

A Window Into Our Collective History
First Baptist Church in Jefferson City, Missouri
(Presented Aug. 19, 2019 by Brian Kaylor)



During the national Angela Project gathering in Birmingham, Ala., in June, one of the speakers quoted black novelist and playwright James Baldwin: “Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it has been faced. History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history. If we pretend otherwise, we literally are criminals.”

To face our history here in the present, we must speak historical truths that may be difficult or uncomfortable. But another way of putting Baldwin’s remark would be what Jesus taught: “the truth will set you free.”

So, as we gather here for this service at First Baptist Church in Jefferson City, let us speak the uncomfortable truths about slavery right here. An analysis of the U.S. census data helps us glimpse who enslaved other persons. This is incomplete data as it only gives us a snapshot every 10 years, but even with such limited information, we have much to confess, lament, repent, and repair.

Of the first seven pastors of FBC — six before the Civil War and the first one after — four of those seven held people in slavery. The first pastor, whose portrait you can find around the corner — he’s the one that looks like Abraham Lincoln but apparently that’s where the similarities ended — that first pastor in 1840 had three enslaved persons. He served as pastor here that very year.

There is no record in the census data of the second pastor owning another person, nor is there for the third pastor. However, that third pastor, after he left here, eventually ended up in Louisville, Ky. With the clouds of war on the horizon, he preached in support of slavery. In fact, he became the de facto leader of the pro-slavery Baptists in Louisville. In 1861, he was elected from Kentucky as a member of the first Congress of the Confederate States.

The fourth pastor of FBC held two persons in slavery in 1850 — a 16-year-old girl and an 8-year-old girl. By the time the Civil War started, he was a pastor in Mississippi and he served in the Confederate Army as a chaplain. There is no record in the censuses of the fifth pastor holding enslaved persons.

The sixth pastor, who arrived at FBC in 1859 had three enslaved persons in bondage in 1850: a 50-year-old woman, an 18-year-old young man, and a 13-year old girl. Ten years later as he served here as pastor, he again had three enslaved persons, but they were three different people: a 31-year-old woman, a 9-year-old boy, and a 2-year-old boy. He left FBC suddenly in 1861 to serve in the Confederate Army, first as a chaplain and then as an officer. Thirty years later he bragged in a letter how his regiment had never surrendered during the war. He wrote: “I had the good fortune never to have lowered the Confederate flag nor the banner of the Cross of Jesus during the entire four years of my service.”

The seventh pastor arrived as the war ended and as FBC looked to rebuild after the building was used during the war by the Union Army as barracks and then a horse stable. We soon sold that building to the congregation now known as Second Baptist Church, which had been created in 1863 by black Baptists, most of whom had been part of FBC along with their slaveholders. After years of FBC leaders pleading with the federal government, FBC eventually received reparations for the old building damaged by Union forces but that had since been sold to Second Baptist.

That seventh pastor, of course, did not have enslaved persons when he arrived at FBC since they had all been set free. But he previously had two enslaved persons in 1850 — a 25-year-old female and a 12-

year-old boy. Ten years later — in 1860 — he had seven: a 37-year-old man, a 21-year-old man, a 7-year-old boy, a 9-year-old girl, two 4-year-old girls, and a 1-year-old girl.

In addition to four of the first seven pastors being slaveholders and three of them serving in the Confederacy, we also know that eight of the 11 white charter members were slaveholders. That group of 11 included the first two pastors. It also included a couple that had five enslaved persons in 1830, and a couple that had a 16-year-old enslaved girl in 1850.

It also included a pre-Civil War mayor of Jefferson City who had two enslaved young females in 1840, five enslaved persons in 1850 — a 25-year-old woman, an 8-year-old boy, a 6-year-old boy, a 3-year-old girl, and a 1-year-old girl — and then a completely different seven enslaved persons in 1860 — a 30-year-old woman, a 16-year-old girl, a 14-year-old girl, a 1-year-old girl, a 6-year-old boy, a 4-year-old boy, and a 3-year-old boy.

And another charter member — a future president of William Jewell College — had four enslaved persons in 1830, five in 1840, and six in 1850. That later year consisted of a 60-year-old woman, a 35-year-old woman, a 17-year-old girl, a 12-year-old girl, a 15-year-old boy, and a 14-year-old boy.

Another early leader at FBC donated the land on which our church now sits. He held two people in slavery in 1850 — a 24-year-old woman and a 4-year-old boy. Ten years later he apparently still had those two as well as four other enslaved persons — a 34-year-old woman, a 4-year-old boy, a 2-year-old girl, and a 1-year-old girl.

So, from those 17 early leaders of FBC, we find a total of at least 54 enslaved persons. We would certainly find many more among the dozens of other members in the first quarter-century of the church's existence.

Now, I have not mentioned any names yet. That is intentional because I want you to instead focus on the names of a few other people. We do not know the names of most of those who were part of this church while enslaved by other members. But we know a few.

In addition to the 11 white charter members of FBC, there were three black charter members. They were likely enslaved as there were only 21 free blacks in Jefferson City in 1840, or about 1.8% of the population. Meanwhile, there were 262 enslaved blacks, or about 22.3 percent of the city's population. And while the records are bit inconsistent, we do have a sense of the first names of those three — unlike white members, only one name is included in the early church records for the black members.

A woman named Jenny. A man named Adams (or perhaps Adam). And a man called General.

Immediately after the church organized, five new members joined the charter 14: three white women and two black women, Milly and Phillis. And we know that one enslaved young man held in bondage by the man who donated the land where FBC now is joined a black regiment of the Union Army during the War. That formerly-enslaved young man was named Louis.

Jenny. Adams. General. Milly. Phillis. Louis.

As we call out their names, let us remember their descendants who still experience systemic racial injustice.

Jenny. Adams. General. Milly. Phillis. Louis.

