

III. *Sites and Stories*

Auburn: North Side

AME Zion Church, site of original
Auburn Prison
Cayuga County Courthouse
Fitch House
Freeman House, site of
Freeman barbershop (Cumpston Lane and South Street), site of
Hornbeck Houses: Jefferson Street Historic District?
Hosmer House
Huntington House-Auburn Theological Seminary
Mansfield House
North Street Cemetery
Northern Christian Advocate Publishing House
Seward House
Swarts House
Underwood/Kiah-Williams House, site of
Wall Street Methodist Church
Westminister Presbyterian Church
Wright House, site of
Northern Independent and African American Barbershop, site of

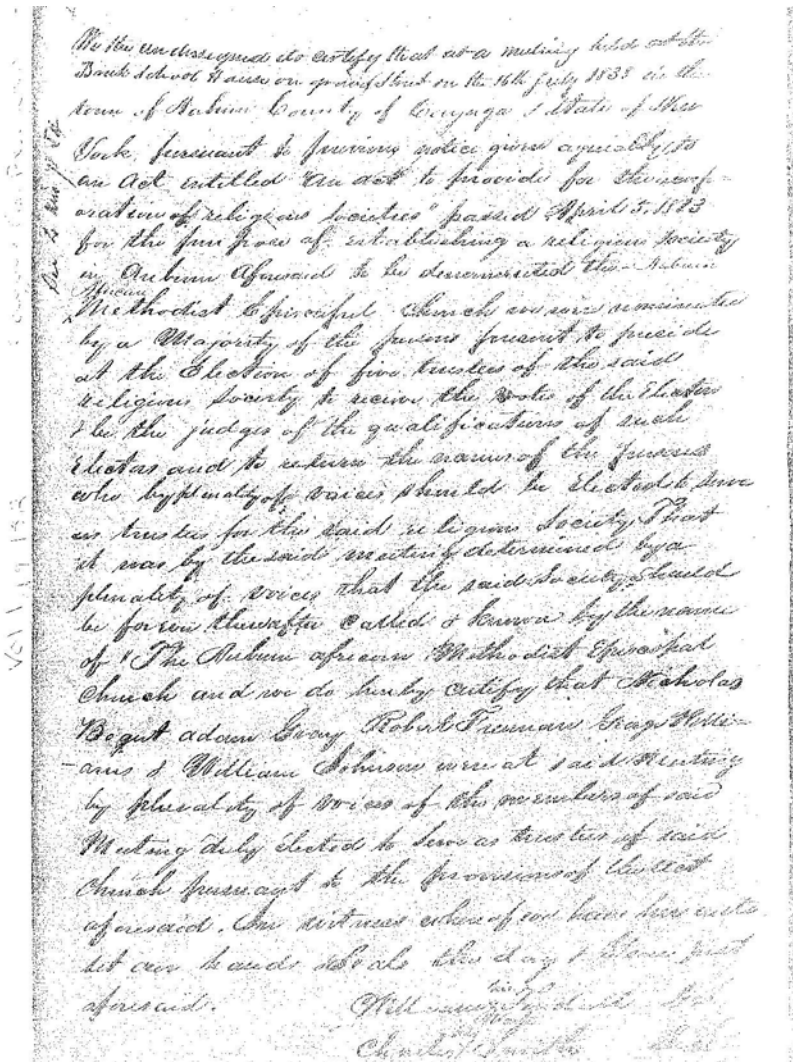
Site of First AME Zion Church**9-11 Washington Street (originally 5-7 Washington Street)****Auburn, New York****Significance: Site of first African American School (c.1839) and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (c. 1847)**

9-11 Washington Street
(Gray house with red trim)
February 2005
Looking northwest

Description: The original school/church on this site was a long narrow, gable-end-to the street building, with the door on the east end, altar on the east, and one aisle down the middle. A house belonging to Deborah Depuy was located at the back of this lot. Both were taken down shortly after 1905 and replaced with the current house.

Significance: In the nineteenth century, churches, schools, and clubs formed important identifying structures of community life. For African Americans in Auburn, the organization of the African American Methodist Episcopal Church was a major step toward a stable community presence. The church, like the school and local African American businesses (such as boarding houses and barbershops) gave aid to people on the Underground Railroad. They supported freedom seekers who wanted to travel to Canada, and they helped find jobs and homes for those who chose to stay in Auburn.

Incorporated in 1838, the church held its first meeting on July 16, 1838, and elected Nicholas Bogart, Adam Gray, Robert Freeman, George Williams, and William Johnson (almost certainly a freedom seeker himself) as trustees. William Terdell/Tudell and Charles Smith signed the incorporation papers with their marks.



On August 24, 1847, trustees held a meeting at the home of Betsy Smith and elected Joseph P. Thompson, Chair, and Robert Freeman and Jacob Jordan, Secretaries and Sebeo Hornbeck, Adam Gray, and Jacob Jordon as trustees. J. P. Thompson and Robert Freeman signed the minutes. On May 3, 1847, they noted that the name of the church was now "The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church of Auburn." On October 26, 1847, they had two ministers, John S. Dallas and Pleasant Bouler and elected Charles Griffin, Sebeo Hornbeck, Adam Gray, George Williams and Robert Freeman as trustees. Reverends Dallas and Bouler signed the minutes.

About this time, with the help of Rev. Mr. Johnson, a few families began worshipping in “an abandoned wooden schoolhouse” on Washington Street that the Village of Auburn had built “for a separate school for colored children, and later turned over by the new city authorities to the colored people for church uses.” This was undoubtedly the same building constructed about 1839, when Nicholas Bogart (sexton of the Baptist Church and employee of William Henry Seward), Adam Gray, and Josiah Churchill printed a card o thanks in the *Friend of Man* for contributions toward building a school for African American children in Auburn. Rev. Mr. Johnson may be the same man that Frances Seward referred to in 1852, when she wrote her husband, William Henry Seward, that “a man by the name of William Johnson will apply to you for assistance to purchase the freedom of his daughter. You will see that I have given him something by his book. I told him I thought you would give him more. He is very desirous that I should employ his daughter when he gets her which I have agreed to do conditionally if you approve.”¹ Of these named trustees and ministers, Sebeo Hornbeck, Charles Griffen, and William Johnson were probably freedom seekers.

On July 6, 1870, a second African American church, St. Mark’s, was organized in Auburn. The church held a meeting in Markham Hall in Auburn and elected as trustees Nelson Davis [Harriet Tubman’s husband], John Purnell, Isaac White, John H. Waire and John Sanford. Zadoc Bell and John Waire were added for the record. Signed by the mark of Zadoc Bell and the hand of John Waire. Of these people, at least Davis, Purnell, White, Bell, and Waire were freedom seekers.²

Rev. James E. Mason, speaking at the dedication of the Harriet Tubman monument at the Cayuga County Courthouse in 1914, remembered the day he first met Harriet Tubman at this church on Washington Street about 1880:

It was on a beautiful September Sunday morning. The monarch of the day had risen in Oriental splendor. The rich and varied hues of the autumnal woods added their attractions to our environment. The eloquent Bishop J.J. Clinton was conducting the Genesee Annual Conference in your city.

The early morning exercises were held in the long one-aisled frame Zion A.M.E. Church, on Washington Street. The lovely feast was practically ended but the rapturous songs of Zion were borne outward through the windows, across the avenue and the passerby’s listened with rapture and rejoiced.

I entered and seated near the altar, facing the audience. Singing, soul-stirring and reviving, continued. Seated four pews from the front, on my right, was a woman with shoulders somewhat stooped, and head bent forward. She had a broad forehead, piercing eyes, thick lips and strong, masculine features.

At the close of a thrilling selection she arose and commenced to speak in a hesitating voice. I understood her impediment resulted from a violent blow, which broke her skull,

¹ “History of Cayuga County,” Cayuga County Historical Society, 1908, 220; *Friend of Man*, April 24, 1839; Frances Seward to William Henry Seward, July 1, 1852, Seward Papers, University of Rochester. Found by Peter Wisbey.

² “Religious Incorporation,” Vol. I, 152, 195, 196, 198, 241, Cayuga County Records Retentions Office. Research by Tanya Warren.

when a child. In a shrill voice, she commenced to give testimony to God's goodness and long suffering. Soon she was shouting, and so were others also. She possessed such endurance, vitality, and magnetism, that I inquired and was informed it was Harriet Tubman—the "Underground Railroad Moses."

Here was a modern Priscilla, a prophetess, telling out of the fullness of her heart God's revelation to her in the secret of His presence.

Service ended, I greeted her. She said, "Are you save?" I gave an affirmative reply. She remarked: "Glory to God," and shouted again.

We have met on many important occasions during the intervening years. In the cottages of the lowly and the palatial homes of the wealthy; in private and in public place of responsibility. Everywhere she was the same determined, generous, enthusiastic, race-loving, cheerful heroic soul. A many chorded harp was her broadly sympathetic nature, sensitive to every touch of her race's sorest travail.

Her wit, humor and originality were striking compelling characteristics. She was directing a band of fugitives over Mason and Dixon's line, when something unexplainable occurred and they hesitated. She is reported as saying:

"Come along, come along,
Don't be a fool,
Uncle Sam is rich enough
To send us all to school."³

The church property itself was intimately connected with the family of Deborah Depuy, who lived at the rear of the church all her life and who may have acted as caretaker. Deborah Depuy was an important member of the local African American community, related to the Freemans. She had testified in the trial of William Freeman in 1846. Deborah Depuy was 29 years old in 1850, wife of Hiram S. Depuy, a 39-year-old laborer. Both were born in New York State. They had four children, Mercent (Morris or Morrison, age 9), John (age 8), Ruth (2), and Jane (2 months).

In 1848, John Bland and William Cropp/Cross came into possession of the Washington St. property via John Bartlett and Horace Knight of Auburn and Charles Merrill of Waterloo. Beginning in 1854, Deborah Depuy paid taxes on part of this property, "at the rear of the African Church." In 1857, John and Charlotte Bland from Charlotte, Ontario, Canada, and William Cropp/Cross, "of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," formally sold part of this land to Deborah Depuy, who lived here for the rest of her life.

Wm. Cropp/Cross was not found in the Pennsylvania census of 1860, but John H. Bland and Charlotte Bland appeared in the Ontario census for 1880. Both were listed as African, born in the USA. They lived in Hamilton, Ontario. John was a barber, age 60. Charlotte was a dressmaker,

³ Rev. James E. Mason, "Pays Tribute to Harriet Tubman," *Auburn Advertiser-Journal*, June 6, 1914, quoted in Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Stories* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 333-34.

age 37. They had two children (age 19 and 15) both born in Ontario, and a 70-year-old woman named Mary Young also lived with them. John Bland was Baptist.⁴

By 1865, Deborah Depuy was a widow. Her son Morrison had become a barber, and she owned property worth \$1000. The 1870 census listed her occupation as laundress. She died in 1879.

Deborah Depuy was assessed \$100 for her land at the rear of the church from 1854 until 1859. From 1860 until her death in 1879, she was assessed between \$350 and \$475 for a house and lot. After her death, the property at 3-11 Washington Street remained off the tax rolls from 1879 until 1905. The church was most likely torn down shortly after 1905 and the current house erected.⁵

⁴ Ontario Census, C-13257, Ward 6, Hamilton, Ontario.

⁵ Assessment Records, Cayuga County Records Retention Office.