

**ROSSVILLE AME ZION CHURCH**, 584 Bloomingdale Road, Staten Island  
Built: 1897; Andrew Abrams, builder

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 7267, Lot 101

On August 10, 2010, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Rossville AME Zion Church and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were six speakers in favor of designation including a member of the Board of Trustees of the Rossville AME Zion Church who read a letter of support from Rev. Janet Jones. Other speakers on behalf of the designation included representatives of the Sandy Ground Historical Society, the Preservation League of Staten Island, the Society for the Architecture of the City, and the Historic Districts Council. The Commission has received two letters in support of the designation, including one from the Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society in America. There were no speakers or letters in opposition.

Summary

The 1897 Rossville AME Zion Church is a rare and important surviving building from the period when Sandy Ground was a prosperous African American community on Staten Island. Beginning in the 1840s through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this area, called Woodrow, Little Africa, or (more commonly) Sandy Ground, was home to a group of free black people residing in more than 50 houses. For much of that time, many of the residents were employed in the oyster trade or in farming. Sandy Ground is located in the southern part of Staten Island, not far from the shipping port of Rossville on the Arthur Kill to the north and the prime oyster grounds of Prince's Bay on the south. The first African-American residents purchased property in the area in 1828 and their numbers were bolstered by the arrival of numerous families from Snow Hill, Maryland, who settled in Sandy Ground in the 1840s and 1850s. These were free blacks who had been involved in the oyster trade on the Chesapeake Bay and came to New York because Maryland had passed a series of harsh laws in the 1840s and 1850s that made it difficult for them to ply their trade. The Sandy Ground community thrived for many years, built substantial houses and established successful businesses and institutions, chief among them the Rossville AME Zion Church.



The founder and first minister of the church was William H. Pitts, a Virginia-born African Methodist Episcopal Zion minister who purchased land in Sandy Ground in May 1849 and began holding prayer services in his home. The African Zion Methodist Church in the Village of Rossville, now Rossville AME Zion Church, was formally established in December 1850. In 1852, the congregation purchased land on Crabtree Avenue, near Bloomingdale Road where they erected a no longer extant church building (dedicated 1854) and established the Rossville AME Zion Church Cemetery (a designated New York City Landmark). By 1890 the congregation had outgrown its first church and purchased this site. The present building was constructed in 1897 by Tottenville builder-developer Andrew Abrams. Over the years the AME Zion Church has played a central role in Sandy Ground. It has had a number of prominent ministers including the famed abolitionist and civil rights leader Thomas James (1872), Rev. Isaac Burk Walters (1906-07), and the renowned minister, missionary, and suffragist Florence Spearing Randolph (1919-1922). Rossville AME Zion was also renowned for its camp

meetings, open-air barbecues, clambakes, and other social events that drew hundreds of participants both black and white. The church remains in use and descendants of the original founders are still members of the congregation.

Originally a simple clapboarded vernacular frame structure with a gabled entrance porch, the building has been reclad with faux brick siding but retains its original form and fenestration pattern. It survives as a tangible and visible link to the rich history of the Sandy Ground community.

## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### Development of Sandy Ground<sup>1</sup>

The Sandy Ground community was founded on a section of high ground near the center of the southern part of Staten Island, midway between the South Shore communities of Prince's Bay and Rossville. This area has been known by various names through the years, such as Woodrow, Harrisville or Little Africa, and its center is at the junction of present-day Woodrow and Bloomingdale Roads. Since this area is inland, rather than along the shore, and was still wooded in the mid 1800s, it was not seen as desirable and therefore was not expensive. The name Sandy Ground first appears on records dating to 1779 and refers to the sandy soil of the area, particularly good for growing certain crops such as strawberries and asparagus.<sup>2</sup>

Staten Island was inhabited for thousands of years by Native Americans.<sup>3</sup> Archaeologist Alanson B. Skinner reported finding evidence of a Woodland Period (2700BP-AD 1500) Native American village at the center of what would become Sandy Ground and there are two documented Native American sites on the lot of the AME Zion Church.<sup>4</sup> While most Native Americans left the island by 1700, a few remained and their descendants could be found on Staten Island as late as the early 1900s. At Sandy Ground, several black families claimed Native American descent and Skinner observed that the Native American tradition of grinding corn with wooden mortars and pestles continued at Sandy Ground into the 1890s.

During the colonial period Staten Island was largely settled by Dutch and Huguenot families with a scattering of English and other Europeans.<sup>5</sup> Many settlers brought white indentured servants or black slaves to the island, with slaves making up between 10 to 23 percent of the population. During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Staten Island's African-American population continued to grow. Some of these people were previously slaves of local residents, while other free blacks chose to settle on Staten Island because land was available and inexpensive.<sup>6</sup> Land ownership records show African-American residents purchased land in Sandy Ground before 1830. John Jackson bought 2 ½ acres of land in 1828 while he and Thomas Jackson (relationship unknown) purchased eight acres in 1835. Apparently John Jackson operated a ferry between Rossville and Manhattan at this time.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1840s and 50s, these first settlers were joined by several other African American families who came from an area of Maryland on the Chesapeake Bay called Snow Hill. Although Maryland was still a slave state in the years before the Civil War, it also had a large number of free blacks, many of whom were involved in the oyster trade.<sup>8</sup> Concerned with the example set by these free blacks for those still living in slavery, Maryland passed a series of restrictive laws to control and limit the activities of free black people. These new laws forbade free blacks to captain their own oyster boats or to own guns (which limited their ability to procure food for their families). In response, several African American families involved in the oyster trade moved to Staten Island. The waters off Staten Island were well known for the fine

and numerous oysters they produced. The oyster industry provided jobs for many people on Staten Island throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As the oyster beds off Staten Island started to become depleted, a constant stream of maritime traffic developed between these two areas, allowing familiarity and an easy movement of people as well as products. Family names of some of these African Americans who came to Sandy Ground from Maryland at this time included Bishop, Henman, Landin, Purnell, Robbins and Stevens, while others, including the Harris and Henry families came from elsewhere in New York and New Jersey.<sup>9</sup>

The area attracted more and more free residents of color and established its own distinct community in this period before the Civil War, creating at Sandy Ground a very early neighborhood within (what is now) New York City where free African Americans owned their own property.<sup>10</sup> Even before the abolition of slavery in New York in 1827, there had been free blacks in the city, and they tended to live together in small enclaves in different parts of each county, but usually they did not own their own homes.<sup>11</sup> It was generally difficult for newly freed people to earn enough money to purchase land, or to find individuals willing to sell it to them if they could afford it. Only a few other communities of land-holding African Americans have been documented in New York at this time. The first was probably Seneca Village, begun around 1825 when John Whitehead sold off small parcels of his land near what later became Central Park, between 79<sup>th</sup> and 86<sup>th</sup> Streets, and Sixth and Seventh Avenues.<sup>12</sup> By 1855, the census listed 264 people at this location, consisting mostly of blacks but also including some whites (mostly Irish and German immigrants), and at least three churches, a school and a cemetery. Against the wishes of the residents the village was destroyed as part of the construction of Central Park by the end of the decade. Another settlement of free blacks began in the 1830s, but was firmly established in 1838 when James Weeks purchased property from the Lefferts family estate in what was (then) the outskirts of Brooklyn, now Bedford-Stuyvesant. More than 100 people lived in this stable African American community throughout the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>13</sup> At Sandy Ground African Americans were also able to own property and start their own institutions, such as churches and schools.

The origins of the church at Sandy Ground date to May 1849 when William H. Pitts, a Virginia-born African Methodist Episcopal Zion minister, purchased land on Crabtree Lane west of Bloomingdale Road. He built a house and began holding prayer services in his house and in the home of his neighbor, William Stephens. In December 1850 a group of residents gathered at Pitts' home to found the African Zion Methodist Church in the Village of Rossville, now Rossville AME Zion Church, and elect five Trustees. On December 11, 1852, this group purchased land on Crabtree Avenue for a church. A "plain wooden structure" (no longer extant), seating 150 persons, was erected by 1854. A cemetery was established on land to its west. (The Rossville AME Zion Church cemetery is a designated New York City Landmark.) These activities are indicative of the thriving and stable community that had developed at Sandy Ground.

The oyster industry was quite successful on Staten Island and some of those who pursued it became wealthy, while others were able to support their families in a comfortable manner for many years. Several residents of Sandy Ground were able to purchase their own boats for dredging oysters, while others worked aboard the boats of others. As the local oyster beds became depleted because of overfishing, the industry learned to harvest seed oysters from other locations and bring them to the waters off Staten Island to mature because the conditions there were ideal for growing oysters. This activity, as well as oyster shucking and processing employed numerous Sandy Grounders for many years. Eventually support businesses sprang up

in the area, such as that of William Bishop, who built and operated a forge to create the long-handled rakes necessary for dredging the oysters.

Pollution in the waters off Staten Island began to poison the oysters by the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The oyster beds were officially closed in 1916, after several outbreaks of typhoid due to eating polluted oysters. The community of Sandy Ground, so dependent on this industry, gradually declined. Some residents were able to find work in local factories or commuted to Manhattan or New Jersey for jobs. Others relied on small farms to feed their families and supply markets in Manhattan. But eventually, this community of free and prosperous African-American families diminished with severe fires in 1930 and in 1963 destroying many homes and property. However, there is still a recognizable community in Sandy Ground consisting of descendants of people who have lived in the area for more than 100 years, and who remain involved in the activities of the AME Zion Church whether they live locally or away.

### The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church<sup>14</sup>

At the founding of the Wesley Chapel (later John Street Methodist Church) in New York in the 1760s, blacks both free and enslaved were encouraged to participate in church ceremonies and revival meetings. The John Street Methodist Church was responsible for helping to secure the freedom of some of its early congregants, notably church sexton Peter Williams, but, although appreciative of the church's strong stance against slavery, many blacks were dissatisfied with church policy on other matters.<sup>15</sup>

In 1796 several African-American members of the John Street Methodist Church applied to Bishop Francis Asbury to hold separate meetings. First choosing the name "African Chapel" and later Zion – "because it is the name most frequently used in the Bible to designate the church of God"<sup>16</sup> – the founding members, led by the first Zion prelate, James Varick, established an official doctrine that "no distinction should be made in the church on account of race, color or condition."<sup>17</sup> The new congregation rented a cabinetmaker's shop on Cross Street, between Orange (Baxter) and Mulberry Streets, where it conducted its first services. By 1800, enough money had been raised to erect a church building at the southwest corner of Church and Leonard Streets, which served the congregation until 1864. Zion was the only African-American church in the city of New York until the founding of the African (Abyssinian) Baptist Church in 1808. By 1819, the growing Zion membership raised \$11,500 to construct a larger stone edifice on the site of its small wood church.

During this initial period the Zion Church remained under the control of the John Street Methodist Church.<sup>18</sup> On July 26, 1820, led by Varick, all but 61 of Zion's 751 members voted to withdraw altogether from the white "Mother" Methodist Church denomination and form a separate "Conference" of African Methodist Episcopal Zion Churches. Within a decade more than a dozen affiliate Zion churches were formed in Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and also Canada.

Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Zion Church history was characterized by outspoken activism in the abolitionist movement,<sup>19</sup> and some of the most famous names in the struggle against slavery were members of the AME Zion denomination. Sojourner Truth, born a slave in New York State and freed upon the state's Emancipation Day, July 4, 1827, was a member of Mother Zion, speaking often at the Leonard Street pulpit against human bondage. Nationally, the AME Zion Church Conference became popularly known as the "Freedom church." Harriet Tubman, a champion of the Underground Railroad, and abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass were both

Zion Conference members. Douglass served as a pastor of the AME Zion Church in Rochester, New York. Many Zion Conference churches were part of the network of Underground Railroad stations.

In the post-Civil War period AME Zion remained committed to expanding Civil Rights. It was the first Methodist denomination to extend voting rights to women in 1876 and the first to ordain women ministers in 1884. AME Zion Bishop Alexander Walters and AME Zion member W.E.B. DuBois helped found the NAACP and Bishop Walters was also a pioneering member of the Pan-African Congress. Many of the denomination's clergy and lay persons were active participants in the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

The AME Zion Church had about 4,600 members and 105 preachers in 1860. Following emancipation, the church sent missionaries to the South, Southwest, and California and by the end of decade had 125,000 members and 840 churches, pastored by 760 elders, 142 deacons, and 143 preachers. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the church established foreign mission programs in South America, Africa, and the Caribbean. By 1896 membership had grown to 359,000. Currently AME Zion has "member churches on all continents but Australia" and about 1.4 million members worldwide.<sup>20</sup> Committed to education, it maintains four colleges and universities – Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina; Clinton Junior College in Rock Hill, South Carolina; Lommax-Hannon Junior College in Greenville, Alabama; and the AME University, in Monrovia, Liberia – and two theological seminaries – Hood Theological Seminary in Salisbury, North Carolina; and Hood Speaks Theological Seminary in Akwa Ibon State, Nigeria. It has also set up numerous schools and clinics in Ghana and Nigeria. In addition many individual churches have Sunday Schools and have instituted social service programs to help families find low-income housing, jobs, health care, and day care.

### The First Rossville AME Zion Church<sup>21</sup>

Under the system governing the African Methodist Episcopal Church, pastors are appointed on a yearly basis. William H. Pitts remained as the minister at Rossville for a few years and continued to reside in Sandy Ground until the early 1860s.<sup>22</sup> The church's second minister (in residence by 1855) was Jephtha Barcroft, a Maryland-born preacher, who according to his *New York Times* obituary "spent almost his entire lifetime in planning and working for the betterment of his race."<sup>23</sup> Walling's Map of 1859, shows Barcroft's house next to first church building on Crabtree Avenue. He seems to have retained ownership of that property until at least the 1880s, although he was residing on Elizabeth Street in Manhattan by 1865, and subsequently moved to Mamaroneck. In 1864, Barcroft's successor, Rev. Isaac Coleman, also bought a house in Sandy Ground that still stands at 1482 Woodrow Road and is owned by the descendants of his wife Rebecca Gray Coleman. That Pitts, Barcroft, and Coleman all bought property in Sandy Ground and retained their houses long after they had been transferred to other congregations speaks to the special character of Sandy Ground as a place where African Americans could expect to live relatively freely among their kind in a community centered on an AME Zion church.<sup>24</sup>

In 1865 Rev. Coleman was transferred to Brooklyn and Rev. Peter C. Coster, a well-known preacher, was assigned to the Rossville church. Among the ministers associated with Rossville in the post-Civil War period was the famed abolitionist and civil rights leader Rev. Thomas James, who in 1872 was placed in charge of the AME Zion congregations in Rossville, Stapleton, Port Richmond, Mattawan, and Newark, with long-time Sandy Ground residents and church deacons Moses K. Harris and William H. Purnell serving as his assistants.

At the July 1874 meeting of the New York Conference of the AME Zion Church, it was decided that because the New York Conference had grown so large New Jersey should be made a separate conference. The dividing line between the two conferences was drawn between Long Island and Staten Island, so that all of Staten Island fell within the jurisdiction of the New Jersey Conference. The following year Rev. G. M. Landin, who had been an itinerant preacher on behalf of AME Zion for some years, was assigned to Rossville while the Rev. John Smith was appointed to the smaller AME Zion congregation in Port Richmond. The Port Richmond congregation was unhappy with Smith and asked Landin to pastor their church. He consented without seeking permission from his bishop. Charges were brought against him and were heard by a committee appointed by the bishop. Landin was found guilty, refused to repent, and was expelled from the AME Zion Church. Edward Henman, who was chairman of the board of trustees for Rossville AME Zion Church, made a report to the congregation supporting Landin. When an appeal to the bishop failed and those who sided with Landin would not yield to the bishop's decision, 57 members of the 70-member congregation left to establish the Mt. Zion ME Church, which joined the Newark Methodist Episcopal Conference. This left Rossville AME Zion with only 13 members, a sizable debt, and a new minister's salary to be paid. In August 1875 a new board of trustees was elected consisting of oystermen Dawson Landin, John Jackson, George Purnell, George W. Bishop and George E. Henman.

### The Present Church

The oyster industry was thriving and Sandy Ground was at the height of its prosperity and population in the 1880s and 1890s and the village was able to support two African-American churches. (Most white residents worshipped at the nearby Woodrow Methodist Episcopal Church or St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Rossville.) By 1890, Rossville AME Zion congregation had once again grown "large and proud" and the church trustees purchased the present 1 ¼ acre site with plans to erect a new church building on Bloomingdale Road.<sup>25</sup> After various setbacks, fund raising began in earnest under the Rev. William T. Biddle, who assumed charge of the church in 1894, and "infused life into the little congregation."<sup>26</sup> According to Hubbell's *History of the M.E Churches of Staten Island*, "it was largely due to the energy and perseverance of Homer Harris that they were able to erect the new building."<sup>27</sup> The \$5,000 total cost for the land, construction, and furnishings was raised through a combination of individual contributions, including some from Staten Island citizens outside the congregation, and fundraising concerts consisting of "jubilee songs and other entertainments."<sup>28</sup>

According to the *Richmond County Advance* the church was constructed by the Swedish-born builder-developer Andrew Abrams (1842-1912), an active member of the Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church in Tottenville.<sup>29</sup> Abrams had come to the United States in 1860, and had enlisted in the U.S. Navy where he served as a carpenter's mate. Following the war, he settled in Tottenville where he began buying land and building houses. He prided himself on his "thorough adherence to the principles of honesty and integrity," for the care and precision of his work, and for the excellent quality of the materials and accessories he employed. He was credited with "many splendid buildings" throughout Staten Island, including almost two dozen buildings and houses he had erected as investment properties.<sup>30</sup> He was active in village politics, and charitable, fraternal, and church organizations.

Resting on a high masonry basement the new church was a simple vernacular gable-roofed frame structure clad with clapboards featuring a gabled entrance porch with peaked drip

moldings setting off the front windows, an angled bay at the rear defining the shallow apse, and a no longer extant Gothic Revival bell tower.

The dedication services for the new building were held on December 19, 1897. The old church was retained for use as a Sunday School and meeting hall. In 1899 the Board of Education arranged to lease an AME Zion church building for use as a school house. It has not been established whether this was the old or new building, although it seems probable that it was the older building since it was described as being “in fair condition.”<sup>31</sup> In 1904 the congregation built a parsonage for its ministers on Bloomingdale Road north of Crabtree Lane.

The importance of this church to the Sandy Ground community cannot be overestimated. As long-time resident George H. Hunter explained to writer Joseph Mitchell in 1956 – “everything in Sandy Ground revolved around the church.”<sup>32</sup> Ministers during the early 1900s included W.T. Biddle’s successor, the Virginia-born Rev. John H. Mason (1898 to 1903), Rev. Isaac Burk Walters (1906-07) “a man of profound piety” with an orthodox preaching style who was the elder brother of Bishop Alexander Walters,<sup>33</sup> and the West-Indian-born Rev. James E. Sarjeant (1908-10), who had previously been associated with the Delaware Conference and who settled in Sandy Ground where his descendants continued to live for many years. By far the most prominent pastor associated with the church was the Rev. Florence Spearing Randolph (1866-1951), a renowned minister, missionary, suffragist, lecturer, organizer, and temperance worker, who served at Rossville from 1919-1922, immediately prior to her missionary work in Liberia and the Gold Coast.<sup>34</sup> Rev. E. A. Carroll, who pastored the church in the late 1920s, wrote a column for the *New York Amsterdam News* detailing social activities of Rossville’s African-American residents. The fact that the *Amsterdam News* and other African-American newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* often carried articles on events in Sandy Ground and news of its residents is indicative of the importance of the enclave to the larger African-American community in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to the church’s regular services, fundraising social events and summer camp meetings also played a major role in the life of Sandy Ground and the larger South Shore community. One early fundraising entertainment, a “mock marriage” held in October 1898, featuring a concert and supper, was organized by leaders of the congregation including members of the Jackson, Harris, Bishop, Landin, and Purnell families, and involved contributions from Pastor John H. Mason, the church choir, soloists from Manhattan, and musical numbers by at least two white neighbors, Mrs. Charles Bogardus, wife of the local general-store owner, and Max Maretzek, Jr., the musician son of the well-known impresario-composer.<sup>36</sup> Church-organized camp meetings began around 1889. As George Hunter recalled:

Every summer, we put up a tent in the churchyard and held a big camp meeting, a revival. We owned the tent. We could get three or four hundred people under it, sitting on sawhorse benches. We’d have visiting preachers, famous old-time African Methodist preachers, and they’d preach every night for a week. We’d invite the white oystermen to come and bring their families and a lot of them would. Everybody was welcome. And once a year, to raise money for the church upkeep we’d put on an ox roast, what they call a barbecue nowadays. A Southern man Steve Davis would do the roasting [in a pit in the churchyard]. ... People all over the South Shore would set aside that day and come to the African Methodist ox roast. All the big oyster captains in Prince’s Bay would come. ... And we’d eat and laugh and joke with each other over who could hold the most.<sup>37</sup>

The 1916 ban on oystering had a negative impact on the church. As Mr. Hunter recounted:

Many of the young men and women moved away, and several whole families and the membership went down. The men who owned oyster sloops had been the main support of the church, and they began to give dimes where they used to give dollars.<sup>38</sup>

It was during this difficult period when it was hard to interest a male minister in taking on the church that Florence Randolph became pastor. She managed to stabilize the church's finances and began a fund raising campaign that raised \$1,600 to pay for the present pews. In 1930 the church had 69 members, 1 probationer, and 1 convert.<sup>39</sup> There were also about 300 children attending the Sunday School, reflecting the tendency of parents who had moved away to find work to send their children back to Sandy Ground to be reared by grandparents.<sup>40</sup>

In the 1930s the congregation of Mt. Zion Church voted to merge back into the Rossville AME Zion Church. "The congregation assembled in Mount Zion Church and carried all the Bibles and hymnals in a solemn parade on Bloomingdale Road."<sup>41</sup> It is probable that it was during this period that the original church building on Crabtree Lane was demolished.

In her reminiscences of growing up in Sandy Ground during the 1930s and 1940s Lois A. H. Mosley recalled that "everything interesting or entertaining happened at the church."<sup>42</sup> In addition to being used for worship services, weddings, funerals, and Sunday School, it remained the neighborhood social center used for concerts and recitations, square dancing, and a variety of games, including bingo, which took place in the church basement. Many congregation members participated in the church's Junior and Senior Choirs, the Pastor's Aid Society, and Men's Club, and prayer groups. Summertime carnivals and barbecues continued until at least 1940.<sup>43</sup> Later, when there was no one who knew how to roast an ox, the barbecues were replaced by clambakes, until "clams got too dear" and the clambakes had to be abandoned.<sup>44</sup> By the 1950s church attendance had also diminished and Sunday evening services were eliminated.

The large fire which devastated the South Shore in 1963 destroyed 25 buildings in Sandy Ground including the church parsonage, stores, the local gas station, and many homes along Bloomingdale Road. Writing in 1988, archaeologist William Askins, who had studied Sandy Ground in the 1970s and 1980s, observed that after the fire "both Afro-American and white families left, though Black families tended to stay if they could afford reconstruction."<sup>45</sup> Overall the fire drastically reduced population and "increased the preponderance of Black families."<sup>46</sup> Askins also observed:

In 1970 the West Shore Expressway was built, destroying the bulk of Rossville to the north and cutting a swath along the edge of Sandy Ground. The community became isolated by the highway to the north and west, while the new artery increased land values for tract housing development. Over the last two decades the pressures and enticements of developers have encouraged some families to sell their land and move away, and the construction of tract homes has hedged in Sandy Ground from the north, south and east, and most recently directly behind the church.<sup>47</sup>

By the late 1980s there were fewer than two dozen African-American families remaining in Sandy Ground, however, descendants of many of the families who had settled there in the 19<sup>th</sup> century continued to be involved in the church, often traveling long distances to attend services. As these changes were taking place, there was a growing awareness of the historic significance



of Sandy Ground and the need to preserve its history.<sup>48</sup> In 1971 the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences proposed that Sandy Ground be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. A committee, made up of the descendants of the Sandy Ground's settlers, was established to raise money to be matched with a grant from the New York State Department of Parks and Recreation to pay for an archaeological survey and historical study of the area.<sup>49</sup> In 1971 and 1972 historical archaeologist Robert Schuyler brought archaeology field schools from City College to Sandy Ground. Schuyler subsequently published his findings in a series of papers<sup>50</sup> and in 1979-80 his student William Askins conducted an archaeological survey and prepared a National Register nomination for the area (listed 1983). The site of the Rossville AME Church is within the National Register Sandy Ground Historic Archaeological District, which was designated to recognize the free black community founded in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>51</sup> The designation included archaeological resources as they could illuminate the evolution of the community.<sup>52</sup> Askins later wrote his doctoral dissertation on Sandy Ground.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile the Sandy Ground Historical Society had been established by members of the Sandy Ground community and descendants of the Sandy Ground settlers "to preserve their dual heritage of cultural and physical environments."<sup>54</sup> In addition to raising funds for Askins' work and sponsoring the National Register listing, the Historical Society organized annual Sandy Ground Day celebrations, which took place at the Rossville AME Zion Church, and began raising funds to acquire and restore a historic house for use as a museum and library. Society members began conducting research on the Sandy Ground, including video-taped interviews with elderly residents. Community outreach efforts included walking tours of historic sites and cooking classes in traditional fare given in the church's kitchen. The Historical Society also began lobbying for the designation of the Rossville AME Zion Church Cemetery as a New York City Landmark, which took place in 1985. In the early 2000s, several members of the church contributed their family stories to Lois A. H. Mosley and Barnett Shepherd's *Sandy Ground Memories*, published by the Staten Island Historical Society in 2003. Under the pastorship of Rev. Janet H. Jones since 2004, the church continues to serve a small congregation and currently leases its basement to a small alternative school.

### Description

One story, frame structure; high masonry basement; rectangular plan with front gable roof; four bays along sides; smaller, enclosed front porch, three bays wide, one bay deep with gabled roof; angled bay at rear; original placement of window openings; small window opening under gable on rear façade; with historic multipane wood window; gutters/snow guards inset in roof (covered with non-historic sheet metal and asphalt shingles); double-door storm hatch on rear.

*Alterations:* windows replaced with stained glass on main story and double-hung vinyl on basement (originally multi-pane, double-hung wood sash); façade clad with faux brick (originally clapboard); concrete stairs with plain railings to central entrance (original wood stairs); glass and metal entrance doors (original double, paneled wood doors); cast concrete door surround; brick soldier courses above and below windows; cast concrete crosses inset in brick material on front and on rear bay; bell-tower/steeple removed (prior to 1940) from front of roof; chimney removed from south side of roof near rear; small, secondary entrance area with single door attached to southern side near front; plain brick chimney on rear façade; small rear exit door with masonry stair and vent over door; two storage structures adjacent to rear (not attached); floodlights attached near roofline to each corner of building; aluminum siding covering soffits.

*Site*: large flat lot, slightly raised from street level; parking lots around building and mature trees around perimeter of lot; sign with glass-enclosed board and brick base; small painted concrete wall along lot line; center sidewalk from street with stairs and plain railings.

Site is within the National Register Sandy Ground Archaeological District, designated to recognize the free black community founded in the mid-19th century; designation included archaeological resources as they could illuminate the evolution of the community; also the lot has two documented Native American sites; therefore the site has the potential to contain significant archaeological resources related to Sandy Ground and to Native American occupation.

Report researched and written by  
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Research Department

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This section on the early development of Sandy Ground is based on Lois A.H. Mosley, Barnett Shepherd, and et. al., *Sandy Ground Memories* (Staten Island: Staten Island Historical Society, 2003); Joseph Mitchell, "Mr. Hunter's Grave," first published in *The New Yorker*, Sept, 22, 1956, reprinted in Joseph Mitchell, *Up in the Old Hotel and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage Books – Random House, Inc., 1993), 504-536; Landmarks Preservation Commission [hereafter LPC], *Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church Cemetery Designation Report*, prepared by Shirley Zavin (LP-1399), (New York: City of New York, 1985); William Askins, *The Sandy Ground Survey Project: Archaeological and Historical Research in Support of a National Register Nomination* (New York: City College, City University of New York, 1980); William Askins, *Sandy Ground : Historical Archaeology of Class and Ethnicity in a Nineteenth Century Community on Staten Island* (New York: PhD Dissertation, Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1988); Minna C. Wilkins, "Sandy Ground: A Tiny Racial Island," *Staten Island Historian* 6 (Jan.-Mar. 1943) 1-3, 7 (Oct.-Dec. 1943), 25-26, 31-32; *Holden's Staten Island: The History of Richmond County*, edited and compiled by Richard Dickenson (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> *Holden's Staten Island*, 481.

<sup>3</sup> This information on Native Americans on Staten Island is based on Askins, *Sandy Ground: Historical Archaeology*, 143; *Indian Notes and Monographs* (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1919), 317; Alanson Skinner, "The Lenapé Indians of Staten Island" in *The Indians of Greater New York and the Lower Hudson*, edited by Clark Wissler (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1909), 37.

<sup>4</sup> The sites are listed with New York State Museum, Site Number NYS 7272, described as "traces of occupation" and Site Number NYS 8497 described as a "village."

<sup>5</sup> On the European settlement of Staten Island and early slaveholding see Phillip Papas, *That Ever Loyal Island* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 9, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Many blacks moved to Staten Island because they felt they were being pushed out of other low-priced homes by the large numbers of poor German and Irish immigrants who flooded into New York at this time.

<sup>7</sup> *Holden's Staten Island*, 482.

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<sup>8</sup> According to Askins, *Sandy Ground: Historical Archaeology*, 3, there were about 150,000 free blacks in Maryland by 1860.

<sup>9</sup> Askins, National Register nomination, sec 8.

<sup>10</sup> The earliest example of landholding among African Americans in New York was probably in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Dutch West India Company gave farms north of the city to some of their “half-freed” slaves. “Gideon and the Great Dock,” <http://maap.columbia.edu/place/8.html>, accessed 12/8, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> For early African-American enclaves in New York City see Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 74-77.

<sup>12</sup> The first purchase of land happened between 1825 and 1827 by Diana and Elizabeth Harding. Information about Seneca Village comes from Ray Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and Its People, A History of Central Park* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992), 66-73.

<sup>13</sup> Today there is only a small physical remnant of this community, the four houses known as the Hunterfly Road Houses (designated New York City Landmarks).

<sup>14</sup> This section on the AME Zion Church is adapted in part from LPC, *Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church Designation Report*, prepared by Christopher Moore and Andrew S. Dolkart (LP-1849), (New York: City of New York, 1993), 2-3; Other sources consulted include Harris, 74-76, 83-85, 90; John Jamison Moore, *History of the A.M.E. Zion Church* (York, PA: Teachers’ Journal Office, 1884), 15-20; William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (Chapel Hill: AME Zion Publishing, 1974), 26-50; J. W. Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (New York: AME Zion Book Concern, 1895); David Henry Bradley, Sr., *A History of the A.M.E. Zion Church* (Nashville: Parthenon, 1956); Charles Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 57-58; Edwin G. Burroughs and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 398-400; African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church “About Our Church,” @ <http://amez.org/newsamezion/aboutourchurch.html>; “African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church,” Wikipedia, @ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-Methodist-Episcopal-Zion-Church>.

<sup>15</sup> Black members had to wait to receive communion until after all of the white members had finished and the few black preachers who were licensed to preach were prohibited from preaching before whites.

<sup>16</sup> C.R. Harris, “Concerning the Naming of the A.M.E. Zion Church,” *Historical Catechism of the A.M.E. Zion Church* (New York: AME Zion Publications, 1922).

<sup>17</sup> “Doctrines and Disciplines of the A.M.E. Zion Church,” in the AME Zion Connection in America, June 3, 1848.

<sup>18</sup> An African-American board of trustees controlled the church’s property and daily operations but a group of white elders and a pastor appointed by the New York Methodist Episcopal Conference had supervisory control over the church. See Harris, 48.

<sup>19</sup> *An Address Delivered Before the New York African Society for Mutual Relief in the African Zion Church*, March 23, 1815; “Report by the Anti-Slavery Committee of the A.M.E. Zion Church, 1863,” *The Black Abolitionist Papers: The United States, 1859-1865*, C. Peter Ridley, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> “About Our Church.”

<sup>21</sup> This history of the Rossville AME Zion Church is based on A.Y. Hubbell, *History of Methodism & the Methodist Churches of Staten Island* (New York: Richmond Pub. Co.), 149-155; LPC, *Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church Cemetery Designation Report*, Mosley and Shepherd, 18-20, 24 30-33, 177-81.

<sup>22</sup> It appears that Pitts was living in Brooklyn in 1864 when he went south to North Carolina where he organized churches in Edgecombe, Pitt, and Martin Counties. (C. Rudolph Knight, “St. Paul was Oldest Black Church in Town,” *The Daily Southerner*, Aug. 25, 2008). In 1880 he was listed in the federal census as a resident of Portsmouth, Virginia, United States Census, Norfolk County, Portsmouth 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward, 6B.

<sup>23</sup> “Jephtha Barcroft Dead,” *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1900, 7. Barcroft had been born to a free-black family and first found work as a coachman. For many years he drove for the family of Ferdinand Hassler, the first director of US Coastal survey. In 1838 Barcroft was ordained as an AME Zion minister having converted to Methodism a few years before. In 1841, he organized an abortive expedition to take a group of free-black workers to Trinidad. On his return he was assigned mission work and became an itinerant preacher. For much of his later career he rode circuit in Westchester, Putnam, and Rockland Counties.

<sup>24</sup> There have often been rumors that Sandy Ground was used as a stop on the Underground Railroad. This was a logical conclusion, since people from here traveled regularly between New York and southern slave states. Additionally, AME churches were often known for their willingness to help escaping slaves. However, since there are so few remaining structures from the original Sandy Ground community, and no written records documenting any occurrence have surfaced, this cannot be conclusively proven.

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<sup>25</sup> Wilkins, Oct.-Dec. 1943, 23. See also Richmond County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds & Conveyances, Liber 201, 327. The church trustees were Robert L. Landin, Sr., George W. Bishop, Robert H. Landin, Levi Moss, George Purnell, and Daniel Green.

<sup>26</sup> Hubbell, 152. According to Hood, 605, William T. Biddle was born in Cecil County, Maryland, in 1833 to a free-born mother and a father who had formerly been a slave. In 1835, his parents moved to Baltimore where he attended Sabbath School. In 1858, a great revival at the Howard Street AME Zion Church in Baltimore reawakened his religious commitment and he was licensed to exhort. In 1860 he was licensed to preach and began riding circuit in Pennsylvania. He was associated with the Philadelphia, Baltimore, Allegheny, Kentucky, Genesee (Western New York), and New Jersey Conferences, prior to being called to Rossville.

<sup>27</sup> Hubbell, 152. Homer (aka) "Omer" Harris (1856-?) was the son of Moses K. Harris and Louisa Harris who had resided in Manhattan where Moses, a New Jersey-born mulatto whose mother was a Mohawk Indian, was listed as a bootblack in the 1850 census. Moses K. Harris and his brother Silas K. Harris settled in Sandy Ground in the early 1850s and became berry-growers and land-owners and were among the wealthiest members of the Sandy Ground community. Moses was a stalwart of AME Zion church who had served as a deacon at Rossville AME Zion Church in 1870s and pastored churches in Tarrytown and New Rochelle in the 1880s. Homer Harris was raised in Sandy Ground and married Josephine Roach, daughter of Louis and Jane Roach of Westfield around 1877. Like his father, Homer initially earned his living as a farmer but later was a well digger and mason who owned his own business.

<sup>28</sup> "The Members of the Sinking Fund . . .," *Richmond County Advance*, Mar. 1, 1890. See also "Concert," *Richmond County Advance*, Dec. 11, 1897.

<sup>29</sup> "Jottings of All Sorts," *Richmond County Advance*, Sept. 18, 1897. This information on Andrew Abrams is taken from Charles W. Leng and William T. Davis, *Staten Island and Its People* (New York: Lewis Publishing Co., Inc, 1930), v. 4, 368; Barnett Shepherd, *Tottenville: The Town the Oyster Built* (New York: Preservation League of Staten Island & Tottenville Historical Society, 2008), 80, 104, 113.

<sup>30</sup> Leng and Davis, v. 4, 368.

<sup>31</sup> *Holden's Staten Island*, 443.

<sup>32</sup> Mitchell, 521.

<sup>33</sup> On Rev. Walters see J. Harvey Anderson, *Biographical Souvenir Volume of the Twenty-third Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1908), 76.

<sup>34</sup> For Rev. Randolph see Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs and Justice* (New York: Albert A. Knopf, 2010) Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons* (San Francisco: Jossey M. Bass Publications, 1998); "Oldest Resident Dies," *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 1, 1919, 5.

<sup>35</sup> See Rev. E. A. Carroll, "Rossville, S.I." *New York Amsterdam News*, July 4, 1928, 11; July 11, 1928; Sept. 12, 1928. After he was reassigned to a church in New Jersey Rev. Carroll continued to sponsor the local Boy Scout troop. "New Jersey News," *Chicago Defender*, July 2, 1932, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Askins, *Sandy Ground: Historical Archaeology*, 124-125.

<sup>37</sup> Mitchell, 521.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 522.

<sup>39</sup> Although small, Rossville's congregation was comparable in size to that of Shiloh AME Zion Church in West New Brighton and the AME Zion church in Westfield, New Jersey, and it had less debt than a number of congregations. See African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, New Jersey Conference, *Minutes of the Annual Session* (Charlotte, NC: AME Zion Publishing House, 1930).

<sup>40</sup> "Negro Village in Richmond a Picturesque Community," *New York Times*, July 7, 1929, 116.

<sup>41</sup> Mosley and Shepherd, 190.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>43</sup> "Staten Islanders Host an Ox Roast," *New York Amsterdam News*, Aug. 29, 1936, 16; "Annual Carnival & Barbecue Ticket," reproduced in Mosley and Shepherd, 178.

<sup>44</sup> Mitchell, 522.

<sup>45</sup> Askins, *Sandy Ground: Historical Archaeology*, 80.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>48</sup> Minna Wilkins' 1945 article on Sandy Ground (see note 1) was the first historical study of Sandy Ground. Interest in the area was also sparked by Joseph Mitchell's evocative *New Yorker* article, by John C. Tyler's study, "The Oystermen of Sandy Ground," *Staten Island Historian* (Apr-June 1958), 13-14; and by newspaper articles by Loring McMillen, "Story of Sandy Ground Obscure, But Its History is Fascinating," *Staten Island Advance* (undated

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clipping in the Sandy Ground file at the Staten Island Historical Society); "I Remember Old Staten Island," *Daily News*, Dec. 6, 1964, SI-12.

<sup>49</sup> A. Stanley Allison, "Sandy Ground Seeks Funds for Historical Designation," *Staten Island Advance*, Apr. 8, 1979.

<sup>50</sup> Robert L. Schuyler, "Archaeological Dig," *The City College Alumnus* 67 (1972), 12-13; Robert L. Schuyler, "Archaeological Sampling in a Black Community in Metropolitan New York," *The Conference on Historic Sites Archaeology Papers* 7 (1972), 13-52; Robert L. Schuyler, "Archaeology of the New York Metropolis," *Bulletin of the New York State Archaeological Association* 69 (1977), 1-19; Robert L. Schuyler, "Sandy Ground: Archaeology of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Oystering Village," in *Archaeological Perspectives on Ethnicity in America* (Farmingdale, NY: Baywood Publishing Co., 1979).

<sup>51</sup> George W. Goodman, "69 City Districts Dubbed Historic," *New York Times*, Dec. 4, 1983, R6.

<sup>52</sup> See note 4 for citations.

<sup>53</sup> See note 1 for the Askins citations. A summary of the Schuyler project and of the main points of Askins dissertation appear in Anne-Marie Cantwell and Diana di Zerega Wall, *Unearthing Gotham: the Archaeology of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 269-272.

<sup>54</sup> Alice Lesch, "Historic Settlement Thrives at Sandy Ground," *Staten Island Advance* (1983 clipping in the Sandy Ground file at the Staten Island Historical Society). For the Sandy Ground Historical Society and the Rossville AME Zion Church's role in the Society's early years see also "Sandy Ground Seeks Funds for Historical Designation," Sylvia Harris, "Sandy Ground Celebrates the Day," *New York Amsterdam News*, Nov. 24, 1979, 39; Mel Tapley, "About the Arts," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 31, 1980, 35; Sheila Rule, "Historic S.I. Community Fights to Preserve Past," *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 1982, B2; Stevie Lacy-Pendleton, "Rossville Church Celebrates Part in History," *Staten Island Advance*, Dec. 3, 1983; Isabel Wilkerson, "S. I. Village Claims a Place in History for Its Dead," *New York Times*, Apr. 15, 1985, B5.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of the building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Rossville AME Zion Church has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest, and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Rossville AME Zion Church is a rare and important surviving building from the period when Sandy Ground was a prosperous African American community on Staten Island; that located in southern Staten Island, Sandy Ground was established in the mid 1840s by free African Americans, many of whom came from Maryland and were employed in the oyster industry; that the Sandy Ground African American community built substantial houses and established successful businesses and institutions chief among them the Rossville AME Zion Church; that the church was founded by William H. Pitts, an African Methodist Episcopal Zion minister who purchased land in Sandy Ground in May 1849 and began holding prayer services in his home; that the African Zion Methodist Church in the Village of Rossville, now Rossville AME Zion Church, was formally established in December 1850, purchased land on Crabtree Avenue, near Bloomingdale Road in 1852, erected a no longer extant church building (dedicated 1854), and established the Rossville AME Zion Church Cemetery (a designated New York City Landmark); that by 1890 the congregation had outgrown its first church and purchased the site for this building, which was constructed in 1897 by Tottenville builder-developer Andrew Abrams; that the church has had a number of prominent ministers including the famed abolitionist and civil rights leader Thomas James (1872), Rev. Isaac Burk Walters (1906-07), and the renowned minister, missionary, and suffragist Florence Spearing Randolph (1919-22); that the Rossville AME Zion Church was also renowned for camp meetings, open-air barbecues, clambakes, and other social events that drew hundreds of participants both black and white and over the years played a central role in Sandy Ground community; that the church remains in use and descendants of the original founders are still members of the congregation; that originally a simple clapboarded vernacular frame structure with a gabled entrance porch, the building has been reclad with faux brick siding but retains its original form and fenestration pattern; that it survives today as a tangible and visible link to the rich history of the Sandy Ground community.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Rossville AME Zion Church, 584 Bloomingdale Road, Staten Island, and designates Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 7267, Lot 101, as its Landmark Site

Robert B. Tierney, Chair  
Pablo Vengoechea, Vice-Chair;  
Frederick Bland, Michael Devonshire, Joan Gerner,  
Michael Goldblum, Christopher Moore, Margery Perlmutter,  
Elizabeth Ryan, Roberta Washington, Commissioners





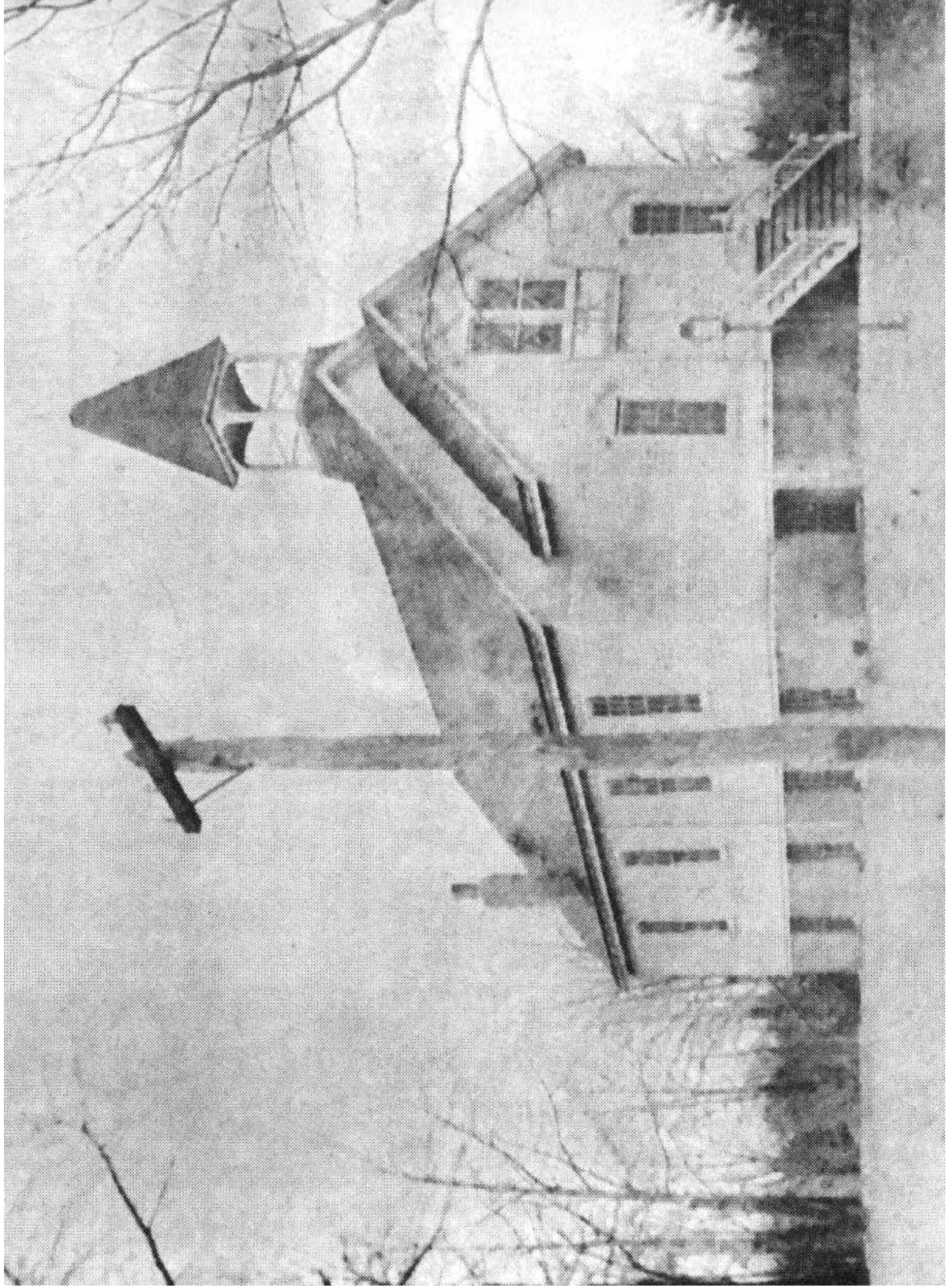
Rossville AME Zion Church  
584 Bloomingdale Road, Staten Island  
Landmark Site: Staten Island Tax Map 7267, Lot 101  
*Photo: Marianne Percival, March 2010*



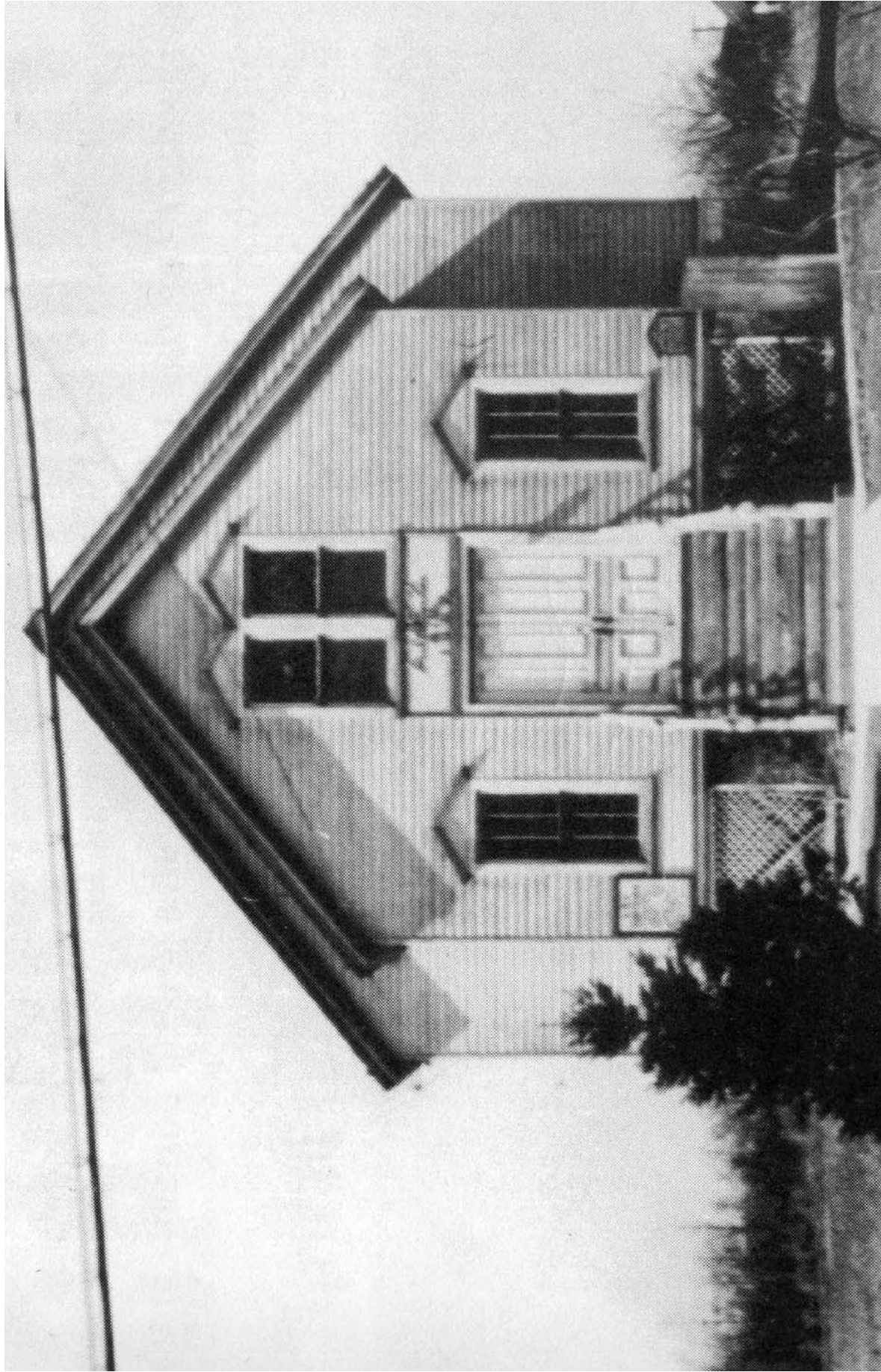


Rossville AME Zion Church  
View from the southeast





Rossville AME Zion Church  
*Photo: Nineteenth Annual Camp Meeting, Broadsidee (c. 1908),*



Rossville AME Zion Church  
*Photo: New York City Department of Taxes (c. 1940), Municipal Archives*



Rossville AME Zion Church  
*Photo: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1980*



ROSSVILLE A.M.E. ZION CHURCH (LP-2416), 584 Bloomingdale Road  
 Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island, Tax Map Block 7267, Lot 101

Designated: February 1, 2011