

Preservation Profile: "Durham Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church: Making the Dream a Reality"

Just east of downtown Buffalo, New York, in a desolate area of new housing in the midst of vacant lots, sits Durham Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E. Zion) Church, a brick edifice dating from the early 1920s. Designated an official City of Buffalo landmark, our church was the first religious structure built outright specifically for an African-American congregation in the city; it is also a cultural and historic landmark within the black community. Since its construction, this church has continued to serve African Americans as a place of worship. As the neighborhood all but disappeared, the church survived testimony to the resilience of Buffalo's African-American population and to the esteem with which the church is held within our community.

For many African Americans, the church is more than just a beautiful building; it is the center of their lives. It was in church that African Americans were able to take control of their lives free from outside interference. The church was a haven from an oppressive world; a place where blacks could tend to their own needs, nurture a positive identity, and pursue their own dreams. African Americans established churches in communities throughout the country. Those who were more fortunate and tenacious were able to overcome overwhelming adversity and build their own houses of worship from the ground up, as our mother congregation did seventy-one years ago. Building their own church, rather than taking over an abandoned structure as a number of other congregations did, was a significant accomplishment for our forebears, and we simply can not abandon this place, sacred to all African Americans in Buffalo. Despite the devastation of the immediate environment, we have embarked on a campaign to repair and restore our church and to build an educational and community wing.

History of Durham Memorial Church

The building that houses Durham Memorial Church was built in 1922-23 as the new home of St. Luke's A.M.E. Zion Church. Our congregation, a splinter group of St. Luke's, was formed in 1958 specifically to remain in this building after St. Luke's, by then a much larger congregation, had voted to move to more spacious quarters elsewhere in the city.

Although we are celebrating thirty-six years as a congregation this year, the historical roots of Durham Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church go back to 1831 when the Colored Methodist Society, Buffalo's first black religious organization, was established. All African-American congregations in Buffalo descend from either this society or from a separate Baptist congregation that dates from about the same time.

From the Colored Methodist Society evolved many other religious organizations including People's Reformed Methodist Church. That congregation reorganized in 1906 and joined the A.M.E. Zion Church under the name St. Luke's A.M.E. Zion Church. It remodeled a building on Michigan Avenue into one of the finest structures owned by blacks in Buffalo. The growing congregation and its related activities placed a tremendous strain on the church. After the Rev. Henry Durham was appointed as the new pastor in 1914, the congregation embarked on building a new complex that would provide both a larger and more dignified sanctuary, as well as an education building for the congregation's extensive programs. The church purchased a lot on East Eagle Street, just east of downtown, and construction began in 1922 with the cornerstone being laid on Palm Sunday. The first service in the new church was held a year later on Easter Sunday.

This new edifice, built at a cost of \$57,000, was the first church building in Buffalo to be built by a black congregation and was, for years, the largest African-American church building in the city. Because of the building's size, numerous black congregations would hold their annual state meetings here, and Masonic groups would use it for their large public services. Designed by Louis Greenstein, it is a brick and cast-stone Neo-Gothic structure with a squat bell tower to the side. Although the congregation completed the church, it did not raise enough money to construct the educational wing. This severely curtailed the congregation's ability to continue its various social programs. While Pastor Durham and the members hoped that money would become available later, 1957 still had not raised the funds for the educational wing, and the congregation had outgrown its church. With membership approaching 1,000, the congregation considered plans for building an addition, remodeling the existing facility, or relocating. After weighing these options, the congregation voted to relocate and purchased a building elsewhere in Buffalo.

However, some members did not agree with this decision. This group petitioned the Bishop to organize a new A.M.E. Zion Society that could remain at the East Eagle Street site, and the request was granted. Out of respect for the man who had served as pastor when the church was being built, the congregation named the new society the Henry Durham Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church. The new congregation chose to keep alive, Pastor Durham's dream of ministering to the people of this section of Buffalo. An important, even essential part of this dream was to provide space needed to house the programs and services that are such an important part of black congregations.

Over the years, pastors have come and gone each wanting to complete the dreams of those before them. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the congregation raised money, which it set aside for a new educational building/community center that would also have included a senior citizens center. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held, but no further progress was made. Henry Durham's vision continued to be a dream.

During these years the neighborhood changed as well. When the church was built, the neighborhood consisted of single- and two-family homes; however, urban renewal brought dramatic changes in the 1950s and 1960s. Most of the houses were torn down and replaced by tall apartment buildings, or "projects," which destroyed the old sense of community in the neighborhood. Throughout this upheaval, the church remained a beacon, providing a constant source of hope and assistance, and serving the needs of both new and old residents.

In recent years, the failure of these urban renewal efforts has been acknowledged, and steps are being taken to reverse their effects. The projects across the street are now empty and many of the buildings will be demolished and replaced with new single family town houses catering to an ethnically and economically diverse population. The remainder is being remodeled as condominiums.

The Congregation Today

I became pastor of the congregation in June 1990. I am a "son" of Durham Memorial, having been a member of St. Luke's congregation when I was growing up. My family lived on Union Street (which no longer exists) one block from the church; the new hospital occupies that location today. Being a native son, I appreciate the building, its status in Buffalo's African-American history, and the church's early mandate to minister to the community. I, too, try to be a catalyst in fulfilling the dreams of my predecessors; they envisioned this church as a spiritual haven, a place for educational and community service, and a center for the black community. I strongly believe that the types of ministry and programs that Pastor Durham sought to offer in the early 1900s are needed today more than ever.

The children's choir is an active participant in Durham's worship services.

The congregation's community presence and outreach has increased in response to neighborhood changes. We have expanded our programming, by opening a soup kitchen in 1990 and roughly 175,000 meals have been served to-date. We provide Legal Aid assistance on a weekly basis; the Veterans Association Homeless task force visits monthly; we provide meeting space for Alcoholics Anonymous; we mount voter registration drives every year; and we offer AIDS education and counseling. Scouting programs help keep young people off the streets and foster a sense of discipline and responsibility. Now with over 200 members, our congregation is stable; it is even growing, and we find ourselves to be the nucleus around which a new community is being developed. The vision of those who stayed when St. Luke's moved is being proved many times over.

Because I embrace Reverend Durham's vision, I embarked on a campaign to "Complete the Dream" soon after my appointment as pastor. As with any worthwhile endeavor, I believed that we must go back to the roots that we had to be firmly grounded. I began a search for church records and information about the church's history from its beginnings in 1831. My goal was twofold: to create a written record of this congregation and its building, and to educate the current membership about the important roles our congregation and this building have played in the history of Buffalo and the city's African-American community.

Restoration Plans

An essential part of Reverend Durham's vision was the need for space for programs and services. The building has suffered many years of neglect. The exterior bricks and masonry must be repointed, and inappropriate repairs made to the tower must be corrected. Another major project that we must tackle is the restoration of the main window of the facade. Originally, this was a very impressive window, with elaborate woodcarvings and green-colored cathedral glass. In the early 1940s, a windstorm blew out a portion of the window, and it was repaired with glass-block. Plate glass in an aluminum frame was added later in the upper half. As part of our capital campaign, we have chosen to replicate the original window. The New York Landmarks Conservancy's Sacred Sites and Properties Fund made a grant to assist in this project, and the Buffalo Preservation Board has approved these plans. We are now searching for pictures, drawings, or other documentation in order to reproduce the original window accurately. Once completed, the restored window will be a visible testament of our commitment to restore our historic church and our determination to remain in the neighborhood.

We continue to keep Reverend Durham's dream alive for additional space and have revived plans for an educational/community wing, using them as a stimulus to begin anew. Since the project has been dormant for so long, I urged members to play catch-up by raising \$36,000 in three months as seed money to cover the administrative costs of a fundraising campaign, and to demonstrate to potential donors the congregation's commitment to this project.

We held the kick-off for the campaign on January 9, 1994. At the conclusion of the event fifteen households had pledged \$15,000! A week later, we received additional pledges of \$11,000. A total of \$22,000 was paid by March 27, the thirty-seventh anniversary of the congregation (Durham Memorial) and the seventy-first anniversary of the building's completion. The fundraising continues, and while more money is needed, it appears that we will be able to meet our initial goal and begin the process of restoring this city landmark.

The restoration of the first church built outright by African Americans in Buffalo will be a powerful symbol of the strength of our historical roots and the future of the surrounding community. This landmark has witnessed the growth and decline of the area; now its presence and renewal will be the core of a new neighborhood. The scripture passage from the Book of Exodus chosen for the kick-off service provided the motivation for the initial gifts and has become the theme guiding the entire campaign: "And the Lord said unto Moses, wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward." We are going forward with our roots firmly grounded in our heritage - not just our heritage as the oldest church building constructed for African Americans in Buffalo - but also our tradition as a spiritual and social center serving the city's African-American community.