

“Building the Bethel A.M.E. Church: 1834 to 2000” & “Fact/Legend in A.M.E. Story” (Excerpts)

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“Building the Bethel A.M.E. Church 1834 to 2000”

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“This narrative account is an attempt to document a dynamic time in the history of a small band of freedmen seeking a new home free of their former bondage. About 1833 in the vicinity of Danville, Kentucky the two families of Dr. Thomas Fry and his brother, Thomas Fry, decided to abandon their home state so they could free their enslaved people by emigrating to Indiana, a Free State since its founding in 1816. The Frys’ were also interested in seeking out a new home where their children would receive good schooling. An Institute for higher learning had been founded the year before in the Wabash River Valley in Indiana, in Crawfordsville. This then became their choice of destination which satisfied both goals.

The large caravan required many months of arduous travel, for most of them, on foot. So it was early in 1834 before the journey ended. Two young Black children had made the trip without their parents, Isaac and Frankie Gates. The children would be free and under the surveillance of friends, the Askin and Patterson families.

The girl, Maria and her brother Thomas made their home with the Isaac Jones family who found lodging on Pike street. Both Gates children were no longer slaves but they were required to be ‘servants’ until they were adults. When Maria was hired by Isaac Elston to help his wife Mariah in their stately brick home on Pike Street, she had no way of knowing the position would last until 1874. Nor that she would marry a man who also came from Kentucky with the Fry families, Nelson Patterson’s oldest son, also named Nelson.

All Maria’s long life she told her children and grandchildren how she had first attended an African-Methodist-Episcopal meeting soon after she arrived town, and that this group decided as early as 1834 to establish an A.M.E. church in Crawfordsville. This first meeting in a log cabin on the southeast corner of College and Water streets stayed with her as she walked to work by the corner almost daily.

It was March of 1847, however, before the A.M.E. sought out a suitable piece of ground to erect a building for meetings. Advised by a friendly Scotsman, John Allen Speed, to apply at the Courthouse they gained possession of Lot 20 located in the north end of town. They were encouraged to ‘get under a roof’ before cold weather, Speed, who was a stone mason, probably helped them erect a 30 by 26 foot shack. The Speeds lived on Lot 19 just west and their support was very welcome.”

Before long this black newly organized church group learned their friend was not only a stone mason but a strong Abolitionist anxious to provide food, shelter and transportation for the enslaved people. Before many weeks the Nelson Pattersons and other families were assisting the

Speeds in their mission, one that soon gained the appropriate name of ‘The Underground Railroad.’ Naturally the black neighbors were truly serious in helping the operation.”

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“By 1850 young Nelson Patterson and Maria Gates had married and living near his father’s family in the vicinity of their small church. The ‘working on this railroad’ was done most of the time during the nighttime. When John Speed could not drive his ‘guests’ to the next ‘depot,’ his black neighbors were grateful to be asked to take in a freedom seeker or two overnight. And before long the church had had dug a cellar in order to hide the freedom seekers. This dramatic activity was a very dangerous one and particularly after 1850 when the Fugitive Slave Law had been repealed making it legal for a bounty hunter to cross into Free States and search for missing freedom seekers...”

Fact/Legend in A.M.E. Story

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“Maria Gates was born near Danville, Kentucky, to Isaac and Frankie Gates. The family were enslaved people, probably owned by Francis H. Fry. Maria at seven and her brother Thomas became members of an emigration caravan seeking freedom for Black Americans and educational advantages for the Frys’ and their enslaved people. Francis Fry’s brother, Dr. Thomas Fry chose Crawfordsville, Indiana as their destination because he had heard that a fine ‘institution of learning’ had been founded there in 1832. He was wise for this school later developed into Wabash College.

The Gates children were traveling with the Isaac Jones family, and it was their small household on Pike street where they first lived in Crawfordsville. Maria attended a religious sect which met in a log cabin on the Southeast corner of College and Water streets. The small group met for several years in members’ ‘homes’ while Maria became confirmed in her faith. In 1842 Maria was baptized by the Rev. Benjamin Hill.

By 1847 the group had become strong enough to consider erecting a church of modest proportion, and they looked for a site. This search led them to the ‘Northend’ a diversified residential area north of Crawfordsville’s commercial district. Here they met and talked with members of the Catholic church, both German and Irish, various tradesmen—cabinet makers, day labors, draymen; carpenters, stable workers, saddlers, and clerks.

The Speed family welcomed their questions and John, head of the family and an immigrant from Perth, Scotland, was the most helpful. He told them how they could apply for a deed to land at the courthouse, even advising them that Lot 20, east of the Speeds’ log cabin on Lot 19, was available.

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“Thus, in August of 1847 the blacks received the deed to Lot 20. Mr. Speed also suggested they ‘get under a roof’ before cold weather. We do not know who put the 30 by 26 foot shack up, but it was probably men of the congregation. Every settler had to be a carpenter to survive so it was a common practice to join together in erecting a place to live or one for worship. The only legend attached to this first church was its exterior finishing of asphalt shingles, and its rough planks provided for benches.

Many of the black families who journeyed together from Kentucky to this Free State, Indiana, had joined the A.M.E. sect. It was not a surprise then when Maria Gates married Nelson Patterson II, the oldest son of Martha and Nelson. The elder Pattersons had settled their large family in the Northend when they arrived in 1834. Their son and Maria also chose a shack near his parents and the A.M.E. church.

Both Maria and her husband found employment as cooks. Maria was more fortunate with her job at the Elston Homestead where her Quaker mistress, Mariah Elston became a kind, generous woman. Maria’s association with the Elston family lasted until 1874 when Mariah Elston died...

The younger Nelson Pattersons became parents of three sons and a daughter between 1851 and 1861. The Civil War meant that several black men joined the U.S. Colored Troops in 1863. Three of the six were members of the church and at least one other, Zachariah Williams, made history by serving in the Union Army. The Old Town Cemetery also in the Northend, and the town’s earliest graveyard, has a granite marker recognizing the men who served in the revolutionary U.S. Colored Troops. Their graves may be at this site, but so many tombstones have been lost making it impossible to find graves. Nelson Patterson II was buried there but where no one knows...

Maria’s four children were active members of her church and also attended their earliest schooling in the church, another first in the history of this First Black Church to be built in the Wabash Valley. One son, Francis George or ‘Frank’ also found a good wife in Sarah Belle Keene, and his daughter, Blanche Patterson became the first black women in Crawfordsville to attend college. Blanche (1884-1965) was especially active in her church, and the Class Rolls from 1915 indicate that the Patterson families were pillars of the A.M.E. church.

The reconstruction of the church in the 1890’s gave all the musically talented Pattersons many opportunities to join in the fund raising projects to finance the ‘new building.’ Lucy, Maria’s only daughter was mentioned often in news items for her brilliant display of talent on the organ. The daughter-in-law Sarah, wife of Frank, had a beautiful voice, and her daughter Blanche played the piano and cello while still in high school here. In later years Blanche delighted audiences with her jazz piano skill.”

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“Grandma Patterson, Maria, ‘the oldest and highly respected ‘colored’ resident in the *Crawfordsville Daily Journal*, described her in the August 31, 1929 obituary notice, was ‘born in slavery and could remember the stirring times preceding and during the Civil War. In spite of her age, she had a keen memory of events of the past ten centuries and has delighted hundreds with her reminiscences of the happenings during the past ten decades. She was referred to as one of the founders of the Bethel A.M.E. church...and throughout her life had been a staunch and active worker...also was one of the first Sunday school teachers of the church.’ The historic lady’s funeral was held on Sunday afternoon at the A.M.E. church, with three pastors in charge.

This obituary was surely a rarity for a Black woman in 1929, and particularly when the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was gaining momentum. Her recognized life of good will had made her ‘a legend in her own day’ and in the years that followed have failed to vanish. The facts of her inheritance keep her legendary status a part of this town’s history, and the recognition stands in place among contemporary members of her church.”