

HISTORY OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN FORT GREENE

THE EARLY CONTRIBUTIONS OF BLACK AMERICANS TO THE INCEPTION AND GROWTH OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN FORT GREENE AND DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN

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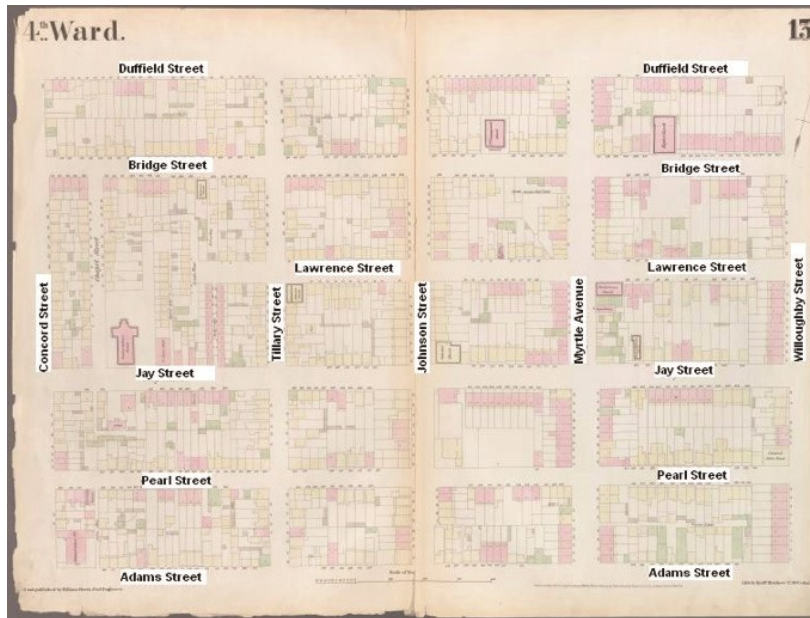
People of African descent have lived in the area known as Brooklyn since the 1600s. Most were slaves and worked on farms owned by early Dutch settlers (Taylor, 1994). In 1683, the land known as Breucklyn, shared a common border with Kings County. By 1816, Brooklyn became a village; in 1834 a city; and on January 1, 1898, it was incorporated as a borough (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015).

During the 1700s, twenty-percent of New York State's black population was free. Kings County earned the reputation of being the 'slaveholding capital' of New York State because of its disproportionately large slave population. By the dawn of the new century, ninety-seven percent of the black population residing in Kings County were enslaved—the largest number in the state (Taylor, 1994).

Methodism, established in New York City in 1766, was the first Protestant religion to spread across the river to Brooklyn through the sermons of itinerant preacher Thomas Webb, who introduced his brand of Methodism in 1768. As the number of people converting to Methodism rose, the number of black Methodist also grew. Webb went on to help establish a number of churches in Brooklyn, including the first Methodist church, known as The Sands Street Methodist Episcopal Church in 1794, and the York Street Church—both located in the area known today as DUMBO (Brooklyn Historical Society). The membership of Sands Street Church consisted of 23 whites and 12 blacks. By 1798, the Church recorded 26 "colored" members on its rolls: "Abraham Anthony, Susannah Anthony, Peter Anthony, William Thompson, Hannah Thompson, Thos. Hartley, Harvey Anderson, Thomas Bristol, Caty Jackson, Dinah Benson, Susannah Thomas, Adam Francis, Bethany Stewart, Mary Dolph, Frances, John Grace, Isaac Minix, Thomas Peterson, Philip Leonard, Cornelius Anderson, Caty Anderson, Titus, Nancy, Sarah, John Graw, Nelly" (Melton, 2007: 115).

¹ The Williamsburg Bridge opened in 1903, and the Manhattan Bridge in 1909. "All the Brooklyn East River bridges carried vehicles and trains at one time. The Brooklyn Bridge started with a cable car, then a steam locomotive and, until the 1950s, trolley cars" (Manbeck, 2008: 158).

Laws were passed that forbade the enslavement of blacks born after 1798 and prohibited the importation of slaves into New York state. These enactments reduced the number of enslaved blacks and fueled the growth of free blacks. In 1800 a quarter of the residents of Kings County were black, and most were slaves. In 1817, New Yorkers voted to free all blacks by July 4, 1827 (Melton, 2007; Morrone, 2010).



1855 Brooklyn Fire Insurance Map 4th Ward

In the 1800s, the population of Brooklyn increased and so did its land mass after the surrounding towns of Bushwick, Flatlands, Flatbush, Gravesend, and New Utrecht were merged into Brooklyn. With the growth in its population, Brooklyn counted 396,099 residents and had begun to wield increasing power in Kings County by the end of the century. In Kings County, between 1800 and 1870, “the black population increased from 1,811 to 5,653 . . . and 4,931 of the county’s 5,653 blacks resided in Brooklyn” (Taylor, 1994: 7). While most blacks

held menial jobs as domestics, farm laborers, waiters and porters; an increasing number were developing skills as tailors and dressmakers, cooks, painters, butchers, musicians and cabinet makers (Taylor, 1994: 8).

Write Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace:

‘Brooklyn was indeed something of a paradise for the African-American middle-class. . . . [T]he city was also home to a small elite of professionals (doctors, lawyers, journalists, ministers, and teachers). . . . Some were affluent enough to invest in real estate during the 1870s’ (Morrone, 2010: 11).

References

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After the abolition of slavery in New York State in 1827, black neighborhoods began to develop. The influx of blacks to Brooklyn escalated with the operation of the steam ferry between Manhattan and Brooklyn. Increasingly, blacks moved to the Fourth Ward, where one-third of Brooklyn’s black population lived by the 1830s. Many helped build Fort Greene and Fort Putnam, now Fort Greene Park (Morrone, 2010; New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs, 2006). The opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883 strengthened the link between Manhattan and Brooklyn (Manbeck, 2008: 158) and the concentration of blacks in the Fourth Ward. An 1855 map of the Fourth Ward shows the area bounded by Concord Street to the north, Duffield Street to the east, Willoughby Street to the south, and Adams Street to

Forgotten New York. Fort-gotten Greene. Available online: <http://forgotten-ny.com/2001/06/fort-greene-brooklyn/>. Downloaded: Sunday, April 19, 2015.

Manbeck, J. B. (2008). Brooklyn: Historically Speaking. Charleston, SC. The History Press.



Former Bridge Street Church, constructed in 1846

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the west (See Map 1: 1855 Brooklyn Fire Insurance Map). The Fourth Ward included the following streets: Pearl Street, Lawrence Street, Bridge Street, Tillary Street, Johnson Street, and Myrtle Avenue.

As a rising number of blacks migrated to downtown Brooklyn, they focused on stabilizing their families and addressing their social, economic, educational, and religious needs. For many African Americans, the black church

was an essential institution in their lives. These sanctuaries helped to buffer the effects of racism and empower them in their pursuit of independence. Seeking places to worship, some black Brooklynites in the downtown area affiliated themselves with the predominately white First Methodist Episcopal Church of Brooklyn, better known as Sands Street Methodist Church (Melton, 2007). But as the number of black members escalated, so did white resentment. After the white members of Sands Street Methodist imposed a ten dollar per quarter charge to worship on people of African origin and the pastor published a pamphlet supporting slavery, black members withdrew in 1818 to found the first black

church in Brooklyn (Melton, 2007). After holding worship services in their homes and taxing members monthly, the black parishioners incorporated the First African Wesleyan Episcopal Church (AWME) on July 30, 1820, and in August of that year formally joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Melton, 2007; Brooklyn Historical Society, 2011). They later purchased land on High Street and constructed a church building of their own (Taylor, 1994: 9; Melton, 2007; Singer, 2012; also see: Mapping the African American Past, available online at: <http://maap.columbia.edu/place/11.html>).

In 1854 the congregation acquired the First Free Congregational Church at 311 Bridge Street in Brooklyn and changed its name to the Bridge Street African Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal Church. It was in this edifice that

. . . the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation was celebrated for three days in late 1862 and early 1863. Orator and writer Frederick Douglass addressed the congregation in February 1863, encouraging blacks to enlist in the Union army. Harriet Tubman, who helped escaped slaves as a ‘conductor’ on the Underground Railroad, was welcomed as a speaker in 1865, (NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, available online: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/downloads/pdf/AfricanChurchArch.pdf>).

Other denominations also sought to build houses of worship in the Fourth Ward. In 1847, members of Manhattan’s Abyssinian Baptist Church who resided in Brooklyn met to discuss the challenges of crossing the East River

Singer, A. (2012). Brooklyn's African American History Remains Largely Forgotten and Unmarked, Source: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alan-singer/brooklyns-african-america_b_1772465.html. Downloaded April 19, 2015.

Williams, G. A. (1996). The Christian Recorder, A.M.E. Church, 1854-1902. Jefferson, N.C. McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers.

and the establishment of a Baptist church in Brooklyn. They later purchased land on Concord Street and built the Concord Street Baptist Church of Christ. In addition to the African Methodists and Baptists founding churches, black Presbyterians also organized Siloam Presbyterian Church in 1849 (Taylor, 1994).

By 1860 the population in Kings County had risen to 279,122, with blacks representing one in fifty residents. Black Brooklynites settled in the area known as Fort Greene—with the largest number of residents living north of Myrtle Avenue.



Brooklyn Bridge, circa 1883

Photos

1855 Brooklyn Fire Insurance Maps (4th Ward). William, P. Maps of the City of Brooklyn, Published in 1855. Source: <http://bklyn-genealogy-info.stevemorse.org/Ward/1855.Bkynwardmaps/1855.13.4wd.html>.

Former Bridge Street Church, constructed in 1846 as the First Free Congregational Church. It is now Polytechnic Institute's student center. Source: <http://forgotten-ny.com/2001/06/fort-greene-brooklyn/church-4/>.

Brooklyn Bridge, circa 1883. Source: <http://thebirdfeednyc.com/2012/05/24/happy-birthday-brooklyn-bridge/>.

Within a ten-year period, the majority of African American Brooklynites lived in Fort Greene, comprising roughly ten-percent of the community's population (Morrone, 2010: 9).

The opening of all the three bridges to Brooklyn further ignited the influx of blacks to the borough, which offered blacks opportunity and the hope of improving their lives. The Black Church served to facilitate the transition of African Americans to life in urban America. Black Brooklynites

formed religious institutions of their own to worship their God in their own way. Blacks built sanctuaries that functioned as safe houses and served as meeting places for social activism. As the black population in Fort Greene and Downtown Brooklyn grew, so did the number of black churches, which included Bridge Street African Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal Church, First African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Concord Street Baptist Church of Christ, Siloam Presbyterian Church, The Church Of The Open Door, Hanson Place Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and more (Taylor, 1994; Melton, 2007; Morrone, 2010; Singer, 2012; Cook, 2013). Blacks erected houses of worship that “they utilized not only for solemn rituals but also as social and cultural centers” (Cook, 2013: 11). It was in these sacred spaces that blacks “asserted their social, economic, and cultural independence, implemented strategies for moral and economic uplift, and challenged their image in the eyes of the dominant society” (Taylor, 1994: 4). The growth in the number of churches in Fort Greene and Downtown Brooklyn built by blacks helped elevate “Brooklyn to become [known as] the borough of churches” (Cook, 2013: 11).