

10-3-1993

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Recommended Citation

Smith, J. Clay Jr., "An Invitation to the Ancestors of Allen Chapel A.H.B. Church's Centennial Celebration, 1893 - 1993" (1993).
Selected Speeches. Paper 156.
http://dh.howard.edu/jcs_speeches/156

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**AN INVITATION TO THE ANCESTORS OF
ALLEN CHAPEL A.M.E. CHURCH'S
CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION
1893 - 1993**

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Most of the people who founded Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church were no doubt born prior to 1862, prior to the ratification of the 13th and 14th Amendments abolishing slavery, and granting them rights as citizens of the United States and citizens of the state in which they resided.

They were our ancestors in Christ; they were men and women of African descent; they were themselves the progeny of slaves, descendants of the slave trade, the daughters and sons of white slave masters, of fathers or mothers who had been lynched, raped and subjected to the worst conditions of human experience. They were our ancestors in Christ.

*The theme of the centennial celebration is "Celebrating 100 years: Honoring the Past, Fulfilling the Present and Preparing for the Future." Dr. Smith delivered the 100 year Pre-Anniversary "Kick-Off" Program on Sunday, October 3, 1993. The Anniversary Chairperson is Willa Easter. The Homecoming Celebration is scheduled between November 8-12, 1993. Rev. John D. MaGee, is the pastor of Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

We can only imagine who, or which group of people, suggested that this community form as a body in Christ to construct a building with a cross representing the "blood of the Lamb," the "Prince of Peace" atop this structure in 1893 to be known as Allen Chapel African American Episcopal Church.

We can only speculate about the conversations, debates and disagreements that may have occurred about the site selection of Allen Chapel. The site selection of the church may have been determined by our race; it may have been determined by the cost of the lot, it may have been determined by ease of access for the men and women who organized the church, or a combination of one or more of these issues.

I do not know whether the original site was sold to or given to the people by a white person or a black landowner, but whether purchased or received as a gift, it cost money to construct the first building.

Again, we can only imagine, how the congregation raised the money to purchase the materials to establish a "house of God" by people, who had declared that their "hope was built on nothing else but Jesus's love and righteousness." These were our ancestors in Christ.

My imagination invites me to see black men bringing logs in wagons driven by mules or horses to the original site of Allen Chapel. Men working in overalls and boots. My imagination leads me to believe that during every stage of the construction of Allen Chapel, people would gather to pray and sing. I bet you could hear somebody giving testimony, and men and women raising their arms singing the praise of Jesus Christ. These were our ancestors in Christ.

I wonder whether the first preacher brought to the Church lived in the Omaha community, and if not, how he was selected as the first pastor of the Allen Chapel flock? I doubt if our first pastor worked full time as a preacher. Was he a farmer, did he work for white folks in the surrounding area, the railroad, or the meat packing house? Was he an itinerant preacher?

I wonder if he was a good preacher? Hopefully, he was respected in the community and drew people to the Allen Chapel to worship and as members. I wonder what the format of the "call to worship" was in 1893 when our ancestors met in this church and the people "became quiet" in the presence of God. It must have been a rich experience for this congregation to call on God to come to Allen Chapel to consecrate this place with His Grace. It must have

been an emotional moment, perhaps on a day like today, when husbands and wives, their children, grand-parents and great-grand-parents "opened the doors" of this church and proudly stepped forward to be received on the rolls as members of Allen Chapel.

All of the original ancestors of Allen Chapel are gone and most of them have long since been forgotten. Many of the first families of the church may not exist any longer. Their collective individual accomplishments may be lost in time, but their fingerprints are--still indelibly stamped on this church. Their hammers and nails are still lodged in the earth of this community and the wheels of their wagons and the hoops and reins used to guide their mules and horses are hanging in someone's antique shop or in some western museum. Our ancestors in Christ, they live.

For a black church to last for one hundred years, Allen Chapel must have had a strong foundation. The founders left a firm foundation, a foundation not solely built on rock, but a foundation built for "the rock of ages." This "rock of ages" clings to me, to us.

New generations of families have succeeded each other at Allen Chapel, but tradition has not been lost. The men and women of this church have responded to the call of duty to defend their country

in every war and police action since 1893. The women of the church gave their son's to the nation to defend it, and some of the young men did not return.

There has been a rich tradition of the involvement of women in the life of Allen Chapel. Indeed our women have lead the way and they have uniformly secured this Church from financial ruin. How have they done this? The women of this church have been "The Willing Workers" and "The Busy Bees", two church clubs that may be nearly as old as the church. There is a phrase - "let your light so shine that people may see your good work to glorify God". The women at Allen Chapel have turned on the lights of this church a many a time. There has been "good work" done in the kitchens of this church and in their homes to cook the meals for special occasions, the cookies for Christmas, the hot dogs for the church picnics. The money that these "good works" have raised over the years for Allen Chapel cannot be calculated, but it has been substantial. The women of Allen Chapel have been more, so much more, than the cooks for special occasions. Women, like Rev. Emma Reed, have stood in this pulpit as a full ordained ministers and administered the sacraments of communion and baptism. (Rev. Reed informs me that I (with Aubrey Wise, Jr.) joined the church after one of her sermons causing Ms. Cortez (who had been cool to her as a woman minister) to embrace her by saying-"If you can save the youth, you can save anybody." I was about 13 years old.) The women have taught in the Sunday School, cared for children not your own

and helped to save families that teetered on the brink of collapse. Yes, there are many women of Allen Chapel, many who are present today, whose caring hands, and big hearts are and have watched over us. Your prayers have saved many children. In fact, I suspect there no one present today, including myself, whose mother has not knelled at this alter or at some alter to ask God's blessing upon us. We are alive today because of those prayers. Sometimes, while sitting in these pews, we heard the prayers of our mothers-during times that their hearts were so full or minds so burdened that their voices stretch out to God for "guidance...for peace be still." During this centennial, let us honor the mothers of Allen Chapel all one hundred years of these mothers in Christ.

This church has been the maker of men, strong, descent and caring men. It was important that men played a role here at Allen Chapel. I have said to this congregation on more than one occasion how the men of Allen Chapel stepped into my life when my father died after an untimely industrial accident at Cudahy Meat Packing Plant in 1951. I was nine years old. The men not only played a role in my life but in the lives of every male student in the church. Mothers can bring their children to church; but fathers can mold future families by their presence in church and by active participation in the management of the church. Such has been the history of Allen Chapel: The "strong men keep a coming," as the great African-American poet Sterling Brown says, "like a poor inch worm...they simply keep a coming on..."

A century is a long time: but in the sands of time, it is but a drop of water. But, a mere drop of water in the name of Jesus can save the church to serve yet another one hundred years. You, the members of Allen Chapel, are that drop of water.

Listen to the water...

"Wade in the water, wade in the water children." It was the water that baptized you, your children. The water has helped to save us all.

You've walked in the footprints: Remember when Emily Smith (my mother); sang- "Footprints of Jesus---leading the way, footprints of Jesus by night and by day, sure if I follow, life will be sweet...."

Our ancestors many, who by the grace of God still live, have left us with a "sweet life." They lead us to "the footprints of Jesus." The ancestors loved to tell the story. Remember the words- "I love to tell the story twill be my theme in glory, to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love."

Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church has been telling the story of love for one hundred years.

This church has much to be proud of. So, "go tell it on the mountain, over the hill and everywhere; go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born."

In closing, all of us have brought our dead to this alter. Death is not the end; it is the beginning of the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things for those lifted behind, not seen.

The mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, and friends that have passed this way at Allen Chapel, these faithful warriors for the cross did not leave us alone- "no, never alone, no, never alone, he promised never to leave us, no never alone." The departed mothers, fathers and sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles, left us in the hands of Jesus, and "leaning on his ever lasting arm."

Many invitations will be given by Allen Chapel for people to come help to celebrate the centennial of Allen Chapel Church. Its going to be a wonderful, and historical homecoming. Many stories will be told, old acquaintances will be renewed, new pledges of faith will be received, tender testimony will be given, great preaching will be heard, sensitive moments will be experienced.

This morning, as I end my remarks, during this pre-anniversary kick off of the centennial anniversary, I ask this church to invite a departed ancestor back to help us celebrate the centennial.

Just look around the church and you can see their faces sitting in their pew, in the choir, kneeling at the alter, hear their laughs; see them teaching in the Sunday School, cooking in the kitchen, sitting in a trustee meeting.

Invite them to the homecoming by calling our their names. (After the congregation calls out the names of the dead inviting them to the homecoming: enter the prayer of confession on the record):

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

O God, our God, we celebrate the new life which you have given us. We have experienced broken lives made whole, old wounds of alienation healed, and tired spirits rejuvenated with new vision. Gracious God, we are so grateful for the purpose and possibilities you have placed before us. Yet there are times when doubt has overcome hope, cynicism has replaced dedication, the world's values have captured us more than yours. Forgive us for those times; we pray. Help us let go of the past that we might move joyfully into a new future that points to your love and justice. Amen.

c:Speech