



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

### 1. Name of Property

historic name: Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church

other name/site number: African Methodist Episcopal Church

### 2. Location

street & number: 916 Fifth Avenue South

not for publication: N/A

vicinity: N/A

city/town: Great Falls

state: Montana code: MT county: Cascade code: 013 zip code: 59405

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this  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  meets  does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally.

*Mike F. ... / SHPO* 7/17/03  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

Montana State Historic Preservation Office  
State or Federal agency or bureau

(  See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
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  
     see continuation sheet
- determined eligible for the National Register  
     see continuation sheet
- determined not eligible for the National Register  
     see continuation sheet
- removed from the National Register  
     see continuation sheet
- other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

*E. Beall*  
Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action  
9-11-03

**5. Classification**

<b>Ownership of Property:</b>	Private	<b>Number of Resources within Property</b>	
		Contributing	Noncontributing
<b>Category of Property:</b>	Building		
		<u>  1  </u>	<u>  0  </u> building(s)
<b>Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register:</b>	0	<u>  0  </u>	<u>  0  </u> sites
		<u>  0  </u>	<u>  0  </u> structures
		<u>  0  </u>	<u>  0  </u> objects
<b>Name of related multiple property listing:</b>	N/A		
		<u>  1  </u>	<u>  0  </u> TOTAL

**6. Function or Use**

<b>Historic Functions:</b>	RELIGION/religious facility SOCIAL/meeting hall	<b>Current Functions:</b>	RELIGION/religious facility SOCIAL/meeting hall
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**7. Description**

<b>Architectural Classification:</b>	LATE 19 <sup>TH</sup> AND EARLY 20 <sup>TH</sup> CENTURY REVIVALS/ Gothic Revival	<b>Materials:</b>	
		foundation:	CONCRETE
		walls:	BRICK
		roof:	ASPHALT/shingle
		other:	METAL

**Narrative Description**

The town of Great Falls lies in the agricultural heart of Montana where the Missouri River—the central geographic feature of the city—joins the Sun River. The Highwood, Little Belt, and Big Belt Mountains lie east, southeast and south of Great Falls, and the Continental Divide is fifty miles to the east. Paris Gibson and others founded the original Great Falls townsite northeast of the Sun/Missouri River confluence in 1883. The Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church sits in a residential neighborhood in the lower south side of the original townsite. The area was developed early in the city’s history and was generally a mixed-ethnicity working class neighborhood. It has been the scene of considerable neighborhood revitalization efforts. At the site of the church, mature landscaping softens the viewshed.

The ecclesiastic home for the Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) congregation is a tall, one-story, rectangular, wooden structure with brick veneer that is sheltered by a steep gable roof. The overall presentation of the church is one of studied formalism, tidiness, and substance. Drawing predominately from Gothic Revival influences, the church also exhibits eclectic influences, borrowing from Tudor styles in the parapeted gable roof, crowsteps and the unbroken wall surface on the southern elevation. Features possibly drawn from Italian Renaissance styles include the square, centered tower and the wide overhangs supported by paired, wooden brackets. Exterior wall surfacing on the church is running bond and decorative brickwork is understated. It includes a soldier course above the foundation and double rowlock perimeters at the window heads.

The church faces north, stands perpendicular to the street and is elevated, which adds to the lofty sense of the architecture and allows light into the full, concrete basement through ten, four-over-four double-hung windows. The rectangular basement windows occur symmetrically, three along both the west and east elevations, and two at the north and south elevations. The roof and spire are protected from the elements by composition shingles. A cornerstone graces the northeast corner of the church directly above the foundation and reads: “Union Bethel AME Church Rebuilt 1917.” The original church’s hand-cut sandstone cornerstone rests on the front lawn and reads “AME Church A.D. 1891.”

The north elevation is articulated by a square, projecting, brick vestibule that is centered and extends upward to a bell tower at the apex of the roof. The bell house is surfaced with unpainted, wooden shingles. Pairs of diminutive Gothic openings

**8. Statement of Significance**

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Applicable National Register Criteria: A, C

Areas of Significance: ETHNIC HERITAGE/Black  
RELIGION  
SOCIAL HISTORY

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A

Significant Person(s): N/A

Period(s) of Significance: 1917-1950

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Significant Dates: 1917, 1920, 1924

Architect/Builder: Unknown

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

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The Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its representation of patterns of black community growth in the western U.S., its association with the historical development of the African American community in Great Falls, and its unusual longevity in Montana, whose black population has declined over the past century. The church is one of the first-built and longest-used African American churches in Montana and thus is significant at the statewide level. The property possesses added significance under Criterion C as a representation of ecclesiastical Gothic Revival architecture typical in Montana in the early twentieth century. The Union Bethel AME church also meets Criteria Consideration A because it derives its primary significance from its association with historical trends and its architectural importance.

The establishment of the African American community in Great Falls followed a general pattern seen elsewhere in Montana and the western United States. Following emancipation and the end of the Civil War, a growing number of freedmen and women and freeborn African Americans joined the national migration west. In 1860 there were approximately 5000 blacks in the western states and territories, excluding Texas and Oklahoma; by 1870 the number had grown to about 25,000.<sup>1</sup>

Prof. Quintard Taylor has outlined a pattern of black community development in the West that provides a context for the African American community in Great Falls, Montana. According to Taylor's model, black westerners overwhelmingly lived in urban settings, where they found both job opportunities and the solidarity of other African Americans. They typically organized for mutual benefit more quickly than did non-blacks in the West; in the Pacific Northwest, this usually began with an African Methodist Episcopal or Baptist church. People in a given locale used the church not only for religious functions, but also as a springboard for benevolent societies, fraternal associations, and other social and educational organizations. This was especially true after a congregation constructed a church building, which frequently housed secular events.<sup>2</sup>

African American organizations to some degree mirrored those in white society, whose membership was often closed to them. But for black westerners, self-segregated churches and clubs played a unique and separate role: it was here that people found opportunities for leadership and self-expression the larger society did not offer. African American churches in the western United States are more associated with social, cultural, and political trends of their congregations than non-black churches because historically they have served secular purposes unnecessary to white congregations. One historian of the AME denomination has written that the "pervasiveness of racism...and economic oppression has generally

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1 Eugene Berwanger, The West and Reconstruction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. 23.

2 Quintard Taylor, In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), pp. 192-5; 208; Taylor, "The Emergence of Black Communities in the Pacific Northwest 1865-1910," Journal of Negro History 64 (Fall 1979), p. 344.

9. Major Bibliographic References

See continuation sheet

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 -- Specify Repository:

Ken Robison  
315 Lamplighter Lane  
Great Falls MT 59405

Barbara Behan  
530 E. Beckwith  
Missoula MT 59801

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: less than one

UTM References: Zone 12 Easting 478130 Northing 5260480 (NAD27)

Legal Location (Township, Range & Section(s)): SE 1/4 NE 1/4 SE 1/4 Sec. 12, T20N R3E, Montana Prime Meridian

Verbal Boundary Description

The property includes all of Lot 5 and the east half of Lot 4, Block 461, Original Great Falls Addition (townsite).

Boundary Justification

The boundary is drawn, based on legally recorded boundary lines, to include the land historically associated with the building.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title : Barbara Behan  
organization:  
street & number: 530 East Beckwith  
city or town: Missoula state: MT

date: May 15, 2003  
telephone: (406) 728-2727  
zip code: 59801

Name: Ken Robison  
Address: 315 Lamplighter Lane  
City or Town: Great Falls state: MT zip code: 59405

Architectural description provided by

Name: Ellen Sievert  
organization: Cascade County Historic Preservation Office  
street & number: PO Box 5021  
city or town: Great Falls state: MT zip code: 59401

funding provided by

Name: Montana Land Title Association Foundation  
street & number: 5 West Sixth Avenue  
Power Block, Suite 41  
P.O. Box 6322  
city or town: Helena state: MT zip code: 59604

Property Owner

name/title: Union Bethel AME Church  
street & number: 4611 7<sup>th</sup> Ave South  
city or town: Great Falls state: MT zip code: 59405-3803

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7

Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Cascade County, MT

Page 2

occur in the side and front elevations of the bell house, divided by pairs of ornate, wooden brackets at the corners and midpoints. The tower is adorned by a tall shingled spire, replete with finial, which is of tapered, octagonal form above and transitions to a square, flared base immediately above the wood-shingled bell house. The spire base is finished with a simple, plumb fascia, beadboard soffit, and is of generous overhang.

The gable end walls of the church are minimally parapeted and are capped with cast stone coping. A single crowstep occurs at each lower corner of the gable walls where they intersect the eave line of the roof. Triangular cast stone inserts occur at one-third points along the steep façade parapet, which give the impression of steps.

Steep, concrete stairs, with engaged concrete handrails, lead to the front entrance. The broad handrails echo the design of the roof parapet, with concrete coping and crowsteps. Flush, wooden double doors, with a single large, Gothic transom above, are centered in the tower and allow access to the vestibule. Inside the vestibule, a second pair of paneled doors opens to the church's sanctuary. Two symmetrically placed, double-hung, Gothic windows flank the tower in the façade. A pair of smaller Gothic windows punctuates the brick tower above the main entrance. Window heads on the north elevation are articulated with flush, cast stone keystones and labels at the springline of the Gothic arches. Flush, wooden double doors, directly below the front entrance, open to the basement level, which can be accessed outside by concrete stairs on either side of the tower. The concrete stairways are parallel to the façade and meet a central stoop under the tower.

Three evenly-spaced, double-hung Gothic windows are placed on the east and west elevations along the nave. Window heads on the east and west elevations have cast stone labels. The brick wall surface of the southern elevation extends up into the gable without break, except for a small window, and is adorned only with the cast stone coping. The window is a rectangular awning-type, oriented horizontally and centered. A staircase, parallel to the south wall, leads to the lower level at the southwest corner of the building. A single wooden door opens into the basement kitchen.

Stained glass originally graced the church's windows, but a period of vandalism in the 1970s forced the removal of the damaged decorative glass. The stained glass has been replaced with single panels of delicately textured glass of a light golden hue. Windows throughout are currently protected by expanded metal screens.

The interior of the rectangular nave contains two rows of original pews, accessed by aisles at both sides and center. A semi-circular altar is centered at the south end of the room, flanked by a small office on the west side and a small room that houses stairs to the lower level on the east. Lighting in the main level is original, with hanging fixtures in the nave and wall sconces on either side of the altar.

The lower level houses a social hall with storage closets flanking the double doors in the north end. A small, remodeled kitchen occupies the southwest corner and the southeast corner contains the interior stairwell and a small powder room. The social hall ceiling was lowered in the 1980s to accommodate new heating ductwork.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7

Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Cascade County, MT

Page 3

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### Integrity

The Union Bethel AME Church underwent minimal repairs and alterations during the period of significance from 1917-1950. After 1950, vandalism ruined the original stained glass windows, which were replaced with textured glass. Despite this diminished integrity of materials and design, the building still retains sufficient integrity to convey its significance. The steeple roof also has been reshingled. Original lights and pews perpetuate the interior historic feeling. Overall, the building retains a high degree of historic integrity in terms of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. During the period of significance the parsonage was reduced from the size it attained during the expansion of 1924, and was completely razed from the property in 1982.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Cascade County, MT

Page 1

characterized the experience of AME adherents,"<sup>3</sup> while another states that the AME in particular provided a platform for "the politization of the freedmen" immediately following the Civil War.<sup>4</sup>

Women were especially important in organizing and sustaining black communities in the west. One early black Colorado woman called them "'the backbone of the church, the backbone of the family, they were the backbone of the social life, everything.'"<sup>5</sup> African American women's benevolent organizations developed both as an answer to exclusion from white women's societies, and as a way to address issues unique to black women and their communities. Most often, they organized such groups from within the context of an African American church.<sup>6</sup>

The history of African Americans in early Montana bears out these generalities about African American churches and their role in western black communities. All over Montana, African American communities sprang up wherever non-Indian settlements developed after about 1865. By the turn of the century, virtually all of Montana's major population centers included thriving, though relatively small, enclaves of African American residents. Most had solidified to the point that they supported some independent businesses, entrepreneurs and professionals, predictably including a clergyman for a Baptist or AME church.<sup>7</sup>

As elsewhere in Montana, the African American community in Great Falls dates to the beginning of the town itself. Paris Gibson had the Great Falls townsite laid out in late 1883, and townbuilding began the following spring. The town grew very slowly until the arrival of the railroad in 1887-8, and a small black community emerged in the late 1880s. By 1890, Cascade County reported the highest percentage of African Americans of any county in the state; other towns with relatively high black populations were Helena, Butte, and Anaconda.<sup>8</sup> Great Falls' first black residents were involved in the larger community from an early date. Republicans elected an African American man named Ed Simms as delegate to the Cascade County Republican convention in 1889, and in 1890 a "colored Republican club" was organized. In 1890 the Great Falls AME church organized as a congregation and began meeting in the city's first fire station on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue South. The next year, Paris Gibson, for the Great Falls Water Power and Townsite Company, sold the lot on which the current AME church stands to Ed Simms, William Morgan and A.W. Ray, trustees of the Great Falls AME. Lot #5 of Block 461 was in a low, swampy area of the south side surrounded by the working-class neighborhood where the town's black

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3 Dennis Dickerson, *The Past in Your Hands: Writing Local AME Church History* (Nashville, TN: n.p., 1990), p. 2.

4 Clarence Walker, *Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: U. Louisiana Press, 1982), p. 3.

5 Glenda Riley, "American Daughters: Black Women in the West," *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 39:2 (Spring 1988), p.26.

6 Taylor, *In Search Of...*, 220; Lawrence de Graaf, "Race, Sex and Region: Black Women in the American West 1850-1920," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (February 1980), p. 306.

7 Barbara Behan, "Forgotten Heritage: African Americans in Territorial Montana 1864-1889," article in progress; "Minutes of Twentieth Session Colorado Annual Conference of the African ME Church Held at Pueblo, Colorado Sept. 19 to 24, 1906 Inclusive," Office of the AME Church Historiographer, Nashville, Tennessee; this source documents five AME congregations in Montana in 1906.

8 U.S. Census Office, "Native and Foreign Born and White and Negro Populations, by Counties, 1870-1890," *Report on Population of the United States at the 11<sup>th</sup> Census: 1890, Part 1*, (Washington: US GPO, 1895), p. 420; and "Population of Incorporated Cities, Towns, Villages and Boroughs in 1900, with Populations for 1890," *Census Reports, 12<sup>th</sup> Census: 1900, v. 1: Population, Part 1*, (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1901), p. 461.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Cascade County, MT

Page 2

population lived for decades. The original one-story wood frame church was built in 1891; a parsonage adjoined the south side of the building.<sup>9</sup>

The Rev. Joel Childress led the drive to raise money for building the original church. From the beginning, the pastor linked the church's ecclesiastic mission with secular issues confronting African Americans locally and nationwide. While western towns like Great Falls offered some opportunities unavailable in the South, they did not always live up to the dream of freedom envisioned by many African Americans. By 1891, Montana's ten-year experiment with segregated schools had ended, but a ban on interracial marriages had not, and many towns, including Great Falls, developed unofficial, yet effective, rules for segregating less affluent and nonwhite neighborhoods from those of the middle to upper class whites. In an 1891 letter to the editor of the *Great Falls Leader*, Rev. Childress echoed the sentiments of many AME followers when he wrote:

The negro is...loyal, first to his God, secondly to his country. He only demands the enforcement of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments to the constitution, which should protect each and every American.... The touch of freedom which he now enjoys, which came from that crimson fount of blood, is precious to him, and he as other men stands and defies trespass or encroachment upon it from any man or nation.<sup>10</sup>

The new church was an active part of the AME structure in Montana and the regional AME organization. When the state hosted the Colorado Conference of the AME church in 1894, the proceedings included a day's visit to the AME church in Great Falls before reconvening in Helena. The Great Falls congregation also hosted the statewide AME conference in 1908.<sup>11</sup>

The black community in Great Falls remained active in the political arena during the 1890s. In 1892 several members of the AME congregation were involved with a black Democrats' club, and some black voters attained nomination by the Democratic Party of a black candidate for Great Falls township constable. When he was defeated, the black political activists returned to the Republican fold and in 1894 AME church trustee William Morgan was nominated to the township constable race. The fact that Morgan was elected and served as constable was tribute to Morgan's personal popularity and an indication of the standing of the black community within the larger Great Falls society at the time.<sup>12</sup>

In 1905 the AME congregation paid off a lingering debt from construction of the original building and formally dedicated the church with the first identified use of the name "Union Bethel."<sup>13</sup> However, by 1916 the original wooden church was falling down, in part because it stood on swampy land. Between September 1915 and April 1917, two successive pastors appealed to the Great Falls public for financial assistance toward building a new church. In a letter published in the *Great Falls Tribune Daily*, Rev. W. H. Prince compared the AME in Great Falls' black community to the YMCA in the white community, and wrote that the "remodeling of our church, with some needed additions, means much for the moral and

9 *Great Falls Leader Daily (GFLD)*, 3 Sep. 1889, 11 Oct. 1890, 13 Jul 1890; *Great Falls Tribune Daily (GFTD)* 21 Jan. 1917; *GFTD* 9 June 1891; Cascade County, *Deed Book* 6, p. 231.

10 *GFLD* 5 August 1891.

11 AME Church, "Minutes of the Eighth Annual Session Colorado Conference of the African M.E. Church Held in Helena, Mont., Oct. 11<sup>th</sup>, 1894," pp. 30-1, Office of the AME Church Historiographer, Nashville, TN; *GFTD* 11 May 1908.

12 *GFTD* 2 September, 5 September, 11 September, 26 November 1892, and 5 September 1894.

13 *GFLD* 11 August 1905.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Cascade County, MT

Page 3

social life and advancement of our people..."<sup>14</sup> In January 1917 the *Great Falls Leader* reported "the building is planned as a sort of social center for colored people."<sup>15</sup>

Between 1915 and 1917, with support from the white community, the church raised the money needed to build the existing wood-frame, brick veneer church and a small wood-frame parsonage at the south end of the lot. Construction began in April 1917 under the leadership of Rev. G.E. Horsey. During construction, the congregation met in another building on the property, probably the parsonage. In 1924, the congregation purchased the east half of Lot 4, Block 461, directly west of the existing property, and built a separate building which served as an addition to the parsonage. The ability of the Union Bethel congregation to raise funds for and replace its original church testifies to its importance in Great Falls' African American community. The town's black community persisted as a viable, if relatively small, element partly because of the availability of service-related jobs generated by the large workforce in Great Falls' rail repair yards and mineral smelters. From 1900-1920, the city's black population of between 116-202 accounted for about 0.8% of the total, a figure consistent with Montana's other largest towns. Indeed, in 1915 a second black church called Immanuel Baptist was built in Great Falls. Located at 1127 5<sup>th</sup> Ave., this church appears inconsistently in records and closed in the early 1950s. The church building is no longer standing.<sup>16</sup>

True to its roots, Union Bethel continued to serve diverse social and civic purposes. The church provided a forum in which African Americans and white Great Falls residents could mix socially in what was generally a restrictive social environment. The AME church occasionally partnered with other Methodist churches in town for religious and public events. For instance, clergy from the First Presbyterian and First Methodist churches spoke at the dedication of the new 1917 church (Paris Gibson, by now a state legislator, declined an invitation to attend at the last minute). When Rev. Horsey took a well-earned vacation after the church was completed, the pastor from the First Methodist Episcopal Church preached in his absence. In 1920, the current AME pastor conducted a funeral for one of Montana's best-known African American citizens, Mattie Castner of Belt. Mrs. Castner knew Union Bethel well through her association with Great Falls black families and periodic attendance at the church. In her will she left large bequests to the Great Falls church and the Methodist Church of Belt, and charged trustees of each with distributing \$5000 to the poor and sick in their towns.<sup>17</sup>

Union Bethel opened its doors to the community, and in varying degrees people in the white population supported and participated in AME events. In 1917, the AME congregation held a patriotic turkey feast, cooked at a local hotel and

14 GFTD 21 January 1917 and 20 September 1915.

15 GFLD 27 January 1917.

16 GFTD 15 April 1917, 19 November 1916; Cascade County, Deed Book 118, p. 110; City of Great Falls, Community Development Department, Records of Property Alterations Requiring Permits; these records were generated by multiple agencies historically and are now filed by address in the Community Development Department. Also census records: Census Bureau, 1900 Census, v. 1: Population, Part 1: Nativity of Black and White and Colored Population Classified by Sex (Washington, D.C.: US Census Office, 1901), p. 664; 1910 Census, v. 1: Population: Reports by States: Montana, "Composition and Characteristics of the Population for Cities of 10,000-25,000," and "Composition and Characteristics of the Population of Butte" (Washington, DC: US GPO, 1912), pp. 1158 and 1159; 1920 Census, v. 111: Population 1920: Composition and Characteristics of the Population by States, "Composition and Characteristics of the Population for Cities of 10,000 or more (Montana)," (Washington, DC: US GPO, 1923), p. 584. Immanuel Baptist Church appears sporadically in Great Falls City Directories and appears to have been most active from about 1915 to the early 1930s.

17 GFTD 15 April, 4 September 1917; GFLD 8 September, 17 September 1917; GFLD 7 April 1920.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Cascade County, MT

Page 4

served at the church, for Cascade County African American soldiers called to duty in World War I. The *Great Falls Leader* Daily reported that the Rev. Horsey delivered “a sort of farewell...admonishing the boys to make a record of heroism for their race.”<sup>18</sup> The church room was full to capacity and dozens of white people attended the banquet. The city earlier had honored the black contingent with a parade on Central Avenue like that given for white soldiers. Seven years later Union Bethel joined with Bethlehem Baptist Church for a joint Thanksgiving service.<sup>19</sup> The church also hosted fundraising dinners that became well-known social events, attended by both black and white Great Falls residents. Edna Jones lived a block away from Union Bethel as a child, and remembered those fundraising dinners and the socializing they inspired. In an interview in 1982, she summarized the church’s importance to her family: “When we were growing up, the...African Methodist Episcopal Church...was the center of the social life of all of the black families.”<sup>20</sup>

But the social climate toward African Americans in Great Falls continued to fall short of what many hoped for and expected. As elsewhere in the country, Great Falls blacks encountered varying degrees of discrimination. The congregation had hurried to finish the 1917 church in time to host the AME Fifth Episcopal District conference, which included delegates from Washington, Idaho, Oregon, British Columbia and Montana.<sup>21</sup> An unfortunate occurrence while the conference was in session illustrated the ambiguous attitudes with which some in the white community regarded black citizens. As reported in the *Great Falls Leader*:

The court room at the police station took on the appearance of the AME Church conference this morning with a large number of the leading members of the local African church, also the bishop who is in attendance, Rev. G. E. Horsey and others, present to defend a Mrs. L. C. Foreman [a delegate to the conference] who was arrested on Central Avenue last evening. The police are conducting a campaign against colored women who accost men on the streets at night. ....When Mrs. Foreman was seen to join two men on Central Avenue last night, the officer placed her under arrest. When her husband vehemently protested, he too, was placed under arrest. ...It developed that they had been in the city but for days and were attending the Methodist conference. Mrs. Foreman had gone to the drug store and Mr. Foreman and another colored man walked on. She overtook them, and they started home. This was the story accepted by Judge Raban, who expressed greatest confidence in the woman...and the case was dismissed with an expression of regret from the court.<sup>22</sup>

In keeping with the Progressive Era spirit of the times, Union Bethel women formed organizations to benefit the church and community. These included a Ladies’ Aid society and a missionary group. Certainly one of the most active organizations to spring from the AME church during the Progressive Era was the Dunbar Art and Study Club, which women of the AME church organized in 1920, six years after Montana women gained the vote. For decades the club performed charitable and literary deeds for the church and Great Falls; it was especially active in promoting civil rights. In 1936 members submitted a copy of an anti-discrimination bill from New York to the Montana legislature, and in 1948 successfully protested a local theater’s refusal to sell tickets to blacks. The club wrote letters on civil rights to President Truman and Montana

18 GFLD 27 October 1917.

19 GFLD 22 November 1924.

20 GFTD 18 February 1982.

21 GFLD 4 September and 8 September 1917.

22 GFLD 6 September 1917.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Cascade County, MT

Page 5

congressmen in 1945, and joined the mayor, unions and the N.A.A.C.P. in opposing a discriminatory instructor at the Great Falls Skating Club the same year. In 1950, a year after the integration of the U.S. armed forces, the Dunbar Club worked on an interracial committee to help black airmen at U.S. Air Force Base East (later renamed Malmstrom A.F.B.) obtain access to local establishments. The women raised money for expenses associated with the AME church, and in 1947, the church's secretary represented the Dunbar Club at a regional meeting of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs in Billings.<sup>23</sup>

The papers of the Montana Federation of Negro Women's Clubs are a rare and valuable historical source containing some of the best information about AME church activities in the community during the period of significance from 1917-1950. Two members of the Dunbar Club and Union Bethel assembled these papers. Unfortunately, there are few known records of men's groups associated with the Union Bethel Church. Those documented are a Masonic lodge and an Odd Fellows Lodge. Men also participated with women in the Willing Workers Club, which was organized in 1931 and raised funds for church maintenance and equipment.<sup>24</sup>

Although very few church records exist, Great Falls' two newspapers have covered Union Bethel AME activities relatively well. Historically, the white press and other recorders of history in many towns tended to bypass events in their African American communities, though some white Republican newspapers began covering black community events during and following Reconstruction. In Great Falls, the "radical Republican" publisher H. P. Rolfe provided strong coverage for the city's African Americans in the *Great Falls Leader* from 1888-1895. Montana also supported three black newspapers before World War I. Although not published in Great Falls, they carried varying accounts of black community activities there. These and other records document that the first half of the twentieth century marked the height of the Union Bethel AME church's role in the African American community in Great Falls.<sup>25</sup>

The church's history from its beginning through the period of significance typifies Quintard Taylor's model for western black community growth: it was one of the first organizations local African Americans started in an urban setting, and it spawned other, secular activities for the benefit of the black community. However, within the state context Union Bethel is atypical in one important way. In nearly every other western state, African American populations increased gradually in the twentieth century, but Montana's began to drop by the time of the Great Depression, and never again reached the 1900 percentage. Statistics about AME churches in Montana reflect this trend. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 1926 there were seven AME congregations with their own buildings in Montana's largest towns. By 1956, only three remained, in Helena, Great Falls, and Butte.<sup>26</sup> There are now two AME churches with their own buildings in the state: Wayman

23 GFTD 24 June 1917; "Papers of the Montana Federation of Negro Women's Clubs," Small Manuscript Collection #281, file 1/12, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

24 GFTD 11 April, 12 April, 15 April 1917, 22 Jun 1918, 22 Jun 1919; and 13 October 1894; "Minutes of the Willing Workers Club," 1931-7, Union Bethel AME Church, Great Falls.

25 Most of the church's records were destroyed some years ago by a cleaning crew. Surviving records include a Willing Workers' Club ledger detailing activities from 1931-7 and Sunday School record books from the 1960s. Black newspapers referenced are *The Colored Citizen*, published in Helena in 1894, and *The New Age*, published in Butte in 1902; both at Montana Historical Society Library, Helena.

26 U.S. Census Bureau, Religious Bodies: 1926 v. II: Separate Denominations (Washington, DC: US GPO, 1929) pp. 998-9; AME Church, "Official Journal of the 65<sup>th</sup> Annual Session of the Puget Sound Conference AME Church, Held in Portland Oregon August 1956," p. 45, Office of the AME Church Historiographer, Nashville.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Cascade County, MT

Page 6

Chapel in Billings and Union Bethel in Great Falls. Thus, while Union Bethel is typical of many AME and other black churches in the West at the local level, Montana's African American history in general is not typical of the West as a region because its relative black population has not increased.

The 1950s can be seen a turning point after which the history of Union Bethel Church shifted as economic and social realities in Great Falls changed. The assignment of black airmen to East Base/Malmstrom Air Force Base in the 1950s brought in new African American residents, some of whom stayed in Great Falls after retirement. In the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of employees lost jobs in Great Falls' traditional job sectors in smelting and rail repair. At the same time, many young people left Great Falls to seek better educational opportunities. After about 1950, then, the influence of older and established black families tapered off and new families moved in. At times Union Bethel suffered sporadic or low membership. By 1950, part of the parsonage was gone. From 1973-86 the church lacked a resident minister and operated with lay leadership from dedicated members.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1990s, the AME Fifth Episcopal District bishop appointed Rev. Robert Payne, an ordained Air Force officer from Malmstrom Air Force Base, to the ministry at Union Bethel. Today, the congregation is flourishing under its new leadership with a multi-racial mix of Air Force personnel and a small but influential group of long-term members and their extended families. Union Bethel is the largest of three AME congregations in Montana, the other two in Billings and Bozeman.

Union Bethel AME Church is historically significant because it represents trends in African American community growth in the western U.S., played an integral role in the historical development of Great Falls' black community, and has remained active since its founding in a state whose relative African American population has decreased. The property is also significant because it is a local representation of ecclesiastical architecture typical in Montana in the early twentieth century.

### Architectural Significance

The structures most often associated with the Gothic Revival style are churches. Architects used the style as the basis for many early twentieth-century churches in Montana, such as the Methodist Episcopal Church in Three Forks, and several built in Great Falls between 1900-1925 displaying dominant influences in the Gothic Revival style. While the architect for the 1917 Union Bethel AME church is unknown, the church is a good representation of local Gothic Revival interpretation, with its characteristic focus on vertical, narrow, and pointed elements, and a typical size and stature for churches built in Montana during the early twentieth century. Features of the style present in this structure include a steeply pitched roof and tall, graceful bell tower, many pointed-arch windows, and brick wall surfaces. Like some other predominantly Gothic Revival style churches in the state at this time, Union Bethel displays secondary influences from other stylistic traditions. The parapeted gable roof and uniform brick surface on the southern elevation illustrate the Tudor influence, and the centered, square tower with wide overhang and decorative brackets borrow from the Italian Renaissance style.

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<sup>27</sup> Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance Map for Great Falls, 1950; personal communication by Ken Robison with Frank Ghee and Kathy Reed, both long-standing Union Bethel members, March 18, 2003.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Cascade County, MT

Page 7

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### Criteria Consideration A

The Union Bethel AME Church meets Criteria Consideration A as a religious property deriving its primary significance from historic importance and architectural distinction.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 9

Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Cascade County, MT

Page 1

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places

## Continuation Sheet

Section 9

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Cascade County, MT

Page 1

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 9

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Cascade County, MT

Page 1

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