

HISTORICALLY BLACK CHURCHES

BY GEORGE BORN

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In remembrance of Black History Month, let's take a look at some of the historically black churches in Bahama Village and beyond.

A freed slave, Sandy Cornish, founded the eponymous A.M.E. Zion Church at 704 Whitehead St. in 1864. Historian Jefferson Browne wrote that Cornish frequently preached "in a voice that could be heard for blocks." The 1887 Key West City Directory noted that the church had 515 members and 300 children in Sunday school. The current building, which replaces an earlier one on the site, dates to 1894. Stylistic details — such as the twin towers, the central steeple surmounted by a cross, the steeply pitched roof and the stained-glass windows with pointed arches — recall the Gothic Revival mode, the most popular style for churches during the 19th century.

The Rev. Long organized the Bethel A.M.E. Church in 1870. Originally built at 712 Duval St., it was listed in the 1887 city directory with 325 members and 105 children in Sunday school. Destroyed by the 1909 hurricane, it was rebuilt onsite. But when a fire in 1922 claimed the second building, the congregation moved to the corner of Thomas Street and Truman Avenue. The existing structure there dates to 1925, featuring masonry walling, twin towers at the front corners and pointed-arch windows, again reminiscent of the Gothic Revival style. A comprehensive rehabilitation is currently underway, and the entire roof structure has recently been replaced.

Black, high-church Anglicans from the Bahamas founded St. Peter's Episcopal Church during the 1870s. The 1887 and 1888 city directories listed a "colored" Episcopal church at the corner of Fleming and Thomas streets, with 130 members and 100 children in Sunday school. At the same time, in 1887, the church bought a lot on Center Street, constructing a building the following year. Damaged during the 1909 hurricane, it was completely destroyed by the 1910 hurricane. The current masonry building dates to 1924, boasting such Gothic Revival elements as stained-glass windows with pointed arches, a steeply pitched roof and decorative brickwork.

St. James Missionary Baptist Church at the corner of Olivia Street and Terry Lane was first built in 1876. While the 1887 city directory listed the church with no regular minister, in the following year's edition, J. H. Croon was listed as pastor. A historic photograph shows the structure with board-and-batten siding, wood-shingle roofing, a small bell tower and louvered shutters covering the windows. The church was rebuilt in stucco in 1962.

The Newman Methodist Church at 404-410 Truman Ave. was established in 1886, and the first church was built around 1892-93. But the lot was shown as vacant again on the 1912 Sanborn map, perhaps the result of a hurricane. The church was rebuilt in 1918 under the pastorate of D. W. Demps. The existing Gothic Revival, wood-frame building features a bell tower, a steeply pitched gable roof with metal shingles and stained-glass windows with pointed arches.

The now-defunct church at 824 Thomas St. was also constructed around 1892-93. It was known as the Primitive Baptist Church or the Baptist Zion Church. By 1927-28, the Rev. Henry Mickens was pastor. The church closed during the 1970s, however, and the property became residential. But its architectural features still betray its ecclesiastical origins: A steeple rises on one corner, a

prominent entrance with double doors still faces Thomas Street and pointed-arch windows hint of its Carpenter Gothic style.

Trinity Presbyterian Church was originally the English Wesleyan Methodist Church, not identified as a "colored" church in the city directories through the 1920s. The current reinforced concrete structure dates from 1924. The change in denomination took place in 1931, when the congregation's racial composition was changing as well. The building is in the ubiquitous Gothic Revival style, displaying corner bell towers with crenellated parapets, stained-glass windows with pointed arches and a steeply pitched gable roof.

Trinity Wesleyan Methodist Church at 619 Petronia St. was built between 1926 and 1948. It, too, is in the Gothic Revival style, a wood-frame structure with a small bell tower on the corner, pointed-arch windows and a gable roof.

The church at 328-330 Julia St. was also constructed between 1926 and 1948. In the latter year, it was noted as Wesley Methodist Church on the Sanborn map, while the 1958 city directory listed it as St. Stephen's A.M.E. Church. In 1993, it was converted to commercial and residential uses. Not surprisingly, this little stone church is in the Gothic Revival style, with a steeply pitched gable roof, pointed-arch windows and a low tower.

The Church of God of Prophecy at 815 Elizabeth St. may date from the 1930s. It appears on the 1948 Sanborn map. Unlike many other churches, it makes no pretense of Gothic styling; it instead exhibits a simple-frame vernacular mode with a low-pitch gable roof and exposed rafter tails at the eaves.

The Southernmost Prayer and Faith Center at 729 Fleming St. had housed a historically white congregation, the Fleming Street Methodist Church. Later, it was vacant. A new congregation bought the old building in 1999, completing a major rehab in 2004. The reinforced concrete structure in the Gothic Revival style dates to 1912, sporting stained-glass windows with pointed arches and bell towers with crenellated parapets.

This is but the latest example in the long tradition of historically black churches in Key West, spanning over a century and a half, from the Civil War to today.

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