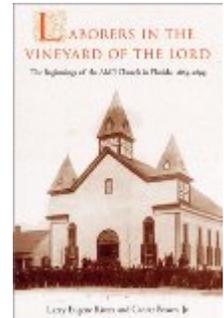


**Larry E. Rivers, Canter Brown Jr..** *Laborers in the Vineyard of the Lord: The Beginnings of the AME Church in Florida, 1865-1895.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001. x + 244 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-1890-4.



**Reviewed by** Charles Ferris

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The AME Church in Florida: The Founding Years

This book seeks to provide historical insight into the first thirty years of the African Methodist Episcopalian (AME) Church in the state of Florida. The AME Church is the oldest black Methodist denomination. Founded in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the decade following the American Revolution, it remained primarily a Northern institution until the conclusion of the Civil War, when it sought to expand into the South. As it expanded South, it continued a pattern of political involvement that it had begun from its inception as a denomination. As a result of the circumstances after the Civil War, that involvement was largely linked to Republican Reconstruction in the Southern states.

Two authors share the responsibility for writing the story of the AME Church in Florida, Larry Rivers and Canter Brown. Rivers has been a professor of history at Florida A & M University and is an expert in the history of slavery in Florida. His coauthor Brown has written several books on Florida politics and African American involve-

ment in Florida. The book they have written moves chronologically from the end of the Civil War to the close of the nineteenth century. As this chronology unfolds various leaders in the Florida AME Church are presented to the readers and fully discussed. The authors focus largely upon the clergy of the church and Florida politicians with whom the clergy interacted, while they depict the development of the Florida church largely through the eyes of its clergy as revealed in their actions and speeches.

Rivers and Brown have utilized, as resources, church records taken from the WPA Writer's Project, other public documents, numerous newspapers and periodicals, and other books that have been written on related subjects. The thorough use of historical material makes this book a work that is full of facts. It also proceeds logically decade-by-decade. However, it does contain several weaknesses.

The overall writing style is at times stagnant and boring. The reader is introduced to person after person who plays a role in the Florida church, but one character tends to merge into the next.

The book proceeds in this fashion in such a manner as to be dull and lifeless in its approach.

*Laborers in the Vineyard of the Lord* also deals with the state of Florida and the AME Church only. There is too much isolation from the events in the text and the larger AME denomination and the United States as a whole in general. Although this is a state study, there is a need to place the state's story in the context of a larger narrative, either within a denominational, regional and/or national context. During much of the Reconstruction period the AME Church was undergoing expansion throughout the Southern states and becoming involved with Reconstruction efforts in all of them.

There also needs to be more reference in the book to the AME denomination in Florida and its relationships with the other black Methodist denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopalian Zion Church and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. Both denominations were rivals of the AME in the South. However, this book tells comparatively little of that rivalry in Florida.

As it is currently written this work contains little to indicate attitudes and actions of the common people within the AME denomination in Florida. It does not focus upon the lives of those people except in economic circumstances, which were generated largely by railroad building. It offered lower economic class blacks work which they could not otherwise obtain in the state. This is a major flaw in the book inasmuch as it lacks depth due to the absence of these grassroots voices.

In conclusion, this work is a good reference source. It could have been much better were it expanded. Perhaps the authors will consider this and offer scholars a revised edition sometime in the future.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida>

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