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Robert Ryland and the first African Baptist Church of Richmond : their antebellum years

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ROBERT RYLAND AND THE FIRST AFRICAN BAPTIST CHURCH OF RICHMOND: THEIR ANTEBELLUM YEARS

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ROBERT RYLAND AND THE FIRST AFRICAN CHURCH: A PART OF HISTORY

During the antebellum years, the First African Baptist Church had a significant influence on the religous and social life of Richmond Negroes. By the Civil War, several thousand blacks had been baptized under its auspices.[1] In spite of white relunctance to permit an independent organization of Negro worshipers, the black members were allowed to leave the First Baptist Church of Richmond, a fact which countered the spirit of the times and distinguished this church.[2] The Baptist Church in the South was not known for deep anti-slavery sentiments, especially after slavery became profitable.[3] In addition, after 1831 many southern whites were fearful of providing what might be fertile ground for sequels to Nat Turner's revolt at Southampton, Virginia. These whites also feared creating an atmosphere for the abolitionists' propaganda to take root.[4] In Richmond, however, these fears did not automatically control decisions on racial issues. The success, or effectiveness, of the African Church has been noted by Robert Ryland in reference to its own leaders, and by Carter Goodwin Woodson in reference to the efforts of the Baptists.[5]

Robert Ryland, while serving the First African 1841-1865, proved to be an exceptional pastor.[6] His reactions to the existance of slavery in a Christian culture differed somewhat from

many southern ministers'. Whereas J. H. Thornwell, B. H. Palmer, Thornton Stringfellow, H. B. Bascom, and William A. Smith devoted a great amount of time to defending slavery in books and sermons, Ryland tried to improve it within its framework, though he did not outwardly attempt to abolish it.[7] Believing that the Negroes should be taught to read for their religious advancement, he took an exceptional step in becoming pastor for the First African Baptist Church at the same time he was president of Richmond College.[8] Memories of this church's minister outlived the antebellum period. Although the congregation had asked for a new minister after the Civil War, they still honored their first minister through "Dr. Robert Ryland Memorial Week," Sunday, October 16 through Wednesday, October 19, 1932.[9]

THE FORMATION OF THE FIRST AFRICAN BAPTIST CHURCH

Richmond's free Negroes actually attempted to organize a church of their own in 1823. With the city's mayor and the "Master of Police" endorsing them, they petitioned the state legislature for permission to construct a building for this purpose which they wanted to name the Baptist African Church. Their request was denied.[10] This predated Nat Turner's insurrection at Southampton, the real onslaught of abolitionists' propaganda, and the black codes. Following Turner's slave revolt, state laws restricting Negro meetings posed a problem for plans to divide the white and black races into separate churches.[11]

Almost two decades later in 1841, even though Nat Turner and the abolitionists had come to trouble Southerners, the First African Baptist Church of Richmond was established when the 387 white members of the parent church, the First Baptist Church, moved to a new home at Twelfth and Broad Street.[12] The building they left behind for the blacks at the corner of College and Broad was built sometime between 1790 and the end of the century during Elder Courtney's term as pastor.[13] Rectangular in shape, it measured thirty-eight by sixty feet with its long side facing Broad Street. Additions were made in 1803 and 1827. Most of the wood used in its erection was Virginia yellow pine.[14] When the church was first built, the town was hardly urban—

and possessed only a few paved roads.[15] In 1700, when the members of the First Baptist Church initially met in Richmond, the town's population was approximately eighteen hundred.[16] This number is only about twice the size of what the First African's congregation was in 1841.[17] The church changed several times during the postwar years, rebuilding at its original site and relocating at its present site, 2700 Hanes Avenue in Richmond.[18]

In analyzing the reasons for this racial division, Rev. Jeremiah B. Jeter denoted the lack of space for accommodating the Negroes of the congregation as a major factor. The problems of instructing and discipling the Negroes also intensified the situation. He even saw the contrast in the types of preaching suited for both races as stimulus for change. Jeter further explained that taking care of "the colored portion of his flock" in addition to a large number of white members could not be done by one minister.[19] Mr. Ryland, who came to be the pastor of the First African, was a little more blunt, and probably more honest in the evaluation of the causes for the change. While he agreed with most of the reasons Jeter gave, he sensed a more rascist motive for the segregation: "... some very fastidious people," he said, "did not like to resort to a church where so many colored folks congregated, and this was thought to operate against the growth of the white portion of the audience."[20]

The Richmond community was not as eager as the First Baptist Church was for this division to occur. Jeter cited the community's opposition to the new church's formation as "a more for-

midable obstacle ... than the lack of money."[21] Many people did not like any attempt to help the slave's life because they did not want to do anything the abolitionists reccommended.[22] Despite the fact that the Baptist authorities tried to insure recognition of the black codes, state and local, by holding meetings during the day only and with whites, there were those who were not satisfied: some Richmonders tried to obtain grand jury indictments against those supporting the church, but were not successful.[23] Most opposition did fail, but nevertheless, public opinion was quick to condemn the First African whenever scandals, like escapes and murders, appeared in the newspapers.[24]

The issue of race also affected the status of the First African's legal ownership of their building. It was not a gift to the newly organized congregation, the members raising some $6,500 for it, but racial prejudice prevented an immediate transferral of the property's title. Sidney S. Baxter, who was Attorney General of the state, wrote that he thought ownership would be shakey if any of the trustees were Negroes. It was 1849 before the property was actually transferred. Then white trustees David R. Crane and Robert H. Bosher, and black trustees Jas. C. Ellis, John S. Kenney, and William Lightfoot were given charge of the transferred property.[25]

Because the Baptist authorities were skeptical about the quality of self-government of a group as large as the First African and as seemingly unprepared for the task, they decided to provide for a predominantly presbyterial church government in the constitution instead of a congregational one, charac-

teristic of Baptist churches.[26] They also assumed that this would save time in counting votes for a decision difficult to achieve.[27] Designated to head the church were its pastor and thirty deacons. These men were elected by the church from its own congregation.[28] After election, they accepted Ryland as the church's first minister.[29] These deacons lived throughout Richmond and represented the First African in their districts.[30] Examples of their involvement in all facets of the members' lives were recorded through the years in the record book. When a member of the First African Baptist Church disagreed with the verdict that the deacons handed down in his or her case, a course of appeal was offered. They could go before a body of twenty-four whites chosen by the First, Second, and Third (also known as Grace Street) Baptist Churches.[31] It happened only twice, and in neither case did the deacons fail to get approval from the supervising body,[32]

The committees also played an important role in the church's organization. In Ryland's opinion the church's major committees were concerned with the grounds, the renting out of the building, the members' debts, the relief programs, and the finances. Each committee was fairly independent of the others and reported their transactions quarterly.[33] The position of treasurer was given to George M. Attkens in November, 1841, in compliance with Article VII of the Rules of Regulation.[34]

The initial size of the First African's membership has been described by several different statistics. Jeter estimated that there were 2,000 Negroes at the First Baptist Church when he

moved to Richmond, and that the number grew a great deal under his charge.[35] He had given this large number of blacks as one of the reasons a separate church was needed: their size strained the facilities. If this were true, then there must have been a considerable number who were either unwilling or unable to leave the First Baptist and join the First African. Being an authority on the matter, Ryland originally (and later) noted in the records that the intial number of the First African was only 940.[36] Though liable to error, Ryland kept a meticulous account and breakdown of the nature of the church's gains and losses, and his figures were probably more strongly motivated. Although it was actually possible that many of these several thousand Jeter referred to may have switched a little later after their owners contemplated the idea, that 2,000 plus still seems disproportionate next to Ryland's figure of 2,766 members in September, 1855.[37]

On November 10, 1841, the announcement came to the First African's deacons from their special committee that the church had been accepted into the Dover Association.[38] The Dover Association consisted of all white, all black, and intergrated churches. The association broke down its records into gains and losses in membership, and compared the number of blacks and whites. In addition to their letter requesting admission, the people of the First African were represented by J. B. Jeter, James Thomas, Jr., and James C. Crane as one of the four new churches that year.[39] After studying the First African's request for membership, the committee of Arrange-

ments found no reason why the church should be rejected, but concluded it was the Association's responsibility to accept and help the new church.[40]

RYLAND'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS NEGROES AND AMERICAN SLAVERY

It appears that the African Church started out on what seems to be a fairly strong, though not completely untethered, foot. To envision the church's climate, it is logical to examine the minister's feelings and thoughts about the Negroes and the racial situation. Robert Ryland explained these views in his monograph The Colored People which he wrote in 1898 at the age of ninety-two, thirty-three years after his connection with the African Church had ended.[41]

Ryland, born March 14, 1805, described his youth on a large Virginia farm where he had fond memories of the Negro slaves.[42] He estimated that forty Negroes of all years lived there.[43] He had a close relationship with his nanny who nursed him and recalled enjoying invitations to eat with the slaves more than meals with his family: "It seemed," he said, "to taste sweeter than what I had eaten with the family."[44]

These earlier ties were transformed into years of service on his part. In general, while sincere, Ryland also seemed defensive about his work with the black people: "For my own part I am not ashamed to confess a long standing concern for the whole race."[45] Most likely, the public pressure contributed to the defensive nature of his writings. Ryland once was given a very poor reception by six thousand Richmonders

when he rode in a wagon across town with Negro murderess Jane Williams to her execution and prayed for her soul.[46]

It is difficult to really pinpoint Ryland's feelings about the Negro race, but it appears to be the combined attitudes of "earthly paternalism" and "heavenly equality." The first of these attitudes towards the Negroes is expressed by his remark:

> We all enjoy private opportunities to exert a kindly influence on the colored people. They are in our neighborhoods and often in our houses. With many of them we are well acquainted and know their needs, their modes of thought and life, and the best methods of approaching them.[47]

His second attitude, which deals with divine equality, is expressed quite vividly in his guidelines for preparing American Negroes to fulfill their purpose in life: "Our bodies are diverse in color but our souls, if they have any color, by nature are equally dark and by the blood of the Lamb, may be made equally white."[48]

The guidelines from which that quotation came are a key part of Ryland's philosophies about the Negroe's prescence in this country and how to orient them towards their purpose in life: he believed their prescence here was directly related to God's plans. In Ryland's mind, through the institution of slavery, God charitably bought these Africans out of a continent of darkness, imbued with slavery and war, and steeped in ignorance, to come to know what a Christian life and salvation meant. These Negroes were the people, Ryland thought, best equipped to be sent back to convert the heathen millions

of Africa: "No class of missionaries would be better adapted to the soil and climate of that continent, none could be supposed to be more anxious to accomplish the grand result, and none would be probably received with more cordiality by the natives."[49]

While Ryland in 1898 was not condemning slavery, neither was he publicly condemning abolition: "I believe the entire South is nearly unanimous in believing that it is best for both races that the Negroes have been emancipated."[50] While the accuracy of that statement is not under scrutiny here, the relationship between his work with the First African Baptist Church and that opinion is. In 1855, his printed opinion stated that he opposed the extremism and radicalism of the North concerning Negroes, and he would not let his position be used to help slaves escape their bondage.[51]

To help prepare blacks for this salvation of Africa, Ryland provided a set of guidelines for whites. Its eight points are summarized as follows: let reciprocating prejudices between the races, especially the white population's dislike "for the black skin, the curly hair," disappear among both the races through religion; be more understanding of the Negroe's weaknesses; hire them for domestic and agricultural tasks, but also, pay them willingly and on time; obtain their trust by initiating the "real kindness, but for the good of both groups segregate schools, churches, and families; strengthen the relationship between freedom and the concepts of self-support and self-reliance; create an atmosphere of help and politeness

to those experiencing a crisis; teach the importance and sacredness of wedding vows and the everlastingness of such a union in God's eyes; and last, give thirty minutes weekly toward instructing your servants for Bible reading.[52]

These guidelines present perhaps the best illustration to be found of Ryland's overall feelings towards blacks, especially his positive, though often condescending, approach towards them. His life history depicts him as an educator, very definitely as a segregationist, and not really as an abolitionist. American slavery in his opinion was not a curse, but a blessing for the Africans.

RYLAND'S PHILOSOPHIES OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION FOR NEGROES

As indicated in his guidelines, Robert Ryland believed religious education was a key ingredient in fulfilling the divine purpose of Negroes in America. He also believed that it would be best for all if these people were allowed to become more capable of knowing the gospel, that there would be a greater realization of the peace.[53] Ryland proposed two methods for the religious instruction of blacks. He cited didactic preaching as the best oral approach to them. He labeled emotional excitement without learning and information as unsuccessful.[54] Jeter concurred with Ryland about the especially strong need in this case to overcome emotion with thinking, and he praised Ryland's qualifications for the task, referring to him as "...an eminently plain, instructive, and practical preacher, dealing chiefly with the conscience rather than the passions."[55] The other method Ryland proposed consisted of using the appropriate religious writings. He asked in "Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church" what improvement would come if the Negroes' reading was not permited to complement their oral teachings.[56]

Dr. Ryland used three didactic approaches to preaching to blacks which deviated from the standard church service. With these methods, he noticed "a spirit of inquiry and shrewdness

of response" indicating concern.[57] One method provided the attendants with an opportunity to ask him questions, but only after he had made it clear that he would research later what he did not know then. Another excercise consisted of quizing them on other semons. The last method he used was quizing the brighter attendants about verses and simple theological language. By using the last method, he edited the Scripture Catechism for the Instruction of Children and Servants.[58] This was a little book he had published in Richmond in 1848 that could be used for written or oral instruction. It was divided into fifty-two different lessons or topics. Some of the major topics were the Ten Commandments, "Truth and Justice of God," Angels," "Satan," "The Depravity of Man," "Humanity of Christ," parents and children, civil authorities, master and servant relationships, conjugal relationships, and prayer and the spreading of the Gospel. Moreso than others, the lessons on the sacredness of marriage and on bondage were particularly relevant to the life of the antebellum slave. The lessons' format used in the booklet was the presentation of a yes, no question, and the correct answer along with biblical verses to support it. This style is illustrated by the following example from the section entitled "Relative Duties - Husbands and Wives:"

> 4. Does the savior condemn divorce except for one cause?
> A. Yes: And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery; and whoso marieth her which is put away doth committ adultery, Math. XIX 9.[59]

Ryland strongly believed that though didactic methods were less than "earth shattering" in brillance, they offered more sincere

chievement:

> After all, it is truth preached, and not the preaching that enlightens and saves the souls of men, and if our churches could at times, be converted into places of study, and the attendants into simple students of the Bible, more good would result than is now derived from religious orations.[60]

Ryland considered the appropriate use of religious readings to be a significant determinant in the improvement of the Negroes' souls. Attempts to supply Negro worshipers with reading instruction and materials often became controversial. Virginia had made the teaching of Negroes to read illegal to prevent their reading incendiary material written by abolitionists.[61] Ryland disagreed with this law, and was the recipient of Mayor Mayo's disapproval.[62] Ryland argued for the good of society, when he said, " greater benefits would accrue both to themselves and to society, by increasing their facilities to understand that gospel, whose maxim is 'on earth peace, good will towards men.' "[63] In 1855, he even made a plea in his second installment of "Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church" for monetary donations to buy some more religious books.[64]

Ryland had the aid of the Virginia and Foreign Bible Society in providing Bibles for the blacks to use.[65] He also gave out reading materials as prizes for memory work for Bible study. The system Ryland liked best was loaning literature on a scheduled basis for that way he reached a larger scope of people.[66] In regard to his liberal policy of religious education, Ryland tried to maintain a "middle of the road" maturity,

avoiding Northern "ultraism and recklessness, as well as southern hysteria.[67]

THE PASTOR AND HIS CONGREGATION: THEIR INTERACTION AND ACTIVITIES

The relationship between the First African's members and their pastor, Robert Ryland, was a very personal one indicating a spirit of devotion on both sides. Ryland's account of their church services, itself, conveys a feeling of great interest on his part. On each Sunday, by 1855, twelve to fifteen hundred worshipers congregated inside the First African.[68] Ryland noted the neatness of the women sitting on the pulpit's right. He appraised them as "serious, intelligent worshippers [sic]," some having "beautiful faces."[69] The men sat on the left wearing more ordinary clothes.than the ladies, but orderly nevertheless, giving an overall impression of cleanliness. The boys and girls sat together in side galleries. Often sitting in the front, were white upper class visitors.[70]

Approximately thirty of the members composed the choir placed in the front gallery. The First African's choir provided its congregation with cohesiveness through their spiritual songs.[71] These singers, spending a great deal of effort in the area of music theory, demonstrated pride in their work. The only faults judges found with the group rested with the women's singing: their voices were not delicate or soft enough. In spite of that flaw, the choir ususally drew and pleased

crowds at benefits.[72]

In an analysis of his sermons, Ryland took into account the conditions and concluded that he did his best. He further stated, " A more important post, if we regard the number, the necessities and peculiar relations of the hearers, is certainly not to be found in the country, probably not in the world."[73] Though this statement may be on the fringes of conceit, it at least demonstrates how seriously he took his congregation's needs. One of Ryland's biggest problems in a slavery oriented society was finding sufficient realistic motivation that his congregation would accept.[74]

Beside forbiding the teaching of blacks to read, Virginia state law also denied blacks the right to preach.[75] From the beginning, Ryland managed to provide the more able worshipers with an opportunity to lead the rest of the congregation in worship. During the service, he would select members to come forward and pray. Being chosen for this was a great honor, and many were good candidates for the privilege. This exercise aided them in overcoming "whining, sniffling, grunting, drawling, repeating, and hicoughing" during their orations.[76] In additior to letting the members lead the prayer, Ryland occasionally relieved himself from the pressures of his duties by inviting guest preachers and also ministerial students from Richmond College to come to the First African's pulpit.[77]

When Ryland stood at the pulpit, he noted the quality and improvement of the reception his congregation gave him. Hats were respectfully removed inside. During the fifteen years of

preaching prior to his publication of "Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church," he observed disorderly conduct only twice during sermons, and they merely consisted of whispering and laughing.[78] In general, he noticed improvement in their concepts of religion. Ryland wrote:

> They have less superstition, less reliance on dreams and vision, they talk less of the palpable guidings of the Spirit as independent of or opposed to the word of God. They have less of the 'I am right because I know I am right' feeling. They are more ready than formerly to give a reason of hope that is in them with meekness and fear.[79]

The First African's official minutes provided information on the church in areas other than the church service. A great deal of this information was collected at the business meetings and recorded by Rev. Ryland in a neat, brown suede record book. These meetings were scheduled for the first Sunday afternoon of each month with the deacons and Ryland was present as the "Moderator."[80] Each meeting was opened by prayer and then progressed.

Recognizing changes in membership was a major item of business. Notations were made of those dead, received by letter, dismissed by letter, excluded, and restored. On January 17, 1847, at a typical meeting, Henry Page and Henry Cox were excluded for theft; James Hawkins, for gambling; Sarah Hawkins and Charlotte Lover, for adultery; and Sarah Branch, Jasper Thompson, James Lewish, and Judy Burton, for drinking.[81] Other offenses that could result in exclusion were fighting, running away, failure to pay debts, rioting, and conjugal discord. The deacons seemed very dedicated to improving the morals of the

members. Three deacons were appointed to inform Brother and Sister Lightfoot that they were wanted at the next meeting simply because rumor said they were having marital problems.[82] The assigning of deacons to summon particular people was normal.. The exclusion of John and Jane Willaims for murder was one of the most serious cases and one which was not typical during this period of the church's history.[83] Moral problems seem to have taken up a great deal of the meetings and were dealt with in deatail. The records show many such investigations, and postponements and continuations of cases were often the norm, not the exception. It is interesting to note that when a member was excluded his name, the offense, and his master's name (providing he had one) were recorded. When a member was restored his name, his master's name, and the reason for exclusion were all recorded again. Through their deligence, the deacons made it perfectly clear that serious deviations from a Chritian life would not be tolerated in their church. This stern attitude, however, did not eliminate the element of forgiveness in the religion they practiced: proof of repentence and improvement could pave an ex-member's way back into the fold. In 1842, the deacons excluded sixteen and restored twenty.[84] In 1848, they excluded forty-nine and restored twenty-four.[85] In 1855, fifty-four were excluded, and thirty-six were restored.[86] The finality of their concept of exclusion seems more closely related to conditional suspension than excommunication

Linked to the problems requiring exclusions, was the problem of having too many baptisms, too soon. In fact, Ryland

deemed it as his largest problem.[87] During the span between October, 1841 to October, 1842. Ryland baptized 618 blacks. Between October, 1842 and October,1850. he baptized 1,446 blacks, and by July, 1855, the sum total was 2,382.[88] To prevent unprepared Negroes from being baptized, Ryland tried to make the process difficult for the candidates. He stated that he was obligated to this by:

> ...holding up the dangers of a premature confession, using my best efforts meanwhile to familiarize their minds with the distinctive doctrines of the gospel, and to encourage them to trust in the divine promises. Each applicant for baptism is required to converse with a deacon and to obtain his approval. He is then expected to bring from his master, if he is in bondage, a testimonial of his general propriety of conduct, or of his recent improvement in that respect.[89]

By recording the owner's names with the slaves when they were baptized, Ryland left a good source for finding the names of many of the Richmond slaveowners. Some of those Richmonders listed in 1842 were Beverly,Ann, and Eliza Blair, Dr. Haxall, D. H. Valentine, Wm. B. Randolph, W. W. Crump, Alex. H. Dabney, Wm. George, Sarah Mosbey, Robert Irby, and M. Ratcliffe.[90] Butter's directory for Richmond listed W. W. Crump as an attorney at law and D. H. Valentine as a Richmond merchant.[91] The records also indicated whether a Negro was free or enslaved. Among those baptized by First African's pastor, from June 5, 1842 to June 19, of the same year, one hundred-two were enslaved and twenty-seven were free.[92] It is also interesting to note that for the most part only a very small number of the slaves listed at that church had taken the surname belonging to their masters and mistresses.

In the years that Robert Ryland was pastor of the First African, a considerable increase in the congregation's size occurred. The figure that Ryland recorded at the end of every twelve months took into account not only additions to the roll, but also, losses through deaths, changes of membership, and exclusion. According to his computations, in 1842, the membership increased from 940 to 1604; in 1855, it increased to 2,766 in 1855; and in 1859, on the eve of the Civil War, it increased to 3,160.[93] By 1859, the average number of children going to Sunday School was 250.[94]

The finances of the church were also recorded in the book of minutes. Hundreds of dollars were exchanged through the treasury during a year, often leaving a small balance. The pastor's salary was $500 a year and the sexton's, $50. In 1846, the church obtained $620.16 from the public collections and $42.95 from society donations. After all expenses, the balance left was $62.67.[95] The finances did not always run smoothly. Ryland observed that his salary was not being delivered on time and wondered if it was too much for the members to pay. He suggested to them that in order to make prompt payments, they reduce his salary. All but one insisted on maintaining his current salary, and they consistently made their future deadlines.[96]

That type of relationship was typical between Ryland and the church committees. He had immense faith in their abilities and virtues. Ryland expressed this faith in no uncertain terms:

...I have not yet discovered one instance of an attempt

> to defraud or palpable negligence of duty, or of a want of competence to the office assumed. The man who comes among them, expecting to find things at odds and ends, and who, in his fancied wisdom, regards them as a set of simpletons, will very quickly transfer the charge of folly from them to himself.[97]

Ryland cited another example of the strong bond between pastor and congregation from one of his visits in the country, a few miles from Richmond, when he followed custom by offering the servant attending his horse a silver coin. The servant refused to accept the gift saying: "Why, sir,you are my pastor, and I could not possibly receive any thing from my pastor."[98]

Of course, in a church as large and unusual as the First African, there can be a few scandalous incidents which can do a great deal towards damaging much that the church has accomplished. Many letters were sent to the church and congregation through Robert Ryland. Some of these were from those who had left without letters of dismission from the church. Often Ryland did not know the people that the letters were for individually, so he called these members to come forward at the end of the church service. The whole congregation became familiarized with this system, and thus, Ryland felt, some people figured a differnt way to use it. Some slaves who had escaped would write back giving instructions to friends. He gave out their letter innocently with the others. An ex-convict charged slaves for help, and then charged their masters for information exposing them. This man suggested that it had been Ryland who had assisted in the escapes, bringing negative

public reactions to the church. The incident upset Robert Ryland greatly. Some of his people had used him. He became stricter about handling the letters.[99] A greater blow to Ryland was the suggestion of some whites that he try to use such letters to find out about future escapse.[100]

The other major incident which has been referred to earlier was the murder committed by Jane Williams in July, 1852. She butchered her sleeping mistress and that woman's baby. Such a crime infuriated the community. Her husband was also condemned, but Ryland thought that was a product of the people's anger.[101]

The last installment of "Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church" was the most optimistic. Here he discussed the more pious and distinctive members of the church. Bro. Nicholas Scott went north but, not liking it there, returned to Virginia. His church attendance was very steadfast and intense.[102] Joseph Abrams, a deacon, led prayers at funerals and was a very noted speaker. He was so respected that an estimated eight thousand Richmonders tried to attend his own funeral service. There were "more than fifty carriages" in his funeral procession.[103] Deacons Simon Bailey, Archibald Gwathney, and John Taylor were all referred to as being truly devout to the end of their days.[104] Ryland probably saved such sketches for last to emphasize the positive aspects of his congregation. Granted, he had problems with some of his member's moral attitudes, but they formed a minority of the church, and many of them seemed to have reformed their behavior. The

church's leaders proved to be extremely strong and dedicated, and the overall relationship between Ryland and his congregation seemed to one of almost continous harmony. He was a white not aversed to a position of close contact with slaves during the crucial years from which the Civil War was launched. His charges distinguished themselves by not revolting during the years of his service, but working towards their self-improvement and maturity in the area of self-government.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Robert Ryland, "Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, American Baptist Memorial, J. L. Burrows, ed. (Richmond, 1855), XIV, 264.

[2]Jeremiah Bell Jeter, The Recollections of a Long Life (Richmond, 1891), 209.

[3]Clement Eaton, A History of the Old South, rev. ed. (New York, 1966), 346-347.

[4]Jeter, Recollections, 209-210.

[5]Ryland, "Reminiscences," 264, and Carter Goodwin Woodson, The History of the Negro Church (Washington, 1945), 160.

[6]Old African Church (n.p., n.d.), 3, and Robert Ryland, The Colored People (Baltimore, 1898), 5. The Old African Church was a collection of articles from the Richmond Dispatch, some of which were dated in 1876.

[7]Eaton, Old South, 346-7.

[8]Woodson, Negro Church, 16, and Jeter, Recollections, 211.

[9]Jeter, Recollections, 212, and In Memoriam, Maggie Walker, ed. (Richmond, 1932), 2.

[10]Ulrich Troubetzkoy, Richmond: City of Churches (Richmond, 1957), 22.

[11]Jeter, Recollections, 202.

[12]B. E. Mays and J. W. Nicholson, The Negro's Church (New York, 1933), 23. The accuracy of the statistic of the size of the white portion of the First Baptist should be questioned since their statistic on the black members differs from Ryland.

[13]Old African Church, 2-3.

[14]Ibid., 3.

[15]Ibid., 1.

[16]Ibid., 2.

[17]First African Baptist Church of Richmond, Minutes of the First African Baptist Church, I (Oct. 2, 1842), 34-35.

[18]Old African Church, 1, and 115th Anniversary of the First African Baptist Church, Daniel Perkins, ed. (Richmond, 1956), 2, 4.

[19]Jeter, Recollections, 209.

[20]Ryland, "Reminiscences," 262-263.

[21]Jeter, Recollections, 209.

[22]Ibid., 210.

[23]Ibid., 211, 213.

[24]Ryland, "Reminiscences," 323-324.

[25]Mays and Nichols, The Hemo'e Church. 23.

[26]Ryland, "Reminiscences," 263.

[27]Ibid., 264.

[28]Ibid. In the Minutes of the First African, I (Oct. 3, 1841), (n. pg.) twenty-seven of the thirty deacons were listed as Simon Baily, Nelson Morris, Wm. Caswell, Eshum Ellis, John Taylor, Gilbert Stunt (sic), Issac Turner, Robert Spriggs, Archibald Gwathmey, Lewis Allen, John Kenney, Humphrey Osburn, Ambly Williams, Robert Wilson, James Chon, Archibald Hite, William Kenny, Thomas Allen, Joseph Abrams, Stephen Kemp, Royal Allen, Elisha Hawkins, Wallace Carter, Carter Page, John Allen, Daniel White, and V. Pleasant Price.

[29]Minutes of the First African, I (Oct. 3, 1841), n.pg.

[30]Ryland, "Reminiscences," 264.

[31]Garnett Ryland, The Baptists of Virginia, 1699-1926 (Richmond, 1955), 284.

[32]Ryland, "Reminiscences," 263.

[33]Ibid., 264.

[34]Minutes of the First African, I (Nov. 10, 1841), 7.

[35]Jeter, Recollections, 209.

[36]Minutes of the First African, I (Oct. 2, 1842), 34-34, and Ryland, "Reminiscences," 264.

[37]Ibid..(Sept. 12, 1855), 209.

[38]Ibid. (Nov. 10, 1841), 7.

[39]Dover Baptist Association, Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth Session of the Dover Baptist Association (Oct. 9, 1841), 4.

[40]Ibid. (Oct, 11, 1841), 6.

[41]It is interesting to note that on the fourth page of The Colored People Ryland stressed his dissatisfaction with the growing attitude of depending on organizations to do what he thought each individual should attempt in their own lives.

[42]Ibid., 5.

[43]Ibid., 4. Ryland and his colleagues practically never referred to the Negroes as slaves. Instead they used the terms "persons of color" and "servants."

[44]Ibid., 5.

[45]Ibid., 4.

[46]First Baptist Church, Richmond, 1780-1955, Blanche Syndor White, ed. (Richmond, 1955), 64.

[47]Ryland, The Colored People, 4.

[48]Ibid., 7.

[49]Ibid. It is intersting that slavery in Africa was one of the things Ryland thought American slavery saved the blacks from.

[50]Ibid., 6.

[51]Ryland, "Reminiscences," 292, 323.

[52]Ryland, The Colored People, 7-11.

[53]Ryland, "Reminiscences," 292.

[54]Ibid., 291.

[55]Jeter, Recollections, 212.

[56]Ryland, "Reminiscences," 292.

[57]Ibid., 291.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Robert Ryland, Scripture Catechism for the Instruction of Children and Servants (Richmond, 1848), 135.

[60]Ryland, "Reminiscences," 291.

[61]Ryland, Baptists of Va., 282.

[62]Old African Church, 11.

[63]Ryland, "Reminiscences," 292.

[64]Ibid..

[65]Ibid., 291.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid., 292.

[68]Ibid., 290.

[69]Ibid., 289.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Ibid., 290.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Ibid., 354.

[76]Ibid., 289.

[77]Ibid., 291-291.

[78]Ibid., 290.

[79]Ibid., 265.

[80]Ibid., 263-264. Ryland usually signed the minutes by name and as the "Moderator."

[81]Minutes of the First African, I (Jan. 17, 1847), 111.

[82]Ibid.

[83]Ibid. (July 18, 1855), 205.

[84]Ibid. (Oct. 2, 1842), 34-35.

[85]Ibid. (1848), 133.

[86] Ibid. (Sept. 12, 1855), 209.

[87] Jeter, Recollections, 212.

[88] Ryland, "Reminiscences," 264.

[89] Ibid.

[90] These names were taken from the records for that year at random.

[91] Butter's Richmond Directory (Richmond, 1855), 61, 163.

[92] Minutes of the First African, I (1842), 20-21.

[93] Ibid. (Oct. 2, 1842), 34-35; (Sept. 12, 1855) 209; and (Sept. 11, 1859) 2.

[94] Ibid. (Sept. 25, 1859), 2.

[95] Ibid. (Jan. 17, 1847), 11.

[96] Ryland, "Reminiscences," 321.

[97] Ibid., 264.

[98] Ibid., 322.

[99] Ibid., 323.

[100] Ibid., 324.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid., 353.

[103] Ibid., 354.

[104] Ibid., 354-355.

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