

[From the foreword to Loudoun Museum's exhibition catalog, February 13 – April 30, 2000, with permission Mrs. Thompson and the museum.]

“Courage, My Soul”
Historic African American Churches and Mutual Aid Societies

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Courage, My Soul is the story of the rise of African American churches and mutual aid societies in Loudoun County during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it is much more than that. It is the story of a people, strong-willed and resilient, who created these institutions to support themselves and their communities in difficult times and to sustain their hope for a better future.

Historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., in describing the plight of Africans in America during and in the decades following slavery, gave this analysis: “By resisting, maintaining, enduring and abiding, by holding on and holding fast and holding out, they provided one of the greatest examples in history of the strength of the human spirit in adversity.”

Our ancestors, who found themselves in Loudoun County, Virginia, went on to establish institutions that we cherish today. Against all odds, they were able to survive the chaos of slavery and reconstruction and to exert more control over their destiny.

Forbidden by law to hold meetings, slaves and free people of color assembled in secret places, using unique and ingenious methods to keep their “invisible” churches hidden. Knowing that slavery was incompatible with Christ’s teachings, some denominations encouraged the “Christianization” of African Americans by sending missionaries among them, or by permitting them to worship in the balconies of white churches. Except in a few rare instances where the number of black worshipers is given, there is little recorded information available to confirm how widespread this practice was. The Old Stone Methodist Episcopal Church in Leesburg did record both slaves and free people of color by name as probationers and full members.

It was not until after emancipation that African American congregations became visible in almost all villages in Loudoun. Worshiping in open fields, private homes, schools, and other buildings, and led by circuit riding preachers, class leaders and evangelic exhorters, the fledgling congregations finally took hold.

The establishment of these churches was conflicted. On one hand, it showed that the congregations were determined to worship in peace and have control over the type of services they held by combining remnants of West African spiritual beliefs with their own interpretation of Christianity. On the other hand, this show of unity made even more obvious the lingering oppression and racism that African Americans faced daily. A brief period of hope after the Civil War was shattered by the Compromise of 1877, which brought an end to Reconstruction and enabled the subsequent Jim Crow laws to flourish unchecked.

In spite of this oppression . . . or perhaps because of it . . . between 1864 and 1900, thirty African American churches came into existence in Loudoun County. Eleven of these congregations, though segregated locally, affiliated with the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Baptist churches generally started as independent congregations and most later joined regional and national associations. The African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church also organized one church each. Of the thirty churches, some have merged and others were granted permission to leave the original churches and relocate, but in all congregations, there are people who trace their roots to these first churches.

Regardless of denomination, these early churches became the center of community life. They were the strongest institutions over which African Americans had control. They fostered a sense of ethnic identity and common interest. Here the members were treated with respect, given titles of authority and taught things not made available to them in the majority community. They were led spiritually and given hope for a better life, not only in eternity, but here and now.

During this same time period, their desire to uplift and improve the overall status of the race, coupled with the knowledge that protection from the federal government was no longer available, led to the formation of mutual aid societies in Loudoun County. Affiliated with national organizations that had sprung up around the country, the local societies, by combining their resources and talents, focused on financial and moral support for members and those in need.

Until they could construct their own buildings, the churches, mutual aid societies and schools often shared facilities. These organizations were strongholds and beacons in the community. They were buffers in a hostile world. It is for these reasons that we celebrate their accomplishments.

Painful though the memories may be and however slow the progress to forget or deny the hardships our ancestors overcame during the decades following the Civil War is to deny their contributions and sacrifices. Their examples of perseverance, faith and stamina should guide us into the new millennium armed with the assurance penned by Charles Albert Tindley, a minister who was born in 1851 and lived during the time when most of Loudoun's African American churches and mutual aid societies were established.

Courage, my soul,
And let us journey on.
Tho' the night is dark,
It won't be very long.
Thanks be to God,
The morning light appears.
The storm is passing over,
Hallelujah.