

ROSSVILLE A.M.E. ZION CHURCH CEMETERY, Crabtree Avenue, Staten Island.
Established 1852.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 7092, Lot 22.

On October 12, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church Cemetery and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Seven witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Rossville A.M.E. Church Cemetery located near the western tip of Staten Island commemorates the history of Sandy Ground, a community engendered by a planned mid-19th century migration northward of free black oystermen and their families. The migration was predominated by families from Snow Hill, Maryland, one of a number of Delmarva Peninsula settlements populated by blacks who had prospered in this industry. Maryland's large free black population -- more than 15,000 by 1830 -- challenged the rationale promulgated by slave-holding states that servitude and black economic survival were inextricably bound.¹ For this reason repressive legislative measures were directed toward free blacks; a law forbidding gun ownership, for example deprived them of an important means of food acquisition. And because successful black oystermen in particular offered not only an ideological but economic threat as well to their white counterparts, legislation controlling competition was enacted; a statute of 1835, for instance, required that all vessels operating in Maryland waters have on board as chief navigator a white person above the age of eighteen.

The mid-century relocation to Staten Island which included members of the Henman, Bishop, Purnell, Landin, Robbins and Stevens families is linked to the history of the island's oyster industry. From the 18th century on, abundant yields from extensive oyster beds located in waters off the lower end of Staten Island -- Prince's Bay and Raritan Bay -- constituted a major sector of the island's economy. By the early 19th century the natural beds had been depleted and the practice of reseeded them with immature oysters brought in from other locations had been instituted. Regional sources such as Long Island Sound originally sufficed, but Staten Island's major oyster planters soon ventured further afield. During the 1820s and 1830s Staten Island vessels began to roam the waters of the Chesapeake and Chincoteague Bays acquiring large cargoes of seed oysters from local gatherers. These were carried to Staten Island and replanted on the old oyster beds of Prince's Bay where optimal growing conditions speeded maturation and enhanced the flavor. Not only were contacts between Staten Island growers and free black oystermen of Chesapeake Bay area established as a result of this commerce, but some of the black oystermen are also said to have sojourned near Prince's Bay during the planting seasons.

Staten Island emerged as a logical and probably already familiar destination as the migration from Maryland was being planned around the middle of the century. The place to which the free black oystermen and their families came was a sandy plateau located on the outskirts of Woodrow, a small farming community gathered around the Woodrow Methodist Church which had been established in 1787. The western edge of Woodrow -- the area near the intersection of Woodrow and Bloomingdale Roads -- was then but sparsely settled. There were, however, at least two black families, the Jacksons and the Williams, and possibly a third, the Holmes, living in the vicinity. To this place there also came black families from New Jersey and New York, the Harrises and the Henrys. These families, together with Henmens, Bishops, Purnells, Landins, Robbinses and Stevenses came together to form the community known later as Sandy Ground.²

An early investigator of Sandy Ground's history concluded its first inhabitants brought with them the considerable assets they had gained in the Chesapeake Bay oystering industry.³ On the other hand, a subsequent oral history has indicated that Sandy Ground was originally populated by insubstantial dwellings and the lives of its inhabitants were characterized by unremitting labor.⁴ A more recent study has posed the possibility that any pre-migration assets of the early settlers were not transferrable and therefore a life of non-consumption was deliberately chosen by the original Sandy Grounders as a means of accumulating the capital required for the realization of future expectations.⁵

Such a life did not preclude addressing an immediate need for a spiritual center which would identify and solidify Sandy Ground as a community. The A.M.E. Zion Church -- at first people meeting in each other's homes -- was formally incorporated in 1850. Land -- three-quarters of an acre -- on Crabtree Avenue was purchased in 1852, and in 1854 what was later described as a "plain wooden structure" with a capacity of some 150 persons was dedicated.⁶ It was located toward the eastern side of the property; the land to its west was reserved for a cemetery. Although the community was small -- the original congregation was comprised of fourteen families -- the optimistic expectations expressed by the construction and size of the church were justified. Sandy Ground was to grow and prosper over the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The late 19th-century appetite for oysters appears to have been almost insatiable. Among the barges purveying oysters from wharves at the foot of West 10th Street in the 1880s there were more than a dozen owned by Staten Island planters alone. Prince's Bay acquired several hotels and inns which offered oyster consumption as a major activity. Advertisements of the day noted that their carriages were available at the Prince's Bay train station to transport visitors from New York City to the shorefront for that purpose. It was this industry which engaged the greater preponderance of Sandy Ground's residents.

Many were employed by the major planters located at Prince's Bay; their tasks included seeding the beds, gathering the mature oysters with long-handled rakes, shucking and packing them for distribution. Other Sandy Grounders, among

them Dawson Landin, Robert Landin and Francis Henry, acquired their own sloops. Their entrepreneurial pursuits included supplying planters with seed oysters taken from the Arthur Kill and Kill Van Kull. Still others were engaged in occupations ancilliary to the industry. Several Sandy Ground forges produced the rakes and other hardware required by the trade. That founded by William Bishop was operated until very recently by his son Joseph. Hundreds of bushel baskets were woven by Sandy Ground craftsmen using the white-oak saplings found in the nearby woods. Farming and market-gardening were taken up by some families. Strawberries, which thrived in the sandy soil, became a specialty and were shipped from the Rossville dock to the produce markets near Barclay Street. And some, principally the Harrises, worked for wealthy white families in New York City. An oral history obtained from Isaac Harris records his employment by the eminent American architect Stanford White.⁷ According to this history, White had architects from his office design the Harris house, still standing at 444 Bloomingdale Road.

The Harris residence was one of many substantial new homes constructed in Sandy Ground beginning in the 1880s. The community's growth and prosperity is also suggested by the fact that it was able to support two churches. A split in the A.M.E. Zion Church had occurred in 1875 when its pastor, Rev. Gilford Landin, was adjudged by the A.M.E. bishop to have exceeded his authority in a matter involving installation of clergy at another church. Members of the congregation who supported him withdrew to form a new congregation allied with the Newark M.E. Conference. A new building, the Mt. Zion M.E. Church, was constructed on Bloomingdale Road a short distance north of Crabtree Avenue. The split in the church appears not to have divided the community however; members from a single family could be found in both churches. Church membership lists compiled in 1898 suggest the size of the Sandy Ground community at the end of the century; together the churches served 99 adults and approximately 150 children. Prosperity was mirrored too by the construction of a new, more imposing, A.M.E. Zion Church on Bloomingdale Road in 1897. The Crabtree Avenue building remained in use for social events, festivals and lectures.

Sandy Ground's history was dramatically altered by the price of progress -- water pollution. Although the oyster beds off Staten Island were not officially closed down by the New York City Department of Health until 1916, the visibly dirtier Raritan Bay and reports of typhoid fever associated with eating Prince's Bay oysters had sent the industry into decline by 1910. Although Bishop's Forge could more readily adapt to altered circumstances -- decorative metalwork, for example, because one of its specialites -- the skills and assets which had sustained the Sandy Ground community for more than half a century were rendered useless. Some families or their children departed. Of those who stayed, some found work locally -- a number of Sandy Ground women were employed by Seaview Hospital -- while others travelled to construction and factory jobs in New Jersey. For Sandy Ground a depression had preceded the Depression, but it did not vanish. Nor was it eradicated, despite the loss of many homes, by the great South Shore fire of 1963 which destroyed more than a hundred structures in the area and many acres of woodland. Although threatened today by encroaching tract-housing, Sandy Ground survives. The Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church is sustained by an active congregation, its open-air barbecues which once drew hundreds have been successfully revived, descendants of original Sandy Grounders still live in the vicinity, and the A.M.E. Zion Church Cemetery remains in use.

Located 450 feet west of Bloomingdale Road, the cemetery occupies a rise of land on the south side of Crabtree Avenue. It is entered on the eastern side by a fairly wide asphalted roadway which extends toward the rear property line.⁸ From the cemetery there is to be gained a panoramic view toward the northwest; on the horizon lie the Watchung Mountains of New Jersey. Although there are a few grave sites on the east side of the entrance road, the main portion of the cemetery lies to its west and extends from Crabtree Avenue to the southern boundary of the property. The western edge of the cemetery is delineated by a chain-link fence. Comprised of family plots, the cemetery is criss-crossed by narrow asphalted paths. Some plots are defined by low posts and pipe-railings; others are not. All plots and the individual stones within them face eastward. Some of the plots are maintained, but others need tending. Tall grasses abound, obscuring many of the gravestones from view. Death dates recorded on the stones begin in the 1860s and continue to the present.⁹ The stones are simple and of modest dimensions; none overwhelm the others.

There are those who lie here without benefit of stone or marker; the lives recorded by markers comprise some 34 families. Of those families associated with Sandy Ground's beginnings we find these names: Bishop, Harris, Henry, Landin, Purnell and Stevens.¹⁰ Those names are joined by these: Bagwell, Benedict, Brown, Coleman, Cooley, Cooper, Decker, Gibbs, Glenn, Green, Hammon, Hines, Hunter, Jones, Junior, Mangin, McCoy, Mitchell, Pennyfeather, Roach, Robinson, Schnidt, Selby, Walker, Wallen, Watts, and Whallen.

One who now lies here, Mr. George H. Hunter, once said this of the A.M.E. Zion Church Cemetery: "Most of the people lying in here were related to each other, some by blood, some by marriage, some close, some distant. If you started in at the gate and ran an imaginary line all the way through, showing who was related to who, the line would zigzag all over the cemetery."¹¹ Mr. Hunter's "imaginary line" illuminates the essence of Sandy Ground's history.

The name Sandy Ground does not appear on maps contemporary with the period of its growth and prosperity. Physically Sandy Ground was part of the larger and racially integrated village of Woodrow. The Woodrow neighborhood in which it was concentrated was known and indicated on maps as Bogardus Corners, the name the intersection of Woodrow and Bloomingdale Roads received after 1860 when the Bogardus family established a grocery business there. The community of Sandy Ground did not coincide with a precisely bounded geographical location. It was a community defined by the network of relationships between people, bonds which were reinforced by Sandy Ground's spiritual centers. Today the community of Sandy Ground located by geography is small. The community joined by an "imaginary line," however, is large and is being strengthened as Sandy Ground descendants and their friends reaffirm their roots. For this community the Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church Cemetery is a tangible and visible link to its history, one now approaching its 150th year.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The background history which precedes the migration from Maryland to Staten Island is summarized by Minna C. Wilkins in "Sandy Ground: A Tiny Racial Island - Part I," Staten Island Historian, 6 (January-March 1943), 1-3, 7.
2. The date when this community was first identified as Sandy Ground has not been determined.
3. Wilkins, 7.
4. Joseph Mitchell, "Mr. Hunter's Grave," New Yorker, September 22, 1956, p.59.
5. William Askins, The Sandy Ground Survey Project: Archaeological and Historical Research in Support of a National Register Nomination, New York: The City College, City University of New York, 1980) f.n. 2, 1-15 -- 1-16.
6. A.Y. Hubbell, History of Methodism and the Methodist Churches of Staten Island. (New York: Richmond Publishing Company, 1898), p.149.
7. Askins, pp.1-5.
8. The entry roadway may cover the site of the 1854 church. An 1898 map indicates it was located toward the eastern side of the property about midway between Crabtree Avenue and the rear property line. The 1906 topographical map of Richmond County shows a small structure at this location; this may or may not be the church. The date the original church was demolished has not been ascertained.
9. Clara Cooley's date of death, June 17, 1837, is the earliest recorded by surviving markers. Interment here prior to the purchase of the property by the A.M.E. Zion Church in 1852 seems unlikely however.
10. An inventory of grave markers and inscriptions is included in Robert L. Schuyler, "Sandy Ground: Archaeological Sampling in a Black Community in Metropolitan New York," The Conference on Historic Site Archaeology Papers, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina, 1972), vol. 7, pp.13-52.
11. Mitchell, p.92.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history and other features of this cemetery, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church Cemetery has 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 A.M.E. Zion Church Cemetery commemorates the history of Sandy Ground, a Staten Island community engendered by a mid-19th-century migration of free black oystermen and their families from the Chesapeake Bay area; that the community grew and prospered, as did the oyster industry, through the early 20th century; that Sandy Ground has survived despite such major disasters as the condemnation of Staten Island's oyster beds in 1916 and the destructive fire of 1963; that the family plots and markers of the cemetery provide a visible record of the network of relationships which constituted the community of Sandy Ground; and that the cemetery provides the Sandy Ground community with a tangible and visible link to a history which is now approaching its 150th year.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church Cemetery, Crabtree Avenue, Borough of Staten Island and designates Tax Map Block 7092, Lot 22, Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences. Black Man on Staten Island Collection.

Wilkins, Minna C. "Sandy Ground: A Tiny Racial Island," Staten Island Historian, 6 (January - March 1943) 1-3, 7; (October - December 1943), 25-26, 31-32.



Photo Credit: Carl Forster
Landmarks Preservation Commission

Rossville A.M.E. Zion Church
Cemetery
Crabtree Avenue

Established: 1852