

Echoes of Shiloh AME Church Westtown, Pennsylvania

Pictured on the facing page is a photograph of the Shiloh AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church, in Westtown, Pennsylvania, which is no longer standing. According to information from a number of sources, the building was erected in 1807 by white Methodists, who at that time would have been served by ministers assigned to the old Chester Circuit of the Philadelphia Conference. The circuit preachers appointed in 1807 were Daniel Ireland and Peter Beaver, though there is no record of their connection to the church or its erection.

African Americans were a part of the congregation from its earliest days, but were “under the direction of the white, [and] were allowed one of the rooms, there being two in the building.”¹ Sometime in the 1810s, the building was turned over to the black congregation; evidence suggests that this was the result of the establishment of a new white congregation in the nearby Borough of West Chester. The first Methodist itinerant to speak in the borough was Rev. William Hunter, who preached at the court house in 1810; in 1812 that same court house became a regular preaching appointment. A society was formed in 1815, under the leadership of Thomas Ogden, whose house on Strasburg Road, just outside the borough limits, became home to the first class meeting. One of the original members of this class, George Hannum, was recalled as “from the little church at Westtown, long since abandoned and sold to the colored people.”²

A first building for the West Chester Church was erected in 1816, the same year that the AME Church was formally founded as an independent denomination in Philadelphia, under the leadership of Rev.

¹*Village Record* (West Chester), July 6, 1905.

²Howard N. Reeves, Jr., *Methodism In and Around West Chester* (1946), 33.

Richard Allen. The next year, 1817, the Westtown chapel was sold to the African Americans who worshipped there, and it became an AME Church, eventually taking the name Shiloh. Some of the early members of this church were James Mauldin, Mr. and Mrs. John Laws, Henry Boyce, Thomas Hewson (a local preacher), Henry Richardson, and a man named Isaac Winters, who in 1905 boasted having been a member and “faithful attendant” for 68 years.³

Among the early AME preachers who ministered there was Jarena Lee, the first African-American female preacher in America. In her memoir about her travels during the mid-1820s, she wrote, “I spoke in our own connexion church in Westtown, then in the white connexion Methodist Episcopal Church in West Chester.” She also records in July 1838, “Preached two sermons in West Chester, went to Chichester Valley, preached to lively congregations. After a visit to Columbia, went to Westtown and visited some aged friends who could not get to church.”⁴

There are records of the Shiloh congregation regularly holding camp meetings, special “entertainments,” and revivals at quarterly conferences – which evidently were sometimes harassed by locals. A notice that appeared in a paper in 1830 reads,

The Westtown Methodist African Church have heretofore suffered much inconvenience from intrusions at their Quarterly Meetings. And they hereby give public notice, that at their Quarterly Meeting, to commence on Saturday, the 7th day of August, and continue on the Sunday following, – they will prosecute all those who intrude on their worship – or are guilty of a breach of the laws. And they hereby forbid all sutlers or others bringing liquors or other refreshments on the ground. By order,

Jeremiah Miller, One of the Trustees
July 16, 1830⁵

³*Daily Local News* (West Chester), June 28, 1905.

⁴Rev. Jean Williams, “19th Century Female Religious Leaders in Chester County and Vicinity” (Paper delivered at the Chester County Historical Society, February 1995), 3.

⁵*Village Record*, July 21, 1830.



Left: Evangelist Jarena Lee; right: Rev. Henry McNeil Turner.

In 1879, a “Large Woods Meeting” was advertised, to take place August 10-17. Featured among the speakers was Rev. Henry McNeil Turner (1834-1915), a prominent civil rights leader and the first black preacher appointed a chaplain of black troops during the Civil War; in 1880, Turner was elected a Bishop of the AME Church. In late 1879, under the leadership of Rev. T. H. Moore, Shiloh Church was closed for repairs, which included a new roof and interior remodeling, costing \$475; in a notice to a local paper, the pastor noted that Shiloh’s membership then stood at 40, and he appealed to the larger community to assist in paying off the repair bills.⁶

A 1905 newspaper clipping described the church as “built of stone, with the old-time wooden high back seats and plain shutters.” The same article also says the building was “used for some years jointly by the white and colored people as a school, there being a movable partition between rooms.” There was also an adjoining cemetery, “filled with hundreds of graves, many of them unmarked, and others with

⁶*Daily Local News*, July 14, 1879 and December 11, 1879.

simply a field stone, while a few are indicated by a piece of plank sawed off and rounded.” The article notes that a former pastor named Rev. William Henry, who died in 1854, was among those buried there, as were six black Civil War veterans: Joseph L. Williams, Robert Colwell of the 3rd USCT, Richard Bye, Eli Davis, John E. Roberts and Thomas Henry. “It is stated on good authority,” the clipping notes, “that the remains of a number of white people are buried in this yard, but there are no markers to show who they are or from whence they came.”⁷

The church appears to have always remained small, and several times discontinued holding regular services for lack of people. In the early 1900s, Shiloh had no appointed pastor for several years, until a female evangelist named Malinda Cotton (1834-1910) reopened the church in 1906 and began holding meetings. The Sunday school was reestablished with 23 students, and the overall membership tripled, from four to twelve.⁸ The church was again added to the list of appointments, and a pastor named R. L. Thomas is noted as holding a grand 100th anniversary celebration in the fall of 1907.

By 1920 the Shiloh congregation had disbanded; the building was used several years as a school house, after which it stood abandoned until it was gutted by a fire in the early 1930s; the remains of the building were removed in 1939. Today, the only echo of this once-thriving African American church and community is found in the names of the two roads whose intersection marks the site where the old stone chapel once stood: Shiloh and Little Shiloh Roads. There is hardly a trace left of the old cemetery, now on private property, where it is believed hundreds of persons, both black and white, sleep beneath the sod, awaiting the last trumpet call.

⁷*Daily Local News*, September 2, 1905.

⁸Williams, 8.