Reverend Thomas James and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

Cheryl Sampson
The College at Brockport, csamp1@brockport.edu

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Rev. Thomas James and Rochester’s African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

There is nothing spectacular about the architecture of the old church that stands at 42 Favor Street in the historic Corn Hill neighborhood in Rochester, New York. Its significance lies in the people who made their marks within its hallowed halls. People like Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Hester Jeffrey all were associated with the church. This project explores the life of Rev. Thomas James and his impact, first in Rochester, NY and as a change agent in the African American struggle for freedom in the nineteenth century.

The three church edifices that occupied this site, starting in 1829, was the epicenter of societal change that radiated, not only throughout the city of Rochester, but in various other places throughout the country. The instigator of this change was Rev. Thomas James – the founder and first pastor of the African Church of Rochester, New York. His life story follows:

**Beginning Years**
- Born into slavery in Canajoharie, New York in 1804.
- Sold / traded to Cromwell Bartlett and then to George H. Hess.
- Ran away via Eric Canal to Lockport, New York then to Canada.
- 1822 - 1827
  - Moved to Rochester (then called Rochesterville) worked in (Eric Canal) warehouse of Hudson and Eric Line.
  - Learned to read at a Sunday School for “colored youth” run by John Freeman on Buffalo Street (this school was the one started by Austin Steward in 1818).
  - Became a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Society in 1823 on Ely Street (Rochester’s Convention Center is now in that location).

**1828 - 1834**
- Ran a school on Favor Street (1828) and held religious meetings (i.e. church).
- Purchased the land on Favor Street to build a church.
- Married “a free colored girl” who died in 1841.
- Started and pastored The African Church in Rochester (1829).
- Ordained by AME Zion Bishop Rush and began using the name Rev. Thomas James.
- Helped to organize Rochester’s Anti-Slavery Society (1833) with Judge Ashley Sampson.
- Published *The Rights of Man*.

**1835 - 1862**
- Under assignment of the AME Zion Church, left Rochester in 1835.
- Started and pastored AME Zion churches in Syracuse (1835), Ithaca (1838), Sag Harbor, Long Island and New Bedford Massachusetts (1840).
- Met Frederick Douglass in New Bedford; ordained him and gave him his first opportunity to speak before a white audience – instrumental in getting Douglass to Rochester.
- As part of the resistance against the Fugitive Slave Law, instrumental in winning freedom of enslaved girl in Boston.
- Worked with Lewis Tappan to secure the freedom of the Amistad captives.
- Challenged and won the right of African Americans to sit in integrated public transportation in Boston.
- Returned to Rochester in 1856 to take “charge of the colored church”.

**1862 - 1865**
- (Left Rochester) As a part of American Missionary Society and then as an agent for the government, provided support to refugees and freed blacks in Louisville, Kentucky after Emancipation.

**1866 - 1878**
- While working as part of General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Connection served as missionary in Ohio and Topeka Kansas.
- Pastored the AME church in Lockport.

**1870 - 1891**
- Returned to Rochester, remarried with two additional young children (He had four by first wife).
- He had some paralysis from the beating he received in Kentucky and was nearly blind with cataracts.
- Rev. Thomas James died on April 18, 1891 and is buried in historic Mt. Hope Cemetery in Rochester, NY.

**After 1891**
- Hester Jeffrey (1843 – 1934) was instrumental in founding Women’s Era Club in Boston; precursor to National Association of Colored Women.
- Moved to Rochester in 1891; became a member of the African Church; Her husband, Jerome Jeffrey, was son of 8th pastor of the church, Rev. Roswell Jeffrey.
- Close friend of Susan B. Anthony; Founded and was president of Rochester Chapter of the Susan B. Anthony Club.
- As a close friend, she was the only lay person chosen to eulogize Ms. Anthony (1906).
- Financed and presented a stained glass window in honor of Susan B. Anthony in the newly build edifice. The window was one of four honoring Douglass, Tubman, and Dr. Joseph Price. Church is now called Memorial AME Zion.
- Church Congregation moved to Clarris Street in 1973.

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* Images: Camp Nelson, Louisville, Kentucky 1864. Courtesy of the Audio/Visual Archives, Special Collections and Archives, Univ. of Kentucky Libraries.