

Singing during services Sunday at Bethesda Baptist Church are (clockwise from top left) James Talley. The church has been at the same location about 123 years.

# PRESERVING THEIR STORY

**Chips of black history.** Bethesda Baptist Church at Stone Mountain is one of three area churches whose histories are bound for a videotape collection at the Smithsonian Institution.

**By Carleens Daniel**  
STAFF WRITER

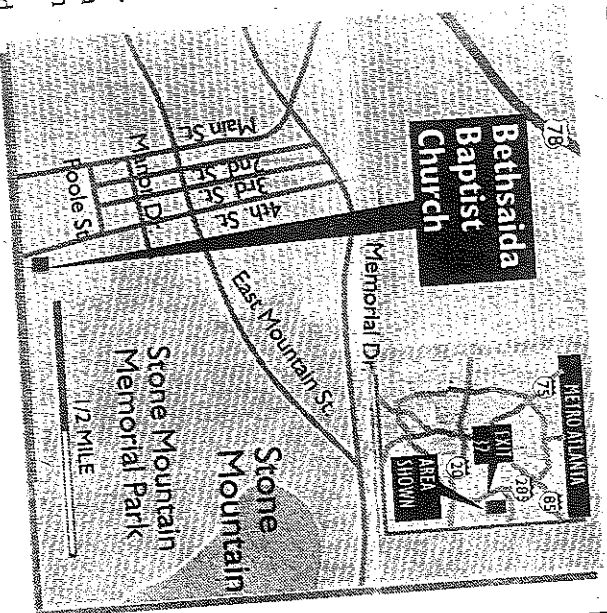
Ida Hall remembers how tough it was for her poverty-stricken relatives to build Bethesda Baptist church at the foot of Stone Mountain with rock chips from the mountain.

"We just had a building," Mrs. Hall, 72, said of the tiny church, founded more than a century ago. "We had to use lamps. We didn't have lighting or running water...."

"We have come a long way," she said. "I can laugh about it now."

Memories of the church, like those of Mrs. Hall's, recently were preserved on videotape and will be recognized by the Smithsonian Institution on Jan. 31.

Bethsaida is one of three Atlanta area churches to have their history placed in the institution's Anacostia African American Museum in Washington. The other two are New Hope AME Church and Shrine of the Black Madonna, both of Atlanta.



The Smithsonian is also gathering other facts from the Atlanta area, including information on black female ministers, urban ministries, rural ministries, laywomen and white clergy in the civil rights movement.

The churches were selected by the Atlanta Interfaith Broadcasters (AIB) African American Video Collection project. Angela Rice, director of productions, said the project's goal is to encourage black churches to preserve their histories.

Please see **HISTORY, B3** ▶

*Live broadcast  
see special  
858 Franklin St  
Stone Mt  
20073*

# History: Klan met near black church in Stone Mountain

Continued from B1

Bethsaida was chosen primarily because of its importance to the Shermantown community, inside the city limits of Stone Mountain. The church currently has about 300 members.

"The only thing we had to look forward to was the church and the community," recalled the Rev. Woodson Morris, 63, the former assistant pastor at Bethsaida.

Apparatus in the Bethsaida videotape are Emma Greene, 80, a Bethsaida member for 70 years; the Rev. James Chandler, 25, pastor of the church; and the Rev. Morris, who is known as the "Son of Bethsaida" because he grew up worshipping at the church.

He continues to fellowship and tithes with Bethsaida, although he now is pastor of Philadelphia Baptist Church in Atlanta.

Bethsaida has existed on the same site for nearly 123 years, despite being located in a historic meeting area of the Ku Klux Klan.

## Rallies, cross-burnings nearby

The church's elder members say they are proud of their community, yet dismayed by its historic connection to the Klan.

James Venable, former imperial wizard of the National Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, is a resident of Stone Mountain, where rallies and cross-burnings have been held on family-owned property.

"We never had any problems with the Klan," the Rev. Morris said. "They would go their way, and we would go our way."

Mrs. Greene said racial conditions for blacks in Stone Mountain were better than in many other cities she visited.

Mrs. Greene, who is married to a former professional baseball player in the Negro Leagues, said she could have lived anywhere she wanted.

"We chose to live in Stone Mountain," she said. "We were friendly with each other [blacks and whites], but we knew our places."

Although the Klan conducted marches through town, neither the church nor the community encountered violence.

But Mrs. Greene recalls her father standing at the door with an ax during one march so he could protect his family if a Klansman tried to enter.

The Rev. Chandler said the Klan still meets about three blocks away from the church.

Bethsaida was founded in 1868 under a bush arbor by the sons of freed slaves. Church members held services in the shade of the arbor until a wooden structure was built in the late 1800s.

"You could sit in the church and see the stars at night because of the holes in the roof," the Rev. Morris said.

After slavery ended in 1865, most male residents of Shermantown worked on the mountain splitting granite, while the women did maid work.

Although the townspeople made low wages, they still contributed significant portions of their earnings and labor to build the church's current building in the early 1920s.

After work, church members were permitted to chip stones from the mountain at no charge.

"My daddy helped cut the rock from the mountain, and my uncle helped haul the brick on horse and wagon to build the church," Mrs. Hall said.

The members never complained about the hard work and living conditions. "We didn't know of nothing else," Mrs. Greene said.

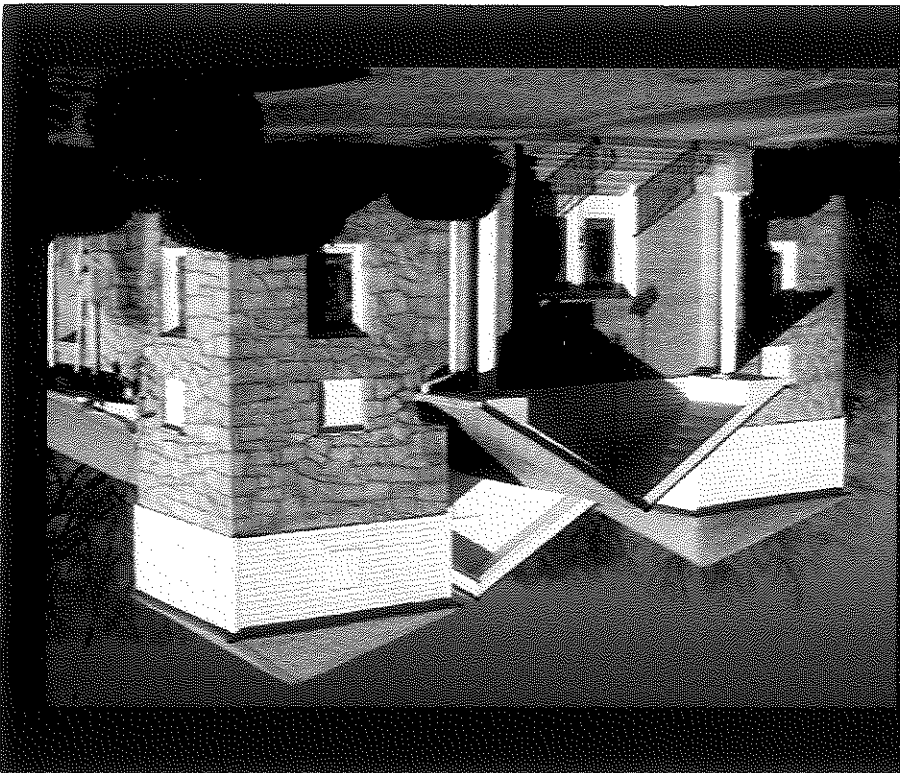
She said she never considered changing churches.

"I love it," she said. "If you are a child of God, he is in every church. I will remain here until I am with God."

Jan. 23, 1992

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

*Bethaida Church founded in 1868 in  
the historic Shermantown community  
of Stone Mountain, Georgia*



**Stone Mountain, GA**

Bethsaida Church 853 Fourth Street, Stone Mtn., GA  
30083 was founded by Rev. R.H. Burson. Rev.  
Burson traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with  
General Sherman after the Civil War to gather information  
on the rights of the Freedmen.

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here*

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# Mountain of racial harmony

Forget tales of KKK;

Shermantown is peaceful place

By Shawn Evans Mitchell  
STAFF WRITER

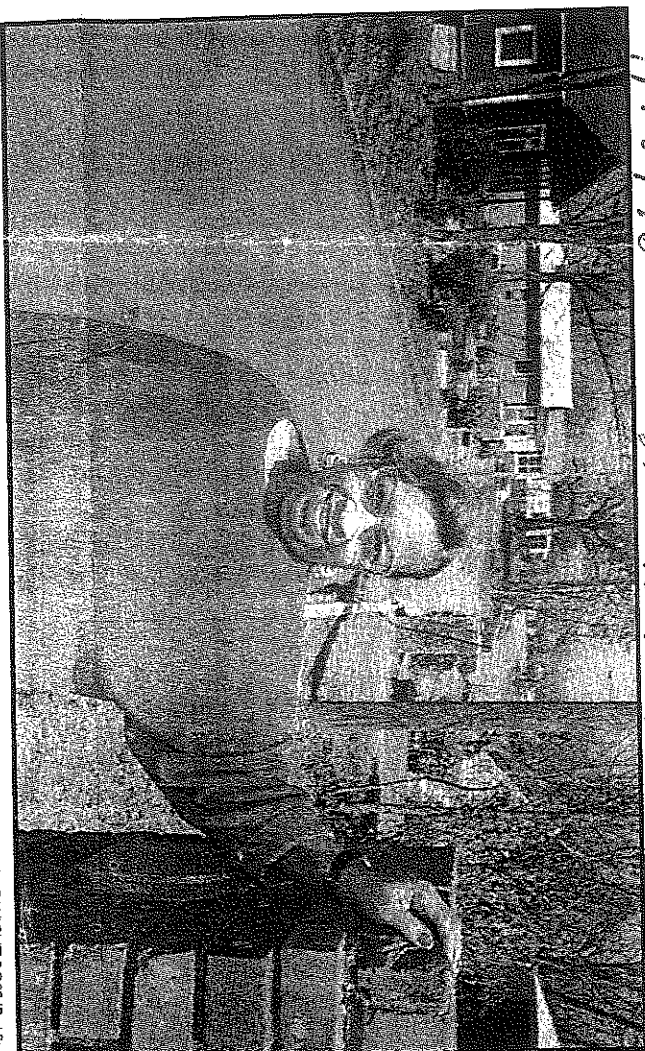
The adage, "You can't know where you're going if you don't know where you've been," is often referenced by African-

Americans determined to retain their history. But residents of Shermantown — a black community in Stone Mountain that dates to 1870 — are just as concerned that the history is recalled correctly.

Many of them want to completely disassociate their community from the Stone Mountain that "outsiders" think of, the Stone Mountain of the Ku Klux Klan, where rallies and cross burnings were annual events.

Residents such as 55-year-old Gloria Brown prefer to delineate new images as clear cut as

A good place to live: Gloria Brown, standing at her mailbox, says Stone Mountain is "not at all like everybody thinks." She lives in the same Shermantown house where she was born.



Photos by DWIGHT T. ROSS JR. / Staff

those immortalized on the side of the mountain. The Shermantown that Brown takes pride in is the one built up by freed slaves who once labored in Stone Mountain's granite quarries.

Shermantown got its name, according to the book "Georgia 160 Years Ago," because Gen. William T. Sherman had barracks set up in the area when he occupied Atlanta.

"Everybody figured we were torn between black and white because of the KKK," said Brown, who still lives in the same Third Street home where she was born. "It's not at all like everybody thinks. We played ball with the white children even before integration and never had a problem.

"We get an image here as a racial town, and we've never had any racial problems."

In her teens, Brown recalled, she and her family received a visit she'll never forget.

"There was a Klansman in town this particular weekend, and his car ran hot. He knocked on our door and asked my father for a bucket of water. . . My father gave it to him and the Klansman said, 'Thank you.'"

When her father closed the door, Brown said his reaction was simply, "You never know who might one day help you."

Shermantown resident Eva Green, 73, also cited nothing but peaceful times.

"It was true the KKK came here from all over to have their rallies, and because of that, everyone just labeled this town as racist, and it

wasn't," Green said. "In fact, what I've always liked about this community is the family atmosphere, not just between blacks, but blacks and whites. That's why I'm still here."

Green, who moved to Shermantown in 1951 from Atlanta, said she never experienced any racial turmoil as a resident or business owner.

The former owner of "Eva's House of Curis," a Shermantown beauty shop still in operation, said white residents from "all over" would also patronize her husband's neighborhood cafe, "Henry's Grill."

Lake Green, Brown also cites the community's "close ties that bind" as a reason for remaining.

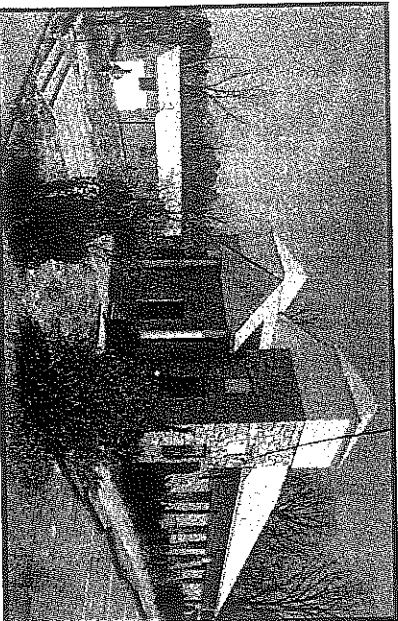
"If you get sick, someone's here to help you. . . If my house were to burn down tonight, as many white people would come to my rescue as blacks," she said.

Shermantown has heavy spiritual affiliations, with at least five houses of worship. Bethsaida Baptist Church, 853 Fourth St., was founded in 1868 by the sons of freed slaves. Built with rock chips from the mountain, it has existed on the same site even though a Klan meeting area was in close proximity.

The church is on a videotape collection at the Smithsonian Institution's Anacostia African American Museum in Washington because of its importance to the Shermantown community.

Shermantown's younger leaders, like 23-year-old Triwana Benton, are just as optimistic about its future.

"I feel that blacks and whites have definitely come together," said the Stone Mountain Civics Club youth director.



Set in stone: The 128-year-old Bethsaida Baptist Church is memorialized for posterity on a Smithsonian videotape.

1/18/96

see p. 12 Ask. Ylan

Church (Baptist) #7.