

## **Freedman Town & St. James A.M.E. Church**

By Nita Thurman

Freedman Town was the first African-American settlement in Denton, a small community established where Martin Luther King Jr. Recreation Center and Tomas Rivera Elementary School are now located.

The small community also founded Saint James African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest black church in Denton and the third oldest black church in Texas.

In 1875, only eleven years after slavery was abolished, a group of freed slaves who lived in the White Rock settlement in Dallas County began looking for land. Heady with the possibilities that their new freedom offered, 27 families acquired property southeast of the town of Denton, land that was wooded and well-watered, for their new community. They harvested logs from the surrounding woods to build their first log cabins.

For the first year, one of the settlers, the Rev. M.P. Lambert, ministered to the little flock. The settlers met weekly from house to house for prayer meetings and church classes. Within a year, a full-time preacher, J.V.B. Goins, came and the congregation was organized into Saint James AME Church.

Henry and Charlotte Maddox, charter members of the congregation, soon encouraged members to build a house of worship. The settlers again went into the surrounding woods to cut timber for a building foundation and erected a church.

Rev. Lambert's son, the late Luther Lambert, later wrote a brief history of the church and community. Willie McAdams, another long-time member of Saint James, expanded on the history when the church applied for a Texas Historical Marker. The marker was dedicated in 1985.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the small black community had prospered and expanded. Much of the growth was northward to a new community known as Quakertown, the site now of Denton Civic Center Park.

At Quakertown, wood frame houses replaced the log cabins. The Saint James congregation built a small church there on Oakland Avenue. There were other churches, a school, stores, a mortuary, a cafe, a lodge hall -- all the establishments needed to serve the close-knit black community.

In 1899, the Saint James congregation rebuilt the church and it was replaced by a larger building in 1909. Church recorder Mabel Ross wrote about Saint James' "second home" in Quakertown in 1983 as part of the historical marker application. She described a

shady grove next door to the church where children played in the evening and gathered for picnics and Easter egg hunts. Church women held fried fish suppers or sold homemade ice cream and pies in the grove to raise money for the church and parsonage.

Every Sunday, the clear sound of the church bell rang out through Quakertown to remind members it was time for worship, Ms. Ross wrote. And worship was an all-day affair, beginning with Sunday school, morning worship, afternoon service, Allen Christian Endeavor League, and evening service.

"The pews were made of unfinished boards which were very uncomfortable to small children, but we knew we would remain seated until the services were over," Ms. Ross wrote.

When the city of Denton demolished Quakertown in the early 1920s to make way for the city park, residents were forced to move. Some returned to the area around the original Freeman Town or to neighboring Solomon Hill. Both sites are in the larger community known as Southeast Denton.

The City of Denton paid Saint James AME Church \$1,032 for the 50- by 120-foot lot on Oakland Street. With unwavering faith, church members used the money to buy a lot at 1107 East Oak Street and build a new church.

Saint James has remained at that address through the succeeding years. In 1962, a storm destroyed the church building and all church records. Faith remained, however, and once again the congregation built a new house of worship.

The Rev. M.E. Rice was church pastor for only a few years in the 1960s, but he left a lasting legacy -- pride in the church's history and an annual Founders Day Banquet that celebrates Saint James AME Church's rich heritage.