

September 22, 2010

Mr. SCOTT of Virginia: Madam Speaker, I rise today to congratulate an institution in Charles City County, Virginia. On Friday, September 24, 2010, Elam Baptist Church will celebrate its 200th anniversary, and I would like to highlight some moments from the history of the church and its contributions to our community.

The seeds of Elam Baptist were originally planted prior to 1810, when groups of African-Americans who worshipped at First Church Petersburg (now Gilfield Baptist) would meet together in canoes on the James River, holding prayer services and singing songs of praise. The father of the church, Abram Brown, donated a parcel of land where the first log hut was built and used as both a church and meeting house. The actual construction date has been lost to history, but it is known that the church was standing in 1810. This date leads historians to consider Elam Baptist to be one of the oldest regular organized churches for people of color in Virginia.

The church applied for admission into the Dover Association of churches and received it in 1813, the same year that the Rev. William Clopton was appointed the first pastor of Elam. The Church's congregation was a mix of both slaves and freed African-Americans worshipping together. While this was initially accepted, as tensions in the country grew, most of the slaves were barred by their masters from worshipping at Elam and were carried to Old Mt. Zion church, the first of many churches Elam Baptist was mother to.

Rev. James Clopton succeeded his father William. Rev. James Christian succeeded the second Rev. Clopton from 1850 to 1865. During this time, Church associations required the presence of a white pastor to lead the congregation; however, the majority of the preaching was left to Rev. Christian's black assistant, Rev. James Brown.

After the war, when there was no longer a requirement for a white pastor to lead the congregation, Rev. Samuel Brown, son of the original church father Abram Brown, assumed the pastorate as Elam Baptist's first African American pastor. He served until his death in 1881. Elam Baptist continued to grow, and by its centennial in 1910, under the direction of pastor Rev. Wesley Curl, the church was either directly or indirectly responsible for the establishment of the 12 other colored Baptist churches in Charles City County, and one in neighboring New Kent County.

This growth demanded a new worship house. The original church site became the church cemetery, and the church began erecting a new building at its current location on The Glebe Lane under Rev. John Kemp. Sadly, shortly before construction was slated to be completed in 1919, a fire destroyed the building before it could be inhabited. However the spirit of the church was not extinguished, and the church was rebuilt. A second fire in 1922 once again consumed the worship house, but the church was not daunted and rebuilt again.

Elam Baptist continued to improve its facilities, installing a front veranda, electric lighting, and baptizing pool. A monument dedicated to the founders of the Church was erected at the cemetery site, and in 1966 a multipurpose annex was erected with offices and classrooms. Elam Baptist is truly a cornerstone of the Charles City County community.

As Elam Baptist gathers to celebrate its bi-centennial, the church can truly remember its past, celebrate its present, and focus on the future with great expectations. I would like to congratulate Rev. Horace B. Parham, Jr., Elam's current pastor, and all of the members of Elam Baptist Church on the occasion of their 200th anniversary. I wish them 200 more years of dedicated service to the community.