



A Rich History: The History of St. James' Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Maryland

By Martin Austin

The first rector of St. James' Church, Lafayette Square, was the Rev. William Levington, a native of New York. He was ordained a deacon on March 14, 1824 and to the priesthood March 23, 1828. Both ordinations were performed by Bishop William White at St. Thomas Church in Philadelphia. It is worthy to note that Bishop White also performed the ordination of Absalom Jones, the founder of St. Thomas parish in 1795, when Levington was an infant in New York.

In the same month of his ordination to the diaconate, Levington came to Baltimore to establish a church for persons of African descent. Considering the social conditions facing people of color, this was a bold and courageous act for this young man of 30.

Levington wrote, "...with the blessings of the great Head of the Church, the twenty third of June [1824], I got a place where I performed divine service and held a day and Sunday school." This first place was at Park Avenue and Marion Street and was called the "Upper Room."

The Rev. George F. Bragg, rector of St. James' from 1891 to 1940 wrote, "And thus it came to pass that the little African babe born in New York, after having received his priestly light from the shrine of Absalom Jones, was the first of his kind to penetrate the land where slavery reigned, and successfully plant the cross of Jesus Christ, in spirit, saying as he journeyed southward, 'Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.'"

Levington was the first black priest to serve as a missionary of the church in the South. St. James' was the first black parish south of the Mason/Dixon line and was the third established black parish in the United States after St. Thomas and St. Phillips parishes in Philadelphia and New York.

From these humble beginnings St. James' Church has moved to various parts of Baltimore. The first church at North and Saratoga Streets was dedicated on March 31, 1827. In 1901 a new church was built at Park Avenue and Preston Street. At 6 o'clock Easter morning in 1932 the first service was held at the present edifice at Lafayette Square.

St. James' Church, Lafayette Square, from its inception became and has remained a guiding force in the life of the community of Baltimore.

Historical Highlights at St. James'

Highlights of the St. James' Church's rich 184 year history, which over the years has seen 28 members become ordained deacons or priests.

- 1843 First ordination held at the church
- 1899 The Rev. George Freeman Bragg Jr. founded the Maryland Home for Friendless Colored Children at 404 Courtland Street
- 1924 St. James' celebrated the 100th anniversary of the church, communicant list totaled 500
- 1932 Good Friday: last service at Park Avenue
Easter Sunday: first service at Lafayette Square
- 1933 St. James' largest confirmation class of 100 presented to bishop
- 1949 St. James' observed its 125th Anniversary
- 1959 The first woman, Mrs. Cleo Diggs, elected to the vestry, making this event a first in the Diocese of Maryland
- 1974 St. James' celebrated its 150th Anniversary
- 1988 Advent Sunday, the Rev. Michael B. Curry became rector
- 1993 June: Lightning struck the church, heavily damaging the sanctuary and destroying the rose window; two years later the congregation returned to the sanctuary
- 1999 St. James celebrated its 175th Anniversary
- 2000 Feb. 11 Curry elected to become Bishop of North Carolina
- 2002 Oct. 5 the Rev. Allen F. Robinson installed as rector

Martin Austin came to St. James' in the early 1970s. He served on the vestry and is a past rector's warden. Austin currently serves St. James' as a lay Eucharistic minister and as a Stephen Ministry leader and trainer. He also sits on the board of directors of the Episcopal Housing Corporation and serves that organization as a community developer strategist and as chair of the Personnel and Management Committee.