



Warren Thomas, The Organizer

Warren Thomas was born in Henry County, Kentucky, in 1812. He arrived in Hickman about 1836 as a slave laborer. He was known as a community leader. Early Hickmanites recall him as a strict disciplinarian and a peace-loving person. The record of Thomas' early ministry is unclear, some say he preached all the time. But stories of his preaching in the woods to his mules and while he labored in the fields, long before freedom, have been recorded by local historians. Aunt Sallie, his wife, did house work and would accompany the family she served to church to care for their four year old son named T.T. Swayne.

Reverend Warren Thomas and his wife Sallie were well known in Hickman. In 1878, a yellow fever epidemic raged in the town of Hickman from August to October. More than 153 men, women and children died from the paralyzing, burning fever. Many people left the town. Only those who nursed the sick or buried the dead were allowed outside their houses. Warren and Sallie Thomas went from

house to house caring for the sick. A prominent citizen, H. A. Tyler, specifically thanked the colored citizens for their efforts in combating the scourge in the *Hickman Courier* edition dated Friday, November 15, 1878.



"Aunt" Sallie Thomas

The church without a doubt has been the cornerstone of the community of Hickman. Prior to the civil war it was common for slaves to attend the churches of their masters, a practice that continued after the conclusion of the war, but this all ended in 1866 on Palm Sunday in the white Methodist Church South in Hickman, KY. The next Sunday, Warren Thomas and 13 adults and some children met in a shack overlooking the Mississippi River to worship on Easter Sunday morning. Thirty four year old Reverend Warren Thomas delivered the sermon to the first black congregation in Hickman.

The year 1866 was the second year of reconstruction. Blacks, free only one year, were receiving pay for their labor. In 1867 Warren Thomas and five of his members met with O.F. Young, treasurer of the East Hickman Operation, a local land development company, and made a payment of \$86.33 on two lots to build a church on

Moscow Street. The balance was due in two years, however, in November the Freeman Bureau, an agency created by the United States Congress, arrived in Hickman. The agency was located at Columbus, Kentucky after the Civil War ended. The duties of the Freeman Bureau were to help newly freed slaves record their marriages, build churches, schools and other assistance. The Bureau paid the balance of \$156.66 for the land. With the encouragement of the Freeman Bureau representatives, Warren Thomas set out to build a church.

Hickman's first black church opened in 1868, on Moscow Street. The church was constructed by ex-slave members who were master carpenters. The name Thomas Chapel was adopted from the founder and first minister, Warren Thomas. They were Methodist because of the white Methodist Church South they had attended. Five years after Thomas Chapel opened, it was destroyed by fire. A temporary building was erected. Warren Thomas armed with the same determination and hope that had carried him through slavery turned to his congregation. In 1890 many watched Frank Thompson fashion bricks and mortar into the present building. Members carried bricks a quarter of a mile to the church site.

Warren Thomas, the leader, could not read or write his name, but he was truly an organizer, a man with vision and faith.

Thomas Chapel church school opened for ex-slaves of all ages in 1870, and was taught by Professor Ballard of Lexington, Kentucky. In later

years the school was moved to Magnolia Street on the bluff near Lovers Leap overlooking the Mississippi River. They changed the name to Riverview School because of the beautiful view. About 1910 the school was moved to Dodd Addition; the principal was Thomas Chapels' own Sunday School teacher, George Halliburton. At one time all the teachers in Hickman's Negro schools were members of Thomas Chapel Church. Mrs. Ella Thompson Caldwell attended the school on Magnolia Street and later was a teacher at Riverview in Dodd Addition, and was granddaughter of Frank Thompson who owned a brick yard and made bricks for the building of Thomas Chapel Church.



In later years Riverview became a four year high school. Students were bused from Clinton, Columbus, Fulton, Cayce, and Oakton, Kentucky and some from Union City, Tennessee.



Members of the Thomas Chapel C.M.E. Church, Hickman, Kentucky, 1899

Ms. Annie Atwood Hale, sister of Dr. Atwood, was a first grade teacher at Riverview for many years. Her husband, Reverend Hale was a pastor at Thomas Chapel Church, and owned a black funeral home. He also was the first black person to work at the *Hickman Courier* newspaper.

Reverend Warren Thomas died May 8, 1898. He is buried in the Hickman Cemetery.

The old Thomas Chapel Church is on the National Registry of Historical Places. The building is now the Warren Thomas Museum, owned and maintained by the Warren Thomas Historical Society, Inc. Membership is open to all citizens.



Warren Thomas Museum, Hickman, Kentucky

About the Author:

Jeannette Dean is curator of the Warren Thomas Museum and a member of Thomas Chapel CME Church. She is active in her community. She was appointed to the Hickman City Commission and was elected to Fulton Co. Extension District Board. Dean received the National Jefferson Award in 1993, in Washington D.C., and a Kentucky History Award in 2003 for support of Community History. She is a member of The Alternative Resource for Kentuckians, a community services agency. Now retired she worked 33 years as a CSBG Outreach Social Worker in Fulton County for Mississippi River and West Kentucky Allied Services. In her own words, "Working with history is not always easy, but the discovery is awesome. I LOVE IT."