

African-American Church Architecture in New York City

Since Colonial times, the church has played an important role in many African-American communities. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, slaves were often encouraged to adopt Christianity, attending services alongside their owners. With the end of slavery in New York State in



All Saints Free Episcopal Church

Photo: NYCGO.com

1827, things changed substantially. A great number of independent black congregations were established, eventually commissioning structures from members of their own community, some of whom were the first licensed African-American architects in the nation. Evidence of this pattern can be discerned in various New York City Landmarks. For instance, St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Harlem traces its roots to Trinity Church on lower Broadway, where blacks attended separate services on Sunday afternoons before forming their own congregation in 1809. Though this building was later demolished to erect the current Trinity Church (1839-46, a designated New York City Landmark), **All Saints Free Episcopal Church** (1827-29, now St. Augustine's Church, a designated New York City Landmark), a Georgian-Gothic-style structure at 290 Henry Street on the Lower East Side, contains a pair of semi-enclosed seating areas that are believed to have been specifically planned for African-American worship. Known as slave galleries or "negro pews," these unique features are located on either side of the organ loft, above the rear balcony.

During much of the 19th century, leading African-American congregations often worshiped in structures that had been built for white parishioners. One of the most impressive examples was the **First Free Congregational Church** (1847, a designated New York City Landmark) at 311 Bridge Street in Brooklyn, which was acquired by the African Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1854. Later called the Bridge Street (AWME) Church, it was in this Greek Revival style building that the signing of the Emancipation



First Free Congregational Church

Photo: Columbia University

Proclamation was celebrated for three days in late 1862 and early 1863. Orator and writer Frederick Douglass addressed the congregation in February 1863, encouraging blacks to enlist in the Union army. Harriet Tubman, who helped escaped slaves as a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad, was welcomed as a speaker in 1865. After seven decades, the congregation relocated in 1942, purchasing the former Grace Presbyterian Church in Bedford Stuyvesant.



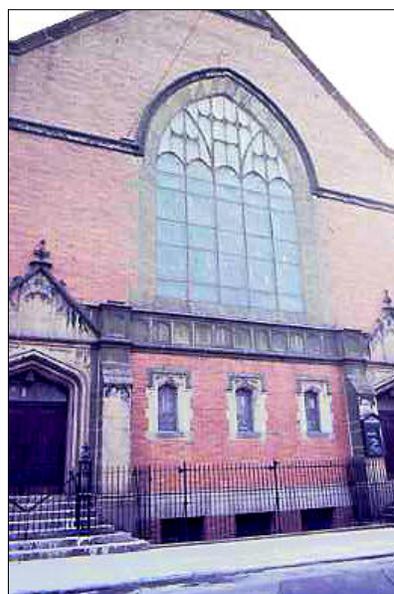
Rossville AME Zion Church

Photo: Preservation League of Staten Island

Staten Island’s African-American community took shape in the mid-19th century. Sandy Ground, located at the island’s south end, prospered and many free black oystermen and their families settled here beginning in the 1840s. **The Rossville AME Zion Church** (1897, a designated New York City Landmark) was formally established by minister William H. Pitts in 1850. Located at 585 Bloomingdale Road, this simple frame structure (now re-clad) replaced a

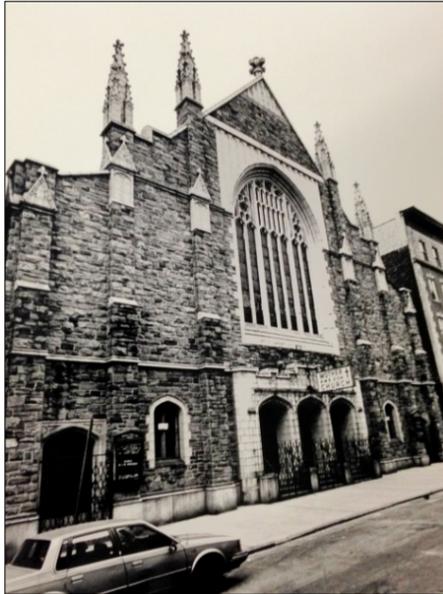
no longer extant church building and is possibly the earliest surviving religious structure commissioned by a black congregation in New York City. The nearby **Rossville AME Zion Church Cemetery** (c. 1852, a designated New York City Landmark), on Crabtree Avenue, contains the burial plots of least 34 African-American families.

Harlem became the focus of African-American life and culture the early 20th century. Though some blacks joined existing congregations or converted older structures, such as the Bethelite Community Baptist Church (originally the Harlem Club, 1888-89, part of the **Mount Morris Park Historic District**) and the Mt. Olivet Baptist Church (originally Temple Israel, 1906-07, part of the **Mount Morris Park Historic District**), three memorable neo-Gothic style churches were commissioned by historically-important black congregations. The first was **St. Philip’s Episcopal Church** (a designated New York City Landmark) at 214 West 134th Street. Founded in 1818, it relocated from 159 West 25th Street to this new building in 1911. Vertner Tandy and George W. Foster, Jr., two of the



St. Philip’s Episcopal Church

first African-American architects licensed in the United States, were responsible for the building's handsome design.



Mother Africa Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

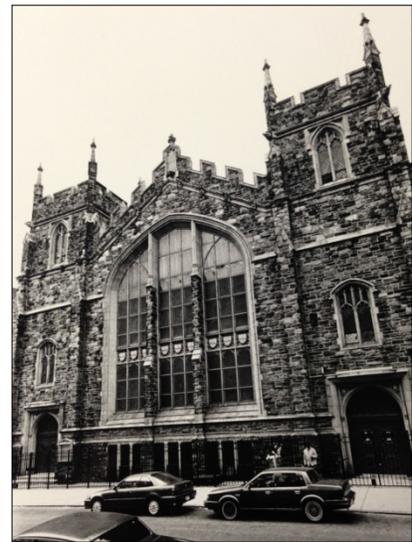
Charles W. Bolton & Sons, a Philadelphia firm specializing in ecclesiastic design. Among the celebrated ministers who led this influential church include Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., who became pastor in 1908 and oversaw the move to Harlem, and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who became the first black congressman from New York City, representing Harlem for 16 terms between 1945 and 1971.

Spanning more than a century, these notable landmarks illustrate the history of African-American worship in New York City.

Matthew A. Postal

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Foster, who lived in New Jersey, also designed **Mother Africa Methodist Episcopal Zion Church** (1923-25, a designated New York City Landmark) at 140 West 137th Street. Often referred to as “Mother Zion,” it was founded by black members of the John Street Methodist Church in 1796 and is home to the oldest African-American church congregation in New York City. **The Abyssinian Baptist Church and Community House** (1922-23, a designated New York City Landmark) is located on the next block, at 132 West 138th Street. Established in 1808, it was designed by



Abyssinian Baptist Church