



BARRIER BREAKERS – The Pilgrimage

St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church, Franklin, NC

Almighty God, you love all people equally and have adopted us all into your life. Grant that this chapel, dedicated to the African Saint Cyprian, may remind us of the diversity, endurance, and faithfulness of your people, so that we may be inspired to continue your work of welcoming everyone into your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

-Written by members of All Saints Episcopal Church

Like many historically black parishes, St. Cyprian's Chapel in Franklin, North Carolina began as a school for African Americans. Like many historically black parishes, the congregants of St. Cyprian's Chapel worshiped separately from the white community for many years, until the parish became integrated in the 1970s. Like many historically black parishes, St. Cyprian's Chapel merged with a nearby historically white church in the 2000s, becoming All Saints Episcopal Church.

But what makes St. Cyprian's so notable, what makes it stand out from the all-too-familiar story of black churches torn down, of stories lost, is that St. Cyprian's chapel never lost its identity. Through all its transitions and changes, the small wooden chapel on Roller Mill Road continued to welcome people through its big red door, to truly live into a sentiment once spoken by matriarch Viola Lenoir and now memorized on the St. Cyprian's wall: "This ain't no black church, it ain't no white church. This is God's Church."

To begin the story of St. Cyprian's, we must travel back to the 1880s, when the Rev. John A. Deal, rector of St. Agnes Church in Franklin, began plans to open an Episcopal Mission School in Macon County for black citizens. The Rev. Deal was a former Confederate soldier, having served as a drummer boy in the Civil War, and was an active church planter, helping to establish five parishes throughout Western North Carolina in his lifetime. To tell this story properly we must be truthful in acknowledging Rev. Deal's former Confederate alliance and his role in the Civil War, and yet we must also recognize that he played a major role in the establishment of St. Cyprian's Chapel.

Another man who was an integral part of the establishment of St. Cyprian's Church was Mr. James T. Kennedy. A schoolteacher from South Carolina, Mr. Kennedy was brought in by the Rev. Deal to lead the colored mission school in Franklin. He was only 21 at the time, but already a stickler for grammar, economics, and industrial arts in his teaching. Under his leadership students studied trade skills and workshop services in an old tannery, until a new church building was constructed in 1886 to accommodate the growing number of pupils. The church was constructed from oak and poplar, a small wooden chapel to be named St. Cyprian's. The wood for the chapel was prepared on the grounds of the mission school,

evidence of which can be found by noting the small line of handprints that run along some of the wooden planks on St. Cyprian's ceiling. In fact, many of the church furnishings were constructed by Mr. Kennedy himself.

Four years later, after the construction of the new building, Mr. Kennedy was ordained a deacon and placed in charge of not only the school but the church of St. Cyprian's, where he would serve until 1911. Rev. Kennedy's life and work in Western North Carolina is truly extraordinary. Not long after his service at St. Cyprian's he was ordained a priest, going on to serve the community of St. Matthias, Asheville and eventually serve as the Archdeacon for Colored Work in the Missionary District of Asheville, overseeing the work of all of the black churches in what would eventually become the Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina. His contribution to the diocese is exceptional, and yet one only has to take one look at the carefully crafted lectern and baptismal font he constructed at St. Cyprian's to be reminded of where he began.

Throughout the early 1900s, the congregation of St. Cyprian's worshiped faithfully every Sunday, often gathering outside service times for meals together in shared fellowship. Though the church remained unconsecrated until 1946 due to a scarcity of bishops in Western North Carolina, the church congregation continued to grow regardless. Church was a time of worship, but also a time of celebration, of community, and of life.

Though much of the early records of St. Cyprian's were lost in fires, it is known that a parish hall was constructed and named for the Rev. Rufus Morgan, another prominent church planter in the far western end of the state who also served the St. Cyprian's community. By 1979, nineteen church members comprised the congregation. Two of such parishioners were Joe and Mary Chavis, Joe Chavis being born into the church and one of the longest standing members of St. Cyprian's to date. In a 2022 conversation, Joe Chavis, alongside his wife Mary, recall the early years of the parish with fondness.

"I think my earliest memory was probably Bible School and Sunday school, with Ms. Viola and her husband Finn Viola teaching. I was so young that he would, not too many black Americans around here had vehicles at that time and he had an old automobile he would go around the community picking up people and bringing them to Sunday School and Bible School, and probably our main reason for coming was for Kool Aid and cookies, not bible school! So he did that for a while and his wife Ms. Viola, she would teach Bible school and also Sunday School and she had a wonderful voice and she was very strict, she didn't like playing around, but she would have Kool-Aid and cookies each time you come to keep you coming!

And after that I guess I was probably around the age of eight or ten and from then on I started coming regularly to church, growing up I'd start serving in the altar and different things like that, I started serving as an acolyte. And I can remember the church wasn't as big as it is now, it was just from the door back this way very small and it didn't extend until it was integrated, got more members, there was very few members here at that time. It was just a great time, lots of children at that time, probably more children than it was adults maybe, and at that time we just did different things, played, and during the summer months we

always had a Fourth of July celebration for the community. And it was just all the friends would be here and we'd play games and different things like that. At the time I was here we didn't have a basketball court but we just did different games and played different games, stuff like that. A lot of times we had dances in the parish house, it was called the teenagers club! I was glad when I got old enough to go to the teenagers club cause I couldn't go until I was thirteen. That was a thing too that we had here at St. Cyprian's.

The priest was part-time only on Sunday, one hour on Sunday that's all we had. The rest of it they had to run it themselves, I was too young, but the older people like Ms. Viola and her husband, Ms. England, Chick Bryson, they kept things going but we only had a priest one hour on Sunday."

For many years, the congregation of St. Cyprians shared a priest with the nearby St. Agnes Church, the white Episcopal parish in downtown Franklin. The parishioners of St. Cyprians were who kept the doors open; the church mothers continuing to recruit acolytes and altar guilds, the church fathers driving parishioners around town. Although the priest was shared with St. Agnes, most priests only served St. Cyprian's for an hour on Sundays, leaving the weekly duties of church upkeep to parish volunteers. Despite this lack of clerical leadership, St. Cyprian's was at the center of the black community in Franklin and continued to thrive for many years.

Everything changed in the late 1970s, when the Rev. Terry Cobb transitioned from serving both St. Agnes and St. Cyprian's to solely St. Cyprian's. This was one of the first times since the leadership of James T. Kennedy that St. Cyprian's had had a priest to call their own, marking almost 100 years of a shared priest, and church membership quickly grew as former members of St. Agnes also made the transition alongside Rev. Cobb. The Chavis' recall this being a period of uncertainty and at times discomfort, but ultimately what kept the parish alive.

"I was like a fish out of water because I was raised in the Baptist Church. The singing I couldn't get used to, the up and down, but you know, you can get used to anything. We raised our kids here, and then after we integrated it took a while to get used to that. And I remember, Joy, I don't know, she was maybe 10 or 11 and we was out on the steps and she said, "Momma, what color is our church?" And I was trying to think, "Our church is white?" And she said, "No, that's not what I'm asking," because I reckon evidently in school they wanted to know what church she went to, a black or white church. That sticks out in my mind. Because just about everyone here was related. It was more like coming to a family reunion.

It was weird, because it was more of them than it was of us. So it was weird but we got used to it. Everybody was friendly and they wanted to make the church grow so I mean, and then they became to love the church. If somebody loves your church, I mean you've gotta love them, and they wanted the best for us, so it's just like having a bigger family.

It was a blessing I think because we were beginning to struggle money-wise and personally I thought we were gonna close in no time if we hadn't come together. It was just a blessing

because I thought St. Cyprian's was going. And it probably would have gone if we hadn't integrated, because it was just a little small church like I said from the door to the altar, and more of the black people beginning to leave town too looking for work, younger people. And older people beginning to die out, so it was just about ready to leave I thought."

During this period of transition, the congregation of St. Cyprian's grew exponentially, and before long the small wooden chapel simply could not account for the sheer number of visitors at every service. In 1983, 100 years after the foundation of St. Cyprian's, an addition was added to the nave, extending it in order to account for more worshipers, and Sunday School classrooms were constructed in the parish hall for the large communities of children in attendance. On November 22, 1983, the first worship service was held in the newly expanded chapel and St. Cyprian's was once again a thriving parish, full of community.

Lee Berger and her family were among the first white members to attend St. Cyprian's. Berger recalls the decision to transition to St. Cyprian's being one that simply felt natural for the time period, the words of Ms. Viola Lenoir ultimately guiding her through the transition.

"I moved here in '75 and my late husband's a pediatrician so he was working on Sunday mornings and so I went to church, that's what I did, that's what I grew up doing, and it just kind of felt right. And when I moved to town you could see St. Agnes it was downtown, it was kind of the natural transition for me at the time, and St. Cyprians wasn't integrated then anyway! But you know, a child goes to college in the 60s and Vietnam and integration, and so when the decision was made to come here it really wasn't so much of a decision as just a natural consequence of what and how I wanted to live.

And there were others too, I wasn't all by myself. But as white people in Franklin, and of course I wasn't even a native, I'll never be a native in Franklin, that concern that yes, when white people tend to go into black environments somehow or another that dynamic starts to shift which is not good but that's just how it happened unfortunately. So there were, there was concern, and then the story came out about Ms. Viola saying "This ain't no black church this ain't no white church. It's is God's church," and I think that was the invitation that yes, please come and worship. But I do remember the numbers at services were to the point, we almost thought about going to two services cause we couldn't get in here! We had to, made the decision to expand.

We used to put chairs down the aisle, then had to move them for communion!

I still felt like it was a family church, I think, you know there's books that tell you how many makes a family church versus a corporate church or whatever. But gosh, potlucks are such fun! And I felt welcome here, it felt right."

Since its inception, St. Cyprian's was a center of community, and the integration of the parish did nothing to change their continued involvement in Franklin and the surrounding areas. Soon after the expansion of the parish, St. Cyprian's offered their church space as a place of worship for the Mountain Synagogue community. By 1983 a Holocaust Torah and dedicated Ark called the parish hall of St. Cyprian's home. St. Cyprian's sent parishioners out into the

world to summer camp and diocesan conventions, and continued to bring people into the parish through events like the Kudzu Festival. It was truly a thriving community with its own unique identity.

However, by the late 1990s, St. Cyprian's was experiencing an effect similar to many churches at the time. The children had all grown and moved away, the older parishioners had passed, and many of the pews in the wooden church sat empty on Sunday mornings. Right up the road, St. Agnes Episcopal Church, historically the white-only Episcopal church in town, was experiencing a similar phenomenon. The two parishes began worshiping together as All Saints Episcopal Community in 2005.

Looking at the history of these two parishes, the merge is a complex and layered decision. As is the case with many mergers between a historically white and historically black church, many times one parish loses their church building, more often than not being the black church. Regardless of the merged communities, the deep love for the identities of both St. Cyprian's and St. Agnes were apparent, and the All Saints community was determined to preserve the identity of both parishes as they approached the future together. A Covenant was created in order to maintain the integrity of both parishes individually, and in December of 2005, the Rev. Dorrie Pratt was brought in to lead the newly merged community. Nine years later, under the continued leadership of Rev. Pratt, the two churches merged together as All Saints Episcopal Church, one parish with two homes, one church with two chapels.

These days, services alternate weekly between St. Agnes Chapel and St. Cyprian's Chapel, but all as one community, All Saints Episcopal Church. Services pay close attention to the history, culture, and stories of the chapel in which they occupy—utilizing elements like “Lift Every Voice and Sing”, an African-American hymnal, when worshiping at St. Cyprian's. Parishioners still kneel at Rev. Kennedy's carefully crafted altar rail, and babies continue to be baptized in the carved oak baptismal font. The stories of those who called St. Cyprian's Chapel home for years before the merge, before integration, before the expansion of the chapel continue to be told and shared to all.

The story of St. Cyprian's Chapel is not without its reminders of how people were othered, even unwelcomed in white spaces for many years. And yet, the story of St. Cyprian's Chapel, and likewise All Saints Episcopal Church, is one of hope; of community and joy and fellowship. All Saints Episcopal Church is a celebration of stories, giving careful autonomy to those who have come before and called these spaces home for decades. The story of St. Cyprian's Chapel and All Saints Episcopal Church urges us to consider how we might all continue forming relationships with one another, relationships built upon celebration of our differences and stories and the active choice to become community.

To learn more about All Saints Episcopal Church, please visit <https://www.allsaintsfranklin.org/>