

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage

Other names/site number: Wayman Chapel AME, Wayman Chapel

Name of related multiple property listing:

Black Montana's Heritage Places

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

Street & number: 402 South 25th Street and 2508 4th Avenue South

City or town: Billings State: MT County: Yellowstone

Not For Publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria.

I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

 national X statewide X local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

X A B C D

MT State Historic Preservation Officer

Signature of certifying official/Title:

Date

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official:

Date

Title :

State or Federal agency/bureau
or Tribal Government

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Private:

☒

Public – Local

☐

Public – State

☐

Public – Federal

☐

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

Building(s)

☒

District

☐

Site

☐

Structure

☐

Object

☐

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RELIGION: Religious Facility
DOMESTIC: single dwelling

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RELIGION: Religious facility
VACANT/NOT IN USE

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

NO STYLE

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property:

WOOD/particle board (church)

METAL/aluminum (parsonage)

Asphalt (shingle)

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraphs

Setting & Location

The Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal [AME] Church, located at 402 South 25th Street, occupies lots 11 and 12 of Block 181 in Billings' Southside neighborhood. The church faces northeast (described below as the east elevation) at the corner of 25th Street and 4th Avenue and the detached parsonage stands to the rear/west end of the same lots and faces northwest (described below as north) onto 4th Avenue South. The Southside neighborhood offers residences, a park, schools, and several churches, as well as the Phillips 66 refinery, sugar beet factory, and a major hospital campus. Many of the community's houses and services were built to support the industry workers. Four blocks north of the church, the Great Northern Railway line bisects the city, forming a substantial boundary between the southside and downtown Billings.

Billings' founders oriented their townsite to the railroad tracks, so the downtown and southside street grid angles 45 degrees north from southwest to northeast. For ease of description, the author describes the church and parsonage's southeast elevations as the south, the northeast elevations as the east, northwest elevations as north, and southwest elevations as west.

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Originally constructed at the 302 24th Street North, the congregation moved the building in 1916.¹ An asphalt-shingled saltbox roof, with the north slope more steeply pitched than the south, covers Wayman Chapel's one-story, rectangular footprint. The building rests on a concrete wall foundation, and horizontal, hardboard, lapped siding covers the exterior walls. Dimensional wood corner boards secure the siding at the east corners. Installed in 1994, the modern siding replaced asbestos shingles installed midcentury, and reflects a similar appearance. A gabled false front masks the asymmetrical roofline at the east (front) side, and supports a tall, centered belltower entry. The tower features a steeply-pitched, flared pyramidal roof.

The saltbox's ridgeline runs, roughly, from the tower's northwest corner to the church's west elevation. The false gable front extends from the southwest corner of the steeple tower, and matches the pitch of the northern slope, giving the appearance of symmetry on either side of the tower. The false gable front is roughly two feet in depth, east to west. Horizontal siding covers the triangular rear wall of the false front. Rising from low on the north slope's west side, a short brick interior chimney topped with a galvanized steel cap vents the heating system.

Narrative Description

CHURCH

East elevation (façade)

Providing entry via double-doors at ground level, a tall square tower stands centered and proud of the east elevation. Devoid of ornamentation, the tower features only a floodlight above the centered, wood veneer, white-painted doors. A single rectangular window opening appears to either side of the tower, and each holds a single-hung, two-sash stained-glass window with a plexiglass storm. The stained-glass windows feature dark, arced glass at the upper corners, giving the appearance of an arched window design. Nestled in a wood-trimmed opening in the siding, a whitewashed concrete plaque dedicated to the church founders appears at the façade's south edge at grade level. It reads: TO THE MEMORY OF FOUNDERS OF AME CHURCH 1897 + 1931 G.D. CHOICE B.D. PASTOR OFFICERS L.P. SOMERVILLE, D.H. KENOLY, A. WALTON.

North (side) elevation

The church's north elevation displays four rectangular window openings: three evenly-spaced across the eastern two-thirds of the building, and another centered in the west third. Each contains a wood-frame, single-hung, two-sash window. Vandalized in 2025, just one of the original leaded, stained glass windows remains intact on this elevation, now protected by a plexiglass storm attached to the exterior frame. The other three windows hold single-light glass

¹ R.L. Polk & Co., *Polk's Billings (Yellowstone County, Mont.) City Directory, Including Laurel and Yellowstone County*. Kansas City, (Mo.: R.L. Polk & Co., 1916), p. 28, R.L. Polk & Co.; *Polk's Billings (Yellowstone County, Mont.) City Directory, Including Laurel and Yellowstone County*. Kansas City, (Mo.: R.L. Polk & Co., 1917), p. 28.

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panes in the original one-over-one wood sashes. The easternmost window's upper sash holds amber-colored textured cast glass, and the rest hold clear glass.

South (side) elevation

A half-story, gabled extension shelters a concrete stairwell that leads to the basement level. The extension appears at the east side of the south elevation, set back slightly from the building's east elevation. A modern steel door, pressed to give a paneled appearance, provides entry from the extension's south wall. To the west of the extension, the south elevation holds three openings. The center opening contains a pair of stained glass, single-hung, two-sash windows. From both the east and west thirds of the elevation, a single window of the same style illuminates the interior. Plexiglass storms cover the two east windows.

West (rear) elevation

A large, centered, pointed-arch stained-glass window dominates the rear elevation. Dedicated to longtime Pastor Freeman's service, the window fills an original opening. The translucent stained-glass artwork exhibits imagery of the cross and open bible. A single window of the single-hung, two-sash stained glass design, punctures the elevation on both the north and south sides. The southern edge of the elevation contains a multi-panel wood door protected by an aluminum screen door.

Interior

The Church's interior exhibits an open floorplan at the main level. The east entry vestibule within the belltower opens to a large sanctuary with a raised chancel at the west end. Plaster coats the walls and ceiling, and wood trim forms a chair rail around the room. Beadboard wainscot remains in place, though Oriented Strand Board (OSB) covers approximately 60% of it. Rosettes and decorative wood trim surround the window and door openings, and carpet covers the floor. Below the carpet, OSB covers the original wood floor. Rows of pews face the arched chancel, set in two groups and diagonally aligned to either side of a center aisle. The chancel rises two steps above the main floor level, and a carved wood rail further differentiates it from the sanctuary.

The basement level, with its concrete floor and low (6'6") plaster ceiling, offers a large gathering space accessed via stairs at the southeast corner that lead to the south exterior door. The southwest corner contains an office, and the north third of the basement level presents three rooms east to west: a kitchen with a half-wall facing the main room, a utility closet, and a bathroom. OSB interior walls, hollow core doors, and fluorescent lighting finish the space.

PARSONAGE

The parsonage stands at the west end of the parcel at 2508 4th Avenue South. In place by 1957, the house's irregular footprint rests on a concrete wall foundation. Moved in to replace an earlier parsonage, the house served as home to the church's longest-serving pastor, Robert C. Freeman, from 1957 until his death in 1997. Pastor Freeman's long tenure brought

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unprecedented stability to the congregation. The gable-front residence faces 4th Avenue, and features the one-and-one-half story main house and a one-story rear extension. Horizontal vinyl siding covers the walls, and asphalt shingles cover the roof. The original wood siding remains intact beneath the modern siding. The extension's rectangular footprint stands flush with the main house's east (side) elevation, but measures slightly narrower than the main house across the south (rear) elevation, and therefore contributes to the irregular shape. The one-story rear roofline consists of a gable, with the west slope incorporating a more shallowly pitched shed extension over an enclosed back porch.

North elevation (façade)

The north façade of the home features a front door, just west of center, flanked by single window openings. A narrow, rectangular, one-over-one, double-hung, wood-frame window fills the east opening, and larger picture window, with fixed transom above, fills the west opening. A small, bracketed gable roof shelters the pressed steel door entry. It features asphalt shingles, a pediment, and white trim board. In the north elevation's gable end, a centered, one-over-one, double-hung window sits beneath the peak. Above the top edge of the window, a horizontal brace board runs between the slopes of the roof. Above the brace board and below the peak, the gable end wall protrudes several inches from the north elevation's plane. This section of the gable end contains a small metal vent at the center.

West (side) elevation

The parsonage's west elevation contains two bays: the main house to the north, and the recessed extension to the south. Within the north bay, three windows appear. The northernmost window opening contains a single wood-frame, one-over-one, double-hung unit. The north bay's south side opening contains two slightly smaller double-hung units. The south bay offers entry through a paneled pressed steel door to the north, and a one-by-one aluminum-frame slider fills a horizontally-oriented opening to the south.

East (side) elevation

The east elevation displays two flush bays, differentiated by the extension's shorter ridgeline to the south side. The south bay contains two, single, evenly spaced, one-over-one, wood frame windows. Another single window, larger but of the same style, appears off center to the south in the north bay.

South (rear) elevation

The rear extension dominates the south elevation's east side, and contains a centered, single, one-over-one, double-hung wood-frame window at both the first story and the gable end. Another window opening appears off-center to the west in the main house's gable end. The opening originally held a double-hung window, but now plywood covers it. A louvered vent appears above the covered window, centered high beneath the peak.

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Interior

The parsonage interior includes a main floor with a large front room along the west side that functioned as both living and dining room, a bedroom in the northeast corner, and a kitchen and bath in the south one-story extension. A flight of stairs situated north of the bathroom accesses the half story above. The upper story contains two rooms: one to the north and one to the south. Finishes over the original wood floors include modern engineered tongue-and-groove flooring in the living/dining room, carpeting in the first floor and the north second story bedrooms, and linoleum tile in the kitchen and bath. Lath and plaster cover the walls and ceilings, except in the south bedroom, which is open to the rafters. Milled trim surrounds the window and door openings. The living room features a small shallow fireplace constructed with bricks embossed with:

THE DENVER
HIFIRE
FIRE CLAY COMPANY

and GOLDEN on the verso.²

INTEGRITY

The Wayman Chapel property experienced several changes to its workmanship and materials during its long period of significance, but overall retains sufficient integrity to convey its historic associations. It satisfies the Registration Requirements listed in the Black Montana's Heritage Places MPD (MC100008427). The property meets Criteria Consideration A, as its significance lies in its association with the development of the Black community and civil rights organizations in Billings.

The Wayman Chapel property's integrity of design endures. As described in the MPD, design integrity for Montana's Black Heritage resources seeks that "the basic form, roof, fenestration pattern, and major features" - like the tower - endure. Both the church and parsonage exhibit these aspects of design, as well as original floorplans and historic interior finishes

The church and parsonage retain a continuity of use and appearance from the historic period. Though currently vacant, the congregation seeks to repair and reinhabit the residence. The church served the congregation as a place of worship and community meeting place nearly

² The Denver Fire Clay Company of Golden Colorado specialized in fire clay, a mined material that could withstand extreme heat and proved appropriate for industrial applications. Richard Gardner, "They Walked Away Alive: 85th Anniversary of the Denver Fire Clay Mine Disaster," Protect the Hogback website, <https://www.protectthehogback.com/copy-of-denver-fire-clay-accident-1937-1>, accessed July 16, 2026.

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continuously for over 100 years.³ Both buildings retain strong integrity of feeling and association.

Moved within the period of significance and in place in the historic neighborhood for decades, the church and parsonage both retain integrity of location and setting, and do not need to meet Criteria Consideration B. While the south side neighborhood has endured change, including the demolition of most of the residences associated with the historic Black community, the blocks immediately surrounding the church property remain residential in character and enhance the property's historic setting.

Non-original siding covers both the church and the parsonage, masking the intact wood clapboard and trims beneath. On the church, the siding also covers the east elevation tower's open belfry and stained-glass transom above the double doors. This modern siding, installed in 1994 as a community volunteer and donations project in response to racist threats against the church, replaced asbestos shingle siding installed at mid-century. The asbestos siding masked the belfry and transom during the period of significance. As noted above, vandals recently broke three of the two-sash historic stained-glass windows, and the large pointed arch window contains a modern stained glass window within an historic opening. The Black Montana's Heritage Places MPD explains that integrity of workmanship "the physical evidence of the craftwork of a culture or group, is generally not a critical aspect of integrity for this group of resources." Further, the document reads:

Materials must be given less weight in evaluating African American historical resources in Montana than other aspects of integrity, especially in relation to residential structures. A substantial portion of surviving historic-period properties appear to have been re-sided with a variety of materials. Changes in cladding alone are insufficient to render these resources ineligible. Likewise, the installation of new sashes or doors in original fenestration patterns does not, on its own, render a resource ineligible. Modifications may cover original materials that remain extant, and/or may themselves date to the period of significance. Even where materials have been substantially modified, properties may convey their essential historic character and significance. The rarity of this entire class of resources and the altered condition of most extant properties are critical considerations for assessing integrity of materials and the implications thereof for eligibility.⁴

³ The church closed for a few years beginning in 2013 when a flood necessitated repairs. "Wayman Chapel Closes," Nonstop Local Billings newscast, August 21, 2013, Accessed July 8, 2026, https://www.kulr8.com/news/wayman-chapel-closes/article_b5649286-cdd2-508a-802a-18e0215432d2.html.

⁴ Delia Hagen, "Black Montana's Heritage Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, MC100008427, December 2022, on File at MT SHPO, pp. 243-244.

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Though non-historic siding covers both buildings, many historic materials endure. Most of the historic stained-glass windows remain unbroken and functional. On the interior, original finishes remain in place, including the trims, chair and altar rails, furnishings, and plaster.

The Black Montana Heritage Places MPD calls out religious organizations as eligible for listing, as institutions “associated with the history of African American organizations in Montana, with group activities of local Black communities, or with institutional entities involved in Black issues.” Further, the document states “residences that housed leaders of local institutions, like Black ministers or pastors, might be considered both residential and institutional properties.”⁵ The property displays sufficient integrity to convey these significant contexts and to individually list in the National Register under Criterion A.

⁵ Delia Hagen, “Black Montana’s Heritage Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, MC100008427, December 2022, on File at MT SHPO, p. 227.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☒ A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- ☐ B. Removed from its original location
- ☐ C. A birthplace or grave
- ☐ D. A cemetery
- ☐ E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ F. A commemorative property
- ☐ G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

SOCIAL HISTORY

ETHNIC HERITAGE: African American

Period of Significance

1916 - 1972

Significant Dates

1916

1920

1957

1972

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

African American

Architect/Builder

unknown

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraphs (

In Billings, on the corner of 25th Street South and Fourth Avenue South, stand the historic Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage. The historic property retains and conveys important ties to the area Black community's social and civil rights history. For more than a century, the place served as a locus for community socialization, political activism, benevolent work, and educational outreach in Billings. From the church and its pastorage, congregation members fostered spiritual, educational, and civic uplift through the twentieth century, and that work continues. Using the property as a gathering space, many members of the Wayman Chapel founded and engaged with local and statewide organizations, including the Phyllis Wheatley Club and its associated Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Founders and parishioners included many of the earliest Black families to settle in Billings. Through the church, subsequent generations maintained ties to the community and organizations, even as Montana's African American population waned. The AME Church's story is integral to the history of Billings, African American history throughout Montana, and linked to local manifestations of the history of civil rights in the United States. For these reasons, this modest church qualifies for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A at the state and local levels of significance.

Wayman Chapel's history falls within the Black Montana's Heritage Places MPD context III, The Heyday of Black Montana; IV, A Shifting West; and V, World War II and After. Its period of significance begins with the church's relocation to the Southside neighborhood in 1916, and continues through 1972, when the Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, including Billings' Phyllis Wheatley Club, disbanded. The 1972 date coincides with the establishment of Montana's new constitution that enshrined human and civil rights protections statewide. Other significant dates include 1920, when the congregation reopened their church to the public after new pews and other renovations took place. Pastor Robert C. Freeman took the pulpit in 1957, and his appointment heralded newfound stability and a major church renovation that included finishing the basement, residing the church, new pews, and stained glass windows. The same year, the congregation moved in the parsonage to house Pastor Freeman, and installed bathroom plumbing in the house.⁶

Wayman Chapel AME Church hosted a predominantly Black congregation during the period of significance, though the church welcomed all, and often co-hosted events with other Billings churches. It functioned as one of the few public meeting places in Billings directly tied to the African American community. By mid-century, Montana boasted eight AME Churches, and the property stands as one of only five purpose-built AME churches remaining in Montana. The others are: Shaffer's Chapel in Butte (NR Reference # 100003199), St. James in Helena, Union Bethel in Great Falls (NR Reference # 03000924), and St. Paul in Missoula.⁷

⁶ "AME Church Is One of City's Oldest," *The Billings Gazette*, June 29, 1958, p. 17.

⁷ The AME Church in Anaconda also stands but was not purpose-built. Other AME churches in Havre and Bozeman no longer exist.

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As a religious building, Wayman Chapel meets the requirements of Criteria Consideration A: Wayman Chapel and Parsonage's significance manifests beyond the doctrinal, and for the purposes of this nomination, it lies in its association with the development and social history of the locality's Black community, and in recognition of its decades-long service to Montana's African American civil rights history. Moved to their present locations within the period of significance, neither the church nor the pastorage must meet Criteria Consideration B.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

The Wayman Chapel stands as one of eight AME Churches that functioned in Montana during the first part of the twentieth century. It served the substantial African American community in Billings and the surrounding area. The church and its associated parsonage functioned as the community's social locus for education, activism, and uplift. Established by the extended foundational Black families Billings, the church building hosted and encouraged important gatherings that supported Black interests, the African American women's group, cooperative interaction with the larger Billings community, and educational services. Directly associated with the contexts developed in the Black Montana's Heritage Places MPD, the chapel and parsonage property stands eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion A.

African Americans in Early Billings

The development of Billings Black community benefited from the presence of the railroad and the surrounding military bases for both jobs and new residents. Established with the arrival of the Northern Pacific Railway in 1882, Billings continues to function as an important railroad center. Members of the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments and the 10th Cavalry deployed to Montana Territory beginning in the late 1880s, and Black troops served at forts Keough adjacent to Miles City, Maginnis near Lewistown, and Custer by Hardin. Many soldiers who mustered out chose to settle in area towns and cities, including Billings. The 1890 census enumerated just 14 Black residents in Yellowstone County. Ten years later, 89 African Americans called Billings home. By 1910 Billings boasted 144 Black residents, most living on the Southside.⁸

The neighborhood came into being when Black pioneer Walker Browning took up residence just south of the railroad in 1883. Though no city ordinance required residential segregation, several Billings neighborhood developments limited homeowners to white residents, and by

⁸ *Building for the Future: The Browning Family & Billings' Early Black Neighborhood*. 2021. Western Heritage Center: High Noon Lecture Series. <https://ne-np.facebook.com/comm7tv/videos/599918181215956/>; Anthony Wood, "Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms (MT Historic Property Record, #24YL2046); Census Office, "Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890 (Part I & Part II)"; U.S. Census Bureau, "1900 Census"; U.S. Census Bureau, "1910 Census."

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the 1910s, Black families chose to live near each other and near their church. Their geographically centered neighborhood and church encouraged cohesion of the greater Black community. As Black residents established themselves on the Southside, they worked in various professions, including cooks, carpenters, engineers, porters, barbers, tailors, dressmakers, inn keepers, saloon owners, janitors, and office workers. Following the established trends of development, the Black community's solid foundation in religious and social realms supplemented their wide-ranging success in the professional realm.⁹

Early History of the AME Church

Historian Sherry Teal developed the following context about AME churches in the United States that appeared in the Shaffer's Chapel National Register nomination. Funded by the Montana State Historic Preservation Office (MT SHPO) and Historic Preservation Fund Underrepresented Communities monies, the contexts may be used with attribution by MT SHPO and the National Park Service.¹⁰

The history of the AME Church has its roots in the anti-slavery movement.¹¹ In 1793, Richard Allen, an enslaved African American who purchased his freedom in 1781, left a Methodist congregation in Philadelphia due to discrimination, and with others, formed the Bethel Methodist Church. In 1816, his group began the first "organized Black denomination" as the African Methodist Episcopal Church.¹² As a missionary church, the AME travelled into every region of the United States and U.S. territories; initial efforts focused on the North and Mid-West, and then the southern states and western territories following the Civil War.¹³ The church concentrated on ministering to freed African Americans while attempting to serve the

⁹ Anthony Wood, "Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms (MT Historic Property Record, #24YL2046); Delia Hagen, "Black Montana's Heritage Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, MC100008427, December 2022, on File at MT SHPO, pp. 34, 106-110; Anthony Wood, "Billings," Montana's African American Heritage Resource website, <https://web.archive.org/web/20260707231024/https://mhs.mt.gov/Shpo/AfricanAmericans/Places/PropertyRecords/Billings>, accessed 7/13/2026.

¹⁰ Sherry Teal, *Shaffer's Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church*, National Register Nomination, listed 12/3/2018, NR# 100003199.

¹¹ Dennis C. Dickerson, "Our History," African Methodist Episcopal Church's official website, <https://www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-history/>, accessed March 9, 2018. "It rejected the negative theological interpretations which rendered persons of African descent second class citizens. There was a theological declaration that God is God all the time and for every body[sic]. The church was born in protest against slavery – against dehumanization of African people, brought to the American continent as labor." "The African Methodist Episcopal Church," African Methodist Episcopal Church official website, homepage, <https://www.ame-church.com/>, accessed March 9, 2018.

¹² A short introductory to the history of the AME church, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/community/text3/allenmethodism.pdf>. See also the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's *Documenting the American South* collection to review the debate between Baltimore and Philadelphia as the birthplace of the AME church: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/payne/payne.html>

¹³ Dickerson, "Our History," African Methodist Episcopal Church's official website.

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still-enslaved populations, and lobbying for their freedom. In the early decades of the AME Church:

the education of the colored population of the states in which the majority of the members of the African Methodist Church were located was strictly forbidden. The laws framed by the various state legislatures were so stringent, and the penalties so severe, that we at this present day can only look back at them and shudder.¹⁴

Even though state laws executed heavy penalties upon African Americans caught learning to read or write, the AME Church discussed education at its conferences as early as 1833.¹⁵ After the Civil War, AME congregations donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to establish Sunday schools that incorporated African American history, reading, and writing. They also produced religious printed works to distribute “as far northwest as Montana” in an effort to give cities with African American communities educational, spiritual, political, and social guidance.¹⁶ During the Reconstruction era after the Civil War, African Americans looked West with hopes of prosperity, and an end to the violence their families suffered in pro-slavery areas. The AME Church “became a major force for community development and civil rights activism in the urban West.”¹⁷

The AME Church in Montana

Barbara Behan, Ken Robison, and Ellen Sievert wrote the following context about the AME Church in Montana that appeared in their Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church National Register Nomination, on file at the Montana State Historic Preservation Office in Helena.¹⁸ While prepared for Great Falls’ Union Bethel, it serves as an excellent overview and context for much of Montana.

Following emancipation and the end of the Civil War, a growing number of freedmen and women and freeborn African Americans joined the national migration west. In 1860 there were

¹⁴ Daniel Alexander Payne. *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, ed. Charles Spencer Smith (Nashville, Tennessee: Publishing House of the AME. Sunday School Union, 1891), p. 54. Digital version on Documenting the American South Website. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/payne/payne.html> .

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 495-6.

¹⁷ Douglas Flamming, *African Americans in the West* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), p. 61.

¹⁸ Barbara Behan, Ken Robison, and Ellen Sievert, *Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church National Register Nomination*, listed 9/11/2003, NR# 3000924.

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approximately 5,000 Black people in the western states and territories, excluding Texas and Oklahoma; by 1870 the number had grown to about 25,000.¹⁹

Professor Quintard Taylor outlined a pattern of Black community development in the West that provides a context for the African American communities in Montana. According to Taylor's model, Black westerners overwhelmingly lived in urban settings, where they found job opportunities and the solidarity of other African Americans. They typically organized for mutual benefit more quickly than did other groups in the West; in the Pacific Northwest, this usually began with an African Methodist or Baptist church. People in a given locale used the church not only for religious functions, but also as a springboard for benevolent societies, fraternal associations, and other social and educational organizations. This was especially true after a congregation constructed a church building, which frequently housed secular events.²⁰

African American organizations to some degree mirrored those in white society, whose membership was often closed to them. But for Black westerners, self-segregated churches and clubs played a unique and separate role: it was here that people found opportunities for leadership and self-expression the larger society did not offer. African American churches in the western United States are more associated with social, cultural, and political trends of their congregations than non-Black churches because historically they have served secular purposes unnecessary to white congregations. One historian of the AME denomination has written that the "pervasiveness of racism... and economic oppressions has generally characterized the experience of AME adherents,"²¹ while another indicates that the AME in particular provided a "platform for the politicalization of the freedmen" immediately following the Civil War.²²

Women were especially important in organizing and sustaining Black communities in the West. One early Black Colorado woman called them "the backbone of the church, the backbone of the

¹⁹ Eugene Berwanger, *The West and Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. 23, as quoted in Behan et al., *Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church* National Register Nomination, listed 9/11/2003, NR# 3000924.

²⁰ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), pp. 192-195; 208; Quintard Taylor, "The Emergence of Black Communities in the Pacific Northwest 1865-1910," *Journal of Negro History* 64 (Fall 1979), p. 344, as quoted in Behan et al., *Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church* National Register Nomination, listed 9/11/2003, NR# 3000924.

²¹ Dennis Dickerson, *The Past in Your Hands: Writing Local AME Church History* (Nashville, TN: n.p., 1990), p. 2, as quoted in Behan et al., *Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church* National Register Nomination, listed 9/11/2003, NR# 3000924.

²² Clarence Walker, *Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: U. Louisiana Press, 1982), p. 3, as quoted in Behan et al., *Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church* National Register Nomination, listed 9/11/2003, NR# 3000924.

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family, they were the backbone of the social life, everything.”²³ African American women’s benevolent organizations developed both as an answer to exclusion from white women’s societies, and as a way to address issues unique to Black women and their communities. Most often, they organized such groups from within the context of an African American church.²⁴

The history of African Americans in early Montana bears out these generalities about African American churches and their role in western Black communities. All over Montana, African American communities sprang up wherever non-Indian settlements developed. By the turn of the century, virtually all of Montana’s major population centers included thriving, though relatively small, enclaves of African American residents. Most had solidified to the point that they supported some independent businesses, entrepreneurs and professionals, predictably including a clergyman for a Baptist or AME church.²⁵ During the 1890s, the AME Church became a presence in several growing Montana cities, and congregations were established in Helena, Great Falls, Missoula, Anaconda, Billings, and Butte (Havre opened in the 20th century). In 1894, the Colorado Conference of the AME Church came to Montana, bolstering the efforts of many of these congregations.

Like the other Black churches in Montana, the history of Wayman Chapel reflects many aspects of community identified by Quintard Taylor in his research of African Americans in the West. The church was an institution that gave a central gathering place, and gave rise to other secular organizations that worked on behalf of the Black community. Women’s groups in particular were at the forefront of political activism to better the lives of all in the African American community.

Wayman Chapel AME Church

Bishop Alexander Walker Wayman served as the AME Church’s Seventh Bishop beginning in 1864 and continued in that role until his death in 1895. He ministered to people across the country, including the South during Reconstruction, and organized conferences of the church

²³ Glenda Riley, “American Daughters: Black Women in the West,” *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 39:2 (Spring 1988), p. 26, as quoted in Behan et al., *Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church* National Register Nomination, listed 9/11/2003, NR# 3000924.

²⁴ Quintard Taylor, *In Search Of...*, p. 220; Lawrence deGraaf, “Race Sex and Region: Black Women in the American West 1850-1920,” *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (February 1980), p. 306, as cited in Behan et al., *Union Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church* National Register Nomination, listed 9/11/2003, NR# 3000924.

²⁵ Barbara Carol Behan, “Forgotten Heritage: African Americans in the Montana Territory, 1964-1889,” *Journal of African American History*, Vol. 91. No. 1, Winter 2006 (Riverside, CA: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 23-40; “Minutes of Twentieth Session Colorado Annual Conference of the African ME Church Held at Pueblo, Colorado Sept. 19 to 24, 1906 Inclusive,” Office of the AME Church Historiographer, Nashville, Tennessee; this source documents five AME congregations in Montana in 1906.

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nationwide. He chronicled the history of the church in his *Cyclopædia of African Methodism*.²⁶

An influential minister, several AME churches across the country bear his name, including but not limited to churches in Kokomo, Indiana; Sumpter County, South Carolina; Bloomington, Illinois; Fort Scott, Kansas; and Houston, Texas. The Wayman Chapel in Dayton, Ohio contributes to the West Third Street Historic District (NR Reference # 88003194).

According to local church members, the Walker and Ruth Browning family established Billings' Wayman Chapel AME church by the mid-1890s. The time period coincided with Wayman's death and a flurry of congregations named their churches in his honor. Anaconda, Montana's AME minister, Reverend W.W. Ingmon, helped raise funds to build or acquire a church building in Billings in June 1897. The Montana Land and Improvement Company donated "two lots on east Montana Avenue, below the flour mill, for the building."²⁷ The congregants chose to acquire:

the old Silverberg building on North 25th street and First avenue, remodeled about a year ago and occupied by Olmstead, the carpenter. It will be moved to the lots donated by the land company on Montana avenue, below the flour mill, and fitted up as a church.²⁸

A building labeled "capr'r" appears in that location, the north corner of N 25th and First, on the 1896 Sanborn map. Documentation remains unclear whether the move took place, but by 1901, Wayman Chapel's five members designated place of worship not below the mill but instead at 302 24th Street North.²⁹ Over the next decade, the congregation grew steadily to include many foundational Black families in Billings: the Brownings, Bivins, McCabes, Emmons, Chases, and Browns. Pastor Benjamin McCully led the flock from 1901 to 1903, and again in 1905. Pastor Charles Brown led the church in 1905, and 1908 -1909 saw Thomas L. Cate then E.D. Abbot at the pulpit. According to a newspaper article, under Cate's leadership, Wayman Chapel "flourished as never before."³⁰

Though he served at Wayman Chapel for only a year, Cate's impact on the congregation and the community proved profound. He announced his weekly sermons in the paper, and often participated in other churches' events. At his welcome, speakers from regional AME church leadership came to offer insights about varied topics and invited all to attend. He published a

²⁶ Alexander W. Wayman, *Cyclopædia of African Methodism*, (Baltimore: Methodist Episcopal Book Depository, 1882).

²⁷ "Local Notes," *Midland Empire News*, June 1, 1897, p. 3.

²⁸ "Local Notes," *Midland Empire News*, June 15, 1897, p. 3

²⁹ Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, "Billings, 1896," Sheet 9 and "Billings, 1903," Sheet 9, Historical Information Gatherers website, https://fims.historicalinfo.com/FIMSSD.aspx?m=04939_1896, accessed July 21, 2026; R.L Polk & Co., *Polk's Billings (Yellowstone County, Mont.) City Directory, Including Laurel and Yellowstone County*. Kansas City, (Mo.: R.L. Polk & Co., 1901), p. 39; Susan Olp, "Wayman Chapel's Roots Go Way Back," *Billings Gazette*, September 8, 2006. Horace Bivins, an honored military veteran, married Browning's daughter Claudia and her sister Lulu married retired Calvary man William McCabe.

³⁰ "African Church in Excellent Condition," *Billings Gazette*, May 4, 1909, p. 4.

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pamphlet in early July 1909 titled "The Progress of the Negro in Eastern Montana." In it, Cate encouraged Black people from the South to come and settle in Eastern Montana, and to take up farming in the state. He wrote "the object of this booklet is to encourage some good colored people to come in, and around Billings." Cate's reference to "good" people revealed his adherence to Booker T. Washington's influence:

Washington believed that the best interests of Black people in the post-Reconstruction era could be realized through education in the crafts and industrial skills and the cultivation of the virtues of patience, enterprise, and thrift. He urged his fellow Blacks, most of whom were impoverished and illiterate farm labourers [sic], to temporarily abandon their efforts to win full civil rights and political power and instead to cultivate their industrial and farming skills so as to attain economic security. Blacks would thus accept segregation and discrimination, but their eventual acquisition of wealth and culture would gradually win for them the respect and acceptance of the white community. This would break down the divisions between the two races and lead to equal citizenship for Blacks in the end.³¹

Reverend Cate's opinions ran in the same vein:

For the negro criminal and especially for the negro loafer, gambler, and drunkard, I have nothing but the severest condemnation. ... The leading citizens, both white and colored, must come together to get rid of this class of people, whether they be white or colored, and then we will have a better city.³²

By encouraging Black people to move to the area, Cate raised the ire of several locals, including the author of a *Billings Gazette* article titled "Jeff, Get Your Gun." The writer threatened violence should Cate's efforts be successful, promising the Pastor "had better get his gun, his pistol, his old blanderbus, and the balance of his military retinue and be prepared to do battle with the Montana army..." He continued that should people accept Cate's invitation, that "Eastern Montana will doubtless rapidly develop into a 'darkest Africa' and the white man will have to seek unexplored worlds in which to plant an abiding place."³³

Despite the pervasive racism, Cate worked with church members to raise funds. They solicited drawings from architectural firms to construct a new building. Prominent Billings architects Link and Haire designed a shingle-clad Gothic Revival chapel for them.³⁴ The new designs likely

³¹ Britannica Editors, "Booker T. Washington," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 4, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Booker-T-Washington>, accessed July 14, 2026.

³² As quoted in "Encourage Negroes to Occupy Farms," *Billings Evening Journal*, July 3, 1909, p. 3.

³³ "Jeff, Get Your Gun," *The Billings Gazette*, February 10, 1910.

³⁴ Link and Haire Architects, "African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Billings," 1909, Montana Architectural Drawing Collection, Drawing Set 236, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University Libraries, Bozeman.

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proved too expensive. Newspaper articles relate the celebrations associated with the church's dedication in 1909, but do not indicate whether the building constituted new construction or a major renovation.³⁵ Sanborn maps reveal that the church's footprint evolved between 1903 and 1912, beginning as a simple rectangular building and expanding to include a steeple at the front and a small residence at the rear, connected to the church building by a hyphen. Recalled to serve a Salt Lake City congregation instead, Cate left Billings in August 1909, and the *Billings Times* editors expressed their admiration for his "great service" and "good ability."³⁶

Reverend E.D. Abbot, a pastor formerly stationed at Great Falls' Union Bethel AME, took over from Cate. By the time Robert House assumed the pastorship by 1912, the church boasted a 25-member congregation – out of the 146 Black people enumerated in the 1910 Billings census.³⁷ From 1901 through 1916, the church and a pastor's residence stood north of the railroad tracks. Reverend House and his congregation actively participated in educational programming and civil rights activism. For example, when the city limited Black resident's use of the public swimming pool, church founder Walker Browning led fight to repeal the rule:

I cannot help but think that the discrimination against the colored people of Billings in not permitting them to use the new municipal pool, and the criticism that arose incident to the setting aside of a day for them is extremely unjust to law abiding colored people of the community. ... We have our own churches here ... The talk of having to scour the pool after use by a colored man is hardly just.³⁸

When local theaters planned to show *Birth of a Nation* in Billings in January 1916, the congregants objected. The church leadership collected 75 signatures from the local Black population, "vigorously protesting against the exhibiting here January 23 of the famous photoplay." House presented the petition to the city council, who in turn gave the petition to the city attorney and mayor to consider action. The pastor relayed the petition's arguments to the public, that the picture represented a "direct blow at the advancement of the negro race ...

³⁵ "Noted Colored Bishop Will Dedicate Local AME Church," *Billings Evening Journal*, July 19, 1909, p. 4.

³⁶ Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, "Billings, Montana," December 1903, Sheet 9 and 1912, Sheet 13, Historical Information Gatherers Database, <https://fims.historicalinfo.com/FIMSSearch.aspx>, accessed July 13, 2026; "Rev Cate Goes to Utah," *The Billings Times*, August 19, 1909, p. 3.

³⁷ R.L Polk & Co., *Polk's Billings (Yellowstone County, Mont.) City Directory, Including Laurel and Yellowstone County*. Kansas City, (Mo.: R.L. Polk & Co., 1901-1916); Montana Historical Society, "African American Census Data (1910 and 1930), Billings," Montana African American Heritage Resources Project, https://web.archive.org/web/20260707231012/https://mhs.mt.gov/Shpo/AfricanAmericans/AfAm_docs/CensusData/Billings_1910_1930.xls, accessed July 13, 2026.

³⁸ Walker Browning, "Communication," *Billings Gazette*, July 14, 1914, p. 4. Following Walker and Ruth Browning's death, their daughter Claudia and her husband, the famous Calvary Captain of San Juan Hill, Horace Bivins, lived at the home as well. Browning and son Charles served as founding members of the local Republican Party's Taft-Sherman Club. Lori Moss, "The Forgotten Pioneers: Walker Browning and Billings' Black Community," *Daily Montanan*, June 19, 2024.

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[and] every negro publication in the United States has united in opposition to the photoplay.”³⁹

The protests spread to include Black churches statewide, including Butte, where the pastors at Shaffer’s Chapel AME and the Baptist church petitioned to block the film. The *Billings Gazette* acknowledged:

In every city the company has visited the colored population through the pastor of the African church has raised objection... Such was the experience here but after an investigation the local city and county authorities refused to take any action and after they saw the picture they were hearty in its praise.⁴⁰

The same year, the congregation sought to erect a church in the Southside neighborhood, closer to most of the members’ residences.

The Move to the Southside

Funding for a new church did not materialize, so in April 1916, the congregation moved the church section of their building to 402 25th Street South.⁴¹ Just a few blocks from the Browning family residences, the new location benefitted its membership:

Walker Browning was not only an upstanding citizen of the Billings community, but was considered by many as the central figure of the African American community as well. As a founding member of the Wayman Chapel African Methodist Church and master of the Colored Mason lodge no. 32, Walker worked tirelessly for the betterment of Billings’ black citizens. Not only could Browning be considered the center of the black community figuratively, in some ways, he was a geographic center as well. His home at 106 S. 25th Street was likely the first structure in the vicinity. By the time of his death in 1925, the 100 block of S. 25th, and the adjacent blocks, were home to well over fifty African Americans in any given year between 1910 and 1930, 24 of the 70-some buildings were occupied by African Americans, and quite literally, the Browning home stood at the center of this black enclave.⁴²

Throughout the late 1910s, news items relate numerous dinners, lectures, and events presented by or with AME church members. Often hosted in the church itself, these events ranged from fundraising dinners to public sermons and literary lectures. As fundraisers proved successful, the congregation made improvements to the property. After some renovations, including new pew installation, church members celebrated on Sunday, December 19, 1920:

³⁹ “Negroes Oppose Nation Birth Pictures,” *Billings Evening Journal*, January 19, 1916, p. 3.

⁴⁰ “Wonder if They Will Play Butte,” *Billings Gazette*, January 27, 1916, p. 3.

⁴¹ “City Briefs, AME Church Moves,” *Billings Gazette*, April 8, 1916, p. 3; African Methodists Move to New Site,” *Billings Evening Journal*, April 7, 1916, p. 2.

⁴² Anthony Wood, “Mrs. Browning’s Furnished Rooms,” Montana Historic Property Record, 2015, p. 5, on file at MT SHPO, Helena.

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The African Methodist Episcopal congregation headed by Rev. J.B. Coleman will hold its first services this morning in Wayman chapel [sic], 404 South Twenty-fifth Street. ... The pastor announced last night that the work of installing the pews had been completed, and the chapel would seat 200.⁴³

A narrow two-story parsonage also appeared on the block by 1923. After 1916, the Polk directories list the pastor's residence as "rear of church," 402 or 404 South 25th Street (the church address), or 2510 4th Avenue South.⁴⁴ In time, the membership of the small chapel grew to over forty members, with many more attending.

The late 1910s and 1920s marked a period of economic downturn in Montana, and the women who attended Wayman Chapel worked together to help their neighbors and community members. A group of women, most of whom attended Wayman, met regularly during World War I as Red Cross "helpers."⁴⁵ They formed the Phyllis Wheatley Club in 1920, led by Ruth Browning, inspired by the work of Mrs. John E. Mapps, Republican Party activist from Spokane. The twenty club members held their first meeting August 12, 1920. Focusing on education, literary speeches, musical performances, fundraisers, and civic uplift, the club continued its "efficient work" for 52 years. With the Yellowstone County Republican Club and the Republican State Central Committee of Montana, they facilitated Mrs. Mapps' speech in the Southside neighborhood's fraternal hall on October 19, 1920. Mrs. Mapps invited "all colored voters, and their families" and spoke of the "political issues of the day."⁴⁶ One of the founding clubs of the Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs [MFCWC], the Phyllis Wheatley Club hosted many of their local meetings and several of statewide organization's annual meetings at the Wayman Chapel.⁴⁷

When the MFCWC formed in 1921, Wayman Chapel member Lulu McCabe served as Recording Secretary, and penned the organization's motto: Unity and Perseverance.⁴⁸ Another Wayman congregant, Emma Harris, wrote the MFCWC's anthem, a song that reflects "the club members'

⁴³ "Wayman Chapel Is Opened for Service," *Billings Gazette*, December 19, 1920, p. 10; "City Briefs, Southern Melodies to be Sung," *Billings Gazette*, May 11, 1916; "Southern Dinner," *Midland Empire News*, March 28, 1916, p. 8; "Billings Notes," *Montana Plaindealer*, August 4, 1911, p. 1; "Wayman Chapel Is Opened for Service," *Billings Gazette*, December 19, 1920, p. 10; "Mrs. Baltimore Entertains," *Montana Plaindealer*, March 25, 1910, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Horace Bivens served in the 10th Calvary at several forts in Montana, and fought with distinction in the Battle of San Juan Hill during the Spanish Civil War. The sharpshooter chose to settle in Billings after he mustered out the first time. He reenlisted during World War I, and tried to again during World War II.

⁴⁵ Christene C. Meyers, "Federation Is No More," *Billings Gazette*, June 21, 1972, p. 21.

⁴⁶ "Mrs. John E. Mapps," advertisement, *Billings Gazette*, October 19, 1920, p. 6.

⁴⁷ "Historian's Report, 1923," State and Local Club Historian Reports (1922 – 1971), Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 14. Montana Historical Society Research Center, Helena, MT.

⁴⁸ "Historian's Report, 1922," State and Local Club Historian Reports (1922 – 1971), Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 14. Montana Historical Society Research Center, Helena, MT; "City Federation Holds Its Annual Dinner on Tuesday," *Billings Gazette*, March 17, 1929, second section, p. 2.

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commitment to advancing civil rights while providing mutual support.”⁴⁹ The MFCWC’s founding members agreed its organizing principles would be “Courtesy—Justice—The Rights of Minority—one thing at a time, and a rule of majority.”⁵⁰

While several different pastors led the congregation through the 1920s, the women’s group and other service organizations based in the church remained constant. Much of their work focused on the church property as well. In 1924, church members hosted fundraisers to help pay for the church improvements, including a Labor Day celebration with barbeque, a chicken dinner, a “patriotic program... with foot races and sports” open to all.⁵¹ City-wide, individuals, businesses, and organizations worked with Wayman Chapel to support their events. A “Children’s Day” celebration at the chapel in 1925 included floral displays from Billings Floral Company, the Hopper Greenhouse, and the Hart-Albin department store, lamps furnished by Billings Hardware, and an audience that “filled the church.”⁵² Many Billings residents, both white and Black, supported the church since its founding, and in 1929, newly-arrived Pastor G. D. Choice sought to raise \$700 for church repairs and to cover heating and lighting bills. With only thirty-nine congregants, the church had difficulty keeping up, but the larger community recognized the church served as the “social and religious center for the negro population of Billings.” Friends and other churches city-wide answered the calls for support regularly.⁵³

The Phyllis Wheatley club held meetings both in the church and in members’ homes, most of which no longer stand, and hosted lectures focused on Black history and accomplishments. Their committees included music, art, literature, and domestic science, and topics ranged from southern spirituals, Fisk University history, Native American folklore, to Filipino embroidery.⁵⁴ Though Ruth Browning died in 1923, the club continued to flourish. The women participated in the social gatherings with other local women’s clubs. For example, in 1928, Wayman Chapel founding member Claudia Bivens gave a lecture to Billings’ City Federation of Woman’s Clubs about poet Phyllis Wheatley. The City Federation elected Mrs. Bivins its treasurer, an accomplishment celebrated as the “first time in city history.” The organization announced weekly meetings of the Phyllis Wheatley Club’s various committees in the newspaper.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Annie Hanshew, “Lifting as We Climb: The Activism on the Montana Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs,” Montana Women’s History Website, Montana Historical Society, online at <https://montanawomenshistory.mt.gov/News/news-articles/Lifting-as-We-Climb-The-Activism-of-the-Montana-Federation-of-Colored-Womens-Clubs>. Accessed 7/23/2026.

⁵⁰ Angie Mills Arnold, ed. “Montana Federation of Negro Women’s Clubs,” (1922). Copy in box 1, fldr 10, MC 281, Montana Historical Society Research Center, Helena.

⁵¹ “Arrange Barbeque to Clear Up Debts on Wayman Chapel,” *Midland Empire News* August 26, 1924, p. 9.

⁵² “Wayman Chapel Observes Children’s Day,” *Billings Gazette*, July 5, 1925.

⁵³ “Local Church Seeks Funds,” *Billings Gazette*, December 15, 1929, p. 3.

⁵⁴ “Phyllis Wheatley Club Honors Member,” *Billings Gazette*, June 6, 1926, Second Section, p. 2; “Phyllis Wheatley Club Meets,” *The Billings Gazette*, March 14, 1926, Second Section, p. 1 and January 17, 1926, Second Section p.1.

⁵⁵ “Woman’s Clubs of City Report on Year’s Activities at Federation Banquet,” *Billing Gazette*, March 18, 1928, second section, p. 3; “City Federation of Women’s Clubs Week’s Calendar,” *Billings Gazette*,

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Wayman congregants and women's club members Bivins, Lulu McCabe, and Pauline Somerville together with other Wayman congregants Horace Bivens and James Tankersley, arranged a "mass meeting of negro voters" on behalf of the Republican Party in 1928.⁵⁶

Transitions and Civil Rights Activism through Mid-Century

By the 1930s, Black women's clubs statewide, including members based in Wayman Chapel, provided social services and petitioned for local and statewide justice and civil rights. The Montana Historical Society's Women's History Project explains the role local Black women's clubs played in their communities:

At the local level, member clubs engaged in a variety of volunteer work, from bringing flowers to hospital patients to adding works by African American authors to local libraries. But at both the local and the state levels, MFCWC members also concentrated on racial politics, raising funds for the NAACP and taking positions on abolishing the poll tax and upholding anti-lynching laws.⁵⁷

In 1937 and again in 1938, MFCWC members requested the state legislators support a Civil Rights Bill akin to the one passed by New York State. Chairman Ada M. Hart of the organization's State Legislative Committee explained:

We are asking for neither sympathy nor charity, nor are we asking social equality through the Civil Rights Bill, but we are asking only the right, which we are at the present denied, to live and earn an honest living as other citizens do. ... I am writing to all the representatives in the cities of Montana who I think will be interested in passing this bill. If the bill is passed, it will benefit not only the Negro, but all races...⁵⁸

While united in social causes, church members and their pastor at times disagreed on the business of maintaining the church. By 1935, the church building, according to Pastor J. Cincinnatus White, stood as "the only institution in Billings affording my people a place where they can assemble and discuss matters of interest to them." The property required modernization to "better meet the needs of our race."⁵⁹ When the church Board of Trustees, including decades-long serving members Horace Bivins and William and Lulu McCabe, voiced

February 7, 1926, second section, p. 2; Historian's Report, 1927, State and Local Club Historian Reports (1922 – 1971), Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 14.

⁵⁶ No title, *Billings Gazette*, November 2, 1928, p. 9.

⁵⁷ Annie Hanshaw, "Lifting as We Climb: The Activism on the Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs," Montana Women's History Website, Montana Historical Society, online at <https://montanawomenshistory.mt.gov/News/news-articles/Lifting-as-We-Climb-The-Activism-of-the-Montana-Federation-of-Colored-Womens-Clubs>. Accessed 7/23/2026.

⁵⁸ "Ada M. Hart to the People of Montana," correspondence, July 1, 1938, "Legislative Committee Reports, Correspondence, Clippings, and Civil Rights Legislation," Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 11.

⁵⁹ "Wayman Chapel to Open Drive," *Midland Empire News*, February 10, 1935, p. 1.

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their opinions regarding how the campaign should be run, Reverend White had the board dissolved and a new board appointed. The church carried on, and the pastor announced “all differences have been amicably adjusted” and 25 of 30 church members agreed.⁶⁰

The next decade witnessed Billings’ Black population holding steady at around 150 souls, but the Great Depression took its toll on Black home and business ownership in the city. Black-owned households dropped from 28 in 1930 to just 18 by 1940, and the number of local Black-owned businesses also fell. That year, the Billings census enumerated only one African American business that maintained employees, and just nine self-employed Black people – four of whom identified as prostitutes.⁶¹ Both the church and club memberships saw reduced numbers – by 1936, the Phyllis Wheatley Club retained only six members – familiar names Claudia Bivens, Lulu McCabe, and Edna Brown, plus Beatrice Million, Nellie Best, and Miss Holiday - as second and third generations of foundational families and newer arrivals found their footing in the community.⁶²

The Wayman Church and Phyllis Wheatley Club hosted the MFCWC Annual Meeting in 1940, where the delegates discussed clubs’ financial hardships, and voted not to pursue a Civil Rights Bill in the 1941 Legislature – over the objections of a handful of the women. They warned the others “we are making a big mistake to lay the bill down now.”⁶³ Through the 1940s, the women of the Phyllis Wheatley Club kept up their activities to help their neighbors, provide educational opportunities, and donate to causes. With the MFCWC, the membership established a scholarship fund named for Claudia Bivens in 1947.⁶⁴ The Claudia Bivens scholarship fund paid significant sums to Black students to attend college and continued through the early 1970s.

During the 1940s, a number of pastors led the Wayman Chapel flock, and often hosted interracial brotherhood services with other denominations. Reverend W.C. Brannon and David A. Sommerville, Wayman’s successive pastors in 1941, brought preachers from numerous Billings Churches and other speakers to the chapel. Subsequent pastors during the later 1940s, including C.C. Brock, hosted similar events. Brock also oversaw the election of new trustees and hosted meetings of the regional AME leaders. While services and community outreach continued, Wayman Chapel continued to see inconsistency in spiritual leadership of the congregation for many years.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Wayman Chapel Has New Board,” *Billings Gazette*, February 20, 1935, p. 8.

⁶¹ Delia Hagen, “Black Montana’s Heritage Places Multiple Properties Documentation Form,” 2022, p. 177, on file at MT SHPO, Helena.

⁶² “1937,” in “Minutes (1936 – 1944) Annual State Convention,” Montana Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 3.

⁶³ Octavia Bridgwater, “Billings Mont., July 15, 1940,” in “Minutes (1936 – 1944) Annual State Convention,” Montana Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 3.

⁶⁴ “Wheatly Club Meets Tonight,” *Billings Gazette*, February 28, 1947, p. 16.

⁶⁵ Christian Church Pastor Addresses Wayman Chapel Meet,” *Billings Gazette*, March 1, 1941, p. 10; “Wayman Chapel Church Sets Interracial Brotherhood Services,” *Billings Gazette*, February 20, 1941, p. 2; “Free Methodist Pastor Is Speaker at Wayman Chapel Meeting,” *Billings Gatte*, February 28, 1941, p.

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Activism and Stability in Post-War Billings

The 1950s brought a resurgence of civil rights activism on behalf of the Chapel and its associated organizations. Women's club members together with their MFCWC sisters again lobbied the Montana Legislature for a civil rights bill. MECWC member Alma Jacobs of Great Falls served on the Cascade County Interracial Committee. The Committee's June 8, 1950 report expressed incidents of discrimination in that locality, and offered a resolution instigate an anti-discrimination education campaign and to ask "all restaurant, hotel and bar owners" to accept a "specific date when all will be extended dining room privileges usual to patrons."⁶⁶ Jacobs led the civil rights lobbying effort on behalf of MFCWC, and asked each club to solicit their representatives.

In 1951, House Bill 58 sought to:

prohibit certain practices of discrimination by employers, employment agencies, labor organizations, and others because of race, color, creed, national origin or ancestry; creating a Montana fair employment practices commission; defining its functions, powers, and duties; providing for its procedure, enforcement powers, and judicial review; imposing penalties.

The bill lost on a floor vote 32 in favor, and 42 against. Also in 1951, the Legislature considered a bill "to guarantee full and equal enjoyment of all places of public accommodation." It did not pass. Undeterred, the MFCWC delegates resolved to solicit support from legislative candidates, learn which legislators sincerely supported the bills, and to "make a better 1953 Legislature in regards to Civil Rights."⁶⁷ The Phyllis Wheatley Cub rose to the challenge. President Beatrice Melton wrote to Jacobs:

I have appointed a legislative committee and we are doing all we can to meet our representatives. Alma I can't promise to have the mass meeting you requested as you probably know how difficult it is to get our people together for

5; Persian Customs, Costumes Discussed at Wayman Chapel," *Billings Gazette*, February 27, 1941, p. 2; "Denver Evangelists Will Speak Here," *The Billings Gazette*, April 13, 1947, p. 3; "Wayman Chapel Names Trustees at Meeting," *Billings Gazette*, December 21, 1946, p. 5.

⁶⁶ "Interracial Committee Report," June 8, 1950, "Legislative Committee Reports, Correspondence, Clippings, and Civil Rights Legislation," Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 11.

⁶⁷ Eruteya, Glenda Rose Spearman. "Racial Legislation in Montana: 1864 – 1955." Master's Thesis, Political Science Department, University of Montana, Missoula, 1981. Available online: <http://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=9660&context=etd>; "Great Falls, July 17, 1951," in "Minutes (1936 – 1944) Annual State Convention," Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 3; "Legislative Committee Reports, Correspondence, Clippings, and Civil Rights Legislation," Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 11.

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anything of this sort, but be assured that the committee will do everything toward this end and fulfill everything you ask.⁶⁸

The 1953 session did mark a significant accomplishment. House Bill 8 sought to repeal Montana's 44-year-old law that denied interracial marriages. Introduced by Billings attorney John M. Schlitz, the bill moved quickly through the Committee on Public Health, Morals, and Safety, and sailed through the House and Senate. Only three Senators voted against it. The repeal took effect upon Governor Hugo Aronson's signature on February 2, 1953.⁶⁹ That year, the MFCWC Legislative Committee, including Wayman member Edna Banks, emphasized the need for union and church support, and solidarity with the Native American voting bloc, to "start right now working on Civil Rights for Legislature 1955."⁷⁰

Two years later, the efforts of Black communities statewide to achieve accommodations equality saw some progress. A block of Yellowstone County Republicans introduced House Bill 52, very similar to the 1951 bill that failed. The 1955 offering fared better, though Legislators stripped virtually all of the original language and all penalties for non-compliance from the final version. With the passage, Historian Glenda Spearman Eruteya explained:

Ninety years after formation of the Territory at the end of the Civil War, Montana's statute books were free of racially discriminatory legislation and the principle of the Fourteenth Amendment had been affirmed by statute.⁷¹

A New Era at Wayman Chapel

The late 1950s saw another big victory for the Wayman Chapel congregation. Reverend Robert C. Freeman assumed the pulpit in 1957 and began an unprecedented long tenure. Until his death in 1997, Freeman served as a pillar of spirituality, activism, and strength in Billings to its African American community. He and his wife Beatrice lived in the parsonage that stands on the property, a one and one-half story house moved onto the lot in 1957 to replace the earlier residence. During his time at Wayman, the city of Billings endured many incidents and trends that reflected state and national tensions as well as civil rights victories. Wayman Chapel and

⁶⁸ "Beatrice Milton to Alma Jacobs," c. 1952 (no date but in association with letters written at that time), "Legislative Committee Reports, Correspondence, Clippings, and Civil Rights Legislation," Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 11.

⁶⁹ Eruteya, Glenda Rose Spearman. "Racial Legislation in Montana: 1864 – 1955." Master's Thesis, Political Science Department, University of Montana, Missoula, 1981, p. 100. Available online: <http://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=9660&context=etd>

⁷⁰ "Helena, July 14, 1953," in "Minutes (1936 – 1944) Annual State Convention," Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 3; "Legislative Committee Reports, Correspondence, Clippings, and Civil Rights Legislation," Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 11.

⁷¹ Eruteya, Glenda Rose Spearman. "Racial Legislation in Montana: 1864 – 1955." Master's Thesis, Political Science Department, University of Montana, Missoula, 1981, p. 113. Available online: <http://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=9660&context=etd>

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parsonage, with Reverend Freeman, his congregants, and the women's club, served as the Black community's locus.

Upon his arrival, Freeman set to work establishing relationships in the Southside neighborhood and throughout the city. A popular speaker, other churches invited him to present to their own congregations. Freeman's sermons - including those outside the Wayman Chapel - often focused on race relations. In his talk titled "Who Is My Neighbor?," he instructed the audience that they "must not look at the texture of a man's skin to determine his worth but look at his heart." He declared that churches served an important role in "showing true Christian neighborliness between races."⁷² He also kept up the long Wayman tradition of hosting and participating in multi-church celebrations of brotherhood and holidays.

He worked to bring Southside neighborhood and other community issues to the fore. He railed against racist implications that the neighborhood's sanitation issues reflected on the people who lived there. Freeman called for proactive city action:

I most certainly hope to be able to do something to alleviate the conditions in the south side. I do have some plans that I feel will get the ball rolling and in the end may arouse the City Council to do something instead of just sitting around and saying it can do nothing.⁷³

His endeavors continued through the decade. For example, in 1963, Freeman called out city officials, accusing the municipality of job discrimination, and "deep-sixing" qualified Black applicants' paperwork, or giving them the "run-around."⁷⁴ The Young Women's Branch of the Phyllis Wheatley Club vocalized their support of Reverend Freeman and charged the city police and other officials and businesses of discrimination, stating that Black job-seekers had been turned away "because of their nationality." They defended Freeman against personal attacks, and sought clarifications and truthfulness from city employees and leaders.⁷⁵ With support from the Wheatley Club, Freeman sought a meeting with himself, the press, the mayor, and city department heads to discuss the situation.⁷⁶ His relationship with local civics continued, and in 1969, Freeman led city officials on a tour to identify tangible actions to take to improve housing and sanitation facilities. With Mayor Willard Fraser, Freeman recognized "absentee landlords aren't going to do anything they don't have to." Fraser and Freeman looked to hold them accountable and recognized that slumlords took "advantage of those least able to care for themselves."⁷⁷

⁷² "Wayman Pastor Evening Speaker," *Billings Gazette*, February 11, 1958, p. 6.

⁷³ "South Side Sanitary Problem," *Billings Gazette*, February 3, 1960, p. 4.

⁷⁴ "Pastor Charges City Drawing Racial Line," *Billings Gazette*, July 22, 1963, p. 1.

⁷⁵ "Women Join Freeman, Club Charges Discriminatory Hiring," *Billings Gazette*, July 26, 1963, p. 5.

⁷⁶ "For Negro Applicants, Pastor Picks Up Job Forms," *Billings Gazette*, July 25, 1963, p. 19.

⁷⁷ "Some Don't Flush; City Should Blush," *Billings Gazette*, March 13, 1969, p. 1; "Tour Finds What It Was Seeking," *Billings Gazette*, March 13, 1969, p. 15.

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As elsewhere in the state and nation, social and political tensions ran high in the Billings area through the 1960s. The Phyllis Wheatley Club supported Freeman and kept up with their work to secure African American rights and uplift the younger generations. They held fundraisers to support the Claudia Bivens Scholarship, supported school bond issues, made donations of books by Black authors to the library, attended and helped organize MFCWC meetings and celebrations, and participated in other women's club federations.⁷⁸ Evelyn Lucero, former Wheatley Club president, assumed the role of MFCWC president in 1964, and with others in the Federation, continued the work of social justice and equal rights. Wayman congregant and club member Mamie Lee Lacey called on the city to help the poor and support housing programs in the Southside neighborhood.⁷⁹

Daughter of Wheatley Club founder Edna Brown, lifelong Wayman Chapel member Edna (Brown) Best, like many other neighborhood residents, dedicated herself not only to her large family, but to the underserved people of the community. Often called "M.C." for "Mother of the Church," Mrs. Best participated in the Phyllis Wheatley Club and Church Women Unite. Her efforts reflected the commitment to community service embraced at the Wayman Chapel by Pastor Freeman and the congregation. She directed Billings Head Start program and ran the Neighborhood House (later called the Friendship House) in the Southside. She served as "mother, big sister, companion, friend, and disciplinarian (with a capital "D") to about twenty youngsters in the "neighborhood" project under the Community Action Program." And she would "go for the preventative any time before the cure was needed."⁸⁰ Her family also understood the discrimination that endured in Billings. During the mid-1960s, looking to purchase a new home, Mrs. Best inquired in another neighborhood. She recalled the realtor said he would "have to check with the neighbors. We told him where he could put his house and kept our home on the southside."⁸¹

As the 1960s progressed, and its members worked for social causes, the MFCWC sought to define the club's standards and future. Phyllis Wheatley Club members suggested additional civic work and publicity to move the clubs forward in the new decade.⁸² The 1965 Civil Rights Act and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society initiatives proved of great interest to the members. The MFCWC's 1966 annual meeting held in Billings included discussions on these topics. Members expressed their thoughts and wrote speeches emphasizing Black communities' roles

⁷⁸ "Celebrate Anniversary," *Billings Gazette*, June 24, 1960, p. 11; "Montana Federation to Hold Meet Here," *Billings Gazette*, June 24, 1962, p. 9; "Tea Date Set by Club Group," *Billings Gazette*, October 7, 1962, p. 38; "Vote YES on Both SCHOOL BOND ISSUES," *Billings Gazette*, March 31, 1965, p. 26; "Club Donates Urn," *Billings Gazette*, February 20, 1969, p. 10; "Delegates Named," *Billings Gazette*, April 23, 1969, p. 10.

⁷⁹ Mamie Lee Lacey, "More Than a Paintbrush Needed to Help the Poor," *Billings Gazette*, July 20, 1969, p. 20.

⁸⁰ Addison Bragg "Neighborhood House – A New Way of Life," *Billings Gazette*, January 17, 1971, p. 46.

⁸¹ Christene C. Meyers, "Out Invisible Minority Won a Quiet Revolution," *Billings Gazette*, October 5, 1975, p. 33.

⁸² "Butte, June 28, 1960," in "Minutes (July 16, 1951 – June 13, 1971) Annual State Convention," Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 3, p. 116.

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in the future, including “Community Service in the Great Society,” and “The Influence of Home Training in the Great Society.”⁸³ By the late 1960s, however, the MFCWC minutes include numerous discussions about how the group would handle its assets should they choose to disband. These included discussions of how the scholarship fund could be continued. The University of Montana boasted the only Black Studies program in the state, and the women considered offering the funds to the University for Black student scholarships.⁸⁴

Phyllis Wheatley Club president Mamie Lee Lacey assumed the MFCWC Presidential role and hosted the annual convention in Billings in 1970. The short attendees list indicates the organization’s shrinking membership. Five delegates attended from three clubs outside Billings: Great Falls, Butte, and Helena. Billings boasted eight local attendees. Through 1970 and 1971, much of the clubs’ correspondence focused on celebrating the MFCWC’s 50th anniversary. Lacey celebrated her fellow clubwomen: “When a few women can stay together for fifty (50) years, and work so hard to make their Federation what it is today my hat is off to all the clubs.”⁸⁵ Nineteen seventy-one’s annual meeting proved bittersweet. Longtime members Armeta Duncan of Butte and Maxine Howard of Helena lamented the disbanding of their local clubs and joined an expanded Dunbar Art and Study Club in Great Falls.⁸⁶ Articles in local newspapers celebrated the club’s accomplishments – from donating “the first complete set of Negro history books to the public library” to monetary support of students, the YWCA, and the Billings Boys Club.⁸⁷

Billings resident Michiko Yokomizo received the Claudia Bivens college scholarship in 1972.⁸⁸ This award represented the first time the Montana Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs awarded funds to a student who did not have African American ancestry. The award also marked the final time the MFCWC chose a scholarship recipient. After twenty-two scholarships, and fifty-one years of existence, the MFCWC disbanded in 1972. President Lacey explained that the University of Montana – Missoula accepted the Bivins scholarship fund’s corpus, \$1000, to “award it to deserving students, regardless of color.”⁸⁹ That year, the

⁸³ “Billings, June 25, 1966,” in “Minutes (July 16, 1951 – June 13, 1971) Annual State Convention,” Montana Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 3, pp. 215-216.

⁸⁴ “Butte, June 10, 1968,” in “Minutes (July 16, 1951 – June 13, 1971) Annual State Convention,” Montana Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 3, pp. 242-243.

⁸⁵ “Mamie Lee Lacey to Mrs. Elizabeth Hill,” correspondence, September 17, 1970, Montana Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 1.

⁸⁶ “Great Falls, June 11, 1971,” in “Minutes (July 16, 1951 – June 13, 1971) Annual State Convention,” Montana Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 3, pp. 293-294.

⁸⁷ “Phyllis Wheatley,” *Billings Gazette*, “Roses to the Billings Clubwomen Special Section,” June 6 1971, p. 4.

⁸⁸ “Scholarships,” *Billings Gazette*, October 5, 1972, p. 52. In 1968, as the women discussed the disposition of the overall scholarship fund, the membership acknowledged that the University of Montana’s Jim Dorsey Martin Luther King Scholarship benefitted recipients, regardless of race, who makes “the greatest contribution to race relations.” In “Butte, June 10, 1968,” in “Minutes (July 16, 1951 – June 13, 1971) Annual State Convention,” Montana Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs Records, MC 281, Box 1, Folder 3, pp. 242-243.

⁸⁹ Christene C. Meyers, “Federation Is No More,” *Billings Gazette*, June 21, 1972, p. 21.

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MFCWC, which at its peak retained scores of members, dwindled to only thirty people statewide, and the four clubs that retained members through 1970 – Billings, Great Falls, Butte, and Helena – officially closed. Lacey lamented the loss of the federation but saw the bright side: “We hate to break up the group. But the need for a segregated federation is thankfully no longer needed here.”⁹⁰

The Federation’s recognition that the need for their work lessened coincided with the ratification of Montana’s new constitution in 1972. The document’s Declaration of Rights affirmed legal rights under the law for all Montanans. It established constitutional civil rights akin to those the Wayman congregation worked to accomplish throughout the 20th century:

Section 3. INALIENABLE RIGHTS. All persons are born free and have certain inalienable rights. They include the right to a clean and healthful environment and the rights of pursuing life’s basic necessities, enjoying and defending their lives and liberties, acquiring, possessing and protecting property, and seeking their safety, health and happiness in all lawful ways. In enjoying these rights, all persons recognize corresponding responsibilities.

Section 4. INDIVIDUAL DIGNITY. The dignity of the human being is inviolable. No person shall be denied the equal protection of the laws. Neither the state nor any person, firm, corporation, or institution shall discriminate against any person in the exercise of his civil or political rights on account of race, color, sex, culture, social origin or condition, or political or religious ideas.⁹¹

Wayman Chapel and Community Service: A Continuing Legacy

The constitution’s words did not curtail discrimination entirely. The need for social service and community uplift continued in the Wayman Chapel community. Its members worked in service, often in conjunction with Wayman Chapel’s efforts. For example, Mrs. Edna Best directed the child services for the Community Action Program and served the Billings Coalition for Women’s Rights. She, with other members of Church Women United, facilitated educational and entertaining programs at the church to further their causes: “empowerment of women, economic justice, human rights, and peace. They address a multitude of topics, from social inequities to entertainments, like a slide show by Billings resident Lois Ramsett’s recounting her “21,000-mile trip in a Volkswagen.” Mrs. Lacey continued to speak up for civil rights, calling on the local commissioners to “do better” by unemployed minorities.⁹² And Pastor Freeman worked actively to help school children, their families, and others in his sphere of influence.

⁹⁰ Christene C. Meyers, “Federation Is No More,” *Billings Gazette*, June 21, 1972, p. 21.

⁹¹ *The Constitution of the State of Montana*, March 2, 1972, <https://courts.mt.gov/External/library/docs/72constit.pdf>, accessed August 3, 2026.

⁹² “Edna Jean Best,” obituary, *Billings Gazette*, January 28, 2021, p. A9; Mamie Lee Lacey, “Do Better,” *Billings Gazette*, January 23, 1972, p. 21; “Slide Show,” *Billings Gazette*, August 30, 1975, p. 20; “May Fellowship Day Friday,” *Billings Gazette*, April 30, 1985, p. 6B.

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Recognized in the newspaper in 1978 for his 20 years service at Wayman and his work to “advance the cause of low-income residents,” Reverend Freeman continued to be a mainstay of the community.⁹³ In addition to his service through the church and at his pastorage, Freeman co-founded Real-Blt, which owned a development called Ponderosa Acres – a Section 8 housing property that still stands. The development used government subsidies and other funding sources to facilitate low-income homeownership. Freeman also served as a truant officer, working closely with students and families to prioritize education. He worked, like his congregant Mrs. Best, for Head Start, and served as president of the People’s Betterment League. In addition to non-profit work, Freeman served on the local government Urban Renewal committee. Praised for activist activities “too numerous to list,” the *Billings Gazette* explained that “there was scarcely a public board or commission dealing with low-income people in Billings that has not had Freeman as an active member.”⁹⁴

From the pulpit he preached for social justice and encouraged Wayman’s long tradition of inter-congregational celebration. Teaming with his friend, Reverend Richard Tizzano of Heights Neighborhood Assembly, the worshippers met together at Wayman and around the city. Tizzano declared that he “never had so much fun in church” as he did with the Wayman members.⁹⁵ Freeman said “we have a predominantly black congregations, but we welcome all people.” He noted, though, that “there’s still prejudice in the air. It’s not the out-and-out open segregation prejudice of years ago. It’s more undercover, it’s more subtle.”⁹⁶

By the early 1990s, local neo-Nazis took a more aggressive tone. Historian Ann Kooistra-Manning explains:

Billings, like many other rural communities in the American West, experienced a troubling resurgence of white supremacist activity and an alarming uptick in hate crimes against racial and religious minorities and the LGBTQ+ community. The community’s collective resistance to this hate-fueled intimidation and violence catalyzed into one of the most unified and defiant anti-hate campaigns in America.⁹⁷

⁹³ “Religious Notes, Anniversary,” *Billings Gazette*, April 22, 1978, p. 9.

⁹⁴ “Change at Real-Blt,” *Billings Gazette*, August 27, 1972, p. p. 20; Roger Clawson, “Pastor: A People Man,” *Billings Gazette*, April 30, 1978, p. 7G.

⁹⁵ “New and Old Churches to Share Services,” *Billings Gazette*, January 19, 1980, p. p.9; “Joint Public Service Held in Theater,” *Billings Gazette*, March 15, 1980, p. 11.

⁹⁶ Christene C. Meyers, “Out Invisible Minority Won a Quiet Revolution,” *Billings Gazette*, October 5, 1975, p. 33. Despite the racist undercurrents in the city, the inter-congregational good will continued through the 1980s, when First United Methodist and Evangelical United Methodist church members helped with renovations at the Wayman property. “Classified Advertisement,” *Billings Gazette*, December 9, 1984, p. 6B.

⁹⁷ Ann Kooistra-Manning, *Billings First Congregational Church*, National Register Nomination, listed 12/29/2025, NR# 100006704, p. 37.

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In February 1993, Billings interfaith leaders, including Pastor Freeman, responded to hateful literature and intimidation toward the city's Black, Catholic, Jewish, and LGBTQ communities. Supremacists littered cars with threats after a Martin Luther King Day gathering, and churches organized the Community Coalition to Oppose Hate Groups. The group petitioned the county commission to pass anti-hate resolutions. With a groundswell of public and civic support, the commissioners enacted resolutions written to curtail harassment and encourage vigilance.⁹⁸ Northwest United Skinheads and the Klu Klux Klan reacted with a flood of attacks: vandalism to the Jewish cemetery and to people's homes, hate mail, and assault. The white supremacists "intimidated churchgoers at Wayman Chapel." Encouraged by law enforcement, the community not only stood their ground, they actively rallied against the crimes. Kooistra-Manning wrote:

Churches ... encouraged their members to demonstrate their solidarity with the black community by attending Sunday services at Wayman Chapel. The community coalition organized a "Stand Together Billings" rally attended by a crowd of 450 and hosted other events, including a lecture series addressing "When Scriptures Lead to Hate."⁹⁹

Tensions climaxed in December 1993 when hate group members threw a cinder block through a Jewish boy's window. The child had taped a menorah drawing to the glass to celebrate Hanukah. Appalled by the violence, people city-wide taped menorahs to their windows, often using a template printed by the *Billings Gazette*, to show their solidarity with all victims of hate crimes. The campaign, embraced and encouraged by the Wayman leadership and congregants, gained national attention and, for the most part, worked to deescalate the Klan and skinhead crimewave.¹⁰⁰

The following year in October 1994, US Senator Conrad Burns publicly used a slur to describe Black people living in Washington D.C. Wayman worshipper and former MFCWC leader Mamie Lee Lacey excoriated Burns for his racist language. She wrote "I want people all over American to see what kind of senator we have ... I am asking blacks all over to stop voting for his party." The controversy coincidentally coincided with plans for a major refurbishment of the Wayman Church exterior. Seeking to show solidarity in the community, interfaith church members, together with local businesses and others among the greater Billings populace, worked to uplift

⁹⁸ Clair Johnson, "County Decries Hate Groups," *Billings Gazette*, March 10, 1993, p. 7; Ann Kooistra-Manning, *Billings First Congregational Church*, National Register Nomination, listed 12/29/2025, NR# 100006704, p. 37.

⁹⁹ Ann Kooistra-Manning, *Billings First Congregational Church*, National Register Nomination, listed 12/29/2025, NR# 100006704, p. 38; Greg McCracken, "Anti-hate Group Rally Attracts 450," *Billings Gazette*, May 3, 1993, p. 1; <https://www.newspapers.com/image/415664946/>; Ed Kemmick, *Billings Pioneer Church: 1882-2007*, May 2007, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁰ Ann Kooistra-Manning, *Billings First Congregational Church*, National Register Nomination, listed 12/29/2025, NR# 100006704, p. 38.

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Wayman Chapel in the wake of the previous year's unrest. The volunteers and donors provided labor and materials to paint and reside the church.¹⁰¹

Over the next four years, Freeman and his church family addressed important social justice issues in the Southside and in the greater community. Freeman helped the city housing authority to complete a Family Investment Center for job training, home management, and parenting skills. He led the church's educational outreach, including Black History Month events that taught human dignity and promoted interracial community.¹⁰² When he died in 1997, his flock and the city as a whole lamented his passing. His obituary by the *Billings Gazette* editors lauded his humbleness, freedom from self, and intrepid courage:

The Rev Bob Freeman has died. Long may he live. Freeman has a soul large enough to encompass all of us, every color and station of life. We are all special in his eyes, and that made him special in ours. ... Freeman was descended from slaves. That is stuff enough from which to build a prison of resentment, but he broke free of that. He accepted everyone at face value, whatever color, whatever station, whatever juncture along the road through life He celebrated their lives and his own.¹⁰³

Freeman's legacy lives on at Wayman, and his congregation honored him with the large stained-glass window on the west wall, overlooking the altar. Mrs. Beatrice Freeman remained active in the church for decades after her husband's death, and her children and congregation honored her with another window after her death in 2016.¹⁰⁴

After Reverend Freeman died, the congregation fractured but endured. Several pastors took the helm, but the flock dwindled to just seven members after the turn of the twenty-first century. Advocacy work continued to be a priority for the pastors, and in 2002, Reverend Jim DeFoe voiced the need for welfare reform and "new ways to reduce poverty" to Senator Max Baucus. As the congregation expanded to include more non-Black worshippers, it began to rebound. Under Rev. Ron Davis' tenure in 2003, thirty people worshipped there regularly. By 2006, its 110th anniversary year, the small number of church attendees had become "a rainbow coalition." That year, Reverend Teresa Swift introduced modern songs and dance to service, and encouraged more youth attendance. Elder member Edna Best explained "now we have a

¹⁰¹ Mamie Lee Lacey, "Burns Remark Terrible," *The Billings Gazette*, October 23, 1994, p. 36; Shannon M. Field, "Complex to Serve Families," *Billings Gazette*, p. 1; Shannon M. Field, "Volunteers Denounce Bigotry," *Billings Gazette*, October 23, 1994, p. 16; Joe Kent Kirby, "Refurbishing Not Political," *Billings Gazette*, October 25, 1994, p. 4.

¹⁰² Susan Olp, "Black History Recalled," *Billings Gazette*, February 25, 1995, p. 5.

¹⁰³ Editors, "A Soul Large Enough for All of Us," *Billings Gazette*, October 17, 1997, p. B1.

¹⁰⁴ Susan Olp, "Windows & Words," *Billings Gazette*, July 23, 2016, p. C1.

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full-fledged church, with Sunday school, Bible study, and a Wednesday night prayer meeting. We've not had that in years."¹⁰⁵

Challenges continued, but the congregants rose to the occasions, staying together through flooding and maintenance issues. Temporarily closed in 2008 due to water damage, the church building stood empty for the first time. Church member April Harris relayed her grief at its closure, "Any time I needed to get away, I'd come here and sit. When I needed guidance and strength, I'd come here and tell God what I'm going through. When I leave, I always feel better." Necessary repairs included a new floor, drywall paint, and regrading the lot. Mrs. Best explained "the pastor is gone. The church doors are locked. The small congregation will continue worship services as usual and on schedule in the vacated parsonage..."¹⁰⁶ Once again the community rallied to help, and by Thanksgiving the following year, many of the repairs were completed. Mrs. Best celebrated in thanks:

Offerings have come from individuals, organizations, corporations and various denominations, and we are most grateful. ... The trees have been removed, the ground regraded, the gutter and downspouts installed and a new furnace in the parsonage (an unexpected problem). The remaining work will be completed in the basement with new cabinets and countertops, now that the mold is removed."

Wayman Chapel continues to host educational and social awareness events, such as the local Festival of Cultures, Not in Our Town rallies, Martin Luther King Day celebrations, and Black History Month gatherings. A longtime member prior to his appointment, Pastor Dalondric "Simon" Bergen has offered stability and guidance for nearly a decade.¹⁰⁷ He understands the significance of the Wayman Chapel and its continuing mission. In 2018, he reflected, "It's always important to look back at where we came from. But there's still a lot of things that need to continue to progress in a better way."¹⁰⁸ When he and his congregation suffered vandalism at the historic chapel in 2025, once again the greater community rallied to help. The broken windows were repaired, and local government, businesses, and organizations donated much needed structural assessments and documentation to ensure the church and parsonage remain in good repair to serve the community for decades to come.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Ericka Schenck Smith, "Bush Welfare Program Flawed, Advocates for Poor Tell Baucus," *Billings Gazette*, March 27, 2002, p. 2B; Susan Olp, "Wayman Chapel's Roots Go Way Back," *Billings Gazette*, September 9, 2006, p. 4D; Gazette Staff, "Wayman Pastor Here a Year, But Church Nearing Its 106th," *Billings Gazette*, April 12, 2003, p. 4D.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Pickett, "This is Gods Will," *Billings Gazette*, July 25, 2008, p. 1; Edna Best, "Congregation Hoping to Return to Building," *Billings Gazette*, August 17, 2008, p. 13C.

¹⁰⁷ Jaci Webb, "Stopping Hate Before It Starts," *Billings Gazette*, June 6, 2014, p. 32;

¹⁰⁸ Sam Wilson, "Community Reflects on Local History of Civil Rights," *Billings Gazette*, January 15, 2018, p. B1.

¹⁰⁹ Paul Hamby, "This Is God's Church," *Billings Gazette*, November 26, 2025, p. A1, A7.

Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage
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Conclusion

Wayman Chapel congregants began their worship services in Billings in 1896. At its original location and then from its place in the Southside since 1916, the church grew to become one of the most important places of community, social uplift, and social justice for Black people in Montana. Its pastors and members rallied against hate groups and discrimination and lobbied for civil rights legislation at the state and local levels. They fostered education, arts, and literacy. They supported and celebrated with their interfaith neighbors for decades, leading racial cooperation and understanding by example and through active work. From the small church building and pastorage in the historic Southside neighborhood, the men and women of Wayman Chapel advanced programs that focused on fair housing, fed the poor, clothed those in need, and found joy in each other and their community. For these reasons, the Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage property is eligible for listing in the National Register at the local and state levels of significance under Criterion A.

Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage
Name of Property

Yellowstone County, MT
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9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

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Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage

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Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

☒ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other
Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): 24YL2047

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1) Latitude: 45.778440, Longitude: -108.497570, 2) Latitude: 45.778670, Longitude: -108.497080, 3) Latitude: 45.778550, Longitude: -108.496950, 4) Latitude: 45.778290, Longitude: -108.497450

Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage

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Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

Per the Montana Cadastral, "BILLINGS ORIGINAL TOWNSITE, S03, T01 S, R26 E, BLOCK 181, Lot 11 – 12." See close-up aerial map Section 9, page 43; reference to this map confirms the boundary.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary includes the lots currently and historically owned and occupied by the Wayman Chapel AME Church and Parsonage during its period of significance.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Kate Hampton

organization: MT SHPO

street & number: 225 N Roberts

city or town: Helena state: MT zip code: 59620-1201

e-mail khampton@mt.gov

telephone: 406-444-7742

date: August 5, 2026

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs

Photo Log

Kate Hampton took exterior photos on January 1, 2026. Brennan DeBoer photographed the exteriors and interiors on July 15, 2026. Unless otherwise noted, all the following information applies to each photograph:

Name of Property: Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage

City or Vicinity: Billings

County: Yellowstone

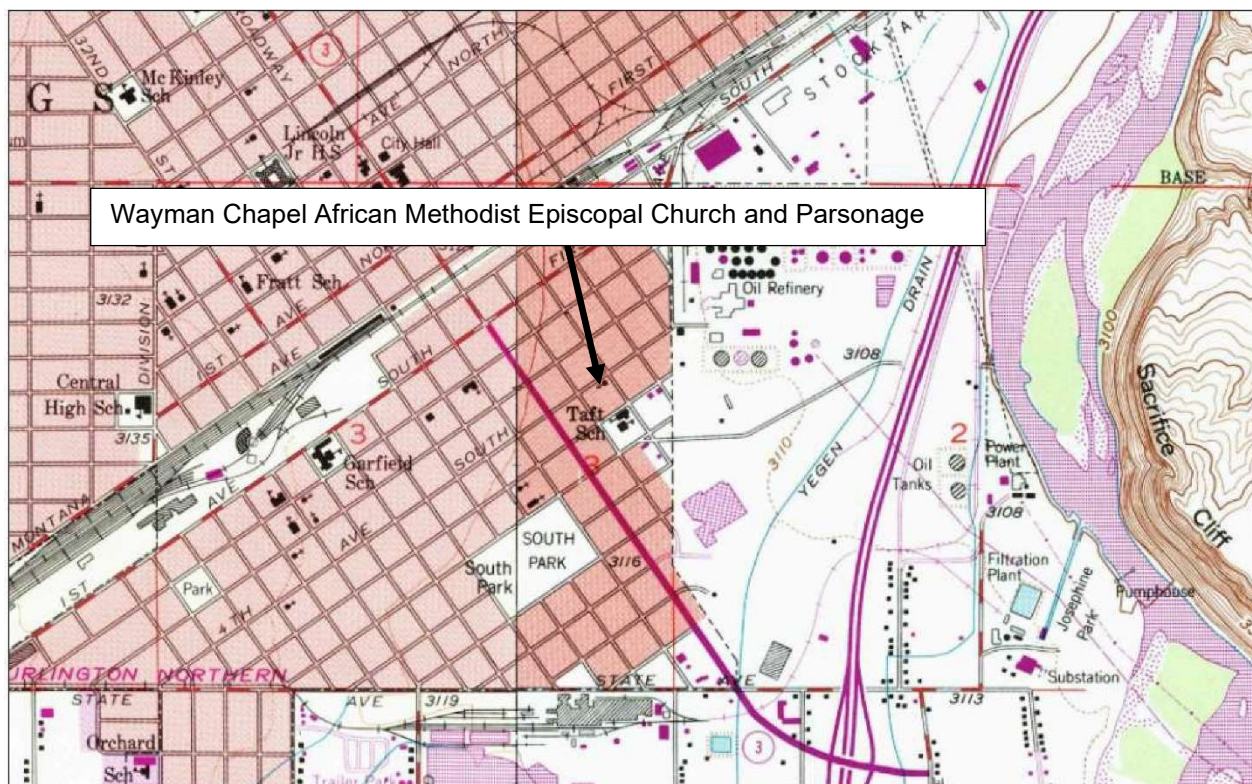
State: MT

See Photographs Below

Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage
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Maps and Floorplans



— = ½ mile

Map created using the Digital Atlas August 6, 2026
<http://msl.mt.gov/GIS/Atlas>

Montana State Library - Digital Library
(406) 444-5354 | geoinfo@mt.gov | <http://msl.mt.gov>

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Parcel location outlined in blue, Montana Cadastral.

500 ft.



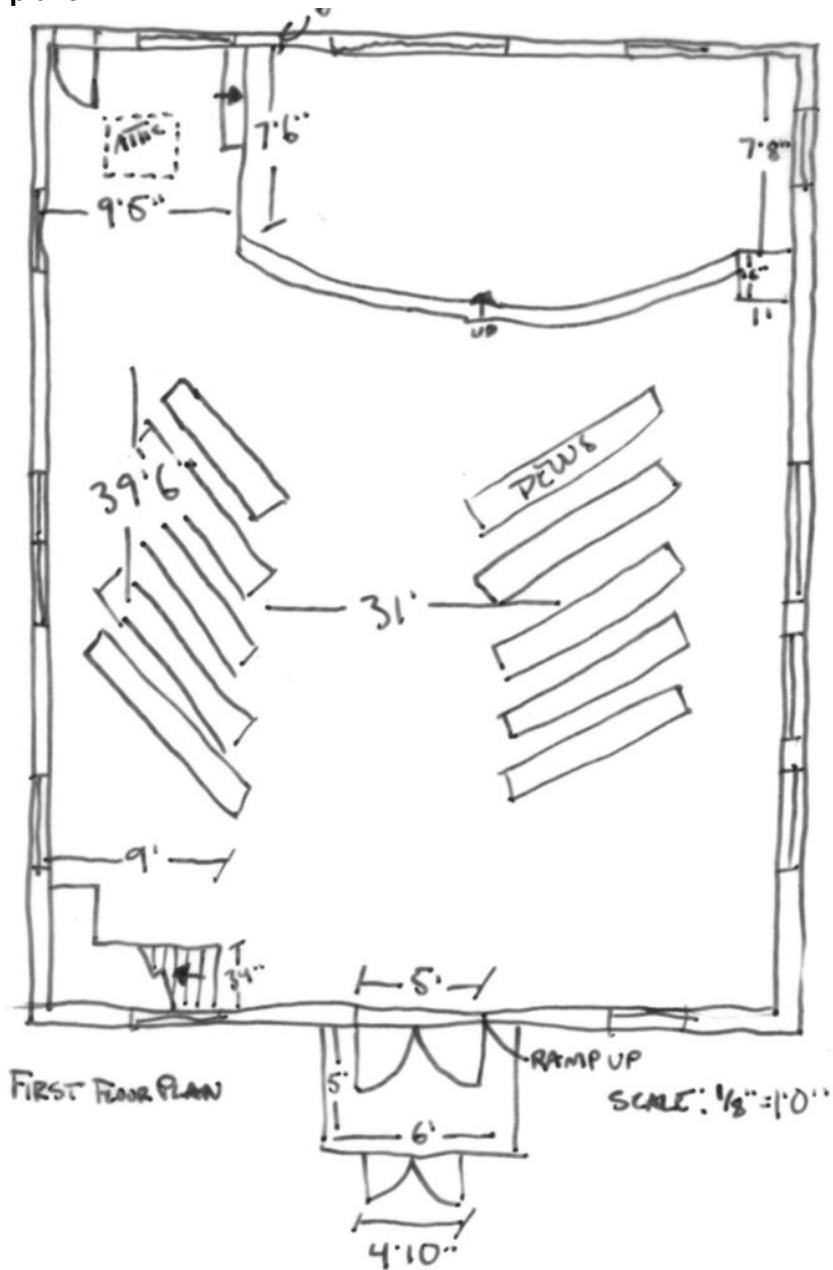
Wayman Chapel AME Church and Parsonage, site plan with parcel boundary, Google

Earth. 1) Latitude: 45.778440, Longitude: -108.497570, 2) Latitude: 45.778670, Longitude: -108.497080, 3) Latitude: 45.778550, Longitude: -108.496950, 4) Latitude: 45.778290, Longitude: -108.497450

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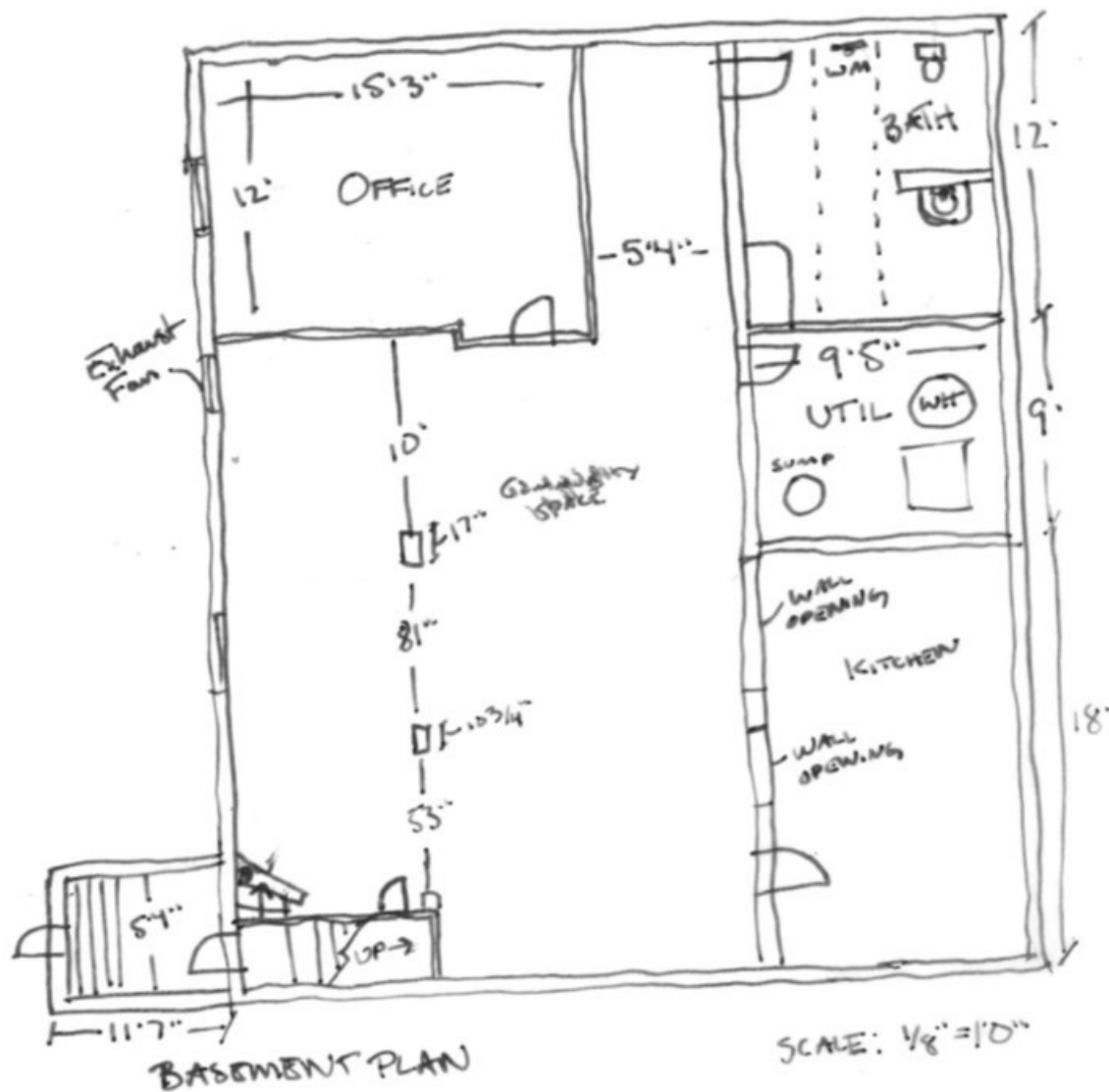
Floorplans



Wayman Chapel First Floor Plan, Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

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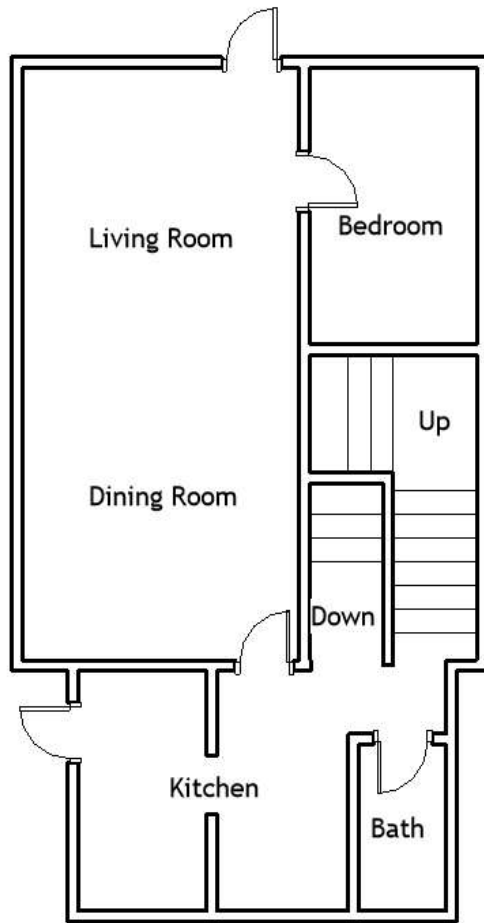
Yellowstone County, MT
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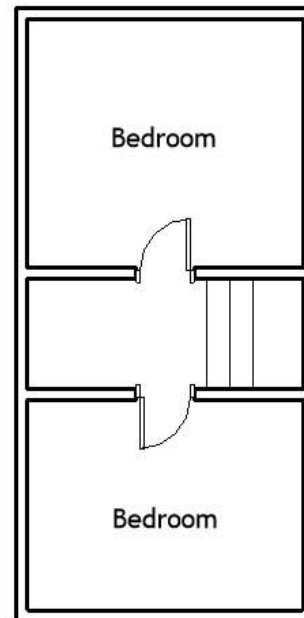
Wayman Chapel Basement Floor Plan, Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

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First Floor



Second Floor

Parsonage Floor Plans, Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

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National Register Photographs



Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0001. Wayman Chapel East (front) elevation, view to southwest. Photographer: Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0002. Wayman Chapel east elevation, view to the south. Photographer Kate Hampton, January 2026.

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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0003. Wayman Chapel east elevation, view to the north northwest. Kate Hampton January 2026.

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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0004. Wayman Chapel south elevation, view to north northeast. Kate Hampton January 2026.

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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0005. Wayman Chapel west elevation, view to northeast. Kate Hampton January 2026.

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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0006. Wayman Chapel north elevation, view to the south southwest. Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0007. Wayman Chapel east elevation dedication plaque detail, view to the southwest. Kate Hampton January 2026.

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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0008. Wayman Chapel basement meeting room, view to the southwest. Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0009. Wayman Chapel sanctuary, view to the northeast. Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0010. Wayman Chapel sanctuary, view to the southwest. Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage
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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0011. Wayman Chapel sanctuary, view to the southeast. Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0012. Wayman Chapel sanctuary, view to the northwest. Note the clear glass windows replaced stained glass windows destroyed by vandalism in 2025. Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage
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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0013. Parsonage, north elevation, view to the southeast. Kate Hampton, January 2026.

Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage
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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0014. Parsonage, east elevation, view to the southwest. Kate Hampton, January 2026.

Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage
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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0015. Parsonage, south and west elevation, view to the north. Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0016. Parsonage, west elevation, view to the northeast. Kate Hampton, January 2026.

Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage
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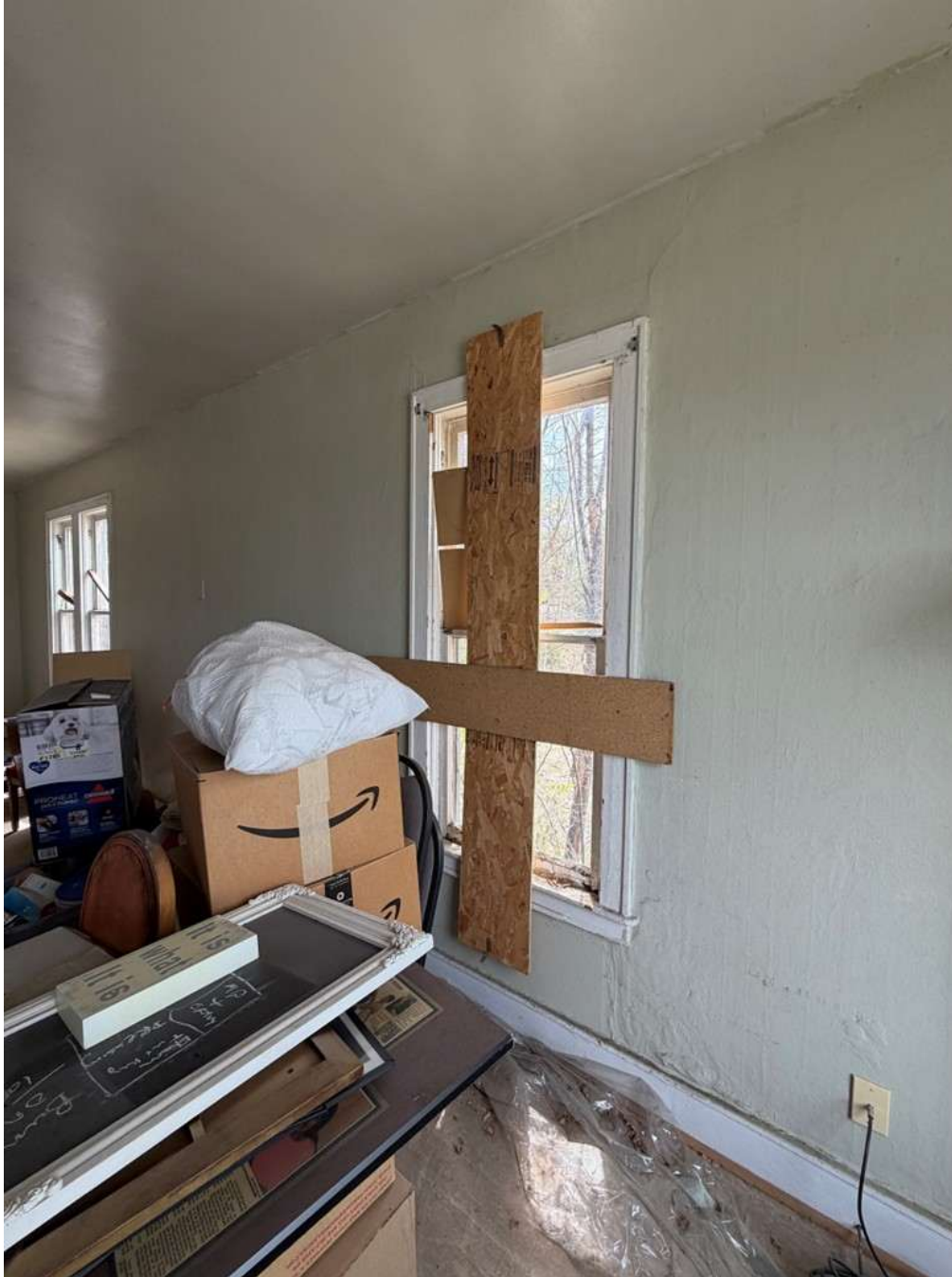


Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0017. Parsonage, living room detail, view to the south. Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Parsonage
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Photo: MT_YellowstoneCounty_WaymanChapelAMEChurchAndParsonage_0018. Parsonage, upstairs front room, view to the northwest. Brennan DeBoer, July 2026.

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Historic Photos



1960 African Methodist Episcopal Wayman Chapel, Western Heritage Center Archives, 95.13.51

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Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Annual Meeting, c. 1935. Montana Historical Society Research Center, PAc 2002-36.04.

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

- Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
- Tier 2 – 120 hours
- Tier 3 – 230 hours
- Tier 4 – 280 hours

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