Isaac Project Narrative Summary, 1825–1890

Introductory Context

The origins of Christ Church are traditionally dated to 1829, but the organization actually began in 1825 when a visiting clergyman led a small group of Episcopalians in worship. In 1829, the first-elected vestry purchased land at the corner of Church Street and Sixth Avenue. Two years later, Christ Church opened its sanctuary doors to the Nashville community.

At the time the church was founded, Nashville, Davidson County, and the region of Middle Tennessee more generally, was a center of slave ownership. The 1830 U.S. Census recorded a population of 28,122 persons in Davidson County, of whom 58.5 percent were free and 41.5 percent were enslaved. This was the largest number of slaves in any Tennessee county. "Slave Auctions," as they were called, were regularly held at Public Square, just three blocks from the site of the original Christ Church building. Local newspapers frequently advertised auctions as well as individual sales and rental of slaves. In other words, the sale and trafficking of enslaved persons was big business in Nashville.

Episcopalians who founded Christ Church were part of the social and economic elite of Nashville, and as such nearly all male heads of household were involved in the ownership of enslaved persons. For example, from 1828 to 1865, all seven rectors of Christ Church were slave owners. At least 85 percent of early parish members, donors, clergy, and vestry members were slaveholders at some point during their association with Christ Church. This evidence confirms that most church leaders not only condoned slavery but were themselves practitioners. Thus, the history of Christ Church is intertwined with this inhumane institution.

Baptism During the Antebellum Era

From the colonial era to the Civil War, Christianity was often used to justify slavery, and yet a fundamental paradox existed. While physical freedom was denied, spiritual freedom could be granted through Christian baptism. Of more than 900 baptisms at Christ Church between 1826 and 1865, parish records show 14 African Americans. These baptisms symbolize the fraught, contradictory, and complex practice in antebellum Nashville and more generally in the context of the Christ Church and the larger Episcopal and Christian communities.

The earliest baptism of a Black person on record at Christ Church was on March 5, 1841, when the Reverend J. Thomas Wheat, rector of Christ Church from 1827 to 1848, baptized Mary Jane—listed as the "coloured servant of Mrs. Minnick." "Coloured servant" was a common euphemism for "enslaved person." The following year, on September 1, 1842, "Isaac (a slave belonging to T. Washington)" was baptized by the Rev. Wheat. Isaac, namesake of the Isaac Project, was an enslaved Black man who lived in Nashville in the first half of the nineteenth century. His baptism in 1842 marks the first and only time a person described as a "slave" received the sacrament of baptism, according to parish records. Isaac was first enslaved by Dr. James Roane, a prominent Nashville physician, and later by Thomas Washington, a local lawyer and communicant of Christ Church.

In the decades before the Civil War, persons of color appeared sporadically in parish records. Aside from Mary Jane and Isaac, we know of only two baptisms and one confirmation, all performed on a single day of prison ministry at the Tennessee penitentiary in 1850, when two African Americans were among a dozen inmates baptized by Rev. Charles Tomes, rector of Christ Church from 1848 to 1857, and his assistant Joseph H. Ingraham. We also know of two marriages involving "free coloured" persons, as they were identified in the parish register, during the era of slavery—one in 1840 and another in 1861.

The baptisms of Mary Jane, Isaac, and others remind us that people of color have long been part of the Body of Christ and Christ Church community, however qualified their membership may have been in the eyes of their enslavers.

First Sanctuary and Early Church Practices

The first Christ Church sanctuary was designed by architect Hugh Roland, and the building was consecrated in 1831 by the Rev. William Mead, suffragan bishop of Virginia. In addition to designing the church, Roland was also the building superintendent, working with contractor Robert L. Duff, builder William Shields, and plasterer David J. White. All these men owned slaves. At the time of Christ Church's construction, enslaved people constituted one third of Nashville's population and often worked as domestic servants and skilled and unskilled laborers.

Due to a lack of records, it is impossible to say who exactly built the original Christ Church. Yet, the construction of the church involved trades in which enslaved craftsmen were not only common but held a virtual monopoly—stonemasonry, carpentry, and plastering. Other Episcopal churches built during the antebellum era include Christ Church, New Bern, NC (ca. 1824); St. John's, Ashwood, TN (1839–42), and Chapel of the Cross, Chapel Hill, NC (1840–48). Each of these churches has documented the use of enslaved labor in their construction. In the context of antebellum Nashville, enslaved men were almost certainly responsible for erecting its stone walls, for the fine woodwork within, and other aspects of its construction.

The beauty and simplicity of the original Christ Church's Gothic interior was a testament to its architect's aesthetic sensibilities, its builders' skill, and its founders' faith. The interior also served as a microcosm of the South's plantation economy. The main level of the nave was subdivided into 66 box pews, or seating enclosed by wooden partitions and accessed by a door facing the aisle. In the absence of regular offertory collections, pew rents were a primary means of fundraising for churches until the early 1900s. At Christ Church, pew rental began with the completion of the first building in 1831. Fifty-two box pews were rented to prominent members' families; the cheapest box rented for $60 (over $2,000 today). Forty-five of these individuals (86 percent) were slaveowners at some point during their lives.

Pew rental also created inequalities that affected white communicants. Less desirable seats in the back of the nave and in the galleries were free, but only pew owners could vote in parish meetings. According to a written account in 1929, "places were reserved for the Negroes" in one

gallery of Christ Church. These seating arrangements ensured the space of the church would mirror the rigid social, economic, and racial hierarchies of the world outside its doors.

Conclusion

Christ Church was organized in the late 1820s and early 1830s. During these decades, the American economy centered on global trade, western expansion, early industrialism, and the continued use of chattel slavery. The founding members of Christ Church were people of sincere religious faith, but they were also part of the social class that overwhelmingly relied on enslaved labor for its own economic vitality and regional wealth. In other words, many white southerners saw no conflict between keeping the faith and keeping or trading slaves. They did so by using selected Biblical passages and arguments about the "positive good" of paternalism.

The Isaac Project is named for a Black man who lived in the early nineteenth century and was enslaved by a member of Christ Church. He was baptized by the parish rector in 1842. Isaac's life now symbolizes our quest to unravel and understand how the church and its members have historically benefitted from and been complicit in systems of oppression.

Perhaps Frederick Douglass best encapsulates the irony of Christianity in the Antebellum South. Born into slavery, he published the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in 1845. He explained: "[B]between the Christianity of Christ, and the Christianity of this land, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked." Christ Church was part of this corrupt religious landscape from the 1820s through the 1860s, but the "good, pure, and holy" Christianity of Christ would endure.

Isaac Project Narrative Summary, 1890–1930

Introductory Context

By the mid-1880s, Christ Church's congregation had outgrown its original building. The vestry purchased land on the western edge of downtown and planned a phased approach to construction. While construction of a chapel on this property was completed in 1888, the current church was not completed until 1894. (Construction of the church included a new, smaller chapel adjacent to the chancel, after which the 1888 chapel was transformed into the parish hall.) Higher than anticipated construction costs were exacerbated by the Panic of 1893—a severe national economic depression that lasted for four years.

The economic depression affected other construction efforts in Nashville as well. The Centennial Exposition, intended to celebrate a century of Tennessee statehood (1896), did not open until May 1897. The exposition was marketed as a World's Fair event, which included a full-scale replica of the Greek Parthenon meant to proclaim Nashville as the "Athens of the South." This moniker was crafted by urban boosters who sought to recast Nashville as a center of industry and higher education following the Civil War.

Nashville's "New South City" vision also included Jim Crowism. Jim Crowism was a legal and extralegal system of racial discrimination, segregation, intimidation, and violence, which began after the Reconstruction Era ended. Federal Reconstruction was an important, albeit all too short, period from 1865 to 1877 whereby many former Confederates were denied political power, Black men were granted the right to vote, and the plantation economy shifted to a quasi-free labor market situated between agriculture and industry.

By the 1880s, southern states had largely returned to a "status quo ante" (same as before) as traditional power forces resumed political, economic, and social control. Such changes were accompanied by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling of "separate but equal" in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the political disenfranchisement of Black men through poll taxes and literacy tests, and the feudalistic practice of economic entrapment through sharecropping.

The era from 1890 to 1930 was also defined by historical revisionism in the form of a southern-inspired narrative called the "Lost Cause." This myth focused on southern honor, states' rights, and righteous causes rather than regret and repentance for the sin of chattel slavery and the inhumanity of this immoral, yet profitable, system. The first published history of Christ Church (1929) fully embraced language consistent with the "Lost Cause" myth and motif.

As an Episcopal parish, Christ Church willingly followed the white cultural norms of Jim Crowism and the "Lost Cause" during these pivotal decades. From the construction of the current church building to the segregated worship space and stained-glass windows, Christ Church's history during these years shows evidence of direct and indirect forms of racism. Regrettably, the clergy and vestry did not abide by the most basic of Christian convictions: "So in Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith" (Galatians 3:26).

Construction and Labor

Christ Church's relocation took place against a backdrop of rapid urban growth. Nashville's population nearly doubled between 1880 and 1890, growing from 43,350 residents to 76,168. The "colored" population, as it was called (primarily Black but also encompassing people of Asian and Indigenous descent), in 1890 numbered 29,395, or almost 39 percent of the total population.

After nearly a decade of construction on the new property, the first service held in the new Christ Church took place on December 16, 1894. Designed by New York architect Francis H. Kimball, the architecture of the building is Victorian Gothic and features intricate masonry and gargoyles. The exterior is built primarily of rough-hewn sandstone from Sewanee, TN, a gift from the University of the South. The doorways and windows are trimmed in honed oolite limestone from the White Stone Quarry in Bowling Green, KY. The colonnettes framing the entrances and windows along Broadway are marble, and the interior columns are polished granite. The chancel features a beautiful wooden altarpiece carved by Swiss-American Melchior Thoni Jr.

While practices varied from quarry to quarry, the most dangerous, back-breaking work was largely performed by underpaid Black quarrymen. For example, in the late 1800s, the White Stone Quarry's workforce was 69 percent African American. However, all the stonecutters and stone carvers, who performed less dangerous, higher-skilled work, were white. The same was true on the building site. The American Federation of Labor required affiliates to have nondiscrimination policies, but they were largely unenforced in the South. Nashville's Stone Masons' Union refused to admit Black members. The city's Black masons formed their own union, but opportunity was decidedly unequal. Historian Louis Kyriakoudes stated that Black masons were largely responsible for laying foundations and hewing hard-stone, "while white stone masons specialized in the higher-skilled, better paying and less arduous soft stone and ornamental work."

The structure and ornament of Christ Church represents the labor of people of color, but the segregated labor practices of the Jim Crow era denied their visibility. In uncovering this history, the Church formally recognizes, credits, and celebrates these important contributors to the current building—even as their names remain known only to God.

Segregation and Symbolism

The new sanctuary included a gallery-style balcony with a capacity to hold 150 people. The gallery overhangs the nave along the Broadway end of the church. Its placement there served at least two practical purposes. By lowering the ceiling height at the back of the nave, it created a kind of narthex, a threshold between the massive oak doors leading out to the street and the soaring space within. Its other purpose was to segregate the congregation.

The Rev. James R. Winchester, rector of Christ Church from 1890 to 1898, published a series of articles in the *Nashville Churchman* in 1896. One article provided a detailed description of the new building, which included this reference to the gallery: "The vestry, following the good old Southern ways, have set aside the gallery with its comfortable seats, and where acoustics and sight of the chancel are the very best in the church, for the colored people." The gallery also ensured that African Americans remained out of sight for white congregants. It is unclear how

long this practice was maintained. There is no mention of discontinuing it in church records. Regardless, the establishment of a segregated gallery in the 1890s was not a novel requirement of the Jim Crow era but an evolution of existing practices.

Dozens of beautiful stained-glass windows designed by artists from around the country surround visitors to Christ Church today. A handful of windows survive from the chapel constructed in 1888, but most date from the century between the opening of the new building and its centennial celebration in 1994. In the late 1890s, Black worshippers seated in the segregated, elevated gallery had before them the chancel's central Resurrection window and behind them the Great Wheel Window, windows which memorialized a wealthy, former-slave-owning tobacco planter and his wife. Most windows installed before 1930 memorialize former slaveholders, Confederate veterans, or members of their families. These are exquisitely crafted, colorful, and vibrant images, but the money that produced them points to an unavoidable reality. The original stained-glass windows served as another symbolic element that reinforced ideals of white power and privilege, transmuting the sinful legacy of slavery into signs of enduring piety and salvation.

As local white leaders sought to recast Nashville as a progressive southern city, people of color in Nashville, including Black parishioners of Christ Church, had to endure and persevere under Jim Crow and the revisionist "Lost Cause" mythos. White members of Christ Church raised funds for Confederate monuments and sought other means to memorialize the Confederacy. On Sunday, January 18, 1914, Christ Church hosted a "Recital in Sacred Memory of Gen. Robert E. Lee" sponsored by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The Christ Church centennial history, published in 1929, incorporates the white racial paternalism associated with Lost Cause narratives. One passage, for instance, depicted freedmen and women as "bewildered" by the abolition of slavery, struggling to "fend for themselves in the world." Thus, "it was only by what help . . . their former masters could give that they managed to exist."

Conclusion

From 1890 to 1930, Nashville's population more than doubled to 153,866 people with 43,200 African Americans. Over these four decades, the percentage of Black Nashvillians fell from 39 to 28.5 percent. This was largely due to greater economic opportunity in northern cities, which also allowed Black families to escape the withering subjugation of Jim Crow and threats of racial violence. This is not to say that the Black community did not create their own opportunities. The strength of African American churches, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and Black-owned businesses led to an influential, elite social class of Black Nashvillians during this era.

Not far from Christ Church, the Fisk Free Colored School opened in 1866—operating out of two former army barracks behind today's Union Station. Fisk was an educational beacon for African Americans with over 900 students enrolled in the first year. Incorporated as Fisk University in 1867, the school received financial support through the American Missionary Association. Chapel services were an integral part of student life, and the curriculum was based on the liberal arts and Christian principles.

Perhaps Fisk's most famous graduate is W.E.B. Du Bois. Raised by a single mother in Massachusetts, Du Bois chose to come South and graduated from Fisk in 1888—the same year

the chapel was completed on the new Christ Church property. He later became the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University. In his 1904 essay, *Credo*, he wrote: "I believe in God who made of one blood all races that dwell on earth. I believe that all men, black and white, are brothers, varying through Time and Opportunity. . . but differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and in the possibility of infinite development."

It was a very different view of Christianity and God than that coming from Christ Church and other white churches in the South. It would take a new post-WWII generation to challenge the racial strictures and perceived righteousness of white religious institutions.

Isaac Project Narrative Summary, 1930–1970

Introductory Context

In January 1889, *The Fisk University Herald* published an editorial that applied a Biblical parable from Matthew 9:17 to make the case against racial segregation and discrimination. "Old wines should not be put into new bottles," the author wrote, continuing, "Records of enmity and hatred should not be refreshed in the hearts of the present generation." This plea for unity and a departure from the animosities of the past underscores the moral and theological contradictions faced by many churches, including Christ Church. Despite calls for racial reconciliation, segregation and exclusion persisted within its walls, reflecting the broader societal struggle to align faith with justice in the twentieth century.

After the Civil War, most newly freed Black Episcopalians left the church of their former enslavers, gravitating toward Black-led congregations in other denominations. This exodus sparked decades of debate within the Episcopal Church. Central to the debate, in the early 1900s, was whether the two races should worship together or in separate congregations.

As the South increasingly enforced segregation in public spaces during the early twentieth century, worship patterns followed suit. Tennessee's Archdeacon for Work Among Colored People stated: "It [is] in their own interest to have, where there are a sufficient number to warrant it, separate congregations for them." This paternalistic rationale led to the official designation of Holy Trinity Church in Nashville, originally founded in 1849 as a mission of Christ Church, as a "colored" congregation in 1908. By the 1910s, Black visitors to Christ Church were no longer directed to the upper-level gallery, as originally intended, but sent to Holy Trinity, a half mile away.

There were rare instances when Christ Church publicly condemned acts of white supremacy and violence. For example, in December 1924, after a 15-year-old named Sam Smith was lynched in Nashville, eight Christ Church parishioners, including the Senior Warden and two vestry members, wrote to the governor to condemn the crime and call for justice. This action signaled a willingness to condemn the most extreme forms of racial injustice even while maintaining discriminatory practices.

Evolution of Church and City

Before addressing race relations at Christ Church from the 1930s through the 1960s, several notable changes in parish life merit attention. Lay leadership underwent significant reform with the introduction of vestry term limits in 1940. Previously, members could serve indefinitely, sometimes for decades. The new policy limited terms to three years, requiring members to take a year off before running again. This reform expanded leadership opportunities while maintaining continuity through a rotating core of experienced leaders.

Women also gained greater roles in church administration. While they had long been integral to church life, formal leadership positions were historically reserved for men. In 1967, the vestry

began allowing women's group leaders to attend meetings. In 1969, Mollie Hirsch became the first woman elected to the vestry, following a Diocesan decision permitting women to serve. The parish also undertook extensive renovations and expansions. Major projects included the construction of the church tower (1944–47), excavation of Cheek Hall under the nave (1957), and interior redecoration (1959–62). While some changes, like removing the bishop's chair and pulpit carvings, sparked resistance from parishioners, these updates ultimately improved the church's facilities for worship, education, and social gatherings. Additionally, neighboring properties were acquired and paved in 1968 to address parking shortages.

As Nashville grew and suburbanized, Christ Church responded by planting St. George's Chapel in Belle Meade. Completed in 1949, it became an independent parish in 1952, resulting in the transfer of over 900 members—40–50% of Christ Church's congregation—and much of its wealth. This loss, however, spurred Christ Church to embrace a new identity as a downtown parish, committed to serving its congregation and the broader city community.

Progress and Resistance

In the 1930s, Christ Church presented itself as a progressive force within certain boundaries. In 1934, the Rev. Edmund Dandridge, rector of Christ Church (1923–38) and later Bishop of Tennessee, participated in a "Good Will Symposium" on WSM radio alongside a local rabbi and Catholic priest. His talk, titled "Religious Ideals Cannot Sanction Bigotry," decried anti-Semitism and called for unity among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews as worshipers of the same God. However, Dandridge only briefly mentioned racial prejudice, focusing narrowly on the violent extremism of the Ku Klux Klan, which he optimistically described as "now happily defunct." His silence on systemic racial oppression suggested his support for the entrenched political, economic, and social restrictions placed on African Americans.

In July 1944, the vestry responded to reports of Black worshippers attending services by designating the last three pews on the west center aisle for African Americans. This policy was aimed at controlling the renewed presence of Black worshippers at Christ Church, but the arrangement proved unstable. In 1949, Black Episcopalians attended a Good Friday service at Christ Church. Holy Trinity, the designated Black congregation, did not offer a Good Friday service, leaving Black worshippers few options during Holy Week. In response, the vestry reaffirmed its commitment to segregated worship, issuing a letter stating that "Negroes are not being encouraged and will not be encouraged in the future to come to Christ Church." The vestry's letter also formalized the church's segregation policies, including seating Black worshippers in the designated rear pews and directing ushers to arrange for Black communicants to receive Holy Communion "at the last rail." While the letter acknowledged that denying communion based on race was un-Christian, it reinforced the racial hierarchy within the parish.

Occasionally, Christ Church hosted exceptions to its segregationist policies. In 1953, the funeral of Dr. W.W. Quinland, a prominent Black physician and long-time treasurer at Holy Trinity, was held at Christ Church because Holy Trinity was too small for the anticipated crowd. The Rev. George E. Harper, a Black Episcopal priest, officiated, becoming perhaps the first Black priest to

lead a service at Christ Church. While this could be seen as progress, it also aligned with the church's paternalistic approach to race, casting such gestures as acts of charity rather than genuine inclusion.

Height of the Civil Rights Movement

The 1950s and 1960s were a transitional period for Christ Church, as entrenched segregationist practices clashed with the civil rights movement and shifting attitudes within the Episcopal Church. In the early 1950s, the leadership of Christ Church openly opposed desegregation efforts. For instance, when the Episcopal Synod of the Fourth Province proposed integrating the School of Theology at Sewanee in 1951, the Christ Church vestry warned integration would be "unwise." Despite objections, Sewanee's theology school integrated in 1953, with the rest of the University of the South following in 1961. During these same years, Christ Church supported the formation of two chapels: St. Anselm's, as a campus ministry for Fisk University and Nashville's other HBCUs, and St. Augustine's, serving the city's predominantly white institutions and located on the Vanderbilt University campus. It is notable that Christ Church expressed greater interest in and an ongoing commitment to St. Augustine's but not St. Anselm's.

The arrival of the Rev. Raymond Ferris as rector in 1954 introduced a more progressive voice on racial issues. Ferris, who had previously served as Dean of the Episcopal Cathedral in the Panama Canal Zone, brought with him a commitment to social justice that had rarely been seen at Christ Church. Early in his tenure, Ferris informed the vestry that while he did not wish to disrupt parish life, he could not support making distinctions based on race. He worked with local organizations like the Nashville Community Relations Conference (NCRC) and hosted events addressing racial desegregation and interracial dialogue at Christ Church.

In 1960, amid the downtown lunch counter sit-ins, Ferris hosted a two-day NCRC event at Christ Church that drew over 400 attendees, including many African Americans. This unsettled some parishioners, leading to a vestry resolution that reaffirmed the church's commitment to segregated worship. Although the resolution avoided explicit segregationist language, it aimed to limit external events at Christ Church without vestry approval. Ultimately, the restriction was rescinded, as the canons of the Episcopal Church grant rectors authority over how church buildings are used.

During Ferris's tenure, the General Conventions of the Episcopal Church increasingly addressed racial issues, condemning segregation as "contrary to the mind of Christ" in 1964. These statements provided moral and institutional support for those advocating for racial justice within the national church and at Christ Church. Just prior to his departure from Christ Church in 1964, Ferris publicly stated, "Men of all races and creeds are welcome at our services. The whole community must have a change of heart, and I think such a change must have its roots in the churches and synagogues." This signaled a shift in Christ Church's official position, though integration remained limited in practice.

Under Ferris's successor, the Rev. John Lane Denson III (1965–1970), Christ Church expanded its engagement with racial justice initiatives. Clergy and lay leaders collaborated with clergy from Black parishes like Holy Trinity and St. Anselm's for joint services. Christ Church also launched urban outreach programs, including free breakfasts for underserved children in Edgehill, a predominantly Black neighborhood. By spring 1969, the breakfast program was serving 100 children daily, illustrating Christ Church's growing commitment to community service.

Despite these steps forward, internal tensions persisted. The vestry minutes reveal that some parishioners remained skeptical of civil rights organizations, viewing groups like the National Council of Churches (NCC) and the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU) as radical or un-American. In 1964, the vestry declined to support the NCC's initiatives to aid Black voter registration in Mississippi. Similarly, they refused to allow ESCRU to meet at Christ Church, describing the group as "militant" and controversial.

Heightened tensions in the late 1960s, including the 1967 North Nashville riots following Stokely Carmichael's visit to Nashville, brought further challenges. Bishop John Vander Horst evicted a liberation school at St. Anselm's linked to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), citing concerns about its curriculum. The Christ Church vestry commended his decision, reflecting ongoing resistance to progressive racial initiatives. By decade's end, Christ Church faced internal divisions. Some members championed civic engagement, while others preferred a focus on traditional pastoral care. While the church moved incrementally toward inclusion and dialogue, progress was uneven and often contentious.

Conclusion

When the Rev. Denson unexpectedly resigned in September 1970, he offered a candid reflection on his departure. Speaking to the press, he stated that Christ Church "has made and will continue to make a creative difference in many lives." However, he expressed doubts about whether the church remained the most "effective lever for turning history into wider fields of justice and peace, for convincing men and women to embrace the greater loyalties to which God calls us." Initiatives like the Store-Front Ministry and the leadership of the Rev. Ferris and the Rev. Denson highlighted Christ Church's growing engagement with its downtown community. However, resistance to racial equality persisted among some leaders and members. By 1970, the overt segregationist rhetoric of earlier decades had diminished, but the church had yet to atone for its historical support of slavery, segregation, and other forms of racism. The lingering tension between progressive actions and entrenched conservatism reflected a congregation grappling with its identity and history amid the broader social changes of the civil rights era.