

# Bethel A.M.E. Church *Becomes Bethel Center*

Written by: **Mary Reisinger**

HONORING THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICANS  
IN GARRETT COUNTY, MARYLAND



For nearly ninety years, the bare wooden structure being used as a workshop sat mostly unnoticed in a field near Oakland, Maryland. A small metal sign identified it as the “only African American church in Garrett County.” In 2022, a worship service was held on the farm before the building was dismantled and moved into storage. Since then, the former church has been reassembled on a new location in Mountain Lake Park. It will now be known as Bethel Center.

This unusual saga began in the late 1800s when the B&O Railroad ran train lines through Mountain Lake Park and Oakland and promoted the area as a mountain resort. The census from 1880 shows 12,175 residents of Garrett County; of these, 112 were African Americans, many of whom had come to work for the railroad or the large hotels that served the tourists arriving each summer, while others farmed or ran small businesses in the area.

African Americans formed a congregation a few years before the turn of the century. Details are difficult to verify, but it seems that these families initially



**Above: The Bethel A.M.E. Church wooden structure being used as a farm workshop.** PHOTO BY MARY REISINGER

**Inset: The historic marker at the farm site.** PHOTO BY LAURA STUTZMAN



BIRDS EYE VIEW OF  
**OAKLAND**  
**MARYLAND**

ALTITUDE 2700 FEET. 1906 POPULATION 1600.

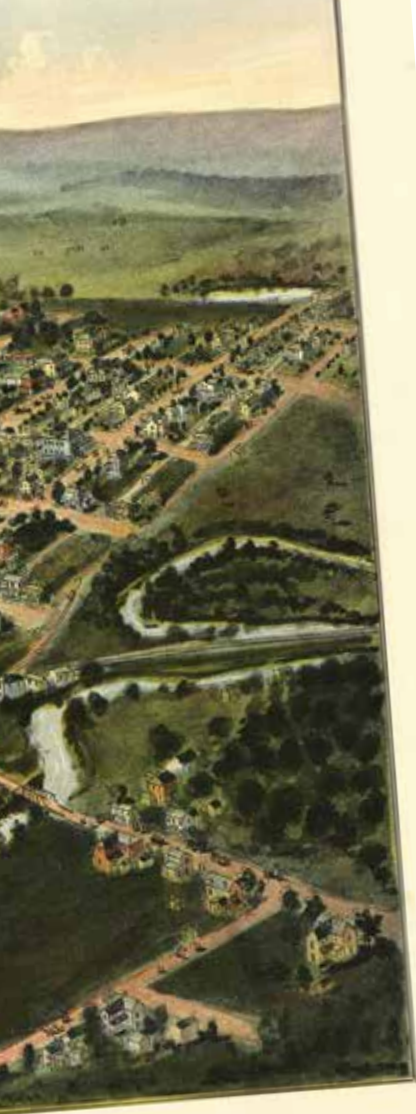
Copyright 1911 by THOMAS M. FOWLER, Mechanics, Pa.

worshipped in a very basic structure. The denominational leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church decided this congregation should have a new building, and a lot was purchased in Oakland at the corner of High and Fifth Streets, across from the town cemetery. In 1895, the deed was recorded. The church that was built, Bethel A.M.E., appears on various hand-drawn maps of this era, and on a

bird's-eye view of the town printed in 1906. One postcard has been found that pictures the part of Oakland where Bethel A.M.E. was located.

It has recently been discovered that a Bible still exists from the early days of Bethel A.M.E. It was originally presented to the church by D.H. Loar, a prominent local philanthropist and member of what was then known as St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church. According to a handwritten list inside

this Bible, the first pastor was Rev. W. H. Walker, 1895-96, the year the lot was purchased. Rev. Walker is one of the signatories to the deed. Rev. G. C. Taylor, who was pastor from 1899-1900, is credited by the *Centennial Encyclopaedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1816-1916* with overseeing the building of the new structure in Oakland. The list in the Bible stops at the year 1911; however, a 1924 article in the Baltimore *Afro-American* newspaper mentions the



**Above:** Bethel A.M.E. is visible on the 1906 Bird's-Eye View of Oakland, Maryland, published by Fowler & Kelly, Morrisville, PA; the enlarged inset highlights the church at the corner of High and Fifth Streets.

PHOTO COPIES BY LAURA STUTZMAN

**Right:** This early postcard of Oakland shows the only known photo of the Bethel A.M.E. building at its original site.

POSTCARD LOCATED BY SALLIE STUART AND PHOTOGRAPHED WITH INSET BY MARK STUTZMAN

congregation being in sound condition due to the work of Rev. M. B. Simpson during his long tenure at Bethel A.M.E.

According to research by local teachers and historians Alice Eary and Jean Grose, a “colored school” was likely housed in the church building until 1907 with enrollment ranging from 15-25 students. Because the enrollment fell below the minimum of 10, it was closed in 1908.

Bethel A.M.E. was part of an active African American community, especially in the early 1900s. The congregation offered social events such as “minstrel” evenings of musical entertainment to the public, and *The Republican* published a weekly social column for residents of color. The paper also records an unusual occurrence: the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan visited the church in the 1920s during a worship service to deliver a donation toward the upkeep of the building, ostensibly as a civic gesture, but perhaps also with an eye to keeping worship, like education, segregated.



**Rev. George Claudius Taylor, D.D., Pastor from 1899 – 1900**

Around 1920, the tourism industry that had thrived since the advent of the B&O Railroad began to erode. The Great Depression bookended by two world wars meant that fewer people had the means to travel for pleasure. After World War II, the increase in road construction and automobile ownership enabled vacationers to drive to destinations beyond rail lines.

Fewer and fewer people came to the mountains by train to stay in the grand hotels of Deer Park, Mountain Lake Park, and Oakland. The wooden buildings burned down—or were torn down for their lumber. Many jobs that had been related to these summer visitors vanished. Deep Creek Lake, started in 1925, did not yet provide plentiful employment as the earlier resorts had done.

Consequently, the African American population in the County declined rapidly starting in the late 1920s, and Bethel A.M.E. lost its membership. The congregation closed, and the church building was sold in 1934 to Amish blacksmith Simon Swartzentruber, who





**Above: A prayer service (left) was held in the former church building before it was moved from the farm. Samuel Yoder (right) made a final wheel before the shop was dismantled.** *BOTH PHOTOS BY MARK STUTZMAN*



**Left: On June 25, 2022, a ground-breaking ceremony was held at the new Bethel Center location in Mountain Lake Park. Participants included (l to r): Yvonne West Burroughs, Bethel A.M.E. descendant; Daphne Gooding, Garrett County NAACP President; Willie Flowers, Maryland NAACP President; Tifani Fisher, Allegany County NAACP President; Ravonah Stringfellow, Mountain Lake Park resident; and Scarlett West-Spicer, Bethel A.M.E. descendant.** *PHOTO BY ALBERT L. FELDSTEIN*

dismantled it from its lot in Oakland, and reassembled it on his farm as a workshop. There it remained in use by the family until Swartzentruber's grandson Samuel Yoder made a final wheel there in May 2022.

Like the former church structure, the turn of the century African American community of Garrett County was largely forgotten for nearly a century.

In recent decades, there has been an increase in the number of African Americans who visit the area and who call Garrett County home. A few years ago, Kate Smith, a black resident of Oakland and former Oakland Town Council member, became aware of the historic building and began to interest other people in reviving earlier efforts to save it.

Samuel Yoder, whose grandfather was adamant the former church should never leave the County, was willing to have the structure moved from his land to a place where it could represent an important part of the area's past. The original Oakland location of the church had long since been used

for a private residence, but through the creative thinking of Don Sincell, mayor of Mountain Lake Park; the efforts of the Mountain Lake Park town council; and the generosity of the congregation of the Apostolics of Oakland Church, a new lot was found.

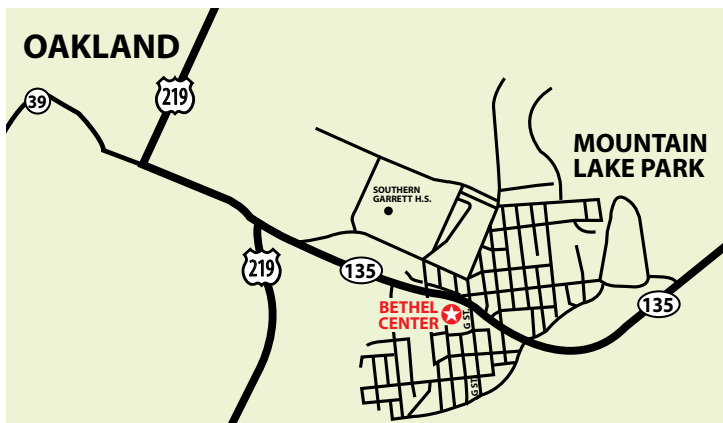
The Apostolics of Oakland Church is situated on 5.5 acres of the original Mountain Lake Park Assembly Hall property. The section chosen for the Bethel structure is convenient and visible, at the corner of G Street and Maryland Highway (Route 135). An essential group of people worked to find grant money (including from Maryland Historical Trust African American Heritage Preservation Program, Community Legacy, Preservation Maryland, and The Maryland State Society Daughters of the American Revolution) and other funding to purchase the new site offered by the Apostolics, to prepare a foundation, to buy the structure, to move it, and to reconstruct it. Many commercial and private members of the community have donated time and materials.



The Mountain Lake Park Historical Association (current officers are Karen Wooddell, Gerry Duket, and Linda Fike; Mark Stutzman serves as a volunteer consultant) was formed to support the restored church building and other historic initiatives in the town. Their very informative website, [mlpha.org](http://mlpha.org), has provided ongoing reports on the Bethel Center project.

In spring of 2022, members of the community and guests from Cumberland and other areas, including some descendants of original Bethel A.M.E. congregation members, held a worship service at the farm to recognize the religious significance of the old building. Then it was disassembled again, this time by Jason Martin. It was stored on the Martin farm until it could be brought to the new site and hoisted into place.

Preservation specialists were consulted. As weather allowed, a new roof was installed, the sliding barn door was removed to allow for a salvaged traditional door, and new siding was nailed over the exterior. Restoration continues with windows—old glass has been found to replace original panes that are missing—and interior finishing of the building. There will be electricity, but no water. Jason Martin has made every effort to retain any of the original fabric of the building that can be saved, and to rebuild as authentically as possible. It has been a challenge; some parts of the structure have held up better than others over more than a century of use, and building techniques of that era were not as standardized as



**Top left:** Jason Martin and helper, Nathan Martin, work to reassemble the building on its new site. *PHOTO BY MARY REISINGER*

**Top right:** A crane places parts of the wooden structure onto the foundation prepared for it in Mountain Lake Park.

*PHOTO BY LAURA STUTZMAN*

**Middle:** By February 2024, the building crew had installed a new roof, framed a new doorway, and started covering the building with new siding. *PHOTO BY MARY REISINGER*

**Above:** Bethel Center is located at the corner of G Street and Maryland Highway (Rt. 135), a short drive from Oakland, MD.

they are now. Jason says that he learned to be prepared for the unexpected.

The ground-breaking ceremony in the Mountain Lake Park location was held on June 25, 2022. Nearly two years later, significant progress has been made. A re-dedication of the former Bethel A.M.E. church building as Bethel Center will be held on September 23, 2024, exactly 124 years from the date of its original dedication. The governor and other officials have been invited. It promises to be a significant day of celebration.

Plans for Bethel Center focus on using it to retrieve and honor the history of a group of people whose important contribution to the area has for the past century received little attention. Those working on the project hope it will be visited by people who want to learn about the early African American residents of Garrett County. Students will be encouraged to make field trips to the building. Bethel Center could serve as a meaningful venue for small weddings and other special religious services. There will be programming around special events such as the Victorian Chautauqua weekend each summer. Look for many opportunities to gain insights into African American culture in Mountain Maryland.

The Mountain Lake Park Historical Association wants to document as much as possible about the members of Bethel A.M.E. Journals, letters, oral history accounts, photographs, and other artifacts related to the congregation would all be most welcome.

Readers with information related to other aspects of African American life in Garrett County could contact the Garrett County Historical Society. Check for contact information at its website: <https://garrettcountymuseums.com/historicalsociety>.



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