



## **BARRIER BREAKERS - The Pilgrimage**

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Morganton, NC

As is the story with many historically black parishes, St. Stephen's came to be not because of a larger force at hand, but because of a few dedicated people.

Long before the church building was constructed on Bouchelle Street, long before the transfer across the Catawba River and the blending with St. Mary's, St. Stephen's existed solely as a group of believers, worshiping above a black-owned hardware shop on West Union Street in downtown Morganton. The small gathering became a solace for the black community in Morganton, not welcome at the nearby Grace Episcopal Church. The year was 1888.

The group was small, totaling 9 persons, but otherwise determined to create a space in which they could equally worship. One of these 9 members, Ms. Lilly Harbinson, knew of an African American priest who might be able to help. The Rev. Henry Stephen McDuffy, a freed slave and rector of St. Matthias Episcopal Church in Asheville, jumped at the opportunity to come.

Rev. McDuffy was a respected leader with a fiery missionary zeal. Though he lived almost an hour up the mountain, he made the journey to Morganton every Sunday, joining with other believers above Lilly and Philo Harbinson's hardware shop. Under his leadership the community grew, and by 1891 the founding 9 members of St. Stephen's were baptized by Bishop Lyman. A year later, the community broke ground on the construction of their own parish, across the street from Grace Episcopal, and on November 23, 1893, the St. Stephen's community worshiped for the first time in a space that they could truly call their own.

Before long, this new church building on McDowell Street became home to much more than just a worshiping community. In 1894, the church opened what was the only school for black children in Morganton at the time, known as the Episcopal Academy. Among the teachers at the school was the aforementioned Lilly Harbinson, who worked at the academy from its creation to its completion, teaching 29 students at the day school. On weekends, when school was out of session, the parish was a hub for sporting events, social gatherings, and the like for the black community in Morganton.

Another woman at the center of St. Stephen's was Ms. Annie Avery. In fact, the story of St. Stephen's would not be complete without her.

Ms. Annie, the longtime choir director at St. Stephen's, is what we might nowadays refer to as a hidden deacon, filling the pews each Sunday—from community members singing in the

choir to schoolboys serving as acolytes. She was a headstrong, passionate woman, with a love for St. Stephen's that ran deep through the community.

In fact, it was Ms. Annie herself that donated the land now most recognizable as home to St. Stephen's. This plot, located in a historically black neighborhood off the main street of Morganton, was at the center of black life, and thus so was St. Stephen's. Officially consecrated in 1949, the worshipping community migrated from their former home on McDowell street to this new building at the center of their lives and community.

Allen Fullwood, who grew up only blocks from St. Stephen's, recalls the impact that St. Stephen's had on his life growing up, despite his family being members of the nearby AME Zion church.

*I have the recollection of Ms. Annie Avery, who lived next door and donated the land to St. Stephen's back in the 40[s] when they built the church. She was a single lady and she provided housing for many of the African American professionals who came here either as schoolteachers or in other positions, because there was no hotels and few apartments for African Americans. So many of the teachers had to live "boarding" so to speak in the homes of many in the community. But Ms. Avery provided room and board for many African American teachers who taught in the school system here for many, many, many years, right up until and until and even after segregation.*

*I think on a daily basis at some point, either in the morning or late in the evening, she would enter and play the organ. And it was such a refreshing thing, to hear that organ playing hymns, any time of the day, it wasn't just on Sunday. She was there rehearsing for the choir. You didn't have to be a member of St. Stephen's, if you were a young man or woman she would recruit you for the choir! So that's how a lot of individuals eventually became members of St. Stephen's because she would motion to you to come over and say, "we need you in the choir!" Maybe they had never attended but she would recruit them and that's the way many of them became Episcopalians.*

*In terms of the African American church, no matter what denomination, has been the centerpiece in terms of African American life in this country. It was the gathering place. When you talk about after Emancipation and beyond, what other properties did they own? It was the church, it was the school. They gathered at the school for PTA and sports events, it was the church where they gathered on Sunday. It was the place, "they dressed up for." Sunday was very important and church was very important. It was a place where certainly very sacred time. It was a time where they were relieved of that everyday pressure, that pressure of facing segregation, Jim Crow-ism. They didn't encounter the white-black water fountains. They didn't encounter, "you have to go to the back, you can't be served in this restaurant, you can't come in the front door." That's why I always said, in the African American church, when you gather there's always food, it was a great time, and I'm speaking certainly from my experience in the AME church and in other churches.*

St. Stephen's called Bouchelle Street home for many years. In the early 1960s, the Rev. Delmas Harris was called to be the rector of St. Stephen's, along with two other nearby parishes, St.

Mary's and St. Paul's. Despite their shared leadership, opportunities to connect the parishes were limited, as many members of the white churches resisted efforts. In an era of Jim Crow, segregation, and daily stories of violence against people of color, members of St. Stephen's were understandably hesitant to connect with communities where they knew they were unwelcome.

Looking at this past, one might find it surprising to learn that the communities of St. Mary's and St. Stephen's are now connected. This transition did not come without its challenges, as members of both communities were hesitant to join together. However, the realities could not be avoided – as larger cities like Asheville and Charlotte grew nearby, church attendance diminished, and both communities found themselves seeking support. As happened with many historically black parishes in our diocese and beyond, the community at St. Stephen's soon merged with that of St. Mary's, leaving their church building behind.

Under the leadership of their shared rector, the Rev. Francis King, St. Mary's and St. Stephen's began worshiping together as early as 2008, but officially merged by vote of Diocesan Convention in 2014, joining together in the small stone building of St. Mary's. St. Stephen's prior home still stands, the building a centerpiece of Bouchelle Street and a reminder of the determination and strength of the early community. Occupied or unoccupied, we must not forget the resilient members who joined together in the face of oppression to craft community, those who called many spaces home, and those who continue to carry the spirit of St. Stephen's with them, looking to the future.

To learn more, please visit the [St. Mary's St. Stephen's website](#).