

Peter Durrett

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Peter Durrett (1733-1823) was born into slavery on the plantation of his white father, Captain Durrett of Caroline County Virginia. He would have learned a variety of skills from his mother and fellow slaves. While in Caroline County, at the age of 25, he was converted to the gospel and began to be active as a Baptist Exhorter. This was during the First Great Awakening, the revival of the late 18th Century when Methodist and Baptist preachers in the south made many new converts. Peter married an enslaved woman who was held on another farm. Peter found out in 1781 that his master was planning to migrate to Kentucky. He asked the captain for help. The captain made an exchange so the couple could stay together, and Peter and his wife prepared to migrate. The Baptist preacher, Joseph Craig, held Peter and his wife as his as Craig, his master's family and slaves migrated in 1781 with congregation and other members of the Traveling Church being led by Craig's older brother Rev. Lewis Craig from Spotsylvania, Virginia. Because Peter Durrett helped the military leader, Captain William Ellis, guide the several hundred migrants on the arduous 600 mile journey through the Appalachian Mountains, he became known as Old Captain among the travelers.

Durrett became a Baptist preacher although he was never formally ordained. In 1784, he and his wife were members of their master Joseph Craig's church at the head of Boone's Creek. It was about 8 miles east of the settlement of Lexington. Soon after the Church dissolved, Peter and his wife got permission from Craig to hire them out and moved to Lexington. They were hired most steadily by the pioneer John Maxwell, who also help them build a cabin on his property at Maxwell Spring. Peter called fellow slaves together and began preaching. In the early years, they often met at different locations.

Durrett applied to the local Baptist association for ordination which they declined to do, but directed him to go in the name of their common Master. Gradually, Durrett and his wife gathered about 50 congregants most of whom Durrett baptized. Durrett began to administer the Lord's Supper. By 1790, they founded the First African Church of Lexington, now known as the First African Baptist Church. It was the first black congregation west of the Allegheny Mountains, the oldest black congregation in Kentucky, and the third oldest in the United States. The congregation was made up of fellow slaves who were joined by an increasing number of free blacks in the Lexington area. The congregation was believed to number up to 300 people during Durrett's lifetime. The trustees, all free men of color purchased their first property for a worship place in 1815. Durrett lived until 1823, when he was said to be near 90 years old.

Reference(s):

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