

## Narrative For The Union Missionary Baptist Church Jefferson, Texas

A church was first established on the property in 1842 in Jefferson, Texas, and it was the first place of worship in Marion County for the African-American community.<sup>1</sup> No description of the church building or the denomination exists of that earliest sanctuary. Permission to build the facility was granted by Captain William Perry.<sup>2</sup> The Captain came to Jefferson and purchased land in 1842, and was soon responsible for bringing the first steamship to the city – the *Llama* – which started the city’s successful era as a riverport.<sup>3</sup>

Several African-American slaves accompanied Perry and his family to Jefferson, and so he provided to his slaves and employees, including free men of color, a block of Jefferson property defined by cartographer Hugh Henesey as Block 86 from January 6, 1846.<sup>4</sup> On the quarter block fronting Houston Street, the house of worship for African-Americans affiliated with Perry and other developers of Jefferson was erected soon after the Urquhart-Durham Dispute, Compromise, and Settlement ending March, 1847.<sup>5</sup> Such an arrangement was not uncommon; slaves, despite their terrible circumstances, often established institutions of worship, in many cases with assistance from their owners.<sup>6</sup>

A formal congregation, the Union Missionary Baptist Church, was established there in 1868 by Reverend Duncan, and was built using native cypress lumber.<sup>7</sup>

As property changed hands in Jefferson, the congregation continued to worship at the church at the mercy of the current owner. The land was eventually deeded to the congregation in 1883 by Mr. L.S. Schluter, one of Jefferson’s prominent citizens; the church would finally own the land where their sanctuary was located. The deed to the property reads, “*The State of Texas, County of Marion. Know all men by these presents that L. S. Schluter of the County of Marion*

*and State of Texas in consideration of the sum of fifty dollars to use in land paid Jordan Tice, Henry Bayley and Don Word as trustees of the Union Missionary Baptist Church (colored) of Jefferson Texas. Having granted, sold and conveyed and by these presents do grant, sell and convey unto the said church and its trustees, and their successors forever for the use and benefit of said Church of the County of Marion and the State of Texas, all that certain lot or parcel of land lying and being situated in the City of Jefferson as drawn by Hugh Henesey for Allen Urquhart as Lot No. (8) Eight in block No. Eighty-Six (86) fronting Houston Street.”<sup>8</sup>*

The church became a cornerstone of African-American culture in post-Civil War Jefferson. The following account from the *Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Texas* describes a tragic event associated with the church:

*Jefferson, August 26, 1868: Last Friday night about 1 o'clock, Albert Browning (a Freedman), one of the quiet inoffensive citizens of our city, was taken out from his bed and in the presence of his wife and little children, his hands tied behind him and after being robbed of his money and many articles of wearing apparel, also a gun, pistol and his horse, was led a short distance from his house and shot through the head, five balls taking effect, evidently simultaneously from different guns or pistols – as but one report was heard. From there they proceeded to the African church, tied their horses and entered the enclosure and commenced breaking down the door, whereupon some Freedmen who were there guarding their church fired upon them, and they ingloriously fled, and in their confusion they dropped the gun and pistol they had taken from Browning, and some other articles of value – also Browning's horse was left tied to a stake. Since that time our city has been in a blaze of excitement, not so much on account of the assassination as from the assemblage of Freedmen at their church every night for the purpose of protecting their property, which is certainly their right, since the civil authorities fail*

*to do it. They go to their church, enter the enclosure, fasten their gates and remain very quiet, interrupting no one, not wishing to interfere with any one, provided they are left unmolested ----*

*On Monday night the excitement became most intense. Mounted men well armed were riding through this city swearing vengeance against the Freedmen at the church. The citizens called a meeting and the crowd was harangued by excited orators. D. B. Culverson, I was informed by a gentleman of undoubted veracity and who was present, attacked D. Campbell, said he had organized the Loyal League here, and that such men were accountable for all this excitement and should be held accountable for anything that might happen, etc., etc., and was generally very bitter against Radicals, and all this in a public harangue to a then infuriated crowd, at a time when Campbell had been compelled to leave his house and come to town and conceal himself as best he could at night to save his life – night after night his house was surrounded by armed men, attempted to decoy him out by professions of friendship, assuming the names of his friends, forced Freedmen from their houses and ordered them to entice Campbell out and because they refused, tortured them by putting their heads under corners of fences and keeping them until life was almost extinct. I could give you many other instances of torture for similar purposes. – The civil law is a blank here, protection we must have soon or else all Union men – I mean loyal men will have to leave this country. Matters are growing worse every day – hundred of negroes are now preparing to move to Louisiana, and I believe eventually all of them will leave this section. We need a squad of Cavalry – say 25 or 30, for the men who are committing these deeds of horror are mounted men and Infantry can never overtake them. Two mounted men dashed boldly into town yesterday and robbed a Freedman's horse and was gone in a few minutes. The civil officers started on foot to arrest them but they never – saw them – Hoping we may have protection soon. I am, Very Respectfully, Your Obedt. Servt., (sgd) W. H. Johnson<sup>9</sup>*

When Union troops occupied Jefferson following the Civil War, numerous buildings were burned, including the church. It is not clear whether the church fire was set by Union soldiers or by local subversive organization. All federal troops were removed from Jefferson by 1871, however, and by 1883 a new structure had been built on the property – the Union Missionary Baptist Church as it stands today.<sup>10</sup>

The building features a main sanctuary with a bell tower, and also has a few smaller meeting rooms behind it. Separate from the building itself is an outdoor sunken brick baptismal. The cornerstone of the building was added in a re-dedication of the church led by Reverend J.H. Patterson, and it reads:<sup>11</sup>

Union Baptist Church  
Jefferson, Texas  
Organized 1868 – Rebuilt 1883  
Rev. Patterson  
Trustees  
Jordan Tice – Henry Bayley  
Don Word

During the first forty-five years of the new church, the congregation had only eight pastors: Revs. Duncan, A.B.C. McBride, N. Beckham (who served 20 years, longer than any other pastor of that era), J.H. Patterson, J.J. Jones, R.A. Granger, H.B. Evans, and Rev. W.W. Web of Marshall, Texas. It was a place of stability – few churches in the district had such a small number of pastoral changes in the same length of time.<sup>12</sup>

The following deacons served the church during that period: Dan Heynes, Henry Bagby, A. Clark, H. Cornell, B.J. Simmons, Peter Smith, and Dan Ward. The church ordained these ministers and sent them out to preach the gospel: Revs. A. Long, Hal Hawkins, R.D. Barnett and J.C. Mitchell.<sup>13</sup>

According to a 1917 writing, the Union Missionary Baptist Church “has a membership of 180, and pays its pastor \$200 per annum.<sup>14</sup> The church has a splendid Sunday School, Star Light Band and W.H.M. Society. The church stands for the interest of the denomination in all the phases of its work.”<sup>15</sup>

Over the years, the church building had fallen into disrepair. The Sept/Oct 2003 issue of Texas Historical Commission’s The Medallion featured a photograph of the Union Missionary Baptist Church as a part of the article, “Help Needed: The THC Introduces The Endangered Landmarks Program.”<sup>16</sup> A non-profit organization consisting of congregation members and other interested parties, including the Collins Foundation – a historic preservation organization in Jefferson, are now spearheading the efforts to restore the church and preserve its African-American heritage. The Marshall News Messenger newspaper stated that, “the church’s remarkable history, started by area slaves, makes it a prime candidate for preservation and restoration as one of the oldest black churches in East Texas.”<sup>17</sup>

In Jefferson, however, opinions are mixed as to the future of this historic property, “which some have said was on the city’s roll of dilapidated structures destined for the wrecking ball.”<sup>18</sup> City Aldermen debated whether or not it should be placed on the city’s “tear-down” list, and in 2008 the City Administrator Jim Gibson stated, “the church building on Houston Street was not on the city list for destruction, but what we’re saying is that it can’t continue to exist in its present form.”<sup>19</sup>

The non-profit organization that was formed to restore the structure has been hard at work, holding community meetings and fund-raisers, and developing a roadmap for the restoration of the property. An independent contractor has reviewed the building and submitted a report to the Union Baptist Church organization, and progress continues. Restoration efforts have stabilized the building while continued preservation is examined and implemented.<sup>20</sup> At the present, the church building continues to serve as a symbol of the Marion County African-American community identity.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Efforts Under Way to Save Historic Church,” Marshall News-Messenger, July 11, 2009: p. 6A.

<sup>2</sup> Oral history of the Union Missionary Baptist Church by Myrtis Floyd, transcribed and archived by the Marion County Historical Society.

<sup>3</sup> Whittington, Mitchel. Angels of Oakwood: Jefferson’s Historic Cemetery. Jefferson, TX: 23 House Publishing, 2006: p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Handwritten deed of L. S. Schluter, April 4, 1883, Marion County Deed Records.

<sup>5</sup> Oral history of the Union Missionary Baptist Church by Myrtis Floyd, transcribed and archived by the Marion County Historical Society.

<sup>6</sup> McQueen, Clyde. Black Churches in Texas. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, April, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> “Union Missionary Baptist Church,” Jefferson Jimplecute, February 21, 2008: p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Handwritten deed of L. S. Schluter, April 4, 1883, Marion County Deed Records.

<sup>9</sup> “Miscellaneous Records Relating to Murders and Other Criminal Offenses Committed in Texas 1865 – 1868,” Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Texas, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, National Archives Microfilm Publication M821 Roll 32

<sup>10</sup> Photographic evidence of cornerstone documented by Marion County Historical Commission, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>12</sup> Kelly, A.L. Reliford. Handwritten records by Kelly from the position of Church Secretary. On file with the Marion County Historical Commission. Date unknown.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “Group Forms to Save Historic Union Baptist Church,” Jefferson Jimplecute, November 13, 2008: p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> A Brief History of Texas and Louisiana Baptist Association, author unknown, on file in the Jessie Allen Wise Archives at the Jefferson Historical Museum, Jefferson, Texas.

<sup>16</sup> “Help Needed: The THC Introduces the Historic Endangered Landmarks Program,” The Medallion, Texas Historical Commission, September/October 2003: p.10.

<sup>17</sup> “Efforts Under Way to Save Historic Church,” Marshall News-Messenger, July 11, 2009: p. 6A.

<sup>18</sup> “Group Forms to Save Historic Union Baptist Church,” Jefferson Jimplecute, November 13, 2008: p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> “Help Needed: The THC Introduces the Historic Endangered Landmarks Program,” The Medallion, Texas Historical Commission, September/October 2003: p.10.