

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

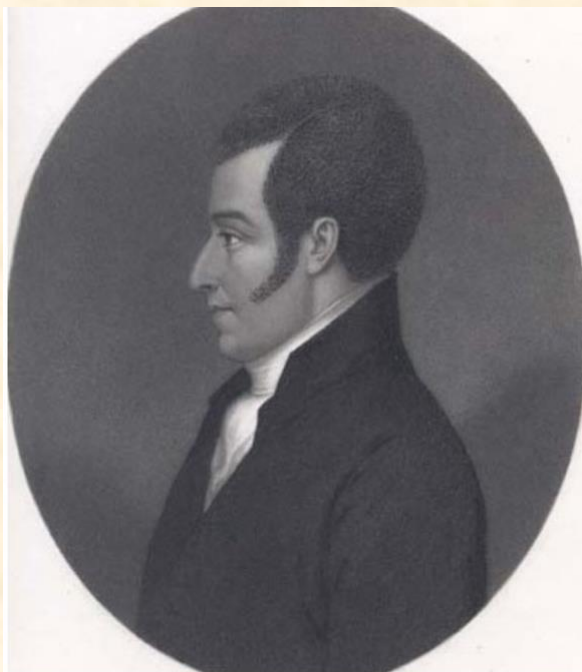
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Teachers, Preachers and Writers at the Sharp Street Church

by David Safier

The Sharp Street United Methodist Church, which began its life in 1802 where the historic Otterbein neighborhood began on Sharp Street between Pratt and Conway, is sometimes referred to as the “Mother Church” of Black Methodists in Maryland ([More on the Sharp Street Church](#)). A number of consequential and influential Black religious teachers, preachers and writers passed through this institution in the first half of the 19th century. Below are short biographies of a few of the men who left their mark on Baltimore, the national abolitionist movement and the evolution of the Methodist Church.

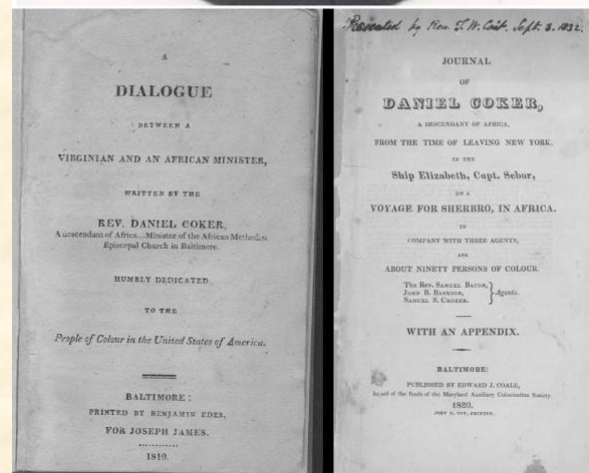
Daniel Coker



Daniel Coker was born in 1870 in Baltimore County or Frederick County to an enslaved Black man and a free White woman. Because his father was enslaved, he was as well. He received an education by attending school with his White half brothers, serving as their valet.

Coker escaped to New York when he was in his teens, then returned to Baltimore where friends helped him buy his freedom. In 1802 he was ordained a Deacon in the Methodist Church. He served as the principal teacher at the African Academy at the Sharp Street Church from 1802 to 1820, and preached at the church as well.

In 1810, Coker published the anti-slavery pamphlet, “Dialogue between a Virginian and an African minister.” In the



dialogue, a slave owner from Virginia tries to convince a Black minister that his views

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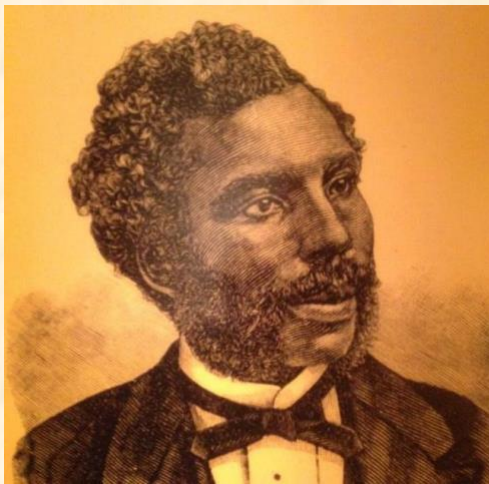
on emancipation are “wrong in the highest degree.” The minister employs logic, history and religion to refute the Virginian’s pro-slavery arguments.

Like many Black Methodists of the time, Coker had mixed feelings about the way the White-led Methodist Church treated its Black members. The church was anti-slavery, but Blacks did not become ordained ministers; they had to work under the authority of White church leaders.

In 1816, Coker traveled to Philadelphia and was part of the group that helped create the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The Bethel AME Church in Baltimore was one of the AME’s founding institutions. Some people from the Sharp Street Church followed Coker to the Bethel church, while others remained at Sharp Street.

Coker became involved with the American Colonization Society, a movement dedicated to resettling American Blacks in Africa. In 1820 he sailed to Africa along with 86 other Black emigrants. He kept a journal of the trip which was published the same year. Coker spent the rest of his life in Sierra Leone with his family, where he died in 1846.

William Watkins



William Watkins was born about 1802. His father was a founding trustee of the Sharp Street Church, and Daniel Coker was young Watkins’ teacher. When Coker left for Africa in 1820, Watkins, then 19, took Coker’s place as teacher.

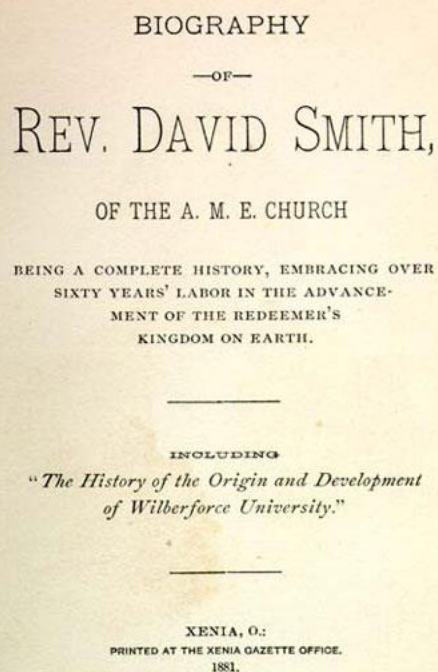
Watkins started the Watkins’ Academy for Negro Youth in the 1820s. He was a minister at the Sharp Street Church and a writer whose work appeared in a number of journals, including Frederick Douglass’ *North Star*. He wrote in favor of abolition and against the colonization movement which Daniel Coker embraced.

Watkins moved to Canada in 1852 where he continued writing until he died around 1858.

The William J. Watkins, Sr. Educational Institute in Baltimore is named in Watkins’ honor.

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David Smith



David Smith is known mainly through the autobiography he wrote toward the end of his life. It is filled with valuable information about his life and the early history of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church.

Born in 1784, Smith was enslaved to a Catholic family near Baltimore. He converted to Methodism when he was very young, gained his freedom soon after and joined the Sharp Street Church when he was twelve. At that young age, he became a public speaker "from the pulpits but also in the streets of the city." Soon he was granted an Exhorter's license -- Blacks were not ordained as Methodist ministers -- in recognition of his preaching abilities. He traveled to plantations preaching his faith.

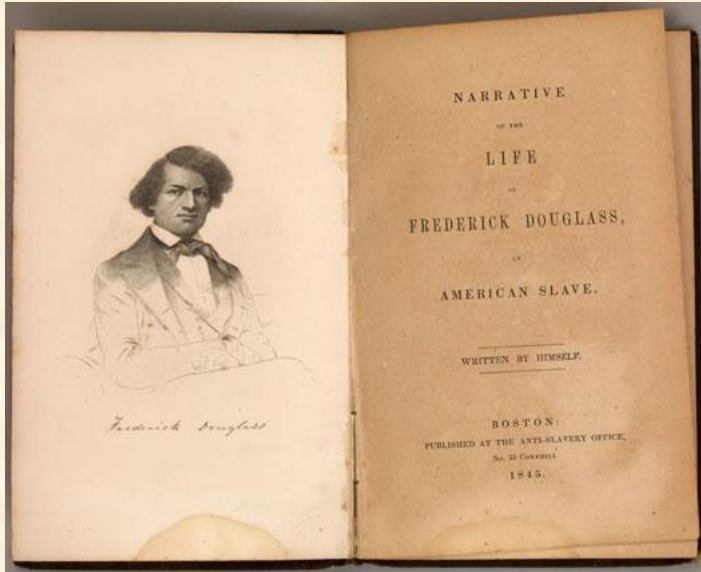
Like many other Black Methodists at the time, Smith grew frustrated with the restrictions the church placed on Blacks. He worked alongside Daniel Coker to begin the AME Church in Baltimore and was ordained a Deacon and Elder of the church.

Smith traveled from state to state to help spread the AME movement, working in places like Pittsburgh, Ohio, New Orleans and Kentucky.

At the end of Smith's autobiography published in 1881, he wrote, "Now, at the close of nearly a century of years, I stand, as it were, up in the dome of African Methodism. My ears are saluted with the noise of a mighty Christian army of the sable sons that have arisen out of the waters of Africa--an army comprising fifteen hundred traveling preachers, three hundred and thirty-six thousand members, and one publishing house, situated at 631 Pine street, Philadelphia."

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Frederick Douglass



Frederick Douglass is among the most influential writers and thinkers in 19th century America. The versions of his autobiography he wrote during his lifetime are historical and literary classics, he was a gifted orator, and his work in the abolitionist movement earned him an international reputation and the ear of President Abraham

Lincoln, whose views on emancipation were influenced by his discussions with Douglass.

The Sharp Street Church and the Otterbein neighborhood claim links to Douglass during his early life as an enslaved young man living in Fells Point and when he returned as a renowned writer and speaker.

At one point during the time he was enslaved in Baltimore, Douglass was a member of the Sharp Street Church. According to a biography of Douglass published in 1998, he sang in the church choir and was a class leader. A 2018 biography affirms his membership but does not mention any connection to the choir or his position as class leader.

The Otterbein neighborhood has two overlapping stories of Douglass visiting the area, but I have found no scholarly evidence to back up the claims. The first is that he planted the towering elm tree at the corner of Sharp Street and Hill Street. The second is that he gave a lecture under the same tree. Since I cannot definitively back up or refute the stories, I will leave them in the realm of legend and speculation.