# Architectural Expression of Allen Chapel AME Church in Murfreesboro, Tennessee by Oluwayemisi T. Adegboyega, 2025. From AME-ARCHIVES.ORG, http://www.ame-archives.org/digitalexhibits/exhibits/show/more-than-a-building--architec

## More Than a Building

Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, is more than just a religious structure. It is a space where spirituality, architecture, community identity, and cultural memory converge. Established shortly after the Civil War by formerly enslaved individuals, the church became a spiritual home and a symbol of autonomy for Murfreesboro's Black community. The current building, constructed in 1889 by members of the congregation, remains a lasting monument to their labor, devotion, and determination.[1]

Allen Chapel's history is deeply embedded in the broader story of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a denomination founded by Bishop Richard Allen in 1816 after his protest against racial segregation in white Methodist churches. That founding spirit of resistance and independence permeates the design and function of Allen Chapel. Built by the hands of freedpeople, the church embodies their resilience and their vision for a sacred space that would serve both spiritual and communal purposes.[2] Designated on the National Register of Historic Places in 1995, Allen Chapel stands today not just as a preserved structure but as a living archive of Black sacred space. Its story reveals how African American communities created, sustained, and defended their own institutions—spiritually, architecturally, and politically.[3]

## Sacred Design: What Makes a Church a Church?

The architecture of Allen Chapel is more than aesthetic, it is theological. Through its design, the church expresses sacredness, reverence, and collective identity. Built in the Gothic Revival style, Allen Chapel features tall, narrow arched windows, a front-facing gable, and a symmetrical brick façade. These elements evoke spiritual elevation and order, guiding worshippers' attention upward and inward. Jeanne Kilde notes that nineteenth-century Protestant

---

[1] John Lodl, *Carving Out Communities: Black Institution Building in Rutherford County, Tennessee 1860–1890* (ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, 2023), 82-83

[2] Dennis C. Dickerson, *The Wesleyan Witness in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement: The Allen Legacy Against 20th Century American Apartheid* (AME Church Archives, 2007), 9

[3] *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Allen Chapel AME Church* (1993), section 8.

architecture was often designed to "shape behavior and belief," reflecting theology in physical form.[4] Yet Allen Chapel's design is not grand, it is modest and locally constructed. As Gwen Steege explains, simplified Gothic elements allowed small congregations to adopt sacred architectural forms without needing elaborate resources. The result is a building that feels both aspirational and grounded, sacred, yet rooted in the lived realities of its builders.[5]

Inside, the sanctuary follows a traditional layout with a raised pulpit and choir platform at the front. A vestibule leads into the worship space, reinforcing a sense of transition from the ordinary to the sacred. High ceilings and tall windows invite natural light, reinforcing spiritual symbolism without extravagance. These choices reflect both religious tradition and the congregation's priorities: reverence, clarity, and communal gathering.[6] Allen Chapel's sacred design is a deliberate theological statement, one that elevates Black spiritual life through form and function. In its construction, the church resists erasure and proclaims dignity.

## Spaces That Speak

Church buildings often speak, not through words, but through the way space is arranged and used. At Allen Chapel, space has always been more than architectural—it has been practical, sacred, and deeply symbolic. The layout of the church shows a clear intention to serve not just worship needs, but also educational and communal ones. One notable feature is the balcony, which was later transformed into a Sunday school classroom. This adaptation reflects the AME Church's longstanding commitment to education and spiritual formation, especially for children. Lincoln and Mamiya describe the Black church as a "total institution"—a place where spiritual, social, and educational life are intertwined.[7]

In the 1930s, the congregation purchased pews from a local white church, demonstrating both pragmatism and resourcefulness. This act also represents a subtle form of reclaiming and repurposing space that once excluded them. The reuse of sacred materials within their own

---

[4] Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).45

[5] Gwen W. Steege, "The 'Book of Plans' and the Early Romanesque Revival in the United States: A Study in Architectural Patronage," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 46, no. 3 (1987): 219

[6] National Register, 1993, Section 7

[7] C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 7

church symbolized not just adaptation, but ownership and resilience.[8] Later in the twentieth century, Allen Chapel expanded by adding a brick annex. This new section provided space for fellowship meals, community meetings, and additional classrooms. While modest, the annex represents an evolving understanding of sacred space, where spiritual formation extends beyond the pulpit and into every aspect of communal life. As Maile Hutterer argues, sacred architecture is not static, it responds to the needs of its people and reflects their values over time.[9] At Allen Chapel, every reused pew, reimagined balcony, and added wing speaks to a congregation that has used space not only to gather, but to grow.

## A Shelter and a Sanctuary

Allen Chapel has long served as a spiritual and physical refuge. Established in the wake of emancipation, the church offered a place where Black worshippers could gather safely, away from the hostile conditions of segregation and racial exclusion. Its walls provided not just shelter from weather, but protection from social vulnerability. Throughout the twentieth century, Allen Chapel was more than a local church. It was a hub for the Tennessee AME Conference. The congregation hosted five statewide AME meetings between 1889 and 1973, confirming its importance within the denomination's regional leadership.[10] The church's role as a sanctuary also extended into the cultural and political landscape. Dennis Dickerson argues that Bishop Richard Allen's founding act of protest—walking out of a segregated church in 1787, was a symbolic beginning of the civil rights movement. That legacy echoed in places like Allen Chapel, where even the act of gathering was a form of resistance.[11]

Though there is limited direct documentation of Civil Rights activism occurring inside Allen Chapel, its enduring presence as a protected Black space during eras of racial violence speaks volumes. As Larry Rivers and Canter Brown explain, AME churches in the postbellum South frequently served as bastions of freedom, even in the face of threats and violence.[12] Allen

---

[8] National Register, 1993, Section 7
[9] Maile Hutterer, "Architectural Design as an Expression of Religious Tolerance," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 76, no. 3 (2017): 283.
[10] National Register, 1993, Section 8
[11] Dickerson, *Wesleyan Witness*, 9
[12] Larry Eugene Rivers and 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).p. xvii

Chapel fit that mold: a place where worship, education, and empowerment came together in the name of liberation.

## Enduring Witness: The Story Allen Chapel Tells

In conclusion, Allen Chapel's story is not only about the past, it is a reflection of how communities endure. Its architecture, grounded in faith and resilience, reflects a theology that centers Black dignity. Built by formerly enslaved hands and sustained across generations, Allen Chapel serves as a living testimony to what it means to claim sacred space under difficult conditions. As Jeanne Kilde emphasizes, Protestant churches in the nineteenth century were designed not just to house worship, but to communicate theology and moral authority.[13] Allen Chapel does exactly that. Its design choices, though modest, speak to a deep sense of purpose, organization, and care. The addition of classrooms, annexes, and modern updates over time reinforces the idea that sacred space grows as the community grows.

Allen Chapel is also a reminder of a broader AME legacy, a tradition that began with Bishop Richard Allen and continues in local churches like this one. Dennis Dickerson describes this as "the Allen legacy," where worship is inseparable from social resistance.[14] Even when silent, the church speaks through its presence. In the face of change, Allen Chapel remains: a place where generations have prayed, protested, taught, and healed. It tells a story of survival, not just in structure but in spirit. That is the enduring witness of Allen Chapel, built in brick, lived in faith.

## Bibliography

[13] Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 47
[14] Dickerson, *Wesleyan Witness*, 10

Dickerson, Dennis C. *The Wesleyan Witness in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement: The Allen Legacy Against 20th Century American Apartheid*. AME Church Archives, 2007.

Hutterer, Maile. "Architectural Design as an Expression of Religious Tolerance." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 76, no. 3 (2017): 281–301.

Kilde, Jeanne Halgren. *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Lincoln, C. Eric, and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990.

Lodl, John. *Carving Out Communities: Black Institution Building in Rutherford County, Tennessee 1860–1890*. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, 2023.

National Park Service. *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Allen Chapel AME Church*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1993.

Rivers, Larry Eugene, and 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.

Steege, Gwen W. "The 'Book of Plans' and the Early Romanesque Revival in the United States: A Study in Architectural Patronage." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 46, no. 3 (1987): 215–227.