second floor and the first floor used as a social hall. Apparently, Holy Trinity was well known in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century for its camp meetings. In June 1905 an organization called the Kent County Improvement and Rescue League for Colored People met at Janes Church and noted with pleasure that only two camp meetings had been held in the previous year, at the A.M.E. churches in Butlertown and Edesville. The League noted that “we are using all our influence to stamp out this evil” and urged officials and ministers of the League not to participate in camp meetings, which nevertheless continued to flourish and are remembered fondly by church members throughout the county.

Emerson Cotton, a long-time member at Holy Trinity remembers that Mr. Carroll Johnson, the Sunday School Superintendent when he was a child, always passed out chewing gum to the students each Sunday with the admonishment not to chew it during church. Mr. Cotton also recalls the nearby Knights

of Pythias Hall, a mutual benefit society of which he was a member, which held dances and hosted social events for the church as well as helping to pay medical and funeral expenses when needed.

The 1885 church was replaced by a new sanctuary dedicated in 1969, and a new social hall adjacent to the church was built in 1999. The current pastor at Holy Trinity is Rev. Sereta Collington. One of her predecessors was Rev. Fred Jones, Jr., who also served as pastor at Bethel and Mt. Olive, Kent County’s other two A.M.E. churches.

### **Mt. Pleasant United Methodist Church Fairlee**

Mt. Pleasant United Methodist Church serves as the center of a small black community on the northern edge of Fairlee. The land on which it sits, on the road from Fairlee to Melitota according to the deed, was purchased on September 3, 1885, for \$50 by trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church: Charles H. Woodland, Moses Rasin, William May, Richard Wallis, James Scott, Henry Thompson, and John Chambers. Within the next few years the current church building was constructed in a late vernacular interpretation of the Gothic revival style. Mt. Pleasant was incorporated on January 8, 1908, by trustees James Scott, Frisby Spencer, Joseph Tilghman, Benjamin Thompson, William May, John Miller, William B. Baylor, and Robert H. Coleman, “now minister in charge.” The current pastor at Mt. Pleasant is Rev. Bethsheila Hunley.

### **Historic Churches Now Closed**

Nine of the African American churches founded in Kent County more than 125 years ago no longer hold services. In most cases the church built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century still exists, if at all, only in the form of ruins. Five of these churches were organized by free blacks prior to the end of slavery in Maryland, and three others were founded during

Reconstruction. The discussion that follows is organized geographically, beginning with three churches that were located in the northeast corner of Kent County near the Delaware border and one in Still Pond. Three other churches were located within a few miles of each other in the vicinity of Sandy Bottom, and two others stood not far apart between Chestertown and Millington.

### **Olivet Hill United Methodist Church Olivet Hill**

According to a church history prepared in 1951, the history of Olivet Hill United Methodist Church near Galena dates back to at least 1863 and probably earlier. After the white Galena Methodists built a new brick structure in 1842, Olivet Hill Methodists moved their no longer needed frame church to the village of Upper Branch, which had been founded by free blacks in the 1840s. It is likely that the black community used the building for worship services from 1842 to 1863.

A deed dated March 5, 1869, documents the sale of land to trustees of the “Col’d M.E. Church called the Col’d Olivet Chapel”: Moses Young, Robert Paca (perhaps Peaker), Thomas Paca, Daniel Roe, George Rasin, Norris Miller, Charles Young, John Caulk, and Shadrack Thompson. The land was described as that “upon which the said Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, called the Colored Olivet Chapel is lying . . . near the Colored people’s village, called the Upper Branch.”

In January 1884 the trustees sold land to the County School Commissioners for the purpose of building a school “in the Colored People’s Village called the Upper Branch.” The trustees also bought a lot in the village in the 1880s to construct a parsonage. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the community of Olivet Hill was large and thriving enough to undertake the construction of a large new church in 1907, which the Maryland Historic Sites Survey described as “among the more complex of

the county’s late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century churches.”

The construction of this impressive new church was soon followed by the beginning of an exodus from the county, especially by blacks working on farms in northern Kent County, which started with better employment prospects elsewhere during World War I followed by the agricultural depression of the 1920s, the general depression of the 1930s, and World War II. The church history in 1951 stated that “today, the outlook of the future church looks dark.” Olivet Hill closed about 1979 after the ceiling fell into the nave, and most of its members transferred to John Wesley in Sassafras.

### **Wesley Henry African Union Methodist Protestant Church, Golts**



Ruins of Wesley Henry African Union Methodist Protestant church,  
built in 1904

On October 13, 1854, a deed conveyed one acre of land in Golts to the trustees of “the Colored Methodist Protestant Church of Wesley Henry Chapel of Kent County.” The trustees were John Hall William Hurtt, Hemsley Emory, Isaac Lee, George Dickson, Henry March, Perry Monson, George Nokes, and William Thompson. The denominational affiliation of Wesley Henry Chapel was unique in Kent County. It was affiliated with the first truly independent black church in the United



States, the African Union Methodist Protestant Church, which was founded by Peter Spencer in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1813.

The next deed involving Wesley Henry, in September 1867, makes reference to Lee's Chapel, a temporary name change probably reflecting the influence of Isaac Lee, one of the first trustees. This deed transfers land to a man from Baltimore, probably associated with the Baltimore Association for the Moral and Educational Improvement of the Colored People, for the "purpose of erecting or allowing to be erected thereon a School House for the use, benefit, and education of the Colored People of the Upper District of Kent County forever."

With the coming of the railroad in 1868, the Golts area experienced a modest boom, including the black community of Willow Hill where Wesley Henry Chapel was located. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century four passenger trains and several freight trains passed through Golts daily. A logging industry developed to harvest the nearby dense forests, and a cannery was built to process tomatoes, asparagus, peas, beans, and corn. Golts was said to have four or five general stores.

This varied economic activity supported a black community in Willow Hill of some 60 families at its height. In 1904 the members of Wesley Henry built a new church typical of Kent County's rural churches that reflected the Victorian Gothic Revival style. By the 1930s decline had set in with the closing of the cannery and most of the logging operations, passenger trains no longer stopped in Golts, and the community black school had closed. Most of the African American families of Willow Hill moved to Delaware or elsewhere in search of jobs, and all that remains of Wesley Henry Chapel are its ruins.

### **St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal Church, Golts**

In 1884, a portion of the congregation of Wesley Henry Chapel in Golts apparently broke

away to form a new church called the Colored Methodist Episcopal Bethelite Church. The trustees of this new church were Isaac Lee (after whom Wesley Henry Chapel had been renamed), Henry Emsley, Perry Thompson, Solomon Holland, Joseph Martin, Upton Brown, George Price, and Theodore Lockerman. On February 10, 1914, two of these surviving trustees transferred title to trustees of the same church now named St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal Church, which had been incorporated on September 26, 1913, by the following trustees of St. Paul's: Upton Brown, Shadrack Johnson, John H. Bunday, Nicolas Camile, Alexander Wright, Solomon Marten, and Leman Morgan. By the 1980s the church was called New Bethel A.M.E. Church. Only ruins remain.

### **Mt. Zion United Methodist Church Still Pond**

On October 22, 1870, trustees of Mt. Zion Methodist Episcopal Church purchased two acres of land for \$600 on "the public road leading from Still Pond to Betterton." Those first trustees of Mt. Zion were Warner Rasin, George Rasin, Lewis Johnson, Risdon Ringgold, and Albert Butler. The congregation of Mt. Zion must have saved for several years to amass what was then the substantial sum of \$600. The church, built in 1870 and 1871, was beautifully sited on a bend in Route 292 just west of Still Pond. At the same time, church members built a school nearby for the African American community, which was later used as the Annex Hall.

In 1886 and 1887 the church was extensively rebuilt under the leadership of Rev. J.H. Mason, at virtually the same time that he led the effort to build the new Union Methodist Episcopal Church in Coleman, also part of his Still Pond Circuit. Not surprisingly, Presiding Elder W.J. Parker wrote in the 1887 Delaware Annual Conference Journal that "Bro. Mason is known as the Champion financier of the district."

The remodeling included installation of a 200-pound bell purchased in Baltimore for \$43.81. On August 8, 1884, Mt. Zion trustees Risdon Ringgold, George Sewell, James Clark, Daniel White, and Samuel Hackett purchased land for a parsonage in the village of Still Pond. According to the 1885 minutes of the Delaware Conference, “a very handsome and convenient parsonage has been completed” at a cost of \$1,100.

On May 9, 1961, the church steeple was destroyed by a wind storm. Within two months, however, the steeple was replaced at a cost of \$1,355.82. Beginning in 1971, extensive renovations were made to the church and property, including clearing and seeding of the cemetery, installing a deep artesian well and, in 1974, adding a new roof. The cemetery contains gravestones dated as early as 1873. In 1993 Mt. Zion merged with Fountain United Methodist to form the New Christian Chapel of Love.

### **African American Meeting House at Hynson’s Chapel, Sandy Bottom**

Hynson’s Chapel, near the intersection of Route 20 and Ricaud’s Branch Road, was established in 1773 as the first Methodist house of worship erected on the Delmarva Peninsula. An 1853 deed for a small plot of land at this site states that the trustees (purchasers) “shall erect and build . . . thereon a house or place of worship and to keep it always erected for the use of the coloured people, members of the Methodist Episcopal Church.” Martenet’s 1860 Map of Kent County shows an “African Meeting House” adjacent to Hynson’s Chapel.

The trustees of this new church were both black and white, suggesting a desire by the whites to maintain some control over this new black church they helped to establish. The “coloured” trustees were Peter Glenn, Abram Brown, Henry Jones, James Jones, Henry Ward, and Samuel Reed. The Lake, Griffing, and Stevenson Atlas of 1877 no

longer shows this African Meeting House or Hynson’s Chapel itself. Its congregation probably disbursed to nearby black churches at Fairlee, Sandy Bottom, and Sharptown.

### **John Wesley United Methodist Church Sandy Bottom**

John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church in Sandy Bottom was founded as early as November 23, 1867, when the church trustees bought one acre adjacent to the parsonage of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church “whereon the African Church is now erected.” The trustees were William Glenn, William Russell, Samuel Reed, Moses Moore, Lewis Henry, George Sanders, George Frisby, John Blake, and Abraham Cotton. On September 11, 1878, the trustees apparently sold to St. Paul’s the same acre of land “whereon the African M.E. Church formerly stood.” A deed dated July 25, 1898, codifies an earlier purchase of two acres (where a new church may have been built) by John Wesley trustees George Frisby, William Pearce, James B. Berry, Charles Washington, John Walley John Stewart, Henry Harris, Robert Hodges, and John Ringgold. John Wesley closed its doors in the early 1970s and there is no longer any physical trace of the church.

### **Hadaway Chapel United Methodist Church Broad Neck**

On May 16, 1870, John Hadaway sold land on the south side of Langford Road in Broadneck for the purpose of “erecting or building thereon, a room or house suitable for a school room for the use of the colored people of Broad Neck.” The trustees who purchased the land were William H. Clarkson, John B. Johnson, Emory Brown, William Comegys, John Watkins, Robert Bowser, and Nelson Hall. The church known as Hadaway Chapel probably already stood on this land since 19th century rural black communities almost always built a church before starting a school. According to a history of



Emmanuel United Methodist, Hadaway Chapel and Emmanuel operated as sister churches as early as 1873.

According to minutes of the Kent County School Commission dated January 23, 1877, the first “colored school” authorized for Broad Neck was housed at Hadaway Chapel. On July 17, 1894, the trustees of Hadaway Chapel gave notice to the School Commissioners that the church building could no longer be used for school purposes. The Commission notified the church trustees that “the school in the district will be discontinued,” but by 1901 the Broad Neck school (perhaps built by the Commission) was back in operation.



Ruins of Hadaway Chapel United Methodist church, built in 1922, photographed in ca. 1985 by Constance Stuart Larrabee.

The membership of Hadaway Chapel built a new church building in 1922, which the Maryland Historic Sites Survey described as a “frame Gothic Revival church” and “a good example of well-proportioned, carefully built, and well-thought-out rural church construction.” The one-room school

nearby served as the fellowship hall. Due to declining membership, Hadaway Chapel closed its doors in 1965. Even in ruin, however, it remained an impressive structure, as shown in the nearby photograph. Since its closure, Emmanuel church has maintained the cemetery of Hadaway Chapel (all that remains at the site) and appointed a former Hadaway member to its board of trustees.

### **Joshua Chapel United Methodist Church Morgnec**

Joshua Chapel was founded in 1839 in the village of Cork Town, now known as Morgnec, established by free African American members of the Caulk family in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. “Cork” probably was a corruption of “Caulk.” The original church, reportedly made of logs, was built on land owned by Joshua and Martha Caulk. On October 8, 1869, the trustees of Joshua Chapel obtained a mortgage of \$200 from the Church Extension Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in order to rebuild the church. The trustees were Charles W. Jones, Marshall J. Jones, Isaac Cotton, Samuel Gleaves, Isaac S. Jones, Isaiah Caulk, Samuel J. Gleaves, John Strichning, and Isaac Caulk. The 1877 Lake, Griffing, and Stevenson Atlas of Kent County shows camp grounds near the church.

School classes were held at Joshua Chapel from about 1866 until 1887 when the heirs of Joshua Caulk donated an acre of land to the Kent County Board of School Commissioners to build a school for Morgan Creek Neck near the church, which continued in operation until the 1930s. Two female descendants of the Caulk family played active roles at Joshua Chapel during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sarah Wilson Taylor served as Communion and Pay Steward of the church, Benevolent Treasurer and organizer of the Ladies Aid, and later the Women’s Society of Christian Service. Her daughter, Dorothy, did much to preserve the history of Cork Town and its church. Joshua Chapel was last used in 2004 to hold the funeral service of Dorothy Taylor Campher.

The church building that still stands on Morgnec Road dates from the late 1890s, although the main auditorium may have been part of the earlier church. The nearby cemetery contains late 19<sup>th</sup> century gravestones of the Caulk, Cotton, and other families.

### **Asbury United Methodist Church Chesterville**

Asbury United Methodist Church on Chesterville Forest Road, built in 1900, appears to be the second church of one of the oldest black congregations in Kent County. Martenet's 1860 map of Kent County shows an "African M.E." church about two miles west of Chesterville and north of a sharp bend in the old Chesterville-Morgnec Road. The church moved to the present site because the center of the African American population in the Chesterville area shifted after the Civil War. Many blacks moved from the farms around Chesterville where they lived and worked before the war to the heavily wooded tracts along both sides of Chesterville Forest Road that were more affordable because they were considered less suitable for farming. Since the distance between the new community and the old church was more than two miles, too far for convenient walking, the congregation built a new church.

The church interior includes pine pews, communion rail, lectern, and communion table that were moved from the long-gone Davis Hill Methodist Episcopal Church, which was located on the northern side of the road leading from Locust Grove to Galena according to an 1869 deed. The original church site in Chesterville, now a grove of trees, contains the church's original cemetery. After 1965 the church used a new cemetery located at the south end of the Chesterville Forest Road at Route 291. In 2014, Asbury United Methodist closed its doors and merged with John Wesley United Methodist in Millington.

### **Conclusion**

Given the widespread poverty and pervasive discrimination that African Americans had to contend with in nineteenth century Kent County and later, the construction and sustainment of 24 churches (roughly one for every 275 black residents) represent a remarkable testament to the faith and resourcefulness of their congregations. This achievement also emphasizes the essential importance of the black church as a community institution, controlled by its members, that not only fulfills spiritual needs but also helps advance the social, educational, and political aspirations of its members.

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<sup>i</sup> I have dated the origin of churches from the time they first organized worship services, which often started in "meeting houses" rather than grander church buildings built after congregations saved sufficient funds to purchase land and construction materials.

<sup>ii</sup> The principal sources for this paper were commemorative histories prepared by the members of certain churches; the Maryland Historic Site Surveys for certain churches, accessed at the Historical Society of Kent County; Kent County land records, accessed at the Kent County Courthouse, and William H. Williams, *The*

*Garden of American Methodism: The Delmarva Peninsula, 1769-1820*, 1984. The history of Joshua Chapel is based upon an article by Jeanette Sherbondy, "Cork Town (Morgnec): A Free African American Village in Kent County," *The Key to Old Kent*, vol. 7.