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History Day at Peoples AME Zion Church



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"Let us make chariot wheels of our difficulties and ride to victory."

– Church motto, on the cover of a Peoples AME Zion pamphlet from the 1940s.

Julya Guins-Clark and Juanita Sales, who are church trustees, were there early, moving tables and chairs, making coffee and setting up. They brought three folding display panels of memorabilia put together by a member of the congregation, laid out laminated newspaper clippings and treasured commemorative booklets. They used an easel for a decades-old, enlarged photo of noted local painter Falstaff Harris.



Nellie Felton (left) talks with historian Judith Wellman on History Day last Saturday at Peoples AME Zion Church. Wellman speaks this Sunday afternoon to the Preservation Association of Central New York (PACNY) about progress on the Peoples Committee to Save 711 East Fayette, the congregation's former home. ([click for larger version](#))

Last Saturday, Peoples AME Zion Church on South Salina Street invited older church members to a History Day focused on the church they'd once outgrown and left in the mid-70s, known at mid-century as Syracuse's "Freedom Church" for its active role in the Civil Rights era. Held downstairs in the church's social hall from ten o'clock until four, History Day was a relaxed affair. There was hot coffee, a choice of chocolate or lemon cake, and no hurry to leave once you sat down and started chatting.

Guins-Clark stepped out for a meeting upstairs at one point for an hour or so and midday the choir practiced in the sanctuary above; afterward some young people came down to inspect the displays too.

History Day was part of a research project to support writing an application for national historic landmark designation for the old Peoples' church at 711 East Fayette. Project organizers have been collecting material, perusing old church records and recording oral histories for several months and, before that, began meeting last spring to find a way to save the old Peoples. Over the intervening months, the Peoples Committee to Save 711 East Fayette picked up more supporters and more steam.

National historic designation and the urban location of the old Peoples would make 711 eligible for restoration funds from a number of sources. In November the NYS Preservation League awarded a grant of \$6,000 through PACNY (Preservation Association of Central New York) to gather the material and write that application, at the same time surveying some 85 other post-Civil War or "second generation" AME Zion Churches in the state to create a template for others who may decide to take similar action. The deadline for the next cycle in the applications process is March 1st.

Just days before snow flew in mid-November – actually the same morning that the PACNY grant check was officially presented – workers completed a winter "button-up" with tarps on the roof and bell tower, plywood on the stained glass windows and some of the crumbling brick, supported by the Gifford Foundation, the Connective Corridor and Lowe's Home Center.

"I've been thinking all day that this is such a good way to celebrate Dr. King," commented Judith Wellman on Saturday. Wellman, who used to teach at SUNY Oswego and is one of the region's foremost experts on historic African American sites, directs Historical New York Research Associates in Fulton.

Wellman signed on to save 711 early, then wrote and now heads up the PACNY grant project, along with Angela Williams, a librarian at Syracuse University's Martin Luther King Library, and Guins-Clark, who – along with Pastor Daren Jaime – has marshaled the participation of congregation members. For a while Peoples was resigned to selling the 711 property, but no more. This coming Sunday afternoon at 2:00 o'clock, Wellman will present a progress report on the project at the annual open meeting of PACNY at the new Philanthropy Center, which is down the street from the old Peoples at 431 East Fayette.



The church, buttoned up against the elements.
([click for larger version](#))

"For years I wanted to do this," said Guins-Clark about the restoration efforts. "But I got tired as the years went by and I decided I wasn't meant to be the one. But it's like the Lord said to David, who wanted to build the temple, that David could get everything ready but his son would build the temple. And he did."

It turned out a lot of people had harbored the same thoughts: Gregg Tripoli at Onondaga Historical Association, who began putting people who mentioned it to him in each others' path last spring so that a first meeting convened; Dennis Connor, also of OHA, who had amassed some history on the building; Sam Roberts, who was instrumental in saving the Underground Railroad "faces" in the basement of another downtown church when he was a County Legislator in the 1990s; preservation architects Beth and Randy Crawford, who were already familiar with the building; Kate Auwearter, who heads the City's preservation office; Mike Flusche and Sam Gruber of PACNY; former City Councilor Mike Atkins and others.

Wellman greeted those she knew on Saturday with hugs and conducted most of the interviews, recorded both digitally and on camera, though often others sat down and joined easily in the conversations. Wellman always brings food and never tires of acknowledging the efforts of other project members. "What a team! I really do feel privileged to be able to do this," she said Saturday.

Joan Bryant, faculty in the University's African American Studies Program and a founder of the Black Syracuse Preservation Project through the Southside Initiative, has also contributed her knowledge of oral history method so that eventually church members can pass on such recording each other. On Saturday she also brought postcards that advertised another project she's been working on, an exhibition which opens on January 27th of the newly restored prints of photographs by Richard Breland that depict growing up in the old 15th Ward.

Some say that 711 was designed by Charles Colton, the architect of City Hall, though so far there's just anecdotal proof and the week before History Day the project meeting had buzzed about the cover article in the latest issue of "Preservation," the magazine of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. There, Logan Ward writes about newly discovered material on Birmingham, Alabama, Black architect Wallace Rayfield, who became the national architect for the AME Zion Church in 1909. Wellman says there's no specific link established yet between 711 and Rayfield, but adds, "The timing would be right."

Against the backdrop of the Civil Rights era, in the 1960s, when Urban Renewal razed that neighborhood and dispersed its residents, Peoples AME and its pastor, Rev. Emory Proctor, had been the beacon – the point from which marches and rallies had originated, and the only church to invite the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to meet under its roof after a threat of fire bombing chased CORE out of Grace Episcopal. Ann and Dale Tussing, who were part of those efforts, have recently joined the project.

An early arrival on Saturday, Nellie Felton wound up staying for about three hours. She came to Syracuse from Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1947, hoping to find work. Later in the afternoon, Rev. Roosevelt Baums said he'd come from Tuskegee too. "I could tell you about the Alabama group," he laughed, adding, "Talk with Mrs. Griffen. They stay in touch and have social functions and scholarships and that goes back before the reunions of people from the old 15th Ward. There's another group from Georgia." Joan Bryant said, "I think we need to have a Great Migration conference so that people can tell their stories and we could invite [the author] Isabel Wilkerson to keynote."

As Felton and Wellman sat looking at an old group photo of the Missionary Society, Felton found a much younger version of herself among the figures and named others as she brought their names to mind. She recounted how she had traveled a great deal to national AME Zion

conferences in other states at one time. Now she is part of group of elder women called Generation to Generation, who meet monthly at Peoples for a lunch and a program.

"She really bridges that earlier generation and the current one," said Wellman of the elegant, purple-garbed Felton.

Millicent Davis also came to History Day and had an interview recorded. Originally from the Bronx, Davis, who is now board president of InterFaith Works and a quarterly secretary at Peoples, joined the church in 2007. In 2006, she recounted, her mother had lost three sisters in eighteen months.

"By the third funeral, I realized that they were all AME Zion. When I came back here, I looked for AME Zion. I had been looking for a church after some years of not attending and, honestly, when I walked in here I fell in love."

Davis says that Peoples' impact on Syracuse continues. "There are a lot of community organizers here – teachers and some school principals, Helen Hudson who works on violence, Rev. Jaime who has his radio show. We have activist and younger people here too. It sounds so cliché," Davis went on, "but the history is critical. If you don't know where you've been..."

Founded in 1841 by Rev. Thomas James, what was to become Syracuse's Peoples AME Zion church initially met in a private home, then moved into a small church structure at 112 South Crouse in 1848. That church building is long gone now. And so was the era of the Underground Railroad and the famed Abolitionist preacher Jermain Loguen by the time the congregation next moved. Dedicated on October 30, 1911, the next church building is still standing at 711 East Fayette Street. For many decades, the 711 Peoples nestled in the midst of what was then a tree-lined residential neighborhood. There was a tiny parsonage in the back "like a dollhouse," says Harry Thompson, who'd had his own oral history recorded earlier in the week but came back on Saturday to be part of the goings-on. He remembered the congregation's moving in 1975 to South Salina Street too.

It's been a century since the dedication of 711 East Fayette. Now it's shadowed behind the parking garage of the high-rise Crowne Plaza Hotel, shorn of its trees (except the adventuresome sapling sprouting from the roof) and its old frame-house neighbors, vacant and badly in need of repair and restoration. The stained-glass windows, some with Masonic symbols that bespeak a lodge active in the church, grow more fragile. Water damage buckles some of the interior plaster walls, though Falstaff Harris' mural escaped that fate. Though painted over, the Harris mural has surfaced in some old photos and project members are determined to see it restored. 711 remains the oldest standing Black church in the county – it was the only one until 1887 when Bethany Baptist was established – and it's now one of the few remaining structures from the old 15th Ward.

Rev. Roosevelt Baums, who now ministers at the James Street United Methodist Church and in Minoa, was himself formerly an AME pastor in Watertown, where he was part of the effort to get that city's Thomas Memorial AME Zion Church on the national Historic Register. Baums is now an advisory board member to the Save 711 project.

"That church," he said of Watertown, "was built by former slaves. There was so much movement along the whole St. Lawrence River from the Underground Railroad. I was always very interested in history and you know, I always wanted to come here to Syracuse. We read

about Syracuse, because of the salt works and the Underground Railroad – it was the promised land! After I got out of the military, my aunt convinced me to come to Brooklyn and in 1970 I was working there as a letter carrier and I had this little transistor radio I carried. One day I heard on this transistor radio about vets' opportunities here at Syracuse University through the SEEK program. I was one of 155 vets and I stayed. I became an AME Zion minister in 1990 – actually I gave my trial sermon right here, on my birthday. But I had joined 711 before they moved. Rev. Proctor, he was very interested in people getting their due and I was looking for a freedom-fighting church. He was involved in the NAACP, in getting jobs at NIMO, in the Jerry Rescue campaign along with Chester Whiteside. The ecumenical community came together and it showed Syracuse has always been supportive of people getting their rights."

Asked about the impact of Peoples over the years, Baums added, "Well, it was a forerunner. A lot of other churches were birthed out of Peoples. There was an army of people – there were a lot more than Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. We are all part of the same strand. Everyone has a right to do God's will."

Ethel Edwards came later in the afternoon. "I went to Bethany Baptist," she said. "But all my friends went to AME so I did too, when Rev. Clarke was there. This was in the 1950s when I was sixteen or seventeen. I was born on Franklin Street and went to Seymour School, then Washington-Irving and Madison. I was in the choir and a junior usher."

Edwards ticked off the names of AME pastors from her years at 711 – Rev. McKinney, Rev. Holness, Rev. Proctor.

"Then they marched over here," she said, adding there literally was a march. Then Rev. Cheeks, Rev. Thornton, Rev. Dunsmore and the current pastor, Rev. Jaime. Edwards liked the old 15th Ward. "It was nice. Everybody knew each other and helped. There was Aunt Edie's and Doc and Lefty's. We used to live on McBride and they tore that place down and we moved to South State Street. I had that house until a couple years ago. I'm still paying for the roof there and it makes me mad every time I drive by."

Edwards, who has been part of the Women's Missionary Society and president of Pastors' Aid at Peoples too, said that because of Peoples, "I take the church more seriously. I've lost a lot of people in the last few years – I went to a wake this morning. The impact of Peoples is that it's like a family."

Nancy covers the arts and is part of the project to Save 711. We'll keep you updated as the project unfolds. Reach her at nancykeferhodes@gmail.com.



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