

OUR HISTORICAL BIRTH

By the Church Historical Commission

PART 1 OF A 3-PART SERIES

MT. PISGAH'S EARLY BEGINNINGS

Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, the Mother Church of Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church of Jersey City, New Jersey, was founded in the year 1850 in Bergen Township, New Jersey (consolidated into Jersey City in 1870), by the Reverend Stephen Barrell, a Local Deacon in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. It was the first African Methodist Episcopal Church founded in Hudson County.

In June of 1851, land was deeded for the sum of \$1.00 to the trustees of Bethel A.M.E. Church by Henry M. Traphagen, a member of a prominent "Old Dutch" family of Jersey City. The land was deeded for the purpose of building a church for people of color. The building was also to be utilized as a school for educating the children of color of Bergen Township.

The land was located on Mill Rock Road at the bottom of Academy Street. The area was called Rock Hill due to a large rock formation on the property. This location was ideal because of its close proximity to a settlement of former enslaved people of color who lived along Mill Rock Road between Academy and Montgomery Streets.

Construction of the church began in the year 1852 and was made possible due to the financial assistance received from the members of Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church and Saint Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church, both located in Jersey City, as well as other prominent white citizens of Bergen Township and Jersey City.

The Reverend Charles Burch, an early pioneer of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, served as the first appointed pastor of Bethel A.M.E. Church from 1851 to 1853. Instrumental in the establishment of A.M.E. societies throughout New Jersey and other areas, he was reported to have blasted rocks with his hands in addition to having painted the interior of the church by himself.

The Dedicatory Service for the newly constructed church took place on Sunday, April 24, 1853.

The sermons during the day were delivered by two prominent white clergy, the Reverend A.W. McClure, pastor of the First Dutch Reformed Church of Bergen Township and the Reverend J. B. Wakeley, pastor of the Forsyth Street Methodist Episcopal Church of New York City.

Bethel A.M.E. Church, also referred to as the "African Church," the "African Methodist Episcopal Church of Bergen Township," and "Bethel of Bergen," served as a beacon for the black community. It served as a center for cultural, civic and social events. For educational purposes, the basement of the church was utilized as a school. In the year 1870, the passage of new laws made provisions for a free public education for all residents of Jersey City. As a result, Bethel's school was renamed "Colored School Number 2" and the Monmouth Street African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.) Church School was renamed "Colored School Number 1." Both schools were among the first for people of color in Hudson County. Both churches shared a special bond and like Bethel, the Monmouth Street A.M.E.Z. Church (present day Metropolitan A.M.E.Z. Church), was the first religious society for the people of color in its respective town. It was founded in Jersey City, New Jersey in the year 1846.

The congregations frequently worshipped together and during the summer months shared the same camp grounds for outdoor revival services. Some of the services were held at Vreeland's Woods, Harrison Grove and near Curries' Woods, all located in Greenville Township. Later in the 1870's, the congregations including, Salem Baptist Church held joint Sunday School barbeque outings in Glendale Park (present day Lincoln Park).

The members of Bethel worshipped on Mill Rock Road for approximately twenty years and by the year 1873, had moved up Bergen Hill to Sackett Street. During this period, this area was known as "Jersey City Heights." Bethel during this time was also referred to as the "Sackett Street Church" and "Bethel on the Heights." The Reverend Lewis S. Lewis, a pioneer of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was Bethel's pastor at this time. During the years 1873 to 1906, the church was located at nine different locations "On the Heights," and was under the leadership of twenty-two different pastors.

Through faith, hard work and by the Grace of God, the members of Bethel A.M.E. Church under the leadership of their pastor, the Reverend Isaac Horsey, were able to purchase a place of worship of their own. On May 10, 1906, the members purchased from the Seventh Day Adventist Church the property located at 25-27 Oak Street in Jersey City. The Dedicatory Service was held on Sunday, July 15, 1906. The Right Reverend Levi J. Coppin, the 30th Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and Presiding Prelate of the First Episcopal District and the Right Reverend Alexander Walters of Jersey City, New Jersey, the 24th Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church officiated.

In addition to a place of worship, the church served as a center for civic, educational, fraternal and political events. Membership drives for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) and voter registration drives were commonplace at Bethel. Nationally prominent people such as James Weldon Johnson and Mary White Ovington of the N.A.A.C.P., were keynote speakers at the church. Joseph Douglass, a well known and accomplished violinist, performed at the church. He was the grandson of the "Great Orator," and abolitionist Frederick Baily Douglass. Block parties and street fairs were held on Oak Street to raise capital in order to satisfy the outstanding debt of the church.

In the year 1914, the Reverend Abraham Lincoln Murray was appointed pastor of Bethel A.M.E. Church. An articulate and gifted preacher, Pastor Murray was popular and civic minded. Under his leadership the membership increased and the church ministries flourished. In the year 1916, a division in the church occurred between Pastor Murray and the trustees regarding the finances and operations of the church. Bethel was incorporated in the year 1905 as a "corporation for pecuniary profit." In this structure, the ultimate control and ownership of the church property resided with the trustees of the corporation. Pastor Murray attempted to reincorporate the church as a "Religious Society" under the control of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In this structure, Pastor Murray would have had control and ownership of the property would have belonged to the African Methodist Episcopal Church. While this case was being tried in the courtroom, Pastor Murray and his supporters worshipped at each others' residences. In late 1916, the court sided with the corporate trustees of Bethel. Pastor Murray was reassigned to a church in Mississippi in late November of 1916.

Unfortunately after the departure of the Reverend Murray, faithful Bethel member and prominent Jersey City dentist, Dr. William H. Beck, D.D.S., left Bethel and co-founded Thirkield Methodist Episcopal Mission in the year 1917 (present day Clair Memorial United Methodist Church). He served faithfully as the Superintendent of the Sunday School of Bethel A.M.E. Church for many years. While at Bethel, he implemented training for the Sunday School teachers and a grading system for the Sunday School children.

A terrible fire occurred at the church on Wednesday evening, June 1, 1921. By the time the fire was extinguished, only the outside walls and beams of the edifice were left standing. By the Grace of God, it was unoccupied and no one was injured. The Reverend Daniel J. Brown, was the pastor at this time. Having to find a place to worship while money was being raised to rebuild the church, the members worshipped at Arcanum Hall located at Clinton and Jackson Avenues. This served as the church home of Bethel until October 16, 1924, when the congregation, still under the pastorate of the Reverend Daniel J. Brown, returned to worship at the partially rebuilt building on Oak Street. The lower level of the church was used for worship.

ST. JOHN'S EARLY BEGINNINGS

Saint John African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church was founded in the year 1921, as a mission church. It was originally named Moore's Chapel and was located on Fifth Street in the downtown section of Jersey City, New Jersey. At this time the Reverend J. H. Hartley was the pastor. He was a former pulpit associate of Bethel A.M.E. Church of Jersey City, New Jersey. He was succeeded by the Reverends W. S. Sale and William V.D. Delaney, respectively. At this time, the Right Reverend William H. Heard, the 35th Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, presided over the First Episcopal District.

The early laity consisted of the following members: Bennie Baker, Filmore and Annie O. Beck (later Charter Members of Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church), Alice and Johnnie Collins, Heyward and Minnie David, Hattie Dunn, Lucille Robinson, E. Slade and family, Susie Diggs, Jane L. Adams, Moses, Katie and Viola Grant, Annabelle Speed and Martha Glove.

These early members worshipped at several locations in Jersey City. Listed in chronological order they were: Fifth Street, Grand Street, Washington Street, Fourth Street, Henderson Street and 371 Halladay Street.

In May of 1924, Moore's Chapel was renamed Saint John African Methodist Episcopal Church during the pastorate of the Reverend Farrior. During this time, the church experienced some hardships that resulted in a brief closure of the church building. At this time, the church was in transition with several ministers serving as pastor, although none were appointed. They were the Reverends King, J.J. Marina Mills and Henry Kirkland, respectively.

Later in the year 1924, Evangelist Martha E. Hill, a member of Bethel A.M.E. Church (later a Charter Member of Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church), recommended the Reverend Marvin L. Oliver for the position of pastor of Saint John. At the time, the Reverend Oliver was a pulpit associate and member of Bethel A.M.E. Church (later a Charter Member of Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church). The Reverend Oliver served as pastor for five years (1924-1929). During this time of hardship, Mrs. Rovena Jones graciously opened her home to Pastor Oliver and the Saint John family for worship services and meetings. Succeeding the Reverend Oliver as pastor were the Reverends Flemming, Stephens and Isaiah Mills, respectively. *To be continued...*