

## MOUNT ZION A.M.E. CHURCH

### 1896

Today we know the church that stands at Third and Penn Street, Riverton, as Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church. It was not always called by that name. From its earliest days, when it was known as the Mite Missionary Society, it has been understood by one and all to be a place where the Lord and the people came together. Its story is a long, sweet recitation of Christians obeying the call of the Almighty to be His witnesses here on earth.

Nearly all the records of the early days of the church were lost in a tragic fire that resulted when lightning struck the church in 1931, and those that were saved were later ruined when the house in which they were stored was damaged by heavy winds and rain that accompanied a hurricane. However, from the memories of long-time members and the few remaining records, it is known that the original organization date was either late in 1896 or early in 1897. The first meetings were held in what was called Robert's Hall, a building which is no longer in existence.

An issue of "The New Era" dated December, 1909, states that the officers of the Society were "Mrs. Alice Taylor, President; Mrs. C. Coggins, Vice-President; Mrs. Eliza Starks, Treasurer; Mrs. Martha Anthony, Recording Secretary; Mrs. Joseph Gould, Assistant Secretary; Mrs. Jennie Jackson, Correspondent."

The Society continued to meet in Robert's Hall until August of 1909. During those years the membership did not increase very much, but still the desire to have a church building of their own and the determination to raise the necessary funds to bring this to pass was continually in the minds and prayers of the few. The road was rocky but finally, having spent \$500 for the land and \$1,000 for the building, Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church was constructed at Third and Penn Street, and even though there were only 21 members, the first chapter of the church had been written! The names on the rolls are shown to have been George Madison, Joseph Clayton, Howard Johnson, George Corney, George Lee, William Cephas, Isaac Fawcett, Arthur Watts, Stephen Sparrow, George B. Coggins, Mrs. Alice Taylor, Mrs. Joseph Clayton, Mrs. Phillis Ashley, Miss Lydia Owens, Mrs. William Cephas, Mrs. Hassie Brown, Mrs. Martha Stills, Mrs. Lydia Watts, Mrs. Jennie Bond, Miss Allie Taylor and Miss Emma Harris. The pastor at that time was the Rev. H. H. Thomas, who began his work at Mt. Zion in 1909 and remained with this flock until 1915.

One of the first things the membership did after moving into the new church was to establish their Church School. This took place in 1910. At that time Mr. Howard Conwell was named superintendent, and he held this position until 1914, at which time Mr. Howard Washington became the school's second superintendent.

Mr. Washington, or "Pop Wash" as he is affectionately known to so many who have had the privilege of knowing him, served in this capacity for fifty-five years!

Many of the teachers who served with "Pop Wash" have long since passed away or moved out of the area. But many of those who were students still remember the days when they were receiving their Christian education in the church and the names that come to mind as they speak of those hours spent in study are: Mrs. S. Vincent, Mary Manual, Dorothy Houston, Anna Mae Brown, Betty McKim, Moriah Hunt Putty, Mrs. Dorothy Johnson Cato, Pearl Brown Taylor, Kathryn Conwell Nelson (she was the secretary for many years), Mary Webb Wright, Hilda Webb Johnson, Cora Barker, Rev. Lawrence Kelly and Alfred Dorsey, Sr.

There are those who still remain active in the church: Mrs. Camilla Lockwood, Maude G. Hamer, Edna Webb, Dolores Turner, Audrey Jones, Victor Washington, and William Dorsey, III, who, like Mrs. Kathryn Conwell Nelson, served for an extended period as Secretary.

After fifty-five years of service "Pop Wash" retired in 1969 and Mrs. Grace Dorsey was named Superintendent. She had already served for thirty-five years as a teacher when she began her term as superintendent. When Mrs. Dorsey retired in 1974, Mrs. Dorsey's teachers appointed her Superintendent Emeritus, and she is still serving the Sunday School Department as an advisor and pianist.

At the end of her term, Mrs. Dorsey appointed Mr. Thomas Townes as next superintendent of the Sunday School. He is still serving in that capacity and is blessed with a teaching staff which includes Mrs. Bessie Foakes, Naomi Kelly Townes, Elsie Myers Kidd, Jacqueline King Dorsey, Marion Swanson, Misses Cheryl James and Sylvia Kelly.

The main objective of the Sunday School is the religious training of the boys and girls that will enable them to arrive at a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ; and

the teaching staff, as well as all other arms of the church, give completely of their time and love in an effort to bring this to pass.

As we move back and forth, linking the past and the present, we need to stop and mourn at the year 1929. It was at this time that the church was struck by lightning and the resulting fire destroyed most of the back of the building. But adversity can be overcome, and the congregation gathered their forces and set about the chore of building a replacement for the burned-out building. It took a lot of work and some time, but by 1931 the new building was complete and is still serving the membership very well.

There are any number of programs underway in the church and the opportunities to serve in one capacity or another are ample. For example, the church has an Annual Missionary Day at which time the representative from the Conference comes to tell of the work in foreign missions. Mt. Zion A.M.E. is involved in mission work being done in Africa. They are happy to report that they have built a school in Nigeria and work to keep the school supplied with books and teaching materials.

The Music Department adds so much to the pleasure of those who are able to hear their ministry in music. The Senior Choir, under the direction of Maude Hamer, who also serves with Mrs. Ida Williams as pianist, sings on the first and third Sunday of every month. The Chancel Choir, directed by Sister Grace Dorsey sings on the fourth Sunday and sometimes on the first Sunday. There are also Youth choirs — the pre-teens are known as the Cherubs and the newest group, working under the direction of Sister Jane Washington, is called "The Gospel Teens."

Mt. Zion A.M.E. is a family church. The names from the past are oftentimes repeated in the present. The first time the name Dorsey comes up is when one speaks of the Rev. William A. Dorsey, Sr. However, William Dorsey, Jr., and his wife, Grace, are still active in the church, thereby becoming the second generation. The line goes on still another generation to include their children, William Dorsey, III, and his wife, Pearl, and William's brother, Maxwell, and his wife, Jacqueline. They mark the third generation. And still once more, the children of Mr. and Mrs. Dorsey, III, and Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell Dorsey, on the membership rolls, extend the church life of this one family to the fourth generation.

The Kellys are still another family whose roots are deeply embedded in the rich ground of Mt. Zion. Mrs. Naomi Kelly Townes is the daughter of the Rev. Frederick Kelly, who was active in Mt. Zion for many years. Her brother, the Rev. Lawrence Kelly, is now ministering to the St. Mark's A.M.E. Church in Cranford, N.J. Her sister is Valerie Kelly Dorsey, who is the wife of the Rev. Alfred S. Dorsey, Sr. They are currently serving the congregation at the A.M.E. Church in Kresson, N.J. The children of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Townes are in attendance at Mt. Zion, so here again is a multi-generation family.

"Pop" Washington's family also has ties which are strong in Mt. Zion. Mr. Washington came to the church around 1909 or 1910 and has been actively involved ever since. He and his wife, Edna, still attend and so do their sons and daughters as well as their grandchildren. Another three generations with representatives of all three still active in the church!

In truth, the congregation is not only the family of God, but in actual fact they are, time and time again, earthly families also. This reassuring continuity is cause for rejoicing when so much of life is changing and people are being moved around by career changes, educational pursuits, or sometimes by just plain restlessness.

The constituency of Mt. Zion is drawn from Cinnaminson, Palmyra and Riverton. All three towns have been well-served by members of the church. Brother William Dorsey, III, served as a member of the Township Council of Palmyra. Brother John Washington worked as a member of the Palmyra Board of Education. Sister Cammilla Lockwood is a member of the Board of Health of Cinnaminson, and Sister Maude Hamer is on the School Board of Cinnaminson.

The current rolls of the church show the membership to be 145. The Sunday School has an enrollment of approximately 50 youngsters. At the very beginning the numbers were so small — somewhere around 25 in 1909 — the growth that has taken place is great and they look forward to a still more productive future.

The newly purchased parsonage at 208 Penn Street is now occupied by the Rev. Marion Stokes and his family. Pastor Stokes came to the church in 1975.

The oldest active members in the church are Sisters Olivia Pearl Gibson and Laura Denby. They are much cherished by their fellow members.

It is good to look to the past and remember the names of those who came before and have passed on to rest eternally with the Lord — Brother and Sister George Madison, Brother and Mrs. Oliver Johnson, Brother Howard Washington, Brother and Mrs. Conwell, Brother John Willies, Sister Alice Taylor — these and many, many other names

come to mind. But in the present, Mt. Zion is full of life, anxious to meet today, and willing to prepare for tomorrow. The Lord has blessed the people of Mt. Zion in the past. He has given them work to do and the grace and strength to accomplish the task in this day and this place. He continues to use them for His purposes and to be their Guiding Light and Counsellor. In the days ahead, He will surely give over to them still other commissions; and with the same thankful hearts for opportunity to be His hands on earth, they will take to themselves whatever is given over to their care.

Mt. Zion Church is God's House. His people dwell there blessed and safely enfolded in His love, which endures all things, heals all sorrows and multiplies all joys.

