

Reverend Green McArthur – Pastor of First African Baptist of Columbus

ing, secretary.

COLORED CHURCHES CITY.

Baptist.—Preaching at 11 a m, and at 3:30 p m. by the pastor, Rev Green McArthur. Sunday school at 10 o'clock a m.

Mt. Zion (Methodist)—Rev Edward W Gibson, pastor. Services at 11 a m, 3 p m, and 8 p m. Sunday School at 9 a m. Class meeting on Monday night at 8 o'clock.

St. John's (Methodist)—Rev R B Bailey, pastor. Prayer meeting on Sunday morning at sunrise; Sunday school at 9 o'clock; prayer meeting on Thursday night at eight o'clock. Preaching at 11 a m, and 8 p m by the pastor.

St James (Methodist) Rev W D Johnson pastor. Preaching at 11 a m, 3 p m, and 8 p m, by the pastor. Sunday school at 9 a m. Class meeting, Monday night at 8 o'clock and prayer meeting Thursday night at 8 o'clock.

Early Street (Methodist)—Rev. R D Brocks pastor. Services at 3 p m, and 8 p. m. Class meeting every Friday night. Sunday school at 1:30 o'clock p. m.

Robertson's Chapel (Methodist)—Rev William Thornton, pastor. Services at 11 a m, 3 and 8 p m. Class Monday 8 p m, and preaching Thursday night.

Shady Grove (Baptist)—Rev O H Jackson pastor. Sunday school at 9 o'clock a m. Preaching 11 a m, 3 p m, and 8 p m by the pastor. Prayer meeting Thursday nights. Sunday School 9 a m.

Today in Columbus History, December 12, 1880, there appeared in the *Columbus Enquirer-Sun* the usual schedule for upcoming church services in Columbus, including those “Over the River” and the “Colored Churches City.” Among the seven “Colored Churches” were the names of the pastors of each church, including the **Reverend Green McArthur**, whose early life I discuss here.

Rev. McArthur was a man who was intensely interested in strengthening his community – generally that community stemming from the largest Black Baptist church in the city – with religion, improvements in education, and by cultivating good relations with powerful white businessmen. His story is one that spans the gamut of African American experiences in the South from slavery to Reconstruction to the Jim Crow era. Born into slavery in 1832, after Emancipation, McArthur rose quickly to become one of the most prominent and popular Black men in Columbus – and in the Black Baptist community of the state of

Georgia. After this prosperous and highly active period that lasted more than a decade, McArthur suddenly resigned his position and lost property in both Columbus and Cuthbert. After 1900 when he appears in the Forsyth, Ga., census with his wife, still working as a minister, there is only one other mention of him, a 1910 Cuthbert newspaper that remembers him as a figure of fun and a con man. I have found no information about his death or where he was buried.

What I focused on here are highlights of his early life, mostly from academic, genealogical sources, and Georgia Historic Newspapers. There is much missing from the record and more sources to delve into.

What struck me in reading the Columbus and other newspapers’ descriptions of his words and deeds from the late 1860s to the early 1880s is that they exemplify the expectations and prejudices white society held for Black leaders in Georgia during those times.

Green McArthur was born into slavery in 1832, probably in Randolph County, Georgia, the property of Peter McArthur (1784-1884), a white settler from South Carolina. Peter McArthur appeared in the Randolph, Telfair, and Clay county censuses and tax digests from 1830 through 1880s, owning a farm where he grew



crops, raised livestock, and probably timber. Peter apprenticed Green for four years to a local carpenter about 1850 and in 1854, Green married (possibly an enslaved woman named Caroline). In 1883, he said that he was father to eleven children, six of whom were then living with him. Although I have not found him in the census for 1880, he may have been married to his second wife Elizabeth by then.

Besides learning the apprentice trade, Green McArthur also had a calling. According to historian Stephen Barber, Green was noted as a “slave preacher” in the records of Benevolence Baptist Church (pictured left), near Cuthbert in Randolph

County, Georgia. McArthur also served in a similar role for Cuthbert Baptist Church’s black congregants, and Barber notes that McArthur continued in that role for several years after emancipation.

As an enslaved person, to get – and keep – the privilege of being a “slave preacher,” Green McArthur had to keep a delicate balance between pleasing the white religious supervisors who had okayed his ordination and preaching what naturally flowed from the Bible’s text: stories of enslavement and freedom, such as the Hebrews escape from Egypt; and the example of the life of Jesus. The stringent state laws and church-imposed requirements that McArthur faced to become a leader of other enslaved Blacks had been put in place by whites fearful of the role earlier Black preachers had played in fomenting actual or potential slave rebellions.



McArthur excelled at preaching and quickly successful as a preacher and pastor. Immediately on gaining his freedom, and often more than once a year for the next two decades, Rev. McArthur attended Black Baptist conference meetings, other denomination meetings, and educational meetings around the state. In 1867, the same year he registered to vote in Randolph County, McArthur served as a delegate to the Georgia Educational Convention held in Macon. In 1878, at the annual meeting of the Colored Baptist Association, to which he was, as usual, a delegate, Rev. McArthur was elected permanent moderator of the group. He must have been a talented public speaker. He would continue to be active – usually in a leadership capacity – in statewide “Colored Baptist” organizations until at least the late 1890s.

In 1870, Green McArthur lived in Cuthbert with his wife Caroline and three children, Vesta, Osker [sic], and Park, working as a “Huckster retail” (a peddler). He undoubtedly was also still preaching, because sometime between 1869 and 1871, Rev. McArthur was called to serve as the pastor of what would become known as the First African Baptist Church in Columbus, a prominent position in the twin cities’ Black society that would bring him much positive attention for at least the next decade.

During the tumultuous period of Reconstruction (1865-1877) and the even more difficult and violent period from the late 1870s until World War I, Rev. McArthur managed a delicate balancing act of cultivating good relations with the white political and business leaders of Columbus, as well as his Black congregants and fellow religious leaders. He quickly became one of Columbus’ Black leaders who were regularly written about in the newspapers in a positive light.

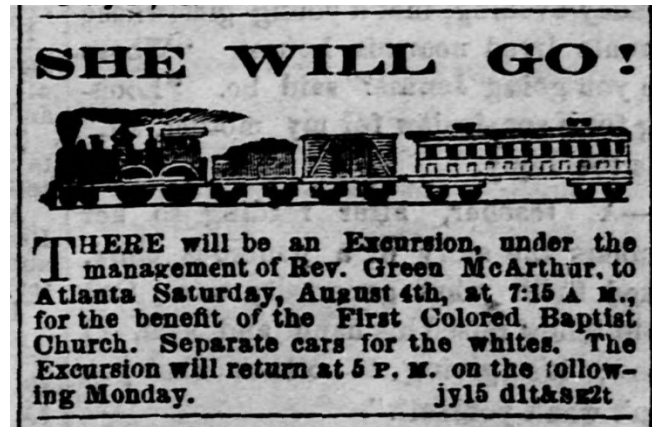
To be financially successful, African Americans (primarily men) had to walk a tightrope in whatever profession they chose. As a minister (as in several other types of careers), positive notice could help bring in new congregants and drum up white social and financial support. McArthur must have made a good first impression in one of his earliest newspaper appearances, by siding with white society as to how much responsibility whites should take in helping newly freed African Americans.

In September of 1871, McArthur, in attendance at the Colored Baptist Convention in Cuthbert, taking up the collection, responded to a black congregant who insisted that white people also “were bound now to give freely” to the collection plate being passed (apparently for a specific project). McArthur asserted that newly emancipated blacks “had no right then to claim any merit in the premises, nor should they ask assistance of the whites in such a spirit.” The *Macon Telegraph*, in praising McArthur’s response, revealed the importance of the issue of whether Blacks had a moral right to ask for “assistance,” i.e., reparations: “We challenge the records of the country to furnish a nobler instance of true moral courage than was here afforded.” This

wouldn't be the last time in which the press highlighted McArthur's ability to quiet the rebellious voices of blacks, while alleviating the fears of nervous whites.

McArthur's early successes in attracting converts and new members to the Baptist denomination were often noted in the press. In early May of 1873, the *Columbus Weekly Sun* published "Colored Immersions," on its front page. McArthur and W.H. Noble, a Methodist minister, attracted a crowd of 5,000 to a baptism of new converts in the Chattahoochee River. The story was reprinted twice in the *Macon Telegraph and Messenger* and again in the *Newnan Herald*. Just a week later, the *Enquirer* noted, also on its front page, the "very creditable opening address" by Rev. McArthur at the Sunday School picnic of the First Colored Baptist Church. During the difficult and often tense times of Reconstruction, a palpable sense of relief seems to emanate from some newspapers that Blacks are getting religion and fitting into white society, while they also present McArthur and his pastoral peers as good examples of social conformity for the rest of Columbus' Black community.

By the mid-1870s, McArthur had found his place in Columbus society, among whites as well as Blacks. In 1875, the *Enquirer* editorialized its approval of the way the pastors of the two largest Black congregations in Columbus (McArthur's First Colored Baptist and W.J. Gaines of Asbury Chapel) had counseled their congregants after the passage of the Civil Rights Bill of 1875. Urging their parishioners not to make trouble or not to thrust themselves in places simply because they had a right to do so."



In 1876 and again in 1877, Rev. McArthur organized a "mixed" train excursion to Atlanta, guaranteeing separate cars for any white travelers who wanted to participate. The trip was to raise funds to help pay the debts of the First Colored Baptist Church and had the full editorial support of the *Columbus Enquirer*.

The newspaper was highly complimentary of Rev. McArthur and talked up the trip directly to white people to support his fund-raising enterprise. "[McArthur is] a high-toned and worthy colored man, and deserves encouragement in all that he undertakes, for it is for the benefit of the country...We hope all the whites who wish to visit the State capital will go on this trip and aid the object this excellent, honorable man and pastor has in view." Afterwards, the paper deemed the trip "a success." The *Columbus Times* reported that 300 people participated in the Atlanta excursion: "Notwithstanding it was a colored excursion, the whites were largely in the majority."

The morning of January 25, 1879, the First Colored Baptist Church, which had just been renovated the previous July, burned to the ground. Rev. McArthur was elected chairman of the church committee to oversee the rebuilding of the church – which would mean lots of fundraising among Blacks and whites. By March, the *Enquirer-Sun* reprinted news from the *Macon Telegraph and Messenger* that McArthur had gone to fundraise in Montgomery, Alabama: "The writer knew Mr. McArthur well for many years in Cuthbert, and can testify to his exemplary character, as a Christian and citizen," and goes on to write that he "comes strongly endorsed by the Baptist minister, Rev. A.B. Campbell, Mr. G. Gunby Jordan, of the Eagle and Phenix factory; Messrs. Watt & Walker, well known merchants, and the Mayor of Columbus, Mr. Wilkins." By the end of the month, the building committee had "nearly \$1,000 in cash now on hand" and hoped to start hiring contractors in April. At the end of September, the *Enquirer-Sun* reported that there would be a parade and ceremony to lay the cornerstone of the church "on the northeast corner of St. Clair and Mercer

streets” or modern Sixth Street and 11th Avenue. This new church, which was completed in 1881, would become known as the Sixth Street Baptist, although still often referred to in the newspapers as the First Colored or First African Baptist Church.

SENATE TESTIMONY

In 1883, Rev. McArthur participated in hearings of the “Committee of the Senate upon the Relations between Labor and Capital,” led by U.S. Senator Henry W. Blair. The committee’s purpose was a broad investigation of the relationship between capital and labor, for example, working conditions and wages. The study ultimately resulted in the establishment of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the government’s “principal fact-finding agency...in the broad field of labor economics and statistics.” About six men from Columbus testified about their experiences at their places of employment and to their perceptions of labor and race relations in the city. Through McArthur’s testimony here, we learn about his early life, enslaved to Peter McArthur, especially as a teenager and young man before Emancipation. He also clearly spells out his belief of the importance of education for the opening up of opportunities for African Americans.

McARTHUR’S PROPERTY AND RETAIL ENDEAVORS

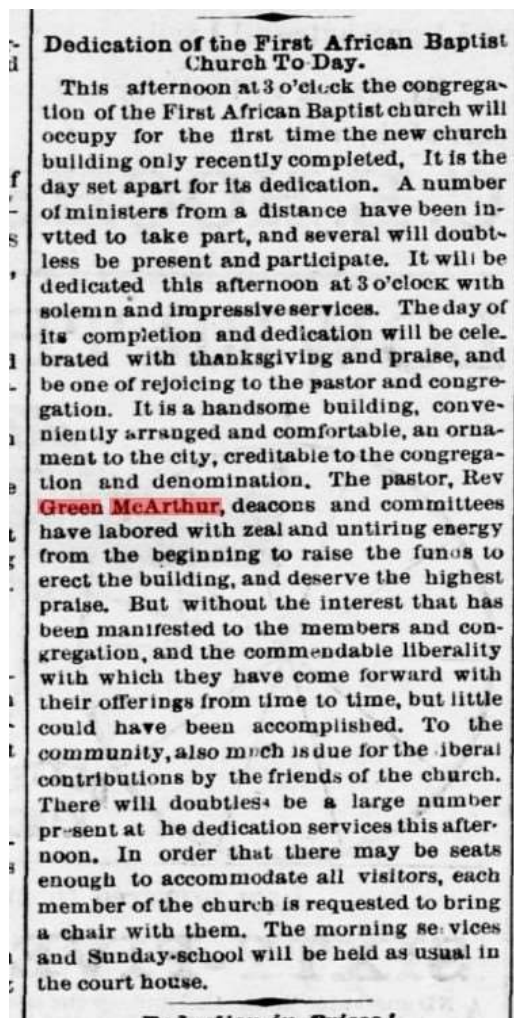
Like most ministers of the time, McArthur was bi-vocational. Along with his pastoral duties, he ran a grocery store and had developed a sideline of ointment, McArthur’s Magical Bowel Mixture and Liniment, of questionable ingredients and effectiveness. Regardless, he listed many endorsements in his advertisements. Only once was his mixture connected to a bad outcome, a possible cause of death in 1891.

Throughout the time he pastored the church, Rev. McArthur paid property taxes in “Lower Town, District 668.” He seems to have owned several properties at different times, including four and a half acres in Columbus, as well as a small place in Cuthbert. Some of those taxes were on horses, mules, livestock, and “household or kitchen furniture.”

CONCLUSION

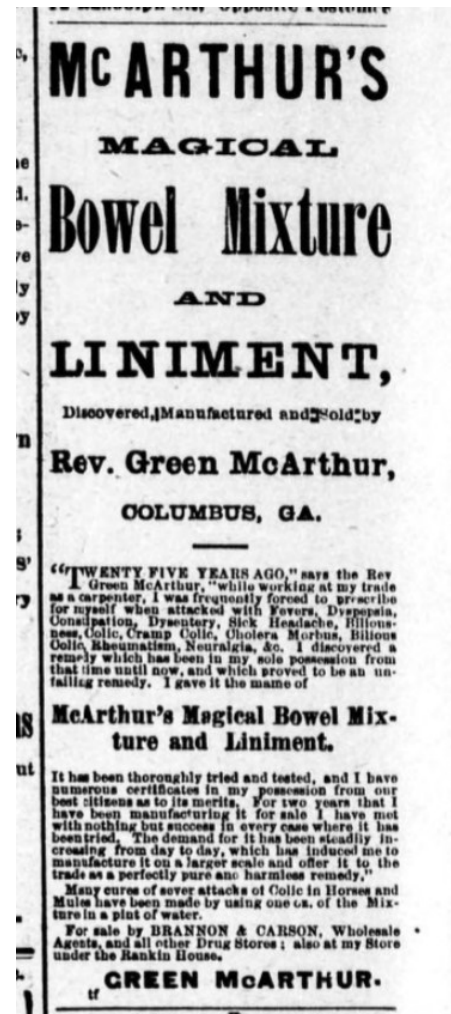
Rev. McArthur served the Colored Baptist Church – later known as Sixth Avenue Baptist and (in the twentieth century) First African Baptist – until he resigned for unknown reasons in December of 1883. At first, the church refused to accept his resignation, and he may have continued for a few more months. But, according to the First African Baptist Church’s website, a new pastor, “Rev. Ramsey,” was called to the church in 1884.

McArthur’s name is not on Columbus’ list of white and colored voters in 1884. He may have been unemployed or underemployed in May of 1886, when land he owned was foreclosed on because of non-payment of a promissory note.



Because of the press's support of him, Rev. McArthur gained a very positive reputation among Columbus whites as a leader of the Black community who promoted the importance of Black education, "minded his own business," and told his congregants to do the same. If he spoke out against the numerous inequities and injustices that African Americans suffered during this time, I found no record of it in the newspapers.

After about 1895, when the newspaper sources seem to dry up, I am not sure where Rev. McArthur was living or working. Finally, his name appeared in 1910, when an Early County newspaper reprinted a piece from the *Cuthbert Liberal-Enterprise* recalling a money-making scheme that Rev. Green McArthur purportedly put over on quite a few people in the Cuthbert area. What is striking in the article is the complete about-face in tone this paper takes toward him after years of the glowing compliments to him in the Columbus newspapers. It reads in part, "Some 40 years ago Rev. Green McArthur, a popular colored preacher among the Baptist darkies, was running a mercantile business [sic] in connection with his ministerial business in Cuthbert. Being 'half-and-half,' as every one who knew him will testify, Green was a slick duck, sharp enough (by being humble and polite) to pull the wool over the eyes of both races and skin them going and coming." The writers willfully ignored Green's years of service to African Americans and compliance with white social demands. If this was the last word on the Reverend Green McArthur, it was an unfitting and unfair assessment of a man who devoted his life to pastoring newly freed west Georgia Blacks through some of the most difficult times of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. — *Rachel Dobson*



Our weekly snippets of Columbus history are usually based on a few days of searching through the most popular sources for Muscogee County history. Meant to inspire readers to explore more about Columbus history, they are not exhaustive dissertations on the topic and may contain mistakes. If you have corrections or additional information, feel free to share them with the group.

SELECTED SOURCES

Stephen Presley Barber, "The Gospel Horse in the Valley: Evangelical Slavery and Freedom in the Chattahoochee Valley, 1821-1877," dissertation, Auburn University, 2011.

Henry W. Blair, and members of the Committee, "Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations between Labor and Capital, and Testimony Taken by the Committee," Vol. IV - Testimony (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1885), 632-634. (Google Books)

Georgia Historic Newspapers: <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/search/advanced/>

First African Baptist Church, Columbus, history page: <http://www.firstafricancolumbus.com/about-us/our-church>