

Early History of Local African American Communities

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, freed men and women in Montgomery County established dozens of African American settlements, but few remain intact today. A symbol of hope and faith, the church was the first institution established in a new black community, usually followed by a school and a charity hall. Fortunately, many of our historic landmark churches still proudly stand as cornerstones of their communities.

African American men and women lived, worked, prayed, and died here long before Montgomery County was formed in 1776. Between 1790 and 1860, enslaved and free blacks comprised about one-third of the total population. Roughly one-third of county landowners held slaves, most with fewer than ten. In 1860, the enslaved comprised 30 percent of the county's population, free blacks eight percent. The largest settlement of free blacks was Sandy Spring, where most Quakers freed their slaves and in 1822 conveyed land to them for a church.

After Maryland slaves were emancipated in 1864, they focused on self-sufficiency and community building. In the next half-century, African Americans established 40 settlements throughout the county. The first institution was typically a church that served as religious center, meeting place, and schoolhouse.

During the century of entrenched segregation – the mid-1860s through the mid-1960s – education provided the first civil rights arena. After Maryland established a school system for black students in 1872, class was often held in the church until a schoolhouse could be built. These “colored” schools were in a constant state of disrepair and open for a shorter term than those for whites. In the following decade, responding to constant appeals from African Americans, the School Board consolidated smaller schools into larger ones, then repeated this with a building campaign in the early 1950s.

The peak construction period for African American churches was 1890 to 1930. Congregations replaced their original buildings with modest, one-room rural frame structures, usually with a front entrance in the gable end and often a bell tower.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, another generation of leadership emerged from the churches, even though the African American population had dipped below five percent of the total county population. With passage and implementation of civil rights legislation such as school integration, fair housing, and public accommodations, barriers to black economic and social mobility began to erode.

In the past half-century, younger generations settled away from these traditional African American communities, homes were replaced or abandoned, and church membership declined. Often, when smaller congregations merged, one property was rented to a newer group or abandoned. Sizeable congregations erected new, larger churches, some of brick and modernist in style. Lodge halls and segregated schools found other uses or were razed.

Today, we are fortunate that physical evidence of these early black communities can be found in Montgomery County's historic churches. Capturing this history helps to maintain connections with family, land, and community. At the end of June, visit some of these historic sites on Heritage Days, often opened by groups that document the past and preserve what remains.