

Historic Green Spring, Moses, Gowan Pamphlet and North America's First Black-led Baptist Church

BY LINDA H. ROWE

Tradition at First Baptist Church in Williamsburg, Virginia, maintains that during at least part of the formative period (1776?-1792) for the historic congregation, African Virginians (slaves and a few free blacks) gathered in secrecy for religious meetings in the thickets and woods on the plantation of Green Spring in James City

County. The clandestine nature of these early gatherings has hampered efforts to develop a clear timeline of the events set in motion by Moses and continued by Gowan, later known as Gowan Pamphlet.

The story begins with an illusive figure known only as Moses who preached among "the people of color" in the Williamsburg area. Moses is known through the work of nineteenth-century Baptist historian Robert Semple who reported that, "Moses, a black man, first preached among them, and was often taken up and whipped for holding meetings." Historian Semple said nothing more about Moses, only that Gowan then "became popular among the blacks, and began to baptize as well as to preach." Unfortunately, historian Semple did not provide exact or even approximate dates for the early activities of Moses and Gowan.

An item in a 1779 *Virginia Gazette* identified Gowan as the slave of "Mrs. Vobe of Williamsburg" but made no reference to his religious life. Widow Jane Vobe had kept tavern in Williamsburg since about 1752, and her slave Gowan lived and worked at her establishment. Given the beatings Moses received, it is likely that he was also a slave, belonging to whom we do not know.

On their own time, slaves and other area blacks began to swell the ranks of prayer meetings led by Moses and then Gowan. Moses could have held clandestine prayer meetings with slaves as early as the mid-1770s, since Semple's account has Moses preaching in the Williamsburg area before Gowan. Baptist sources tell us that Gowan had commenced his own religious work by 1781. (Tentative though it is, this



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timeline moves Moses back into the 1770s which squares more or less with the undocumented tradition at First Baptist Church that puts the founding of the church in 1776.)

Though the written record does not document outright the tradition that initially the

gatherings took place at Green Spring, that plantation is a plausible location for slaves to have assembled secretly. Circumstantial evidence supports the idea. Green Spring, five or six miles southwest of Williamsburg and north of Jamestown Island came into the possession of William Lee, a Virginian living in London, when his wife inherited the place about 1770. Over 4000 acres of fields and woodland fanned out from a mansion house providing ample cover for Lee's own slaves, other slaves and free blacks from the surrounding area to meet in relative safety. Criss-crossed by three roads that led to Jamestown and different parts of James City County, and connected to roads to York County, Yorktown, and Williamsburg, the Green Spring tract was accessible to slaves from perhaps ten or fifteen miles around.

Within a few years, the meetings moved closer to Williamsburg. Raccoon Chase, as it was known, was across Jamestown Road from Matoaka Lake (then Jones Mill Pond) in wooded low ground below a spillway. By 1793, Gowan was a freedman and had gained membership for his 200-member congregation in the regional, white-run Dover Baptist Association. Presumably less secretive by that time, the congregation remains shrouded in mystery until 1808 when tax records place it on Nassau Street in Williamsburg. By that time Green Spring was a fairly distant memory, but clearly, a hallowed one for the remarkable church.

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