

MT. ZION AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL  
CHURCH OF NEW BRUNSWICK

African Methodism began in Philadelphia in 1787 with the preaching of Richard Allen. His strong doctrine of Self-help, Manhood and Involvement was heard by the black men of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware — even as far as Baltimore, Maryland. Not long after the A.M.E. Church was formally organized in 1816 the movement had its effect in New Brunswick.

Although no record is available to substantiate the theory, some scholarly clergy believe that Richard Allen himself may have visited New Brunswick. Certainly, he was a traveler of energy and a preacher of force. H. Solomon Hill, former pastor and President of Shorter College, has said, "I expect Richard Allen, himself, came here and preached just as the record says he did in Salem and Trenton."

Whether it was through a personal visit, or through the preaching of others, the blacks of New Brunswick who joined the very first effort of the Negro in America to walk alone, in freedom and independence. They heard the call to be the instruments through whom God would plant the tree of faith on Division Street, a tree which would grow in freedom and independence through every wind of adversity, every storm of bigotry, every winter of indifference, every steaming summer of poverty and want — and it would not simply survive but thrive and bear fruit.

The First Property and Church

According to a deed registered in Somerset County Court House, a lot 30x13.5 was purchased for \$417.73 from Abraham S. Clark and wife, for the little congregation with a membership of 30 persons. Rev. H. Solomon Hill remarks about this, "Buying a lot for \$417.73, at a time when laborers wages were \$.50 to .75 a day, meant the average member gave 20 days' earnings (with our current 5 day work week, that would be almost a month's



Rev. Jeremiah Pierce,  
Pastor 1891-1892

earnings) just to buy the land. They built a church on it at even greater sacrifice." Since this transfer of property apparently took place on December 12, 1829, it is reasonable to surmise that some other place, perhaps a private home, perhaps even that of Joseph and Jane Hoagland, served as a meeting place for the congregation for almost two years.

J.H. Morgan's "History of the New Jersey Conference of the A.M.E. Church"(1887) states that Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church of New Brunswick was organized in 1827 when the denomination was only 11 years old. It is known also that "Aunt Jane" Hoagland and her husband, Joseph Hoagland, were prominent organizers of the church and that they gave land to the church and the parcel is still part of the present church property. Piecing these few facts together it is possible to conjecture that the origin of Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church went something like this:

In 1827, Jane and Joseph Hoagland with other blacks in the New Brunswick area, perhaps with the assistance and encouragement of a circuit rider, organized to form a



This sketch by Herbert Marsh depicts the first church as described in early historical accounts.

congregation of the A.M.E. Church. They held meetings and prayed, perhaps in private homes, while they worked and saved to make their dream come true. The Hoaglands contributed a parcel of land to which the land purchased in 1829 was added and the first church was built. Other interpretations are, of course, possible but these facts are clear.

1. The congregation of Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church was organized in 1827.
2. By December 12, 1829, they held title to property on Division Street in New Brunswick on which the first church was built.
3. The first church was a small, frame structure that looked like "the little red schoolhouse" so dear to the hearts of our forefathers. There was a burying ground around it.

The first church and grounds as they have been described in a number of historical sources have been illustrated in a line drawing by Herbert Marsh reproduced here.

Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church and St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church were the first two

churches this side of the Pennsylvania Railroad. At that time, the railroad was not elevated. The worshippers used to bring fagots with them to make the fire. Sometimes the spiritual fire would be so great that other heat was not needed.

There was no musical instrument in the first church. Singing was rendered by the congregation without accompaniment. Later, a melodeon was installed, and played by a member, Sister Sibina Clark.

The first director of singing was a white man, Brother Wright. He was later succeeded by Brother Saunders. Still later, Brother Josiah Henson who loved and devoted his spare time to music, desired to organize a choir. Some strongly opposed this, feeling they could ill afford to pay for an organist. Others didn't like organ music. Considerable time would pass before the first Mason and Hamlin organ was secured.

Not only did the first congregation lack musical instruments, during the early days of the church there were no regular pastors. Circuit riders pastored the church. Morristown, Rahway, Trenton, Pennington, Freehold,