

## MT. ZION AME CHURCH - Building from Yesteryears...Bonding Today!

By Gwen Hunter, Anita Jackson, and Dr. Cheryl Gonzalez

Sometimes, the past is difficult to interpret. People live and die. More people are born, grow up, some stay, and some leave. Wooden buildings burned that held precious memories, treasures, and historical artifacts to us today. However, those things, photos, and documents were viewed differently in the eyes of their owners "back in the day." Decrepit buildings were condemned and torn down. Development happened and continues until this day. Investors invest, and entrepreneurs seek to thrive. Historically, some moved, and some stayed. Some are buried in the historic cemeteries.

Ninety-seven years after the American Revolutionary War of 1776, eight years after the American Civil War in 1867 between the Union and the Confederacy states, and one year before the incorporation of Green Cove Springs, Florida in 1871 along the historic West Bank of St. Johns River, a church began to evolve from the Arbor Bush (similar to a homemade gazebo) to meetings in the home of Henry and Sarah Bran. It must have been a daunting task to start a church amid the Reconstruction Era from 1865 to 1877.

Mt. Zion Church was organized and built with the help of several Union army soldiers, freed men, and well-known local citizens. The Church flourished to the point that residents travelled to Jacksonville to request permission to become part of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, which was founded by Right Reverend Richard Allen of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Their desire was granted in February, 1873.

To establish the Mt. Zion African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Green Cove Springs, Florida, nine local citizens laid down their differences and embarked upon a mission on behalf of African American families. Three Freedmen and six Caucasians, all male except one female, used their talents, gifts, and treasure to further the mission of Mt. Zion Church, as some call it. Original Trustees were Thomas Jenkins, Daniel Brunson, Henry Bran, Mr. and Mrs. A. L. Shipman, Dr. Carey Allen Trimble, Dr. Joseph W. Applegate, Theodore T. Edgerton, Sr., and Major J. Houston M. Clinch, respectively.

Bringing context to the Church's historical framework Edward Waters College was founded in 1866, Florida Memorial College in 1879, and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University was founded in 1887, well after the establishment of Florida State University 1851 and University of Florida in 1853. The historic Bethune Cookman University was founded in 1904. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was founded on February 12, 1909 in New York City, and most Black social service Sororities and Fraternities came into existence between 1906 and 1922.

When resources in the African American community were scarce or limited, Mt. Zion was often the go-to community meeting place. During World Wars I and II, Mt. Zion served as the Information Bureau notifying residents of updates on the wars and the welfare of their loved ones who served in the military.

When a major section of the two-story, red-wooded Dunbar School serving Black students caught fire and was destroyed. The fire accidentally was caused by a student who sought to warm up the wooden structure "because it was cold." Mt. Zion then became the interim school location. The school included first through ninth grades and was located on the site of today's Augusta Savage Park on the corner of Walburg Street and Cypress Avenue. Ninety-nine year-old Mt. Zion AME Church member, Alice Johnson Williams was asked about the school's existence. She quipped, "I ought to know about it because I graduated from the school." Rev. Elaine McBride, now living in Atlanta, Georgia, also remembered the school and stated that she once lived "across the street."

World War II had not yet ended. In Green Cove Springs, education was at a premium. However, the church and school partnership were shortened when another fire occurred on October 25, 1945. This time, the church and interim school were destroyed. With local community help, the church building was rebuilt in 1946 under the

leadership of Pastor Rev. A. J. Dayley. With nowhere else for Black students to go during segregation, they persevered as students in the unfinished Dunbar High School. The school was still under construction with “no doors, windows, or heat,” stated researcher Eugene Francis

The church continues to operate as a testament to demanding work, community effort, and the power of God, says current Pastor James Pernell, Sr. whose wife, Roxanna Pernell agrees. Some historic individuals associated with Mt. Zion AME Church included Minister Ed Fells, father of sculptor Augusta Fells Savage, who was elected Constable of Green Cove Springs around 1890; and Mr. Joseph and Mrs. Sarah Catherine Muldrow once owned and operated the now defunct Muldrow Hotel, one of only two known hotels owned by African Americans in Northeast Florida. Several principals of Paul Laurence Dunbar School attended Mt. Zion during various historic changes through the decades including Professor Royal Bannerman, Mrs. Eugenia Argrett, Mr. Maxwell Saxon, Mr. James Brown, Mr. Galvin Brown, and Mr. Malachi Henry. Recent years have included Matthew Tinney, Sr., who served as the first African American Clay County Deputy Sheriff; and his son Matthew Tinney, Jr., still living, who was elected to the City Council of Green Cove Springs and served as Mayor.

Mt. Zion AME Church has shared its sanctuary with, hosted, or supported other religious groups and multi-cultural gatherings such as United Church in Christ, the AZUSA Conference, and the Acts 2 Church of Jacksonville. Current Pastor Pernell consistently meets with other pastoral groups regardless of denomination, and his dynamic, spirit-filled, and engaging teaching style keep him speaking broadly throughout the Green Cove Springs and surrounding area. The church supports the local Food Pantry and initiatives for those in need and has established the Mt. Zion Community Development Corporation, Inc.

This is a snippet about Mt. Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church. Its contributions to the community continue to be researched. Richard Wright, author, aptly stated:

*“... , we are far from making the claim that the African Methodist Episcopal Church has been the sole agency in the religious and educational enlightenment and uplift of the colored race... . We do not forget the vast and efficient work along these lines of the Zion A. M. E. Church, the Baptist Church, the Methodist Episcopal, the C. M. E., the Congregational, the Presbyterian and Catholic churches--branches of the Church of Jesus Christ.”* (Source - <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/wright/wright.html>)