



“The Church Community: The Oldest Black Church, Past and Present

Curriculum Unit 89.01.13
by Maizie P. Seabrook

James Varick, master and abolitionist from New York led a strong battalion of Christian warriors fighting for ecclesiastical freedom as early as 1796. This group was called the A.M.E. Church of New York. Later Zion was added to the name to avoid confusion with another Black Methodist sect. On November 11, 1818 Varick, leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church Society’s Christian warriors, intervened in the struggles for religious freedom between poor illiterate Black Methodists in New Haven, Connecticut and their educated masters. This enslavement was a strong contradiction to John Wesley’s (founder and leader of the world Methodist movement) opposition to human bondage. Though Wesley and his white followers were strict believers of Jesus Christ on the issue of humane treatment for all mankind, unfair treatment existed within their walls and slavery was rampant in America. Methodists in New England were victims of overt discrimination because of the strength of the Calvinist Movement. Yet, they were insensitive to blacks in their congregation. The very people who cooked, cleaned their homes and helped to rear their children could not kneel and pray with them at the same altar as they worshipped the same God.

Named in the memory of Bishop James Varick, founder and first Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, standing tall and shining as a beacon of light even in 1989 is a symbol of the blood, sweat and tears of the early Christian warriors. This symbol still remains because Jesus Christ consecrated it and it was dedicated to his service. The Varick Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church of New Haven, Connecticut was named in the memory of James Varick.

The New Haven Society experienced movement back and forth from both its membership and leadership. This back and forth movement served as a detriment in the struggle for religious freedom among Black Methodists at large. By 1841, the society was in possession of their own building. Methodism’s class meeting style (from its beginning) didn’t necessarily call for a “physical building” but a “spiritual building” of those with a sincere desire to dedicate themselves to God’s service. Therefore, for many years the New Haven Society worshipped wherever they could gather in privacy. Shortly after acquiring a place for worship a fire destroyed the building, a year later to be exact. There was not sufficient insurance coverage and the church experienced a serious loss.

It took more than 24 years of praying, planning, fundraising and many sacrifices so that in 1866 an edifice was purchased from the East Pearl Street Methodists. This edifice was moved from Fair Haven location to Foote Street in the Dixwell Neighborhood. The new worship quarters would embody a recommitment of dedication so to speak. It was a lovely structure depicting the old New England architecture with large white columns and

a huge bell tower. The foreparents in Zion spent a great deal of time in church. There was morning service, Sunday School, evening service, weekly service and class meetings on Friday.

During the formative years the John Wesley Society experienced its ups and downs and had many great leaders. The ministers included noted abolitionists, writers, medical doctors, all excellent orators. Frederick Douglas, Harriett Tubman and Sojourner Truth were devoted Zionists to mention a few. The list of leaders during this era is as long as it is impressive. It makes one wonder how early New Haven historical accounts could have overlooked such a rich heritage.

Frederick Douglas : Coincidental with the most creative era of freedom history of the A.M.E. Zion Church, "there escaped from slavery out of Maryland, a young man of native genius, with great natural gifts as an orator. But he was ignorant of his powers, and being a fugitive slave was slow in discovering them in the world." Frederick Douglas, the legend of all times, began to make himself a part of the Negro community of New Bedford, Massachusetts soon after he had settled down in their home on Elm Street. He was a member of the Sharp Street Methodist Church in Baltimore, and sought to renew his religious contacts. "He joined a local Methodist Church, but remained there only a short time. He discovered that Negroes were second-class communicants, sitting in special sections of the church." During a communion service, when Negroes were called on last, in disgust he walked out of the church never to return.

"At the South, I was a member of the Methodist Church. When I came north, I thought one Sunday I would attend communion, at one of the churches of my denomination, in the town I was staying. The white people gathered round the altar the blacks clustered by the door. After the good minister had served out the bread and wine to one portion of those near him, he said, "These may withdraw, and others come forward"; thus he proceeded till all the white members had been served. Then he drew a long breath, and looking out towards the door, exclaimed "Come up, colored friends, come up! for you know God is no respecter of persons? I haven't been there to see the sacraments taken since."

He joined the little schoolhouse church on Second Street, known as Zion, where he soon became a leading member of the congregation. Rev. William Serrington was the minister then, in 1838. Douglas states that "I found him a man of deep piety, and of high intelligence." Douglas was extremely active in the church, serving as sexton, Sunday School superintendent, steward, class leader, clerk and exhorter. Being a member of Little Zion, New Bedford and having numerous experiences there were among the happiest days of Frederick Douglas's life.

In the summer of 1845 Douglas sailed for England still a fugitive slave. In England and Scotland he worked and lectured on freedom. While there his friends raised money to purchase his freedom, and he became famous and a free man. He returned to America in the Spring of 1847 where his prestige had greatly increased.

Among the demonstrations of welcome, were a large gathering of Negro people in New York at Zion's (Mother Zion) Church, "to voice their joy at Douglas's success." Douglas soon made up his mind to move to Rochester, New York, where he founded the famous anti-slavery newspaper, *The North Star*, in the winter of 1847. The very first issue of *The North Star* carried the news that its editor was already involved in the operation of the Underground Railroad. "Rochester was the last main stop on the Underground. Douglas's house on Alexander Street became an important station. By 1850, Douglas was the leader of the Railroad in Rochester, superintending all the activities and having contact with agents in the rest of the country.

Frederick Douglas died in 1895. He had two large funerals, first in Washington, D.C. (where he spent his last days), held at the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church, with a wide range of clergymen and statesmen participating.

The second funeral was held in the huge Central Presbyterian Church at Rochester, because Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church was not large enough to hold the crowd; where also a wide range of clergymen and statesmen participated. The last time this church had held such a crowd was when “Douglas sat on a platform with President Harrison on the Sunday before the unveiling of the Soldier’s Monument in May, 1892.” Rev. Dr. James Edward Mason, presiding elder, and Rev. Wesley Ely, pastor of Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church, participated in these last rites. Bishop Alexander Walters, Dr. Mason, and ministers of the Western New York Conference, promoted principally by J.W. Thompson, Zion’s foremost layman in Rochester of that day, steered the Rochester community in building and dedicating the Douglas Monument. Unveiling ceremonies took place at Douglas Memorial Park, June 9, 1895, with a host of outstanding persons throughout the nation and state taking part. It was led by Governor Theodore Roosevelt, senators, congressmen, the Mayor of Rochester, the Douglas family, Susan B. Anthony and others.

Sojourner Truth : Sojourner Truth was born a slave in Ulster County, New York, about 1797, and named Isabella. Her mother was the third and last wife of an African called Baumfree, whose first two wives had been sold away from him. Elizabeth Baumfree, familiarly known as Mau-Mau Bett, had been the mother of ten or twelve boys and girls, “all but two of whom had been sold away to other plantations.” Isabella and her brother Peter remained with their mother until they were older. Isabella’s mother was a perpetual moralist, believed that the God of the slave and the God of the master were one and the same—and that He was good.

As a young girl, Isabella (Sojourner) had experienced the ignominy of being sold three times. When she was ten years old, on account of her mistress’ ill-will, she became the victim of various hardships. She was brutally beaten by her master. Deep gashes were cut into and blood streamed from the wounds to the ground below. All her life she would carry the scars of this beating with her as a remembrance of the occasion.

Isabella was a woman in her late twenties. She had been patiently waiting for July 4, 1827, when according to a law passed in 1817, she would be a free woman in New York State. Two years later she drifted into New York City, and one of the first things she did after obtaining employment was to join the church. At first she attended the class for Negroes in John Street Methodist Church, but later she transferred to the A.M.E. Zion Church on Church and Leonard Street where she wrote her name into fame.

From a story that was once told about Isabella (Sojourner) as she was attending a church service she went to the altar for prayer. After the prayer she extended her hand to another person who prayed beside her. For some reason something was strange yet familiar about the person whose handclasp she thought she recognized. After the prayer, she looked at the person beside her who looked familiar but she couldn’t think of her name. It puzzled her and she thought about trying to think of who was this person!? To find out some time later that it was her own sister. They had been separated when they were children due to slavery.

Isabella changed her name after traveling in the vicinity and passing through intensely hectic experiences, she said God had given her a new name on the road, since she was a journeying woman and her employment was proclaiming truth. She came to a religious meeting one night, and “rose suddenly and announced herself to be ‘Sojourner Truth’.” The Lord had commanded her, she said, to travel throughout the land to declare Truth! She became one of the most effective antislavery speakers, and later, she took a part in the movement for women’s suffrage.

Sojourner Truth was one of the greatest inspirations to her race, as she preached freedom and pleaded the cause of justice for all. After a life well spent in the service of mankind, she died at Battle Creek, Michigan on November 26, 1883 where she had lived during her last days.

Another abolitionist who belonged to the A.M.E. Zion denomination was Harriett Tubman.

Harriet Tubman known as “The Moses of her People” was the bravest and most courageous conductor of the Underground Railroad. In 1821 she was born a slave on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in Dorchester County, as Harriett Ross; inheriting her first name from her mother Harriett Green, and her surname from her father, Benjamin Ross, although as a slave she was not entitled to a legal name upon birth. She never had a day of schooling. “She was taken from her mother when she was an infant and placed into slave labor. At the age of five she knew what it was to have a mistress, to keep house, to take care of a baby, and to labor day and night. By the time Harriett was 12 or 13, she was laboring in the field. During this time, she became the victim of her master’s rage, who caught up a two-pound counter weight and hurled it toward the doorway. The block of iron struck her a stunning blow and she fell unconscious to the floor. When she regained consciousness, she took up prayer. She prayed sincerely for change. She however suffered a skull injury from the impact of that blow, causing a pressure upon her brain, from which she would suffer until death. It caused occasional sleepy spells, “but that brain which seemed so dull was full of busy thoughts, and her life problem was already trying to work itself out” at this early age. (Conrad,)

Harriett married John Tubman a free man in 1844. He never understood her desire to be free. In 1849, she ran away, accompanied by two brothers. Her brothers feared capture and returned soon after they set out, “but Harriett went on, and finally arrived in Pennsylvania.”

“When Harriett made her escape, the Underground Railroad was fairly well organized, both in the East and the Middle West, and was effective enough to harass the slave owners. The system had received its name from the modern industrial invention, the railroad, with its locomotives and trains, its stations and terminals.” The railroad was a network of secret routes in the northern free states and Canada. Harriett and hundreds like her made dangerous journeys into the South, and led thousands of Negroes to freedom.

The Underground Railroad took concrete form in New York with the organization of the Committee of Vigilance, at a meeting held in the A.M.E. Zion Church. “It became one of the most fearless of the antislavery groups and carried on the serious business of spiriting runaway slaves from place to place along the underground route. Its members were called ‘practical abolitionists’. Fugitives were referred to as ‘parcels’, intermediary stops as ‘stations’, and the committee’s agents as ‘conductors’.” Not only was Mother Zion Church an Underground Railroad station, but “runaways were concealed in such ‘stations’ as the basement of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, New York, and its pastor Henry Ward Beecher, was a ‘conductor’.”

Auburn, New York is where Harriett made her permanent home, and started a station of relief for the destitute, the lonely, and the aged. “From Auburn, Harriett’s bands were delivered to Rochester, where Frederick Douglass and the woman’s suffrage leader, Susan B. Anthony, housed the slaves, and paved the way for the last jump to Canada.” (Conrad, 1942) In Rochester, sometimes Harriett and her slave collections took shelter inside the A.M.E. Zion Church at Spring and Havor Streets. Fugitives by the score hid in its pews. “Here was also her spiritual home while in Rochester.” (Conrad, 1942).

Harriett was always deeply religious. She joined the A.M.E. Zion Church in Auburn and devoutly worshipped there until the end of her days. Prior to Emancipation, she had courageously led 316 slaves successfully to freedom, so that she could boast, “I never ditched my train, and I never lost a passenger.”

Harriett grew old and the 1880’s and 1890’s were hard years for her. Her second husband (Davis), her parents, and her old friends had passed away. However, she was extremely active. She took an active part in the growth of the Western New York Conference of the A.M.E. Zion Church, fought for her pension and

eventually established the Home for the Aged and Indigent. She also helped to build the local church (now Thompson Memorial), addressed public meetings and worked with the women suffragists of Auburn and the central New York region, appearing on the same platforms with its leaders, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, both of whom greatly admired and respected her (Conrad, 1942). "One of the last acts of Harriett's life was the purchase of twenty-five acres adjacent to her home." This property was deeded in her lifetime to the A.M.E. Zion Church for an old peoples' home. Harriett had become a legendary figure.

Harriett died in her home at Auburn, March 10, 1913. One year after her death, the people of Auburn, New York honored their great townswoman, dedicating a bronze tablet to her.

Forty years after her death, April 30, 1953, the citizens of Auburn assembled once again in large numbers for the dedication of Harriett's Home house on South Street, which had been rebuilt and furnished by the A.M.E. Zion Church, at a cost of \$30,000, led principally by Bishop W.J. Walls and the conferences of the First and Second Episcopal Districts; from 1944-1953, namely, New York, western New York, New England, Allegheny, and western North Carolina Conferences. People from all walks of life assembled to pay homage to this noble soldier of the cross, led by the Board of Bishops, general officers, general missionary society officers and members of the A.M.E. Zion Church, with Rev. and Mrs. Arthur E. May, co-directors of the Harriett Tubman Home. Mrs. Irene McCoy Gaines, president of the National Federation of Colored Women Clubs, of Chicago, guest speaker, Mrs. Howard (Sue Bailey) Thurman the outstanding leaders of Auburn, including the mayor (Mayor Nelson), State Senator George Metcalf, and other statesmen. The grand parade to the Court House ceremonies afterwards was led by Auburn High School Band.

The Educational Component

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church has sponsored institutional education practically since its beginning. The first little frame church built and dedicated to God in 1800 also had accommodation for a school. Most schools were housed in churches, and funds were granted through the city by the state legislature for such encouragement.

The A.M.E. Zion Churches first resolve was to have a school in each presiding elder's district, and later, a school in each Bishop's district. Some of these schools had promising beginnings and survived several decades. Others were shortlived. Only three of them have remained and are still grappling with the situation today. The A.M.E. Zion Church sponsors one four year college, Livingstone, located in Salisbury, North Carolina .Two junior colleges: Lomax-Hannon Junior College located in Greenville, Alabama and Clinton Junior College located in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Livingstone College is a liberal arts school that also has a Theological Seminary.

Livingstone College was found by Dr. Joseph Charles Price in 1881. Dr. Price named Livingstone College in memory of the great explorer and missionary to Africa, David Livingstone.

Dr. Joseph C. Price became the first president of Livingstone. Under his leadership the college grew like a mushroom. W.E.B. DuBois said that: "The star of achievement which Joseph C. Price, a black boy of those days, hitched his wagon to was the founding of a school for colored youth, a sort of black Harvard . . ." DuBois also said, had Price lived, Livingstone would have become a black Harvard. He was in touch with the leading philanthropists and received their support for the college. Livingstone College, from its beginning had a broad charter with no discrimination of race, creed or color.

There was a growing conception when Livingstone College was established that it was time for an institution

of learning by blacks for blacks. This self-creation of Livingstone College was to be a concrete justification of the educational enterprise of northern whites for leadership training of blacks. In opening the school at Salisbury, Price immediately secured funds for the enlargement of the building on the property purchased from Collins P. Huntington of New York, a philanthropic supporter of Dr. Price. The building was used as a dormitory for both teachers and students, auditorium-chapel, library and classrooms, and a kitchen and dining room in the basement, and named Huntington Hall. It was later destroyed by fire. Subsequent buildings were erected through the help of philanthropic supporters.

When I entered Livingstone College, Samuel Edward Duncan was the president. Under his leadership the largest number of buildings were erected as were of any president of the school during his ten year tenure. The Theological School got its highest consideration under his administration. And to date no other president has surpassed his accomplishments.

Clinton Junior College

Clinton College was founded in Rock Hill, South Carolina, in 1894 by presiding elder Nero A. Crockett. The school was named in honor of their presiding bishop, Isom Caleb Clinton, and received as a connectional institution in the 1896 General Conference. Many presidents have come and gone. Clinton College remains today and has a reputation of producing students with accurate and well-disciplined learning.

Lomax-Hannon Junior College

Lomax-Hannon College was organized in 1893 in Greenville, Alabama. It was first Greenville High School by Bishop Thomas H. Lomax and leading elders of the East Alabama Conference. It was the first high school, black or white, in Butler County.

Bishop John Wesley Alstork was responsible for lifting Lomax-Hannon to the level of junior college. Although the school had constant financial problems it continues to exist today and produces students who continue their education.

General Church Structure

The A.M.E. Zion Church has their rules and regulations outlined in the *Discipline*. In the discipline are the articles of religion as were used in the Methodist Church founded by John Wesley.

The A.M.E. Zion Church is overseen by ecclesiastical leaders called Bishops. Until the General Conference of 1988, there were twelve Bishops. Now there are thirteen Bishops. Each Bishop is elected by two-thirds of the General Conference and serves until his seventy-sixth birthday recently changed in 1988 to seventy-two years old.

The Bishop's responsibilities are:

- To preside in the annual and general conference;
- To form presiding elder districts according to the judgement of the conference;
- To make out the appointments of the preachers annually;

During the year a presiding elder is appointed to be a liaison between the local churches and pastors with the presiding Bishop.

Each Bishop has a section of the country to oversee. The work includes the U.S., the Virgin Islands, Jamaica, West Africa, India, England, and Tobago.

The presiding elder meets quarterly with the local laity and preacher of each church for the promotion of the spiritual and temporal upbuilding of the work committed to the charge. The presiding elder issues licenses to and instructs candidates for the ministry.

The Pastor in charge of each church is to carry out the 34 rules listed in the discipline. His basic responsibility is to organize the laity into Sunday School, Varick Christian Endeavor Societies, Woman's Home and Overseas Societies, and other boards and committees as required by the discipline. Through these organizations as well as tithes and offerings he must meet the obligations for the general district and annual conference budgets.

It is the responsibility of the Pastor in charge to organize a board of trustees with not less than three nor more than eleven persons, one of whom shall be the Pastor. Their major responsibility is to take care of church property and to see that it is insured and maintained.

The Steward Board is made up of three to nine persons and take charge of the money collected for the ministry. They are to provide a parsonage for the Pastor and his family and to also aid the needy and distressed members. This board is led by a Preacher's Steward.

The Stewardess Board is made up of females whose duty is to assist the Stewards in making provisions for the Pastor and his family.

The only lay members who have an official ordination is the Board of Deaconess. Their duties are to visit the sick, minister to the poor, pray with the dying, care for the orphans and to prepare the essentials for Holy Communion. No other lay member may prepare for the Communion except a Stewardess in case of the absence of a full compliment of Deaconess.

A Pastor may organize other community based programs and clubs as necessary.

Varick A.M.E. Zion Church Today

Varick today is in a connection with churches in Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, D.C. and the state of Washington.

It also has churches in the Bahamas, Barbados, Central Nigeria, East Ghana, West Africa, Guyana, South America, Jamaica, West Indies, Liberia, West Africa, India, London and Birmingham, England, New Rivers, South Africa, Nigeria, West Africa, Trinidad, Tobago, the Virgin Islands, and West Ghana, West Africa. The A.M.E. Zion Church has a total membership of over two million members.

At the General Conference of 1988 in Charlotte, North Carolina, the A.M.E. Zion Community College in Liberia, West Africa, has become another school that the A.M.E. Zion Church supports.

The Varick A.M.E. Zion Church, New Haven today has a membership of five hundred members. The pastor is

the Rev. Cleveland S. Thornhill II, a Yale Divinity School graduate. Though Rev. Thornhill's research he found that the parsonage was used for an Underground Railroad. Many Civic and Community groups as well as schools have toured the renovated parsonage. However, the tours have ceased due to the stairs being broken.

Lesson Plans

Vocabulary

1. denomination
2. A.M.E.Z.
3. Methodist
4. slavery
5. edifice
6. sacrifices
7. exhorter
8. suffrage
9. Holy Communion
10. indignities

1. Students will write respellings and definitions.
2. Students use words in sentences or make puzzles with the definitions and words.

Objectives

1. To familiarize students with a specific denomination of the church community, the A.M.E.Z. Church.
2. To help students identify the oldest black church in New Haven, and the third oldest church in the denomination.
3. To identify several famous black Americans who held memberships in this particular denomination.
4. To identify educational institutions that are directly supported by the A.M.E. Zion Church.
5. To show students the key role the church played in our heritage.

Activities

1. After teaching the lesson about famous black Americans students will do further research in the library.
 - a. They will read biographies about James Varick, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglas and Sojourner Truth.
 - b. They will do book reports after reading about each person.
 - c. They will use audio visuals (videos or filmstrips) to further enlighten them about each person.
2. Students will take a class trip to view the historical Varick A.M.E. Zion Church. While there, they will also view the area that was designated as part of the Underground Railroad.
3. Students will visit the historical societies of New Haven.
4. Students will locate A.M.E. Zion churches on a map by state.
5. Students will locate A.M.E. Zion churches in other parts of the world on a globe or world map.

Notes

Biographical materials related to this unit are available at the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute.

Reading List for Students

Bradford, Sarah H., *Harriett the Moses of Her People*. New York: George R. Lockwood & Son, 1886.

Douglas, Frederick, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Boston: DeWolfe, Fiske & Co., 1893.

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Reading List for Teachers

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Moore, John J., History of the A.M.E. Zion Church in America. York, PA.: Teachers Journal Office, 1884.

Walls, William J., The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Reality of the Black Church. Charlotte, NC: A.M.E. Zion Publishing House, 1974.

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Resources

The Discipline (latest edition) A.M.E. Zion Publishing House, Charlotte, North Carolina.

The Star of Zion Periodical Weekly A.M.E. Zion Publishing House, Charlotte, North Carolina.

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