



SANKOFA

@Home

*Historic Black
Churches*



Transform Minnesota

PILGRIM BAPTIST CHURCH

We're exploring the history of several historic Black churches with this month's Sankofa at Home, starting with Pilgrim Baptist Church in St. Paul.

The building, completed in 1928 and placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991, houses a congregation that has been a pillar of St. Paul's Black community for 160 years.



Pilgrim Baptist Church

732 Central Ave W
St. Paul, MN 55104
pilgrimbaptistchurch.org

In 1863, Rev. Robert Hickman led a group of around 50-75 escaped slaves up the Mississippi River out of Boone County, Missouri. Calling themselves “pilgrims,” the group traveled via raft and were eventually towed to St. Paul by a steamboat. The group was met in St. Paul by an angry crowd who hurled rocks and insults, prompting the steamboat to tow them further upstream to Fort Snelling.

The original group was split between three different cities, with the largest of these groups settling in St. Paul. Rev. Hickman led church services for the pilgrims in houses around St. Paul. After a baptismal service in the Mississippi River, Pilgrim Baptist Church was formally chartered on November 15, 1866. The congregation continued to meet around the city until moving into its first building in 1870.

The congregation has been housed in three buildings throughout its history. The church moved to their current location in the historic **Rondo** neighborhood in 1928.

In September 2023, the building was the first site in Minnesota added to the **National Park Service's National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom**. While the building itself was not part of the underground railroad, the move honors the history of the original founders who escaped slavery in the midst of the Civil War.

Pilgrim Baptist has been important to the religious life, community, and history of St. Paul and Minnesota. This includes playing a role in the establishment of the **Hallie Q. Brown community center** and the local **NAACP** and **Urban League** chapters.

SANKOFA AT HOME INTERSECTION: MAY 1863

May of 1863 turned out to be a remarkably active time at **Fort Snelling**, especially for the history of race in Minnesota. Along with the arrival at the fort of a group of formerly enslaved people who had been towed up the river via steamboat in the midst of the **Civil War**, a group of approximately 1,500 Dakota interned below the fort in the aftermath of the **U.S. - Dakota War of 1862** were on the verge of being removed from the state.

The name of the steamboat involved in towing the formerly enslaved group to the fort has differed across reports (either the *War Eagle* or the *Northerner*), but there is high likelihood that whichever ship was involved was bound for Fort Snelling to remove the group of Dakota from Minnesota.

ST. JAMES AME & PILGRIM REST

Pilgrim Baptist vies with St. James AME in Minneapolis for the title of oldest Black church in Minnesota. Known affectionately as Mother St. James, the church's origins date to 1860 when a group of freed African Americans began holding house-to-house prayer meetings in St. Anthony (now Northeast Minneapolis).



St. James AME Church in South Minneapolis

The congregation formalized as the First African Methodist Church in 1863 and found a formal place of worship in 1869.

St. James has also been housed in a number of locations throughout the city. The church completed and moved into its current home in 1959. The building was designated a historic site by the city of Minneapolis in 2018, as the influence of the church “has had a lasting effect on the social history of Minneapolis and Minnesota.”



Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church in North Minneapolis

Other historic Black churches have contributed to the formation of communities around the state, including one in North Minneapolis which recently celebrated a major anniversary.

Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church in Minneapolis' Shingle Creek neighborhood celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2023. The church, started by formerly enslaved people, spent its early years meeting in a converted garage and a basement.

In 1968, the church received an old Osseo schoolhouse which had been converted into a church by nearby **Hope Lutheran**. Pilgrim Rest has met in this building ever since.

In 2017, Pilgrim Rest was designated a historic site by the city of Minneapolis, recognizing the church as “...an important structure for social events, meetings, entertainment, and as an anchor for the Shingle Creek African American community.”

Each of these churches played a role in the history of Minnesota, and laid a foundation for the formation of more than 100 primarily Black congregations which exist in the state today.

TIMELINE OF HISTORIC BLACK CHURCHES IN MINNESOTA*

1863: St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church, Minneapolis

1866: Pilgrim Baptist Church, St. Paul

1876: St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church, St. Paul

1880: St. Peter's African Methodist Episcopal Church, Minneapolis

1887: Bethesda Missionary Baptist Church, Minneapolis

1888: St. Peter Claver Catholic Church, St. Paul

1890: St. Mark's African Methodist Episcopal Church, Duluth

1892: Brown's Chapel (AME), Hastings

1894: St. Phillip's Episcopal Church (congregation originated 1888)

1903: St. Thomas Episcopal Church (congregation originated 1899)

*Information per UNBREAKABLE: Celebrating the Resilience of African Americans in Minnesota exhibit at the Minnesota African American History Museum and Gallery

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Children of Lincoln: White Paternalism and the Limits of Black Opportunity in Minnesota

William D. Green

“Framed around four white champions of African Americans in Minnesota, **The Children of Lincoln** reveals a little known but critical chapter in the state’s history as it intersects with the broader account of race in America. It reveals a pattern of racial paternalism, describing how even ‘enlightened’ white Northerners would come to embrace policies that reinforced a notion of black inferiority.”

The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song PBS

“The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song is a moving four-hour, two-part series... [which] traces the 400-year-old story of the Black church in America.”

The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

A companion book to the documentary series, author **Henry Louis Gates** presents a powerful new history of the Black church in America as the Black community's abiding rock and its fortress.

Video History of Pilgrim Baptist Church Pilgrim Baptist Church

Minnesota SP Pilgrim Baptist Church National Archives

African Americans in Minnesota MNOpedia

Reverend Robert Hickman National Park Service

Robert Hickman, Minister African American Registry

Pilgrim Baptist Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota (1863-) Black Past

St. Paul’s Pilgrim Baptist Church added to Underground Railroad rolls Star Tribune

Black churches play special role in Minneapolis history.

FOX 9

St. James African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church

Building

City of Minneapolis

Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church

City of Minneapolis

Minneapolis church started by freed slaves celebrates 100

years

FOX 9

Historic Black church turns

100 years old in North

Minneapolis

KSTP

St. Mark's AME Church, Duluth

MNOpedia

St. Peter Claver Church, St.

Paul

MNOpedia

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

After you visit Pilgrim Baptist Church:

- What's new to you?
- What do you feel?
- What do you notice about the building?
- How is the history of different racial and ethnic groups intertwined?
- Are you familiar with the reasons the Black church began? How does understanding this information help us understand the Black church today?
- Pilgrim Baptist offered support to the community of pilgrims after they arrived in Minnesota. How do Black churches continue to offer support to their communities?
- How do we think about slavery's influence in Minnesota?
- What can majority culture churches learn from churches of other racial or ethnic groups?
- How do churches from different racial and ethnic groups reflect the image and mission of God?
- If you don't already, would you consider attending one of the churches mentioned in this post? Why or why not?



Transform Minnesota

COMPLEX ISSUES. BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE.

This resource list is part of Transform
Minnesota's Sankofa @ Home series

Inclusion of a resource on the list does
not represent a full endorsement of
stated beliefs