

## Brick Baptist Church reaches 150 years

By JILL COLEY  
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Built by black slaves for white plantation owners in 1855, St. Helena Island's Brick Baptist Church will turn 150 years old this year. Parishioners are preparing events to celebrate the historic site's anniversary.



Brick Baptist Church on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard on St. Helena Island will celebrate its 150th anniversary starting in March. *Bob Sofaly/Gazette.*

From laying the church's foundation to being forced to attend services from a second-story balcony -- out of the view of the plantation owners seated on the first floor -- 8,000 freed slaves took control of the church when Port Royal fell to the Union army, six years after its doors were opened to worshipers.

Events celebrating the church's history will begin next month with a special worship service and a three-day revival. Activities will continue throughout the year, culminating on the church's anniversary, Sept. 18.

The Civil War battle that sent white plantation owners fleeing from St. Helena Island and the church was named the "big gun shoot" by many enslaved blacks because of the booming canon fire, according church historians.

While the original white members of Brick Baptist dispersed and were absorbed by other area churches, the deed was passed to the Baptist Church of Beaufort, which charged a nominal annual lease until signing over the deed in 1973 for \$1.

The history of Brick Baptist Church is closely wound to Penn Center, one of the first school for freed slaves.

Laura M. Towne and Ellen Murray, Quaker missionaries from Pennsylvania, began teaching former slaves at the Oaks Plantation in 1862. The classes outgrew the plantation site and moved to Brick Baptist Church until the Old Schoolhouse on the Penn Center campus opened in 1864.

Over the years, Brick Baptist spawned Adam St. Baptist, First African Baptist, Faith Memorial and Ebenezer Baptist Churches.

The need for a parsonage, in order to secure a residential minister who could serve the people every day, became pressing after the turn of the 20th century.

In 1926, the church secured a \$2,000 loan from a benefactor who assisted rural churches in order to build the home. The church repaid the loan in five years, half the time allotted. Further additions include an \$180,000 fellowship hall and an educational building, both completed in 1984.

The Rev. Abraham Murray of Charleston was elected church pastor in April 2001. He became the first residential pastor in more than 28 years, moving his family to Beaufort in 2003.

Murray sees the role of the church in the community as holistic: "It's not just preaching but also reaching out to members and nonmembers, having our facilities open to the community and being a partner with the community."

The church's mission, Murray said, is "staying connected with the community, with each other and with God."