

Roanoke Public Libraries
Gainsboro Library
First Baptist Church Collection

Collection Description

Repository: Gainsboro Branch of Roanoke Public Libraries

Title: First Baptist Church Collection

Physical Characteristics: One (1) record storage box

Arrangement: The items in the folders are arranged by item type and subject, with folders being arranged alphabetically and multiple item types arranged chronologically.

Creator: First Baptist Church

Reproduction Restrictions: No known restrictions on publication. Gainsboro Library copy fees apply.

Processor: Margaret Yates, 15 January 2025

Historical Note

The First Baptist Church of Roanoke Virginia, beginning September 30, 1867, has had an extensive, century-spanning tenure of providing for the Black, Baptist Christian community of Gainsboro. As the first Baptist church in Roanoke and an integral part of Roanoke's Black history, it has been a spiritual home for many generations, with doors wide open to the minority community that established it in times when other doors were closed.

Its history began in a dwelling on Hart Avenue, Northeast, Big Lick, Virginia, before services were moved to an old hall, then to the church's first house of worship, built on Diamond Hill. The first pastor, Rev. Edmond Johnson, served the church for fourteen years (1867 to 1881), with membership increasing at a rapid pace that eventually pushed the First Baptist Church to purchase a brick church from St. John's Episcopal Church, which was moving from Old Lick to New Lick, for \$800 in 1876. The second pastor, Rev. Moses Johnson, had a short, one-year-long administration wherein the church paid off its debt of \$600.

In 1898, under Rev. Richard Jones who served from 1882 to 1904 (twenty-two years), the beloved "Old First" was built on the corner of Jefferson and Patton Avenue, Northeast, costing \$25,000, which was majorly paid off in the remaining years of Rev. Jones's pastorate. Other additions under Rev. Jones included the purchase of the church's own cemetery, the church's first organ, and the arrangement of the church's first choir.

Succeeding Rev. Jones in 1904, Rev. W. R. Brown saw the construction of pews in the balcony, the building of a parsonage on Patton Avenue, other renovations, and a cancellation of the church's

remaining \$5,000 debt from the construction of Old First. In 1915, Rev. E. E. Ricks began his time as pastor, and through his influence, Mr. Andrew Carnegie gifted the church with the installation of a \$2,500 pipe organ. Other changes were made during Rev. Ricks's time, including the installation of a steam heating plant, hymnals for the pews, individual communion service, envelope system to support individuals' gift giving to the church, and electric lights under the balcony and in the Sunday School room.

After Rev. Ricks came Rev. A. L. James, a much beloved figure in the history of the First Baptist Church. Coming to the church in October of 1919 and remaining until 1958, his extensive, over forty years of service, make for a long list of accomplishments. These accomplishments include but are not limited to: stained glass windows installed, purchase of a lot adjoining the church building, business office opened and a secretary employed, Parish Hall built, the first black Vacation Bible School (instituted in 1924), first equipped playground for black children in connection with the Vacation Bible School, noonday prayer meetings beginning in 1927, support of a missionary in Africa under the auspices of the Lott Carey Foreign Missionary Board, provided scholarship for a native African student by the church junior organization, the Busy Bee Club, published the church's only newspaper (The Church News, which was one of the first black newspapers in Southwestern Virginia, with the first saved copy in this collection being from May of 1933), and more.

In 1959, leadership was transferred to Rev. E. L. Green, who remained pastor until September of 1966. 1961 was the year the "New Church Fund" was established, and the church began to prepare for a new building, and another parsonage was bought and paid for. Also happening that year, the Day Nursery and Kindergarten was organized, and a bookkeeping and audit system went into effect.

On October 21 of 1968, the eighth minister, Rev. David Lee Collins, was installed. His time was brief, as he died suddenly in 1970, but in that time he led the church in discussing a site for the new church and guided the Bible Band Circle to launch the First Baptist Food Bank for the depressed people of the area. In 1974, when Rev. Kenneth B. Wright took over, he followed in the footsteps of 1882-installed Rev. Jones and the new church was built on Wells and Jefferson, costing more than \$1,000,000. The building was dedicated on June 20th, 1982.

In 1990, the "Old First" building was registered as a Virginia Landmark, and gained a position on the National Registry of Historic Places. Work began on turning the building into an arts center. Five years later, on Saturday, April 22, 1995, it burned.

There were several days of back and forth on the possibility of saving it before a Roanoke Times article published on the 29th urged for an investigation of the fire. President of the Historic Gainsboro Preservation District at the time, Evelyn Bethel stated that community suspicions of arson (due to the presence of an broken window) and the perception that officials had been quick to suggest the building be razed necessitated that steps be taken to ease fears and ensure the safety of future community establishments. The next day, the Roanoke Times reported that two boys, 16 and 11 years

old, had been linked to the church fire. Later documentation states that they set it alight with two wine bottles filled with gasoline, and the sudden heat had led to them breaking a window in order to escape.

In June of 1996, the church itself decided that the remains of the building should be razed. Unincluded in these records, but available with a search of “Old First Baptist Roanoke” and a click into the Virginia Tech’s online library pulls the testament of one Evelyn Bethel, who opposed the razing of Old First, even after it had been decided and done.

Scope and Contents:

- The First Baptist Church Collection is composed of one (1) box, consisting of twenty (20) folders. Within these folders is a collection of official documents, programs, booklets, news clippings, newspapers, a book enclosed in an envelope, a hymnal, etc.
- This collection contains historical documents from the First Baptist Church of Roanoke, including documentation from the National Registry of Historic Places, copies of The Church News, a compilation of works from the Rev. A. L. Jones, a hymnal, church service programs, important news clippings dating back to 1929, etc.
- The records date from a church service program from 1927 to a newspaper clipping from 2017.

Container List

Box 1 of 1

Folder 1 - A.L. James: Copied News Clippings

- Item 1- “Roanoke Pastor is AFRO Club Visitor: Rev. A. L. James, Sr., Speaker at Regular Meeting Saturday” The Baltimore Afro-American, 30 November 1929
- Item 2 - “Rich Dr. Powell No Example For Poorer Pastors: People Need Leadership as Much as Food and Money, Says Rev. A. L. James” The Baltimore Afro-American, 27 December 1930
- Item 3 - “Dr. A. L. James of Roanoke Heads VA Baptists” The Baltimore Afro-American, 27 June 1931
- Item 4 - “Church Takes to Air to Fight Depression: Rev. A. L. James Has Community Pantry” New Journal and Guide, 23 January 1932
- Item 5 - “Rev. A. L. James Named Baptist Head” The Baltimore Afro-American, 18 September 1937
- Item 6 - “18th Year as Pastor Celebrated by Dr. A. L. James” New Journal and Guide, 23 October 1937
- Item 7 - “Preacher Pledges Negroes’ Support: Calls on People to Aid in Fight for Freedom”

1941 (presumably)

- Item 8 - "Rev. A. L. James Has Served As Pastor Here for 25 Years" Roanoke Times, 6 October 1944
- Item 9 - "A. L. James is Appointed To Post on Library Board" June 1950
- Item 10 - "Rev. James Elected To Roanoke Board; Dr. Penn Ousted" New Journal and Guide, 30 June 1951
- Items 11, 12 - "Church Will Honor Pastor on Birthday" July 1952
- Items 13, 14 - "Dr. A. L. James Observes Anniversary in Roanoke" New Journal and Guide, 16 October 1954
- Item 15 - "Dr. A. L. James Says: Churches Favoring Court Ruling On Side Of Right" New Journal and Guide, 1 December 1956
- Item 16 - "Dr. A. L. James" Roanoke Times, 10 September 1968
- Item 17 - "A Glowing Tribute to Dr. A. L. James" No Date

Folder 2 - A.L. James: Works, Publications, and Related

- Item 1 - Excerpt from *History of the American Negro, Volume V*, Edited by A. B. Caldwell, Published 1921
- Item 2 - Program for the Thirtieth Anniversary of Rev. Arthur Leonard James; 9 October 1949
- Items 3, 4 - "Side Lights on Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Dismissal" by Rev. A. L. James, D.D.; 1951
- Item 5 - *Sketches of My Life and Ministry* by Arthur Leonard James, Pastor Emeritus, 1958
- Item 6 - "A Series of Brief, Quiet Talks on Prayer" by the Rev. A. L. James, D.D., Pastor Emeritus, August 1966
- Items 7, 8 - Program for the funeral service of Dr. A. L. James, 12 September 1968

Folder 3 - Church Anniversary Programs

- Items 1, 2 - Program for the 75th Anniversary First Baptist Church, 4 October 1942
- Items 3, 4 - Program for the 90th Anniversary of First Baptist Church, 8 October 1957
- Item 5 - Program for the 120th Anniversary of First Baptist Church, 25 October 1987

Folder 4 - Church History

- Item 1 - Document, likely a scan from a book, with images of the 1920 and 1957 First Baptist Church Board of Trustees members
- Item 2 - "A Brief History of the Church" at the time of the 85th Anniversary of the First Baptist Church, written by Clerk of the Church Joseph Kenly Trent, 1952
- Item 3 - "A Brief Historical Sketch of First Baptist Church" after the new church building was opened in 1982, written by Church Historian, Eunice R. Poindexter
- Item 4 - "History Update" that goes as far as 1987

Folder 5 - Church Journal, June 1982

- Item 1 - First Baptist Church Journal, June 1982

Folder 6 - Church Service Programs

- Items 1, 2 - Programme of the Church School Officers, Teachers, Workers and Friends, First Baptist Church, November 1927 to July 1928 and Photocopy

- Item 3 - Program for the 50th Anniversary Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, 2-3 September 1947
- Items 3, 4 - Program for "The Brotherhood of Christmas: A Musical & Dramatic Interpretation of Christmas," 19 December 1947 and Photocopy
- Items 5, 6 - Junior Missionary Society Program of the First Baptist Church, February to July 1949 and Photocopy
- Item 7 - Program for the Fourth Anniversary Services of The Rev. Emmet Leroy Green Pastor, 8-14 July 1963
- Item 8 - Program for the Pageant "Our Glorious Heritage," 6 October 1967
- Item 9 - Program for the Services of Installation of The Reverend Mr. David C. Collins as Minister, 21-28 October 1968
- Item 10 - Program for The Installation Events of Kenneth Bernard Wright as Pastor, 11-14 October 1973
- Item 11 - Program for the Cornerstone Laying Service, 13 June 1981
- Item 12 - Program for Dedication Sunday, 20 June 1982

Folder 7 - Church Fire News Clippings

- Item 1 - "Fire claims historic church: A piece of Roanoke history was destroyed Saturday when the old First Baptist Church in Gainsboro burned" Roanoke Times, 23 April 1995
- Item 2 - "Burned church may have to be razed" Roanoke Times, 24 April 1995
- Item 3 - "Preservationists may try to restore 'special' church" Roanoke Times, 25 April 1995
- Item 4 - "Church's walls may be saved" Roanoke Times, 26 April 1995
- Item 5 - "Major probe of church fire urged: An investigation to find the cause of the First Baptist Church fire is needed to ease fears in Roanoke, said Evelyn Bethel, president of the Historic Gainsboro Preservation District." Roanoke Times, 29 April 1995
- Item 6 - "Boys linked to church fire: Formal complaints issued against 2" Roanoke Times, 30 April 1995
- Item 7 - "Gainsboro braces toward recovery: Fire-gutted church to stabilize walls" Roanoke Times, 26 July 1995
- Item 8 - "Old Gainsboro church to be razed: Two boys burned the historic structure in April 1995. Now the congregation has faced up to a difficult decision." Roanoke Times, 10 July 1996

Folder 8 - Hymnal: Great Gospel Songs and Hymns

- Item 1 - *Great Gospel Songs and Hymns: The Complete Church Hymnal*, compiled by Adger M. Pace, W. B. Walbert, G. Kieffer Vaughan, Luther Drummond, Published by James D. Vaughan, Music Publisher, 1942

Folder 9 - Journal and Magazine

- Item 1 - Excerpt from the Historical Society of Western Virginia's 2015 Journal
- Item 2 - Discover Magazine: History and Heritage, Southwest Virginia Personalities, December 2017

Folder 10 - Misc. Documents

- Item 1 - Obituary for Mr. Francis Oscar Cowan, 30 April 1969

- Item 2 - Document for the Corner Stone Laying, First Baptist Church, 13 June 1981
- Item 3 - Flyer for Annual Women's Day with First Baptist Church, 23 May 1982
- Item 4 - Photo of an alter, no date or description

Folder 11 - Misc. Newspapers and News Clippings

- Item 1 - Compiled scans from Roanoke Times, 30 November 1936
- Item 2 - "First Baptist Installs Its Fourth Pastor" New Journal and Guide, 13 November 1943
- Item 3 - "Participants in Tom Thumb Wedding in Roanoke" New Journal and Guide, 29 August 1942
- Item 4 - "Negro First Baptist Church To Observe 75th Anniversary", October 1942
- Item 5 - "Church Observes Anniversary", October 1942
- Item 6 - Clipping from Roanoke Times about two young men from the First Baptist Church who fought in WWII, March 1945
- Item 7 - "Oakmulgee and Glasgow Gospel Singers will meet in a Battle of Songs at First Baptist Church", March 1953
- Item 8 - Clipping regarding James M. Brown, 13 February 1954
- Item 9 - "Special Report/black church becomes history", February 1982
- Item 10 - "A Commitment To The Community--Dedication Of New First Baptist Church Building," Roanoke Times, 19 June 1982
- Item 11 - "History of Roanoke church is a compilation of firsts" Roanoke Times, 11 February 1988
- Item 12 - "Faith kept a little church safe" Roanoke Times, 25 April 1995
- Items 13, 14, 15 - "A Salute to Old First... Plus Anniversary Flashbacks" Supplement to The Roanoke Tribune and Photocopy
- Item 16 - "Justice Dept. to mediate Gainsboro church dispute" Roanoke Times, 4 April 1999
- Item 17 - "First Baptist Church--Gainsboro welcomes Pastor-Elect" Roanoke Tribune, 29 June 2017

Folder 12 - Old Lick Cemetery

- Item 1 - Old Lick Cemetery, Betsy Biesenbach, 12 July 2023

Folder 13 - The Church News

- Item 1 - The Church News, May 1933
- Item 2 - The Church News, October 1933
- Item 3 - The Church News, February 1934
- Item 4 - The Church News, March 1934
- Items 5, 6 - The Church News, October 1938 and Photocopy
- Item 7 - The Church News, February 1944
- Item 8 - The Church News, April 1944
- Item 9 - The Church News, September 1947
- Item 10 - The Church News, November 1948
- Item 11 - The Church News, March 1956 (Dr. Penn's Victorious...)
- Item 12 - The Church News, March 1956 (Lest We Forget...)

- Item 13 - The Church News, March 1961
- Item 14 - The Church News, June 1963

Folder 14 - The National Registry of Historic Places

- Item 1 - Correspondence containing copies of photos to accompany First Baptist Church Preliminary Information Form to determine eligibility for The National Register of Historic Places, 22 November 1989
- Item 2 - Photocopy of the complete National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for First Baptist Church, 9 September 1990
- Item 3 - Correspondence containing information on Section #7, Page 5 of the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 14 March 1991
- Item 4 - National Register of Historic Places Registration Form with note: "destroyed by fire 4/95"
- Item 5 - Pages 67-69 from *Virginia Landmarks of Black History: Sites on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places*, prepared by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Edited by Calder Loth, published 1995