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People of Color in the First Baptist Church of Providence, RI to 1869

Dataset Article

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Description

This documents Black members of the First Baptist Church in Providence, RI to 1869. It is an adaptation, with additions and corrections, of one published by the Black Heritage Society in 2011.¹ It documents formal members of the church only, not attendees broadly. According to available documents, none of the African American members were still enslaved by 1800.

One might wonder why people of color would join a white church. If they chose to be a Baptist in Providence, there was no alternative to the First Baptist Church until 1805. The number of

¹ J. Stanley Lemons, Ray Rickman, and Robb Dimmick, *Black in a White Church: Biographies of African American Members of the First Baptist Church in America* (Providence, RI: Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, 2011).

blacks in the town was so few that the formation of a black congregation in Providence had to wait until 1819-1820, when a critical mass of people existed. Even then, they formed a non-denominational entity called the African Union Meeting and School because too few black Methodists, Congregationalists, and Baptists existed to support individual sectarian churches. That would have to wait until the middle of the 1830s when the number of blacks in Providence had grown and sectarianism had increased.

By the 1840s, Providence had five African American churches: two Baptist, two Methodist, and one Episcopal church. In the 1820s most African Americans exited the white churches to worship together in the African Union Meeting and School, but it was a constant struggle to fund, which required continued help from sympathetic white churches. For the black community, the African Union Meeting was a place of their own, where they could worship as they pleased without white supervision and domination, and where they could be the leaders, instead of having to sit in the white churches in segregated "pigeon holes," as William J. Brown described them in his autobiography.²

The First Baptist Church did not begin to keep records of people who joined before June 1759 and had no list of members until 1764, so one does not know about people of color in the church prior to the middle of the eighteenth century. The minutes record that Mary Cesar, an Indian woman, was baptized in 1762, and the 1764 list of members includes Mary Manning and John Carr, who were likely members even before 1759. Mary Cesar was the wife of William Cesar, a Narragansett-African American who later joined the church in 1790.

Then, a revival began in the church in December 1774 and lasted through nearly all of 1775. It was sparked, we are told, by the accidental shooting of a young man by a close friend, and the first converts to the church after this incident were two black women, Venus Arnold and Tamar Clemmens. Between December 1774 and November 1775, the church added 123 members, including 17 African Americans. Among those new black members were two former slaves of Moses Brown, and several others who appeared still to be enslaved by various masters. On Sunday, April 2, 1775 when Joseph Brown was baptized, three African Americans were also baptized, including Providence Brown, formerly enslaved by Moses Brown. In 1775 of the 122 pew owners (most of whom were not members of the church), 36 of them appeared to be owners of slaves.

However, in the 1780s, especially after Rhode Island passed its gradual emancipation law in 1784, slaveholding declined sharply so that by 1790 only two pew owners had slaves, and the attitude in the church turned to the point that John Brown (a pew owner, but not a member) angrily resigned his place in 1790. By then, Brown University president and pastor James Manning had freed his slaves and become a member of Moses Brown's Abolition Society, along with Congressman David Howell, Arthur Fenner, and Nicholas Brown, the younger—the man for

² William J. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown, of Providence, R. I., with Personal Recollections of Incidents in Rhode Island (1883)*, introduction by Joanne Pope Melish, forward by Rosalind C. Wiggins (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2006), 25.

whom Brown University was named. As the document shows, a steady stream of African Americans continued to join First Baptist right into the 1820s, even after the formation of the African Union and Meeting in 1819-1820.

First Baptist was one of the white churches that helped to launch and sustain the African Union. Among the black founders of the African Union were several men affiliated with First Baptist, including George Willis. They met in the vestry of the Meeting House of the First Baptist Church with the pastors of some white churches to plan the creation of the African Union. Especially supportive were Henry Jackson, a young white ministerial student, and Stephen Gano, pastor of First Baptist. Gano, nephew of James Manning, the first president of Brown University, served First Baptist from 1792 to 1828. Gano offered the prayer before the ground-breaking for the meetinghouse in April 1819, and Henry Jackson preached the first sermon when the vestry was dedicated for worship on Sunday June 4, 1820. All through the 1820s and 1830s, First Baptist gave money to support the African Union and provided Sunday school teachers for the school. When the Freewill Baptists gathered their own congregation from the African Union, First Baptist gave money to support their minister, John Lewis, and one woman, Hannah (Colin) Hopkins, transferred her membership to the Abyssinian Freewill Baptist Church in 1839 (now the Pond Street Baptist Church).

When two African Methodist Episcopal churches (Bethel and Zion) spun off in 1838 and 1839 and the Freewill Baptists left to meet elsewhere, the African Union was left with only about a dozen regular Baptists, including George Willis. This remnant organized the Meeting Street Baptist Church in December 1840, and George Willis was its Deacon. He and several others officially transferred their membership to the new church. The result was that the churches became highly segregated. For example, First Baptist, which had about 11% minority membership in 1800, seems to have had no people of color join the church from 1869 to 1890.

Dates of Data Collection

1975-2021

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

Providence, RI

Temporal Coverage

1764-1869

Document Types

Membership List
Religious Registry

Sources

First Baptist Church in America Records, 1768-1996, MSS 417, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI.

Providence Town Papers, 1639-1832, MSS 214, sg1, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI.

Methodology

This document about people of color at the First Baptist Church in Providence grew from an effort to retroactively create a “parish register,” which sought to identify and describe the members of the church. It is largely based upon the written records of the church. Although the church was gathered by Roger Williams in 1638, no record book was kept until 1755, and even then, it was only sporadically maintained until the early 1770s.

Until the 20th century, the church clerk always designated people of color (“Black,” “Negro,” “Mulatto,” “Coloured,” “an Indian woman”), which made it easy to identify them. Whether they were enslaved is more difficult to know, but prior to 1784, if an entry said that Sophia Jenckes was “a servant to brother Jenckes,” she was enslaved. Or when the entry said that Phillis Bowen had “difficulty with her mistress,” it was assumed that the mistress was an owner. The 1774 Rhode Island Census identified who was free and who was enslaved even though only family names were listed. If the only “Power” family in Providence was white, one can usually assume that a person of color in that household was enslaved. As no free Power family was listed in the 1774 Census, Caesar Power was most likely an enslaved man when he joined the church. The Providence Town Papers contain detailed accounts about ownership, manumissions, residency hearings (often leading to individuals being warned out of town), apprenticeship assignments, and other issues that particularly afflicted the poor, especially people of color.

The following fields of data were extracted from the church records regarding members: Date of Entry (initiation of membership), Joined (manner of acquiring membership), Name, Date of Departure (from membership), Ceased (manner in which membership ended), and Remarks, including other known information about the individual.

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Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse [<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JHDCJX>]

Linked Data Representation: [Enslaved.org](https://enslaved.org) [Summary Visualization](#)

Acknowledgments

Black Heritage Society

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