

Historic Black church celebrates 160 years

June 7, 2024

RICHARDSON—On June 16, Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church—affectionately known to its members as [The Rock](#)—will celebrate 160 years of faithful Christian service and ministry.

While there is healthy discussion, Mount Pisgah member Elyse Clark said, among the closely connected African American churches in Dallas County as to who legitimately holds the title of oldest church, Mount Pisgah has records supporting their claim.



Historical Marker for Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church. (Courtesy Photo)

The congregation also has a Texas Historical Commission marker commemorating its legacy.

Mount Pisgah was founded on the third Sunday in June—June 19—of 1864, when a few enslaved people and Robert Fabius Butler, a white circuit preacher from Richardson, met under a large elm tree in the town of Alpha, in Upper White Rock, to establish a church.

The law prohibited enslaved people from congregating without the presence of a white man.

Early history and background

The congregation named the church Mount Pisgah from Deuteronomy 34:1. The newest pastor of the oldest African American church in Dallas County, S. Micheal Greene, said there are no records explaining why that name was chosen. But he speculated the hope of the Promised Land might have resonated with enslaved people in Texas in 1864.

Founding deacons at the first meeting included John Huffman, Dan Howard, Sam Fowler, William Phifer, Tobe Howard and Jack Saunders.

The founding meeting took place exactly one year before [Juneteenth](#), when federal troops led by Major General Gordon Granger, arrived in Galveston to enforce the end of slavery. The troops arrived a full two-and-a-half years after the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring enslaved people in Confederate States free, first was signed.

Upon his arrival in Galveston, Granger read out General Order No. 3, the final execution and fulfillment of the terms of the Emancipation Proclamation, informing Texas residents slavery no longer would be tolerated, and all slaves were now free.

Plantation owners were slow to abide by the order, according to [historian](#)

[Henry Louis Gates Jr.](#), often refusing to release unpaid laborers until troops arrived to make them.

The ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment brought an end to chattel slavery throughout the United States, with the exception of tribal lands, which was negotiated through separate [treaties later](#).

Descendants



Elyse Clark, great-great granddaughter of founding deacon Sam Fowler.
(Courtesy Photo)

Elyse Clark is the great-great-granddaughter of Sam Fowler, one of the founding members of Mount Pisgah who was there at the first church meeting. Members of her family have been active in Mount Pisgah for the entire life of the church.

She said nobody knows how many, if any, members of the church had heard they were declared free in 1863, but it didn't matter if they knew. Until troops arrived, there was no way to live in the freedom they'd been

granted.

Clark said not much is known about the early pastors who served Mount Pisgah, other than their names from church minutes, but sometime not long after Juneteenth, the church called its first African American pastor, Elder J.L. Wyems.

For the first 24 years, Mount Pisgah met in a brush arbor, until they voted to purchase land along White Rock Creek. Some of those years, the congregation may have shared space with White Rock Chapel Methodist Church, as well, Greene said.

In 1888, the trustees purchased an acre of land from William and Elvira Wilkerson, former enslaved people, at 14000 Preston Road, for \$10. The water well the church used at the first building remains today.

The church began construction of the limestone structure on Preston Road, where its historical marker is located, in 1943. Men from the church hauled in stones from Jacksboro, and African American carpenters Lee and Wash Grant worked with men of the church to complete the new sanctuary in 1945, according to the church history brochure.



Mount Pisgah members enjoying the new archives room. (Photo/Calli Keener)

The church still owns this building, allowing another congregation to hold services there.

Mount Pisgah moved to its current home on Sherman Road in Richardson in 2016 to accommodate their growing congregation.

Clark said eight generations of her family has attended Mount Pisgah. "It has always been a part of us."

Sam Fowler's child and grandchildren played integral parts in the church as deacons. They served in ministry and worked throughout the church.

Many of them had many children who stayed in the same place, Clark said. "It has just been an ingrained part of our lives.

"That's where you grew up. That's where you were reared. That's where you received your life training.

"That church made me who I am. That church gave me the confidence to go

out in the world ... and be comfortable in it.

“Our parents served there. Our grandparents served there, and that’s just what we do.”

But until she got older, she didn’t really understand the history of her family’s involvement in Mount Pisgah.

Archives and fond memories

Clark said one of her fondest memories growing up was on First Sunday’s when the church would have communion on Sunday evening in a special service, instead of in the morning. She said everybody would file around and shake hands and hold hands around the church and sing hymns.



Mary Ann Fowler and the cape she is wearing in the photo.
(Photo/Calli Keener)

When someone was old enough to join the church, be baptized and take

communion, it was a special thing to get to participate in that ceremony, she said. And she remembers it fondly.

The church always has been a commuter church where people came from all over. It's never been located in the middle of a community or neighborhood, Clark said.

However, it's been active in the area providing scholarships and service to homeless populations, school supplies and food bank assistance locally, as well as providing for a water well in Ghana.

The church opened a new archives space in the building with a ribbon cutting ceremony June 1 as one of its anniversary month celebrations.

Elaine Johnson serves as church historian, following the work of Jesse Arnold, who came to the church in 1937 and served as historian until 2017.

As a result of their combined commitment to acquiring and cataloguing archives and artifacts related to Mount Pisgah, and the eight-generation line of the Fowler/Turner family, the room is filled with many historical treasures.

They include a photograph of Mary Ann Fowler, wife of founding deacon Samuel Fowler, wearing a beaded cape, with the more than 150-year-old cape she is wearing in the photo displayed beside it.

Looking to the future

Greene said about 30 percent to 40 percent of the church members are descendants of Sam Fowler. Whereas legacy families can have a reputation in some churches of being entitled, that is not the case with Mount Pisgah, the pastor said.

"They're some of my most solid members," Greene said. "They've been the

most encouraging, and they have communicated how they wanted to see the church grow ... just excited about how the church is moving.”

Mount Pisgah is known for its music ministry, Greene said. “Our music ministry has always been monumental. As a matter of fact, our music minister retired after 43 years in December, so [there is] consistency in that.”

Greene is only the 15th pastor in 160 years, so consistency in ministry of all types is a hallmark of the congregation, he said.



Pastor S. Micheal Greene preaching in the current sanctuary of The Rock-Mount Pisgah. (Photo/Calli Keener)

Greene said there is something for everybody in the anniversary celebrations, such as the opening of the archives for the descendants, who he calls the “Pillars of the church,” and other history-minded members.

And, for the newer members—more than 60 have joined in the year since Greene came, mostly in their mid-40s—the church will be hosting a Sneaker Ball, where everyone dresses up in formal attire, aside from the sneakers on their feet.

Greene said pastoring at Mount Pisgah is an answer to prayer and a dream come true for him. He wanted to pastor a people with whom he identifies.

He loves the history and appreciation of tradition, but with an embrace of the contemporary, too.

Serving there means getting “to remember our past as we work together toward our future,” he continued.

“I would say, we’re not only excited about where we’ve been, but we’re eagerly anticipating where God is taking us.”