

Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site) commemorates 1619 arrival of first enslaved Africans in America

Text by KATRINA DIX for THE FREE LANCE-STAR, August 25, 2019

Photos by JEROMIE B. STEPHENS for THE FREE LANCE-STAR

At least four generations gathered Sunday afternoon to listen to the bells ring at Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site) in Fredericksburg, from 13-year-old Jason Campbell to 91-year-old Marguerite Young.

Starting at 3 p.m., Jason, along with Montgomery Breaux, 14, and Jordan Johnson, 19, rang the bells for four minutes straight—one minute for each of the hundred years since the first enslaved Africans were brought to the United States in late August 1619.

“It means everything. I was here when the bells were ringing a lot more often,” Young said. “This is something, because I’ve come through things here in Fredericksburg. It took some doing, and it took some waiting.”

The small crowd listening on the sidewalk could hear the echo of answering bells as other churches all over Fredericksburg—and across the country—recognized a history that many felt has been hidden for too long.

“For a lot of us, we’re learning history, because it wasn’t taught when I went to school,” said Lynette Box–French, who graduated from James Monroe High School in 1969. “African American history was a week in February... This gives us a sense of hope that things are changing.”

Some have bickered over the historic details, especially after Gov. Ralph Northam used the phrase “indentured servants” earlier this year in reference to the Africans who arrived in 1619. Legally speaking, slavery based on race didn’t exist until much later in the century, according to historians.

Most of those brought to the United States early on were called “indentured servants”—whether they had debt contracts or end dates, or not. And some historical records suggest that of the “20 and odd” captured Africans delivered to Virginia in late August 1619, a few were freed and given land. But many historians—as well as average citizens—grant that whatever it was called, capture followed by lifelong servitude was slavery.

“You don’t erase the ugly by putting aside,” said senior pastor Aaron Dobyne before the bell ringing—not the history of slavery, and not the reality of life for African Americans since slavery was abolished by the passage of the 13th Amendment in 1865.

Attendees shared hope and worry, triumph and determination as they reflected on how much has changed for the better, and how much work remains to be done.

In a brief service before the ceremony, Dobyne shared a story he'd heard from Janice Davies, wife of the Rev. Lawrence Davies, former mayor of Fredericksburg.

Shortly after their arrival, sometime around the spring of 1962, the Davies went to a diner "dressed in their ebony best," Dobyne said, and asked for a table.

" 'We don't serve Negroes here,' " Dobyne said the reverend's wife was told.

"This lady, as quick-witted as she was, replied, 'I don't eat them, either!' "

Moments like that, he said, made Davies' later rise to mayor all the sweeter—but, he added, "That represents a dark time that we can't forget."

After the service, Dobyne said he just had lunch at that diner last week. He believes people need to be "ambassadors for good will," he said, but that doesn't mean ignoring history.

"I think there's a failure to call out the ugly," he said.

Fredericksburg has come a long way since the last time he saw the church crowded for a specific cause, in 1963, said Roland Moore, one of first African American students to graduate from James Monroe High School.

Moore spent much of his professional life elsewhere before returning about six years ago. But in 1963, he was 15, and Shiloh Baptist was a host church for buses heading north on their way to the March on Washington.

"This is not the Fredericksburg I left," he said. Now, white friends he had as a teenager can openly acknowledge his friendship.

"Back then, if you were Caucasian, it was much more difficult to have an African American friend, publicly," he said. "Things take time."

Teenagers Jason and Montgomery face new versions of the same challenges at times. Racial tension and negative mindsets still persist, they said.

"Friends say black people seem a little terrifying to them," said Montgomery, adding that he sometimes identifies as black, sometimes as mixed-race. He enjoyed having the historically black church filled with a wider mix of races than usual on Sunday, he said.

"It feels more warm, like home," Montgomery said.

Jason said it bothers him when people address each other with slang terms for their race—whether white, black, or any other.

"I just think more people should respect each other," he said. "If you know their names, use their names."



Gaye Adegbalola leads the crowd in one final song at a service commemorating the arrival of the first African slaves.



Donna Woolfolk sings “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” during Sunday’s ceremony.



From left, Laura Smart and Margaret Ingam, both of Fredericksburg, and Karen Clark of Upper Marlboro, Md., listen to the bells of Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site).



Marie Rollins sings “We Shall Overcome” with others at a ceremony at Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site).