

January 7, 1998
Historical Documents on the Founding and
Growth of Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church

Information compiled and presented to Tennessee State Archives by Sandra Cecelia Seaton, Associate Professor of English at Central Michigan University, great-great-great granddaughter of Anna and Dempsey Cherry, and great-great-granddaughter of Eliza Cherry Webster.

On August 10, 1996, after collecting documents from Rev. David Williams of Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist church, I presented the attached documents to the Tennessee State Archives for storage on microfilm on behalf of Mt. Lebanon. Mount Lebanon, the oldest National Baptist Church in Tennessee, has grown from a humble beginning as a group of slaves worshipping and singing in fields out of sight of their masters to one of the acknowledged centers of leadership within the surrounding African American community. The first African American Christians in Columbia, fearing punishment if discovered, met to worship in fields out of sight of their masters. Later a small group of African Americans began to attend services at The First Baptist Church, which was established in Columbia, Tennessee before 1840 as a white church. This group was allowed to worship only in the balcony and therefore was not able to participate fully in the church services. Eventually they decided to form their own church. On October 20, 1843, Elisha Hanks, the minister of the First Baptist Church, met with seven deeply religious African Americans to work out a way in which the seven could form their own Baptist church. These seven individuals became the founders of a new institution of historic significance, Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church.

The seven founders were Rev. Edmund Kelly, Rev. Richard Sanderson, Dyer Johnson, Reuben Polk, Dempsey ("Demps") Cherry, Anna ("Annie") Cherry [husband and wife] and Eliza Cherry Webster [daughter of Dempsey and Anna Cherry]. Although two of the seven, Edmund Kelly and Dyer Johnson, had not yet gained their full freedom, the other members were free blacks at the time of Mt. Lebanon's organization. While Edmund Kelly and Dyer Johnson remained legally enslaved at the time of the founding, they had each managed to achieve a freedom of movement and activity usually denied slaves. Few realize that African Americans succeeded in organizing their own churches in the South before the Civil War, yet Mt. Lebanon was in existence nearly twenty years before the war began. The achievement of the founders and their successors in maintaining an independent African American institution in the South in the years before the Civil War provides powerful evidence of their collective intelligence, determination and character, and, above all, evidence of the strength of their faith. Present-day Mt. Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church continues to serve as a source of spiritual and social energy in the Columbia, Tennessee community.

Part Two: A Documentation of The History Of Mt. Lebanon Church As Derived from Materials Collected From the Church.

This history of Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church in Columbia, Tennessee is based on documents stored in the Tennessee State Archives and on several other published documents. Many of the facts mentioned are derived from a history of the church printed and distributed by Mount Lebanon itself under its current (January, 1997) minister, Rev. David E. Williams, pastor since August, 1963. This document is cited as Williams. A 1998 interview with Rev. Williams is also cited as interview with Rev. Williams. Additional details are based on an anonymous handwritten three page note composed by a church member in 1970 (the document states that the church is "today . . . celebrating [its] "127 Anniversary"). The church records were kept by church officials, with titles such as clerk, secretary, deacon or deaconess; probably one such official wrote the three page history. Statements based on this document will be identified as 1970. Another anonymous, handwritten note, again by a church member, is undated; it will be cited as Undated. The "Autobiography" of Prof. J. H. Kelly, as printed in *The Life and Work of Prof. J. H. Kelly* compiled by Beatrice E. Gordon, is cited as *Autobiography*. This work has been used with reference to the life of the first minister of the church, Rev. Edmund Kelly, the father of Prof. J. H. Kelly. A two page note handwritten by Mrs. Eddie M. Johnson Jones is cited as Jones. An undated, typed historical document produced by the church subtitled "The Oldest National Baptist Church in Tennessee" is cited as *Oldest*. Wade Hall's *The Rest of the Dream: The Black Odyssey of Lyman Johnson* (University Press of Kentucky, 1988), the oral autobiography of Lyman Tefft Johnson, is cited by its title.

The following narrative is based on these notes and my first hand knowledge as a direct descendant of three of the founders of Mt. Lebanon. To the best of my knowledge, the facts presented below are accurate, but, as with any historical inquiry, it remains possible that further research will uncover additional information or reveal errors.

The first African American Christians in Columbia, fearing punishment if discovered, met to worship in fields out of sight of their masters. Later a small group of African Americans began to attend services at The First Baptist Church, which was established in Columbia, Tennessee before 1840 as a white church. This group was allowed to worship only in the balcony and therefore was not able to participate fully in the church services (interview with Rev. Williams). The minister of the First Baptist Church, Elisha Hanks, "on October 20, 1843" (Undated) met with seven deeply religious African Americans to work out a way in which the seven could form their own Baptist church. The original location of the Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church was at 1020 Maple Ash Avenue in Columbia (Williams, 1970, Undated). The original seven African American founders of the church were Rev. Edmund Kelly, Rev. Richard Sanderson, Dyer Johnson, Reuben Polk, Dempsey ("Demps") Cherry, Eliza Webster, and Anna ("Annie") Cherry. These individuals founded the first National Baptist church for African

Americans in Tennessee. Rev. Kelly was "the moving spirit in the organization of the church" (Williams). Rev. Edmund Kelly was in 1843 a slave, according to the available documents. His son's "Autobiography" states that

My father being inclined to preach the gospel, was permitted by his master to travel, especially in Tennessee and Kentucky, but was required to report every two months to his owners, and then again return to his work as an Evangelist.

According to his son's autobiography, Rev. Kelly gained his freedom by simply failing to return. Instead, he "traveled extensively, both in American and Europe, preaching and lecturing" (Autobiography 8). Eventually, Rev. Kelly raised the \$2800 necessary to buy his wife and four children from slavery. Afraid, however, that "his master would retain him by force" if he returned to Tennessee himself, he employed an "agent" to make the transaction (Autobiography 9). The sale was completed, and Rev. Kelly's wife and four children joined him in New Bedford Massachusetts, where he lived until his death, and where his fifth child, J. H. Kelly, the author of the "Autobiography," was born. Professor John H. Kelly was born in New Bedford on November 15, 1852 (Birth Register, Massachusetts State Archives). The "Autobiography" refers to Rev. Kelly as "Early Kelly" (8), whereas Williams and 1970 call him Rev. Edmund Kelly. (The birth register of New Bedford, Massachusetts records that the father of John H. Kelly, the future Professor Kelly, was "Edmund Kelly." His profession is listed as "Preacher.")

The 1970 document states that Rev. Kelly "was ordained by the White Baptists in convention at Nashville 1843." The Undated document likewise confirms that Rev. Kelly was ordained by a convention of white Baptists. The 1970 tells a somewhat different story from the "Autobiography" about Rev. Kelly's path to freedom. According to 1970,

Later [after becoming pastor of Mount Lebanon] when his owner got into financial trouble to save his being sold on the block to the highest bidder, he was sent away, and through her will, obtained his freedom. He died in Massachusetts in 1894.

Dyer Johnson, the chairman of the first Deacon Board of the church, was a slave when he helped found the church, but he had already found ways to put aside money of his own. He contributed sixty dollars (the other four deacons contributed ten dollars each) to buy land for a church building (Williams). A striking picture of Dyer Johnson emerges from the sketch presented in Wade Hall's *The Rest of the Dream: The Black Odyssey of Lyman Johnson* (University Press of Kentucky, 1988), the oral autobiography of Dyer Johnson's grandson Lyman Tefft Johnson:

My father's father was a carpenter and a slave. He never learned to read or write, but he was an excellent carpenter so he must have known how to figure. He had to have a lot of native ability to pick up a trade like that and excel in it. People could tell him what they wanted built, and he could build it. He was a smart man--smart enough to buy himself out of slavery.

He did such good work that his master hired him out to work for other people repairing and building houses. When the master got paid for my grandfather's work, he would sometimes share part of it with him to keep his incentive up. My grandfather quietly saved what he was given. Of course, he didn't have access to banks, so he must have hidden it in little cans under the apple trees or some place like that. One day, apparently kidding his master, he must have said: "Massa, would you sell me? If somebody offered you a good price, would you sell me?" The master said, "Oh, yeah." My grandfather said: "I thought you liked me. I didn't think you'd sell me." The master said: "Oh, yes I would. If the price was right, you'd go like all the rest of my slaves. But don't worry right now. As long as you satisfy the people you're working for and as long as you behave yourself, I won't put you on the block."

My grandfather brought up the subject several times, and finally the master admitted that if anybody offered him \$1,300 he would sell him. This was around 1849. One day my grandfather walked in and said to the master, "There's a fellow I know that wants to buy me." The master said, "Well, tell him to send me \$1,300 and he can have you." My grandfather was all set. In a few days, he came to the master and said, "That man I told you about that wants to buy me, well, he sent you \$1,300." So he counted out \$1,300 that he'd picked up out of those cans under those tree. The master took his money and said: "Well, if he trusted you so much with this much money, I'll trust you to go on over there and turn yourself into him. You're through here. Get going." "Yes, sir," my newly freed grandfather said, "but the man said he'd like to have a receipt. He looked up at the freedman. "Now, whose name do I put down as your new owner?" My grandfather said, "Put down 'Dyer Johnson!' " The man started to write it down, then looked up suddenly and said "But that's you." "That's right, " Grandfather said. "Put my name down as my new owner!" So the slaveowner said, "Well, I said I'd sell you for \$1,300 and so I will." He wrote "I sell Dyer Johnson to Dyer Johnson" and signed his name. My grandfather reached down for the document and was a free man from then on (22-3).

Besides the seven founders, early members of the church included Cyrus Webster (Eliza Webster's husband), Frank Wickfall and Milton Leftwich. Member Washington Harrison worked as a carpenter on both the original building on Maple Ash and later on the building that still stands on East Eighth and Glade. The Williams history emphasizes that Annie Cherry and Eliza Webster were "inspirational and zealous," describing them as "moving spirits in the progress of the church."

Although we know that Dyer Johnson gained his own freedom in 1849, the documents do not state when Rev. Edmund Kelly left the church and the South to gain his freedom. Rev. Kelly was living in New Bedford in 1852 when J. H. Kelly was born. The birth certificate lists Edmund Kelly's occupation as "preacher." Rev. Richard (Pap) Sanderson succeeded Rev. Kelly as pastor (Williams, 1970, Undated), remaining in office until 1873 (date given in 1970 and Undated). Rev. Sanderson organized and served as Moderator of the Duck River Association "for many years" (Jones). Rev. Baalim (1970 and Undated) ("Bealim" in Willams) Frierson replaced Rev. Sanderson, remaining pastor until 1883 (date given in Undated and 1970). Rev. Frierson "split the church" and "started the First Baptist Church," some of whose members later started the Mount Calvary Baptist Church (Williams, Oldest).

The present Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church structure at the corner of East Eighth and Glade Streets was built during the 1883-94 pastorate (dates in 1970) of Rev. John Smith Gilmore (Jones, Williams, 1970, Undated). The "leading carpenters were Jesse Sims and Washington Harrison, both members of the church" (Williams). Washington Harrison died while working on the project as the result of being struck "by a hatchet which fell from the roof." His funeral was held in the unfinished church, the first funeral in the new structure (Williams, 1970).

Rev. Gilmore was born in Pulaski, Tennessee in 1846. He "served for the Union the two last years of the Civil War" and later attended the Baptist College in Nashville which later became Roger Williams University. Rev. Gilmore "commenced preaching in 1871" and "organized and built five different churches" during his career (1970). Already moderator of the Richland Creek Association when he became pastor of Mount Lebanon, Rev. Gilmore led Mount Lebanon itself into the Richland Creek Association, leaving the Duck River Association founded by Rev. Richard Sanderson (Jones). In 1894 Rev. Gilmore left Mount Lebanon because of "a difference of opinion" (1970), taking the parsonage as a settlement for money owed him by the church (interview with Rev. Williams). After he left, he organized St. John's Baptist Church on the southeast corner of Eighth and Glade (interview with Rev. Williams). The next minister, Rev. Nicholson, wanted to change the church from Baptist to Church of God; when he was unable to do this, he left and established the Original Church of God, now located two blocks from Mount Lebanon on East Eighth Street (interview with Rev. Williams). When Rev. Gilmore left Mount Lebanon, the church rejoined the Duck River Association (Jones).

The pastorate of Rev. Gilmore was followed by a number of pastors serving for no more than two years: Rev. Peter Cross [1895], J. G. Blackshire [1896], and A. Nixon [1897] (1970). Rev. Nicholson is mentioned as serving during this period by Williams and Oldest but is unmentioned by 1970, which otherwise agrees with the two about the names of pastors.

The pastors of Mount Lebanon in the twentieth century begins with Rev. S. H. Johnson, whose term began in 1899 (1970). The list of pastors who have assumed office in the twentieth century is as follows (Williams):

1902--Rev. C. A. Ward

1905--Rev. J. B. Spratlin

1911--Rev. B. L. Ivory

1914--Rev. W. T. Green

1916--Rev. J. F. Robinson

1917--Rev. W. C. Kelly

1918--Rev. L. R. Womack

1919--Rev. L. A. McEwen

1920--Rev. B. L. Campbell

1921--Rev. J. W. Lee

1926--Rev. B. L. Brocks

1930--Rev. D. M. Ealey

1934--Rev. L. R. W. Johnson

1936--Rev. I. T. Mack

1939--Rev. S. M. Weaver

1942--Rev. M. F. Riley

1945--Rev. R. White

1947--Rev. R. L. Lillard

1948--Rev. D. L. Dunlop

1950--Rev. J. S. Harris

1956--Rev. J. R. Bridgewater

1963--Rev. D. E. Williams

1998--current associate ministers: Rev. Joseph Brown, Rev. William Johnson (Dyer Johnson's great-grandson), Brother Eugene Whitaker (yet to be ordained)

In the last half of the twentieth century Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church has continued to grow. In 1954 the church acquired a parsonage, a five-room frame house (Oldest). In 1963, at the beginning of the long, still-continuing pastorate of Rev. D. E. Williams, the parsonage was remodeled into a seven room house with walls of white stucco and storm doors (Oldest, Williams); a garage was also added. Rev. Williams resides there with his wife, Shirley Martin Williams. Their children are Constance Crawford, Cheryl Williams, Debbie Caldwell, Victoria L. Williams, and David E. Williams, Jr. Under Rev. J. R. Bridgewater the walls of the church's sanctuary were reconstructed, and other improvements were made (Williams). In 1969 Rev. Williams oversaw a "complete renovation" of the interior and exterior of the church's structure. The exterior of the building was sandblasted, new classrooms were added, new air-conditioning and heating units were added, and many other improvements were made (Jones). Under the leadership of Rev. Williams, the church has acquired several additional properties, including the G. A. Newbern and Eural Cofer Educational Building, a

Prayer Garden at the Old Gray Stone Hall, the Melrose Grill, a one and three-fourth acre lot on West Eighth Street on which a building providing housing for the elderly is planned, and a parking lot on land adjacent to the church (Williams).

Members who have made exceptional financial contributions to the church in the last half of the twentieth century include Mr. Fred Webb, Mr. Walter Cunningham, Mr. George Newbern, Sr., Mrs. A. J. Armstrong, Mrs. Eddie Jones, Mr. W. C. McConnico, Mr. Eural Cofer, and Mrs. Stella Barnett (Williams). Other prominent members of the congregation over the years have included: Deacons: Mr. Eli Alexander, Mr. Walter Booker, Mr. Aaron Higgins, Prof. Robert Johnson, Prof. Will Johnson, Mr. Frank Sanford, Prof. S. E. Jones, Mr. Andrew Booker, Mr. Phil Williams, Mr. Thomas Whittaker, Mr. Felix Payne, Mr. John Glover, Jr.; Deaconesses: Mrs. Mary Higgins, Mrs. Daisy Cunningham, Mrs. Alice Booker, Mrs. Lou W. Webb, Mrs. Bertha Alexander, Mrs. Aaron Higgins, Mrs. Willie Armstrong, Mrs. Elizabeth Cofer; Church Mothers: Mrs. Rosa McKissack, Mrs. Anna Johnson, Mrs. Jesse Oden (Chair), Mrs. Ruth Pillow, Mrs. Kate Young; Treasurer (for fifty years): Mr. Walter Booker; Trustees: Mr. George Whittaker, Mr. Jordan Braden, Mr. James Moore, Mr. Clarence Spence, Mr. James Kelly, Mr. George Newbern (Chairman); Clerks: Mrs. Camille Johnson, Mrs. Alice Booker, Mrs. Willie Pearl Shorts; Assistant Clerk: Mrs. Cornelia Braden; Pianists: Mrs. Minnie Spence, Miss Victoria Williams, Mrs. Juanita Warfield; Organists: Mrs. Alma Johnson, Mr. John Garnett.

The many improvements to the church during the pastorate of Rev. Williams provide evidence of his effective leadership and demonstrate as well the generosity and loyalty of the members of Mount Lebanon during the last half of the twentieth century. Mount Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church, the "oldest National Baptist Church in Tennessee" (Williams and Oldest) is maintaining its vitality as it prepares to enter the twenty-first century.