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Michigan Street Baptist Church; History; 1836-1908

Mary Burnett Talbert

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Michigan St. Bpt. Chur - History

235 [Box 6]

HISTORY OF THE MICHIGAN STREET BAPTIST CHURCH.

MARCH 1836 - 1908.

In looking over the records of the Buffalo Baptist association, formerly the Holland Purchase Association, we find this note:

During the ministry of Elisha Tucker, Pastor of the Washington Street Baptist church, a council was called to organize a colored Baptist Church, to be constituted of members from the Washington Street Church,-- March 9, 1836.

Thus we are able to fix with a certain degree of definiteness the institution of what was known for several years as the second Baptist Church of Buffalo. In 1904 Sister Emeline Coy, then being 79 years of age, in good health, with a vivid and clear recollection of the many interesting incidents connected with her Church, having enjoyed its fellowship for 58 years, looked back and with the warmth of unwonted emotion, kindling the chilled heart of old age, gave to us history, which now could never have been written.

At the touch of memory's wand, forms long since mingled with the dust, "bright dreams buried in the far dark past" and scenes that had vanished like "Fancy's fairy frost work, started up in all the freshness of life and reality until she forgot the present and lived only in the recollection of the past.

During the fall of the year 1836, thirteen men and women withdrew from the parent church, and formed the Second Baptist Church of Buffalo. It is interesting to note that the first child sent out from the Mother ^{Washington} Church, was the Michigan Street Church. This faithful band commenced their worship in a small wooden building, over an Undertaker's Establishment at the corner of Niagara and Eagle Streets. A colored gentleman named William Munroe, had been ordained and was chosen as their minister, occupying all the positions that the name

would indicate, Preacher, Pastor, Teacher, Janitor and Friend, his salary was raised by public subscription-- after administering to this little flock for two or three years left them, and a Mr. Verrinder, white, but not regular ordained minister, took charge of this little flock. It is interesting to note that the minutes of the 25th anniversary of the association, held in Springville Sept. 9th and 10th 1840, record for the first time the second Baptist Church with Charles E. Smith as clerk, and a membership of 19.

In the digest of letters from the churches, the one from the Second Baptist Church reads: "That they seem rather in a downcast state as Elder Munroe had left them, but they were enjoying the labors of Bro. Verrinder and beg your prayers for them;" we find however that Bro. Verrinder did not tarry long as pastor, and he was succeeded by Rev. Mr. Jeffrey, a white ordained minister.

In 1841, we find that for the first time the Church sends delegates to the association, Stephen Dutton, Deacon William Qualls and Deacon Peyton Harris. Deacon Qualls and Harris were respectively the Uncle and Grandfather of Mr. William Talbert.

In 1842, we find Rev. Dutton, a colored preacher from Toronto as pastor, with A. S. Brakenbough as clerk. Bro. Dutton added a great many to the Church by baptism, and brought the membership up to 49. During that year Mr. Verrinder was appointed as one of the delegates to the state convention. About this time the country was in the hands of a revolution and the angry clouds of the Mexican War were hovering over us. Among the resolutions adopted at the state convention was this one. No. 4, on Slavery-Resolved, that the System of Slavery is alike opposed to the spirit of the Gospel and the Principles of Justice, that we have no fellowship with it, and we recommend to the members of

our Churches the use of all suitable means to effect its entire abolition. In 1842 the Church wrote "Since your last meeting the LORD has been very merciful to us and has added many to our members, of such as we trust will be saved. The membership in 1843 reached 56. The Rev. Mr. Sharpe now took charge and in 1842 gave the right hand of fellowship to Sister Coy, who remained a faithful member until her death in January, 1905.

The Rev. Mr. Sharpe, seeing the needs of worshipping in a better building, commenced to solicit funds to build a suitable house of worship, where this little flock might serve GOD according to the dictates of their conscience. In looking about for a site, Deacon Wm. Qualls and Peyton Harris, reported to the church a very fine piece of land on Michigan Street near Batavia, and after being duly delegated to purchase what site they thought best, they bought the land where the Church is now situated, Batavia Street being changed to Broadway. Rev. Sharpe went to England in search of aid, but was not successful and returned home. It was at this point that the women of the Church came to the front and united themselves into a Ladies Aid Society-object to aid the brethren in the building of a church, and from that time until the present, may I add that it has fallen to the lot of the women of this Church to remain in the front in carrying on of the Gospel in this branch of the Master's vineyard. In 1844 with an increased membership of 56- they secured the services of Samuel H. Davis. In the letter to the Association that year they write that they have experienced those trials and encouragements common to the household of faith and add that they are doing all they can to build a house of worship. Mr. Peyton Harris succeeded in obtaining all of the lumber, brick and stone for the

erection of the building and the Pastor, Rev. Davis, a mason by trade did the mason's work.

That was a memorable day, the first Sabbath in June 1845, when the colored Baptist Church laid their corner stone. Such enthusiasm, such rejoicing, and with them rejoiced other ministers and Rev. Levi Tucker of the Washington St. Church and the members of his congregation, and all the ministers of the association joined in the laying of the corner stone. Work progressed rapidly on the building and the following spring they were able to worship in the basement. Mr. Sharpe at this point left and the Rev. Mr. Jefferies, a colored Preacher from Geneva took up the work; however his stay as a pastor was very short and in less than six months he departed for other fields, the membership being 66. Samuel Davis and Mr. Miller were the next ministers, both of whom were ordained in the basement of the Church. In 1848 the membership increased to 81 and the sabbath school was organized. In their Church letter to the association, they write that they have experienced those trials and encouragements common to the household of faith and add that they are doing all they can to finish the house of worship. While the brethren were engaged in doing all they could, the sisters purchased a small show case, which we still have, and sister Sarah Coy was intrusted with the needlework, proudly exhibited in this case. During the year the women raised \$260.00 from hand work.

On Feb. 14, 1849, Bro. F. Thomas, Deacon Wm. Qualls, and Peyton Harris were invited with other brethren to consult concerning the advisibility of granting the request of the First German Baptist Church. Rev. Miller remained about one year and then decided to go to Hayti, thus returning Samuel Davis to the Church, who contented himself by getting married and remaining three or four years.

During the pastorate of Rev. Miller in 1851, the name of the Church was recorded in the minutes as Michigan St. Baptist Church and not as Second Baptist. The membership reached the highest point it has ever reached, 93. During all of this time the members were wondering how they would be able to raise enough money to finish their main auditorium and after much prayer and consultation, the members decided to pay \$10.00 annually for the rent of a pew. Deacon Harris was again detailed to go out in search of more lumber, for the building of the pews. No doubt the question burned the deacon's mind and in his sleeping hours as well as his waking ones. The burden of the lumber was upon him. One sabbath afternoon while the pastor waxed eloquent in his sermon and had suddenly stopped to see who had annoyed his congregation by snoring in Church, Deacon Harris not yet fully aroused from his slumbers said in a loud voice, "Throw the lumber on the other side." It is needless to say that the services were broken up for the day, and Deacon Harris very much chagrined hastily beat his retreat to his home, which was next door to the Church, which building is still standing.

The services of a carpenter were finally secured who agreed to take his payment on what is now called the installment plan, and you can now in fancy's eye see the straight back seats with doors attached, so that the proud possessor of a pew, who had paid the required \$10.00 could walk proudly to his seat on a sabbath morning and open his door and after his family had entered close the door without any danger of intruders.

In 1849, the Church announced that they had completed and dedicated their House of Worship. The building being worth \$3500.00, and the land \$2000.00. While the courts of Missouri were deciding the

famous "Dred Scott" decision and one judge had declared that a colored man had no rights that a white man was bound to respect and John Brown had planned to do what he could to help burst the shackles which tied down the helpless slave, and the voice of GOD had spoken as he did to the Patriarchs of old, "Let my people go" and the thunder of Fort Sumpter, the pen of Garrison, and of Lovejoy and the call to arms had all united in one mighty clamor for unity and freedom, this little church bravely stood and oft-times only supplied from the association, receiving communion from the pastor of the Washington St. Church in the afternoon. Through all of her ordeals, every sabbath this Church was open for divine service. Here surely were rights that any man would dare respect.

For the next three years, Rev. Duke Anderson created a new spirit in the Church. In 1858, he was followed by Rev. J. Sella Martin from Detroit, a young man who had professed religion, decided that he wanted to cast his lot with these people and was ordained in the upper room of the church. The Sunday following his ordination, together with Rev. Anderson, they went to the foot of Erie St. and ⁱⁿ Lake Erie baptized 32, the youngest a girl 15 years of age, Miss Frankie Martin, now living and for many years a school teacher in Washington, D. C. On the following Sabbath the right hand of fellowship was given. Miss Katie and Sophia Brown of St. Catharines, Ontario, together with Miss Martin are the only ones now living.

During the next few years, Bro. Rantz of the German Baptist Church, Bro. Malori of the Washington St., and other ministers were regularly appointed by the pastor of the Washington St. Church to supply this pulpit. Each Sunday finding a new speaker, as the messenger happened along. Rev. Rufus Perry next took charge, then the Rev. F. J. Boag, Rev. Jones and Rev. Warring. The Church having had so many Speakers, ministers, preachers, pastors and divines, it was frequently said

that any minister who needed experience must first come and pass a probationary state and if successful in pleasing this august body, he was amply qualified to proceed further. Hence Rev. Perry came, saw and conquered in a year, accepting a call to a larger Church in New York. Then Rev. Calluis, tarries for a year, and like Peter's delivery from prison, he was gone, and they knew not where he had departed, but unlike Peter he did not arouse Rhoda or seek the house of prayer. Then came Rev. Warring of Toledo, Ohio, like doubting Thomas, unless he could see his work progress he felt called to other fields and departed to Washington, where he built a larger Church. His son Prof. Warring of Baltimore, Md., was with us this summer making a special trip to the Church his father had pastored.

Messrs. Lapins and Steniker in the true Paul-Barnabus missionary style, labored for several years without compensation, conducting both Church and Sabbath School.

In 1859, we find the name of Bro. R. Dickers as delegate to the Association, the father of Mr. Charles Dickers also Mr. James Henry, the father of Mrs. Minnie Powell. During this year the committee on resolutions again attacked the institution of American Slavery and deemed it as a system of oppression in its character and influence, evil only evil, and that continually, and we earnestly entreat our brethren to use all laudable means and measures for its removal. Bro. Francis from the Cedar St. Church helped supply the pulpit. In 1861 the membership decreased to 41. Among the delegates that year was Mr. L. D. Tucker, the uncle of Miss Fanny Catto. In 1862 the membership was 29. In 1863, the delegate was William Storum the father of Prof. James Storum of Washington. In 1867 the membership decreased to 36. In 1870, we find 24 members, and in 1872, 41 members. In 1877 Rev. J. Tanner supplied the Church, with a membership of 20. In 1882, the Church member-

ship decreased to 18. In 1883, Mr. Philip Peck, who had been a member years before, returned from California and acting as church clerk, Sunday School Superintendent, also minister, occupied the pulpit for nearly two years. The membership during those years numbered 13, 1883, 1884 and 1885. We might call them the faithful 13. And let me call the roll, not one is here to answer to his name, Sister Mary Bartlett, wife of Wm. Bartlett, Sister Sarah Coy, who during those years acted as janitor without pay, faithfully guarding all of the Church property, Sister Emeline Coy, Sister Mary Elebeck, mother of Mrs. William Bartlett, Sister Elvira Green, Brother John Gramby, Brother Philip Peck, Sister Anna Leslie, mother of Mrs. Laura Dowling, who came here a bride from Toronto, Ontario, in 1849, and united with the church, remaining a faithful member until her death in 1891. Sister Rachall Peters, sister of Mrs. Martha Cannon, Bro. Wm. Storum, Sister Anna M. Talbert, Mother of Mr. Wm. Talbert, Sister Charlotte Tucker, sister of Mrs. Catto, Sister Peyton Harris, the second wife of Mr. Peyton Harris.

Deacon Peyton Harris had been called home from Labor to Reward in 1882, and this little band of Worshippers were earnestly looking for the silver lining of the cloud which had settled over them. In 1885, with a debt of \$900.00 hanging over the church and with two male members, being old and infirm, unable to give any financial help, in vain they cast about for help. Deacon Storum then went to see the President of the Buffalo Baptist Union, Mr. E. L. Hedstrom. The history of the Church up to this year has been one of pastor, preachers, of delegates and assistants, but as truly as Lincoln has been called the Savior of his country, so the future generations must look upon Mr. E. L. Hedstrom as the Savior of this Church.

He heard the story from Mr. Storum and listened carefully, then told Mr. Storum that he would investigate and for him to call and see him later.

Those were anxious, trying hours for this little group of men and women and when Deacon Storum again visited Mr. Hedstrom, he told him to report to the brethren that the Union had decided to gather them under its care, and during the fall, new windows and other repairs were made. Jan. 1, 1886, was re-opening day and in the order of services printed that day, this verse was chosen for the opening: "LORD I have loved the hesitation of thy house, and the peace where Thine honor dwelleth." Mr. P. J. Ferris, Mr. W. D. Parsons, then Superintendent of the S. S. spoke and the principle address was given by Mr. Hedstrom. The services closed with this verse: "My house shall be called the house of prayer." Mr. Hedstrom then interested the Union in securing a pastor for the Church and the Rev. Mr. Holland Powell of Va. accepted the call and came in Feb. 1886, remaining four years. He succeeded in raising \$800.00 of the debt of the Church, added new members, put in a pool, for they had either used Washington St., Cedar St., Prospect Ave., or the Lake for their baptizing.

During that year Mr. Hedstrom supplied the Church with all of the coal needed for heating and for several years after saw that the Church was supplied with fuel at his expense.

Jan. 17, 1886, Rev. John Gordan in his farewell sermon at the Washington St. Church in recalling the history of the Church says, that on Jan. 20, 1844, 40 were dismissed to organize the Niagara Square Church. Feb. 4, 1849, 23 were dismissed to organize the First German Church. March 23, 1859, 49 were dismissed to start the Cedar St. June 10, 1865, 87 left to organize the 9th St. now Prosepct Ave. In 1882, 96 were dismissed to establish Dearborn St. and Delaware Ave. Thus six churches

have been planted by the membership of the old church. It is to be hoped that the future historians in recalling the history of the First Baptist Church will not forget, and yet will be proud of the fact that the first church set aside from the mother Washington Church was the Second Baptist or Michigan St. The Rev. Mr. Powell was called to Richmond, Va., and the Union found Rev. A. C. Quarles through Rev. Powell. Rev. Quarles remained two years, and left for other fields.

The Board cast their net about Wayland Seminary and Rev. J. Edward Nash, one of the graduates of 1892 was chosen, having shown at that time, although quite a young man, superior qualifications which seemed to fit him as pastor of such a charge. The Missionary Committee decided to engage him three months on trial, and if he could pass the probationary state to permanently engage him. Seventeen years ago you might have seen a slender youth with a wealth of hair coming into Buffalo to take charge of a congregation. (A hand full, for the church at that time numbered 34.) The required three months passed and at the end of that time, the Union presented to the Church their new pastor for better or for worse. The straight back seats which Deacon Harris had put in two years ago were still there. On either side were two coal stoves, not mates, but noted as much for giving out gas as heat. The large windows in front were of plain glass, painted white. No cushions were upon the seats, for that was a luxury unneeded, a small organ in the corner, opposite to the side which had been known as the Amen Corner furnished the music. One large chandelier furnished light for the church; an additional light for the pulpit was to be had from a well polished oil lamp. During the first year, some of the Sisters of the church decided that their minister, being so young, had not been well informed upon the subject of clerical dress, so unbeknown to the pastor, a committee of three, consisting of the Misses Coy and Bro. Peck, visited several tail-

oring establishments in search of a suitable ministerial coat for their new pastor. Such a one was found and duly presented, which was found to be quite too large, but the sisters assured him that he would grow to fit the coat, and being too timid to refuse to don the same, he put it on and the next Sabbath morning, with a collar which buttoned in the back and a coat buttoned to the neck, he preached the word of GOD. True to the predictions, the minister in course of time grew to fit the coat, and then outgrew the same. It must have been a happy day when Rev. Nash decided that he had outgrown the frock and packed it carefully away and presented it to a minister in Va. on one of his trips home, and we wonder not, but that coat is still doing ministerial duty.

During the pastorate of Rev. Nash he was assisted by Deacon Ben. Wright, who continued up to his death, and since that time, Deacon F. M. Tarry has performed the office alone. And so today we again have called the members of the Buffalo Baptist Union, the pastors of the sister churches, and other friends to rejoice with us in our re-opening. The improvements which have been made, you can now see.

But though the past can only be recalled in Fancy's eye, it is still in our power to so improve the present, that we can look back upon it in the evening of life with gratitude and pleasure, We should be interested in any improvements or suggestions that may tend to make our church home what it should be, the sweetest and most attractive spot this side of Heaven.

And so through these 16 years, Rev. Nash has labored earnestly with us, and we truly feel that he was called of GOD. During his administration, our minutes recall but one church clerk, Sister Florence Linza, who has served faithfully 16 years.

When we consider that our church is one of the few in the

downtown district, for we have seen our sister churches one by one move away from us; when we consider that for finance, the burden has been mainly upon the women of the church and none of them with large salaries. Can we doubt that our pastor does not follow the injunctions of the Scriptures, which says: "Take no money in thy purse, but preach the word to all people."

We have learned long ago to convert our trials into blessings, our joys into praises, our sighs into prayers. We believe that the Church should unite husband and wife, parents and children, by the most sacred of all bonds, that of Christian fellowship - and bind them all by a golden chain to the throne of GOD. And when death comes to sever these earthly ties and separate for a season those who have lived and walked in the shadow of these walls, we mourn not as those who have no hope, we look into the Valley of the Shadow of Death and find inscribed upon its portals, "Pleasant in life and in death not divided."

At that great day, how unlike any meeting on earth, no vacant seats to awaken painful recollections. No fear of separation to chill the blissful intercourse; then we shall be forever with each other, and forever with the LORD. All tears shall be wiped from our eyes and the days of sin and struggle and hope shall be ended and loved ones of every church shall be reconsecrated to GOD'S continuous service. Until then may GOD hasten the day that in every place, and in every church, we will unite and sing: "As for my house we will serve the LORD."

* * * * *

Written and read by Mrs. William H. Talbert at the re-opening of the Church, December 27, 1908.

Origins of the

1997

Michigan Street Baptist Church

Buffalo, New York

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Monroe Fordham¹

The 1828 *Directory for the Village of Buffalo* listed 59 "Names of Coloured" heads of families. In 1832, when the City of Buffalo was incorporated, the city directory listed the names of 68 colored heads of families.² The pre-Civil War African American population of Buffalo was centered in the fourth ward-- east of Main Street, north of South Division Street, and south of North Street.³ Michigan Street ran through the heart of the residential area where African Americans lived. Although most of the City's African American population lived in the fourth ward, that area was not an all-black area. In fact, the vast majority of the residents of the fourth ward were white.

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century Buffalo's free Black residents began to form a closely knit society concentrated in the Michigan-William Street area on the eastern fringe of the downtown commercial district. Hardly a recognized ethnic element at this time, the Negro population of the entire city numbered around 350 when the Michigan Street Baptist Church was built in 1845. Some Blacks who were domestic servants lived scattered throughout the city, but the majority listed in the 1840 census lived within two wards east of the central business district. A sociological study made by Niles Carpenter in 1927 shows that Buffalo's relatively small and cohesive Negro population continued to live and expand in the same area of the city at the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century.⁴

Early records of the region indicate that African Americans were present in the Buffalo area by the 1790s.⁵ Buffalo's location was a factor in attracting African Americans. Located in the far western, and at that time a fairly remote, part of the state, Buffalo was also just across the border from Canada.

Those factors made the region very attractive to fugitive slaves as well as free people of color who wanted a quick escape route from bounty hunters. African Americans helped to rebuild the city after it was destroyed by the British in the War of 1812. Blacks were present when the village was incorporated in 1822.

The city directory of 1838 noted the existence of a "colored Baptist and [a] colored Methodist society." That was the first time a Buffalo city directory noted the presence of an African American religious body. However, other primary sources note the existence of organized black religious activity in Buffalo by the early 1830s.⁶ In all probability, some level of informal organized and independent religious activity was present even earlier, especially in light of the fact that Buffalo had a documented sizable African American community back as early as the 1820s. In addition, some blacks worshiped in white churches. Religion was very important to northern free black communities and by the late 1790s, northern free blacks had begun to establish their own churches and other community agencies.⁷ While passing through western New York in 1837, Charles B. Ray, a traveling agent for the *Colored American* weekly newspaper filed a written report describing Buffalo's African American community.

The Colored community of Buffalo are, in many respects, above any community of our people I have visited during my western tour.... They have among them two religious societies, one benevolent, and three literary [societies]. The males spend

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

their winter evenings in debating moral and political questions. Their school is for the present discontinued for want of a teacher. Their children are in attendance at the white private schools.⁸

The congregation that became known as the Michigan Street Baptist church was formally organized between 1832 and 1837. A historical sketch of the church written around 1908 by the Rev. Dr. J. Edward Nash, the church's pastor, states that "During the ministry of Elisha Tucker, Pastor of the Washington Street Baptist Church, a council was called to organize a colored Baptist Church, to be constituted of members from the Washington Street Church."⁹ (The Buffalo city directory for 1836 lists "Tucker, Elisha, pastor of baptist ch."). The Washington Street Baptist Church was the first Baptist church to be established in Buffalo. It was apparently a white congregation that allowed blacks to worship in the facility. Rev. Nash's historical sketch further stated that,

During the fall of the year 1836, thirteen men and women withdrew from the parent church, and formed the Second Baptist Church of Buffalo. It is interesting to note that the first child sent out from the Mother Washington Church, was the Michigan Street Church. This faithful band commenced their worship in a small wooden building, over an Undertaker's Establishment at the corner of Niagara and Eagle Streets. A colored gentleman named William Munroe, had been ordained and

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

was chosen as their minister, occupying all the positions that the name would indicate, Preacher, Pastor, Teacher, Janitor and Friend, his salary was raised by public subscription--after administering to this little flock for two or three years left them, ...¹⁰

The 1839 and 1840 Buffalo city directories listed Rev. William Monroe as the pastor. In the 1840 directory Rev. Monroe is referred to as the pastor of "2d baptist church." In 1841 the weekly newspaper the *Colored American* referred to the Michigan Street Church as "Second Baptist Church." The historical sketch by Rev. Nash reported that "the minutes of the 25th anniversary of the [Buffalo Baptist?] association, held in Springville Sept. 9th and 10th 1840, record for the first time the second Baptist Church with Charles E. Smith as clerk, and a membership of 19".¹¹ By 1842 the membership had increased to 49.¹² In the 1848-49 city directory, the church is listed as "Michigan Street Second Baptist Church-colored." The following year, the words "Second Baptist" were dropped from the title. Prior to moving into the brick structure at 511 Michigan Street, the church occupied a "meeting room" on "Niagara Street, near Pearl."¹³

During the 1840s and 1850s, the Michigan Street congregation was served by numerous pastors including the Revs. William Monroe, A. Brown, Stephen Dutton, John Sharp, David Miller, Samuel H. Davis, D.W. Anderson, and J.S. Martin. Several of the church's early ministers were white. The white ministers

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

included, "Mr. Verrinder, white, but not regular ordained," and "Rev. Mr. Jeffrey, a white ordained minister."¹⁴ Officers included James L. Thomas, Carr Johnson, Nathan Steward, Peyton Harris, William Qualls, Henry K. Thomas, Henry Fields, John Dandridge, and Benjamin Young.¹⁵

Rev. Nash's historical sketch has a rather detailed account of the background to the construction of the church building at 511 Michigan Street. The campaign to build a new church began in earnest in 1842.

The Rev. Mr. Sharpe, seeing the needs of worshipping in a better building, commenced to solicit funds to build a suitable house of worship, where this little flock might serve GOD according to the dictates of their conscience. In looking about for a site, Deacon Wm. Qualls and Peyton Harris, reported to the church a very fine piece of land on Michigan Street near Batavia, and after being duly delegated to purchase what site they thought best, they bought the land where the Church is now situated, Batavia Street being changed to Broadway. Re. Sharpe went to England in search of aid, but was not successful and returned home. It was at this point that the women of the Church came to the front and united themselves into a Ladies Aid Society-object to aid the brethren in the building of a church....¹⁶

One of the Ladies' fundraising projects was to sell needlework to the public.¹⁷ The fundraising continued and by 1844 the church

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

had a membership of 56.¹⁸ In that year, "Mr. Peyton Harris succeeded in obtaining all of the lumber, brick and stone for the erection of the building and the Pastor, Rev. Davis, a mason by traded did the mason's work."¹⁹ The church cornerstone was laid in 1845 and the congregation held the first services in the new structure in 1846.

That was a memorable day, the first sabbath in June 1845, when the Colored Baptist Church laid their corner stone. Such enthusiasm, such rejoicing, and with them rejoiced other ministers and Rev. Levi Tucker of the Washington St. Church and the members of his congregation, and all the ministers of the [Buffalo Baptist?] association joined in the laying of the corner stone. Work progressed rapidly on the building and the following spring they were able to worship in the basement. Mr. Sharp at this point left and the Re. Mr. Jeffries, a colored preacher from Geneva took up the work; however his stay as a pastor was very short and in less than six months he departed for other fields, the membership being 66. Samuel Davis and Mr. Miller were the next minister[s], both of whom were ordained in the basement of the church. In 1848 the membership increased to 81 and the sabbath school was organized.²⁰

By 1849 the church "announced that they had completed and dedicated their House of Worship. The building being worth \$3500.00, and the land \$2000.00."²¹ By 1851 church membership

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

reached its highest point up to that date--93. "During all of this time the members were wondering how they would be able to raise enough money to finish their main auditorium and after much prayer and consultation, the members decided to pay \$10.00 annually for the rent of a pew."²²

Over the years the Michigan Street Baptist Church has been a central part of the history and culture of Buffalo's African American community. Even in the early decades of its existence as an independent institution, the theology of the African American church was not dramatically different from that of white Protestant churches of the ante-bellum period. However, drawing from the mainstream Protestant revival doctrines, the independent black church articulated themes that addressed the unique needs and conditions of free people of color who felt a strong kinship to the slave community.²³

The African American church emphasized a theology of hope and optimism at a time when northern blacks were a small minority in an often hostile environment. The 19th century black population of Buffalo never reached more than 1.5% of the total Buffalo population.²⁴ Moreover, a large portion of the pre-Civil War Buffalo black community was made up of transplanted southern blacks who had seen slavery first hand. Their religion and their church was often the strongest sustaining force in their lives as they tried to cope with slavery and "racial caste." The church

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

continued to meet important social, cultural, and spiritual needs even after slavery was abolished.

The pre-Civil War black church was the institution that was under the total control of blacks themselves. It was the institution that enabled African Americans to harness the energy and resources of the black community and to transform their ideas and aspirations into functional programs and activities. Like most Protestant religious institutions that advocated revival and reform doctrines, the African American church was active in the campaign against slavery. In addition, the African American church voiced strong opposition to racial prejudice and discrimination.

In 1838 a group of Buffalo's most influential colored men, which included at least four officers from the Michigan Street Baptist Church, published a statement protesting the "opprobrious epithets continually poured out against the colored citizens, and the contemptuous manner in which we are treated." The statement asked rhetorically, "are we deserving of such treatment?" Their answer was obvious -- "Surely not." The statement went on to outline how black Buffalonians had been loyal to their community and country. Black Buffalonians were said to be ready to "protect the city against any aggressors." (They were probably referring to fears of aggression from Canada).²⁵

In the pre-Civil War period the church was a meeting place for a wide range of community social and cultural activities, and

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

abolitionist and reform meetings. One such meeting took place in Buffalo in 1841. On March 28, 1841, "the colored citizens of the City of Buffalo met..., for the purpose of expressing their gratitude for the liberation of the *Amistad* captives." (The *Amistad* was a Spanish slave ship carrying African slaves to America. The slaves mutinied and took control of the ship. Eventually the ship was capture and the slaves arrested and held for trial. Following the intervention by abolitionists and a celebrated court case, the Africans were freed.) At the aforementioned meeting, Buffalo blacks offered several prayers. One prayer was offered by "Rev. A. Brown of the Second Baptist Church." Prayers were also offered by Nathan Steward and J. Dandridge, both officers of the Second Street Baptist Church. Several resolutions were passed, one thanking God for liberating the *Amistad* captives, another thanking federal officials and abolitionists for their roles in the case.²⁶

In 1842 the Michigan Street Baptist Church adopted a resolution opposing slavery. "Resolved, that the System of Slavery is alike opposed to the spirit of the Gospel and the Principles of Justice, that we have no fellowship with it, and we recommend to the members of our Churches the use of all suitable means to effect its entire abolition."²⁷

Black abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Highland Garnet, Martin Delany and others, made frequent stops in Buffalo to speak at anti-slavery gatherings.

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

In fact, Brown was a resident of Buffalo during the 1830s. Although providing assistance to fugitive slaves was a violation of federal law, it was widely held that the Michigan Street Baptist Church was a station on the "underground railroad." By the late 19th century, such stories had attained legendary status.

Members of the Michigan Street Baptist Church participated as delegates to the National Convention of Colored Citizens. Those conventions were annual events from 1830-1835. In the 1840s and 1850s the conventions were held only periodically. Delegates from free black communities throughout the North met to consider the plight of African Americans--slave and free, and to plan strategies to promote the uplift of Americans of color.

In 1843 the National Convention of Colored Citizens was held in Buffalo. Samuel H. Davis of Buffalo, who spent several years as pastor of the Michigan Street Baptist Church, was elected Chairman pro tem of that convention. Henry Thomas of Buffalo, an officer in the Michigan Street Baptist Church, was appointed as one of two convention secretaries. Davis gave the opening address. In that address Davis gave a strong condemnation of both southern slavery and northern prejudice and discrimination. After outlining the problems of blacks in the North and South, Davis asked a rhetorical question. What shall we do and who do we turn to for help? In answering his own question, Davis urged his listeners to "rise up and assert our rightful claims, and

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

plead our own cause." He asserted that "We ourselves, must be willing to contend for the rich boon of freedom and equal rights, or we shall never enjoy that boon."

In 1849 the National Colored Convention was held in Troy, New York. Peyton Harris, an officer in the Michigan Street Baptist Church was a delegate. Moreover, the convention elected Harris as one of three vice presidents.²⁸ Harris was described as "an early Negro resident of Buffalo," and as "one of the church founders." He was said to have been "comparatively wealthy." (In the 1930s, his great granddaughter--Mrs. Sarah May Keelan lived next door to the church).²⁹

Even in the pre-Civil War period the Michigan Street Baptist Church was considered the pride of Buffalo's African American community. It had been built especially for an African American congregation. It was not a hand-me-down building. A newspaper clipping from the early 20th century stated that "old church records tell of the pride the congregation had in its first gas lights," which were installed in the mid-1850s.³⁰

At the end of the 19th century, there were still only three African American churches in the city of Buffalo. Because of its location and its involvement in the community, the Michigan Street Baptist Church continued to be central to the the life and history of Buffalo's African American community. The National Registry nomination form highlights two developments from that period:

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

At the turn of the century two compelling community figures became associated with the Michigan Street Baptist Church and contributed greatly to the politicization of Buffalo's Blacks. The first was the Rev. Dr. J. Edward Nash (1868-1957) who became pastor of the church in the 1890s and remained there for 61 years during which time he was instrumental in founding the Buffalo Urban League and the local branch of the N.A.A.C.P. In 1953 Potter Street behind the church was renamed Nash Street in his honor, and the National Conference of Christians and Jews presented him its annual Brotherhood Award in the field of human relations....

The second prominent figure associated with the Michigan Street Baptist Church was Mary B. Talbert, a neighbor and an active parishioner. [Mrs. Talbert earned a national reputation as a reform activist]. Her house was at 521 Michigan Avenue, two doors from the church (now demolished).³¹ In 1905 W.E.B. DuBois and other prominent African American leaders met at Mrs. Talbert's home (521 Michigan Avenue) and adopted the resolutions that led to the founding of the Niagara Movement.

By the third decade of the 20th century the "Great Migration" and related factors had begun to transform historically small northern African American communities like that of Buffalo. By 1930 the African American population of Buffalo had grown to more than 13,000. A description of the lower part of Michigan Street,

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

which was written in the late 1920s, suggests some of the changes that historical evolution had in store for the Michigan Street community. "Gradually the Negro community grew up here taking possession of homes vacated by a line of owners and renters before them. They are among the oldest buildings in the city, less than four blocks from the business district and flanked on another side by a warehouse and light manufacturing area." The report continued,

Michigan Avenue, the main thoroughfare, once a neat and orderly street.... begins properly at the bridge near the Union Station, crosses Seneca Street into a string of pawn shops, light manufacturing, second hand clothing stores and cheap eating places before it reaches the Negroes. Swan street, the extreme southern boundary of the Negro residence area, once stiff and aristocratic, is a street of dilapidated rooming houses. There still stand the solid looking square brick buildings with light individual differentiation but conforming to a type--now weather beaten and old and with the look of long neglect.... Further on Michigan Avenue are auto repair shops, restaurants, clothes cleaning shops, [and] second hand furniture stores.³²

And of course at 511 Michigan stood the historic Michigan Street Baptist Church.

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

As the northern black communities increased in size, the number of churches and other agencies serving those communities also increased. In time, other churches and community agencies began to assume some of the functions that the Michigan Street Baptist Church had performed for more than a century. Although the Michigan Street Church has given up center stage in community life, its significance in the 19th and early 20th century history of Buffalo's African American community should be celebrated and memorialized by all future generations. The Michigan Street Baptist Church, at 511 Michigan Street, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. The Michigan Street Preservation Corporation is working to restore and preserve the site as a community landmark.

¹ Monroe Fordham is a Professor of History at Buffalo State College.

² The Directories for the city of Buffalo that are cited in this report were housed in the library of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

³ The fourth ward as defined in the 1850 Federal Census.

⁴ National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form, for Michigan Street Baptist Church.

⁵ Atkins, Barton, *Modern Antiquities: Sketches of Early Buffalo*, pp. 6-7.

⁶ See John L. Myers, "The Beginning of Anti-Slavery Agencies in New York State, 1833-1836." *New York History*, Vol. 43, April, 1962, p. 160; see also Payne, Daniel A., *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, (New York: Johnson Reprint Co., 1968), pp. 117-120.

⁷ Woodson, Carter, *The History of the Negro Church*. (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers), Chapter IV.

⁸ *The Colored American*, November 4, 1837, p.2, c.2.

⁹ According to Rev. Nash's six page typescript, the source of that statement was the records of the Buffalo Baptist Association, formerly the Holland Purchase Association. The statement in quotes was dated March 9, 1836. Rev. Nash's, "History of the Michigan Street Baptist Church, March, 1836-1908," was loaned to this author by Bishop William Henderson. Hereafter, that paper will be referred to as Nash, "History."

¹⁰ Nash, "History," p. 2.

¹¹ Nash, "History," p. 2.

¹² Nash, "History," pp. 2, 3.

¹³ The Buffalo city directory of 1842 lists the Niagara Street location.

¹⁴ Nash, "History," p.2.

¹⁵ All except A. Brown were listed in the Buffalo city directories. Brown was named in the *Colored American*, April 17, 1841. Stephen Dutton, William Qualls, and Peyton Harris were also listed in Nash's, "History," as the first delegates to go to a Buffalo Baptist Association meeting. See Nash, "History," p.2 Qualls and Harris were described as the uncle and grandfather respectively of Mr. William Talbert, an early 20th century member of the church and a resident of 521 Michigan Street.

¹⁶ Nash, "History," p.3. Rev. Nash's historical sketch is drawn primarily from an interview he conducted in 1904 with an elderly member of the Michigan Street Church. "Sister Emaline Coy" was described as being "79 years old ...in good health, with a vivid and clear recollection of the many interesting incidents connected with her church." Sister Coy joined the Michigan Street Baptist Church in 1846 at the age of 21.

¹⁷ Nash, "History," p.4.

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

¹⁸ Nash, "History," p. 3.

¹⁹ Nash, "History," pp. 3-4.

²⁰ Nash, "History," p. 4.

²¹ Nash, "History," p.5.

²² Nash, "History," p.5.

²³ For an examination of ante-bellum northern black religious themes see, Monroe Fordham, *Major Themes in Northern Black Religious Thought, 1800-1860*, Hicksville, New York: Exposition-University Books.

²⁴ The number ranged from about 300 in the 1830s to approximately 1100 in 1890.

²⁵ *The Colored American*, January 27, 1838, p.1, c.4. The four officers of the Michigan Street Baptist Church were Peyton Harris, Nathan Steward, William Qualls, and John Dandridge.

²⁶ *The Colored American*, April 17, 1841, P.2, C.1.

²⁷ Nash, "History," p.3.

²⁸ Bell, Howard Holman, *Minutes and Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864*. (New York: Arno Press and New York Times). Specifically, see the proceedings of the 1843, the 1849 conventions.

²⁹ Newspaper clipping, dated June 30, 1939, in the clipping file at the Buffalo/Erie County Historical Society Library.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form, for Michigan Street Baptist Church.

Afro-Americans in New York Life and History

³² Johnson, Charles S., "The Negro in Buffalo," a paper written for the Buffalo Urban League, p.71. The paper was written around 1927. A copy is in the University Archives, SUNY at Buffalo.

LEGIBILITY ON ORIGINAL DOCUMENT POOR

BUFF

Famous in Slave Days:

Buffalo's last link with the days when the question of abolition or retention of slavery rocked the country is the old Michigan Avenue Baptist Church. It was a station on the Underground Railway by which slaves were helped on their way to escape in Canada. It is changed little from the time when it harbored hundreds of men and women who slept on its pews and ate in its cellar.



Old Church Once Station On Underground Railway

Michigan Avenue edifice had adventurous career in days before Civil War

Austere and simple in its exterior and interior, the old Michigan Avenue Baptist Church in appearance does not betray its history of adventurous happenings, or the fact that it is the most beloved shrine of the Negro population of Buffalo. The red brick edifice is declared by local historians to be the only remaining station of the old underground railroad left in the vicinity of Buffalo.

There are old mansions near the

slaves, they slept on the hard benches, which still stand in the basement.

There are dozens of Negro families in Toronto and other nearby Canadian cities who have a great affection for the Buffalo church, for in it their grandfathers and grandmothers rested before their final dash for freedom in Canada.

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There are old mansions near the shore of Lake Ontario in Western New York which still bear proudly on their doors the secret insignia which marked them in the days before the Civil War, as havens of refuge for escaping slaves from the South on their way to Canada. However, the old church in Michigan Avenue, just south of Broadway, is Buffalo's last tangible link with the

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There are dozens of Negro families in Toronto and other nearby Canadian cities who have a great affection for the Buffalo church, for in it their grandfathers and grandmothers rested before their final dash for freedom in Canada.

There is not a single sign in the old church that it once was a haven for men and women running away from slavery. The church remains the same as it was when it was built in 1845, except for electric lights fitted into old candelabra. From its appearance it is difficult to believe that the edifice is one of the proudest remaining monuments to the battle for human freedom.

times when the question of whether runaway slaves should be arrested or aided was a stirring national question.

Few Changes in Building

According to the Rev. J. Edward Nash, pastor of the church for almost 45 years, there have been few changes in the church since 1845 when it was built. Old church records tell of the pride the congregation had in its first gas lights. They were installed more than 80 years ago after the congregation had been formed about eleven years. The original gas chandelier still is in the vestibule.

The church was built for a Negro congregation and was something of a protege of the First Baptist Church, which was located then in Washington Street. Prominent in the founding of the congregation was Payton Harris, an early Negro resident of Buffalo, who was considered comparatively wealthy. His great-granddaughter, Mrs. Sarah May Keelan, lives next door to the church now in Michigan Avenue.

The slavery question began to rock the United States shortly after the church was built. The Abolitionists had a strong following and an active membership in Buffalo and Western New York. Because their activities were illegal, such as bootlegging was during the twenties, the most active of the slave runners took pains to conceal their membership in the underground railway as well as their activities.

It is known that some of the wealthiest and most prominent of families of Buffalo before the Civil War were ardent Abolitionists. They not only contributed money but personal services also in aiding slaves to escape across the Niagara River to Fort Erie, where they were free from pursuit and bondage.

Next Station Westfield

The nearest underground railway station was Westfield. From there, carriages drawn by swift horses brought escaped slaves to Buffalo during the night. Stormy nights were favored for the trips to avoid traffic. When the runaways arrived in Buffalo, they were brought to the Michigan Avenue Baptist Church. They stayed there for days and often for weeks until agitation about the fugitives died down and then they were helped across the river. The escaped slaves were fed in the basement and slept on the padded pews of the church itself.

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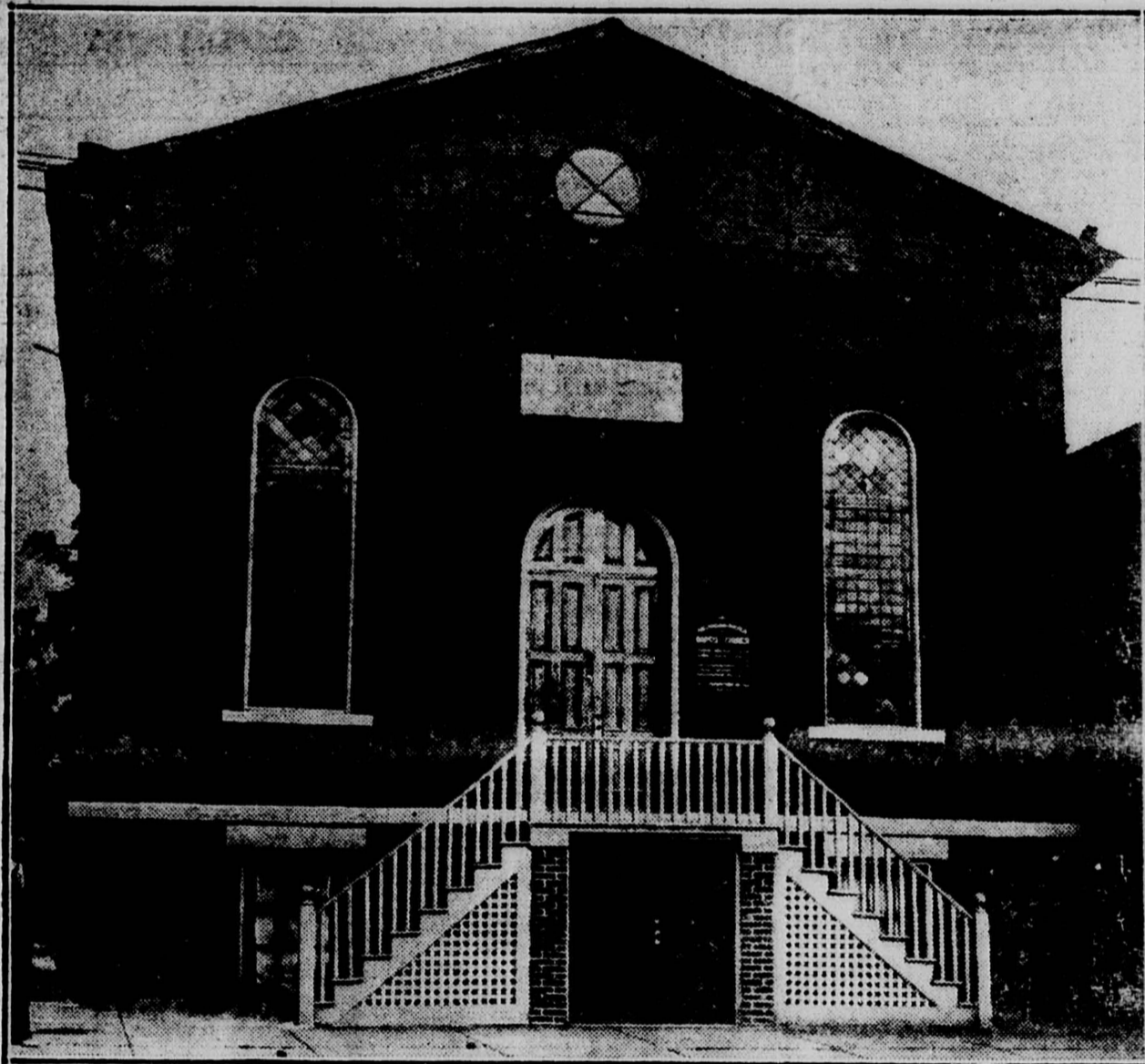
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