Urban Black Protestants and the Predicament of Emancipation
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Union forces entered the capital cities of Richmond and Raleigh in quick succession, on April 3 and April 13, 1865. The troops who occupied these cities, as well as the missionaries and bureaucrats who came in on their coattails, were quick to make contact with the respective cities’ Black leaders. Many of these leaders were churchmen, influential members of antebellum religious communities and future ministers of Black-controlled institutions. Northern Black and white interlopers not only offered their support but also interfered without hesitation in the religious affairs of the freedpeople. In Richmond, for instance, Black Union soldiers tried to arrest Robert Ryland, the white pastor of First African Baptist Church, within a few days of their triumphant arrival. Ryland’s congregants interceded in his behalf at that time, though they did accept his resignation and replace him only weeks later. African Methodist Episcopal (AME) minister G. W. Brodie traveled to Raleigh from New York after that denomination’s annual conference in June and reported a similarly high level of interest in freedpeople’s ecclesial affairs among Union soldiers in North Carolina. Upon arrival at the city’s St. Paul’s AME Church, formerly a white-supervised mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS), he preached to a full house of over 1,000 attendees. “Several officers,” he noted, “with more than 100 privates, all white, helped to swell the throng.”

The urban Blacks—including those who migrated to towns or cities after the war—with whom northerners came into contact became the vanguard of independent Black churchgoers in the South. In Richmond, Black Baptists had boasted several large and prosperous churches that

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operated with only nominal white oversight before the war, and the men and women in these communities were therefore primed to embrace the model of racially independent worship promoted by the new arrivals. Scarcely two months passed after the fall of the city before members of four of the city’s semi-autonomous Black churches had voted to become fully independent, jettisoning southern white oversight and calling new ministers. Most congregations called Black men to the pulpit, but a few—including First African Baptist—took the intermediate step of first calling northern white preachers. On August 11, 1865, native Black leaders from seven of these churches and their allies convened at Ebenezer Church to form the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association, an impressive organization that at the time of its inception already included in its grasp 9,674 members in good standing.\(^2\)

The leaders of the Shiloh Association hoped from the group’s inception that their model of Black ecclesial control would ripple out into the countryside. They anticipated that many of the “country” Baptists would be in more dire straits and would need some encouragement and guidance on how to organize independently. Accordingly, they sent Peter Randolph back to the North “to solicit contributions from the benevolent to aid us in sending the Gospel to the thousands of Freedmen scattered over Virginia.” Finally, rather than wait for the receipt of these funds, they also organized the “Baptist Missionary Society of Virginia,” which they intended to expand the number of Black churches “by supplying vacant churches when requested, and sending missionaries into destitute regions within [their] reach.”

Of course, in many instances, rural brethren initiated the movement to Black-controlled churches. In neighboring Amelia County, for instance, the “colored portion” of five

\(^2\) Minutes and Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia (Richmond: Republic Book and Job Office, 1865), esp. 4; O’Brien, “Reconstruction in Richmond,” 263.
congregations wrote to Richmond’s urban black ministers in advance of the meeting of the Colored Shiloh Association to inquire about how they might follow the Richmond and Petersburg Baptists’ example and organize independently. Leaders of the Shiloh Association resolved that that these communities “be visited and organized as soon as it may be practicable.”

While there is considerable evidence, some outlined below, that urban churches were months or years ahead of their more rural counterparts, the exchange between the Amelia County churches and the emerging denominational leadership in Richmond is significant. It not only shows the organic connections between urban and rural congregations, but it also reveals one of the vexing definitional questions of this study, which is the difference between the moment Black churchgoers began worshipping on their own in a given location and the moment when they were “organized.” From the perspective of the urban dwellers who became denominational leaders and who supplied most of the qualitative evidence, worshippers needed to finish the process of securing a duly ordained minister and being recognized by denominational authorities before they considered them fully established. The records available to historians therefore do not always capture the first stages of this process.

In part because the Black southerners in the South’s villages, towns, and cities represented such a small portion of the population, historians have noted but not tended to focus upon differences in the urban and rural experiences of emancipation. Scholars of religious history have been no different, suggesting divisions among Black churchgoers in the postwar period based on ideological predisposition towards whites, orientation towards northern

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3 Minutes … of the Colored Shiloh Association, 7, 10, 15.

4 For an excellent account of this process, see James Melvin Washington, Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1991), esp. part II.
reformers, and/or antebellum religious commitments, but rarely geographic situation.5
Moreover, some scholars, none more influential than Steven Hahn, have continued to emphasize
solidarity among Black southerners, regardless of their location. If anything, in his landmark
work, A Nation Under Our Feet, Hahn placed rural Blacks at the center of the Reconstruction
struggle. In contrast, the men and women featured in this paper—mostly men, for formal
religious leadership remained a male prerogative—believed firmly that they needed to work from
urban centers to take their message of independent worship to the populous but poorly organized
countryside. The fact that it was those urban Black southerners who interacted with northerners
who were most likely to pursue separation and create Black-run institutions undermines Hahn’s
claim that commitments to “separatism and community development, the pursuit of collective
rights, and protonationalism” were widespread inheritances of the plantation regime.6 The

5 Many excellent studies of emancipation and/or Reconstruction give attention to some of the distinctions
between the experience of emancipation in urban and rural areas but do not assign any particular cultural, religious,
or political leadership to towns and cities. See Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), e.g. 143. The dynamic discussed here is slightly different from that
articulated in the best current synthesis of the church separations, William E. Montgomery, Under Their Own Vine
and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University
Press, 1993). Montgomery (36-37) posits conflict between northern Blacks and freeborn southern Blacks on the one
hand and devotees of the “sometimes invisible churches of southern slaves” on the other. Montgomery dramatically
underestimated the number of enslaved / freedpeople aligned with the more denominational vision of northern and
freeborn blacks, and the difference is more properly expressed as one between urban and rural Blacks. Nonetheless,
his sense of internal conflict was prescient and his study remains the surest guide to the phenomenon. For more
ideological distinctions among southern Blacks, see Reginald Hildebrand, The Times Were Strange and Stirring:
Methodist Preachers and the Crisis of Emancipation (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) and Gayraud S.
Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American
Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana
State University Press, 2010). Scholars of later period shave noted distinctions between urban and rural patterns of
adherence among Black southerners. For example, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless, “Of the Least and the
Most’: The African-American Rural Church,” in R. Douglas Hurt, ed., African American Life in the Rural South,

6 Steven Hahn, A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the
dynamics of Reconstruction-era Black churches, see Elsa Barley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public
Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” Public Culture 7 (1994): 107-
146 and Nicole Myers Turner, “Faith and Freedom: The Politics of Black Religious Institutions in Post-
emphasis here on the special role that Black from more nucleated communities played in setting
the tone for Reconstruction might revise Hahn’s analysis, but it is in step with two recent trends
in the literature: a willingness to discuss divisions among freedpeople and a heightened
awareness of the spatial dimensions of emancipation.  

Black churchgoers who came into contact with the Union Army, the Freedmen’s Bureau,
and/or northern missionaries were more likely to separate early from their white coreligionists
and, subsequently, to try to rationalize/normalize those new ecclesial arrangements by
cooperating in the construction of new institutions. As a corollary, urban Blacks controlled this
process, taking their message of separation and education out aggressively (and with the
assistance of military authorities) to their rural coreligionists. Scholars have almost universally
recognized Black southerners’ movement out of white-controlled churches and their formation of
Black-controlled institutions as one of the main developments of Reconstruction, so this is an
important storyline to understand. Whether it was spontaneous, widespread, and uniform or

7 Emphasis on divisions among Black southerners builds upon recent work on emancipation studies,
including Natasha Lightfoot, Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation (Durham:
Duke University Press, 2015) and Rebecca Scott, Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery
(Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008). For the US context, a good introduction is the
essays in William A. Link and James J. Broomhall, eds., Rethinking American Emancipation: Legacies of Slavery
and the Quest for Black Freedom (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Yael Sternhell, “Revisionism
Reinvented?: The Antiwar Turn in Civil War Scholarship,” Journal of the Civil War Era 3, no. 2 (June 2013): 246-
47.

On movement, see: Sternhell, Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); David Silkenat, Driven from Home: North Carolina’s Civil War
Refugee Crisis (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016); and—regarding emancipation in particular—
“Visualizing Emancipation,” Scott Nesbit, University of Richmond Digital Scholarship Lab, accessed August 3,
2016, http://dsl.richmond.edu/emancipation/. On occupation, see: Judkin Browning, Shifting Loyalties: The Union
Occupation of Eastern North Carolina (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Patricia Click, Time
Full of Trial: The Roanoke Island Freedmen’s Colony, 1862-1867 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
2001).

8 For instance, Foner, Reconstruction, 88; Hahn, Nation Under Our Feet, 230; Evelyn Brooks
Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920
uneven with a strong urban to rural vector matters for the way we understand both Black aspirations and the exercise of federal power. The divergent paths Black southerners followed out of white-controlled churches highlights the contingent nature of freedom’s victories and the hard choices facing Black southerners in emancipation, at the same time that it suggests that scholars have overstated the integrationist impulse among northerners (particularly northern whites). They have allowed American Missionary Association (AMA) officers who wanted to plant churches but ended up with only schools and idealistic Methodist Episcopal (MEC) churchmen who wanted a colorblind church to stand in for white northern Protestants at large.9

This essay about the initiative of urban Blacks was inspired by the observation that not all Black churchgoers left white-controlled churches at the same time or in the same way. While perhaps as many as two-thirds of black churchgoers left white-controlled churches by 1867, the converse is that one-third of these worshippers were not ready to leave for over two years after emancipation. The MECS offers one gauge of this dynamic. Clerks reported via their denomination’s published minutes 171,857 “colored members” in 1860. In 1867, two tumultuous years after jubilee, that year’s cohort of clerks claimed that their churches retained 54,172 African Americans as full members (31.5 percent of the pre-war total). The proportion was lower for North Carolina and Virginia, the two states featured in this essay; the combined

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North Carolina and Virginia Conferences retained only 4,383 Black members in 1867, or 23 percent of the pre-war total. A larger proportion of Black Baptists in North Carolina and Virginia stayed connected to their white-controlled churches for the same period (through the summer of 1867). Officers of the white-controlled Baptist General Association of Virginia estimated in the summer of 1867 that 44 percent of the 50,000 Black members they had claimed before the war were still with them. North Carolina’s denominational officials did not attempt a statewide tally, but clerks for most associations (e.g. Chowan, Cape Fear, and Raleigh) boasted a retention rate of over 50 percent. There were only nominal numbers of Blacks in Presbyterian, Episcopalian, or “Christian” churches. Scholars too often have glossed over the fact that hundreds of thousands of freedpeople chose to remain in white-controlled churches longer than their peers based on the accurate observation that most eventually left by the mid-1870s.

10 Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for the Year 1860 (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1861), 293 and Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for the Year 1867 (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1870), 196. Please note that the MECS figures included a small number of black members of conferences in states which remained loyal to the Union. Not also that “members” represented on a fraction of the persons attending a church (“adherents”). Nineteenth-century observers estimated that there were roughly four adherents for every member. See Robert Baird, Religion in America, or An Account of the Origin, Progress, Relation to the State, and Present Condition of the Evangelical Churches in the United States: With Notices of the Unevangelical Denominations (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1844), 265.

11 Minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia ... 1867 (Richmond: Dispatch Steam Power Presses, 1867), 56.

12 Minutes of the Sixty-First Annual Session of the Chowan Baptist Association ... 1867 (Raleigh: Hufham & Hughes, 1867), 54 percent; Minutes of the Annual Session of the Cape Fear Association ... 1867 (Raleigh: Mills & Hughes, 1867), 108 percent; Minutes of the Sixty-Second Annual Session of the Raleigh Baptist Association ... 1867. (Raleigh: Biblical Recorder Publishing Co., 1867), 93 percent.

13 The classic formulation is Foner, Reconstruction, 91. He bolsters his discussion of Black southerners’ efforts to form autonomous institutions by noting that “By the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the vast majority of Southern blacks had withdrawn from churches dominated by whites.” Most scholars have similarly elided early disagreements among Black churchgoers.
The case of Black in Raleigh, North Carolina’s First Baptist Church both proves that separation was not a universal instinct and, at the same time, shows the limitations of this study. Black members of First Baptist Church sought and gained permission from their congregation’s white leaders to start an independent Sunday school in September 1865 and to meet apart from whites, though still under their oversight. Emboldened by these successes, the group of roughly two hundred then asked in December for permission to call their own pastor. When whites refused the request, Raleigh Blacks deferred the search for independence for years. Black ministers continued to preach intermittently to the congregation despite whites’ refusal to approve full separation, but even William Warrick, the Philadelphia import who preached most often, was not able to convince the Black members to cut the cord from the white-controlled congregation. A Methodist observer documented Warrick’s failing efforts in March 1866, sympathizing, “He is trying hard to get his people to see where they stand, and to induce them to come under an independent and free flag, where they can have the services of their own preachers.” Not until June 5, 1868 did Raleigh’s Black Baptists present whites with a fait accompli, sending a delegation to declare that they had already formed a separate body, “The First Colored Baptist Church,” and asking for retroactive permission to withdraw.14

Raleigh Black Baptists’ longsuffering is a reminder that no one factor was completely determinative of when black Protestants chose to establish their own churches, and other dynamics not detailed in this essay often influenced the timing of ecclesiastical separation. In Richmond, for instance, the preexistence of semi-independent churches weighted the scales

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14 Basic narrative from W. Glenn Jonas, Jr., Nurturing the Vision: First Baptist Church, Raleigh, 1812-2012 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2012), 126, 135; Methodist commentary from “General Book Steward’s Correspondence: Raleigh, North Carolina,” CR, March 31, 1866. The CR article confusingly calls Warrick the congregation’s pastor, which might simply mean that he ran the independent Sunday school (though he did ultimately become pastor). Strange, hybrid arrangements involving shared authority were not uncommon.
towards exodus, whereas in Raleigh the concessions offered by whites likely forestalled full independence. Additional variables beyond the scope of this essay included: demographics (whether or not there was a critical mass of Black residents); denomination (denominations with small Black memberships before the war had a higher retention rate); political context (racial violence tended to push Black worshippers to independence); education level (literate church leaders proved more capable of forming new congregations); and economic considerations (affluence created choices, then as now).

To some extent, the observation that urban Blacks led the way in church separations is a subset of the more intuitive observation that Blacks in areas occupied by Union forces had access to more allies and resources. There was a strong correlation between occupation by the Union Army and Black church formation. In sections of North Carolina and Virginia occupied by the Union Army during the war, for instance, the MECS lost members, while jurisdictions that remained in Confederate control until the bitter end gained members or held steady. Before the war had even ended, the hemorrhaging began in occupied territory. The Norfolk (VA) and New Bern (NC) Districts of the MECS provide the best examples; both fell to Union control in 1862 and were subject to consistent occupation. Based on the 1861 and 1865 reports on these jurisdictions, 4,958 of the 5,443 Black members left during the war. The interior districts (not the state capitals) of Greensboro (NC), Salisbury (NC), and Charlottesville (VA) provide a startling contrast; Methodist clerks from these combined districts reported a net loss of only three persons (out of 1,728).

To cite another compelling example, representatives from five churches in the vicinity of the Union stronghold Fortress Monroe formed the first Black-controlled

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15 *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for the Years 1859-1865* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1870), 328, 332, 558, 563.
association in the Confederacy in 1863, with their first formal meeting in 1864. In James City, a protected contraband camp for some 3,000 freedpeople (and therefore one of the larger towns in North Carolina), Samuel Peterson and Fred Long formed the Old Eastern Missionary Baptist Association in 1865, North Carolina’s first Black-controlled association.

Especially as they settled into the post-Appomattox role of occupation, Union officials naturally chose to station troops in the South’s towns and cities. “Towns” and “Cities” might need an asterisk here, because Virginia claimed only a handful of truly urban spaces, and North Carolina lagged far behind the Old Dominion. In 1870, Virginians lived in three of the nation’s 100 largest cities: Richmond (51,038), Norfolk (19,229), and Petersburg (18,950). No Tar Heel town could claim such an honor; Wilmington (13,446) was far and away the state’s largest city in 1870, followed by Raleigh (7,790) and New Bern (5,849). Most of the communities considered here passed the threshold of 2,500 to qualify as a town; a few “villages” (following Edward Ayers’ formulation, “settled, named places of under 2,500 population”) are included as well, as long as they were among the one or two largest communities in the county and included greater than 1,500 inhabitants. These were the sorts of places that tended to host field offices for the Freedman’s Bureau in rural counties. Consider, for instance, the Bureau offices in Elizabethtown (1,904) and Magnolia (1,606) in NC. In Virginia, the Union tended to occupy the county seats, even if—as in the case of Jerusalem (2,061) in Southampton County—that meant choosing a marginally smaller base of operations.

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16 Montgomery, Under their Own Vine, 112.


In these occupied territories, Union soldiers and Northern volunteers either encouraged or created the conditions for ecclesiastical separation, empowering a generation of Black leaders to take the program beyond the urban areas which remained centers of Union influence. Northerners encouraged Black churchgoers to worship independently in both overt (and conscious) and subtle (and unintentional) ways. Most importantly, as historians have amply documented (in part because the objects of their study left such a marvelous paper trail), the Union Army and Freedman’s Bureau facilitated the access of Northern missionaries to freedpeople. Because these missionaries, whether for the AMA or another group, typically failed to plant churches but concentrated on schools and education, scholars have not always fully appreciated the role of these missionaries in helping Black southerners to form Black-controlled churches. Even when they were not working with representatives of benevolent organizations, federal officials nonetheless facilitated the development of Black-controlled churches in a number of more indirect ways: providing meeting spaces; sustaining the right of freedpeople to meet independent of white control; and forcing the relocation of hundreds of thousands of persons away from their home churches and the obligations of membership.

The Union Army literally escorted northern apostles of ecclesiastical disunion into urban enclaves within the Confederacy. AME minister Alexander Wayman, en route to his famous visit to Norfolk’s Bute Street Church (affiliated with the MECS) “to seek his brethren,” acknowledged missionaries’ utter dependence on military transport in wartime. When a Union provost marshal hesitated to give him a pass to Virginia, Wayman protested, “Sir, religion and everything else must submit to the military authority, and we cannot get along without its

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protection.” To Wayman’s relief, the officer “finally said to the clerk, make out a pass for this man to Fortress Monroe.” Missionaries like Wayman remained dependent on military power for access to the South for months after the fighting stopped. The Presbyterian Board of Missions for Freedmen explained in their first annual report (1866) that their ministry “was controlled, in great measure, by military lines, and was chiefly in connection with military and contraband camps, and hospitals.” Moreover, they asserted “that prejudice and lawlessness rendered it unsafe to locate missions or schools where military protection was not afforded.”

Southern whites affirmed this perspective and reported the most constraints on their treatment of freedpeople when proximate to urban spaces. One North Carolinian in September 1865 “bewailed his proximity to Greensboro’ with its Yankees and Superintendent of Freedmen, who appeared to think a negro was better than a white man.”

When federal officials took Black and white missionaries into towns and cities and brokered their connections with local Black leaders, they reinforced the special role urban spaces played as incubators of Black leadership. When enslaved people from the countryside rushed into southern cities in wartime, they joined in what Stephen Ash has called a “vibrant, distinctively urban black subculture,” hearth of Black-controlled (or partially Black-controlled) institutions such as churches, fire departments, and grog shops. Missionaries came precisely to these places. Prior to 1872, for instance, the combined ranks of missionaries from the American

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20 First Annual Report of the General Assembly’s Committee on Freedmen, of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Pittsburgh: Jas. McMillin, 1866), 5.

21 “The South as it Is,” The Nation (September 28, 1865).

22 Stephen V. Ash, The Black Experience in the Civil War South (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 51.
Baptist Home Mission Society, the Episcopal Commission for Home Missions to Colored People, and the Presbyterian Board of Missions went in North Carolina exclusively to towns large enough to merit a Freedman’s Bureau office (or within less than ten miles), with the lone exception of a brave Baptist in Hendersonville, roughly 24 miles from an outpost in Asheville.\(^{23}\) Even though Blacks in Hendersonville were not fortunate enough to have a Bureau office in their community, their hometown with 1,636 inhabitants was the largest city in Henderson County.\(^{24}\)

One of the reasons the immediate postwar dependence on the military for transportation and security—and their corresponding focus on urban spaces—was so significant is that missionary organizations tended to double down on their early commitments (in schools, churches, and/or seminaries) and to plow resources into existing initiatives. The Episcopal Church typified this pattern in both North Carolina and Virginia. In North Carolina, Episcopalian supported educational and spiritual initiatives in Wilmington, New Bern, Raleigh, Asheville, and Fayetteville. In Virginia, they allocated some funds to Richmond but concentrated most of their efforts on Petersburg, which became the epicenter of Black Anglican life in the Commonwealth for generations.\(^{25}\)

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\(^{24}\) *Ninth Census*, 223.

Once in the South’s cities, missionaries quickly plucked the lowest-hanging fruit, the large, semi-independent Black churches that were exclusively an urban phenomenon across the region. In the antebellum period, white Baptists and Methodists had each set up mechanisms to provide for Black worship under white supervision, pursuant to the stringent regulations against Black preaching that came after Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion. Especially for congregations as large as Richmond’s First African Baptist—the church had an extraordinary 3,260 members in 1860—whites could simply not manage church affairs without extensive reliance on Black auxiliaries, making these communities training grounds for Black church leadership. When Peter Randolph, a Black Baptist minister from Boston with Virginia roots, came into Richmond on the heels of the Union Army (twenty-five days after the surrender!), he immediately met with Fields Cook and other lay leaders of First African Baptist. Subsequently, he served as the lead negotiator in a series of meetings with southern white Baptists about the future of the all-Black churches and came away an advocate of separation. None of the seven congregations which Randolph rallied together as charter members of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association in August 1865 had any white members.26

Black Methodists were also more likely to enroll in Black-only congregations in urban areas and more likely to leave soon after war’s end. North Carolina’s white Baptists generally did not allow all-Black congregations before the war, but white Methodists established several,

26 Minutes ... of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association, 4; membership based on Minutes of the Seventy-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Dover Baptist Association ... 1860 (Richmond, Va.: H. K. Ellyson, 1860) and Minutes of the Seventy-First Session of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association ... 1861 (Petersburg: O. Ellyson, Printer, 1861). For the one charter church not in the Dover or Portsmouth Associations (Manchester / FBC South Richmond), see Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, “First Baptist Church, South Richmond,” African American Historic Sites Database, accessed August 18, 2016, http://www.aahistoricsitesva.org/items/show/144. On Randolph’s leading role, see Peter Randolph, From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit. The Autobiography of Rev. Peter Randolph; the Southern Question Illustrated and Sketches of Slave Life (Boston: Edwards and James H. Earle, 1893) http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/ranaldoph/ranaldoph.html.
including thriving missions in the cities of Raleigh (278 full members), Fayetteville (296), New Bern (722), and Beaufort (240), as well Cape Fear (350). AME and AME Zion missionaries aimed at these congregations as targets of opportunity (they represented huge potential gains in membership for their connections) made accessible by the progress of Union arms. Black North Carolinians in each one of the large missions had voted to leave MECS control within a few weeks of Appomattox.27 One important effect of the extremely swift mobilization by Black northern missionaries of the south’s urban, semi-independent, all-Black churches was that it effectively made the rich get richer; in other words, it made towns and cities, already the natural hubs of Black organizational life because of the relative freedom of movement and association they provided, into even more important spaces—because they subsequently housed the best-funded, first, and most well-connected Black-run institutions in their respective states. James Walker Hood, AMEZ missionary, exemplified the significance of these spaces when he traveled from the home base he established in New Bern (where he wrested control of Andrews Chapel from both the MECS and an AME competitor) to Raleigh to lead the first Freedmen’s Convention in September 1865, held in an AME church that had been an MECS mission only six months earlier. Deepening the nexus between urban spaces, Black religious and political activism, and Union occupation, Hood subsequently relocated to Fayetteville, but spent time in Charlotte and Wilmington as well.28 The most effective Black Methodist organizer in either

27 Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the MECS ... 1861 and 1865, 332, 563. Cape Fear does not register as a town to contemporary readers, but with 2,285 residents in 1870 it was Chatham County’s largest community.

North Carolina or Virginia rationally chose to concentrate his efforts in building Black-run institutions on the biggest towns and cities within his reach.

Federal officials without a specific religious agenda in the south also helped to encourage the development of Black-controlled congregations, in part by sustaining Black southerners in their conflicts with whites over access to church property. Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton sanctioned early in the war a policy through which officers could remove disloyal ministers from the pulpit, install (at least through the duration of the war) loyal ministers, and protect in some degree the rights of Black members. As Lincoln put it, the Army would see to it that members (explicitly including “freedmen of the South”) “will be allowed to assemble & worship as heretofore in their respective meetinghouses without ‘let or hindrance.’”29 Some commanders exercised this prerogative with more gusto than others; the Liberator gleefully reported that on March 11, 1864, that by order of Benjamin Butler, soldiers were placing “all places of public worship in Norfolk and Portsmouth” under military command, with the goal that all churches would be “open freely to all officers and soldiers, white or colored, at the usual hour of worship, and at other times, if desired.”30 Instances of Union authorities intervening on behalf of Black believers are relatively rare in the Official Records (for an important exception see the May 1865 case of Greensboro), but there are numerous well-documented cases in both denominational records and newspapers.31

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30 “Norfolk, Va.,” The Liberator, March 11, 1864.

Fugitives from slavery and Union officials also made new urban spaces in the form of contraband camps which accelerated the separation of Black southerners from white ecclesial control. When enslaved men and women either fled to Union lines or found themselves refugeed into the Confederate interior, they were leaving white-controlled churches and becoming open and available to the prospect of joining a Black-controlled church. Most fugitives did not intend their flight as an ecclesiastical protest, but their escape from slavery nonetheless had the practical effect of severing their relationship with white-controlled churches. Indeed, white officials in the churches from which they fled typically voted to exclude them from membership.\textsuperscript{32} The men and women who made it to Union lines and into the camps could participate in the formation of new, Black-controlled congregations. In Alexandria’s Freedmen’s Village, which became something of a model refugee community set on the estate of Robert E. Lee, residents established one Methodist and two Baptist churches, a scene that played out similarly in refugee communities in eastern North Carolina and Virginia.\textsuperscript{33} When AMA missionary H. S. Beals first toured a “contraband camp” just outside of New Bern, he was fascinated by the organic development of Baptist and Methodist congregations in the safety guaranteed by federal soldiers. After passing (and inserting himself into) services conducted by a man who had kept the antebellum, white-controlled church at arm’s length, he found a “church just back of their

\textsuperscript{32} For example, Minutes of the Twentieth Annual Session of the Rappahannock Baptist Association, Held with Upper King & Queen Church, King & Queen County, Va. (Richmond: Smith, Bailey & Co., 1863), 5.

\textsuperscript{33} Joseph P. Reidy, “coming from the Shadow of the Past’: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom at Freedmen’s Village, 1863-1900,” Virginia Magazine of History and Geography (Oct. 1987): 412; Click, Time Full of Trial; Browning, Shifting Loyalties.
village, reared by their own hands for their Sabbath services,” and filled with more than four hundred souls. A “devoutly pious Negro” who had previously served in a lay capacity with a Baptist church was preaching.34

Federal officials and missionaries lent tangible material support to separatist Black ministers, more than to those continuing in their ecclesial relations with whites and more than to their rural counterparts. Northern missionaries, white and Black, felt they could best serve their southern coreligionists by providing education and quite sensibly based their efforts to train ministers in towns and cities. Joseph Whiting Parker, Corresponding Secretary of the New England Educational Commission for the Freedmen and subsequently in the employ of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, organized his entire ministry around seminars he conducted for aspiring or new ministers of Black-controlled churches (with “some special instruction for those who are already preaching and others who were deacons and officers”) in southern city after southern city. Included on his itinerary were Richmond, Wilmington, Augusta, Atlanta, Savannah, Jacksonville, etc. After a session in Richmond in the fall of 1866, he gave a “lightly used’ suit to each of the thirty pastors who had completed the five to six week course.35

Parker’s Presbyterian rivals in North Carolina adopted a similar tactic of education and institution-building. They realized the best way to keep freedpeople within the Presbyterian family was to provide education and ordination to aspiring Black ministers. Their successful efforts to do so hinged on their work in eight Carolina communities (seven of which—Charlotte,
Salisbury, Statesville, Concord, Franklinton, Wilmington, and Lexington—were towns or cities with Freedman’s Bureau field offices, with the outlier being “Centre Mission,” triangulated between Lincolnton and Statesville). They trained ministers and paid for churches in these communities, causing a white southern Presbyterian spokesman to complain: “I doubt very much whether any considerable number of our colored church members would have been drawn away from us, if it had not been either from the expectation of certain secular benefits that they supposed you would confer on them, or from a foolish ambition on the part of many of them to exercise functions in the Church of Christ for which they are utterly unfit.”36 Sometimes the link to the Bureau was even more direct than colocation, as was the case on May 3, 1867, when Richmond officials gave Burwell Toler, one of the first ministers ordained by the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association, the use of a horse so that he could take his ministry further into the countryside.37

For their part, Black church leaders, including those native to the South in addition to repatriates and northern missionaries, made cities the bases for their campaign to organize their Virginia and North Carolina brethren. They imagined—and embodied—concentric circles of Black organizational initiative radiating out from cities. The lists of churches admitted to the Shiloh Colored Baptist Association is an astounding gauge of this dynamic. Representatives of the seven, founding churches in the urban centers of Richmond and Petersburg first helped organize brethren in Amelia. For the summer 1866 meeting delegates arrived or sent message from 28 total churches, including those in other major towns (Lynchburg, Danville, Farmville, 


etc.) as well from some rural churches in the immediate hinterland of Richmond and Petersburg (in Goochland County, Henrico, Powhatan, etc.). By 1868, there were 75 churches, including those not identified with a village or town—and an amazing 95 by 1869, with a comprehensive geographical sweep across central Virginia.38

Tantalizing details in narratives and in rare fragments of private papers show the way that expertise from the city migrated outward, along lines of communication between rural and urban communities that may have predated the war. John Jasper, the famous Virginia minister—who, incidentally, studied under Joseph Whiting Parker at one of his seminars for church leaders—traveled far afield to help organize Black-controlled congregations. Joseph Baysmore was one who called to Jasper for help, writing to Petersburg for assistance in organizing a church for his much smaller community of Weldon, NC (208 residents in 1860, but adjacent to the more populous Rapides [now Roanoke Rapids]). Baysmore had started to preach in capacity to a group of Black Baptists following emancipation, though it is unclear how many and in what relation to white-controlled Baptist churches. After Jasper’s June 1866 intervention, Baysmore’s church took off, and he received twenty-six new members from the nearest white-controlled church.39 It was doubtless an intervention such as this for which the correspondents from Mournolver Church were hoping when they approached James Jefferson. In a letter which must date from December 3, 1865, William Kennedy, the indefatigable churchman and Republican organizer from Henrico County, wrote as clerk for James Jefferson, who was apparently unlettered, to the brethren at Mournolver (spelled in the letter “Mornover”) about an appointment

38 Minutes of theFirst, Second, Fourth, and Fifth Annual Meetings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association. Minutes of the Fourth are mislabeled on the title page as the Third.

to help organize them into a church. Through Kennedy, Jefferson wrote: “i am redy at any time to do whatever i can help the case of the church of christ i will do so at all times but you mus let me no in time i am not well at this time.” He must have recovered and had a satisfactory meeting, for Jefferson is listed as one of the messengers from Mournolver Church in the August 1866 minutes of the Shiloh Association. Ministers of successful urban churches provided the institutional initiative to organize like congregations in the hinterland.

In conclusion, Black churchgoers who looked out from slavery did not share a uniform vision for how to organize their communities in the postwar period, a reality suggested by the different pace at which rural and urban Blacks withdrew from white-controlled churches. Those at the center of northern intervention into the Confederacy, i.e., those in towns and cities, came into contact with soldiers, bureaucrats, and missionaries who supported the separation of Black churchgoers into their own churches. Southern Black leaders largely adopted that tactic as the best way to advocate for their dignity as Christian believers and for access to the rights of governance within and outside of the church. Those in Black-controlled churches then founded or joined larger denominational organizations which became important bases for Black organizing in their own right, as well as the key training grounds for Black politicians.

While on the one hand this is an embarrassingly straightforward conclusion, it does raise complex questions about the predicament in which Black churchgoers found themselves. To the extent that Southern Black churchmen embraced a theology of uplift compatible with that of the missionaries and joined or founded parallel denominational institutions, Sylvester Johnson has recently argued, they came to share the “civilizing” mission of those missionaries—and thereby

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accepted a narrative of white, Christian progress in which people of color would always be peripheral.41 Black Protestants in Reconstruction, if Johnson and others skeptical of the way European Christians coded racism into their faith and practice in the early modern period are right, faced only compromised options. Staying in white-controlled churches meant acquiescence to white racism within their churches, while leaving meant alignment with an imperial project that marginalized Black Americans. If Black-controlled churches became the greatest legacy of Reconstruction after the noble experiment of biracial democracy collapsed under the weight of southern white militancy and white northern indifference, we might take greater care to understand the founding assumptions of those institutions. It may be that Black southerners in Reconstruction were able to reconstitute or rediscover some less culturally captive strain of Christianity, in which there was truly neither Jew nor Greek—or it may be that the inertia from generations of institutionalized racism in United States churches forced Black churchmen to join a discourse community in which their voices would always be muted.