

London African Methodist Episcopal Church

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A small plain wood frame cottage that had been vacant for some time stood slated for demolition in 2014 to make way for a parking lot. Members of the London, Ontario community raised their voices in protest, arguing that an important piece of London's Black heritage would forever be lost. What did the structure represent, and who built it? Was it just the relic of a long lost past, or was it important enough to save and restore? These questions and more are the topic of this paper.

The London African Methodist Episcopal Church was one of the earliest Canadian churches to join the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) conference that expanded into Upper Canada (now Ontario) in the 1820s. In 1832, an itinerant pastor named Jeremiah Miller was appointed to the province and a missionary named Richard Williams was assigned to the congregation in St. Catharines in 1837.¹ Winks notes that within two years AME churches opened in Malden, Hamilton, Brantford, and Toronto.² A petition was filed to have the congregations in Upper Canada be received in the AME Connection. They were attached to the New York Conference.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church (often called Bethel Methodists) is a Black denomination of the Methodist church that was established during the late eighteenth century. The AME was formed when Black Methodists faced discriminatory seating in some churches by white church leaders. After unsuccessfully advocating for equal treatment, Black parishioners decided to withdraw from individual Methodist congregations in Baltimore, Maryland in 1787 and in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1792. They formed their own Black Methodist churches as racially separate branches of the mainstream Methodist church. In 1816, under the leadership of

Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, these churches sought more control over the governing affairs of their congregations. They joined three other Black Methodist churches and established the Bethel Society that led to the founding of the AME church. Allen was selected as the first Bishop.³ The denomination grew rapidly. Their membership rolls included African Americans from various backgrounds, such as teacher and future newspaper publisher Mary Ann Shadd Cary and well-known freedom seeker and Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman.⁴ The AME Church established foreign missions, including in Canada, to meet the interest in the church. They also created a strong publishing program to print and distribute its religious materials. Dorothy Shreve states that Black migrants into Canada generally tended to be Baptist or Methodist, which contributed to the church's growth among freedom seekers.⁵ But there were other denominations that Black inhabitants adhered to like the Catholic and Anglican churches.

In 1840, the General Conference of the AME Church passed an order to organize an AME Church Conference in Canada under the leadership of Bishop Morris Brown from Philadelphia, who was the missionary to Canada West (name of Ontario after Upper Canada). The meeting was held on July 21, 1840, in Toronto. There were twelve AME members of this first conference of the Upper Canadian General Conference. Along with Brown, who chaired the meeting, there was Elder Edmund Crosby, assistant to the Bishop; Deacon George Weir of Rochester, New York; and the following preachers, who were all residents of Canada West: William Edwards, Samuel Brown, James Harper, Alexander Hemsley, Jeremiah Taylor, Daniel D. Thompson, Peter O'Banyoun, Jacob Dorsey and Henry Bullard.⁶ They established **circuits**⁷ in St. Catharines, Brantford, and London, with a **station**⁸ in Toronto. Ministers were appointed to the congregation in these locations to serve a membership of 265.⁹

The congregation in London formed a **society**, which is a congregation that gains permission to enter the AME conference and forms a formal body of a religious society with the establishment of a board of trustees. The first minister of the London church was James Harper, from 1840 to 1842. The congregation was likely meeting in the homes of parishioners until they erected a chapel.



Figure 1. North Branch of the River Thames, London (Ontario), 1842. James Hamilton, artist. PICTURES-R-582, Baldwin Collection of Canadiana, Toronto Public Library.

In 1847 the society acquired crown land. Extant land records show that on September 6, 1847, carpenter William Clark received the original deed for the lot. The indenture describes the property's location as being on: "Lot 26 commencing at 118 feet south of the south side of Bathurst Street, running 30 feet along Thames Street then east 110 feet." The following month, Clark sold his parcel of the lot for twenty-two pounds and two shillings (£22 10s.) to the trustees of the "African Methodist Church [...]" in trust that they shall erect, or cause to be built there on,

a house or place of worship for the use of the Members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.”¹⁰ The trustees were William Hamilton, Benjamin Harris, Henry James, Henry Logan, John Osburne, Thomas Wingate, and George Winemiller, all members of London’s growing Black community. Sometime after 1848, The AME trustees contracted the construction of a small frame church on Thames Street which was completed in the early 1850s. The church’s street address was 275 Thames Street.¹¹ It served the growing Black community.

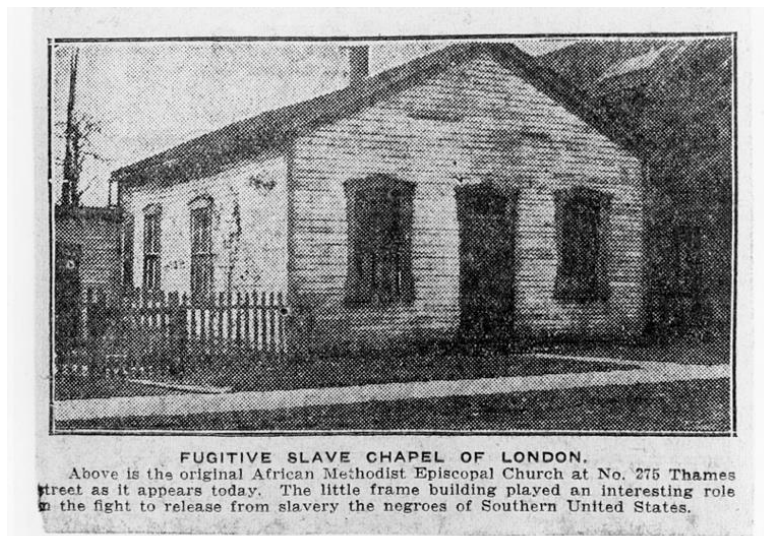


Figure 2. Image of the AME chapel in the London Advertiser, May 8, 1926.

In the early 1830s, there were approximately thirty Black people in the town of London, and that number increased to just over five hundred by the 1850s. A small number of London’s Black inhabitants had relocated from the Wilberforce settlement located about 28 kilometres north of London in Lucan-Biddulph after the planned settlement collapsed. The majority were freedom seekers from the United States who had fled enslavement, many via the Underground Railroad through Ohio. Many crossed Lake Erie on cargo vessels with the assistance of abolitionist steamship captains. The incoming African American refugees primarily settled in all-

Black sections on Thames Street near Horton and the area bounded by Thames Street on the west, Ridout Street North on the east, York Street on the north, and the train tracks on the south (the present site of Copps Lumber). This area of high concentration of Black residents received the derogatory label of “Ni**er Hollow.” Black Londoners also lived on Grey Street east of Wellington Street, and near the Wellington Street Bridge at Grand Avenue.¹²

As the first appointed minister, James Harper was responsible for the services of the London congregation and all of the AME congregations west of London that were part of the London circuit.¹³ The second pastor assigned to the circuit that included the London AME congregation was Jeremiah Taylor. He held the post from 1842 to 1847. At the annual general conference held in Hamilton in 1847, Taylor reported that there were 22 members. The third minister was Richard Warren (1847-1849). The purchase of land for a chapel and the erection of the building were accomplished while both Taylor and Warren were leading. In his memoir, *Narrative of the life and sufferings of Rev. Richard Warren (a Fugitive Slave)*, Warren described becoming an AME pastor in Detroit, Michigan and being sent to Upper Canada to minister as an itinerant. He noted that he visited London on November 29, 1845 and remained there for one week with Reverend Taylor and Reverend Noah Caldwell W. Cannon, who was in charge of the Toronto and Hamilton circuits.¹⁴ Warren stated that at the Eighth Annual General Conference of the AME Church for the Province of Canada that was held at Hamilton in August 1847, he was appointed to the London circuit. He reported that, “When I entered upon my labors at London, I found a membership of 21. I commenced a series of meetings, and the Lord was present with us, and several souls were brought nigh unto God through faith in Christ Jesus.”¹⁵

The worshippers of the London AME Chapel were from the growing Black community in London. According to the 1842 census, there were 63 “colored” males and 50 “colored”

females enumerated.¹⁶ By 1855, the number of Black inhabitants climbed to an estimated 350 due to the influx of freedom seekers in the town.¹⁷ These men and women worked as waiters, painters, plasterers, teamsters, woodcutters for the railway, domestic servants, seamstresses, washerwomen, and ice packers. African Canadians in London also ran businesses including barbershops, cobble shops, grocery and supply stores, and pharmacies.¹⁸

On August 1, 1851 the London AME Church hosted the annual General Conference. It was presided over by Bishop William Paul Quinn and welcomed visitors from the Philadelphia, New York, and Indiana conferences. The date coincided with Emancipation Day, which was likely observed as part of the gathering. In 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act was passed by the United States Congress. The threat of the return to slavery and the potential danger that Canadian AME members could face attending conferences in the US because of the new legislation began to raise concerns among congregants. This situation led to the convening of the North American Convention for Colored Freemen, led by *Voice of the Fugitive* publisher Henry Bibb, at the St. Lawrence Hall in Toronto. Its purpose was to deliberate the best place for Black people to live in safety and freedom. The delegates representing London were Alexander Hamilton, Aby Bedford Jones, and Henry Garret.¹⁹

The Fourteenth Annual General Conference was held the following year at the Bethel Chapel in St. Catharines. The minutes printed in the *Voice of the Fugitive* newspaper recorded that the London chapel had 44 members and was under the pastorship of Henry Stevens, who was assigned to the London circuit.²⁰ The membership grew steadily. London reported 50 members in 1853, an increase of 7 from the previous year. Aaron Macrey (McCrea) was the designated minister. Province-wide, the denomination had reached a membership of 1,069 in a total of twenty churches that were served by fourteen ministers.²¹ The twenty churches were in

Toronto, Oro, Hamilton, Grand River (Dunnville, Cayuga, Norwich, Simcoe), Brantford, Drummondville, Niagara, St. Catharines, London, Simcoe, Norwich, Chatham, Buxton, Dawn, Windsor, Sandwich, Amherstburg, Colchester, Queen's Bush, and the East Canada Mission. Overall, the AME Church continued to grow across the province.

Daniel Alexander Payne, Bishop and historiographer of the AME Church, visited London in 1854 while taking a tour of societies in the province. He noted:

In October I was again in London, Canada, where I preached, and lectured on the elevation of our people. At this visit I went to see the school of the "Colonial Church and School Society." This school contained four hundred pupils, about eighty of whom were colored. The system was Lancasterian; and the children were advanced to the rank of monitors--according to their *qualifications, not their color*. In the male school I saw two monitors--boys of color--each drilling a class in which but *one* pupil was colored; and the white lads seemed to be as happy as those whose monitors were white, thus verifying Lewis Tappan's utterances on the subject years before--"that all children are naturally anti-slavery, and only by false teachings become pro-slavery."²²

The majority of the Black children in the city of London attended the mission school operated by the Colonial Church and School Society through St. Paul's Anglican Church because they were barred from attending the local common (public) schools due to their race. Black parents paid the school tax but were denied access to public schools. In 1847, the London Auxiliary Bible Society reported that "[I]f any Coloured child enters a school, the white children are withdrawn, the teachers are painfully obliged to decline, and the Coloured people ... yield to an injustice which they are too weak to redress."²³ Black abolitionist William Wells Brown and white abolitionist Samuel Gridley Howe observed the persistence of the racial prejudice that Black families in London encountered in schooling when they visited in the early 1860s. Howe conveyed, "there is a distinction of color, and negroes do not have equal advantage from public instruction with whites."²⁴ The parents and students of the mission school in all likelihood included members of the AME Church.

In 1855, London chapel's membership was 78 and had been placed in the modified Chatham Circuit. The preacher assigned was Benjamin Stewart, who took over when McCrea passed away.²⁵ The matter of creating a distinct Canadian Conference in response to the impact of the Fugitive Slave Act remained a concern and was put forth on the Annual General Conference agenda in 1855 as it had been at the 1854 conference at Chatham. Most of the AME church members in Canada refused to attend General Conferences in the US because of the law. They also wanted to identify themselves more closely with Britain and the British colony that granted them their freedom and equal rights. A resolution was passed to submit a petition requesting separation at the next annual US AME General Congress. In response, the bishops ordered a convention to take place before the next Canadian General Conference in September 1856 at Chatham to discuss the requested establishment of an independent denomination and to select a bishop. George W. Clark was the London minister at the time of the 1856 Convention and General Conference.²⁶ The resolution was proposed at the 1856 convention. It was deliberated and passed. The eighteenth and final AME General Conference of the Canada District was held and the first Annual Assembly of the British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church convened. Guidelines were established to maintain a relationship between the two connexions. Reverend Willis Nazrey was chosen as the first bishop of the BME Church in Canada. Henry J. Young was the first BME minister at London. William Wells Brown stated that during his visit in 1861, he was invited to speak at the Methodist church, and did so twice that day "to a crowded house on both occasions."²⁷ The foundations of the Black Methodist church in London held firm.

In May 1869, the trustees of the London BME Church sold 275 Thames Street to James Seale, and the congregation moved to 430 Grey Street where a new, larger church was built. The

church was named Beth Emmanuel British Methodist Episcopal Church. The City of London heritage report on the former AME building stated that after 1869, the chapel at 275 Thames Street became a residential dwelling.²⁸ At some point, the small frame structure became known as the Fugitive Slave Chapel. That title may have come from local mainstream media near the turn of the twentieth century. Research in newspapers of the Black community have not located any use of this descriptor. Historian Nina Reid-Maroney observes that the prevailing idea of the ‘Fugitive Slave Chapel’ “remains embedded in the myth of the North Star, in which the church itself is sometimes conflated with a romanticized vision of an Underground Railroad safe house, clouding the view of who made up the early congregation and what the space meant to the wider community.”²⁹ In 1986, the London Historic Sites Committee recognized the AME Church as a site of historic and cultural significance and installed a plaque on the building.

From 1944 to 2000 the property was owned and occupied by members of the Mancari Family. Since 2000, it has been used for storage purposes by Aboutown Transport. It was slated for demolition in 2014. Local heritage groups, citizens aware of the building’s origins, and the leadership of Beth Emmanuel BME Church raised concerns and lobbied for cessation of the demolition order in an effort to preserve the Black history associated with the structure.³⁰ In November 2014, the former AME Church building was moved after funds were raised by the newly-formed Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project (now the Chapel Project) to relocate the structure. It was moved to 432 Grey Street, a vacant lot beside 430 Grey Street, its daughter church – Beth Emmanuel BME Church. A brief archaeological assessment was conducted by Timmins Martelle Heritage Consultants in a 60-day period after a temporary stay of demolition was issued to allow for the documentation of the cultural and archaeological heritage of the property. In 2022, efforts continued by various stakeholders – the BME Church, the City of

London, and the Chapel Project - to restore the oldest surviving building connected to London's Black community and to move it to a new home. On September 20, 2021 the Fanshawe Pioneer Village Board of Directors passed a motion "to accept the building known as the Fugitive Slave Chapel...when the funds and in-kind support for the relocation and restoration project reach a minimum level of \$300,000."³¹ The building was successfully moved on November 22, 2022.³²

The London AME Chapel was an integral part of the institution-building of the Black inhabitants of the nineteenth-century city centre. It was connected to a network of churches and Black communities in southwestern Ontario that embody the settlement of Black people in the province during that era. The church served to evangelize and exhort in the Methodist faith. But it was more than a place of worship. It was a place where Black people formulated and articulated opposition to slavery, racial discrimination, and other social issues that were negatively impacting Black life. The AME Church as a body served as a church for the Black Atlantic, connecting people of African descent in Christ and cause. It was also an important space where Black self-determination was modelled, promoted, and nurtured.

¹ Richard R. Wright, *The Encyclopedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Church, 1947), 450.

² Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 356.

³ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Richard Allen," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Allen>.; Peter Ripley, ed., *Black Abolitionist Papers II: Canada, 1830 - 1865* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 1.

⁴ In an 1851 letter to George Whipple, Mary Ann Shadd explains, "In the states, I was connected by membership, with the African Methodists but have not renewed my membership with that body of Christians in this country, because of its distinctive character and do not purpose to do so." See Ripley, *Black Abolitionist Papers II*, 185; Karolyn Smardz Frost, "The Cataract House Hotel: Underground to Canada Through the Niagara Borderlands," In *Harriet's Legacies: Race, Historical Memory, and Futures in Canada*, edited by Ronald Cummings, and Natalee Caple, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 46.

⁵ Dorothy Shadd Shreve, *The AfriCanadian Church: A Stabilizer* (Jordan Station: Paideia Press, 1983), 42.

⁶ Linda Brown-Kubisch, *The Queen's Bush Settlement: Black Pioneers, 1839-1865* (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2004), 60.

⁷ A *circuit* is a city, town, district, or circle, taking in several societies (AME congregations), whose business concerns are conducted by separate bodies of trustees or stewards, according to their charters or constitutions, and consequently require separate trustees and leaders' meetings.

⁸ A *station* is a city or town where there is but one society (though having several houses of worship), whose temporal concerns are conducted by one body of trustees or stewards, or one leaders' meeting.

⁹ Richard R. Wright, *Centennial Encyclopaedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church Containing Principally the Biographies of the Men and Women* (Philadelphia: Book Concern of the AME Church, 1916), 296, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/wright/wright.html>; Brown-Kubisch, *The Queen's Bush*, 60; Daniel Alexander Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the AME Sunday School Union, 1891), 129, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/payne/payne.html>.

¹⁰ L. E. Dent, "Request for Designation of 432 Grey Street by the Trustees of the London Congregation of the British Methodist Episcopal Church in Canada," *Report to London Advisory Committee on Heritage*, September 12, 2018.

¹¹ Dent, Report to London Advisory Committee.

¹² Natasha Henry, *Emancipation Day: Celebrating Freedom in Canada* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010), 124.

¹³ Donald G. Simpson, *Under the North Star: Black Communities in Upper Canada* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005), 171.

¹⁴ Richard Warren, *Narrative of the life and sufferings of Rev. Richard Warren (a Fugitive Slave)* (Hamilton, ON: Christian Advocate Book and Job Office, 1856), 18, https://archive.org/details/cihm_50755/page/n3/mode/2up

¹⁵ Warren, *Narrative of the life and sufferings*, 21.

¹⁶ "1842 Census, Canada West," London, Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁷ Michael Wayne, "The Black Population of Canada West on the Eve of the American Civil War: A Reassessment Based on the Manuscript Census of 1861," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 28, no. 56 (1995), 469, 483. The 1861 census indicated 370 Black residents in the city of London.

¹⁸ Henry, *Emancipation Day*, 171; Tracey Adams, "Making a Living: African Canadian Workers in London, Ontario, 1861–1901," *Labour/Le Travail* 67 (1), 9-43.

¹⁹ *Voice of the Fugitive*, August 27, 1851.

²⁰ *Voice of the Fugitive*, August 12, 1852.

²¹ *Minutes of the Fifteenth Annual General Conference of the AME Church for the Canadian District, Held in the Township of Peel*, July 13, 1853, Wilberforce University Library and Archives; Kubisch, *Queen's Bush Settlement*, 152.

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- ²² Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the AME Sunday School Union, 1888), 125, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/payne70/payne.html>.
- ²³ London Auxiliary Bible Society to William H. Draper, March 27, 1847, J. George Hodgins Fonds, F1207, Archives of Ontario.
- ²⁴ Samuel Gridley Howe, *Report To The Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, 1864: The Refugees From Slavery in Canada West* (1864; reprint, New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 50; Ripley, *Black Abolitionist Papers II*, 467-470.
- ²⁵ *Minutes of the Fifteenth Annual General Conference of the AME Church in the Province of Canada, Begun at Chatham*, July 30, 1855, Wilberforce University Library and Archives.
- ²⁶ William H. Jones, "Remarks Concerning the Origin of the BME Church," *Minutes of the Eighteenth Annual General Conference of the AME Church in the Province of Canada, Begun at Chatham*, September 29, 1856, Wilberforce University Library and Archives.
- ²⁷ Ripley, *Black Abolitionist Papers II*, 466.
- ²⁸ Dent, Report to London Advisory Committee.
- ²⁹ Nina Reid-Maroney, "Possibilities for African Canadian intellectual history: The case of 19th-century Upper Canada/Canada West," *History Compass* 15, no. 12 (December 1, 2017), 5.
- ³⁰ Dent, Report to London Advisory Committee; Timmins Martelle Heritage Consultants, *Preserving Black Heritage in London, Ontario: The Fugitive Slave Chapel (1847-1869)*, 2017, <https://tmhc.ca/fugitive-slave-chapel>.
- ³¹ *The Chapel Project Letter to Friends*, December 2021. London Community Foundation, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.lcf.on.ca/chapel-project>.
- ³² See Fanshawe Pioneer Village, "The AME Chapel Moves to Fanshawe Pioneer Village," YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wuuIxt64UU>.

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