



PHILLIPS CHAPEL CME CHURCH



Original Phillips Chapel building with CME Sunday School Convention of the Los Angeles District in front (1909). This is the first building for the Phillips Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal Church west of Texas. Shown in front are Bishop Charles H. Phillips (center right foreground) and the first pastor, Rev. James A. Stout (left foreground). *Santa Monica Public Library Collection*

African Americans began to establish a new religious congregation in 1905 at Hull's Hall on Third Street in the north section of Santa Monica, which subsequently became Phillips Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church in the Ocean Park neighborhood. At this time Santa Monica *was* known regionally and across the United States for amusements, entertainment activities and beach resorts.¹

The first African Americans settled in Santa Monica in the late nineteenth century, joining Chinese, Latino, Japanese, old Californios and new Mexicans, Anglo Americans, Jews, and immigrants of other nationalities in building the new city. Most African Americans migrated from southern states, attracted by the climate, employment and escape from Jim Crow laws and practices. Seduced by the recreation and economic opportunities of the sand and surf resort town, the early African American pioneers came to seek their Golden State dreams, just like other migrants to the region.

In 1905 Western Regional CME Church leader Bishop Charles H. Phillips received a request from Rev. Richard Edwards, a church missionary, for a minister to start a congregation in Santa Monica. Rev. J.W. Reese from the West Texas Conference was sent to assist with this endeavor. When Bishop Phillips made his first visit

¹ The CME Church changed its name from "Colored" to "Christian" Methodist Episcopal Church in 1954. Lakey, Othal Hawthorne, *The History of the C.M.E. Church* (Memphis, TN: CME Publishing House, 1985), 349.

to Santa Monica's CME Mission in the summer of 1908, the Washington School building that had been damaged by a fire was purchased from the Santa Monica School Board. Originally constructed in ca. 1890–1895 at Ashland Avenue and 4th Street, the building was moved to 4th and Bay Streets, where it was renovated and reborn as the first African American house of worship in Santa Monica. The structure was probably the second or third school building constructed, and, in its remodeled form could possibly be oldest continuously used public building in the city.²

The new church building was paid for by funds raised from various strong congregations in the CME fold in other parts of the nation, the local Methodist Episcopal Church and from the local membership. It is known from varied church records that Phillips Chapel was remodeled in 1910 and during the 1940s at its 4th and Bay location. Throughout the remodels and renovations, the building has retained its historic Colonial Revival architectural style into contemporary times.³

Named for Bishop Charles H. Phillips, this was the first CME church established west of Texas. Rev. James A. Stout (1875–1932) was the first pastor, and later became the presiding elder of the region. He was involved with the formation of several CME churches on the Pacific Slope. The Stout family made Santa Monica's Ocean Park neighborhood their permanent home.

The *Daily Outlook* newspaper reported that the Cornerstone dedication ceremony held for Phillips Chapel on Sunday, October 31, 1909 was attended by more than 100 people. Some family members of the African American clans, such as the Brunsons, the McCarrolls, the Gordons, the Reeses, the Tabors and the Jacksons, all living in the Santa Monica Bay region for a few years by then, may have attended the event. In the following decades these families, complemented by the presence of the church, would become part of the draw encouraging African Americans from the southern California region and beyond to enjoy recreational and social opportunities at the nearby beach between Pico Boulevard and Bicknell Street sometimes called "the Inkwell," down the hill from Phillips Chapel Church.

The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church was the first national African American organization established by formerly enslaved citizens in 1870. The first independent Black churches were formed in New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. Freeman Richard Allen and Absalom Jones walked out of St. George's Church in Philadelphia in 1787, because they refused to accept segregation and discrimination. The earliest separatist church movement among African Americans led to the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in 1816 and of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) in 1821, as well as of many Baptist churches during this time period. The themes found in the writings and preaching of the independent Black church movement were justice, liberation, hope, love and suffering. As the first social institutions controlled by African Americans, they also used their new churches for coping with the social, political and economic needs of their communities, as well as their spiritual and religious needs.⁴

The CME Church was formed during the Reconstruction era after the Civil War. It grew out of the Methodist Episcopal Church South (MECS). In 1784 the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) had been formed in the American Colonies out of the John and Charles Wesley reform movement of the Church of England. This movement began to be known as Methodism earlier in the eighteenth century.⁵

MECS separated from the MEC in 1844 over the issue of slavery. From that time period until the end of the Civil War, enslaved people were a large percentage of the membership of the MECS. The CME Church was formed with the support of MECS. The CME Church today is very similar in belief and practice to the United

² Lakey, 349; City of Santa Monica, "Historic Resources Inventory Sheet for Phillips Chapel," Prepared by Leslie Heumann, 1992; James W. Lungsford, *Looking at Santa Monica: The Ocean, The Sunset, the Hills and the Clouds* (Santa Monica, CA: 1993), 39.

³ Bishop Othal Hawthorne Lakey. CME Church, Interview by author, April 2005, Los Angeles, California, Via telephone.

⁴ J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 7th ed. (New York, NY: Thomson Gale, 2003), 1177; Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1867-1877*, (Philadelphia, PA: Harper Perennial, 1990), 41-42.

⁵ Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience: Studies of Traditions and Movements* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), 401; Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME), *Brief History*, From the Internet: www.eden.edu/cuic/members/denominations/amez.pdf (copy in author's possession), December 2010.



Illustration from *Looking at Santa Monica: The Ocean, The Sunset, The Hills and The Clouds* by James W. Lungsford (1983)

Methodist Church. Education of the formerly enslaved and their children was a major priority and activity for all Methodists. The CME Church established several schools across the South, including: Lane College (Jackson, Tennessee); Paine College (Augusta, Georgia); Miles College (Birmingham, Alabama); Mississippi Industrial College (Holly Springs, Mississippi) and Texas College (Tyler, Texas).⁶

Santa Monica's early African American community's social life centered on the family, the church, social groups and the few places that allowed their patronage. Informal discriminatory practices meant that African Americans could only swim at municipal pools the day before the facilities were cleaned and attend movies, concerts or plays at certain theatres, sometimes relegated to segregated seats. They were refused service at many hotels, restaurants and other establishments until protests of this exclusion and legal victories secured and clarified their civil rights.

Discriminatory practices in Santa Monica meant most adult pioneer settlers were limited to domestic and service positions such as maids, butlers, janitors, draymen and chauffeurs. Some entrepreneurs ran boarding houses, barber shops, beauty salons and hauling companies serving both blacks and whites. A few ministers led African American congregations, but opportunities did not open in other professions such as teaching, medicine or law until the 1950s. Restrictive real estate covenants prevented African Americans from buying property in certain areas and limited the schools their children could attend.

Phillips Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal Church was the spiritual and institutional center of the earliest African American neighborhood clustered around 4th and Bay Streets, and the group's greater community living in other parts of Santa Monica. Descendants of early seepia settlers continue to reside in the bay city. Santa Monica is the only seaside enclave in the region with a historic African American community which emerged in the dawning of the twentieth century that continues to exist in the twenty first century. Phillip Chapel has eleven stained glass windows commemorating some of the prominent families who attended the church. In 2005, Phillips Chapel was designated as a City of Santa Monica landmark.

⁶ Ibid.; Lippy, 401. The MEC and MECS evolved to become today what is known as the United Methodist Church.



Phillips Chapel CME Church (2008). Photography by Alison Rose Jefferson.

Phillips Chapel Christian (formerly Colored) Methodist Episcopal Church
2001—4th Street
Ocean Park District ~ Santa Monica, California