

Building a Bigger Table for Celebrating Freedom's Eve



The Rev. Carlon Lassiter, pastor of St. John Baptist Church, preaches during the Freedom's Eve service at Historic First Baptist Church on New Year's Eve. (Johnette Weaver/First Baptist Church)



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PUBLISHED: January 2, 2026 at 1:00 PM EST | UPDATED: January 2, 2026 at 4:10 PM EST

On New Year's Eve, approximately 100 people gathered at Historic First Baptist Church for a Watch Night service to recognize Freedom's Eve. The date Dec. 31, 1862, is called Freedom's Eve because it was the night before President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation that freed nearly 4 million enslaved Black Americans from institutional slavery. Today, it is a time to reflect on the history of slavery and freedom as well as how to successfully navigate today's challenges.

The service was sponsored by Let Freedom Ring Foundation and First Baptist Church's History Committee. After sharing the traditional Freedom's Eve meal of fried chicken, black eyed peas, stewed tomatoes, collared greens, kale and cornbread, Connie

Matthews Harshaw, president of the foundation started the service by reading a portion of the Emancipation Proclamation:

“That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever, free; and the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and all persons held as slaves within any State or will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.”

Laura D. Hill

“These are the words the enslaved heard. Tonight we honor our ancestors and provide hope for our descendants,” she said. First Baptist Church, one of the oldest Black



congregations in the nation, dates back to 1776 and was a fitting location because ancestors of some of its current members would have gathered on Dec. 31, 1862, anticipating the news of their freedom.

Next, Devin Canaday described what New Year’s Eve typically looked like prior to 1862. “This was the tale of two Americas,” he began. “White Southern slave owners gathered

joyfully with family and friends. There were weddings and birth celebrations, and reconciliation of books. While enslaved Blacks worried and wondered what's in store tomorrow on New Year's Day. They lived with the threat that they or their children would be sold to settle a debt or given as a wedding gift."

After musical selections by First Baptist Church's choir, three local pastors took a deeper dive. The Rev. Reginald Davis, the senior pastor at First Baptist Church, preached that America was a nation struggling with its identity when the Emancipation Proclamation became the law of the land. "The pendulum swayed from bondage to freedom, from humiliation to human dignity, from national shame to Democratic claim," he said.

Davis was followed by the Rev. Fred Liggin, pastor of Williamsburg Christian Church, who descends from Elijah Liggin, an enslaver and confederate soldier. Liggin compared the joy of 19th century abolitionists to the agony of enslavers, who were still fighting in Civil War battles when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed.

The Rev. Carlon Lassiter, pastor of St. John's Baptist Church, rounded out the preaching by sharing the apprehension that enslaved people may have felt. Lassiter indicated that enslaved people were excited about becoming freed from the oppression of slavery, yet they feared violence and retaliation from individuals and organizations whose wealth was derived from slavery.



Guest enjoy the traditional meal of fried chicken, black eyed peas, stewed tomatoes and cornbread at the Freedom's Eve service at Historic First Baptist Church. (Johnette Weaver/First Baptist Church)

Although it would be nearly three years later before the 13th Amendment, signed on Dec. 6, 1863, abolished slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation was a bold and intentional step in the freedom process. As we prepare to celebrate our nation's 250th anniversary on July 4, 2026, we must continue to take bold and intentional steps to embrace the full story of our history, even the painful unsavory parts. This is how our nation heals from racial wounds.

Healing requires building bigger tables to "right" historical "wrongs," listening to members of historically marginalized communities and giving them a seat at policymaking tables, and committing resources — time, money and personnel — for reparative acts to address harm done by centuries of institutional racism.

When we come together to build a more liberating and truthful community, we all win!