

# That Preachin' Man

## Chauncey I. Withrow A.M., D.D.

(1866 - 1927)



**REV. C. I. WITHROW, A. M.,**  
Pastor Augusta Street M. E. Church, **Staunton, Va.**

Photo courtesy of Minutes of the 41st Washington Annual Methodist Episcopal Conference, 1904

*That which has been is what will be,  
That which is done is what will be done,  
And there is nothing new under the sun. Ecclesiastes 1:9*

Briskly striding past several distinguished elders seated on the rostrum of Warren Methodist Episcopal Church, Rev. Chauncey Isaiah Withrow ascended the sacred desk, ready to deliver his themed homily for the 11 a.m. service on the first Sunday. Visiting representatives from local civic organizations, academic institutes, and the Washington Methodist Conference's presiding elder leaned in from their chairs, eager to hear what the Lord would speak through this black divine. Seated on the front pew directly in front of the pulpit, Mrs. Mattie Louise (Dorsette) Withrow gleamed momentarily as her dear husband opened the Bible.

Had that scene been transported to 2020, Mrs. Withrow would be feverishly tweeting phrases from the good Reverend's sermon, 'The Superiority of the Reign of Solomon.' It was February 25, 1899—exactly 52 years and two days before this writer's birth—that Mrs. Withrow's notes would have contributed to a compilation of her husband's sermons.<sup>1</sup>

But it was the quick strokes of the local *Pittsburgh Press* reporter's fountain pen that repeatedly captured Withrow's services from 1899 to 1905. Perhaps the reporter enjoyed being assigned to cover this particular colored church, as he found Withrow's exhortations both scripturally sound and culturally relevant. The *Pittsburgh Press* held its spot in a lineup of national and Eastern U.S. publications that chronicled Withrow's activities from approximately 1894 to 1925.

Both the black and white fraternal brothers in service that morning were listening for keywords, seeking confirmation of Withrow's intent to align his budding ministry with the example of the Solomonic Temple. Fathers, who had been laboring under intense pressure just 35 years earlier,

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<sup>1</sup> "Among The Churches - Methodist Episcopal and Miscellaneous", *The Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), 25 Feb 1899, Sat, page 7

silently hoped the preacher would emphasize God’s ordinance for peace between the black man and the white former overseer peeking through the side window. Meanwhile, peering anxiously over his spectacles in the left front row, a balding treasurer-elder responsible for supervising Warren’s building projects hoped the pastor would successfully convince the congregation to become the first and strongest financial supporters. And ah yes, the lovely young ladies, decked in their Sunday go-meeting finery, hugged their shawls while winking at the young deacons-in-training.



Five years into a marriage that seemed like a match made in heaven, Mattie Louise savored the life of an increasingly popular clergyman’s wife.  
2 A native of Randolph County, North Carolina, she was the second

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<sup>2</sup> “Local Reviews”, The Reidsville Review (Reidsville, NC), 21 Sep 1894, page 3, “united in marriage last week”

daughter of a well-respected farming couple, David Franklin and Lucinda (Pope) Dorsette. Planting collards and cotton weren't the only significant crops the Dorsettes produced: their first daughter Cornelia, married Dr. Jordan Douglass Chavis Sr., president of Bennett College, an HBCU in Greensboro, North Carolina. And their first son, Cornelius Nathaniel, notably pioneered as Montgomery, Alabama's premier black physician in 1884.<sup>3</sup> These same Dorsettes would later provide crisis intervention for a Chauncey and Mattie's foster child who would eventually become the first African American nurse in the American Red Cross. (<https://redcrosschat.org/2022/02/01/black-history-month-honoring-frances-reed-elliott-davis/>)

I first heard of the Rev. Chauncey I. Withrow in the 1870 U.S. Federal Census for Rutherford County, North Carolina where he is listed as the 10<sup>th</sup> and youngest children of Isaac and Jane (Wesley) Withrow, my great-great-grandparents.<sup>4</sup> In this source, the first census in which formerly enslaved people were enumerated by name, he was nine years old. However, his actual age remains unclear with various news articles contradicting census records specifically. So far, I haven't found any enslavers' Bibles, plantation records or oral accounts stating Chauncey's or any of his family's names, birth dates and birth places. But I cautiously evaluated the 1790, 1850, 1860 U.S. Federal Census Slave Schedules which list an enslaver's name and the age, gender, complexion of the slaves at each farm or plantation he or she owned. In the 1860 slave schedule, James Withrow, a slaveholder of my ancestors, reported older slaves in Rutherford county's Sandy Run district and young ones in Flint

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<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Nathaniel Dorsette, M.D., "Early African-American Physicians in Alabama, <https://sites.google.com/site/earlyblackdocsalabama/>

<sup>4</sup> 1870 United States Federal Census, Rutherfordton, Rutherford, North Carolina; Roll: M593, house #115, Isaih Withrow

Hill. Two 2-year-old males are listed in the latter, one of whom may have been Chauncey.<sup>5</sup>

African-descended and Indigenous peoples living in the Americas during the 1800s did not carry smartphones or hang pictorial wall calendars in their cabins to remind them of birthdays, anniversaries. Although it was illegal for enslaved people to become literate in English, that did not prevent them from noting, recalling, observing significant events in ways unfamiliar to colonists and enslavers. Whether they developed calendars similar to the Ishango bone (circa 8500 BC), as passed down from their Kongolese ancestors, or relied on sheer memory, one thing is certain: a bone-tired mother's account of childbirth should hold more weight than sensational journalism promoting false narratives. So, even though Mother Janie was thoroughly exhausted from scrubbing clothes and perhaps husking maize on the very day Chauncey opened his eyes to the world, surely she would know if she gave birth to this "little David" before—or, as the news sensation spread, after—Emancipation. Surely!

During his adulthood, journalists of his day often romanticized Chauncey's alleged birth date as being 'soon after the Emancipation,' drawing comparisons to Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute. This was likely a marketing ploy to bolster Chauncey's growing popularity among both white and Black constituents.<sup>6</sup> Or perhaps it was Chauncey's own idea to promote a post-Emancipation birth to disassociate himself from the stigma of being born enslaved. Regardless, numerous news articles praised Chauncey's outstanding scholarship and youthful character, as if he were destined to outshine even Mr. Washington.

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<sup>5</sup>"United States, Census (Slave Schedule), 1860", FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:WK5T-15T2> : Tue Oct 28 13:07:04 UTC 2025), Entry for James Withrow and , 1860

<sup>6</sup> "Rivals Booker T. Washington", Daily Press (Newport News, VA), 30 Oct 1909, Sat. page 3

## **Part 2: Converted by the Lord**

In the June 1880 Federal census, teenage Chauncey appeared in two locations: on June 5, he was working the fields alongside his elder brother Ervin for James Davis, a chain-maker in Sulphur Springs, Rutherford county.<sup>7</sup> But after work, he hurried back home on a three-and-a-half-hour trek. Like the biblical shepherd boy David, Chauncey was responsible for safely delivering their meager pay into their 60-year-old mother's hands.

Two days later on June 7, the census taker recorded Chauncey as the sole family member living with his widowed mother, Janie, on their farm in Union, Rutherford.<sup>8</sup> Sadly, Papa Isaic had already "gone on home to the ancestors." But thankfully, Mother Janie's daughter, Lucinda, lived nearby with her children whom Janie could watch while preparing care packages for her sons working down the road. Clearly, all those days of rushing back and forth between farmed fields had prepared Chauncey for his future itineraries in the fields of education, Christian ministry, and politics.

While laboring as a teenager alongside his elder brother Ervin in the same fields Ervin had once slaved in, Chauncey undoubtedly heard him recall stories of his experiences under the peculiar institution. While Ervin became distinctly positioned as a respected former slave in Rutherford county, Chauncey had no intention of remaining on the plantation for long even for pay. Naturally, he was exhausted from running back and forth between the home-place and labor, dreaming of better days far away.

He was probably more influenced by their elder brother Albert (1851-1919) who allegedly became an African Methodist Episcopal minister while farming in Duncans Creek near James and Julia (Hamrick) Withrow's place. I'm told that Albert paid for the young man's education

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<sup>7</sup> 1880 United States Federal Census, Sulphur Springs, Rutherford, NC, Roll 981, FHL 1254981, Pg 475A, ED 159

<sup>8</sup> 1880 United States Federal Census, Union, Rutherford, NC, Roll 981, Pg 469D, ED 158

seeing that he had a propensity towards religion and public speaking with a future unencumbered by sharecropping or indentureship. Albert's childhood gives a glimpse of how indoctrinated white slaveholders were to pervasive racism in the Carolinas.

According to an article by local historian and the enslavers' descendant Scott Withrow, Suzanne K. Sweeney Withrow, a dedicated Sunday school teacher, had taught young Albert to read the Bible. It is unknown whether she used the typical King James Version or a 'Negro Slave Bible,' which intentionally excluded certain passages to benefit planters (<https://youtu.be/Rt6-fN3ohZU>). And it's unknown how she knew Albert since she hadn't married Sgt. William Patterson Withrow, son of enslavers James and Erixana Withrow, until November 1865 when the Confederate prisoner of war had returned to his home from City Point, VA.

Did Suzanne defiantly believe she was above the North Carolina anti-literacy law which could have her indicted, fined or imprisoned for teaching a slave to read and write? Or did she care - or not care - that such a literate slave, male or female, would be whipped with 39 lashes as court-ordered? That could have been little Albert's fate! See: <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/primary-source-bill-prevent>, *Legislative Papers, 1830-31 Session of the General Assembly*.

If she cared, was she a clandestine Quaker in a predominantly Methodist region? As committed abolitionists in America since the 1770s, the Religious Society of Friends, a.k.a. Quakers, were known to risk punishment for teaching enslaved people in North Carolina. <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/primary-source-quakers-and>. The answer is no; evidence points to Suzanne being a Baptist likely intent on saving lost souls and especially black ones.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Katharine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery, Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: Univ. of PA Press, 2018)

Many Americans whether religious or not, are unaware of Christianity's African roots as evidenced by African histories and archaeological recoveries. The famous early church fathers whose theological writings are doctrinal bedrocks were North and Northeast Africans: Simon of Cyrene (Libya), Tertullian (Tunisia), Origen (Egypt), Athanasius (Egypt), Augustine of Hippo (Algeria), Aurelius of Tunisia, Clement of Alexandria (Egypt), Cyprian of Tunisia, Mark the Evangelist (Libya). Their lifespans ranged from about 43 C.E. to 430 C.E. and their influences naturally spread to subsaharan kingdoms through traders, invaders and missionaries.

Chauncey's ancestors were likely rooted in west-central African where traditional spiritualities, Saharan Muslim, Hebrew and Christian influences had converged before the transatlantic slave trade. During that trade's Middle Passage, African captives were stripped of any external expressions of their languages, beliefs, treasured customs. But their spirits resonated with blood memories of ancient observances and griots' oral histories which enabled them to survive the peculiar institution's evils. Unfortunately and insidiously, the religion of European colonizers and American planters - Christianity - evolved into an instrument of domination that coerced "virtues" of docility and submission upon the black African (and indigenous) captive workforce. American slaves under duress became familiar with farm implements: a Bible and a whip.

So growing up during the Reconstruction era, was young Chauncey mesmerized by his big brother Albert fluidly quoting scripture while they tied cotton bales in the fading glow of sunset? Maybe. And maybe he simply sensed a propensity towards deep spiritual awareness inherited from the ancestors. Chauncey began attending public school around age seven, spent a year at a boarding school run by a British headmistress, and then returned to public school. At 18, he began teaching in Cleveland and Rutherford counties' schools until the age of 21, when he was 'radically converted by the Lord.'

### ***Part 3: On the Circuit and Family Life***

His academic qualifications led him to become a public school principal in South Carolina until 1888. A rare gift for speaking, strong commitment, and exceptional character enabled him to be licensed early on as an exhorter in the Methodist Church, after which he was assigned to a circuit. In 1889, he entered Bennett College, an HBCU in Greensboro, North Carolina, originally established to educate freedmen and to train teachers. While a student there, he began pastoring a Methodist Episcopal church in Reidsville, North Carolina and hopelessly fell in love with Mattie, the charming young lady mentioned earlier and sister-in-law of the college president.

Chauncey was ordained a minister in 1893, graduated from Bennett with honors and a double B.A. in 1894, and was elected to several offices within the Methodist Episcopal Church Conference. Increasingly respected by all as a rising star among colored people, he was readily endorsed by fellow principals, politicians, civic leaders, and Masonic officials from Texas to Washington, D.C. He skillfully addressed race relations before a mixed crowd at the Rutherford courthouse in July 1894, garnering support from them as well as peer educators from Waco, Texas, and the Rutherford Military Institute.<sup>10</sup> About six weeks later, he married Mattie Louise and true to preacher form, assumed the pastorate of a church in Charlotte.<sup>11</sup>

When it came time to eulogize Thomas Hughes, General Robert E. Lee's bodyguard and the veteran sexton of the University of North Carolina, Chauncey was called upon to deliver the address, deeply impressing the university's faculty and student body. It was noted that he was the sole colored minister in a predominantly white ministerial association where he spoke regularly. After graduating from Bennett, Rev. Withrow attended

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<sup>10</sup> "Rev. Withrow At His Old Home", Webster's Weekly (Reidsville, NC), Thur, 2 Aug. 1894, pg.3

<sup>11</sup> "Rev. C.I. Withrow, united in marriage...", The Reidsville Review (Reidsville, NC, Fri., Sep 21, 1894, pg. 3

the Western Theological Seminary in Allegheny, Pennsylvania while also shepherding the Warren Methodist Episcopal church and preaching early Sunday mornings at Grace Deaconess Chapel, a church supported by millionaire donors. He made it a priority to leave his pastorates spiritually healthy and debt-free.

By February 1900, several months after the birth of his first son, Chauncey Jr., the good reverend had been used by God to conduct revivals effectively, where many were converted and became members of the Washington Methodist Episcopal Conference. It was around this time that he established a home in Staunton, Virginia where he later pastored the



**Augusta Methodist Episcopal Church,  
Staunton, VA**

Augusta Methodist Episcopal church. During the 1899-1901 annual meetings of the Virginia State Teachers' Temperance and Educational Associations, Rev. Withrow spoke on 'The Effects of Intemperance' and the attitude toward education of African-descended students, as reported by both colored and white teachers.<sup>12</sup>

While residing in Pittsburgh and tirelessly working to strengthen his congregations, Chauncey was devastated by the

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<sup>12</sup> Virginia School Report, 1900 & 1901, Supt. of Public Instruction, Commonwealth of VA, Richmond, pg. 165

untimely death of his beloved companion Mattie in 1900. If ever there was a perfect helpmeet designed by God to walk alongside His servant, Mattie Louise had fulfilled that calling. Despite the attendance of several assistants, 'two of Pittsburgh's best physicians,' and likely advice from her brother in Birmingham, Alabama, Dr. Cornelius N. Dorsette, she succumbed to illness leaving this world behind.

For four years afterward, Chauncey continued to fervently encourage Southern black communities to capitalize on the lucrative agricultural industry before European immigrants would eventually crowd them out of the land. In contrast to colonizers manipulating the Bible to justify slavery, Chauncey used scripture and common sense in exhorting his people to return to God and to embrace entrepreneurship, particularly as successful farmers, through his message: 'The Relation of Agriculture to Christian Civilization.'<sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup> In May 1902, *The Colored American* newspaper in Washington, D.C., headlined him: 'He Preaches a Practical Theology and Organizes the Negro Farmers for Advancement in Agricultural Science.' Rev. Withrow enjoyed ongoing positive coverage from local newspapers, including a 'white Republican newspaper' that favorably recognized his progress for the benefit of the entire population.

Miss Agnes Blanche Crampton of Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood caught Rev. Withrow's eye, and they married in January 1905 at her parents' home. However, by August of that year, the rave reviews began to diminish due to Chauncey's financial difficulties, leading his Staunton church to request his resignation. Unfortunately, Chauncey and his late wife, Mattie, also had a significant mark against them as role models: they used a foster child as a nanny for their son, removing her from school—how ironic! They had personally pocketed the funds donated for her education. But thankfully, that foster child was rescued from their home by Mattie's parents and later became the prominent first African

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<sup>13</sup> "A Sermon To Farmers", *The Southern Workman*, Hampton Institute Va, 8 Jan 1902, pg. 133

<sup>14</sup> "Religion In The Soil", *The Colored American* (Washington, DC), 31 May 1902, pg. 2

American Red Cross nurse, Frances Reed Elliott Davis. Sadly again, Chauncey was haunted by accusations of fiduciary mismanagement as it appeared he struggled to separate funds intended for founding an independent school from the church coffers. He had worked feverishly over the years to replenish them.

Nevertheless, Rev. Withrow later became a co-founder and president of The Collegiate and Industrial Institution in Athens, Tennessee with the

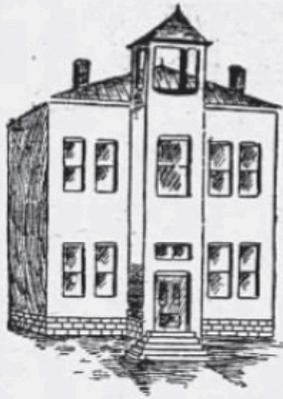
## NEW PROJECT IN EDUCATION

For the Colored Race Started  
At Athens.

Rev. C. I. Withrow is the Prime  
Mover in the Enterprise That  
Promises Well.

Rev. C. I. Withrow has spent several days of the past week in Knoxville and while here was engaged in seeing several friends of the institution of which he is the head, and which is located at Athens. He is in charge of a movement of great importance to the colored race and is receiving substantial support from many quarters. Being prime mover in the enterprise he was chosen president of the school in which he intends to educate the colored youth of several of the Southern states.

The Athenian, a paper printed at Athens, has the following to say of Rev. Withrow and his work:  
The school site was purchased of Rev. and Mrs. C. A. Beard and lies next to



**COLLEGIATE AND INDUSTRIAL INSTITUTE.**  
Two-story, 10-room frame structure for Primary, English, Normal, Academic and College work, together with Industrial courses. Cornerstone laid May 1.

Amos Jackson, Berry Isbell, Mattison Hammonds, C. I. Withrow, Jessie Matlock, Will Magill, Henry Douglass, Wiley Gibson, Mesdames Frances Douglass, Lizzie Matlock, Bertie McGee; Henry Newman, Samuel Greenwood, W. C. Caspers, J. H. Isbell; Mesdames Mary Lane, Mattie Evans, Mattie Isbell, Lizzie Magill, Ada Magill, Wilda, Luke Ragan, Mary McGee, Martha Evans, Alice McBeth, R. Pettitt, L. Rucker, Maggie Bayless, Kizzie Hammond, Jane Cleage, Ross Keith, Collins, Mary Newman; Moses Bradford, Maples, all of Athens and McMinn county, Tenn., and Rev. A. L. Cowan, Presiding Elder, St. Elmo, Chattanooga, Tenn.; Rev. W. H. Ferguson, Harrisburg, Pa.; Bishop J. W. Smith of Ninth Episcopal district.

The desire of the trustees is to make this the school whose patronage shall cover the following territory: Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas, Texas, and the North Louisiana conferences. It is believed that the superior advantages of Athens as an educational town will be crowned with the hopeful success of the trustees of Athens Collegiate and Industrial Institute.

The promoter of this movement is Rev. C. I. Withrow, one of the ablest colored divines in America. An estimate of his character can best be formed by reading the following taken from the Rutherford N. O. Sun.

Rev. Chauncey I. Withrow, the subject of this comment, was born in Rutherford county in 1806. His father was a slave of William Withrow. Young Chauncey spent his early life on the farm, working under many disadvantages as his advent into the world was at a time when the south was in a most distressing and trying ordeal. The war between the states had just ended and chaos and confusion reigned supreme. There were no schools even for the whites and the colored race had less opportunity and fewer privileges than the whites. The casual observer can readily see that this young colored boy had but little to encourage him and indeed nothing to inspire him to the higher and nobler life to which he has attained and the success with which he has met in his



**ZION CHURCH AT ATHENS.**  
and adjoining the Zion M. E. church (colored) in North Athens. It is a very desirable location and from an artistic point of view, will appear to the students coming in from the lowlands of other states and sections as an inspiring place for study.

backing of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and was yet lauded as 'one of the ablest colored divines in America.' The power of the press prevails to this very day. His sermons, eulogies, and writings were read nationally and he remained a popular revivalist while also supporting the District of Columbia National Guard, specially deployed by President Woodrow Wilson.

However, trouble brewed at home as Agnes grew less tolerant of Chauncey's convictions, travels, and growing popularity. In 1916, she filed for and was granted a divorce on grounds of desertion, a decision Chauncey contested for nine years. They mutually owned property in the Ivy City neighborhood of Washington, D.C. which was eventually 'transferred' to an individual in 1921 for just \$10.

A few of Chauncey's handwritten letters are archived. On July 14, 1927, he began requesting copies of *The Crisis*, the NAACP's official journal edited by Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, in which he was featured. He mentioned being elected principal of a Blacksburg, South Carolina public school and expressed his intent to sell the copies as part of a fundraising effort. Classic Chauncey. It is unknown whether he ever received the issues or if he began the fall school semester at all in South Carolina. On December 30, 1927, determined but exhausted, Chauncey passed on to glory, leaving behind an ex-wife, two sons and eight stepchildren. His funeral service was held at the Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., where the seating capacity accommodated a multitude of family and friends.

This Rev. Dr. Chauncey Isaiah Withrow is my great-granduncle.

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