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Origins of the Michigan Street Baptist Church, Buffalo, NY

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Origins of the

1997

Michigan Street Baptist Church

Buffalo, New York

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Monroe Fordham¹

The 1828 *Directory for the Village of Buffalo* listed 59 "Names of Coloured" heads of families. In 1832, when the City of Buffalo was incorporated, the city directory listed the names of 68 colored heads of families.² The pre-Civil War African American population of Buffalo was centered in the fourth ward-- east of Main Street, north of South Division Street, and south of North Street.³ Michigan Street ran through the heart of the residential area where African Americans lived. Although most of the City's African American population lived in the fourth ward, that area was not an all-black area. In fact, the vast majority of the residents of the fourth ward were white.

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In the second quarter of the nineteenth century Buffalo's free Black residents began to form a closely knit society concentrated in the Michigan-William Street area on the eastern fringe of the downtown commercial district. Hardly a recognized ethnic element at this time, the Negro population of the entire city numbered around 350 when the Michigan Street Baptist Church was built in 1845. Some Blacks who were domestic servants lived scattered throughout the city, but the majority listed in the 1840 census lived within two wards east of the central business district. A sociological study made by Niles Carpenter in 1927 shows that Buffalo's relatively small and cohesive Negro population continued to live and expand in the same area of the city at the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century.⁴

Early records of the region indicate that African Americans were present in the Buffalo area by the 1790s.⁵ Buffalo's location was a factor in attracting African Americans. Located in the far western, and at that time a fairly remote, part of the state, Buffalo was also just across the border from Canada.

Those factors made the region very attractive to fugitive slaves as well as free people of color who wanted a quick escape route from bounty hunters. African Americans helped to rebuild the city after it was destroyed by the British in the War of 1812. Blacks were present when the village was incorporated in 1822.

The city directory of 1838 noted the existence of a "colored Baptist and [a] colored Methodist society." That was the first time a Buffalo city directory noted the presence of an African American religious body. However, other primary sources note the existence of organized black religious activity in Buffalo by the early 1830s.⁶ In all probability, some level of informal organized and independent religious activity was present even earlier, especially in light of the fact that Buffalo had a documented sizable African American community back as early as the 1820s. In addition, some blacks worshiped in white churches. Religion was very important to northern free black communities and by the late 1790s, northern free blacks had begun to establish their own churches and other community agencies.⁷ While passing through western New York in 1837, Charles B. Ray, a traveling agent for the *Colored American* weekly newspaper filed a written report describing Buffalo's African American community.

The Colored community of Buffalo are, in many respects, above any community of our people I have visited during my western tour.... They have among them two religious societies, one benevolent, and three literary [societies]. The males spend

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their winter evenings in debating moral and political questions. Their school is for the present discontinued for want of a teacher. Their children are in attendance at the white private schools.⁸

The congregation that became known as the Michigan Street Baptist church was formally organized between 1832 and 1837. A historical sketch of the church written around 1908 by the Rev. Dr. J. Edward Nash, the church's pastor, states that "During the ministry of Elisha Tucker, Pastor of the Washington Street Baptist Church, a council was called to organize a colored Baptist Church, to be constituted of members from the Washington Street Church."⁹ (The Buffalo city directory for 1836 lists "Tucker, Elisha, pastor of baptist ch."). The Washington Street Baptist Church was the first Baptist church to be established in Buffalo. It was apparently a white congregation that allowed blacks to worship in the facility. Rev. Nash's historical sketch further stated that,

During the fall of the year 1836, thirteen men and women withdrew from the parent church, and formed the Second Baptist Church of Buffalo. It is interesting to note that the first child sent out from the Mother Washington Church, was the Michigan Street Church. This faithful band commenced their worship in a small wooden building, over an Undertaker's Establishment at the corner of Niagara and Eagle Streets. A colored gentleman named William Munroe, had been ordained and

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was chosen as their minister, occupying all the positions that the name would indicate, Preacher, Pastor, Teacher, Janitor and Friend, his salary was raised by public subscription-- after administering to this little flock for two or three years left them, ...¹⁰

The 1839 and 1840 Buffalo city directories listed Rev. William Monroe as the pastor. In the 1840 directory Rev. Monroe is referred to as the pastor of "2d baptist church." In 1841 the weekly newspaper the *Colored American* referred to the Michigan Street Church as "Second Baptist Church." The historical sketch by Rev. Nash reported that "the minutes of the 25th anniversary of the [Buffalo Baptist?] association, held in Springville Sept. 9th and 10th 1840, record for the first time the second Baptist Church with Charles E. Smith as clerk, and a membership of 19".¹¹ By 1842 the membership had increased to 49.¹² In the 1848-49 city directory, the church is listed as "Michigan Street Second Baptist Church-colored." The following year, the words "Second Baptist" were dropped from the title. Prior to moving into the brick structure at 511 Michigan Street, the church occupied a "meeting room" on "Niagara Street, near Pearl."¹³

During the 1840s and 1850s, the Michigan Street congregation was served by numerous pastors including the Revs. William Monroe, A. Brown, Stephen Dutton, John Sharp, David Miller, Samuel H. Davis, D.W. Anderson, and J.S. Martin. Several of the church's early ministers were white. The white ministers

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included, "Mr. Verrinder, white, but not regular ordained," and "Rev. Mr. Jeffrey, a white ordained minister."¹⁴ Officers included James L. Thomas, Carr Johnson, Nathan Steward, Peyton Harris, William Qualls, Henry K. Thomas, Henry Fields, John Dandridge, and Benjamin Young.¹⁵

Rev. Nash's historical sketch has a rather detailed account of the background to the construction of the church building at 511 Michigan Street. The campaign to build a new church began in earnest in 1842.

The Rev. Mr. Sharpe, seeing the needs of worshipping in a better building, commenced to solicit funds to build a suitable house of worship, where this little flock might serve GOD according to the dictates of their conscience. In looking about for a site, Deacon Wm. Qualls and Peyton Harris, reported to the church a very fine piece of land on Michigan Street near Batavia, and after being duly delegated to purchase what site they thought best, they bought the land where the Church is now situated, Batavia Street being changed to Broadway. Re. Sharpe went to England in search of aid, but was not successful and returned home. It was at this point that the women of the Church came to the front and united themselves into a Ladies Aid Society-object to aid the brethren in the building of a church....¹⁶

One of the Ladies' fundraising projects was to sell needlework to the public.¹⁷ The fundraising continued and by 1844 the church

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had a membership of 56.¹⁸ In that year, "Mr. Peyton Harris succeeded in obtaining all of the lumber, brick and stone for the erection of the building and the Pastor, Rev. Davis, a mason by traded did the mason's work."¹⁹ The church cornerstone was laid in 1845 and the congregation held the first services in the new structure in 1846.

That was a memorable day, the first sabbath in June 1845, when the Colored Baptist Church laid their corner stone. Such enthusiasm, such rejoicing, and with them rejoiced other ministers and Rev. Levi Tucker of the Washington St. Church and the members of his congregation, and all the ministers of the [Buffalo Baptist?] association joined in the laying of the corner stone. Work progressed rapidly on the building and the following spring they were able to worship in the basement. Mr. Sharp at this point left and the Re. Mr. Jeffries, a colored preacher from Geneva took up the work; however his stay as a pastor was very short and in less than six months he departed for other fields, the membership being 66. Samuel Davis and Mr. Miller were the next minister[s], both of whom were ordained in the basement of the church. In 1848 the membership increased to 81 and the sabbath school was organized.²⁰

By 1849 the church "announced that they had completed and dedicated their House of Worship. The building being worth \$3500.00, and the land \$2000.00."²¹ By 1851 church membership

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reached its highest point up to that date--93. "During all of this time the members were wondering how they would be able to raise enough money to finish their main auditorium and after much prayer and consultation, the members decided to pay \$10.00 annually for the rent of a pew."²²

Over the years the Michigan Street Baptist Church has been a central part of the history and culture of Buffalo's African American community. Even in the early decades of its existence as an independent institution, the theology of the African American church was not dramatically different from that of white Protestant churches of the ante-bellum period. However, drawing from the mainstream Protestant revival doctrines, the independent black church articulated themes that addressed the unique needs and conditions of free people of color who felt a strong kinship to the slave community.²³

The African American church emphasized a theology of hope and optimism at a time when northern blacks were a small minority in an often hostile environment. The 19th century black population of Buffalo never reached more than 1.5% of the total Buffalo population.²⁴ Moreover, a large portion of the pre-Civil War Buffalo black community was made up of transplanted southern blacks who had seen slavery first hand. Their religion and their church was often the strongest sustaining force in their lives as they tried to cope with slavery and "racial caste." The church

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continued to meet important social, cultural, and spiritual needs even after slavery was abolished.

The pre-Civil War black church was the institution that was under the total control of blacks themselves. It was the institution that enabled African Americans to harness the energy and resources of the black community and to transform their ideas and aspirations into functional programs and activities. Like most Protestant religious institutions that advocated revival and reform doctrines, the African American church was active in the campaign against slavery. In addition, the African American church voiced strong opposition to racial prejudice and discrimination.

In 1838 a group of Buffalo's most influential colored men, which included at least four officers from the Michigan Street Baptist Church, published a statement protesting the "opprobrious epithets continually poured out against the colored citizens, and the contemptuous manner in which we are treated." The statement asked rhetorically, "are we deserving of such treatment?" Their answer was obvious -- "Surely not." The statement went on to outline how black Buffalonians had been loyal to their community and country. Black Buffalonians were said to be ready to "protect the city against any aggressors." (They were probably referring to fears of aggression from Canada).²⁵

In the pre-Civil War period the church was a meeting place for a wide range of community social and cultural activities, and

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abolitionist and reform meetings. One such meeting took place in Buffalo in 1841. On March 28, 1841, "the colored citizens of the City of Buffalo met..., for the purpose of expressing their gratitude for the liberation of the *Amistad* captives." (The *Amistad* was a Spanish slave ship carrying African slaves to America. The slaves mutinied and took control of the ship. Eventually the ship was capture and the slaves arrested and held for trial. Following the intervention by abolitionists and a celebrated court case, the Africans were freed.) At the aforementioned meeting, Buffalo blacks offered several prayers. One prayer was offered by "Rev. A. Brown of the Second Baptist Church." Prayers were also offered by Nathan Steward and J. Dandridge, both officers of the Second Street Baptist Church. Several resolutions were passed, one thanking God for liberating the *Amistad* captives, another thanking federal officials and abolitionists for their roles in the case.²⁶

In 1842 the Michigan Street Baptist Church adopted a resolution opposing slavery. "Resolved, that the System of Slavery is alike opposed to the spirit of the Gospel and the Principles of Justice, that we have no fellowship with it, and we recommend to the members of our Churches the use of all suitable means to effect its entire abolition."²⁷

Black abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Highland Garnet, Martin Delany and others, made frequent stops in Buffalo to speak at anti-slavery gatherings.

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In fact, Brown was a resident of Buffalo during the 1830s. Although providing assistance to fugitive slaves was a violation of federal law, it was widely held that the Michigan Street Baptist Church was a station on the "underground railroad." By the late 19th century, such stories had attained legendary status.

Members of the Michigan Street Baptist Church participated as delegates to the National Convention of Colored Citizens. Those conventions were annual events from 1830-1835. In the 1840s and 1850s the conventions were held only periodically. Delegates from free black communities throughout the North met to consider the plight of African Americans--slave and free, and to plan strategies to promote the uplift of Americans of color.

In 1843 the National Convention of Colored Citizens was held in Buffalo. Samuel H. Davis of Buffalo, who spent several years as pastor of the Michigan Street Baptist Church, was elected Chairman pro tem of that convention. Henry Thomas of Buffalo, an officer in the Michigan Street Baptist Church, was appointed as one of two convention secretaries. Davis gave the opening address. In that address Davis gave a strong condemnation of both southern slavery and northern prejudice and discrimination. After outlining the problems of blacks in the North and South, Davis asked a rhetorical question. What shall we do and who do we turn to for help? In answering his own question, Davis urged his listeners to "rise up and assert our rightful claims, and

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plead our own cause." He asserted that "We ourselves, must be willing to contend for the rich boon of freedom and equal rights, or we shall never enjoy that boon."

In 1849 the National Colored Convention was held in Troy, New York. Peyton Harris, an officer in the Michigan Street Baptist Church was a delegate. Moreover, the convention elected Harris as one of three vice presidents.²⁸ Harris was described as "an early Negro resident of Buffalo," and as "one of the church founders." He was said to have been "comparatively wealthy." (In the 1930s, his great granddaughter--Mrs. Sarah May Keelan lived next door to the church).²⁹

Even in the pre-Civil War period the Michigan Street Baptist Church was considered the pride of Buffalo's African American community. It had been built especially for an African American congregation. It was not a hand-me-down building. A newspaper clipping from the early 20th century stated that "old church records tell of the pride the congregation had in its first gas lights," which were installed in the mid-1850s.³⁰

At the end of the 19th century, there were still only three African American churches in the city of Buffalo. Because of its location and its involvement in the community, the Michigan Street Baptist Church continued to be central to the the life and history of Buffalo's African American community. The National Registry nomination form highlights two developments from that period:

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At the turn of the century two compelling community figures became associated with the Michigan Street Baptist Church and contributed greatly to the politicization of Buffalo's Blacks. The first was the Rev. Dr. J. Edward Nash (1868-1957) who became pastor of the church in the 1890s and remained there for 61 years during which time he was instrumental in founding the Buffalo Urban League and the local branch of the N.A.A.C.P. In 1953 Potter Street behind the church was renamed Nash Street in his honor, and the National Conference of Christians and Jews presented him its annual Brotherhood Award in the field of human relations....

The second prominent figure associated with the Michigan Street Baptist Church was Mary B. Talbert, a neighbor and an active parishioner. [Mrs. Talbert earned a national reputation as a reform activist]. Her house was at 521 Michigan Avenue, two doors from the church (now demolished).³¹ In 1905 W.E.B. DuBois and other prominent African American leaders met at Mrs. Talbert's home (521 Michigan Avenue) and adopted the resolutions that led to the founding of the Niagara Movement.

By the third decade of the 20th century the "Great Migration" and related factors had begun to transform historically small northern African American communities like that of Buffalo. By 1930 the African American population of Buffalo had grown to more than 13,000. A description of the lower part of Michigan Street,

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which was written in the late 1920s, suggests some of the changes that historical evolution had in store for the Michigan Street community. "Gradually the Negro community grew up here taking possession of homes vacated by a line of owners and renters before them. They are among the oldest buildings in the city, less than four blocks from the business district and flanked on another side by a warehouse and light manufacturing area." The report continued,

Michigan Avenue, the main thoroughfare, once a neat and orderly street.... begins properly at the bridge near the Union Station, crosses Seneca Street into a string of pawn shops, light manufacturing, second hand clothing stores and cheap eating places before it reaches the Negroes. Swan street, the extreme southern boundary of the Negro residence area, once stiff and aristocratic, is a street of dilapidated rooming houses. There still stand the solid looking square brick buildings with light individual differentiation but conforming to a type--now weather beaten and old and with the look of long neglect.... Further on Michigan Avenue are auto repair shops, restaurants, clothes cleaning shops, [and] second hand furniture stores.³²

And of course at 511 Michigan stood the historic Michigan Street Baptist Church.

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As the northern black communities increased in size, the number of churches and other agencies serving those communities also increased. In time, other churches and community agencies began to assume some of the functions that the Michigan Street Baptist Church had performed for more than a century. Although the Michigan Street Church has given up center stage in community life, its significance in the 19th and early 20th century history of Buffalo's African American community should be celebrated and memorialized by all future generations. The Michigan Street Baptist Church, at 511 Michigan Street, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. The Michigan Street Preservation Corporation is working to restore and preserve the site as a community landmark.

¹ Monroe Fordham is a Professor of History at Buffalo State College.

² The Directories for the city of Buffalo that are cited in this report were housed in the library of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

³ The fourth ward as defined in the 1850 Federal Census.

⁴ National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form, for Michigan Street Baptist Church.

⁵ Atkins, Barton, *Modern Antiquities: Sketches of Early Buffalo*, pp. 6-7.

⁶ See John L. Myers, "The Beginning of Anti-Slavery Agencies in New York State, 1833-1836." *New York History*, Vol. 43, April, 1962, p. 160; see also Payne, Daniel A., *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, (New York: Johnson Reprint Co., 1968), pp. 117-120.

⁷ Woodson, Carter, *The History of the Negro Church*. (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers), Chapter IV.

⁸ *The Colored American*, November 4, 1837, p.2, c.2.

⁹ According to Rev. Nash's six page typescript, the source of that statement was the records of the Buffalo Baptist Association, formerly the Holland Purchase Association. The statement in quotes was dated March 9, 1836. Rev. Nash's, "History of the Michigan Street Baptist Church, March, 1836-1908," was loaned to this author by Bishop William Henderson. Hereafter, that paper will we be referred to as Nash, "History."

¹⁰ Nash, "History," p. 2.

¹¹ Nash, "History," p. 2.

¹² Nash, "History," pp. 2, 3.

¹³ The Buffalo city directory of 1842 lists the Niagara Street location.

¹⁴ Nash, "History," p.2.

¹⁵ All except A. Brown were listed in the Buffalo city directories. Brown was named in the *Colored American*, April 17, 1841. Stephen Dutton, William Qualls, and Peyton Harris were also listed in Nash's, "History," as the first delegates to go to a Buffalo Baptist Association meeting. See Nash, "History," p.2 Qualls and Harris were described as the uncle and grandfather respectively of Mr. William Talbert, an early 20th century member of the church and a resident of 521 Michigan Street.

¹⁶ Nash, "History," p.3. Rev. Nash's historical sketch is drawn primarily from an interview he conducted in 1904 with an elderly member of the Michigan Street Church. "Sister Emaline Coy" was described as being "79 years old ...in good health, with a vivid and clear recollection of the many interesting incidents connected with her church." Sister Coy joined the Michigan Street Baptist Church in 1846 at the age of 21.

¹⁷ Nash, "History," p.4.

¹⁸ Nash, "History," p. 3.

¹⁹ Nash, "History," pp. 3-4.

²⁰ Nash, "History," p. 4.

²¹ Nash, "History," p.5.

²² Nash, "History," p.5.

²³ For an examination of ante-bellum northern black religious themes see, Monroe Fordham, *Major Themes in Northern Black Religious Thought, 1800-1860*, Hicksville, New York: Exposition-University Books.

²⁴ The number ranged from about 300 in the 1830s to approximately 1100 in 1890.

²⁵ *The Colored American*, January 27, 1838, p.1, c.4. The four officers of the Michigan Street Baptist Church were Peyton Harris, Nathan Steward, William Qualls, and John Dandridge.

²⁶ *The Colored American*, April 17, 1841, P.2, C.1.

²⁷ Nash, "History," p.3.

²⁸ Bell, Howard Holman, *Minutes and Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864*. (New York: Arno Press and New York Times). Specifically, see the proceedings of the 1843, the 1849 conventions.

²⁹ Newspaper clipping, dated June 30, 1939, in the clipping file at the Buffalo/Erie County Historical Society Library.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form, for Michigan Street Baptist Church.

³² Johnson, Charles S., "The Negro in Buffalo," a paper written for the Buffalo Urban League, p.71. The paper was written around 1927. A copy is in the University Archives, SUNY at Buffalo.

Famous in Slave Days:

Buffalo's last link with the days when the question of abolition or retention of slavery rocked the country is the old Michigan Avenue Baptist Church. It was a station on the Underground Railway by which slaves were helped on their way to escape in Canada. It is changed little from the time when it harbored hundreds of men and women who slept on its pews and ate in its cellar.



Old Church Once Station On Underground Railway

Michigan Avenue edifice had adventurous career in days before Civil War

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There are old mansions near the shore of Lake Ontario in Western New York which still bear proudly on their doors the secret insignia which marked them in the days before the Civil War, as havens of refuge for escaping slaves from the South on their way to Canada. However, the old church in Michigan Avenue, just west of Broadway in Buffalo's last remaining block with the

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There is not a single sign in the old church that it once was a haven for men and women running away from slavery. The church remains the same as it was when it was built in 1845, except for electric lights fitted into old candelabra. From its appearance it is difficult to believe that the edifice is one of the proudest remaining monuments to the battle for human freedom.

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Few Changes in Building

According to the Rev. J. Edward Nash, pastor of the church for almost 45 years, there have been few changes in the church since 1845 when it was built. Old church records tell of the pride the congregation had in its first gas lights. They were installed more than 80 years ago after the congregation had been formed about eleven years. The original gas chandelier still is in the vestibule.

The church was built for a Negro congregation and was something of a protege of the First Baptist Church, which was located then in Washington Street. Prominent in the founding of the congregation was Payton Harris, an early Negro resident of Buffalo, who was considered comparatively wealthy. His great-granddaughter, Mrs. Sarah May Keelan, lives next door to the church now in Michigan Avenue.

The slavery question began to rock the United States shortly after the church was built. The Abolitionists had a strong following and an active membership in Buffalo and Western New York. Because their activities were illegal, such as bootlegging was during the twenties, the most active of the slave runners took pains to conceal their membership in the underground railway as well as their activities.

It is known that some of the wealthiest and most prominent of families of Buffalo before the Civil War were ardent Abolitionists. They not only contributed money but personal services also in aiding slaves to escape across the Niagara River to Fort Erie, where they were free from pursuit and bondage.

Next Station Westfield

The nearest underground railway station was Westfield. From there, carriages drawn by swift horses brought escaped slaves to Buffalo during the night. Stormy nights were favored for the trips to avoid traffic. When the runaways arrived in Buffalo, they were brought to the Michigan Avenue Baptist Church. They stayed there for days and often for weeks until agitation about the fugitives died down and then they were helped across the river. The escaped slaves were fed in the basement and slept on the padded pews of the church itself.

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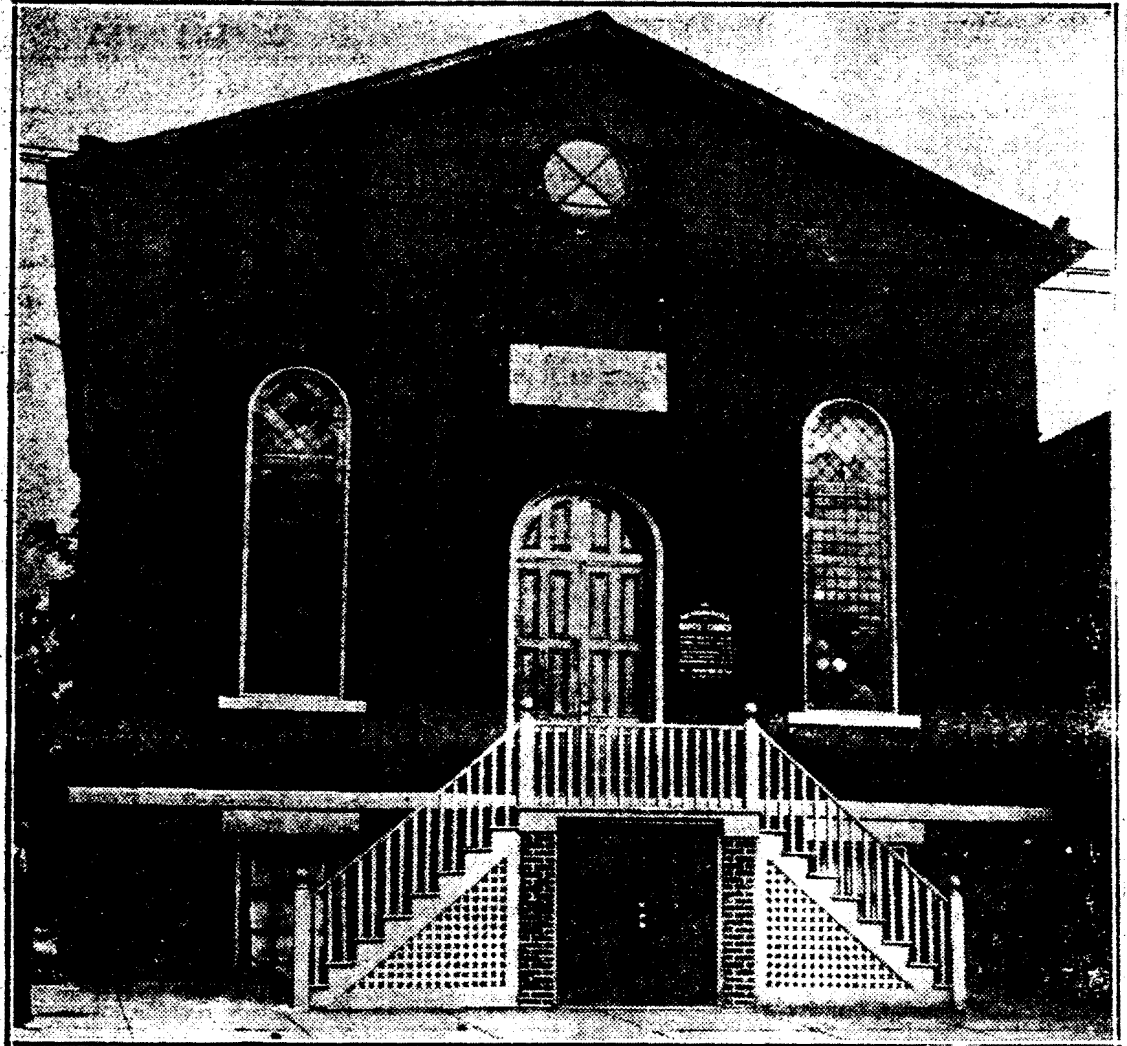
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