

# Saving Grace

## NEW BERN AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE TRAIL



Rue Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church

## African American Churches in New Bern

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the emergence of independent Black congregations and Black churches gave African Americans in New Bern the opportunity, for the first time, to gain control of their community’s spiritual life.

Prior to the 1830s, Black New Bernians, for the most part, worshiped alongside White congregations. Seated in separate sections of the chapel, Black ministers were, on occasion, allowed to perform services. In 1831, however, panic spread across the slaveholding South following a brutal Virginia rebellion led by Nat Turner, an enslaved preacher. States in the region, including North Carolina, enacted laws restricting the movement, marriage, and education of all Blacks, free and slave. Black ministers, especially, were banned from conducting services for fear of fomenting insurrections. Not until the Civil War did they fully grasp the chance to establish separate denominations, form new congregations, and build new sanctuaries.

## A New Providence

In 1843, Andrew’s Chapel became New Bern’s first independent Black church when the 800 parishioners were deeded the former Methodist meeting house after the White congregation built a new sanctuary. White ministers, however, continued to conduct worship services. The chapel’s role in the community gained added prominence following federal occupation in March 1862 when the sanctuary doubled as a school for Black refugees. The church served as a central gathering place for aspiring Black political leaders, such as Abraham Galloway.

The Civil War made New Bern fertile ground for northern Black missionaries. In early 1864, James Walker Hood founded the first African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E. Zion) church in the South by creating an alliance with Andrew’s Chapel. The new church was called St. Peter’s. Later that year, Clinton Chapel (A.M.E. Zion) was established in the Long Wharf area of town. Before 1864 ended, Black members at New Bern’s Christ Episcopal Church formed St. Cyprian’s, the state’s first independent Black Episcopal congregation.

Empowered by the war and emancipation, the momentum continued into 1865 when George A. Rue, a New Bern native and former member of Andrew’s Chapel, returned to establish one of the first African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) congregations in North Carolina, Bethel Church, later renamed Rue Chapel. Together with St. Cyprian’s, they held dual services in the former Christian meeting house, located at the corner of Johnson and Metcalf streets before Bethel Church built a new sanctuary in the Dryborough neighborhood.

Other distinct Black denominations emerged in the first decade following emancipation as well. In 1865, St. John’s Missionary Baptist Church was founded, followed in 1869 by Cedar Grove Baptist whose parishioners constructed a small framed church in a corner of Greenwood Cemetery. A decade later, First Presbyterian’s Black congregation established Ebenezer Presbyterian Church and built a new sanctuary on Pasteur Street. Together, these churches became the backbone of spiritual, social, and political life in New Bern’s African American community.



- 1 St. Cyprian’s Episcopal Church
- 2 St. Peter’s African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
- 3 Ebenezer Presbyterian Church
- 4 First Missionary Baptist Church (Cedar Grove Baptist)
- 5 Rue Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church



St. Cyprian’s Episcopal Church



First Missionary Baptist Church



St. Peter’s A.M.E. Zion Church



Ebenezer Presbyterian Church

Images: Encore Interpretive Design, State Archives of North Carolina, Library of Congress