

Sharing a Common Bond

Metropolitan United Methodist Church in the heart of Princess Anne and its neighbor, the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, share a history that spans three centuries.

Thomas Tilghman, Metropolitan's historian, can trace his congregation's roots to "Negro adherents, who worshipped in the balcony of the St. Andrew's Episcopal Church ... during the days of slavery (and) where they learned churchmanship."

According to Tilghman's account, they eventually organized into a separate congregation, and around 1841, began building a wood-frame building on Georgia Jones' farm. They named it after John Wesley, the principle founder of the Methodist movement in America.

Members worshipped there until 1860, when they sought a more suitable location. Church records show members bought land from Hampden Deshields "quite a distance from town," Tilghman says. By 1861, they had a new church and a school.

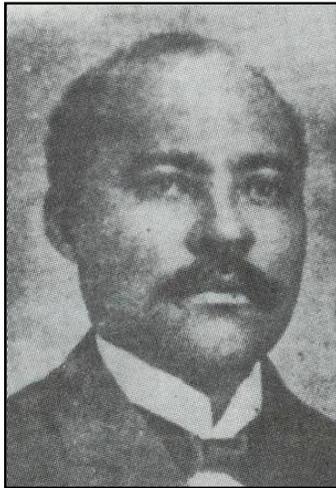
John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church flourished, but eventually it became inadequate as the congregation grew. According to church minutes from April 1884, the Delaware Conference of the Episcopal Methodist Church gave church trustees permission to search for a new location in Somerset County.

Two months later, Thomas Dixon sold the congregation land for \$400, which as Tilghman notes, "was once the site of a county jail and an auction block where our fore parents were sold."

By the following spring, church leaders sought a construction loan from the conference.



Tilghman notes the “membership struggled to make the annual payment.”



“We have raised on the New Church (Metropolitan) this quarter by cash and subscription (of) about \$782.85. We shall commence (building) the new church just as soon as we are able,” the August 1885 church minutes read.

The pastor at the time was [Joseph R. S. Waters](#), who saw more than a need to minister to his flock. Waters and [John A.B. Wilson](#), a white Methodist pastor, are credited with securing the Delaware Conference’s support to open a private school for Negroes in the community.

Before the new church’s foundation could be laid, bricks from the old jail had to be cleared away. A cornerstone was laid Sept. 19, 1886 – six days after nine students enrolled in the Delaware Conference Academy walking distance from the church.

The move into the town of Princess Anne marked a new era for the congregation, which chose to call its new house of worship Metropolitan Methodist Episcopal Church.

Even after the congregation settled into its present location in 1888, there was still a struggle, which minutes from an October 1889 meeting make clear.

“The worshippers of Metropolitan worked hard raising funds to pay this enormous debt,” Tilghman said. “And very soon, the mortgage for this debt was burned ...”

Like many of its peers founded in the post-Civil War era, training farmers, teachers and preachers was UMES’ initial mission. In the early years, students at the academy were required to attend services at Metropolitan.

Though no longer formally linked by Methodism, the bond remains strong between Metropolitan and the college.

“A large portion of the church membership consists of the faculty and staff of the University of Maryland Eastern Shore,” Tilghman said. “There are many devoted and dedicated leaders of our church on the college campus.”

† - *The University of Maryland Eastern Shore is indebted to Metropolitan UMC historian I. Thomas Tilghman for his assistance in the retelling of this remarkable story.*