Before the Civil War, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the nation's oldest black denomination, existed primarily as a northern institution. In 1787 Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and other Philadelphia blacks left St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church after a bitter encounter with racial discrimination. Out of their Free African Society came Bethel A.M.E. Church which Bishop Francis Asbury dedicated in 1794. Black Methodist groups from Baltimore, Salem, New Jersey, Wilmington, Delaware, and Attleborough, Pennsylvania gathered at Bethel Church in 1816 to form the A.M.E. denomination with Allen as their first bishop. Other congregations in northern and western communities also became a part of the burgeoning organization. For a time, African Methodism flourished in South Carolina, but the alleged connection in 1822 between the Denmark Vesey slave conspiracy and the A.M.E. group in Charleston led authorities to ban the denomination. After 1865 the church spread rapidly into the former Confederacy, and thousands of freedmen embraced African Methodism.

As A.M.E. congregations developed from Virginia to Texas, and increased membership from 50,000 in 1866 to over 300,000 in 1876, gifted and ambitious southern preachers, some with experience in Reconstruction politics, sought greater influence in church affairs. They viewed the domination of northern based bishops and other denominational officers as a hindrance to southern representation in the church hierarchy. William Fisher Dickerson, a bishop born and educated in the North, confronted...
these difficulties when the General Conference of 1880 assigned him to a southern district. As a young northern minister, Dickerson’s career was promoted by Bishops Daniel A. Payne, Jabez P. Campbell, and James A. Shorter through a series of important pastoral appointments which culminated with the prestigious Sullivan Street Church in New York City. From this influential pulpit, Dickerson, at the age of 36, was elected a bishop and assigned to South Carolina and Georgia. Although membership growth and the founding of educational institutions occurred under Dickerson’s supervision, southern preachers, suspicious of his northern origins, at times opposed his authority.

The future prelate was born in Woodbury, New Jersey, on January 15, 1844, to Henry and Sophia Dickerson. His parents migrated from Maryland where William’s father was ordained an A.M.E. local preacher. Dickerson spent his childhood and adolescence in Woodbury where he went to the public schools, worked on a farm, and attended Bethel A.M.E. Church. In 1862 he moved to New York City where he joined the Sullivan Street A.M.E. Church. Dickerson, an active member of the congregation, served as a class leader, musical director in the Sunday School, and chorister of the church choir. As an aspirant to the ministry, he became a licensed exhorter and then a local preacher.

Lincoln University in Pennsylvania offered Dickerson an opportunity to train formally for the ministry. Founded as Ashmun Institute in 1854 by Presbyterian colonizationists, the institution educated blacks for missionary work in Africa. The emancipation of four million slaves by the Civil War, however, convinced the Ashmun trustees to change the name to Lincoln University in 1866 and to encourage the students to become ministers and teachers among southern freedmen. Dickerson enrolled at Lincoln in 1865 during this period of transition. He spent four and a half years in the college and seminary studying Latin, Greek, logic, theology, and other subjects in Lincoln’s classical curriculum.

Dickerson belonged to the Garnet Literary Society which sponsored debates, orations, and poetry recitations. Professor Lorenzo Westcott, who organized the group, strongly influenced Dickerson, and helped him and other students develop their forensic abilities. When the Garnet held a memorial service for Westcott in 1879, Dickerson delivered the eulogy. He also benefitted from the philanthropy of William E. Dodge, a New York

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William Fisher Dickerson

businessman and prominent Presbyterian elder, who contributed scholarships to worthy students. In 1883, shortly after Dodge's death, Dickerson, who described him as the "ideal man," presided at a memorial service for his Lincoln benefactor at Bethel A.M.E. Church in Columbia, South Carolina.5

During his matriculation at Lincoln, Dickerson perfected his preaching abilities and broadened his denominational contacts. The Rev. H. J. Rhodes, probably a pastor in nearby Oxford, renewed his license to preach in 1867. On one occasion he preached at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Hinsonville, a village community near the campus. Some of Dickerson's fellow students also planned to enter the A.M.E. ministry. In the future, Charles W. Mossell and James W. Morris would pastor with him in the New England Annual Conference and James C. Waters would help him build Allen University in South Carolina.6

When Dickerson was graduated from Lincoln University with a B.A. degree in 1870, he became one of the few formally educated preachers in the A.M.E. Church. Between 1868 and 1880 his ministry developed under the watchful eyes of four bishops who successively supervised the First Episcopal District, an area which embraced the New York, New Jersey, New England, and Philadelphia Annual Conferences. These prelates, anxious to appoint trained pastors to their leading churches, moved Dickerson from a tiny New Jersey mission to a major New York congregation within seven years. Bishop Alexander W. Wayman, who married Dickerson to Isabella Demarest, ordained him an itinerant deacon in 1868. In 1870 Bishop Jabez P. Campbell appointed him to Elizabeth, New Jersey, where on his first Sunday "the church was filled." The Elizabeth congregation grew substantially during his one-year pastorate.7

Bishop Campbell ordained Dickerson an itinerant elder in 1871, and transferred him to Providence, Rhode Island. Bishop James A. Shorter moved him in 1873 to the prestigious Charles Street A.M.E. Church in Boston, Massachusetts. During his two-year pastorate he conducted "the largest revival . . . ever produced" among local blacks. "His exhortations,

4Bond, pp. 413, 449, 455; William F. Dickerson, "A Eulogy upon the Life, Character, and Death of Rev. Lorenzo Westcott, A.M." (Lincoln University, Chester County, Pennsylvania, Garnet Literary Association, 1879); The Christian Recorder, May 31, 1883.


his prayers, and his preaching,” wrote one observer in *The Christian Recorder*, “were attended with spirituality, with pathos and with power.” During Dickerson’s stay in Boston, he and the congregation planned to obtain another edifice. After his departure, he returned to preach a dedication sermon for the new Charles Street Church. He reminded his former parishioners of the early efforts of Richard Allen, Daniel Coker, and Morris Brown to establish the A.M.E. Church. Like other denominations, “African Methodism is kindling the blaze of gospel truth upon the hilltops of civilization . . . and . . . is moving on to light up the darkness of heathen lands.” He commended the Charles Street Church, formed in the 1830s amid “clouds of oppression,” for its endurance despite racial antagonism.8

The 1876 General Conference sent Bishop Daniel A. Payne to the First Episcopal District. An influential and persistent advocate of an educated clergy, Payne, concerned with Dickerson’s ministerial advancement, appointed him to Bethel A.M.E. Church in New Haven, Connecticut. In 1877 Payne promoted the 33-year-old pastor to Sullivan Street Church in New York City, one of the largest congregations in the district. Bishop Campbell, now an interested onlooker, noted that some doubtful members thought Dickerson “too young” and lacking in preaching and administrative ability. The new pastor, Campbell observed, proved the skeptics wrong.9

Dickerson, *The Christian Recorder* asserted, preached superb sermons and drew several converts to Sullivan Street Church. In 1880 he delivered a widely read sermon entitled “Religion Without Morality,” when Christine Cox, a member of his congregation, was executed for murder. Additionally, Bishop Campbell praised the young pastor for exposing his parishioners to literature, theology, and philosophy through a lecture series he inaugurated. “By this means,” wrote the prelate, he “is glorifying God and . . . advancing the Redeemer’s kingdom.”10

Campbell referred to Dickerson’s “Thinker’s Course of Lectures” which started in late 1877. He invited leading black preachers and poets to participate in the series, and he planned a concert to come at the end. His Lincoln classmate, Francis J. Grimke, a student at Princeton Theological Seminary and a future pastor of Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., began the program with a talk on “The Inherent Moral Forces of Society.” Hallie Quinn Brown, an 1873 graduate of Wilberforce University and a teacher in Mississippi and South Carolina, followed Grimke. She read several religious and literary selections including an excerpt from *The Pickwick Papers* by Charles Dickens. The third lecturer,  

8Wright, *The Bishops*, p. 158; Smith, p. 81; *The Christian Recorder*, January 11, 1877; February 12, 1885.
9Smith, p. 117; *The Christian Recorder*, August 30, 1877; February 12, 1885.
10*The Christian Recorder*, August 30, 1877; January 15, 1885; *Alumni Magazine*, Lincoln University, February 1, 1885, p. 34.
Bishop Daniel A. Payne, spoke on "The Nature and Position of Man in the Universe of God." Dickerson also asked Frances Ellen Harper, the poet, Rev. Henry Highland Garnet, the antebellum abolitionist and pastor of Shiloh Presbyterian Church in New York City, and Rev. Benjamin T. Tanner, the editor of *The Christian Recorder*, to deliver addresses.11

In the New England Annual Conference, where Dickerson spent most of his pastoral ministry, he became a conspicuous participant in district affairs and a leader among fellow clergymen. The conference embraced thirteen congregations in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Maine, and twice in the early 1870s Dickerson was elected the regional secretary. He counseled colleagues and helped one to enter the ministry. The Rev. S. T. Douglass commended Dickerson and three other preachers for advice during his pastorate at Bethel A.M.E. Church in Lynn, Massachusetts. When Dickerson served Bethel A.M.E. Church in Providence, Rhode Island, he licensed James W. Morris, a Lincoln classmate, to preach. While Morris pastored A.M.E. congregations in Taunton, Massachusetts and Bridgeport, Connecticut, Dickerson recommended him for ordination as a deacon and elder. At the 1873 New England Annual Conference in Lynn, Dickerson preached a sermon "full of spirit" on "The Possibility of Final Apostasy." When the conference convened in 1875 in New Haven, he delivered the annual sermon which praised struggling pastors who "stand firm" despite "poverty" and "suffering." Their "self-sacrifice and labor" yielded the conference a gain of 270 probationers. As the A.M.E. Church experienced major membership increases in the southern states, "New England is doing her part in the vineyard of the Lord."12

Dickerson also wrote numerous articles in *The Christian Recorder* discussing important denominational issues. He praised Benjamin T. Tanner for his able editorship of the *Recorder*, but he decried the lack of subscribers "to our only church organ." He advised pastors and laymen to help Tanner by contributing "interesting reading material from their experiences and observations." In 1871, as pastor of Bethel Church in Providence, he solicited subscriptions for *The Christian Recorder*, collected funds and sold publications for the A.M.E. Book Concern. In 1872 he received a copy of William Still's *The Underground Railroad* for


12*The Christian Recorder*, June 17, 1871; June 26, 1873; June 24, 1875; March 23, 1876; April 27, 1876.
his efforts in behalf of the Concern. Additionally, Dickerson called for better financial support of the A.M.E. Church. He believed that the organization needed an investment fund of $100,000 whose 7% or 8% interest could strengthen the general budget. In 1873 he challenged the First Episcopal District to double its annual $5,700 contribution to the denominational treasury.¹⁸

Dickerson's involvement with Wilberforce University enhanced his visibility within the A.M.E. Church. He and other ministers backed Bishop Payne in his efforts to develop Wilberforce into an educationally reputable and financially solvent institution. Although established in 1856 near Xenia, Ohio as a cooperative endeavor with the Methodist Episcopal Church, Wilberforce did not become an A.M.E. college until 1863 when Bishop Payne purchased the property for $10,000. Despite periodic contributions from numerous philanthropists, Wilberforce depended heavily upon denominational funds. In 1873 Dickerson and three other pastors presented special resolutions in behalf of Wilberforce to the New England Annual Conference. They strongly recommended that ministers contribute to the Wilberforce endowment, and that the conference provide funds for two representatives to attend the institution's trustee meeting and commencement. In 1874 Dickerson and a fellow pastor from Newport, Rhode Island discharged these responsibilities. In 1878 he delivered a lecture on "Culture in Common Life" during graduation exercises. In recognition of his educational and pastoral achievements, Lincoln and Wilberforce Universities respectively conferred in 1873 honorary M.A. and D.D. degrees upon the young preacher.¹⁴

Dickerson extended his connectional activities in 1872 when he attended the General Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. He became a full participant in the next General Conference in Atlanta, Georgia in 1876. He served as a reading clerk, and he represented the First Episcopal District on the Educational Board. When President Edmund A. Ware of Atlanta University invited the delegates to visit the campus, Dickerson and Benjamin T. Tanner delivered speeches. They and Reverend James H. A. Johnston travelled to Baltimore as fraternal delegates to the 1876 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In his address, Dickerson asserted that his denomination deserved recognition as "the eldest daughter" of the M.E. Church. Within sixty years, Dickerson boasted, the A.M.E. Church had accumulated $4,000,000 in property and several educational institutions and included 2,000 ministers and between 300,000 and 400,000 members. He also suggested that a "united Methodism" which stretched "from ocean to ocean" could evangelize

¹⁸The Christian Recorder, July 22, 1871; November 2, 1872; November 9, 1872; October 30, 1873.
¹⁴Smith, pp. 348-349; The Christian Recorder, July 3, 1873; July 16, 1874; June 13, 1878; June 27, 1878; September 6, 1883.
effectively in the United States among blacks and whites. Participation in national church affairs and his role as an A.M.E. representative to various religious and educational groups increased Dickerson's visibility as a denominational leader and made him a major contender for the episcopacy.

When Dickerson announced his candidacy for the A.M.E. bishopric, he encountered a very tough competitor, Henry M. Turner. A Civil War chaplain and state legislator, Turner served as a pastor, presiding elder, and the principal organizer of the A.M.E. Church in Georgia. Born in 1834 in South Carolina, he and his missionary subordinates drew thousands of freedmen into the denomination and attracted numerous preachers into the itinerant ministry. Turner personally persuaded an important Atlanta congregation to affiliate with the A.M.E. Church in 1865. Subsequently, Big Bethel developed into one of the largest A.M.E. congregations in the South. Dickerson had another formidable rival in Richard H. Cain, a South Carolina state senator, congressman, and founder of the 3000-member Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina. South Carolina, like Georgia, burgeoned with thousands of newly-recruited A.M.E.s who delegated Cain and Turner to challenge the domination of northern based bishops and pastors within the denomination.

In 1865 Bishop Daniel A. Payne arrived in his native Charleston, South Carolina to spread African Methodism from the Carolinas to Florida. He organized the South Carolina Annual Conference which embraced North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. The denomination grew so rapidly that each state became a separate jurisdiction within two years. Bishop Payne brought numerous northern clergymen to establish and pastor southern A.M.E. congregations. Some of these ministers along with indigenous southern preachers sought greater representation for their region in the episcopacy and in various denominational offices. Several of these clergymen also held seats in state legislatures, Congress, and other government positions during Reconstruction. They gained valuable political experience which they used to increase their influence in church affairs.

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15 Smith, p. 116; Wright, The Bishops, p. 158; The Christian Recorder, June 29, 1876; February 12, 1885; Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, held in Baltimore, Md., May 1-31, 1876, pp. 290, 492-494.


Payne, who eschewed the political involvements of A.M.E. ministers, viewed the connectional aspirations of Turner and Cain with disfavor. Both were veteran politicians who also represented a growing southern constituency within the A.M.E. Church that Payne and his episcopal colleagues did not control. At the 1876 General Conference, Turner from Georgia and Cain from South Carolina won important denominational offices, Manager of the Publication Department and Secretary of Missions respectively. These victories symbolized growing southern influence in denominational affairs and made Turner and Cain formidable contenders for the A.M.E. bishopric. 18

Aspirants for the episcopacy arrived at the 1880 General Conference in St. Louis, Missouri to compete for three vacancies. The last election for the bishopric occurred in 1868 in Washington, D.C., when Thomas M. D. Ward, John M. Brown, and James A. Shorter became A.M.E. prelates. Denominational growth during the 1870s, however, convinced A.M.E. leaders to increase the number of episcopal districts from six to nine. Hence, three additional bishops would be elected. 19 Bishop Payne, who presided at the election, probably preferred Dickerson. He and Bishops Wayman, Campbell, and Shorter promoted his ministerial career and admired his educational achievements. His elevation to the episcopacy would also sustain northern influence in denominational affairs. Moreover, many of his views agreed with those of Bishop Payne. Both believed that black clergymen should devote themselves completely to the ministry and avoid participation in politics. Dickerson held that James Lynch, an A.M.E. minister who joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, and J. Sella Martin, former pastor of Joy Street Baptist Church in Boston, engaged in politics to the detriment of their spiritual calling. Dickerson also shared Payne's enthusiasm for an educated A.M.E. ministry. 20

Payne remembered the General Conference of 1880 with a mixture of praise and disdain. He noted that the delegates possessed "greater intelligence" and "business tact" than their predecessors. He resented, however, the assertive behavior of preachers from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia who had "no respect for age and experience, no respect for authority, [and] no respect for the Discipline which they had vowed to obey." These southern delegates, some of them with political experience in Reconstruction, came to the General Conference to express their opinions and gain greater influence for their region in national church affairs. Payne referred specifically to Turner and Cain, whose political activities "damaged" their "usefulness" as ambassadors "of the Cross," and one whom he described as "greatly lacking in moral conscience." 21

18 Walker, p. 125; Wright, The Bishops, pp. 121; 336-337.
After Bishop Wayman gave instructions to the election tellers, the balloting for the three new bishops began. Henry M. Turner defeated Dickerson on the first ballot. Turner, who competed with twenty-four other candidates, won with 135 votes. Dickerson was a distant second with 80 votes while Wesley J. Gaines of Georgia and Richard H. Cain of South Carolina trailed respectively with 46 votes and 42 votes. On the second ballot, Dickerson gained an important advantage. John T. Jenifer, Benjamin F. Lee, and Benjamin T. Tanner, northern ministers who sought the episcopacy on the first ballot, withdrew to support Dickerson's candidacy. With the South probably divided between Cain with 58 votes and Gaines with 43 votes, Dickerson gained 111 votes, and at the age of 36 became the youngest man ever elected to the A.M.E. bishopric. On the third ballot, Cain encountered Gaines and John T. Jenifer, a northern candidate who reentered the election. Although Cain polled 92 votes, he needed 5 additional votes to become a bishop. Gaines whose 35 votes probably came from southern delegates, and Jenifer who tallied 33 votes impeded Cain's effort to reach the episcopacy. On the fourth ballot, however, Cain finally attained success. Gaines, his southern rival, withdrew and helped him defeat Jenifer 112 votes to 52 votes.22 While Dickerson's election to the bishopric sustained northern influence in national church affairs, the elevation of Turner and Cain to the episcopacy meant that southern A.M.E.s gained a greater share in the governance of the denomination.

Dickerson immediately assumed his ecclesiastical responsibilities. After his consecration as bishop, he presided over a session of the General Conference. Several days later he and Bishop Campbell left St. Louis to visit nearby Alton, Illinois to preach at the A.M.E. Church. Dickerson also attended the 1880 General Conference of the British Methodist Episcopal Church in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The B.M.E. Church, formerly the Canadian branch of the A.M.E. Church, split from the parent denomination in 1856. The 1880 General Conference of the A.M.E. Church approved a resolution to reunite with the B.M.E. Church, and appointed a commission to implement action. Dickerson addressed B.M.E. delegates on the merits of reunion and urged them to support it. One B.M.E. from St. Catharines, Ontario remembered the enthusiastic response to Dickerson's presence. Although the bishop left during one of the sessions, "the entire conference rose spontaneously and applauded him." Dickerson's persuasiveness helped to convince the B.M.E. General Conference to endorse organic union.23

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In 1882 Dickerson returned to New York City to preach at the renovated Sullivan Street Church, his former congregation. His classmate at Lincoln University, the Rev. Charles W. Mossell, asked him and other A.M.E. dignitaries to visit Haiti. Although Dickerson did not go, he praised Charles and Mary Ella Mossell for their missionary activities in the Caribbean. Dickerson also congratulated H. C. C. Astwood, the U.S. Consul to Santo Domingo and an A.M.E. minister who promoted the denomination while performing his diplomatic duties. The bishop believed that Haiti and Santo Domingo could comprise a Missionary Conference.24

Dickerson and nine other A.M.E. representatives attended the Ecumenical Methodist Conference in London, England in 1881. He offered a prayer at a devotional service, and expressed his views on Methodism and education and interdenominational relations among Wesleyan groups in the United States. Dickerson argued that Methodism “has been sadly misunderstood by . . . [the] wealthy and cultured.” Although “it has always stooped to the lowly,” Methodism “born . . . amid classic surroundings,” promoted “the highest culture.” The various denominations had “highly trained pastors and . . . liberally cultivated people,” but Dickerson believed that “the necessities of the Church” required even greater commitments to higher education. Methodism, he declared, must meet the “foes” of both Christianity and Protestantism “on the field of letters.” “We choose our most highly cultivated men to edit our Church organs,” said the bishop, “because they are set for the defense of the Church.”25

Dickerson and other A.M.E. leaders, including Bishops Payne, Brown, and Shorter, participated in the ecumenical conference with delegates from the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. Although J. W. Tucker, a layman in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, noted the presence of his “colored brethren,” he seemed irritated by “frequent references” to the servile status of blacks before the Civil War. These reminders, he said, “are not germane to our business [and] productive of no good.” He advised the three black Methodist denominations to merge and direct their forces “to the evangelization of the colored race.” “If such a union be effected,” declared Tucker, “they are much more likely to attract the regards of the Christian world and to receive that material aid so important for them . . . at this time.” Before the benediction, an annoyed Bishop Dickerson responded to Tucker’s challenge. The prelate appeared to reject the claim that the M.E. Church, South was “deeply interested” in black evangelization, and that the black delegates were truly Tucker’s fellow

24 *The Christian Recorder*, October 21, 1880; September 26, 1882; Dickerson, *The Quadrennial Address*, pp. 7-8.
"countrymen" and his "brethren in Christ." Dickerson doubted whether "we have reached [this] Beulahland" alluded to by Tucker. He did not discuss the prospects for organic union among black Wesleyan groups, but the bishop stressed the need for respect, mutual confidence, and mutual sympathy among all Methodist denominations.

Delegates to the ecumenical conference attended meetings in several English cities to discuss Methodism in various parts of the world. At a London gathering, Dickerson and other representatives spoke on "Methodist Work on the Continent of America." The bishop also addressed audiences in Leeds and Birmingham. Dickerson told his Birmingham listeners that Methodism flourished "among the colored people in the United States." "Somehow," the prelate said, "his people took to Methodism naturally." He acknowledged the efforts of Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists to win black converts and found schools for freedmen, but "Methodism exceeded them all." He predicted that as soon as black Methodists "attended to their own people in America," they would "turn their efforts towards . . . Africa, to send to the darkness of that continent men . . . to preach to their brethren the unspeakable riches of salvation."

Perhaps the promising developments toward organic union with the British Methodist Episcopal Church encouraged A.M.E. leaders to seek a merger with the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. Founded in 1870, the C.M.E. Church consisted of former black members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Bishop Lucius H. Holsey, who represented the C.M.E.s at the London ecumenical meeting, visited an A.M.E. conference in Georgia over which Dickerson presided. Dickerson remarked that "if it should please God to bring about an organic union of African churches, it would be a matter of delight with me to have it strike in at first with the A.M.E. Church and C.M.E. Church." A short time after Holsey's appearance, a presiding elder in the M.E. Church, South suggested a union of "all Methodist churches of the colored race." Dickerson, however, demurred and replied that white Methodist churches must first set the example. Moreover, in 1884 he reported that efforts to merge with the C.M.E. Church had failed. Probably Colored Methodist officials, mindful of past A.M.E. resentments toward C.M.E. competition for new members among the freedmen, distrusted the ecumenical rhetoric of Dickerson and other denominational spokesmen.

Despite the importance of Dickerson's ecumenical activities, his principal responsibility as bishop lay in South Carolina and Georgia. The

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A.M.E. General Conference of 1880 assigned the three new episcopal leaders to southern jurisdictions. Dickerson became the prelate of the Sixth Episcopal District which embraced the South Carolina, the Columbia, the Georgia, and the North Georgia Annual Conferences. Additionally, the delegates to the General Conference mandated that the three new bishops establish southern residences. Dickerson's predecessor in the Sixth District, Bishop Campbell, lived in Philadelphia. With the assistance of the Columbia and Georgia Annual Conferences, Dickerson purchased a home in Columbia, South Carolina.29

Dickerson traveled in South Carolina and Georgia within weeks after the 1880 General Conference. He preached in Macon and at all four A.M.E. churches in Atlanta. In Charleston he delivered sermons in the city's two leading A.M.E. congregations, Emanuel and Morris Brown. Additionally, he and visiting Bishop John M. Brown dedicated two churches near Winnsboro, South Carolina. L. S. Priolean, a presiding elder in the Columbia Annual Conference, expressed confidence in Bishop Dickerson and declared that sectionalism within the denomination needed to disappear.30

Apparently, Dickerson's northern origins did not inhibit expansion in the Sixth Episcopal District. In 1878, two years before he arrived in the Palmetto state, the South Carolina Annual Conference, which consisted of 161 appointments, yielded 89 congregations to the newly organized Columbia Annual Conference. During Dickerson's supervision important improvements commenced in several of these South Carolina congregations. As the first bishop to visit John's Island, for example, he laid cornerstones for four new edifices within a group of five A.M.E. churches. Georgia experienced a rapid growth in new congregations. In 1881 the Augusta District in the Georgia Annual Conference gained eight new churches. The Griffin District grew with the addition of new congregations in La Grange and Corinth. This proliferation of new churches convinced Dickerson to establish the Macon Annual Conference in 1883 to embrace A.M.E. congregations in central Georgia.31

The bishop spoke frequently about education in his annual conferences and various district meetings. In 1881 when Dickerson met the North Georgia Annual Conference at Big Bethel, Atlanta, he told his listeners that one of his goals was to promote Christian education. Ignorance "made the negro inferior," he said, but education elevated him. In 1882 when the conference convened at Bethel, Augusta, the prelate stressed the importance of reading books written by Negro authors and to acquaint our churches and people with "the good productions of our own

29Smith, p. 135; Gaines, pp. 131-132.
30The Christian Recorder, August 5, 1880; August 12, 1880.
race.” Dickerson also encouraged leading ministers within his jurisdiction who wanted to establish colleges to educate preachers.\textsuperscript{32}

The founding of educational institutions in the Sixth Episcopal District was a by-product of A.M.E. expansion in South Carolina and Georgia. Ministers in the Columbia area established Payne Institute in Cokesbury, South Carolina in 1870, while another group of clergymen founded Payne High School in Cuthbert, Georgia in 1879. Despite the existence of these two schools, Wilberforce University continued to claim the loyalty and support of most A.M.E.s. The Rev. Wesley J. Gaines, a leader in the North Georgia Annual Conference, believed that Wilberforce, “the grandest enterprise owned by colored people,” deserved denominational backing. Although Gaines and other preachers in the South acknowledged the Ohio institution as the national university of the A.M.E. Church, they wanted southern schools to train ministers for the Sixth Episcopal District. Consequently, these clergymen established Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina and Morris Brown College in Atlanta, Georgia, to replace less desirable sites in Cokesbury and Cuthbert and to rival Wilberforce as the denomination’s principal educational center. Dickerson, despite his strong support of Wilberforce, acquiesced to the educational ambitions of his South Carolina and Georgia constituents.\textsuperscript{33}

The bishop endorsed the move of Payne Institute from Cokesbury to Columbia. At the 1880 session of the Columbia Annual Conference in Spartanburg, he appointed a board of trustees to secure a state charter to found Allen University. He also sought financial support for the school in the state’s two annual conferences. At the 1882 South Carolina Annual Conference in Aiken, for example, contributions for Allen amounted to over $400. The sale of the Cokesbury property additionally aided the fledgling institution. Housed in a mansion once owned by “a slaveholding aristocrat,” Allen University offered primary and secondary education, and it possessed a normal school and a college. Students who came from several parts of South Carolina and other states could also enroll in the law department from which four were graduated in 1884. After just one year of operation, Dickerson believed that Allen University had “reached a degree of success not attained by Payne Institute in ten years.” The Rev. James C. Waters, who served as president, attended Lincoln University with Bishop Dickerson and credited him with “bringing the small work of Payne Institute up to the magnificence of Allen University.”\textsuperscript{34}

When the bishop convened the North Georgia Annual Conference at Big Bethel, Atlanta, several ministers supported the establishment of an

\textsuperscript{32}Gaines, pp. 108, 137.
A.M.E. college. Wesley J. Gaines, then a presiding elder, received an appeal to aid Clark University. Steward Wylie, an officer at Big Bethel, reasoned that the A.M.E. Church should found its own institution in Atlanta instead of helping Clark, which later affiliated with the Northern Methodists. Additionally, A.M.E.s in Georgia probably believed that Atlanta was a better site for an educational institution than Cuthbert, where Payne High School was located. Gaines presented a resolution to found Morris Brown College and to form a committee to find a suitable place in Atlanta “for the training... of our sons and daughters.” Bishop Dickerson enthusiastically endorsed the proposals, and stressed the importance of education for both clergymen and laymen.  

Ministers in Georgia promised to give financial support to Morris Brown College through periodic contributions. Bishop Dickerson and the trustees from both conferences convened in February 1881 in Atlanta and decided to purchase a tract of land for $3,500 with contributions from the state’s two A.M.E. jurisdictions. Gaines led the effort to build Morris Brown. Although some ministers were slow to raise money from their congregations, he collected enough funds to complete construction in 1884 on Gaines Hall. In May at the 1884 General Conference, Bishop Dickerson reported that land for the Morris Brown campus had been paid for, and that classes would commence the following September. In both South Carolina and Georgia, indigenous A.M.E. preachers initiated the founding of Allen University and Morris Brown College. Since African Methodists in the northern wing of the denomination took special pride in Wilberforce, Dickerson supported southern efforts to establish schools to respond to regional educational needs.  

Numerous northern A.M.E. ministers preceded Bishop Dickerson in the Sixth Episcopal District. After the Civil War, Bishop Payne, for example, brought preachers from the New York, New England, and Philadelphia Annual Conferences to assist him in spreading the denomination to South Carolina and its adjacent states. Although some of these ministers were native southerners, most received their education and pastored congregations in the North. Dickerson also wanted northern A.M.E. clergymen in his district since they tended to be better educated than their southern colleagues. He welcomed James C. Waters, his Lincoln classmate, to the presidency of Allen University. Additionally, the bishop invited John T. Jenifer, a Wilberforce graduate and a leading pastor in the First Episcopal District, “to help” him “in the South.”


Some southern A.M.E. preachers, however, resented the presence of northern ministers and viewed them as “carpetbaggers.” One such clergyman was William E. Johnson of Sumter, South Carolina. Born in 1838, Johnson, a mulatto, was free before the Civil War and worked as a cabinet maker and eventually entered the A.M.E. ministry. During Reconstruction he participated in the South Carolina Constitutional Convention, and between 1868 and 1877 he represented Sumter in the state House and Senate. He and Richard H. Cain, a fellow A.M.E. preacher and legislator, became business and denominational associates. In 1870 Cain served as president of the Enterprise Railroad, “a horse-drawn freight streetcar line” in Charleston. Johnson belonged to the board of directors. The General Conference of 1876 chose Cain as corresponding secretary in the missionary department, but the bishops later removed him. Although he made an unsuccessful plea to the 1880 General Conference to reinstate him, W. E. Johnson strongly supported his appeal. When Cain successfully sought election to the episcopacy, Johnson endorsed his candidacy and formally presented him for consecration. 38

Dickerson recognized Johnson’s influence in South Carolina, and he made a vain attempt to mollify him. In Georgetown, at the 1884 South Carolina Annual Conference, for example, he assigned the Sumter clergyman to preach at a local Baptist church as an A.M.E. representative. Nonetheless, difficulties occurred when Dickerson commenced the election for General Conference delegates. When Johnson was chosen an alternate delegate, he accused Bishop Dickerson of politicking and demonstrating partiality in the election. Angered and disappointed, Johnson denounced the bishop and called his administration “damnable” and “hellish.” When he refused to retract his statements, Dickerson suspended him. 39

Johnson viewed the bishop as the embodiment of northern domination in the A.M.E. Church. Moreover, he and his followers believed that denominational assessments collected in southern jurisdictions were “so manipulated” at the General Conference that they seldom benefitted churches below the Mason-Dixon line. Allegedly, Dickerson and other officials achieved these objectives by filling southern pulpits with northern preachers and sympathetic southerners who lacked “any independence of character or of speech.” Since A.M.E. church property belonged to the denomination and bishops possessed the exclusive privilege of pastoral appointment, congregations in the South were left virtually powerless. 40

To remedy this inequity Johnson proposed to organize an independent African Methodist Episcopal Church of the South. He tried to per-
suade existing A.M.E. congregations to withdraw from the denomination and affiliate with his movement. He made an unsuccessful attempt in Charleston to bring Graham Chapel Church into his organization. In the absence of the pastor, Johnson occupied the pulpit and tried to convince the congregation to leave the A.M.E. Church. When the pastor returned, he sent for a policeman and eventually sued Johnson for his unlawful actions. Johnson was helped by J. E. Hayne, another preacher suspended by Bishop Dickerson, and some former trustees in Charleston’s Morris Brown Church in an effort to pull this important congregation out of the A.M.E. denomination. Samuel Washington, the pastor, was a Dickerson appointee. Although he was a West Indian, Johnson and Hayne viewed him as a representative of northern A.M.E. interests. When Washington selected new trustees for Morris Brown Church, the displaced officers took control of the building and accepted Hayne as their minister. After the 1884 General Conference, Bishop Turner resolved the issue by formally appointing Hayne to Morris Brown, thus preventing its departure from the denomination.41

Despite these setbacks in Charleston, Johnson attracted followers in several South Carolina cities, including Sumter, Orangeburg, Beaufort, and Georgetown, and some in Williamsburg County, Georgia. In 1885 he formally organized the Reformed Methodist Union Episcopal Church. Johnson, who viewed the bishopric as an anathema, assumed the presidency of the group. Although this secessionist movement drew few followers, it signified the depth of sectional tension within the A.M.E. Church.42 Moreover, with the ending of Reconstruction and the curtailment of black political participation, A.M.E. preachers like Johnson, who once satisfied their ambitions in secular politics, shifted their interests to the church and sought ecclesiastical prestige and influence. Henry M. Turner and Richard H. Cain were successful in making this transition, but Johnson was not.43

Perhaps the approach of the 1884 General Conference in Baltimore relieved Dickerson from some of his worries in the Sixth Episcopal District. Since his colleagues chose him to write The Quadrennial Address of the Bishops, his attention shifted from jurisdictional matters in South Carolina and Georgia to other denominational concerns. Dickerson stressed the importance of greater A.M.E. commitment in Africa, Haiti, and Santo Domingo. He also called for a better organized Board of Home

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41Tindall, pp. 193-194; Charleston News and Courier, May 6, 1884; May 7, 1884; May 8, 1884; These references in the Charleston News and Courier come from Tindall’s South Carolina Negroes.
and Foreign Missions. He advocated denominational support for Wilberforce, Allen, Morris Brown, and Paul Quinn College in Texas. Additionally, he made a special plea for an A.M.E. school established in Port-au-Prince, Haiti by Mary Ella Mossell. Other efforts for the general education of ministers and laymen were endorsed including the denomination’s Historical, Literary, and Educational Association, and a Connectional Sabbath School Union to disseminate religious literature to A.M.E. youth. The bishop stated that each annual conference could decide whether to have presiding elders and he urged the delegates to approve the ordination of women to the ministry. He also noted that 1884 marked 100 years since the founding of American Methodism at the Christmas Conference in Baltimore. Dickerson served as chairman of the Centennial Committee of the A.M.E. Church.44

After the General Conference, the bishop assumed his new assignment in the Second Episcopal District which embraced the Baltimore, Virginia, and North Carolina Annual Conferences. He already served within the jurisdiction during the previous quadrennium as an associate to the aging Bishop Payne. He attended the 1880 North Carolina Annual Conference in Raleigh, where he spoke on Christian education and preached the ordination sermon. As the district’s new prelate, he endorsed efforts to revitalize Wayman Chapel A.M.E. Church in Winchester, Virginia, he presided at the North Carolina Annual Conference in Morganton, and he approved the founding of Kittrell College. The idea originated in Raleigh where a northern white teacher with the help of some A.M.E. ministers taught Bible classes. Dickerson authorized the North Carolina Conference to purchase a site at Kittrell Springs to expand this educational endeavor.45

John T. Jenifer and James C. Waters and perhaps a few other close friends knew that Dickerson “suffered a heart malady which at any moment might” end his life. Asthma also weakened his already frail coronary system. As Dickerson presided at the 1884 North Georgia Annual Conference, Wesley J. Gaines noted that the bishop “had been suffering much in bodily affliction.” On their way to Morganton to the North Carolina Annual Conference, his wife “found him in a suffocating condition.” When he arrived for the Morganton meeting, Dickerson confessed to the Rev. R. H. W. Leak that “I am in poor health and may not be able to preach.” Nonetheless, in November 1884, he went to Columbus, Georgia, and helped Bishop Shorter preside at the Macon Annual Conference. Within a few weeks, however, he was back at his home in Columbia, South Carolina, where on December 20, 1884 he died, less than a month before his 41st birthday.46

44Dickerson, The Quadrennial Address, pp. 6-9, 14-18, 20-21, 26-27; The Christian Recorder, November 20, 1884.
45Smith, pp. 146, 357-358; The Christian Recorder, December 30, 1880; January 8, 1885; January 22, 1885; February 5, 1885.
Dickerson, unlike his contemporaries, Henry M. Turner and Richard H. Cain, eschewed political involvement and showed little interest in becoming a race leader. Nonetheless, he forcefully defended the legitimacy of the black church and he spoke out against racial injustice. In 1873 *The Christian Recorder* published his sermon on “The Reasons for the Existence and Continuance of Race Churches.” He asserted that black churches existed because of the racial exclusivity of white congregations. He also contended that “colored churches” had intelligent preachers coming from such institutions as Lincoln, Wilberforce, Howard, and Fisk to serve black people. He asserted that black churches needed their independence until racial equality was realized in American society. While delivering the Quadrennial Address at the 1884 General Conference, Dickerson protested the unfair treatment of three A.M.E. bishops whose first-class train tickets did not entitle them “to enjoy the rights, privileges and comforts for which they had paid.” He denounced the Supreme Court for declaring unconstitutional the Civil Rights Act of 1875, and he suggested that prayers “to the Giver of all good” will “afford us that relief which is denied us here among our fellows.”

Despite his brief presence in the A.M.E. episcopacy, Dickerson responded effectively to the aspirations of his southern constituents. His support of their efforts to found Allen, Morris Brown, and Kittrell represented his attempt to develop the southern wing of African Methodism and to allow it to find its place within the denomination. Although the schism initiated by William E. Johnson revealed the depth of sectional tension within the A.M.E. Church, it did not prevent other southern A.M.E.s from responding to a northern born episcopal leader who understood and promoted their religious and educational interests.

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46Payne, *Recollections*, pp. 311-312; Gaines, p. 154; *The Christian Recorder*, January 29, 1885; February 5, 1885; February 12, 1885; February 26, 1885.