

LVHS History Notes – February 2025

Researching Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church, A Lost Black Church in Upper Lancaster County

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Several sources from the late-1800s to the mid-1900s provide evidence that a Black church called Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church once existed in upper Lancaster County. This article shares information learned about Asbury so far, but the history is incomplete and readers are invited to add their knowledge.

Research on this Asbury M. E. Church was started several years ago by Rev. Dr. Larry E. Adams, retired pastor of the Bethel-Emmanuel United Methodist Charge, with help from Mrs. Deborah B. Walker and Mr. Maurice Simmons of Mollusk who had firsthand knowledge of the church and its people. After Adams' death in 2022, Mrs. Walker and Mrs. Margaret L. Forrester have continued his research and Mrs. Forrester is working on an Asbury book for the Lancaster Virginia Historical Society's Dunton Library for Genealogy and History.

The Lancaster County GIS Parcel Database places the Asbury Church property at the corner of River Road (Rt 354) and Western Branch Road near Mollusk. This Asbury should not be confused with another one, known at various times as Asbury Methodist Episcopal, Methodist, and United Methodist, that was founded in 1896 by a white congregation and located in Foxwells near White Stone. Bishop Francis Asbury, famous figure of the early Methodist movement, was a popular church namesake.

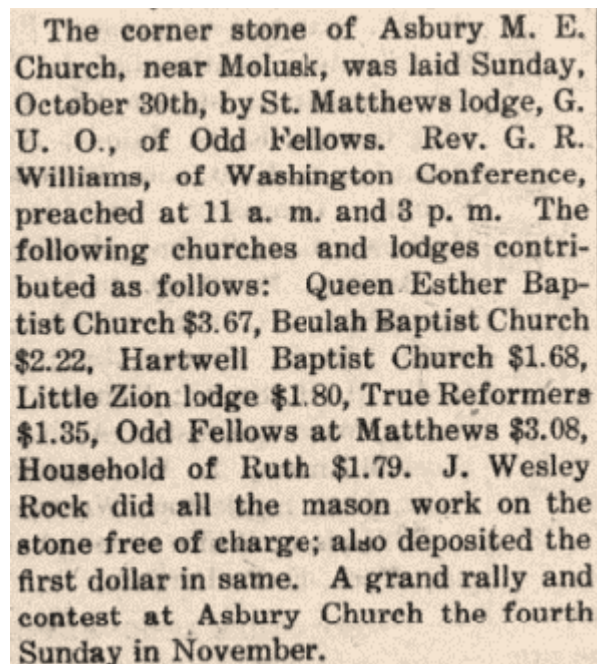
The earliest known documentation for the Black Asbury M. E. Church is a June 17, 1872 court record referencing a deed from "John R. Chilton and A. L. Carter to one John Kelley and others who were trustees of the M E Church (colored) for a lot of land one acre in size." Another court record on April 29, 1887 named John Kelley, Daniel Conaway, Lewis Corbin, and Lewis Jackson as the trustees of "a certain building known and called Asbury Church and a lot of land on which the said house stands."

There were at least two buildings on the Asbury property at different times. The first one originally housed White Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church in Lively (later renamed Bethel Methodist) from about 1814 to 1876. When a newer church was constructed for Bethel circa 1874-1876, the older building was dismantled and carried by cart and horse through a path in the woods to the Asbury land, according to Bethel historians.

On April 22, 1910, in the "Afro-American Notes" section of The Virginia Citizen newspaper, a meeting of the Asbury congregation was announced to "plan for the erection of a new building." The November 18 issue reported that the cornerstone was laid on Sunday, October 30, 1910 and Mr. J. Wesley Rock did the masonry work free of charge. Various issues of The Virginia Citizen from 1903-1911 contain other mentions of the church's members and activities such as summer camp meetings.

Researchers have also found seven state-issued death certificates from 1913-1950 that specify Asbury M. E. Church near Mollusk as the burial place. The deceased were Otha Taylor, Joseph H. Davis, Nancy Fauntleroy, Everett Fauntleroy, Polly Conaway, Charles R. Lewis, and Dalla Wright. Additionally, in a personal interview, Maurice Simmons recalled that he was a pallbearer for the funeral of Priscilla Davis at Asbury in 1950.

So, what happened to the Asbury M. E. Church building and cemetery? That and many other questions still beg to be answered. When did Asbury begin its ministry? When and why did it end? Who were the pastors and congregants? Are there any historical pictures or surviving documents such as council minutes, worship bulletins, or registers of baptisms, marriages, or deaths? If you can help tell more of the story of Asbury and its role in local Black history and religion, please contact the Lancaster Virginia Historical Society at 804-462-7280 or LancasterVaHistory.org.



The corner stone of Asbury M. E. Church, near Molusk, was laid Sunday, October 30th, by St. Matthews lodge, G. U. O., of Odd Fellows. Rev. G. R. Williams, of Washington Conference, preached at 11 a. m. and 3 p. m. The following churches and lodges contributed as follows: Queen Esther Baptist Church \$3.67, Beulah Baptist Church \$2.22, Hartwell Baptist Church \$1.68, Little Zion lodge \$1.80, True Reformers \$1.35, Odd Fellows at Matthews \$3.08, Household of Ruth \$1.79. J. Wesley Rock did all the mason work on the stone free of charge; also deposited the first dollar in same. A grand rally and contest at Asbury Church the fourth Sunday in November.

News clipping from The Virginia Citizen
Nov 18, 1910
(viriniachronicle.com)