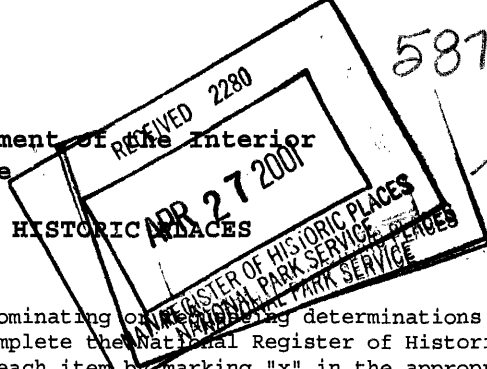


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service



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Rev

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name: Bethel AME Church

other names/site number: N/A

2. Location

street & number 220 Bell Street not for publication N/A

city or town Reno vicinity N/A

state Nevada code NV county Washoe code 031 zip code 89503

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility, meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide X locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Ronald M. Jones, SHPO
Signature of certifying official/Title

3-20-01
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register Sarah D. Pope
- See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register
- See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register

 other (explain):

Sarah D. Pope
Signature of Keeper

6/12/01
Date of Action

(for)

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property (Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.) N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: RELIGION Sub: Religious Facility

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: SOCIAL Sub: Homeless Shelter

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Folk Vernacular/Gothic

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

roof Composition shingle

walls Brick

other _____

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.) See continuation sheets.

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

ETHNIC HERITAGE/Black
SOCIAL HISTORY

Period of Significance 1907-1965

Significant Dates 1910, 1941, 1965

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) N/A

Cultural Affiliation African-American

Architect/Builder Unknown/Unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.) See continuation sheets.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets (see continuation sheets))

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 0.039 acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	<u>11</u>	<u>257590</u>	<u>4378760</u>	3	_____	_____
2	___	_____	_____	4	_____	_____
	___	See continuation sheet.				

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.) See continuation sheet.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.) See continuation sheet.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Norma Washington, Historian, Bethel A.M.E. Church, and
Mella Rothwell Harmon, Historic Preservation Specialist
organization State Historic Preservation Office date 11/15/00
street & number 100 North Stewart Street telephone 775-684-3447
city or town Carson City state NV zip code 89701

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Carol Giannotti
street & number 733 Marsh Street telephone 324-7786
city or town Reno state NV zip code 89509

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 1

Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

7. Description

Reno's Bethel AME Church is located at 220 Bell Street on APN 011-021-05, a .039-acre parcel located just south of the railroad tracks that run east and west through town. The building was constructed in 1910 by Reno's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) congregation, which had been established just three years before. The original church building, which exists beneath the surface of the brick expansion undertaken in 1941, was a small rectangular, gable-roofed, clapboard building with a centrally-placed, enclosed, hipped-roofed vestibule, and a single entry door. The most prominent features of the little church were the four Gothic pointed-arch stained glass windows and an oculus over the vestibule.

The building was enlarged and remodeled in 1941, and this is the version of the church that stands today. Still rectangular in shape, the 1,782-square-foot building encompasses the original sanctuary, an enlarged vestibule, which allows entry from the side rather than the front, a full basement that housed a kitchen, furnace, and air conditioning unit, and additional space on the north side that provided a parlor, library and study, choir room, and the pastor's office. A rendering of the proposed building shows a more formal gabled entrance than was actually built. It is not known why the finished product was less elaborate than planned, but one must assume it had to do with financing.

The current church is sided in running bond brick, with a rowlock above the basement level. The gabled roof is sheathed in asphalt shingles and a simple wooden cross adorns the peak of the gable at the front gable end. At one time, the cross was outlined in neon, but only a small section of tubing remains. The original Gothic pointed-arch stained-glass windows were retained on the south elevation. The north wall is completely obscured by a modern building that was constructed within a half inch of the church. Along the rear elevation is a single door at the northeast corner.

Entry into the early church was through a single, double door in the small vestibule. The fact that the church had a single entrance is significant, because some black churches provided separate entrances for men and women (Middle Tennessee State University 2000). The renovations of 1941 re-oriented the entrance from the front of the vestibule to the south side of the expanded vestibule, but the single-entry arrangement was retained. The 1941 vestibule sports a flat roof rather than the original hipped roof. Three rectangular stained-glass windows in the west wall of the vestibule were donated by local organizations. The oculus above the vestibule was modified to a flattened-arch shape. Entrance to the vestibule is gained by way of seven concrete stairs leading to an uncovered concrete porch. In 1941, the entire building was lifted off the ground to accommodate the basement.

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CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7, 8 Page 2

Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

7. Description, continued

The newer foundation consists of a concrete perimeter basement wall that extends above-grade by ± 18 inches, in which a series of rectangular metal casement windows provide light and air to the basement. The interior is largely intact, although the sanctuary now houses a dormitory for homeless veterans. The pews have been replaced by bunkbeds, but the stained-glass windows remain, as do the double doors leading from the vestibule to the sanctuary.

The building retains a high degree of all seven aspects of integrity. It remains in its original location, although integrity of setting has been somewhat compromised by the introduction of modern commercial buildings next to and across from it. The building's design, unchanged from the 1941 remodel, continues to reflect its historic functions. Likewise, the high level of integrity of materials and workmanship contributes to the building's significance. Most importantly, Bethel AME Church retains a high degree of integrity of feeling and association, which allows it to strongly reflect a sense of time and place, and the important historical events with which it is associated.

8. Statement of Significance

Bethel AME Church in Reno is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under criterion A for its role in the history of African Americans in Reno, and its role in Reno's civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It is one of but a very few extant buildings in Nevada associated with its African-American population, and thus it possesses exceptional significance in the social and ethnic history of Reno. For the civil rights period of the 1950s and 1960s, the church meets the requirements of listing under criteria consideration G. As a church, the building must also be addressed under criteria exception A as a property once owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes. Black churches, however, have historically served, and continue to serve, as key social institutions, transcending their religious significance. Reno's Bethel A.M.E. congregation had grown to such an extent by 1993 that they sought to acquire a larger church. The congregation now worships in a newer facility in Sparks, Nevada, and the older church was sold to a private party, who converted the building into a homeless shelter. It no longer performs a religious function.

Blacks in Nevada

African Americans have long been a small, albeit persistent, component of Nevada's population. Black Americans were among the first non-native people to enter the Great Basin in the early 1840s.

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CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 3

Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

Prominent among them was Jacob Dodson, who accompanied John C. Frémont, and James P. Beckwourth, after whom a pass he discovered in the Sierra Nevada mountains is named. Comstock Lode silver was discovered in 1859, and blacks were among the first to flock to the booming area. Although for the most part black men were excluded from high-paying jobs in the mines, some were able to secure lower-level employment. Blacks in Nevada filled a variety of jobs in the nineteenth century. Women worked as maids and caretakers for children, and men found employment in a variety of service jobs. There were a number of black businesses on the Comstock, including barbering, which was a profitable and respected business for many blacks. A recent archaeological excavation of Virginia City's successful Boston Saloon unearthed artifactual remains of the African-American business, operated by William A.G. Brown, a freeman from Massachusetts (Ronald M. James, personal communication, November 12, 2000). Other nineteenth-century black saloons are known from the historical records, including one in Carson City. In other parts of the territory, blacks worked as cowboys, ranch foremen, and ranch operators. Ben Palmer was at one time the largest taxpayer in Douglas County. He and his sister, Charlotte Barber, were among the first non-native settlers in Carson Valley, and one of Charlotte's children was the first non-native child born in the valley (Johnson and Rusco 1989).

Even before statehood in October 1864, blacks in Nevada territory established churches, fraternal organizations, literary societies, political organizations, and other groups. The first Baptist church to be formed in Nevada was organized by blacks in Virginia City in 1863. Within the next decade, the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the AME Zion Church were established, as were several Masonic lodges. Ashlar Lodge No. 8, of Prince Hall Masonry, was organized in Virginia City in 1867. It operated until the 1880s, when records of its existence seem to have vanished. A second Prince Hall lodge, St. John's Lodge No. 13, was established in Carson City in 1875, but with such a small black population the lodge was unable to sustain itself. Other groups with educational, social, and cultural goals were established in Virginia City and Carson City in the 1860s and 1870s. Among these were the United Sons of Freedom, which was a "benevolent association of colored persons." The Dumas Social and Literary Club was organized in Virginia City in 1874, and was dedicated to the self-improvement of its members. The club met at the AME church, which is appropriate since education as a means of self-improvement is one of the underlying tenets of the AME discipline. Other social and political clubs were established, but their names have not survived (Rusco 1975:178-184). With the exception of the AME Church in Virginia City, which burned in

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

the 1875 fire and was not rebuilt, none of these organizations constructed buildings to house their activities.

The black population totaled 44 in 1860, in the part of Utah Territory that comprised what would become Nevada. It peaked at 396 in the late nineteenth century (D'Azevedo 1992). During its territorial days, Nevada displayed antislavery inclinations, and the Republican party dominated the political scene until the 1870s. These conditions did not, however, preclude racial discrimination from being practiced. The earliest territorial legislatures prohibited blacks from voting, holding political office, serving in the legal profession, or military service. Blacks were subject to civil, criminal, and tax law, but could not serve as jurors or witnesses in cases involving whites. Intermarriage with whites was prohibited and punishable by one to two years in territorial prison for both the offenders and the person solemnizing the union. Nevada's antimiscegenation laws were not repealed until 1959 (Coray 1992). In the early years, Nevada's schools were racially segregated by statute (to exclude blacks, Indians, and Asians). The small size of the black population did not provide the minimum number of students necessary for a separate school, and when the state refused to hire a teacher for black students, the black community sued. In 1872, the State Supreme Court declared the discriminatory law unconstitutional (Nevada Black History Project 1997).

Nevada achieved statehood in October 1864. With the motto, "Battle Born," Nevada played an important role in the post-Civil War politics. Nevada's popular and electoral votes were needed by Abraham Lincoln to gain re-election and to support his moderate reconstruction policies for the South. Lincoln believed that the Confederate states needed reconstruction before they could be readmitted into the Union following the Civil War. At the time, radical Republicans, under the leadership of John C. Frémont, wanted to severely punish the South, and the Democrats, behind General George McClellan, wanted to readmit Confederate states with virtually no conditions (Rocha 2000). With the help of Nevada's electorate, Lincoln won re-election and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, abolishing slavery. Nevada's senatorial delegation contributed further to civil rights legislation by supporting the 14th Amendment (ratified 1868), which granted citizenship to blacks, and the 15th Amendment (ratified 1870), which prohibited states from denying the right to vote because of race, color, or previous condition of servitude (Morris 1953, 246-248).

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

The African Episcopal Methodist Church Movement

The African Methodist Episcopal Church traces its roots to 1787, when Richard Allen and his followers in Philadelphia organized the Free African Society for blacks who had been denied freedom of worship in their chosen denomination.¹ The society was established in response to blacks' need for self-expression and fuller involvement in society, and a means to gain a sense of dignity and self-respect. To foster these goals, the society emphasized education as a means of self-help. From the beginning, the church offered night classes for members, and in 1808, Allen and others in the society established an insurance society for slaves and freemen in America. The first members of the Free African Society, although poor and uneducated, purchased an old smithy in Philadelphia, which later became the first Bethel AME Church (Allen 1960). This church still stands today and is known as Mother Bethel (Mother Bethel AME 2000).

The Methodist Episcopal conference took charge of the church established by Allen and the Free African Society, and charged exorbitant fees for supplying an ordained minister. Eventually, the society refused to accept the white pastors, and Richard Allen applied for a writ of mandamus for the right to ordination and the pulpit of the black church. With the help of a well-known attorney, the plight of Allen and the society was brought to court, and the suit was settled in favor of the black organization (Allen 1960:8). This led to the establishment of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, controlled by African Americans and dedicated to improving their condition.

Generally following the doctrine of the Methodist Episcopal Church (ME), the AME Church eliminated the pro-slavery provisions in the Methodist Discipline. Richard Allen became AME's first bishop, and in 1816, at their first annual conference, the church combined with other black churches in Baltimore, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and other Pennsylvania communities (Allen 1960:8). By 1856, the AME Church boasted about 20,000 members. The church's goal was to improve relations between blacks and whites and to instill a sense of civic pride in blacks. To accomplish the latter, the church set out to offer support and services to the community, thus fostering a tradition of public service among AME members (Middle Tennessee State University 2000:7).

¹ Richard Allen and other blacks in Philadelphia were assigned special seats at St. Georges Methodist Episcopal Church, but were not allowed full freedom of worship by the white congregation (Allen 1960).

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

Prior to the Civil War, the AME Church was banned from many areas in the South because slave owners feared slave revolts. In 1863, when Union forces occupied parts of coastal South Carolina, AME missionaries went from Baltimore to Charleston to establish mission churches. By 1866, AME churches were established in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Following the Civil War, the AME Church took an active role in Reconstruction politics to seek civil and political equality for blacks. These activities established for the AME Church a reputation for community and political activism (Middle Tennessee State University 2000:8).

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the AME Church was one of the largest of the black churches, as it expanded nationwide with the migration of freed blacks from the South. The AME Church also extended its missionary activities overseas, with more than 22,000 churches in Africa and the Caribbean (Middle Tennessee State University 2000:8). AME churches have historically played significant roles in matters of civil rights. From participation in the Underground Railroad of the mid-nineteenth century to the activism of the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century, the AME Church has actively championed equal rights for African Americans.

Bethel AME Church in Nevada

The earliest black religious congregation in Nevada may have been an attempt to organize a branch of the Methodist Church South in Virginia City in 1862. The attempt was largely unsuccessful, beyond the occasional visit from a pastor of that denomination (Angel 1881:209). The first Baptist Church in Nevada was a black congregation that met in a meeting house on B Street in Virginia City. Although several white people attended services there, the church was established to serve the black population. Samuel T. Wagner, a founding member, stated that the blacks wanted their own church in order that "they might worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience and in their own peculiar way, without interfering with or coming into contact with their white brethren" (Rusco 1975:174).

The AME Church of California supervised churches in other Western states including Oregon, Nevada, and Idaho, as well as British Columbia. Their first annual convention was held in 1863, and Elder Jacob Mitchell reported on his visit to Virginia City the previous year:

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Section 8 Page 7

Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

. . . on his arrival there he was cordially received. Preparations for meetings had been made by the brethren, who had been apprised of his intended visit. The Court House of that city was opened for him to preach to the people in. On the first Sabbath our meeting was numerously attended; the audience appeared deeply interested, and a collection of \$100 was taken up. Our brethren there have organized a building committee, and bought a lot for the erection of a house of worship. The original size of their lot was 100 x 100 feet. Of this the brethren had been induced to sell two lots, each 100 x 25 feet, They deem their lot sufficiently large, and it has finally cost them \$100. They have now in their fund, towards a building, \$390 (quoted in Rusco 1975:175-176).

Before their own building was constructed, the white Methodist Episcopal Church in Virginia City, which had just built a new church, allowed the AME congregation to meet in their former meeting-house. Elder Mitchell reported that it was there that, “. . . I had the happiness of taking twenty-three of my brethren and sisters by the hand, and organizing a branch of the Church militant,² under the AME Discipline” (Rusco 1975:176). This organization of the Virginia City AME presumably occurred at some time during the year following the annual convention in September 1863. Of the AME Church, an 1864-1865 directory indicated that “a neat and substantial church has lately been built on F Street, and religious services are held every Sunday” (Rusco 1975:177). This information is a bit confusing, as a notice was published by Bishop Ward in 1870 that the church in Virginia City was to be dedicated on October 1. In any case, the AME Church was destroyed in the great fire that devastated most of Virginia City in the fall of 1875. It is possible that the building was rebuilt, but church records suggest that the church gave up attempts to provide a minister for Virginia City after the fire.

Carson City maintained a small AME congregation during the 1870s, often sharing ministers with Virginia City. Carson City also supported an AME Zion Church for a few years during the 1870s. No records have been found to suggest there were black churches in other parts of the state during

² Webster's Dictionary defines church militant as: “the Christian church on earth, which is supposed to be engaged in a constant warfare against its enemies, and is thus distinguished from the church triumphant in heaven” (Dictionary.com 2000).

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Section 8 Page 8

Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

the nineteenth century, including a search of the records of the Church Survey conducted during the Great Depression by the Works Progress Administration, under the auspices of the Survey of State and Local Historical Records project. Although the African American population was very small during the territorial years and early statehood, they made persistent efforts to maintain their churches in spite of ongoing financial difficulties.

Nevada's black population decreased markedly during the last decade of the nineteenth century with the 1900 census recording a total of 134 in the state. This loss of population can be attributed to a decline in the mining industry that had provided service jobs for blacks. By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, the black population had rebounded, and the 1910 census recorded 513 (Rusco 1975:124). By now, Nevada's biggest and most prosperous town was Reno, and the majority of the black population had shifted there. Following more than twenty years without an established black church in Nevada, a Bethel AME congregation was organized in Reno in 1907.

At the time, it was reported that there were 225 blacks in Reno and the congregation anticipated a membership of about 50. In spring 1910, the California Conference of the AME Church sent Reverend William Solley to Reno to facilitate the construction of a church building for the small congregation. On March 16, 1910, Reverend Solley reported,

We obtained a permit today to build our church in Reno on the lot at 226 Bell Street, just back of Sheriff Ferrel's home. The lot had a house on it—Mrs. Hamilton's—but that was moved off to make room for the church. We will put up a simple little frame church at first, but a good little building. The Reno church will be built at once. I hope we can start on it tomorrow. At any rate we will get under way some day this week sure (*Nevada State Journal* March 17, 1910).

Good progress was made on the church, and the *Reno Evening Gazette* reported that the dedication ceremony was to be held Sunday, May 29. The church was formally dedicated by presiding elder, Reverend Wilson. In the newspaper article on the event, Reverend Wilson indicated his desire that the ceremony be attended by all black people in Reno and he extended a cordial invitation to white people, as well (*Reno Evening Gazette* May 19, 1910:2). The church's significance is manifested through the fact that it was only the second structure built by blacks in Nevada to house their social activities, and is clearly the oldest surviving black institution in the state.

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CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 9

Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

In keeping with the tenets of their faith, congregants of Reno's Bethel AME Church strove to improve their place in society by making contributions to the community. The church was not only the seat of religious observance, but also a center of social interaction and participation. For the 31 years between the time Bethel AME church was built and the 1941 remodel, church members were active in community activities that sought to promote equality for blacks through the example of good citizenship. It is not surprising that when in 1919 Reno blacks, along with several prominent whites, formed the first Nevada chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP),³ a majority of the founding membership was affiliated with Bethel AME Church (Rusco 2000b:14). Many of the names on the Application for Charter submitted to the NAACP Board of Directors listed their addresses at 226 Bell Street, a boardinghouse adjacent to the church that catered to black residents, and the chapter held its executive meetings at the AME church (NAACP var.).

By early 1941, the presiding pastor at Bethel sought to find new quarters for the congregation, which wanted to expand its facilities to include a kitchen and space for a social hall. Members of Bethel AME raised money for their church by serving Friday night meals to the public. Since a number of the members worked as domestics in the homes of wealthy and prominent white families, the level of culinary skill was high, and the church dinners were popular among the white population. It was also an acceptable way for the whites to support the blacks community (Norma Washington, personal communication, January 4, 2001). To further the expansion goals of church, Reverend E.H. Booker made an offer on an existing building, Dania Hall, at Seventh and Sierra Streets in northwest Reno.

At the February 24, 1941 Reno city council meeting, however, a large group of property owners from the neighborhood appeared and demanded that the church be prevented from taking possession of the building. Protests were made by representatives of the University, the Reno school board (the hall was near Reno High School), and Gamma Phi Beta sorority. The protesters asserted that property values in the neighborhood would suffer if the congregation was allowed to buy the hall. Since neither zoning nor ordinances applied to the case,⁴ a committee was named to address the neighbors' concerns (*Nevada State Journal* February 25, 1941). It is not known what the outcome

³ The second chapter of the NAACP was organized in Las Vegas in 1927.

⁴ A 1917 the U.S. Supreme Court case ruled unconstitutional a Louisville, Kentucky ordinance requiring blacks to live in certain sections of the city.

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

of the committee's investigation was, but in the end it was clear that the intrusion of blacks into the "midst of an old established residence neighborhood which has grown up in the vicinity of the Reno high school and the university" would not be tolerated (*Reno Evening Gazette*, February 28, 1941). Hence, on March 29, 1941, the Nevada State Journal reported that Reverend Booker had relinquished the contract to purchase Dania Hall. Reverend Booker stated,

If we had anticipated that there would have been opposition to our purchase of the property, we would not have done so. It was the desire of the congregation to secure better quarters where our program of religious activity would have facilities for serving dinner through which we are able to help support our local church. It has now been decided to remodel the present church on Bell Street and we are appreciative of the interest and assistance which the community has given us in the past (*Nevada State Journal* March 29, 1941).

Reverend Booker reported that the remodeling project will entail the construction of a basement with kitchen and dining room, the addition of three rooms for Sunday School activities and the application of a brick veneer on the entire structure (*Nevada State Journal* March 29, 1941). A fund drive for \$5,000 for the construction was undertaken, but by the end of May only \$852 had been raised (*Nevada State Journal* May 28, 1941).

Ultimately unable to raise the needed funds, the church petitioned district court for permission to borrow the full \$5,000, and permission was granted to secure a loan on July 10, 1941 (*Reno Evening Gazette* July 10, 1941). On August 16, 1941, the *Nevada State Journal* reported the opening of the expanded church the previous evening. Besides several church officials, in attendance were Nevada Lt. Governor Maurice Sullivan, representing Governor E.P. Carville, E.H. Walker of the Reno Chamber of Commerce, and Reverend P.H. Willis, retired Methodist minister from Sparks. Following the speeches, a tour of the expanded facility was given:

Improvements made to the Bethel A.M.E. Church include the addition of a full basement, measuring 40x50 feet. The basement includes a kitchen, furnace, and a complete air conditioning system. Other improvements include a church parlor, and a study room and an office for the pastor (*Nevada State Journal* August 16, 1941).

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

Physically, the church did not change from the 1941 remodeling until 1993, when the congregation acquired a building on Rock Boulevard in Sparks. The old church was purchased by a private owner and converted to a homeless shelter for veterans. In 1998, the Bethel congregation celebrated its 91st anniversary, having grown from a congregation of 25 in 1985 to 300 in 1998. Bethel AME is the oldest surviving black church in Nevada, and the first 83 years of its existence were at the Bell Street church. Retired minister, Reverend Cecil Howard recalled, "The persons who started this church were genuine trailblazers. That is why we have this church today because we had no fear. We as African Americans may be persecuted, but with faith in God we don't have to face it alone" (*Reno Gazette Journal* July 16, 1998:4C). Bethel AME Church was the first institution in Reno to battle against the forces of persecution and discrimination in Reno, and for that its significance to all Nevada citizens cannot be overstated.

Civil Rights Movement in Nevada

Reno's Bethel AME Church was at the center of the civil rights movement in northern Nevada, but long before the organized civil rights activities of the 1950s and 1960s, Bethel provided a refuge and a foundation for blacks facing discrimination in the area. Blacks were among the first non-native settlers to the territory, and they faced a certain degree of prejudice and discrimination. With the end of the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, blacks in Nevada felt hopeful that the future would provide better conditions. This sense of promise ended with the rise of white-supremacist beliefs in the latter half of the nineteenth century. These views were supported by the U.S. Supreme Court, which declared in 1883 the Civil Rights Act of 1875⁵ to be unconstitutional.⁶ Further, in 1896, the principle of

⁵ The Civil Rights Act of 1874 guaranteed equal rights in public places (e.g., inns, public conveyances, theaters, etc.) without distinction of color and prohibited the exclusion of blacks from jury duty (Morris 1953:251).

⁶ The rationale for overturning the Civil Rights Act was that the Act protected social rather than political rights by prohibiting invasion of the states of civil rights, but did not protect the invasion of civil rights by individuals unaided by state authority. This ruling put to an end attempts by the federal government to protect blacks against discrimination by private citizens (Morris 1953:468).

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

“separate but equal” was legitimized by the Supreme Court’s ruling on *Plessy v. Ferguson*.⁷ By 1914, every Southern state had passed laws that created two separate societies divided by race (USBOL 2000). These laws, known as Jim Crow laws, influenced racial attitudes in other parts of the country, including Reno, Nevada.

Contributing to the Jim Crow attitudes of the turn of the twentieth century was a downturn in Nevada’s mining industry. An extreme reaction occurred in November 1904, when Reno’s police chief ordered all unemployed blacks out of the city, reportedly in response to the attempted shooting of a police officer by a “black fiend.” The act sought to remove from the city “all negroes [*sic*] not having any visible means of support” (*Reno Evening Gazette* November 17, 1904). Those refusing to comply with the order were to be jailed. The newspaper article suggests that the action was successful, and that the city was “well rid of a large number of negroes [*sic*] who have been hanging around the city for the past week” (*Reno Evening Gazette* November 17, 1904). It was within only three years of this mass eviction that the Bethel congregation was organized.

Until the 1960s, Reno practiced segregation, although it was not formally legislated. Blacks were restricted in their housing and employment options, were not served in white restaurants and bars, could not enter white casinos, nor could they seek accommodations in white hotels. Such practices were common across Nevada, resulting in the unfortunate title of the Mississippi of the West. Blacks in Reno strove to maintain their dignity and sense of community in the face of social restrictions. Attempts to improve their lot included the organization of Bethel AME Church in 1907, and the Colored Independent Political Club in 1910 (*Nevada State Journal*, September 4, 1910), as well as the colonization of 11,000 acres by 100 black families from the South in an area known as Black Springs, 18 miles north of Reno (*Territorial Enterprise* March 26, 1913). To stem the tide of discrimination, Reno’s black community organized the local chapter of the NAACP in 1919.

The NAACP was established in 1909 in New York City by a group of black and white citizens committed to social justice. Prompted in part by an epidemic of lynchings of blacks in the South, the NAACP set as its goal the abolition of forced segregation, the promotion of equal education, civil rights under the protection of the law, and an end to race violence. The NAACP strategy of

⁷ The basis of this ruling upheld a Louisiana law that required segregated railroad facilities. The court held that as long as there was equality of accommodation, segregation did not constitute discrimination, and blacks were not deprived of equal protection under the 14th Amendment (Morris 1953:469).

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

ending discrimination through legal action evolved during their first twenty years, as did their commitment to non-violence. The NAACP focused its actions on the press, the petition, the ballot, and the courts to accomplish their objectives to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of minority citizens (NAACP 2000).

Reno's NAACP chapter was approved by the Committee on Branches on September 17, 1919, and by the national organization on September 23. The chapter application listed 60 members, although several of the founding members were white, the membership represented a significant percentage of Reno's black population, which numbered about 100 at the time. As reported earlier, many of the leaders of the Reno chapter were members of the Bethel AME Church. Six of these listed their address as 226 Bell Street, which along with a rear house (226 ½) was one of several boardinghouses catering to blacks in Reno at the time (Rusco 2000:13-14).

Although the Reno chapter got off to an auspicious beginning, surviving records of the national organization do not offer much insight into their work, and no local records have been located. One significant activity involved the chapter's effort to secure prosecution of a white gambler for the shooting of a black porter at the Overland Hotel. On July 18, 1922, chapter secretary, Mrs. Thomas Russell, sent a news clipping of the incident to the NAACP National Secretary. She also wrote that the man who shot William Hubbard was a gambler and "we colored people are afraid his friends will try to squash the matter by paying a little money." Although Mrs. Russell's letter suggested that an indictment was expected, "we have decided to retain a lawyer to follow the case, and if justice is not meted out we will be in a position to carry the case on" (Rusco 2000:15). In the end the lawyer was not needed, as the perpetrator was not only indicted, but after two trials was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to a one- to -two-year term (Rusco 2000:16).

The branch was evidently active through 1923, but by 1924, membership had dropped to 18, and in 1927, the balance of the branch's funds was sent to the national office. In December 1933, an attempt was made to revive the branch, led by Mrs. Edna Holley. Bethel AME Church was again involved, as evidenced by Mrs. Holley's remark, "Rev. A.C. Claybrook is our pastor" (Rusco 2000:17). The attempt was not successful until more than a decade later, however.

In the mid-1930s, well-known black writer and poet Langston Hughes was in Reno. The reason for his visit is not known, although it might have been related to NAACP activities since Hughes kept an active schedule of speech-making during those years. While in town Hughes stayed with O.H.

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

Hammonds and his wife at 226 Bell Street. The Hammonds were active in the NAACP and were members of Bethel AME Church. Hughes' stay in Reno resulted in a short story, *Slice Him Down*, which was first published in 1936 in *Esquire Magazine*. Hughes also wrote an article in 1934 for the black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The subject of the article was Reno's O.H. Hammonds, who was notable for being the first black person employed as an observer with the United States Weather Bureau. Hughes explained how Hammonds, a former school teacher, had passed the civil service examination in 1907, and was immediately assigned to Reno. At the time of Langston Hughes' visit to Reno, Hammonds operated from his office in the Reno Downtown Post Office building.

Besides the ongoing *de facto* segregation in Reno, a major issue was being raised in southern Nevada as a result of the discriminatory hiring practices at the Boulder Dam construction site. The Las Vegas branch of the NAACP was established in 1927 by members of the African-American Progressive Club, but it was the Colored Citizens Labor Protective Organization that fought for equal hiring practices at the dam. In contrast to the Reno experience, civil rights activities in Las Vegas were not directly connected with a church, but rather with labor organizations. This is not surprising since Las Vegas was home to several major federal projects including the construction of Boulder Dam in the 1930s, and the establishment of the Las Vegas Gunnery Range and the Basic Magnesium plant in the early 1940s. A number of Southern blacks moved to Nevada during those years in hopes of finding employment, and the operations at the Basic Magnesium plant was a test case for President Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802, which banned racial discrimination by defense contractors (Coray 1989:31-15).

In the decade following World War II, when Las Vegas was making a name for itself as a gambling and entertainment mecca, nationally-prominent black musicians and performers were popular on the showroom stages. They were not, however, allowed to stay in the hotels, gamble or dine in the casinos in which they performed. In response to this situation, the first inter-racial luxury resort was opened in May 1955 to cater to the black performers and to provide them a place to stay, mingle, and "jam" before a racially-mixed audience of residents and tourists. The Moulin Rouge was open only a few months, but its creation turned the tide segregation in Las Vegas. In 1960, the Moulin Rouge, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1992, was the site of an important meeting between the local NAACP branch, hotel owners, city and state officials, including Nevada governor Grant Sawyer. The meeting resulted in the collapse of segregation on the Strip and in downtown Las Vegas (McFadden 1992).

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

Although Elmer Rusco reports that the Reno NAACP was re-established in the 1940s, the 1950s and 1960s saw a marked increase in civil rights activities state-wide. Clearly, the 1940s brought to the fore specific issues of prejudice and discrimination in the community. The furor over the acquisition of Dania Hall in 1941, and the flagrant exclusion of blacks from Reno businesses, jobs, and housing had reached an intolerable level. Signs were prominently displayed in store windows stating: "No Negroes, Indians or dogs." Blacks were being forcibly removed from white business establishments, black families were being forced away from white-owned trailer parks and housing developments, and the town effectively was closed to African Americans.

During the early 1940s, Bethel's minister, Rev. Emmer Henry Booker, corresponded with Nevada Governor E.P. Carville to promote racial equality. In early 1940, upon receipt of an informational flyer on the *75 Years of Negro Progress Exposition* to be held in Detroit, Michigan in May 1940, Governor Carville wrote to Rev. Emmer seeking his assistance with the establishment of a committee to sponsor a Nevada entry. In addition to himself, Reverend Booker recommended two Reno blacks for the commission, including O.H. Hammonds of Bethel AME Church, and Ray Cheatham of the Negro Political Science Club. Mr. Booker also recommended four white men for the commission including, politically-active and influential George Wingfield, attorney Lester D. Summerfield, Dr. Leon Hartman, and Rev. Dr. William Moll Case. Governor Carville apparently supported Nevada's participation in the exposition because Rev. Booker wrote Carville,

I share with you the idea that with all the other states participating in this extraordinary affair surely Nevada does not want to be left out, especially in view of the fact that her history is so significantly connected up with the granting of freedom of the Negroes in the United States. The Negroes would not have had an opportunity to make any progress had it not been for the birth of Nevada as a sovereign state. Her birth materially helped to save the union and return an oppressed people to their birth right.

Ironically, it was the following year that Bethel's congregation was forced to give up their plans to purchase Dania Hall and expand their existing church instead, in response to a fierce protest by white property owners. The official program of the dedication service and the newspaper articles covering the event suggest there was some support from the white population for the black community, the reality of discrimination was continuing unabated (*Nevada State Journal* August 16, 1941).

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

In 1952, a newly-arrived contingent of black servicemen from the 3904th Composite Wing based at Stead Air Force Base, a few miles north of Reno, had to be bused to Sacramento for entertainment because they were unwelcome at Reno establishments. The newspaper headline read: "Air Force Men Taken to Sacramento to Avoid Humiliation Met With Here" (*Nevada State Journal* July 27, 1952).⁸ The Chamber of Commerce took immediate steps to determine the magnitude of the discrimination problem in Reno, but the Chamber president expressed his doubt that "complete tolerance could be expected here at this time" (*Nevada State Journal* July 30, 1952). Reno blacks had long been relegated to segregated facilities from boardinghouses, restaurants, churches, to bars and casinos.

During the decade of the 1950s, Bethel AME Church continued in its role as arbiter for race relations. In 1954, Brotherhood Week activities were held at the church, and speakers from various denominations and organizations stressed the "immediate need for concerted action by all Reno groups in improving local conditions for minority groups" (*Reno Evening Gazette* February 23, 1954). Bethel also maintained its position within the NAACP, serving as the official meeting location for the local organization, and contributing many of its congregants to the group's membership. During an "action-packet two hour meeting" at the AME church in January 1958, the NAACP voted to endorse the area's first low-cost public housing development proposed by the Reno housing authority and approved by the Reno city council. This meeting also set the branch's agenda for the coming year to include the "study and development of proposals to be presented to the 1959 session of the state legislature" (*Reno Evening Gazette*, January 23, 1958).⁹

By the end of the 1950s, the NAACP became more active as the fight to legally end discrimination continued. In 1959, the Reno-Sparks branch filed a resolution of its opposition to State Senate Bill 177, which proposed to abolish the state welfare department and transfer welfare activities to the county level. Prior to the 1960 winter Olympics, held at nearby Squaw Valley, California, the branch

⁸ This would not be the first time that the military presence near Reno contributed to social reform. It was in 1941, that the Army Air Corps protested to city officials that the town's red light district served as an unwelcome distraction for airmen, which resulted in the banning of prostitution in Washoe County.

⁹ The Nevada legislature meets biennially in odd-numbered years.

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8. Significance, continued

also petitioned the members of the Reno and Sparks city councils, and the Washoe County Board of County Commissioners:

... to make it mandatory upon the operators of all our places of public accommodation, including hotels, motels, restaurants, taverns and places of gaming and amusement to offer equal service and facilities to any well behaved, respectable person or persons who may desire same, regardless of his or their nationality, color or race.

Also in 1960, the local NAACP branch undertook picketing at the Woolworth store in Reno, presumably to protest the company's discriminatory practices in the South. The August 1960 newsletter of the NAACP admonished members to continue to "withhold your patronage from this store. This program has been very effective in many areas. Remember a dollar spent in this Woolworth Store denies a Negro a seat at a Woolworth lunch counter in the South" (*Reno-Sparks NAACP Newsletter* August 1960).

Legislative relief for discrimination was slow in coming to Nevada. The first political action came in 1958, when a Reno judge declared Nevada's antimiscegenation law unconstitutional. This law, and other racist holdovers from the nineteenth century, were repealed by the Nevada legislature in 1959. In 1960, discrimination by public agencies, contractors for the state, and apprentice programs was banned. It was not until 1965, a full year after the federal Civil Rights Act, that enforceable civil rights legislation was passed (Nevada Black History Project 1997). Housing continued to be a problem for blacks, however, and in February 1965, the situation erupted into violence as rocks and chunks of coal were thrown through the window of a home being purchased by a black family. The president of the Reno-Sparks Chapter of the NAACP, and pastor of Bethel AME Church, Rev. Howard Gloyd, reported that it had been the second such incident to occur that day (*Nevada State Journal* February 11, 1965). Housing discrimination was not outlawed in Nevada until 1971.

Summary

The dearth of published information on Nevada's twentieth-century black experience has been observed by several scholars. It is clear, however, that although conditions had been relatively good for blacks in the mid-nineteenth century, the coming of the Jim Crow era brought overt

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

8. Significance, continued

discrimination and *de facto* segregation to Nevada, particularly the two largest cities of Reno and Las Vegas.

Reno's small black population had few social institutions to champion its causes or to provide continuity to its social life. The first and most enduring of these was Bethel AME Church. Built as Reno's first black church¹⁰ in 1910, it is the longest operating black congregation in Nevada. Holding to the tenets of the AME Church to provide opportunities for self-expression and fuller involvement in society, as a means through which members could gain a sense of dignity and self-respect, Bethel AME Church has fostered social equality through its active role in the community, through its direct link with the NAACP, and through its abiding dignity in the face of conspicuous and unrelenting discrimination. Along with the Moulin Rouge in Las Vegas, which was not built until 1955, Reno's Bethel AME Church is one of Nevada's most significant buildings associated with the history of its black population.

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¹⁰ The second black church to be built in the Reno-Sparks area was the Second Baptist Church built in Sparks in 1946.

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

10. Geographical Data

Boundary Description

The National Register boundaries of Bethel AME Church includes the .039-acre parcel identified as Assessor's Parcel Number 011-021-05, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada, located in Section 11, T.19 N, R. 19E, MDM, USGS 7.5-minute quadrangle, *Reno, Nev.*, 1967, photorevised 1974.

Boundary Justification

Resource boundaries include all land commonly associated with town lot identified as Reno, Washoe County, Nevada APN. 011-021-05.

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Bethel AME Church, 220 Bell Street, Reno, Washoe County, NV

Photographs

Name of Property: Bethel AME Church

Location of Property: 220 Bell Street
Reno, Washoe County, Nevada

Location of Negatives: State Historic Preservation Office
100 N. Stewart Street
Carson City, NV 89701

Photograph 1: Bethel AME Church, front elevation, facing east
Photographer: Mella Rothwell Harmon
October 2000

Photograph 2: Bethel AME Church, front and north elevations, facing northeast
Photographer: Mella Rothwell Harmon
October 2000

Photograph 3: Bethel AME Church Cornerstone, facing east
Photographer: Mella Rothwell Harmon
October 2000