

5th Avenue Presbyterian Church

Historical Benchmarks

Premise

- Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church genesis began in 1890 and has been nurtured for 125 years. It evolved at its peak to be one of the most influential Black Churches in the Roanoke Valley. The history of Roanoke's Black renaissance cannot be told without referencing Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church Pastors, its distinguished congregation, and its commitment to the growth and development of the community and African American youth. Therefore, these benchmarks are a glimpse of the range and stature that Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church has had on the post emancipation/reconstruction era, the city's boom period, the growth of Black Business enterprises, the movement of civil rights/equal opportunity/desegregation, and most importantly, the facilitation of the pursuit of higher education among the Black youth of Roanoke.
- **First Presbyterian Church** (formerly Roanoke Presbyterian Church) under the leadership of Dr. William Creighton Campbell gave permission to Rev. P. R. Twine to conduct group meetings and Sunday school classes for blacks to take place in the basement of the church, which gave birth to Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. **The little group consisted of Lucy Addison, Thomas T. Henry, John Riley Dupree, Jesse Wingfield, C. E. Dodson, Ervin I. Terry, and Alfred F. Brooks.**

Education:

- The preeminent educator of the colored community was Miss Lucy Addison who was a teacher in the public schools of Roanoke for thirty-three years. Just as her influence contributed to the moral, educational and spiritual uplifting of the colored race, she was instrumental in the up building of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church from its inception and served as the church's Superintendent of the Sunday school. Because of her dedication to education and to spearheading the accrediting of a high school for colored youth (Harrison High School), she is forever remembered by the newly built colored high school being name after her, Lucy Addison High School for 45 years (1928 -1973). Although the high school was converted to a Middle School, the name of the school continues to be Lucy Addison.
- Over the years the church was identified by having many public School teachers as members. At its peak, there were over 25 teachers and at least three school principals who were employed in the Roanoke Public Schools who were members of Fifth Avenue. These teachers were

instrumental in keeping the Sunday School operative, maintaining Vacation Bible school viable each summer and leading the Presbyterian Youth organization (formerly Westminster Fellowship) The Assistant Superintendent of the Colored schools, Gertrude West, who was a devote member of Fifth Avenue, upon her and her husband's death, their estate provided for the West Education Fund for the church to provide educational assistance to the youth of the church.

- The influence of excellence and education resulted in over 75% or more off Fifth Avenue youth pursuing higher education and becoming outstanding citizens wherever they settled post earning their undergraduate/graduate degrees.

Economic Development:

- The establishment of Burrell Memorial Hospital created economic independence within the segregated healthcare field. The hospital was named after Dr. Isaac Burrell who was a member of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. He was not only a practicing Doctor, he also own and operated the first pharmacy for colored people in Southwestern Virginia. After his untimely death fellow doctors came together to establish a hospital for the colored community. Two of the five founding doctors of Burrell Memorial Hospital were members of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. Of the additional doctors who practiced at Burrell, three out of the seven were members of Fifth Avenue. Also the hospital provided employment opportunities for many African American professional and para professional support staff in nursing, dietary, housekeeping, finance/billings, maintenance/grounds, and personnel. Many Fifth Avenue members were employed by Burrell Hospital.
- Within the dental profession, six of the practicing dentists of eight during 1900 to 1950 were members of Fifth Avenue.
- Hotel Roanoke was built in 1882; the Superintendent of Services from 1908 to 1947 was a member of Fifth Avenue and was influential in hiring many hospitality staff from the colored community.
- Many significant small business owners were members of Fifth Avenue which covered the following scope of services:
 - C. C. Williams Funeral Home, Mr. Williams was first black member of the Roanoke Chamber of Commerce
 - The Claytor Clinic
 - The Claytor Gas Station and Auto Repairs
 - The owner of Dumas Hotel for colored patrons.
 - The founder & CEO of the only Savings & loan company for black people (Magic City Savings & Loan
 - Founder/operator of the Star City Auditorium
 - Owner/CEO of Johnson & Reid Realty
 - Owner of Coles Beauty Supply Company
 - The owner/operator of the Virginia Movie Theater

- The law practice of George Lawrence, Esq.
 - The law practice of the honorable Ozlie Ware
 - The owner and proprietor of Calhoun Furniture Upholstery and Restoration
 - Insurance Agents & Brokers
 - Construction contractors
 - Preschool Entrepreneurs
 - Child Day Care Services
- Norfolk & Western Railroad was the largest employer in Roanoke, and at least 33% of Fifth Avenue's congregation was employed with N & W.

Civic Contributions:

- Over the years Fifth Avenue had at least four members who were appointed to the Roanoke City School Board
- Rev. L. L. Downing was first probation officer of delinquent youths of the black race and organized one of the first Boy Scout troop in 1930 at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church.
- Rev. Kearns served on the Commission on Human Relations, on Board of Directors Blue Ridge Council, Boy Scouts of America and on committees of the Red Cross and the United Fund campaign.
- Rev. James Ephraim was actively involved in community and humanitarian projects. As a board member, he served Habitat for Humanity for the Roanoke Valley, Gainsboro Project Area Committee, and the League of Older Americans. He was one of the founders and board member of the alliance for Excellence Programs for Minorities, Virginia Western Community College.
- The Rev. Dr. Vernie Bolden, Sr. served as board member of the Child and Family Services of the Roanoke Valley, The Child Abuse and Prevention Council and the Blue Ridge AIDS Support Services.
- Three members of the congregation participated on a biracial committee made up of six Black citizens and six powerful members of the white business community to desegregate department store employment and drugstore luncheon counters as well as strategically employ black people at job locations that had never hired people of color before. They had a common goal to prevent violent confrontations that other southern cities had encountered over desegregation issues.
- Because many Fifth Avenue members were movers and shakers of education, healthcare, small businesses in the Black community, the founding of most national service and social organizations within the Black community had at least one or more charter member(s) who were members of Fifth Avenue. For example, five of the charter members of Beta Chi Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. were members of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church.

Linkages to the Presbyterian Church:

- Rev .L. L. Downing was a member of the Interdenominational Ministerial Conference, a delegate to three General Assemblies and Moderator of the Synod of Catawba.

- Rev .C. Andre Kearns served Moderator and vice Moderator of the Presbytery of Southern Virginia and was the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of Southern Virginia. He served on the Synod’s permanent Judicial Committee and was a member of the General Council.
- Rev. James Ephraim served as Moderator of the Southern Virginia Presbytery, Chairman of the Mission funding and support division and as Bible teacher for the Synod School, Synod of the Piedmont
- Dr. Vernie Bolden served as chairman of the Higher and Theological Education Committee, Presbytery of the Peaks
- For over 122 years due to the civil war, the Presbyterian Church was divided between the Northern and Southern Churches. Fifth Avenue was the only United Presbyterian Church USA in the Roanoke Valley.
- When the Southern and Northern churches merged in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church USA, in due time, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church joined 7 sister congregations from the old Presbytery of Southern Virginia as charter members of the Presbytery of the Peaks, Presbyterian Church (USA)

Chronology of Pastors & Their Significant Milestones:

- **1890 – 1892; Rev. P. A. Twine** gave birth to the concept of establishing a Presbyterian church for coloreds in Southwest Virginia in the boomtown of Roanoke, Virginia. However he died in 1892 not long after the church’s official acceptance into the Presbytery. Jesse W. Wingfield, an elder, conducted religious services until a new pastor was called.
- **June, 1893 – June, 1894; Rev. J. W. Spurlock** became Pastor of a very small congregation. Due to a short illness, his pastorate ended within a year of his pastorate.
- **July, 1894- January, 1937; Rev. Lylburn L. Downing** pastorate was known for using his leadership skills, his dynamic preaching oratory, his commitment to youth development and his community and familial connections to grow the church to prominence among the clergy, other churches and within the Black community. Under his leadership a frame church was constructed on Fifth Avenue in the Gainsboro section of Northwest Roanoke on land that was initially purchased by J. H. and Lizzie Bear and given to Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church to construct its own building for worship. A major donation was received from family and friends of Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson which resulted in the placement of a memorial stain glass window in the church. It is significant to note that the inscription on the window states it is in memory of Stonewall Jackson, the man, not Gen. Stonewall Jackson, the Confederate Civil War officer. The artwork depicts a campground where the wounded Stonewall Jackson asked to be taken across the river to rest in the shade of the trees before he died. Rev. Downing’s first introduction to God was through his attendance as a slave boy at the Sunday school that was started by Stonewall Jackson and where his parents first received their Christian education slaves and learned to read and write. It was from this experience that Rev. Downing received inspiration to enter the ministry. The Rev. Dr. Downing was active in the affairs of city and state, ceaselessly striving for the betterment of mankind generally. His most cherish accomplishment was his work as being the keeper in charge of a home for delinquents that was established on High Street.

Until his death his work was responsible for reclaiming many colored youths from careers of crime.

- **1939 – 1940; Rev. H. Lawrence McCrorey** upheld the dignity of the pulpit with his peerless preaching. Because of illness, a promising ministry was cut short and he left Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in 1940.
- **1940 – 1953; Rev. William James Simmons** leadership resulted in the growth of the church from 165 to 290 and the Sunday school grew to 120, the aggregate of both was 400. He brought with him a minister of music, Mr. Troy Gorum who enhanced the music of the church as well as within the community along with the existing organist Mrs. Audrey Long Whitlock who served in this position from 1930 to 1992. A school of music was established that was affiliated with the Oxford School of Piano. Concerts were presented that featured the church's own artists, Augusta Bailey, soprano and William Dupree, tenor. Activities were sponsored exposing the congregation and others in the community to tasteful cultural events. These activities included the personal appearance of internationally famous artists in concert of Roland Hayes, tenor, and Marion Anderson, contralto. His signature of service was the increase of young adults in the activities of the church, the ordination of the church's first female Elder, Mrs. Margaret Burrell and his establishment of a building fund to fulfill his vision of a new church.
- **1955 -1970; Rev. C. Andre Kearns** led the congregation through a crucial period (1959) of the church's history, the destruction of the church by fire due to lightening and electrical malfunction of the original frame church. He provided leadership from the day of the fire to the erection of a new church located on the church's original site Patton Avenue formerly known as 5th Avenue. After fire, only a few artifacts survived the fire. The most significant of them was the Stonewall Jackson Memorial Window, the baptismal stand and two altar flower stands. These items were restored by church members; Audrey Whitlock (refreshed the stained glass window) and Leroy Calhoun (refinished the woodwork of the baptismal stand and altar flower stands to match the blond furniture of the new décor of the church.) Also, under Rev. Kearns leadership the membership increased, the Women's Association was organized and the youth organization was conceived. He concentrated on Sunday school through frequent canvassing-evangelism programs. Youth were brought into Christian fellowship and their families sometimes followed. More than 55 youth came into the church by communicant classes. These young people from various economic levels gave vitality to the congregation. Just before the conclusion of Rev. Kearns tenure with 5th Avenue, there was a burning of the mortgage which was paid off within a ten- year period.
- **1972 – 1981; Rev. William G. Heck** acceptance of the pastorate marked the first attempt of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian church to racially integrate the membership of the church. Under his leadership the church sponsored food and clothes closet with the neighboring St Paul Methodist Church. A team of Meals on Wheels volunteers carried hot meals to shut-ins; a summer neighborhood youth program was formed for Presbyterian youth as well as for youth without church affiliation. Neighborhood children attended church school on Saturday morning, boy Scouts planted a garden on the vacant lot next to the church and the church was the site for Wednesday night prayer meeting & bible study and a tutoring program for neighborhood youngsters. The women and men of the church enriched their activities with nursing home visits

once a month. Also, the church was host to the Northwest Diner's Club, a weekday dinner program conducted by the league of Older Americans. His hope for the congregation is explained in his following statements: "As we continue to move ahead, we become more realistic and hopeful. Small is beautiful. A dedicated group of Christians can accomplish a great deal"

- **1982 – 1888; Rev. James Ephraim** was outgoing, energetic and kind. He was especially gifted in communicating with youth. Under his leadership, the church membership increased tremendously. He was proud of his African American heritage and worked diligently, not only to share his knowledge, but to establish self-esteem and pride in others. He is most remembered for providing an atmosphere for the "frozen chosen" to receive the spirit of God's presence way down deep in their soul. He freed them to say amen once in a while.
- **1988 – 1991;** the church was without a pastor. During this period, the congregation was served by many visiting ministers with challenging and uplifting messages.
- **1991 -1994; Dr. Vernie L Bolden, Sr.'s** notable contribution was the establishment of the Fifth Avenue Guidance, Counselling, and Psychology Institute, a church/community program to serve the family. He brought new perspective and greater depth to the Wednesday Bible study. He conducted a special one week bible study at First Presbyterian Church. His seminars, and conferences at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian church, in the community and at local colleges have covered psychological topics as well as outstanding black personalities and their contributions.
- **November, 1996 – 1998; Rev. Michael Lynn Moore** pastorate was short served due to his sudden resignation to return to his home city of Philadelphia to attend to family obligations. He is remembered by his thoughtful sermons, his sincere calling to do God's will and his desire to be a servant leader of God's people. He was also responsible for the redesign of the pulpit layout that is currently being used today.
- **1998 – 2000;** again the church was without a pastor. Services were provided by visiting guest ministers and the Elders and Deacons provided pastoral care services when requested and needed by the congregation.
- **2000 – 2005; Rev. William T. Reinhold** was the second non-Black pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. His pastorate was received with love by the congregation due to his compassion, concern, and personal involvement with each parishioner as their friend, and spiritual leader. His emphasis was on promoting missionary involvement (he took the church youth & parents on a mission trip to Jamaica), evangelism and stressing the church's obligation to be a good and welcoming neighbor to all residents living in the surrounding neighborhood. Under his leadership, a parking lot was built and glass entrance doors were installed to replace the original wooden front and side doors which were weather beaten over the years. As pastor, he crossed the racial divide and built a racially diverse congregation.
- **2005 – 2011;** the church did not have a pastor. Services were provided by a rotation of Assistant/Associate ministers from the Loudon Avenue Christian Church, and a retired pastor emeritus. Fortunately, Rev. Ellen Woodworth, an ordained Presbyterian minister who is on the administrative staff of Fifth Avenue, provided First Sunday Communion Services until a permanent pastor was called.

- **2011 – 2014; The Shalom Parish** was established and sanctioned by the Presbytery of the Peaks. For almost three years the Rocky Mount Presbyterian Church and the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church shared Pastors. **Dr. Russ Merritt** conducted weekly 9:30am Sunday church service at Rocky Mount Presbyterian Church and 11:15am Sunday service at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. Not only did the churches share pastors but would have joint services on Christmas Eve, Maundy Thursday and joint church picnics. One Easter, the choirs of both churches presented an Easter Cantata at both churches' Easter Sunday service. The Shalom Parish enabled two small churches with memberships of cultural diverse heritages to have a rebirth of energy and life. Under Dr. Merritt's leadership, the church purchased a van and a security system. As pastor, the congregation became regular church goers due to Dr. Merritt's profound preaching and teaching from the pulpit. His daily presence at the church enabled him to visit with neighbors and encouraged many of them, especially the children and youth, to attend church and join in with our youth program activities. When Dr. Merritt accepted an interim pastor position at Northminster Presbyterian Church, the Shalom Parish dissolved.
- **2014 – 2017; Fifth Avenue was without a pastor.** The church returned to a rotation of guest ministers with Rev. Ellen Woodworth providing the First Sunday Communion service.
- **2017 to present;** The Rev. Vernie L. Bolden was appointed to become the 13th pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. Our blessings are in the making we move on as a church under the inspiration and profound vision of our new pastor

The 125 years have been filled with challenges:

- The journey to establish a Colored Presbyterian Church in Roanoke, Virginia;
- The undertaking of building a church of worship twice;
- The building of a viable, strong congregation; which spans 4 to 5 family generations within the church and within the Presbyterian denomination throughout the nation.
- The nurturing of African American youth through the metamorphosis of being Black in America;
- The impact of urban "renewal" in the Northeast and Northwest sections of the Black community resulting in the fabric of the Black community being destroyed and torn asunder and the church finding itself being an island surrounded by new faces of a rapidly changing neighborhood;
- The competition of the emergence of nontraditional churches and the decline of established denominations being more attractive to today's African American worshippers;
- Over the 125 years, the church has had a total of 17 non consecutive years when it did not have a Pastor.

A significant benchmark of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church is that its success as a church could not have happened without the Roanoke sister churches providing support and assistance along its faith's journey.

- First Presbyterian Church (formerly Roanoke Presbyterian Church) under the leadership of Dr. William Creighton Campbell gave permission to Rev. P. R. Twine to conduct group meetings and

Sunday school classes for blacks to take place in the basement of the church, which gave birth to Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church

- Mt Zion AME Church provided an alternative location for church organizing members to meet and worship.
- The Odd Fellows Building and Davis Hall served as meeting places for meetings and Sunday worship and bible study as well as at some of the founding members' homes until a church was built.
- Macedonia Seven Day Adventist Church (currently Melrose Seven Day Adventist Church) who invited Fifth Avenue to conduct Sunday worship services while the church planned its future two days after the fire. Resulting in the church never having to miss a Sunday of worship up to the day Fifth Avenue conducted its first worship service in the newly constructed Church. (this arrangement took place from 1959 to 1961)
- Second Presbyterian Church's congregation who provided a sizable donation toward the church's building fund after the fire and when the church has experienced unforeseen expenses relative to the upkeep of the church building.
- Loudon Avenue Christian Church sharing their pastoral pool of assistant/associates ministers to provide pulpit preachers while the church did not have a full time Pastor.

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church was a "mega" church in its day however, not because of its size but because of its resilience, pride and greatness as stakeholders and investors in the renaissance of the Black community. A mega church as defined in today's terms it will never be, but Fifth Avenue, if the work of the past is any indicator, will always consists of a few dedicated people trying to do many great things with God's help.

Please note that these benchmarks are probably not everything that is associated with Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. It represents a condensing of various information sources that have been summarized. It is hoped that this captures a good portrait of 125 years of history.