

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown heroes who have made a difference.

Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church

Informally organized in 1837, the congregation at Allen Chapel African Methodist-Episcopal Church has played a significant role in Vigo County history for 168 years.



Survival has not always been easy. In 1839 founding members of the congregation—William Bass, Polly Bass, Nelson Bass, Nancy Bass, William Johnson, Mary E. Johnson and Juda Florence—enlisted the Rev. William Paul Quinn, a circuit-riding clergyman from eastern Indiana, to assist them. Later a bishop in the A.M.E. church, Rev. Quinn probably was the first pastor at the frame building on South First St., near Sheets (now Crawford) St., which served as the parish church for 31 years. In that modest structure during May 1842, Allen Chapel hosted the first Indiana A.M.E. convention and Hiram Rhoades Revels—later the first black U.S. Senator and initial president of

Alcorn State University—initiated a private subscription school. Parishioners paid 25 cents a week for each child. During the 1850s, the church was likely an important haven on the Underground Railroad.

Allen Chapel sought a new home after the Civil War, engaging architect J.W. Henson to design a facility at the intersection of Third and Crawford streets, employing ingenious means to raise funds. During March 1868, Frederick Douglass made two spellbinding speaking appearances before standing-room-only crowds at Dowling Hall to raise money for the building fund. The new church was dedicated in 1870 and, thereafter, served as a temporary sanctuary for migrant laborers seeking employment in the local iron and steel industry. The bell used in the first Vigo County Courthouse, razed in 1866, was presented to the congregation. Allen Chapel trustee Zachariah M. Anderson was Terre Haute's first black public school teacher. Using funds from the estate of Terre Haute philanthropist Deloss W. Minshall, the church was remodeled in 1902 to include a new tower at the southeast corner above the Third Street entrance.

The resilient and determined congregation sustained a devastating setback on March 23, 1913, when fire engulfed the church during the deadly Easter Sunday tornado. Though some contents, including a few of the pews and the unique tracker action pipe organ, were salvaged, it was five years before the rebuilt church could be occupied.

During the 1960s, urban redevelopment eliminated many west-side residences, impacting the size of the congregation. By the time the church was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on Sept. 5, 1975, membership had dwindled from 200 to 45, requiring parishioners to seek periodic assistance for renovation and repair.

In recent years, Friends of Allen Chapel, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving western Indiana's oldest African-American church, has spearheaded continuing restoration efforts. On Saturday, Aug. 6, 2005, the group is sponsoring an Island Hopping Party at the Chestnut Room of the Holiday Inn to raise funds to preserve Allen Chapel's historic stained glass windows. Reservations may be made by calling 466-6268.



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