

St. Francis Baptist Temple and the Civil Rights Movement in St. Joseph, Missouri



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The congregation that became St. Francis Baptist Temple has played a central role in the life of the African American community of St. Joseph for more than 150 years. On December 6, 1863, Adam Demit, a Black member of the First Baptist Church was ordained as a minister, creating the First African Baptist Church.¹ This new congregation met in a building located on Francis Street between 10th and 11th streets. By 1872 there were 350 members.²

Rev. William W. Steward (Stewart) was the first pastor of the church. Little information is known about him. He is listed in the 1882 City Directory as the pastor of the African Baptist Church, living at 713 South 4th Street.³

In 1891, the church was under the leadership of Rev. Emmett L. Cohron.⁴ Rev. Cohron was born in Marion, Alabama. He moved to Lawrence, Kansas in about 1887 and served as the pastor of the 2nd Baptist Church.⁵ His first wife died at their home there on Sept. 7, 1889.⁶ He ran for the Board of Education there in 1890 and lost by only 20 votes.⁷ Rev. Cohron married for the second time on Oct. 23, 1890, to Elizabeth Salisbury.⁸ He and his family moved to St. Joseph in 1891⁹ and he was soon a well-known figure in the city. In May 1895, accompanied convicted rapist Joe Burries to the gallows in one of St. Joseph's few legal executions.¹⁰ His children attended Bartlett High School, the only high school in the city open to African Americans. In 1908 he delivered the baccalaureate sermon for the school; that year his daughter Oneta was tied for salutatorian.¹¹

During the 23 years of Rev. Cohron's pastorate, changes were made to modernize and establish the church. A substantial new building was built in 1889 and the name was changed to Francis Street Baptist Church.¹² During this period, the church emerged as a powerful voice for social change and justice, a voice it continues to exercise. In January 1902, Silome Yates, the president of the National Association of Colored Women gave a lecture at the church on the topic, "Woman as a Factor in the Solution of Race Problems."¹³ In February 1911 a large group from the Black community gathered at the church to discuss the need to create an industrial home for Black girls in order to care for and rehabilitate juvenile offenders.¹⁴ The church played host to N.C.

¹ "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years," pg. 3.

² "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years," pg. 4.

³ The house no longer stands, this area is now the location of several manufacturers.

⁴ Emmett M. Cohron (1858-Nov. 25, 1922).

⁵ Also known as Ninth Street Baptist Church.

⁶ "Died," *Evening Tribune* (Lawrence, KS), Sept. 7, 1889.

⁷ "The Election," *Lawrence Daily Journal*, April 2, 1890.

⁸ State of Kansas, Marriage License.

⁹ "Rev. E.M. Cohron Leaves," *Lawrence Daily Gazette*, July 27, 1891; "A Pastorate Closed," *Lawrence Daily Journal*, July 27, 1891.

¹⁰ "The Drop Fell at 11 O'Clock," *St. Joseph Weekly News*, May 17, 1895.

¹¹ "12 Graduate from the Bartlett H.S.," *St. Joseph Gazette*, June 1, 1908.

¹² "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years," pg. 4.

¹³ "New Society is Organized," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Jan. 19, 1902.

¹⁴ *St. Joseph News Press*, Feb. 1, 1911.

Bruce¹⁵ in September 1911; Bruce was the head of the Dalton School, an institution designed to provide agricultural and domestic service training for Blacks.¹⁶

Rev. Cohron left St. Joseph in 1912 to become pastor of the First Colored Baptist Church in Boley, Oklahoma.¹⁷ He ultimately moved to Denver where he died. His body was brought back to St. Joseph and he was buried with other members of his family in Ashland Cemetery.¹⁸



Francis Street Baptist Church, photo taken in the late 1910s

Photo Credit: "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years,"

Greene L. Prince became pastor in 1912 and served for 13 years. He was born in Princeville, Texas to Sallie Clark and Samuel Prince. He was a public-school teacher for 29 years before entering the ministry. Before coming to St. Joseph, he was pastor in churches in Oklahoma City and in Kansas City.¹⁹

¹⁵ Mr. Bruce had been the principal of Bartlett High School in St. Joseph.

¹⁶ Reading the account of Bruce's speech is disquieting. He stated: "Our people seem to find themselves better when at work with their hands and when they are trained in connection with the soil. City attractions often have deluded our people and the large sums spent for book-learning merely have been worse than wasted. The negro must at last work his own way to usefulness and respectability out on farms and in other productive pursuits, away from city life." "Work on Farm Negro's Future," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Sept. 4, 1911.

¹⁷ "Negro Preacher Gets Call," *St. Joseph News Press*, Aug. 17, 1912.

¹⁸ The location of his burial is uncertain, his obituary in the *St. Joseph Gazette* has him in Ashland Cemetery in St. Joseph; however, there is a stone for him in Denver next to his second wife. "Former Negro Pastor Here Dead," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Nov. 3, 1922.

¹⁹ "Rev. G.L. Prince Going to Pastorate in Denver," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1923.



Rev. Green L. Prince

Rev. Prince was a major force in the quest for civil rights.²⁰ In December 1912, Kathryn Johnson, representing the N.A.A.C.P. chapter of Kansas City gave a talk at Saint Francis Baptist Church to introduce the work and mission of the organization.²¹ Over the next few years, the church was the site of several talks associated with the emerging civil rights movement.²² On January 1, 1915, the church was the site for a celebration in commemoration of the 52nd anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, sponsored by the Negro Business Men's League.²³ Four hundred individuals attended the event.²⁴ The local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. was organized in January 1915. Rev. Prince was the president; B.F. Perry, Vice-President; William F. Neil,²⁵

²⁰ "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years," pg. 4.

²¹ *St. Joseph News Press*, Dec. 12, 1912.

²² *St. Joseph Gazette*, Feb. 12, 1914; "Negro Will Deliver Address," *St. Joseph News Press*, May 9, 1914; "To Speak Here for Negro Race," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Jan. 18, 1915' "On Race Problems," *St. Joseph News Press*, Jan. 19, 1915.

²³ "Fifty-Second Anniversary," *St. Joseph News Press*, Dec. 31, 1914.

²⁴ "Negroes Celebrate Emancipation Day," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Jan. 2, 1915.

²⁵ William Fred Neil (Sept. 29, 1876-Oct. 26, 1940).

secretary. The Directors were Mrs. R.L. Scott,²⁶ Prof. J.H. Sims,²⁷ Mathew Hill,²⁸ M.N. Goodson, Mrs. W.M. Webster, I.F. Ramsey,²⁹ J.D. Jones, John Franklin, and W.H. Whitsey.³⁰ In November 1915, memorial services for Booker T. Washington were held at the church.³¹

A large meeting was held at the church in March 1917 to protest a Jim Crow law that was under consideration by the Missouri State legislature. A committee was formed to organize the protest against the law.³² In July of that same year, a crowd packed the church to protest the race riots in East St. Louis. They sent telegrams “setting forth their cause and their rights to protection on the part of the government” to President Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. Rev. Prince was one of the signatories on those telegrams.³³ They vigorously denounced the violence against Blacks; however, they took pains not to rock the boat in St. Joseph. According to the *Gazette*, “Dr. Crossland³⁴ declared that there was no alarm to be felt by the negroes here, as this was the best city in the country as regards the tolerance and consideration shown by the whites.”³⁵

The St. Joseph African American community was quite active in politics, generally supporting the Republican party. Organizers frequently held meetings at St. Francis Baptist Temple with the goal of energizing and educating their community.³⁶ On January 1, 1918, Judge William Harrison, a well-known African American attorney from Oklahoma City spoke at the church about the role that Blacks have played in the protection of democracy throughout the history of the United States. Harrison exhorted his listeners, “If you don’t insist on being counted in this fight nobody counts you. The world will take you at your own price – and it has a right to do so. Put a 100 percent value on yourselves!”³⁷ In November 1919 the Colored League of Women Voters held a meeting at the church where Mrs. M.F. Cook from Kansas City spoke on “The Colored Woman and the Ballot.”³⁸ The next year, Rev. Prince’s wife, Laura,³⁹ as president of the Colored Women’s Republican Club held a meeting designed to educate Blacks on the issues of the upcoming election.⁴⁰

²⁶ Ida Morris Scott, (Oct. 31, 1858-April 12, 1955) married to Robert Lee Scott.

²⁷ When Mrs. J. Silome Yates, the president of the National Association of colored Women, visited the city in 1902, she stayed with Prof. J.H. Sims who had been her pupil in Jefferson City. “New Society is Organized,” *St. Joseph Gazette*, Jan. 19, 1902. He was a teacher in the public school system in St. Joseph.

²⁸ Mathew M. Hill (April 30, 1874-Jan. 21, 1932).

²⁹ The proprietor of Ramsey’s Funeral Home and a leading figure in the Black community.

³⁰ “On Race Problems,” *St. Joseph News Press*, Jan. 19, 1915.

³¹ “Booker T. Washington Memorial Here Sunday,” *St. Joseph Gazette*, Nov. 16, 1915; “To Memorialize Washington,” *St. Joseph News Press*, Nov. 20, 1915.

³² “Negroes to Protest ‘Jim Crow’ Measure,” *St. Joseph Gazette*, March 12, 1917.

³³ “Send Messages on Killing of Negroes,” *St. Joseph Gazette*, July 10, 1917.

³⁴ Dr. John Russel Asbra Crossland (April 24, 1864-Sept. 12, 1950). Crossland was a well-respected physician and political figure. He served as the U.S. ambassador to Liberia in 1902 and was appointed Special Expert in the Veterans’ Bureau charged with looking after the interests of Black soldiers and sailors after WWI.

³⁵ “Race Riot Condemned by St. Joseph Negroes,” *St. Joseph Gazette*, July 9, 1917.

³⁶ “G.O.P. Meetings,” *St. Joseph Gazette*, Oct. 28, 1920.

³⁷ “Appeals to Negroes to Show Patriotism,” *St. Joseph Gazette*, Jan. 2, 1918; “They Saved Teddy,” *St. Joseph Observer*, Jan. 5, 1918.

³⁸ *St. Joseph News Press*, Nov. 15, 1919.

³⁹ Laura F. Williams Prince (July 31, 1877-Feb. 20, 1939). Born in New Orleans. Married Greene in 1897.

⁴⁰ *St. Joseph News Press*, Oct. 2, 1920.

In 1924, Rev. Prince accepted a call to be pastor at Zion Baptist Church in Denver.⁴¹ From there he took a position in Galveston, Texas. In 1944 he was President of the Mary Allen College in Crockett, Texas and he established the G.L. Prince hospital in that city.

Following the short-lived pastorate of T.M. Bedford⁴² from 1925-1926; the reins of leadership passed to Rev. Custer Plato Morrow.⁴³ Rev. Morrow was born in Waxahachie, Texas to Rev. John D. Morrow and Celeste Dickens. He attended school in Dallas, Texas and earned his college degree before being ordained as a minister. Before accepting the call to come to St. Joseph he had served in Larned, Ottawa, Emporia, Abeline, and Atchison, KS.⁴⁴



Rev. Morrow's pastorate was a period of great change. In 1926, the city of St. Joseph decided to annex and demolish a great number of structures in order to clear the space for what is

⁴¹ "Rev. G.L. Prince Going to Pastorate in Denver," *St. Joseph Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1923.

⁴² Rev. Bedford is a somewhat mysterious figure. The 1926 City Directory lists him as Patrick Bedford, residing at 404 S. 17th St. It is possible that he is the Dr. P.A. Bedford who founded the San Joaquin Missionary Baptist Association in California. Rev. Bedford merits additional research.

⁴³ Custer Plato Morrow (March 2, 1886-May 17, 1949).

⁴⁴ "Death Ends Minister's Long Service," *St. Joseph News Press*, May 17, 1949.

now known as City Center Park. The Francis Street Baptist Church was one of the buildings to face the wrecking ball.⁴⁵ In 1927, the congregation purchased property at 17th and Angelique Streets and renamed itself as Saint Francis Baptist Temple. They built an impressive brick structure at a cost of \$80,000 (the debt was fully paid off in 1946).⁴⁶ The new church opened on April 8, 1928.⁴⁷



Important issues continued to be of concern to the church. In March 1926, the N.A.A.C.P. held a meeting at the church to support the anti-lynching bill of Senator McKinley of Illinois.⁴⁸ The church served as a base of operations for the N.A.A.C.P. in St. Joseph as that organization sought to increase its membership through recruitment in the Black churches.⁴⁹ On June 9, 1927, the Mayor of St. Joseph, Louis V. Stigall spoke at Francis Street Baptist Church in support of the work of the N.A.A.C.P.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ “St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years,” pg. 5.

⁴⁶ “Death Ends Minister’s Long Service,” *St. Joseph News Press*, May 17, 1949.

⁴⁷ “St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years,” pg. 5.

⁴⁸ “Favor Measure Against Lynching,” *St. Joseph Gazette*, March 8, 1926.

⁴⁹ “Negro Drive Next Week,” *St. Joseph News Press*, Sept. 18, 1926; “Negroes Having ‘Drive,’” *St. Joseph Gazette*, May 4, 1927.

⁵⁰ “Stigall Will Speak,” *St. Joseph Gazette*, June 9, 1927.



Rev. Louis L. Sikes

Rev. Morrow died in 1949 and Rev. Louis L. Sikes⁵¹ led the church for the next two years.⁵² Rev. Sikes was born in Commerce, MO and came to the ministry by way of manual labor. In 1930, he was living with his mother Elizabeth in St. Louis and working as a laborer in a steel foundry.⁵³ By 1940, he was still in St. Louis and working as a laborer in an iron foundry. He was married and had a four-year-old son, Louis L. Sikes Jr.⁵⁴ He earned a bachelor of theology degree at Western Theological Seminary in Kansas City.⁵⁵ When he left St. Joseph he joined the faculty at Kansas City's Western Baptist Seminary.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Louis Lilburn Sikes (July 4, 1889-Aug. 28, 1973).

⁵² "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years," pg. 5.

⁵³ Federal Census, 1930.

⁵⁴ Federal Census, 1940.

⁵⁵ "New Pastor," *St. Joseph News Press*, July 16, 1949.

⁵⁶ "Homecoming Is at Temple Tomorrow," *St. Joseph News Press*, Jan. 4, 1958.



Rev. William A. Sparks

The departure of Rev. Sikes opened the door for the Rev. William A. Sparks,⁵⁷ who established himself as a respected city leader until his death on June 24, 1962.⁵⁸ Rev. Sparks was born in Groesbeck, Limestone County, Texas to Jim Sparks and Lucy Barrett.⁵⁹ The family worked as agricultural laborers. William entered the Baptist Academy in Ft. Worth, Texas in 1917.⁶⁰ He appears to have remained in Texas until 1942, when he moved to Kansas City and was installed as the Pastor of Progressive Baptist Church on November 6, 1942. In October 1943 he married Margaret Bessie Pulliam⁶¹ of San Angelo, Texas. She was a public-school teacher and a talented musician⁶² – both skills that would stand her in good stead in their ministry in St. Joseph. While in Kansas City, William served as the Vice President of the local N.A.A.C.P. chapter.

⁵⁷ William Alfred Sparks (Nov. 27, 1894-June 24, 1962). Following his departure from the church in 1962 he remained in St. Joseph, dying at Methodist Hospital of a perforated bladder. He is buried at Ashland Cemetery. Missouri Death Certificate.

⁵⁸ “St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years,” pg. 6.

⁵⁹ The Sparks family were enslaved by Captain Barber in Sandy, Limestone County, Texas. “The Cultural Development of Negroes in Limestone County Since 1860,” MA Thesis, Prairie View A&M College, 1951, pg. 34.

⁶⁰ “Rev. W.A. Sparks Dies in St. Joseph,” *The Call*, July 6, 1962.

⁶¹ February 6, 1902-Feb. 21, 1973. Died in Pamoona, CA.

⁶² “Announcement This Week Reveals October Marriage of Kansas City Minister to Texas School Teacher,” *The Call*, Dec. 24, 1943.



Margaret Bessie Sparks

Rev. Sparks was installed as minister at St. Francis Baptist Temple on November 11, 1951.⁶³ In 1956 he was elected as president of the Inter-denominational Ministerial Alliance.⁶⁴ In St. Joseph he also served on the human rights commission and the welfare board.⁶⁵

⁶³ "Will Install New Pastor," *St. Joseph News Press*, Nov. 3, 1951.

⁶⁴ "Dr. Sparks is Elected," *St. Joseph News Press*, Dec. 22, 1956.

⁶⁵ "Rev. W.A. Sparks Dies in St. Joseph," *The Call*, July 6, 1962.



St. Francis Baptist Temple, 1951

Photo Credit: "St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years,"

In 1957, Rev. Sparks spoke in praise of race relations in St. Joseph. He noted editorials in the *News Press* condemning discrimination and the ease with which the school district accepted integration.⁶⁶ He highlighted the work of the city's recreation department whose "fine job of good race relations and integration was according to the will and wishes of the city council and Mayor Stanley I. Dale." Rev. Sparks noted that a few drug stores in town will allow people of all races at their lunch counters. However, Jim Crow remained in place in the theaters in the city. According to Sparks: "I hope the theaters of our city will open their doors to all people in the near future. This has been done in a large number of theaters in Kansas City and other cities. Most of the hotels and restaurants have opened their doors to all people in those cities also." Sparks also stated:

"Indications are all places serving the general public will, in the very near future, serve everyone, irrespective of race or color. This is basically and morally right. I am of the opinion, shared with millions of others, that any person operating a public business forfeits the right to operate such business if he refuses to serve any person because of race or color. Negroes know they are a constitutional part of the citizens of this nation along with all other minority or majority groups. They feel it undemocratic and an injustice to be discriminated against and refused public accommodations and services... St. Joseph is moving forward in eliminating

⁶⁶ In 1954, the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* made segregation in public schools illegal. St. Joseph was the first school district in the state of Missouri to comply with the ruling. Over the summer of 1954, the two Black elementary schools closed, and Bartlett, the Black High School was converted into an elementary school. Alonzo Weston, "Integration in St. Joseph Came Quickly After Ruling," *St. Joseph News Press*, June 28, 2020.

discrimination. I believe we will do well as citizens to work together for better race relations. We can make St. Joseph one of the finest cities in the nation for all people.”⁶⁷

Through the 1960s and 1970s, Saint Francis Baptist Church appears to have taken a less overt role in the civil rights movement. The pastors and congregation continued to speak up concerning social issues and certainly furthered the movement as individuals.

In December 1962, Rev. Ernest E. Thompson⁶⁸ took up the pulpit. He had served as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army during World War II, acting as a chaplain.⁶⁹ He earned a bachelor’s degree from Drake University school of theology in Des Moines, Iowa and a further bachelor’s degree in religious education from Western Baptist Bible College in Kansas City. Before coming to St. Joseph, he held pastorates in Bonner Springs, Kansas; Kansas City, Kansas; and Jacksonville, Illinois.⁷⁰

Rev. Thompson was well respected in the city. In 1969, he gave the invocation at the annual Chamber of Commerce breakfast;⁷¹ it was very unusual for an African American pastor to be invited to perform that role. In 1970, he was the only Black minister to be part of the closing service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.⁷²

Rev. Thompson resigned in August 1970⁷³ and his position was taken by Rev. Norman S. Fiddmont who served until September 15, 1974.⁷⁴ Before entering the ministry he taught world history and geography at Lincoln High School in Kansas City.



Norman S. Fiddmont

⁶⁷ “Minister Sees Much Progress in Good Race Relations Here,” *St. Joseph News Press*, Jan. 23, 1957.

⁶⁸ May 22, 1909-Aug. 5, 1987. Born in Kansas City, MO.

⁶⁹ He continued in the reserves until his retirement in 1971.

⁷⁰ “The Rev. Ernest E. Thompson,” *Kansas City Times*, Aug. 7, 1987.

⁷¹ “250 to Attend Chamber Event,” *St. Joseph News Press*, Dec. 10, 1969.

⁷² “Final Week of Prayer Service Sunday Evening,” *St. Joseph News Press*, Jan. 23, 1970.

⁷³ “St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years,” pg. 6.

⁷⁴ “St. Francis Baptist Temple, Sesquicentennial, 1863-2013: Rooted in Faith for 150 Years,” pg. 7.

Rev. Fiddmont was at the center of some controversy in 1973 when he spoke harshly about Presidents Nixon and Johnson at a service commemorating the end of the Vietnam War. He was chastised by the *News Press* for his statement and in response he wrote a letter setting out his position. It read in part: “You are probably one of those people who have been so hung up on a war thousands of miles away that you have not been able to see that children, and especially black, here in St. Joseph, are being subjected to mental genocide, injustice, and inhumane treatment and are growing up with a real hatred for people like you because you obviously can’t see the need of ending the war on minorities, ill-housed, unemployed, ill-housed, unemployed, under-employed, poor and aged in St. Joseph.”⁷⁵

Saint Francis Baptist Temple has stood at the center of African American life in St. Joseph, Missouri for more than 150 years. Its pastors and members have stood for social justice and have spoken clearly for civil rights. This is a tradition that it continues to this day.

⁷⁵ “Replies to Letter Based on Alleged Misquotation,” *St. Joseph News Press*, Feb. 9, 1973.