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# **“Know Austin, Love Austin: St. John Regular Baptist Association”**

If you were to venture to where 25th Street and Leon Street intersect in West Campus, or formally known as Wheatville very near to the University of Texas at Austin, I want to know if you could imagine a large oak tree with four men sitting underneath its canopy. Could you imagine what it must have felt like for these formerly enslaved men, shedding the condition of bondage from their persons and organizing the state of Texas into four divisions of associations?

On that day in 1867, two years following the emancipation of African people in the United States, the St. John Regular Baptist, the Lincoln Baptist, the Guadalupe Baptist, and the Mount Zion Baptist Associations were organized.

In defiance of the prevailing ideas of Black inferiority of those times, those Black men sitting underneath those canopies rose and went back to their respective communities to lead their people into self-determination.

Although I wasn't there when the ministers in charge of St. John Regular Baptist Association began the organization, my great-great-grandfather, Reverend Calvin Allen Sr., was. He was among reverends Jacob Fontaine, Jessie B. Shackles, John Henry Winn Sr., Buffington, and Horace Smith.

His presence that day would ensure that I would be here today sharing with you their story and how they organized one of the largest independent associations of Black people within the state of Texas following the emancipation of enslaved Africans in the U.S. The St. John Regular Baptist Association went on to have over 200,000 members in its earlier years.

We cannot discuss race, racism, slavery, and its lingering impacts without discussing the historical role of the American church. Even a cursory examination would unveil troves of theological essays and works penned to justify enslavement, segregation, and other blatant forms of dehumanizing discrimination. Western churches, across denominations, knowingly received slave-owning members in good standing and across the board reinforced segregation.

We must also include that, before the Transatlantic Slave Trade that trafficked tens of millions of people from the African continent to the Americas and other places, Black African people were instrumental in





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the creation of Christianity and other Abrahamic faiths. Now, this is not to say that all African people practiced these faiths. The continent of Africa is a large and diverse place where people have their own traditions—their own views—which were largely demonized and used to justify their dehumanization, enslavement, and exploitation. Even the Christian sacrament of baptism was employed to classify African people for specific types of labor and justify what would be their fate in the Americas as enslaved people.

But, despite these horrific truths, many African people adopted Christianity within the Americas. But they did this on their own terms and with the uniqueness of their circumstances in mind.

One example are prayer meetings, which have a long history within the African-American tradition starting from times during enslavement. Enslaved Africans would hold secret prayer meetings in the woods. In many cases, even if they were allowed to attend Christian services with their captors, they would be taught inconsistent truths reinforcing slavery in these services.

But, this hypocrisy did not go unnoticed by Africans. The Africans understood the subversive tactics of these messages. They then internalized the Christian doctrine and truth in their own services and would go on to foster and fuel some of the most significant abolition movements that this country knows. From Nat Turner to acclaimed abolitionist Frederick Douglass, truths from the life of the Christian Bible were leveraged on the path of self-emancipation within the United States' history. From these points an institution was born—the Black church.

The Black church gave people the chance to escape surveillance and spaces intended to reinforce and justify the practice of slavery disguised as spiritual worship. The origins of the St. John Regular Baptist Association follows along these same lines.

One of the association's founding members, the famed Reverend Jacob Fontaine, was trafficked to Austin from Arkansas as an enslaved person. The last person who held him in bondage was actually where he gets his last name, the white Reverend Edward Fontaine.

Reverend Jacob Fontaine served as Edward Fontaine's sexton at St. David's Episcopal Church right here in Austin. And in the afternoons, Reverend Jacob Fontaine would preach to Black people in the basement of the old Methodist church located at Brazos and 10th streets.

But, by 1864 Reverend Jacob Fontaine had organized the Black members of his congregation and they began to secretly meet and plan how they would break away from the white church.





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And by 1867, two years following emancipation, that same year he sat under the canopy of that large oak tree on the corner of 25th and Leon streets, Reverend Jacob Fontaine founded the First Colored Baptist Church in Austin. The first building of that sanctuary was constructed on the corner of 9th and Guadalupe in 1869.

The early pioneers of the St. John Regular Baptist Association and their congregants were determined to define themselves and operate independently. The church served as an entire institution for them.

As they had done during slavery—organizing, fellowshiping, and planning outside the gaze and surveillance of the mainstream white society—they efforted to do the same post-emancipation with the creation of their own associations like St. John. They created a network of communities throughout the region and unified themselves under the name of St. John Regular Baptist Association.

It's important to note that the association did not begin with the name of St. John Regular Baptist Association. When the association was first founded in 1867, it was called the Travis County Association. However, according to St. John Regular Baptist Association's official history, "Reverend John H. Winn Sr. did such a mammoth of a job in leading, colonizing, and building the St. John Regular Missionary Baptist Church and Freedom Colony with the same name, the association favored the name change to honor the pioneering member." From that time in the early 1870s, the association has been known as the St. John Regular Baptist Association and St. John Colony is still there in Caldwell County and continues to host one of the oldest Juneteenth celebrations in the country. John H. Winn Sr. is also the namesake of the St. John neighborhood, tabernacle, community center, and avenue in Austin, Texas.

As a multi-faceted organization that St. John Regional Baptist Association was and still is, the association went on to found, fund, and support Black churches and other entities in the region.

The St. John Regular Baptist Association was more than just a collection of churches. Here in Austin, they purchased over 300 acres of land and built the St. John's Orphanage and encampment grounds. The orphanage, the school, and the encampment grounds were located where present-day ACC Highland campus stands. During July, when the encampment was going, the grounds attracted tens of thousands of Black baptists to Austin.

In the early years of the encampment, anywhere from 10 to 25,000 people were in attendance annually. Now, that is a considerable number of people given that Austin at the time only had a population of about 30,000 residents.





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Educational events and seminars, such as those on farming, finances, and self determination, were provided to those who attended. Large political figures of the time, including Booker T. Washington, also came and attended. Mr. Washington even remarked on one of his visits on the superb nature of the St. John Orphanage and school that was founded and administered by L.L. Campbell.

In the latter years of the encampment, even the famed and late Barbara Jordan was also in attendance. Barbara Jordan was elected the first Black person to the Texas State Senate after the Reconstruction Period and she was then the first southern Black person elected to the United States House of Representatives.

Now, we have to think about Barbara Jordan's civic career and significance within the history of St. John Regular Baptist Association. By doing that, we can see that the association was not only a place where Black people were able to organize and run their institutions, but it was also a place where they could—and still can—provide opportunities for their youth to do the same.

That is the importance of the Black church. It's an institution where leaders can be formed.

Many of St. John Regular Baptist Association's founding members, like Reverend Jacob Fontaine and my great-grandfather times 3, Reverend Calvin Allen Sr., were formerly enslaved and then went on to occupy menial positions such as janitors in mainstream society. But when they finished their day jobs, they went on to occupy high standing positions within their communities and they were somebody!

In a 1904 editorial of the Austin American-Statesman, they predicted that the association and the Negro race will become extinct. It read, "When the shackles of slavery were thrown aside, the Negroes, yielding to licentiousness and ignorance will soon disappear."

Well, they were terribly mistaken because the St. John Regular Baptist Association continues until this very day. Upholding the same determination as those men who sat under that large canopy of the oak tree between 25th and Leon Street that decided they would take the future into their own hands and uplift their people.

"For it is not an enemy who taunts me—  
then I could bear it;  
it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—  
then I could hide from him.





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But it is you, a man, my equal,  
my companion, my familiar friend.” (Psalm 55:12-13 ESV)

“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” (Galatians 6:10 ESV)

It’s those that are closest to us that can also do us the most harm. The injury of a loved one, trusted figure of authority, or caretaker can do far more than the intended injuries of a stranger or an enemy. It’s one thing to be attacked by a purse snatcher on the street. It’s another to be assaulted or manipulated by a parent or teacher.

As you take in the history of the St. John Regular Baptist Association, consider the suffering endured by Black brothers and sisters at the hands of those who espoused the truth of the image of God in all people and a gospel of God’s grace for all people.

What must it have been like to receive “Negro Bibles” with most of the Old Testament and select passages of the New Testament removed? What suffering came as a result of being excluded from worship by those who should’ve been first to recognize the hypocrisy of being Christian and considering other image-bearers of God property? What was it like to see brothers and sisters who claim the same Christ justify segregation in worship?

History attests to the accounts of Black men and women thrown out of church as they were praying. History attests to the formulation and propagation of unfounded theological justifications for it. What are the lingering effects of this today? In most cases, the cultural climate then caused even the clergy, who personally and privately saw segregation as Christian hypocrisy and took issue with it, to practically implement segregation for the sake of “keeping the peace.” Among whom was the “peace” kept? Past unrepentant hypocrisy among most predominantly white churches remain the main reason why Sundays remain the most segregated hour today.

Then, consider the beauty of the resilient faith expressed in the leadership of men like Calvin Allen Sr. and Jacob Fontaine. Formerly enslaved men who, against all odds, had the foresight, tenacity, and concern for the welfare of their own communities enough to organize how they have toward an effort that has endured to this day. The promises of God fueled and informed their work.

Now, as we transition to prayer, consider what God is teaching you.





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Take in the stories and history you have heard today. What do you feel? What assumptions are being challenged? What memories are provoked? For just a minute, sit with what's surfacing and ask God what He's teaching you.

Now, thank God—who reveals truth and instructs our hearts that we might be conformed to the image of Christ.

Let's do this now.

Now, we turn to the practice of lamenting prayer. Lament is a prayerful expression of sorrow and grief over sin and its effects to God. At its core, lament takes hold of how God views sin and brokenness of every sort.

Lament now the long history of racial injustice perpetuated in Jesus' name. Lament the specific history of men and women here in Austin who endured the denial of human dignity decade after decade even after the abolition of slavery by those who should've been first to recognize, repent, and make restitution—especially toward those who are of the household of God. Lament the lingering effects of sin and on-going injustices like police brutality and mass incarceration still happening today. Do so now.

We lament because God hears and aligns our hearts to His through lament. We lament because brokenness and injustice of every kind will not go unaddressed—the finished work of the cross of Christ purchased redemption for all sin and will one day be fully evidenced in reality when Christ comes again. As we close our time, thank God for these promises, which enable us to take hold of living hope. Then, pray and ask God for wisdom and direction on what it means for you to take a step of obedience forward toward embracing God's heart for racial justice. Leave space to listen. Is it to pursue cross-cultural friendships? Is it to learn? How might God be calling you to steward your influence and resources in light of what He's teaching you?

Pray now as we conclude.

