Unsung Heros of Christ Episcopal Church, Forrest City, Arkansas

By Marilyn Powell

Introduction

We know the documented stories of those who have attempted to bring about a better life for African-Americans, such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's movement and Medgar Evers' activism, but all over the United States, individuals have quietly and diligently worked to create a more harmonious and equal playing field. One group of unsung heroes for racial equality in the United States came by way of the Episcopal Church in the state Arkansas, in the city founded by and named after the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

It was in Forrest City, Arkansas, where the first black Episcopal Bishop in the United States had a vision and recruited a Black priest to bring it to fruition, with the assistance of the Black community. From that vision, Christ Episcopal Church became a beacon for the betterment of the community's Black citizens.

Background: How It All Began

Founded in 1921 as a mission, Christ Episcopal Church operated as a private parochial and industrial school for Black students from 1923-1968. Today it is believed to be one of the last remaining predominantly Black Episcopal churches.



Bishop Demby

The mission and school were founded by the Rt. Rev. Edward T. Demby (1869-1957), the first African American suffragan Bishop in the United States, serving as Suffragan Bishop for "Colored Work" in the Diocese of Arkansas, in the Southwestern Province of the national Episcopal Church. (The Demby Foundation was created in the bishop's name and still exists today).



Christ Episcopal Church's chapel and parish remain a landmark in Forrest City, Ark.

Bishop Demby sought to build a thriving African-American ministry in eastern Arkansas, as well as to create an avenue for equality and a quality education for the Black children in Forrest City and the surrounding county.

Bishop Demby requested and received funds from the Auxiliary of the Diocese of Pennsylvania to build a chapel. Bishop Demby then brought in a Black priest to oversee this extraordinary project: Rev. James Henry King, a mission priest who had the knowledge and experience as both a pupil and administrator of a parochial and industrial school. He was admitted as a priest in Arkansas in January 1922 and the vision was put into motion.

Rev. King served for 30 years as the priest over the mission and principal of the school. The school trained students in maintenance skills and domestic science (food preservation and other domestic survival skills), as well as patterning the curriculum after that in the public school. Father King was an enthusiastic fundraiser and often used local resources to help finance the school.

The tuition-based private school accepted produce and other bartered items as payment. Those items and items produced at the school, such as rugs, were sold throughout the nation.

Rev. King's wife, Nina Pearl Fields King, was in charge of the domestic science courses and taught many families in the community how to preserve the food they grew. Nina Pearl also petitioned and received a donation of a community pressure cooker from the Episcopal Church Women (ECW). She would accept canned vegetables as payment for use of the cooker. The food received was then used for school lunches at a time before public schools provided lunch. Hers most likely was the first school lunch program.

After a fire at the school in 1957, the church and school moved to a new location on five acres of land donated by two families. In November 1959, two school buildings were dedicated, one in memory of Bishop Demby and the other in memory of Father King. A new church building was constructed on the campus in1962 and consecrated by the Rt. Rev. Robert R. Brown (1910 -1994), best known for his work in the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. After Father King's death, Alonzo Turner became the principal, followed by Edward Norman. In the mid-1960's, a former student became the last headmaster/principal: the Rev. Emery Washington Sr. (1935-2015), a priest, educator, and community organizer.



Bishop Brown



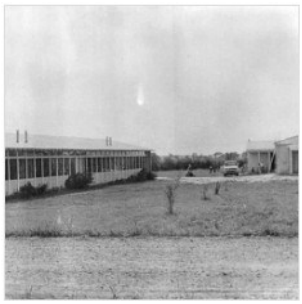
Rev. Washington



Christ Church Crucifier



Christ Church Parochial and Industrial School



Christ Church Parochial School Buildings



Rev. J. H. King

This montage includes a picture of Christ Church's original Parochial School (top right) as well as the buildings that replaced it after a 1957 fire (bottom left).

History of the School

The school's early beginnings included only grades one through eight; it later grew to incorporate grades nine through twelve and kindergarten. Throughout much of its existence, fundraisers and the community (the unsung heroes) funded the school. Locals today still discuss what an excellent fundraiser Father King was. He garnered respect from everyone, which likely contributed to the success he had with gaining support from the community to ensure the school remained open.

Toward the end of the school's life, when it was scaled back to grades one through six, the Arkansas Diocese paid teachers' salaries and a small portion of the expenses, until it was decided to close the school. The integration of public schools and the cost to remain in compliance with state requirements ultimately led to the demise of the school. The school was usually filled to capacity with a waiting list, but lacked the funds to meet all state requirements. Therefore, at the

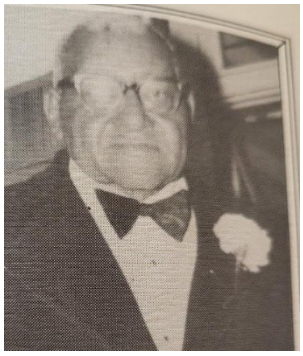
annual convention in 1968, delegates voted to close the school.

As with most Episcopal churches that have a social hall or buildings (school, etc.), the space was converted to community outreach, renamed the J.H. King Center. It offered a preschool, a summer meal program that produced as many as 500 meals a day, adult education classes, and tutoring. The facilities were also rented out for meetings and gathering places for organizations such as the NAACP, Eastern Star and Masonic groups, wedding receptions, and even served as a polling place. The mission became a parish and remains a self-sufficient parish today.

Conclusion and Family Ties

The school is still remembered as "Father King's school." The vision of Bishop Demby and Father King was possible due to several individuals who lived in the city and served in the congregation and school for many years. The Phillips, Warren, Wright, Shaw, Jones, Driver, and Norman families, among many others, gave of their time and talents to continue the vision and dream during and after Bishop Demby and Father King. Those core families were the backbone of the unsung and unseen heroes who created an avenue that advanced the future of Black children in Forrest City and the surrounding counties. They gave their time, money, and talents to uplift the community and produced a positive institution that today, although small, is remembered and looked upon in high regard as a symbol of advancement for the Black community.

As a small child, I can think of my great aunt serving as the musical director, overseeing not only the music department and church choir, but several theatrical performances for holidays and special occasions. I recall hanging out with my godmother in the kitchen as she prepared the meals for the students. And I still think of my grandfather, a member and leader in the church for more than 50 years, who gave of his time, talent, money, and network in the community.



The author's grandfather, John Henry Phillips Sr. (1941-1994) was a longtime Senior Warden at the Forrest City church.

From this institution, future attorneys, educators, college professors, clergy, U.S. Court leaders, accountants, entrepreneurs, and other successful professionals have emerged. All thanks to a dream and the dedication of a community to see that dream become a reality.

The author lives in Vacaville, California, and serves on the Vestry at Church of the Epiphany.

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