

By 1890 the population of Hastings had grown to 3,705 people, including immigrants from Germany, Poland, Ireland, Norway and Sweden as well as those whose parents were not listed as “foreign born” on the census record. Because many people of Swedish descent settled at the top of West 4th Street it became known as “Swede Hill” by the locals. Scattered among the “Swedes” were a few families of German and Irish parentage and the Wallace and Curry families. They were neighbors, their school age children attended Tilden school and many of the men worked together at the saw mill and other jobs regardless of their race or nationality.

Their places of worship, however, tended to be shaped by nationality as well as religious persuasion. There were the Swedish and German Lutheran churches, the German and Irish Catholic churches and a German Baptist church. The First Baptist, St. Luke’s Episcopal, First Presbyterian and Methodist churches tended to attract citizens from the New England states rather than a nationality.

Of these, the Methodist Church was the choice of the colored citizens of Hastings until October, 1890 when a meeting was held at John and Nancy Wallace’s house to discuss starting a church of their own. Reverend J. C. Anderson, a pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, had been commissioned to organize a church in Hastings. Officers elected that evening were: James Wallace, Class Leader; James Curry, Secretary; and John Wallace, Treasurer. A congregation was formed as a result of this first meeting.

An opportunity arose in late 1891 for the congregation to purchase a small frame church from the German Baptists located on the corner of Fifth and Sibley Streets. The members pledged what they could afford and then began soliciting subscriptions to help raise \$500.00, the purchase price of the property.

On December 26, 1891 The Hastings Gazette published a letter to the editor written by J.C. Anderson providing background to the newly formed African Methodist Episcopal Church. He explained that they had been meeting as a congregation in a private home and then rented rooms on the upper floor of the Hanson’s block for over a year, but...

“Experience has taught us the necessity of having a place of our own, where we may become permanently situated, and worship God according to the dictates of our own consciences without shame or fear.”

He ended the letter with a request for financial support from the community to accomplish their goal of raising \$200.00 for a down payment.

The funds were raised and on Saturday, July 16, 1892 an article in Hastings Gazette announced, “The colored people of Hastings and vicinity are making great preparations for the opening of Brown’s Chapel on the corner of 5th and Sibley on Sunday..... The people of Hastings. of whatever religious opinion, are requested and cordially invited to attend.”

Finally the big day arrived. Brown’s Chapel opened Sunday, October 17, 1892. Detailed planning had resulted in three services throughout the day. The first one was at

10:30 a.m. Rev. J.C. Anderson preached and a choir composed of colored singers from St. Paul and Minneapolis provided music.

Pastors from three Hastings churches celebrated with them for the 3 p.m. service. Reverend Lewis Llewellyn, pastor of the First Baptist Church offered prayer, Reverend E.R.Lathrop, Methodist pastor preached on, "There is no salvation without suffering", and the Reverend R. M. Donaldson, First Presbyterian spoke of the general good of an institution like this in a community. The Methodist choir conducted the singing.

Reverend J.R.James, of Minneapolis, preached at the 7:45 p.m. service and the colored choir again sang.

It was a full and memorable day for all who had helped make this dream a reality. They now had a gathering place of their own, to worship according to their traditions.

Wallaces were again in the news in October, 1893, when they hosted a wedding at their home. Hastings Gazette reported on the 19th, "Mr. Seth Austin of St. Paul, and Miss Ora Edwards, late cook at the Gardner, were married at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. John Wallace Wednesday evening, the Rev. J.P.Hearst officiating. Miss Josephine Edwards of Lakeville, was bridesmaid and Mr. Thomas Willis, of this city, best man. An informal reception was held, the happy couple leaving on the late train for their future home in St. Paul."

Thomas Willis, jr. was between 18 or 20 years old at the time of this wedding. His father, Thomas, born in Mississippi was 62, so it seems more likely that the jr. Willis served as best man in the above marriage. Thomas, sr. served in the Civil War in Co. G, 18th Colored Infantry from August 11, 1864 to August 15, 1865. He was a member of the Hastings Peller Post #89 and is listed on the Hastings Civil War honor roll. He died from Bright's disease in February, 1896. His wife Louisa and children Thomas, Ida and Anna were his survivors. The family lived on the corner of 16th and Pine. His funeral was held at Brown's Chapel.

From the September 12, 1896 Hastings Gazette "George Daniels and daughter, from South Dakota, were the guests of John Wallace Tuesday." This bit of news provides a glimpse into the lasting friendship between George and John, both veterans of the Civil War who arrived in Hastings about the same time. More than 16 years had passed since the Daniels family moved away from Hastings and settled in White, South Dakota.

"Card of Thanks", Hastings Democrat November 22, 1896 "The A.M.E. Church of this city, wish to extend to the generous people of Minnesota and Wisconsin thanks for the assistance they have rendered in contributing to the fund raised by Samuel Golden, solicitor, of Prescott, Wis., for payment on the debt on our church, which we are unable to raise ourselves. The sum raised this year is \$49.81 net. Signed by trustees: James Curry, James Wallace, John Wallace and Cornelius Peterson, Pastor."

April 10, 1897 Hastings Gazette "John Wallace will give a history of his life, with a few plantation songs, at Matsch's Hall next Wednesday evening, at seven o'clock, the net proceeds going to Brown's Chapel. Admission twenty-five cents."

March 6, 1900 John Wallace died. The next day the Hastings Gazette carried his obituary.

"Mr. John Wallace died at his home on West Fourth St yesterday, half past eight a.m. after a protracted illness, aged about seventy years. He leaves a wife and one son, James Wallace. The deceased was one of our most widely known colored citizens and had formerly been a slave. He was brought here from Kentucky by Company F, Third Minnesota Regiment in 1862 and has ever since been a resident. He was a good citizen, and by his genial manner made many friends. His familiar figure upon our streets will be greatly missed. He was a prominent member of the A.M.E. Church. The funeral will be held tomorrow."

The 1900 census was taken in June, three months after John's death. Fifteen year old Nellie Wallace was living with her Grandmother Nancy at 714 4th Street West. Thomas Willis was a boarder. Next door at 726 was William Douglas and next to him, James, Ella Wallace with their six other children were living at 746. Not quite a block away at 801 4th Street West was James and Ella Curry with their growing family. These four residences accounted for 21 of the 35 colored people counted on that census. All of them were members of the A.M.E. church and would have been at John Wallace's funeral. There can be little doubt that John's presence in that close knit neighborhood was greatly missed. Fortunately he did not live to experience the loss of the church he worked so diligently to start and support.

On October 31, 1907 the Hastings Democrat carried this news:

"Fire!! The ringing of the fire bell on Friday evening called out the fire department, when it was ascertained that the African Methodist Church was on fire, and through their efforts the fire was promptly extinguished. Upon investigation it was found that an entrance had been effected by someone through a back window by cutting the screen, and raising the sash. There were indications where kerosene had been poured over the floor, pews and elsewhere in the building so that there is no doubt that it was the work of an incendiary."

November 2, 1907 Hastings Gazette reported:

"Brown's Chapel — The African Methodist Church on Fifth Street was discovered on fire Monday evening, the work of incendiaries. The woodwork had been saturated with kerosene, and a blaze started. The floor was ruined, most of the pews badly charred, the walls and ceiling blackened and the windows broken. The department turned out, and by their prompt efforts the building was saved. There was no insurance."

Both papers agreed the fire was the work of incendiaries, but reported different days that it occurred. No newspaper articles have been found that report an investigation into who started the fire. Two years following the fire it was reported that Browns Chapel had been sold to Michael Graus for \$300.00.

The next and last article of this series will cover the exodus of black families from Hastings.

Possible Sidebar:

The African Methodist Episcopal Church was started in 1787 in Philadelphia by Richard Allen. He was born a slave in Philadelphia in 1760 and was sold as a child to Stokeley Sturgis near Dover, Delaware where he was converted to Christianity by Methodist preachers who aimed their preaching toward black slaves. He eventually bought his freedom and became a Methodist preacher himself. His experience of extreme racism at St. Georges Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and other attempts by white Wesleyan clergy to assert control over his African Methodist congregation prompted him to found the African Methodist Episcopal Church. As a denomination created because of racial oppression, the AME Church fashioned a distinctive ministry to the African American population throughout the states. It was this ministry that brought Reverend J.C. Anderson to Minnesota.

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