

By Bill Stevens from Church Brochure – Originally published in the December 2006 Newsletter

This National historic site located at 92 Geneva Street was open during Doors Open Niagara on the weekend of October 14 and 15, 2006. Members of the congregation enthusiastically welcomed guests, who took advantage of the opportunity to tour this treasure in our community. The church and the congregation's history are contained in a small brochure that was available at Doors Open Niagara and is reprinted here as follows:

Bishop Richard Allen of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church of the U.S.A. started the first national movement for resettling free Negroes in Canada in 1830. This movement was the first step in establishing A.M.E. Churches in Canada. The A.M.E. Church of the U.S.A. sent missionaries to Canada in 1834 to preach the Gospel among the Black settlers. In 1837, Richard Williams was sent to the St. Catharines area by the New York Annual Conference. He established the first official A.M.E. congregation in St. Catharines in 1838.

The Fugitive Slave Act was in force in the U.S.A. since 1787. The British Parliament decided to abolish slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833. By this law, Canada, a British colony, prohibited slavery; therefore, Canada became a haven for fugitive slaves. The Northern States of the U.S.A. were against slavery, they took the initiative to create the Underground Railroad movement. They were helping the fugitive slaves flee from the South to the Northern States and Canada during the years prior to the Civil War (1861-1865).

Harriet Tubman (1820?-1913) was personally aided by the "Underground Railroad". She escaped from slavery in Maryland to freedom in 1849. She became a conductor of the Underground Railroad and made at least nineteen trips to the Southern States. She brought more than 300 Blacks from slavery to the Northland Canada despite a price of \$40,000 on her head. Because of her brave activities of liberating her people from slavery, she was honoured as the "Black Moses".

In 1851, Harriet Tubman brought eleven freedom seekers to St. Catharines. They joined the A.M.E. Church in St. Catharines. Harriet Tubman was a member of the said church and resided behind it on North Street.

Methodist Societies of the A.M.E. Church were growing rapidly throughout Upper Canada. They were carefully watching the political tension between the North and South and also the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act that passed in Congress. A splinter group was developing among the A.M.E. membership in Canada. The group wished to sever their ties with the A.M.E. Church in the U.S.A. to identify themselves more closely with the British ideals and government.

Rev. Benjamin Stewart proposed a motion to form a separate body at the A.M.E. Church Conference held in 1854. The motion was successfully passed. Then the Canadian Annual Conference of the A.M.E. Church sent a memorial to the General Conference of the A.M.E. Church in the U.S.A. seeking to withdraw from the A.M.E. Church. Their request was granted in 1856 and the British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church of Canada was formed in Chatham, Ontario.

People of African Descent came to settle in the St. Catharines area as free Blacks and Loyalists as early as 1780. They were a major part of the early fabric of the Niagara Peninsula. They had formed an African Methodist Society of the A.M.E. Church as early as 1820. Most of the Black community lived close to the Geneva, Welland and North Streets district in St. Catharines. Abolitionists, William Hamilton Merritt and Oliver Phelps sold land on Geneva Street, at the corner of North Street, for the use of the "African Methodist Episcopal Church". The congregation built a small church made out of crude logs. It was later demolished once the current site was built. The building work started in October of 1853 and the service of dedication for the church was held on November 15, 1855 and was conducted by Rev. Dr. Payne of Cincinnati.

The A.M.E. Church was built with the memory of the churches the freedom seekers left behind in the Southern States. Therefore, the church has significance both in its structural rarity and its social history.

The church is a small white wooden frame building with stucco over the original clapboard. It is set on a rubble foundation which has been reinforced with concrete and supported by walnut timbers. The front facade is three bays wide with two long gothic windows. The original square doorway has been altered to accept gothic doors. In addition, a protective platform has been suspended over the doorway. There are four gothic windows on both sides of the building which are identical to the front windows. The church is an exact replica of southern Baptist churches. This architecture is unique in Ontario.