

“Lift Every Voice and Sing:” Tolson’s Chapel, Sharpsburg, Maryland

(Music – “Lift Every Voice and Sing, till earth and heav'n ring, Ring with the harmonies of liberty; Let our rejoicing rise, high as the list'ning skies, Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.”)

Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, Ph.D – University of Maryland

I’m standing beside the restoration project for Tolson’s Chapel in Sharpsburg, Maryland. This is a United Methodist Church, what had been known as the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in the time when it was first founded in 1866. The congregation would have consisted of former slaves and freed African Americans. This is a church that came about after the Civil War; it’s one of the churches that is allowed to come into a slave state after the war has ended.

Eddie Wallace – President, Friends of Tolson’s Chapel

Sharpsburg is, of course, best known as the location of the Antietam battle of 1862 during the American Civil War. And one of the main outcomes of the Antietam battle was President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation which freed the slaves in the rebellion states in 1863. Maryland was a border state; it was a slave state that was still within the Union, and so the slaves of Maryland were not freed until 1864 by a new Maryland constitution.

Now this was an ironic twist for Jeremiah Summers and Hillary Watson who were both slaves on the Antietam battlefield during the battle. They were freed in 1864 by the new Maryland constitution. Jerry Summers and Hillary Watson were both members of the black community of Sharpsburg in 1866 when this church was established. Initially, it was a white washed log building and soon after that the board and batten siding was added. It was named for the first minister, John Tolson.

Cheryl Janifer LaRoche-

One of the things I see around the country with these black churches is that they owned the land on which the church sits, and this is one of the reasons why these churches can survive. In this case, if you look at the deed, often on the deed the trustees are listed and one of the wealthier people, one of the land holders, will often give an acre of land for the church and that is the case here, when Samuel Craig gave the plot of land on which the church sits. We see

this around the country and so the deed to the church becomes a very important historic document. In fact, the oldest continuously owned piece of property by African Americans is the church site at the AME Bethel Church in Philadelphia. There's an older site up in Nantucket in Massachusetts, but it's not a church site. But these are among the oldest structures and the place where we first see black communal efforts and black communal expression.

I do this work across the country and one of the things that we know and we see that's really clear about the black church, and particularly that you have a structure here that's standing and I cannot emphasize how important this is, the black church indicates where black communities once were. When we see a black church, usually we see the black cemetery and that's all that remains and usually that's overrun. But when we see the church and the cemetery, we know it's indicative of a once thriving community life where blacks were able to come together and worship and be in community and be together for support. So that the church stands as not only a symbol of worship, not only as one of the leading institution but it's also a civic association, it's the library, it's the social hall, it is the heart and soul of the black community before integration in particular.

The black church as an institution is a very important supporting institution for African-Americans in this time period. And so we're standing in front of not just a historic structure but the church that is of monumental importance for the history of African-Americans, for the history of Sharpsburg, and for the history of the Civil War. The black church has to be the institution, the supporting institution for African-Americans during this time period because the government has failed them and so many other institutions, in this case the state of Maryland is not that supportive of African-Americans as they come into freedom.

Education is always one of the most important aspects of what it means to be free, and even when blacks are enslaved education is, literacy is, something that is of monumental importance. One of the ways that literacy is found, one of the ways in which people attain literacy is through reading the Bible. And so any time you're at these black churches, whether they're small and rural such as this one here in Sharpsburg, or whether they are across the country, the Bible, reading the Bible, preaching the Bible is a key to literacy. And we see that here, one of the artifacts that we have that remained from the church are their early bibles.

Eddie Wallace-

In 1868, the congregation of Tolson's Chapel arranged with the Freedman's Bureau to have a teacher sent to establish a school here in the chapel. The teacher was sent in April of 1868 from Philadelphia. He was a white man; he experienced a lot of resistance here in Sharpsburg from

the white community who refused to give him room and board and so in fact he had to stay with members of the black church.

Behind me is a remnant of the liquid slate which is a 19th Century black paint that was used in place of slate board for the school activities. Tolson's Chapel continued as both church and school for the Sharpsburg black community through 1899 when the Washington County School Board finally built a school for the black community here on High Street just down the road. The church continued as a center of a very active black community here in Sharpsburg until about the middle of the 20th Century as younger members began to move to the city looking for work and older members began to die off. And by the 1970's they were holding services about once a year to raise money to keep the church in working condition and electricity flowing.

Ralph Monroe, who grew up in the Tolson's Chapel congregation, left Sharpsburg, became a Methodist minister and served in the region. He returned to Sharpsburg for his retirement and continued to care for the chapel although there was no congregation left, until 2002 when the United Methodist Church de-consecrated the building because it was no longer in use. At that time, they were looking for a group that would save this historic building. Members of Save Historic Antietam Foundation stepped forward and took ownership of the chapel while a group of interested people pulled themselves together as a non-profit group that is now called the Friends of Tolson's Chapel. And the Friends of Tolson's Chapel is in the process of the restoration of this building. In the past three years, the log structure has been restored, logs that were still good were maintained, and logs that needed to be replaced were replaced in time. The siding has been restored to the original board and batten siding. The plaster on the inside will be repaired. Other than that, the inside is in very good condition.

Cheryl Janifer LaRoche-

I walk rural cemeteries around the country, and one of the things that I am always looking for in both pre- and post-Civil War sites are Civil War graves, USCT's. Either people who left the community and came back after the war, and in this case we have one grave for a U.S Colored Troop. Wilson Middleton is buried here and although he did not fight with one of the Maryland regiments, his grave and the graves that I see around the country are indicative of the importance of the Civil War. Just as the black church is the guiding institution, and it is the support, the Civil War was viewed as the vehicle to freedom. And we see around the country that African-Americans fight for this war, they are often not buried in the USCT section for example at Arlington Cemetery, but they are here in these local cemeteries and so every time I walk a local cemetery I think of it as a Civil War grave because I know I am going to see, at one

time or another, at least one grave of a U.S. Colored Troop soldier and we have that here in the Tolson's Chapel cemetery as well.

The Tolson's Chapel project is an important restoration project. We have few standing structures from this time period, particularly this post-Civil War period. So we are saving this chapel because it is an important monument in the landscape, it is an important reminder not only of what happened before the Civil War in times of slavery, but an important reminder of the struggle for freedom, the struggle for literacy, the struggle for community, and the struggle to be fully American in the United States.

(Music – "Lest our feet stray from the places Our God where we met Thee, Lest our hearts drunk with the wine of the world we forget Thee; Shadowed beneath Thy hand May we forever stand, True to our God, True to our native land.")