

Bethlehem Methodist Episcopal Cemetery State of Florida Historic Marker History

The Bethlehem Methodist Episcopal Church and Cemetery of Archer were established in 1873. The Rev. Major Reddick donated the land, which was part of a parcel awarded to him through the 1862 Homestead Act. Church trustees were Romeo Reddick, Rinaldo Reddick, Major Reddick, Henry Peterson, Adam Moulton, Richard Doby, and Arthur Haynes. Originally called Deer Hammock, Archer became an economic hub for local plantations, especially after the cross Florida railroad was built in the 1850s. Sen. David Levy Yulee's Cottonwood was the most well known of these plantations. At least 25 African Americans who had once been enslaved were interred in the cemetery. Elbert McKinney Sr., born in 1829 in South Carolina, was buried here. McKinney, an enslaved blacksmith at Cottonwood, daily blew a ram's horn to call the enslaved laborers to work. Ellen Lawrence {ca. 1796-1884) has the earliest marked grave in the cemetery. Formerly enslaved laborer James Dansey homesteaded 40 acres to the east of Reddick's donation; he sold the parcel to his brother, Rev. Frank Dansey, in 1881. Dansey, founder of St. Joseph's Missionary Baptist Church, began to use 1.28 acres nearest the Reddick donation for burials. Dansey was buried here in 1911.

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Bethlehem Methodist Episcopal Church remained active until the 1960s, though the structure may have been moved to another location at some point. The cemetery remained active until 1989. The cemetery went through a period of neglect until local educator, community advocate, and civil rights activist Careatha "Clyde" Williams (1924-2021) stepped in. In 1999, Williams founded the Bethlehem Methodist Episcopal Cemetery Restoration Organization (BMECRO) to preserve the resting place of the community's ancestors and to honor their resilience in the face of enslavement, segregation, and racial terror. In 2004, Henry Penny Jr. formally donated 1.28 acres to BMECRO. This parcel had once been the Rev. Frank Dansey's land, which had been used as part of the cemetery since the 1880s. In all there are more than 125 identified individuals buried in the cemetery, including formerly enslaved people and veterans from World War I and II. In 2021, BMECRO partnered with the Historic Preservation program at the University of Florida and the Florida Public Archaeology Network to survey, document and prepare a preservation plan. More than 65 unmarked graves were discovered using ground penetrating radar.

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