

Big Bethel A.M.E. Church

The Church That Grew with the City It Called Home

The year was 1847. The start of the Civil War was more than a decade away. The town at the terminus was growing fast. It was still Marthasville. But, by year's end, it would officially become known as Atlanta.

Big Bethel History

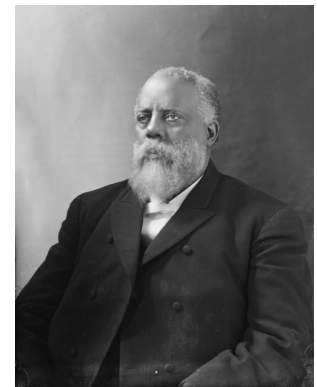


It was in 1847 that a group came together to begin building a church. Its original congregants were enslaved men and women who had been given permission to worship in a white church. Less than a decade later, though, the congregation had its own building and a name, Bethel Tabernacle. In the years to come, the church would be known by a variety of names, including *Old Bethel*, the *A.M.E. Tabernacle*, and finally *Big Bethel*.

In the years after the Civil War, Bethel Tabernacle became affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal denomination. AME, as it is often called, had formed in the early 1800's to serve Christians of African descent. It did not truly begin to build a presence in Georgia and the south until the end of the Civil War.

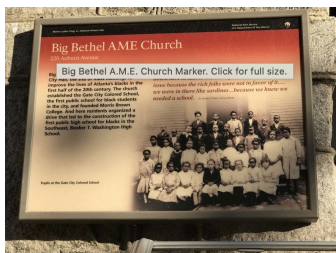
Several Bethels

By 1868, Bethel was being led by Bishop Wesley John Gaines, a figure who played a significant role in several aspects of the church's history. It was during this time that the congregation moved into its second building. The new structure had been constructed along what was then Wheat Street – later Auburn Avenue – and the then-Butler Street – now Jesse Hill Jr. Drive. Within two decades, though, the congregation had moved into its third building, where it became known as Big Bethel. In the 1920s, that building was destroyed by fire and the church's fourth – and current – home was built. It was this building where the church would add its iconic steeple, topped with blue lights spelling out "Jesus Saves."



Bishop Wesley John Gaines

Serving the Community



Big Bethel Church Marker

As being of service to those in need is a key part of the A.M.E. church, it is no surprise that Big Bethel has long made outreach and serving the community part of its mission. In its early years, groups came together at Bethel to form organizations that worked to serve the community. Known as benevolent societies, these groups included: The Daughters of Bethel Benevolent Society and the Independent Daughters of Bethel. By the middle of the twentieth century, radio listeners were able to hear the church sermons, which were broadcast on WERD. Assisting the needy is a tradition that

continues at Big Bethel today. A look at the ministries listed on its website shows no fewer than one dozen groups devoted to serving the community.

In addition to tending to the spiritual and physical needs of Atlantans, Big Bethel also played a role in meeting their educational needs. In 1879, it was the founding site for the Gate City Colored School, Atlanta's first public school for African Americans. A few years later, at the urging of Bishop Gaines, Morris Brown, the lone Georgia college started only by African Americans, began in the church's basement.



Big Bethel A.M.E. has seen its share of changes over time. Today, the church that is said to be home to the oldest African American congregation in Atlanta remains a thriving part of Auburn Avenue.

- Takeaways:**
1. Big Bethel's history goes as far back as the year Atlanta was chartered
 2. Social action has long been part of the church's mission.
 3. Big Bethel's legacy reaches beyond its campus.
 4. Big Bethel's community outreach efforts
 5. Educational legacy of Big Bethel A.M.E.

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