



## **First African Baptist Church History (S0006)**

**Collection Number:** S0006

**Collection Title:** First African Baptist Church History

**Dates:** 1974

**Creator:** First Baptist Church – St. Louis

**Abstract:** The First African Baptist Church History contains a four-page document that briefly describes the history of African Americans in St. Louis as well as the First African Baptist Church in St. Louis. The church was founded in 1827 by Reverend John Berry Meachum and is the oldest African-American church west of the Mississippi River. Many of the original congregation consisted of slaves, who were permitted by their owners to attend. A physical church was built two years following the organization's inception and went through two other location changes to accommodate the rapid growth of the church's congregation.

**Collection Size:** 0.01 cubic foot  
(1 folder)

**Language:** Collection materials are in English.

**Repository:** The State Historical Society of Missouri

**Restrictions on Access:** Collection is open for research. This collection is available at [The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis](https://www.shsmo.org/research-center). If you would like more information, please contact us at [stlouis@shsmo.org](mailto:stlouis@shsmo.org). Collections may be viewed at any research center.

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**Preferred Citation:** [Specific item; box number; folder number] *First African Baptist Church History* (S0006); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis [after first mention may be abbreviated to SHSMO-St. Louis].

**Donor Information:** The papers were donated to the University of Missouri by Julia Davis on March 11, 1977 (Accession No. SA1023).

**Processed by:** Processed by AJ Medlock and Zachary Palitzsch, January 2020

**Historical Note:**

The First African Baptist Church in St. Louis was founded in 1827 by Reverend John Berry Meachum, a free African American from Virginia. In 1817, Reverend John Mason Peck established the First Baptist Mission in St. Louis. Meachum attended this Mission and became an ordained minister in 1825 by Reverend Peck. Two years later, Rev. Meachum established the First African Baptist Church in St. Louis, starting with a congregation of only 14, becoming the first African-American church west of the Mississippi River. Within the two years following the church's founding, the congregation grew to over 220 people, 200 of them slaves who attended with the permission of their owners. Because of the church's rapid growth, Reverend Meachum purchased a plot of land in St. Louis at the intersection of Third and Almond Street, becoming the church's first building.

In 1825, St. Louis passed an ordinance that made it illegal for African Americans to assemble without a permit from the city and a police officer present, making education difficult. Reverend Meachum began a school for African Americans, teaching secretly in the basement of the church and was eventually broken up by the police in 1847. Historians have speculated that as a result of the school being shut down, Reverend Meachum built his own steamboat called the "Floating Freedom School," anchoring it in the middle of the Mississippi River, which was the property of the Federal Government, making the new school out of St. Louis' jurisdiction.

By the 1840s, the church grew to over 500 congregants. In 1848, to accommodate for the large church population, Rev. Meachum bought property one block away from the original location, between Fourth and Fifth Street, and built the new building there. Reverend Meachum died six years later in 1854 while he was giving a sermon in his church. In 1917, the church moved once more to its current location at 3100 Bell Avenue.

**Arrangement:** This collection has been arranged into a single folder.

**Scope and Content Note:**

This collection contains a four-page document describing a brief history of the African-American settlers in St. Louis, a brief history of the church and its previous pastors, and notes on "John Berry Meachum - Pathfinder and Builder," a radio show taking place in the 1950s. The histories also document the life of Reverend John Berry Meachum, founder of First African Baptist Church in St. Louis.

**Container List:**

Box 001    f. 1                      History of the First African Baptist Church, 1974

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