

***The Invisible Made Visible:***  
***A Brief Overview of African American History***  
***In the New England Conference of The United Methodist Church***  
*(updated in 2020 from the original version (prepared in 2001/2002)*  
*with additional comments from the Rev. Patricia J. Thompson, Conference Historian)*

INTRODUCTION

In the year 2000, the New England Conference Commission on Archives and History hosted the Northeastern Jurisdiction Commission on Archives and History for their annual meeting. As is often the tradition, if the resident bishop is available, s/he often leads our opening worship service. That year, the service was led by our then resident Bishop, Susan W. Hassinger. In her message, she challenged us to examine the lenses through which we see the history which we are recovering, reporting, and celebrating.

As I began to reflect on that challenge, I had one of those “aha” moments as I realized nearly all of the history which had been written about the New England Annual Conference (of which I was aware, anyway) had been written through a white, male, Methodist Episcopal lens. I decided right then and there that this needed to be corrected!

Prior to this time, I had spent most of my research and writing on recovering the stories of women in the annual conference – stories which had never before been told, either. In 2000, however, I began a journey that has continued through the present to uncover the history of the people of color in the New England Conference – a history that had been, for the most part, invisible up to that point. I also realized that it was a somewhat perilous journey for a white woman, but also that if I did not do it, it might never get done at all. I was strongly encouraged in this effort, however, by my good friend, Bishop Martin McLee, who was, at the time, the pastor of the Union United Methodist church in Boston – the first African American congregation in our annual conference.

And, I must say, that it has been both a fascinating and at times a frustrating journey. One question which might be asked at the outset was why so little had been written about African Americans in the annual conference? There are several reasons for this. First, the number of African Americans in churches in New England, especially in the early days was very low; however, that does not mean that there were not African American church members from the outset of the annual conference in 1793 and African American congregations from as early as 1818. There were. But, for the most part, they were simply ignored or only passing references were made to them when the histories were written.

Second, up until 1864, in the United States African American men were only allowed to be ordained as *local* deacons and elders – they were not accepted as equal to their white brothers - and only the sketchiest of records were kept on local pastors of any color or gender until recently. Thus, the history of local pastors themselves is rendered nearly invisible, and as a result, it is nearly impossible to uncover within the official, published minutes and records of the annual conference. Interestingly, however, there are sometimes references in the original handwritten records of the annual conference to the ordination of African Americans that for some unknown

reason never appear in the official published records – another reason that the history of the people of color in the conference remains invisible, due, in part, to our white privilege of choosing what to include or not to include in the official published records.

Fortunately, however, non-church resources are now available through the internet and a fair amount of information has been discovered on the African American pastors of the New England Conference as well as on members of their families in some situations – much of which has never been published in a coherent whole.

During the early 2000's both Stephen Pentek, who was then the archivist for the New England Conference archives at the Boston University School of Theology Library, and I spent a good deal of time and effort attempting to uncover the history of the African American churches in the annual conference and the early pastors who served them, and, we prepared "A Brief Overview of the History of the African American Churches in the New England Annual Conference." I also wrote several articles on the Rev. Samuel Snowden, the first African American pastor in the annual conference, as well as an article on the Rev. John N. Mars. Mars was the first African American in the Methodist Episcopal Church to have been received "on trial" in preparation for membership in the Methodist Episcopal Church in New England in 1864 prior to General Conference actually approving conference membership (and thus, equal clergy rights) for African American men that same year.

Later, with the help of a number of Korean pastors in the annual conference, I also prepared "A Brief Overview of the Korean Churches in the New England Annual Conference." Although it had been my goal to then prepare a similar overview the Hispanic/Latino Churches in the annual conference, the Rev. Luis Benavides wrote and published a wonderful history of those churches entitled, *Latino Christianity: History, Ministry, and Theology, The New England United Methodist Situation*, and thus, eliminated the need to do that.

Finally, in 2005, while serving as the pastor for the Wolcott UMC in Wolcott, VT (which was then still located in the Troy Annual Conference), I began researching the life and ministry of the Rev. George S. Brown, the founding pastor of that church in 1855. As far as I have been able to discern, Rev. Brown is the *only* African American pastor in the United Methodist Church who can be credited with organizing a white congregation (in 1855) and then overseeing the construction of the church building for that congregation (in 1856).

Although some information about the Rev. George S. Brown has been published in recent years in our conference online newspaper, *UM Catalyst News Notes*, the other information was basically confined to our earlier newspaper, *Cross Currents*, or in the case of the "Brief Overviews," made available at annual conference.

In response to the issues which are currently being raised in this country over issues of racism and "Black Lives Matter," The United Methodist Church just recently presented a town hall gathering on the history of racism in the United Methodist Church which can be viewed at: <https://www.umc.org/en/content/dismantling-racism-town-hall>. While watching this, I was reminded, once again, about the work which I had done at the beginning of the century, and how easy it is for us to forget about and lose track of the history of the people of color in our denomination – especially in a predominantly *white* conference. Over the

intervening years, I have come to understand that much of this is, in fact, due to our white privilege as white historians.

Now, in support of the “Black Lives Matter” movement, it seems appropriate to make available, once again, the history of the African American churches in the New England Annual Conference, in particular, and the stories of the lives and ministries of their pastors – some of whom dealt with a great deal of white privilege and racism within the Methodist Episcopal Church and yet made the decision to stay with that church rather than to defect to one of the growing African Methodist Episcopal denominations. And, in spite of that, we do have a lot of positive history relating to African Americans here in the annual conference, as well, and I do not want us to lose sight of that either.

Thus, over the next few weeks I will be making available updated versions of many of the materials and stories which were originally published in the early 2000’s to help us to celebrate the presence of the Black lives that have been a part of our conference from the very beginning and the contributions which many have made to our history and the history of our country but which have often been ignored or forgotten due, in great part, to our white privilege.

### ***EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATIONS OR RELATED CONGREGATIONS***

#### **1) May Street/Revere Street MEC/Union United Methodist Church, Boston, MA**

As far as we have been able to determine, prior to 1905, there was only one African American congregation in the New England Conference. That is the church that is now known as Union UMC. It was gathered in 1818 as a mission of the Bromfield MEC and remained as such throughout the nineteenth century. William Albert Thurston in his 1897 book, *Souvenir History of the New England Conference* describes the situation which caused the separate black congregation to be formed:

[S]ome of the colored people could not be made to feel at home, because they were far more sentimental in their religious worship than were their white brethren; for during the divine services the colored worshippers, it seems would allow their imagination wide range for that mere luxury of excitement. As this particular trait in their character manifested itself only in the religious services, to the more intelligent portion of the congregation it appeared to be an abnormal one and they sought to correct it. But some of the colored people regarded the correction as criticism upon their mode of religious worship; and in order to be freed from it, they asked the Bromfield Street Church to give them a meeting-house of their own, where they could worship God in their own simple way.<sup>1</sup>

*[Note the condescending language which Thurston used to describe the reason that this once integrated congregation moved to become a segregated congregation. On the other hand, the*

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<sup>1</sup>William Albert Thurston, *Souvenir History of the New England Conference, Volume 11: South District* (Boston: Lounsbury, Nichols & Worth, 1897) p. 92.

*move toward having a congregation of their own resulted in bringing our first African American pastor into the area, who organized the congregation, and became a well-known activist in the anti-slavery movement in the Boston area.]*

As a result, an African American exhorter named Samuel Snowden, connected with the Methodist Church in Portland, was called to Boston to pastor this congregation in 1818. As far as we can determine, Snowden was the first African American pastor in the annual conference. He was preaching in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, as early as 1800:

In the year, 1800, there were a few Methodists living in the vicinity of Brown's Hill, in Cape Elizabeth, who were members of the class in Portland.

Samuel Snowdon [sic], a colored preacher, was one of the first Methodist preachers who held meetings in this part of the Cape. Mr. Snowdon preached many Sabbaths in the place. Rev. Asa Heath and Samuel Barnes also preached here occasionally.<sup>2</sup>

That portion of Cape Elizabeth known as Brown's Hill eventually became what is now South Portland. In 1824, the church today known as First United Methodist Church, South Portland, was located on Brown's Hill.

Despite the fact that they had their own separate building and pastor from 1823 onward, known first as the May Street Mission, then the Revere Street Church (May Street was changed to Revere Street in 1860), it was not until 1841 that, for the first time, the Conference lists a separate congregation called the "colored church."<sup>3</sup> In 1843, the list of churches included May Street (instead of the "colored church"), but the church statistics for that year counted only white members, so May Street is listed with no members. (Prior to that statistics had been reported as "white" and "colored.") Beginning the following year, only "members" were listed in all of the New England Conferences, with no "white" or colored" distinction. By the mid-1850's this seemed to be the national trend, as well. Thus, other than the list of pastors (with no distinction of race), this congregation remained virtually invisible for many years.

*[Note: While this choice not to distinguish the race/ethnic group of members may at the time have seemed the "correct" process to use, as noted, it basically rendered members/congregations of color invisible. The same is true today for clergy. The race/ethnic background of clergy members of annual conference is not required in their official clergy record. Therefore, again, it is not possible to discern how many pastors of color we actually have today. In 2004-2005 when I was writing my book on the history of women clergy and their journey toward full clergy rights, Courageous Past, Bold Future, we determined that we wanted to identify the first woman in every ethnic group in every annual conference to have received full clergy rights. However, since the race/ethnic group of clergy was not identified, this often meant that it was left to individuals who may have known personally such a clergywoman to identify her. This, again, renders some of our history as invisible – for both men and women.]*

Samuel Snowden became a well-known anti-slavery activist in the Boston area and he and his family, including his daughter, Isabella and his son, Isaac, became very active in the

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<sup>2</sup>Rev. Stephen Allen and Rev. W.H. Pilsbury, *History of Methodism in Maine 1793-1886 Vol 1* (Augusta, Maine: Press of Charles E. Nash, 1887) p.289.

<sup>3</sup>*Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church.* (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh).

underground railroad, as well. Thus, there is a fair amount of information available about the life and ministry of the Rev. Snowden in resources outside of the Methodist Episcopal Church. This will be shared in a separate article in the upcoming weeks. Samuel Snowden remained as the pastor of the church until his death in 1850.

While researching the life of the Rev. Samuel Snowden and the May Street/Revere Street church, an interesting piece of their history came to light in the biography of a young white man from Vermont, named Rufus Kinsley. Interestingly enough, in the late 1850's Kinsley, who was working in Boston for local newspapers - first the *Life Boat*, and then the *Traveller*, both devoted to the issue of temperance – joined the May Street MEC and eventually became the superintendent of the Sunday School. David Rankin, in his biography of Kinsley, *Diary of a Christian Soldier: Rufus Kinsley and the Civil War*, says:

Among Kinsley's predecessors as superintendent of the Sabbath school was Robert Morris, the first African American to gain admission to the Massachusetts bar. Morris was an eloquent leader in campaigns to desegregate the state's public schools and a fearless defender of Anthony Burns and other fugitive slaves who were captured in Boston and were slated under federal law to be returned to Rufus Kinsley the South...

The May Street Church had a long and illustrious history not only of saving souls but also of fighting racial oppression. David Walker, the author of the revolutionary "Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World" (1829) and Boston's most famous abolitionist, had been a member of the May Street Church and a close friend of its first pastor, Samuel Snowden.... Snowden, whom William Lloyd Garrison referred to as "my beloved colored brother," and his successor, the Reverend Elijah Grissom, who was himself a fugitive slave were both members of an enduring biracial coalition that simultaneously fought segregation in Boston and slavery in the South. Under their tutelage, the May Street Church became a center of abolitionism, where clergy and lay people alike taught that slavery was a sin and that opposition to the institution, even violent opposition, was a Christian duty. At the May Street Church Kinsley learned that black men like Robert Morris, David Walker, Samuel Snowden, and Elijah Grissom were part of a long tradition of black activism that dated back to the Revolution. He learned that the tradition of radical reform in Boston was not limited to white Bostonians with names like Wendell Phillips, Charles Sumner, and William Lloyd Garrison. <sup>5</sup> By working at the Sabbath school, Kinsley also got to know ordinary, working-class African Americans. Many of those he dealt with at the school were poor migrants from the South – in 1860 a quarter of Boston's black population was Southern born – and doubtless some were runaway slaves who had come to Boston in search of the promised land. The May Street church welcomed these impoverished refugees and offered them food, clothing and housing as well as spiritual aid.<sup>4</sup>

In 1857 Rufus Kinsley quit his job at the *Traveller*, resigned as the Superintendent of the May Street Sabbath school and returned to Fairfax, VT. At the time of his resignation, the church made him a special gift of a writing case, "filled with stationery and stamps, and containing a good number of gold dollars...and was by him carried through the [Civil] war for the suppression of the slaveholders' rebellion from 1861 to 1865, where it served a very useful purpose in giving a great many hundred (late) slaves the rudiments of an education... It had [also] served as Kinsley's link to the militant black community of Boston, to the church of Elijah Grissom, Samuel

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<sup>4</sup> David C. Rankin, *Diary of a Christian Soldier Rufus Kinsley and the Civil War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 16-17.

Snowden, and David Walker” It was also out of this desk that Kinsley wrote his diary that was subsequently published by David Rankin.

Five months before his death, Kinsley gifted the writing desk to his daughter, Amy L. Gelo; it was eventually gifted to the Vermont Historical Society, where it currently resides at the Vermont History Society in Barre, VT as a part of the Kinsley Collection.<sup>5</sup>

In 1869/1870, the Rev. John N. Mars (see #4 Below) was appointed Revere St. MEC and served as their pastor for two years.

In the 1895 report of the Boston South District: “There are seventy-two churches on the district. Of this number, ten are Swedish churches; one is an Italian church.”<sup>6</sup> But there is no report of an African-American congregation. In James Mudge’s 1910 *History of the New England Conference* they are nearly invisible, as well. Other than a note that Amos Binney...”gave to the colored people their church on Revere Street, Boston,” the only other mention of the congregation is buried in a paragraph about Swedish churches in the conference and it is not referenced in the index under May Street, Revere Street or Boston: “...A society for the colored people was organized in May Street, 1818; their numbers at that time were reported as thirty-three...” [and then follows notes on four of their recent pastors.]<sup>7</sup>

The Bromfield Street congregation (apparently, in part, through the generosity of Amos Binney) paid for the early building on May Street, and they held the deed despite the fact the Boston blacks had the privilege of owning land and voting. During the 1830’s two groups of members from the May Street congregation became frustrated with the oversight of the Bromfield Street MEC and separated from the May Street Congregation to form what would eventually become the AME and the AMEZ Churches in Boston. Despite the fact that several members of the congregation left to join churches where African Americans were more welcome and had more opportunities to exert control over their own lives, Samuel Snowden never left the MEC.<sup>8</sup>

In 1903, when their building fell into disrepair, it was sold out from under them with no replacement forthcoming. This resulted in the request for a transfer to the Delaware Conference, one of the all-Black conferences organized after 1864 (and the end of the Civil War) to serve Black churches in the Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>9</sup>

[Note: *Prior to the end of the Civil War, the Methodist Episcopal Church knew that it had to make some structural changes in its over-all organization to accommodate all of the African Americans that had been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, along with their churches. In order to give Black pastors equal rights with their White clergy counterparts, the 1864 General Conference granted full clergy rights to African American pastors for the first time. That same General Conference also made provision for the organization of all-Black Conferences to accommodate the Black Churches and the Black pastors now eligible for full clergy rights. Although this had the effect of segregating all of the Black Churches in their own*

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

<sup>6</sup> *Journal of the New England Conference 1895*, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> James Mudge, *History of the New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1796-1910* (Boston: The Conference, 1910) p. 255; p. 311.

<sup>8</sup> Roy E. Finkenbine, “Boston’s Black Churches as Institutional Centers of the Antislavery Movement,” in *Courage and Conscience Black and White Abolitionists in Boston*, ed. Donald M. Johnson (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) p. 173.

<sup>9</sup> *Journal of the New England Conference 1904*, p. 47.

*annual conferences, it did, for the first time, also provide the opportunity to African Americans to have leadership positions in their annual conferences, including the options of being appointed as Presiding Elders (the earlier term for District Superintendents) and being elected as Bishops. Therefore, this was a mixed blessing for African Americans in the MEC. Nevertheless, by 1939, when the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church came back together to form the Methodist Church and many knew that this would not happen if African Americans had rights in the church equal to those of their white counterparts, the mechanism was already in place to easily accommodate the organization of the Central Jurisdiction. That is, for the first time, white churches were organized in geographical units called “jurisdictions” for the election of Bishops and conducting of other business. All of the Black churches, however, were organized into one non-geographic jurisdiction for the same purpose, thus continuing the segregation which had, for all intents and purposes, begun with the organization of the Black Annual Conferences in 1864.]*

According to records from the All-Black Delaware Conference (which covered Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania and New Jersey), in 1905 Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Worcester decided to join the Methodist Episcopal Church through the Delaware Conference.<sup>10</sup> At the same time there was also a listing for a Malden Circuit. This transfer apparently did not work well for the 1908 minutes of the Delaware Conference reported that, “As Boston Methodism positively refuses to aid our colored churches in that city and Worcester, unless they are placed in the New England Conference, it is evidently better for those churches that they be allowed to return to the Conference able and desirous of giving them the necessary aid.”<sup>11</sup> The New England Conference minutes reported that, “The old Revere Street church is again restored to its mother Conference after a visit of a few years to the Delaware Conference.”<sup>12</sup>

*Note: As a result of this move, Union and St. Andrews churches were never a part of the Central Jurisdiction described above. Apparently, the Malden Circuit mentioned above never really materialized into an active church as they were not mention in 1908 when Union and Bethel transferred back into the New England Conference from the Delaware Conference. As of this writing, more research needs to be conducted to determine what might have happened in Malden. Unfortunately, Delaware Conference Journals are not readily available in any form.*

Upon their return, the Boston Missionary Society and the Bromfield Street MEC then helped Revere Street to find a building. Their current website states:

With the migration of Boston’s black population, the congregation moved from Beacon Hill to Roxbury and then to its current home on Columbus Avenue in Boston’s South End—and taking the name “Union.” Educator and activist Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, aunt to our pastor, was the keynote speaker for the formal opening on May 8, 1949.

Throughout the decades Union has hosted the NAACP convention (1950) that voted to pursue *Brown v. Board* and the Duke Ellington Sacred Jazz Orchestra (1966). In the 1970s, Union led the development of Meth-Union Manor, a four-building affordable

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<sup>10</sup>*Journal of the Delaware Conference 1905*, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup>*Journal of the Delaware Conference 1908*, p.43.

<sup>12</sup>*Journal of the New England Conference 1909*, p. 45

housing cooperative in the South End. During the 1980s and 1990s we fought against apartheid in South Africa and for economic equality for all at home. In 2000, Union voted officially to become what it had been for decades: a safe space for LGBTQ persons. [*Union UMC was the first African American congregation in the country to become a Reconciling Congregation.*]

Today, we continue this rich legacy, and each year we co-present Boston's premier and the nation's longest running MLK Memorial Breakfast, which unites the "beloved community" for peace and justice.

At the 2002 session of the annual conference, Union UMC was recognized as one of the Historic Congregations of the New England Conference. It is also considered to be one of the Historic Black Congregations of the United Methodist Church. It is the seventh oldest Black congregation to have been organized in the United Methodist Church and the fifth oldest still in existence.<sup>13</sup>

*For more information about Union UMC, go to: [unionboston.org](http://unionboston.org). In the weeks ahead, more extensive articles on the lives of Samuel Snowden and some of his family members and the Rev. John N. Mars will be available in the UM Catalyst.*

## 2) **Bethel AME/St. Andrews/Covenant-St. Andrews UMC, Worcester, MA**

Bethel AME church also transferred into the New England Conference in 1908. The only records which we have of Bethel MEC to date are brief references in the conference journals which indicate that the church was embroiled in a very difficult court battle over a piece of property on which they hoped to build a church. The court case was settled in 1913 but it appears that it was not until 1924 when they purchased a building on Chandler Street that they actually had a building of their own. It was also at this time when their name was changed to St. Andrews:

...Worcester Methodism has been strengthened during the year by the purchase of a brick meeting house for the congregation of colored worshipers formerly called Bethel Church, but now named St. Andrews. A new addition to the membership of 19 means a great deal and with the new church much progress may be confidently expected.<sup>14</sup>

St. Andrews merged with Covenant UMC (a white congregation) to form the Covenant-St. Andrew UMC in the early 2000's.

## 3) **Wolcott UMC, Wolcott, VT**

In 2010 the United Methodist churches in Vermont became a part of the New England Conference and this brought two other churches into the conference with African American connections, the Wolcott UMC, in Wolcott, which had been organized in 1855 by the Rev. George S. Brown, the first African American pastor in the Troy Conference of the MEC, and the Winooski United Methodist Church (see #12).

Brown had had an interesting and painful life within the Methodist Episcopal Church. Much of what we know about Brown's early life comes from his *Journal* which was published in 1849: *Brown's Abridged Journal Containing a Brief Account of the Life, Trials and Travels of the Rev.*

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<sup>13</sup>Grant S. Shockley, ed., *Heritage and Hope The African-American Presence in United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) Appendix B, p.309.

<sup>14</sup>District Superintendent's Report, *Journal of the New England Conference 1925*, p. 251.

*Geo. S. Brown, Six Years a Missionary in Liberia, West Africa: A Miracle of God's Grace.*

He was born a free man in Newport, RI, in 1801. Although he grew up in a Baptist home, he was not drawn to Calvinism. He says in his *Journal*:

I was trained up after the straitest sect of Calvinism [the theology of the Congregationalists and Baptists], till I was twenty years old. I then took my departure from my father's house, (by his consent,) and went to seek refuge for myself. But soon I became a profligate. . .

The first effectual seed which was sown in my heart was under the preaching of Rev. L[orenzo] Dow at campmeeting in Mansfield, [CT] when I was about fourteen y[ea]rs.<sup>15</sup>

The Rev. Dow was an eccentric Methodist Episcopal minister sometimes referred to as "Crazy Dow." He was among the earliest Methodist circuit riders to have been assigned to Vermont, traveling up and down the Champlain Valley and into Canada, as well. He was, however, eventually refused ordination in the Methodist Episcopal Church because he did not conform to Methodist standards.

Brown was not converted until the late 1830's when he moved to the Glens Falls area of New York. At the time, Brown made his living by building stonewalls and there are still many of the walls that he built during the late 1820's and early 1830's still standing today. He was first converted to the Baptists, but soon after he met a "Holy Ghost" preacher from the Methodist Episcopal Church named William Ryder, Brown felt called to join the Episcopal Methodists and become a preacher. Brown received a verbal license to exhort from the Rev. T. Fields in 1830, then a formal license to exhort from the Washington Circuit Quarterly Conference in April 1831 and a license to preach on July 27, 1833.<sup>16</sup>

Shortly thereafter, however, he felt a strong call to go Africa and preach to the Native Africans there, and was subsequently sent to Liberia as a teacher in 1836. Note that at the time Liberia was a newly developing colony supported by the American Colonization Society for slaves from the United States who were being freed but weren't being welcomed into American Society. Brown's primary interest, however, from the beginning of his call, was in bringing Christ to those who had never heard about him before.

The story of his life in Liberia as a teacher and eventually as a very effective preacher is a long and painful one full of racism and white privilege, which will be told in a subsequent article on his life and ministry. He was, however, while he served there, eventually ordained as both a deacon and an elder and taken into membership in the Liberia Annual Conference. Note that the only annual conferences at the time that would receive African Americans as full members were the missionary conferences. Brown, however, was eventually expelled from the Liberia Conference, and sailed back to America in 1843, never to return, leaving his wife behind

Due to even more racism and white privilege, Brown spent the next ten years fighting to have his preaching credentials restored in the Troy Conference, here in the United States. He was strongly opposed by two white brothers, James and George Harvey, who did not want a man of color in their church, as well as in letters written back to the United States by the white Superintendent in Liberia, John Seys. Brown eventually felt he had no other choice but to sue the Rev. Seys in civil court in Albany, NY. The suit was finally settled in his favor in 1848. His *Journal* describing in great detail his entire experience, was published in 1849. Despite the way

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<sup>15</sup> Geo. S. Brown, *Brown's Abridged Journal, Containing a Brief Account of the Life, Trials and Travels of Geo. S. Brown, Six Years a Missionary in Liberia, West Africa: A Miracle of God's Grace* (Troy, NY: Press of Prescott & Wilson, 1849)5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

he had been treated, however, Brown refused to leave the Methodist Episcopal Church and continued to fight for restoration of his clergy credentials.

It was not until after he came to Vermont in 1852 with the Rev. Henry Boardman Taylor, that Brown's credentials were finally restored by the Troy Conference in 1853 at the recommendation of the St. Albans District Presiding Elder. Brown then spent the next two years as an evangelist before he went to the little town of Wolcott and held a revival in the spring of 1855 which resulted in the gathering of an entirely white congregation there that became strong enough to hire him as their pastor that same year. The following year the minutes record that Brown appointed seven white men to become the Trustees of the church which was built that same year. Brown remained as the pastor there through 1857; then, due to ill health, he returned to the Glens Falls area of New York which he called home.

Like the African American history in the New England Annual Conference, however, George S. Brown's history was also unknown and for all intents invisible, until recent years as well. Prior to being appointed to the church in late 2004, I was attending the Puffer UMC in Morrisville, which, at the time had been yoked with the Wolcott UMC since 1943. The only thing that was known about Rev. Brown until that point were two sentences from Hamilton Child's *Gazetteer and Business Directory of Lamoille and Orleans County, Vt, for 1883-84* which appeared in the history of the Wolcott Methodist Church: "The M.E. church, located at Wolcott village, was organized at an early date, and supplied for years by circuit preachers, Rev. George Brown, a colored man being the first resident pastor. Through his energy and perseverance money was raised to build the present church building which was erected in 1855 [1856]."<sup>17</sup> I have spent the last 15 years uncovering his story and sharing that with the congregation, the town, and the annual conferences.

*Note: Although one might ask why no one had uncovered George S. Brown's story prior to the early 2000's, in all fairness, it probably needs to be stated that it is only recently, as more and more resources are becoming available online that many stories which previously had been lost, forgotten, or buried, have become more accessible. In George S. Brown's case, it is very interesting to note that his work in Vermont, which might be considered among his most important and lasting work was virtually unknown except for the two lines quoted above. A fair amount of information had been written about Brown's life in the Glens Falls, New York area, especially at the Sanford's Ridge church where he was most active. There is even an historic marker near the church which references Brown, though inaccurately. However, none of the published material in that area makes any reference to Brown's work in Vermont. Even Charles and Ouida Schwartz, who do at least make mention of Brown and his missionary work in Liberia in their 1982 A Flame of Fire, the Story of the Troy Annual Conference, and also list Brown as the founding pastor of the Wolcott UMC in their subsequent book, The Spreading Flame, do not make the connection between the two.*

*When I began researching Brown's life, the first place that I began was the Troy Conference Archives. There was nothing specific in the archives under Brown's name at the time. It was not until someone else made a reference to the history of the Sanford's Ridge UMC, that Karen Staulters, the archivist at the time, came across references to Brown in the history of that church, and his story slowly began to unfold. There was still no reference at all to any of his*

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<sup>17</sup> Hamilton Child, *Gazetteer and Business Directory of Lamoille and Orleans Counties, Vt, for 1883-84* (Syracuse, NY: Journal Office, July 1883) 162.

*work in Vermont and though I finally was able to obtain a copy of his published Journal, that, too, made no reference to his work in Vermont because it was published in 1849. Therefore, for a number of years, I simply made a “leap of faith,” and assumed that the two were one and the same since the chances that there were two African American men named George S. Brown, who were local pastors in the Troy Conference, was slim to none.*

*It was not until 2008, when I made a trip to Jackson, MI, where Brown had traveled during the Civil War to build a stonewall, and obtained copies of correspondence between Dwight Merriman, the man who commissioned the stone wall and his father-in-law, Abraham Wing, III, who made arrangements with Brown to build the stone wall, that I actually had written documentation that he had been in Vermont.*

*Later, one day when we were holding a Commission on Archives and History meeting at the archives in Saratoga Springs, one of our members, Richard Ward, was assisting the archivist, in processing some materials and came across a biography of the Rev. Henry Boardman Taylor, who brought Brown to Vermont with him in 1852 - after having been acquitted at the annual conference of charges brought against him for taking Brown into his church after he had been expelled from another church. As Ward was just flipping through the biography, he came upon the pages which described Taylor’s relationship with Brown. Further investigation in the box of materials also produced the handwritten charges which were brought against Taylor by the Presiding Elder (now District Superintendent). That led to a search of the handwritten minutes of the Troy Conference for 1852 which revealed the motion for Brown’s credentials to be restored.*

*None of this information would have been available to any of the previous historians of the Wolcott UMC as they were all in relatively obscure resources.*

In 2008 the Troy Annual Conference designated the Wolcott UMC as an official United Historic Site and in 2011 the State of Vermont approved a Vermont State Historic Roadside Marker honoring the Rev. George S. Brown, and in 2015 the church became a site on the newly organized Vermont African American Heritage Trail.

Along with articles about Samuel Snowden and John N. Mars, a more extensive article about George S. Brown will also be available in the weeks ahead.

#### **4) The Rev. John N. Mars**

As noted, it was in 1864 that African American men were finally given full clergy rights, equal to those of their white clergy brothers in the United States. The first African American to be received into an annual conference was the Rev. John N. Mars, who was received into the New England Conference as a probationary member at the urging of the Rev. Gilbert Haven, an outspoken pastor and abolitionist in the Conference. According to William B. Gravely, in his book, *Gilbert Haven Methodist Abolitionist*, it was Haven’s hope that this would be the first step in integrating the pastors within the conference and doing away with what he called the system of “caste” - that is, differentiating between African American and white pastors with regards to

clergy rights and assigning pastors to churches based on their color or race.<sup>18</sup> But his efforts were far from successful at the time. It would only be much later that this would happen. It is also interesting to note that the conference memoir for John N. Mars fails to point out that his service prior to joining the annual conference was primarily in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Although the places he served are listed, it is implied that he served these churches through the MEC as a “local pastor.” Both Samuel Snowden and John N. Mars were outspoken abolitionists and active in the antislavery movement.

### 5) Other African American or anti-slavery connections

The Rev. Bill Trench shared that he remembered that there had been a split in the Mansfield, MA, MEC over the issue of slavery. Stephen Pentek has found the following information:

The East Mansfield MA church was started in the 1790s with a church constructed on the common in 1816.

In 1836, a colored man, Reverend Cecil Burleigh, was invited by the pastor to come and plead for his race. He was grossly insulted and later mobbed in Mansfield Centre.

"This started the disruption of this old society, and in 1840, led by the pastor, the Reverend M. P. Alderman, many of the old church members left the society and started a new organization, the pastor declaring he 'would rather use a barrel for a pulpit and preach through the bung hole than preach there again.'"

"The pro-slavery people joined the Protestant Methodist denomination and continued services until 1861. Lack of funds and growing lack of interest worked a complete disintegration of their fellowship, and the society became extinct. Later the church building came into the possession of Osiah Robinson, who sold it to Jacob Blake. It was then torn down and the material removed to the Center where it was used in the building of a dwelling house."

"The anti-slavery people, led by Mr. Alderman, established a separate society, and in 1842 erected a new house of worship on land donated by Captain Charles Day. The society thus founded on the principle that all men are created with equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and ought to be free, has perpetuated its existence, with varying degrees of prosperity."<sup>19</sup>

Rennetts C. Miller in his *Souvenir History of the New England Southern Conference* states (in some garbled text) that in 1841 Alderman, pastor of the Protestant Methodist church, organised the MEC church.<sup>20</sup> [*Seems like it might have been vice-versa*].

Interestingly, Miller lists M.P.Alderman again, as pastor of the newly formed MEC in Mansfield, which was organized in 1860, about the time the MP congregation closed. This

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<sup>18</sup>William Gravely, *Gilbert Haven Methodist Abolitionist A Study in Race, Religion, and Reform, 1850-1880* (Nashville & New York: Abingdon Press, 1973) pp.128-29. There is an entire chapter on Haven's "Crusade Against Caste" (pp.158-199).

<sup>19</sup>"A Glimpse into the Past of the Methodist Meeting Houses, East Mansfield, Mass. 1937. The History of the Old Meeting House cites 1) Records of the MEC of East Mansfield, 2) "Methodism in Mansfield" by Frank L. Brooks, and 3) "History of the MEC in Mansfield" by George W. Davis.

<sup>20</sup>Rennetts C. Miller, *Souvenir History of the New England Southern Conference in Three Volumes* (Nantasket, MA: Rennetts C. Miller, 1897) Vol 3, p. 200.

congregation used the old Unitarian Church, with a church finally constructed for themselves in 1876.<sup>21</sup>

6) Gary Shaw has shared that there was a person of color [his father was Dutch and his mother Surinamese] from the Caribbean in Lynn, MA, named Jan Ernst Matzeliger who invented the first mechanical shoe lasting machine. According to an Internet article about him, "...after being denied membership in several churches [including apparently the MECs in Lynn], he finally joined a young adult group which made his days less lonely." He was eventually accepted by the First Church of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

7) There are several other allusions to African Americans of antislavery sentiment in Miller's *Souvenir History of the New England Southern Conference*. Unfortunately, the records from the New England Southern Conference never were deposited in the archives at Boston University. Some have been destroyed and others are yet to be located. There are limited historical pamphlets and newspaper articles available, however.

County Street MEC, New Bedford (p.128, Vol. I) - "Colored people, twenty-four of whom at one time were members, sat in the northeast gallery and partook of the Lord's Supper last, by themselves. Because of this distinction, Frederick Douglass, soon after arriving in New Bedford, abandoned his determination to join Elm Street Church. The colored people had Timothy Dyer for class leader, who also taught them to read and write. In 1835 an anti-slavery lecture was given in the church. In 1840 anti-slavery prayer meetings were held. Such were the beginnings of New Bedford Methodism in the Elm Street Church, from which were colonized Fourth Street in 1831, and Pleasant Street in 1843."

No further information on this situation was located. However, New Bedford was the first place where Frederick Douglass lived after he made his escape from slavery<sup>23</sup> and this particular situation most likely influenced his decision to unite with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church rather than the Methodist Episcopal Church.

First M.E. Church, Taunton, MA (p.213, Vol. I)

"...At about this time [1833] Messrs. Anthony, Woodward and Haskell came from the Green and started meetings in the house of a colored woman named Mitchell, at what is now known as Happy Hollow. These services were held at 5 o'clock Sunday afternoons, and resulted in the conversion of a very large number of persons - heads of families as well as the younger people - and these people constituted the nucleus of that church, which was soon after organized here at the Weir."

No further information was found about Mrs. Mitchell whose first name apparently was not remembered. *Another way that people of color are often rendered invisible.*

M.E.C. New London, CT (p. 96, Vol II)

"The subject of slavery was much discussed throughout the country from 1834 to 1840. A strong anti-slavery feeling was developed in the New England churches.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p.100.

<sup>22</sup>website: <http://www.invention.org/culture/african/matzeliger.html>

<sup>23</sup>Robert L. Hall, "Massachusetts Abolitionists Document the Slave Experience," in *Courage and Conscience* (see footnote #6) p.86

In 1840 many withdrew from the denomination and organized the Wesleyan Methodist Church without Bishops. Forty members of the church withdrew and joined the new movement. The trustees were in sympathy with them, and gave them the use of the meeting house, shutting out the Methodist Episcopal Church, which became reduced in numbers to 155 members.”

A History of *One Hundred-fifty Years of Methodism in New London 1793-1942* states on pages 7-8:

In 1827, during the pastorate of LaRoy Sunderland, some difficulties arose between the pastor and the influential members of the church, and the doors of the church were closed against the preacher. The following years until 1831 were full of trouble, and the church was on a circuit, being too weak to support a pastor. The election of a new board of trustees in 1830, and the appointment of James Porter to the station in 1831 and 1832, settled the difficulties, however, and the members of the church united for Christian work and had a good revival...

But, although everything seemed peaceably settled at last, it was not long before the church was in trouble again.” [then continues essentially the same information above from Miller].

Since LaRoy Sunderland was one of the founders of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, one has to wonder if it was not the issue of slavery which caused the earlier problems between pastor and parishioners, as well.

Vol. III, p. 240 has pictures of local preachers including W.H. Connor (101 yr. old, born a slave). A review of the New England Southern Conference Journals indicates that W.H. Connor was a part of the New London, CT, church. His name appears until 1902 so that he would have been 106 years old when he died. There is no mention of him or his service, however, either in the succeeding conference journal or in the available New London histories – due, in part, to his status as a local preacher.

8) Other than a note that anti-slavery meetings were held in the Revere St., Boston Church we have found only one mention of anti--slavery sentiment in William Albert Thurston's *Souvenir History of the New England*:

Lowell, St. Paul's - “While a thousand people as a regular congregation in St. Paul's Church has been known in various periods of its history, severe divisions have also wrought mischief. At the time of the great antislavery discussion, Lowell Methodism was sadly involved, and the pastor of St. Paul's withdrew, carrying with him a large part of the membership. A season of great discouragement followed, but Rev. William H. Hatch, being appointed as the next pastor, drew together the few scattered forces remaining and at the close of a two years' pastorate, left a united and strong church.<sup>24</sup>

10) We also have information on James L. Smith, a former slave, who joined one of the Methodist Churches in Norwich, CT, in the early 1840's. It appears that he eventually became a part of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, but he is listed as attending quarterly

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<sup>24</sup>William Albert Thurston, *Souvenir History of the New England Conference, Vol 111: North District* (Boston: Lounsbury, Nichols & Worth, 1897) p. 92.

conferences at all of the MEC's in Norwich during that time but is not identified with no specific church:

Lay and local members of several Fourth quarterly Conferences, beginning with those of May 28, 1842, held at the Landing. The Union of the respective M.E. Churches of Norwich in Quarterly Conference commenced September 8, 1841. The list will contain only those present at session." In 1842, James L. Smith is listed as a Local Preacher; in 1843, he is listed as an "exhorter and leader."<sup>25</sup>

10) For more information on antislavery positions and activities of the various annual conferences, see the following: Stephen Allen, *History of Methodism in Maine* (see footnote #2)pp. 104ff. through a number of chapters; Jerry O. Cook, "Significant Events During the First Century," in *Roots and Branches*, ed. Jerry O. Cook (Boston, MA: New England United Methodist Historical Society, 1989)pp. 64-70; Charles W. Kern, ThD, *God, Grace, and Granite* (Canaan, NH: Phoenix Publishing, 1988)pp. 38-46.

11) The Rev. James Young has shared these experiences relative to KKK activity in Maine:

I have a firsthand story. Ira Scanlon, the long time Superintendent of the Church School at Grace Church in Bangor, greeted me with open arms when I became the pastor in 1966. After a week or two he asked me to join him in the balcony. He stood there and in hushed tones described an event that inspired him to the core.

Carl Garland was pastor (1921-25) at Grace Church. Ira told how Carl invited the Sunday morning congregation to join him for a special service that evening. Ira sat in the balcony on that occasion and was wide eyed as an electric cross was lighted, the symbol of the KKK. He was so excited that over forty years later he could only tell the story with reverence! I was appalled, until Ed Allen told me that his own father (who was also a clergy member of the Maine Annual Conference) had been the Secretary to the Clan in the 1920s.

Almost any study of the daily newspapers in the 1920s would reveal all sorts of Clan action in Bangor and Portland. The real focus at that time was against Catholics and Jews, not Blacks. But, of course, they got their share and more!

Sorry to report this, but our beloved Methodist Episcopal Church in Maine was right in the middle of the growth of the KKK in the 1920s.

NOW, let me report a more positive event. In the 1980s (c 1983) when I had returned from my stint as Executive Director of the Methodist Action Program in Wilmington, Delaware, the KKK announced a rally and cross burning at Rumford. I contacted Harry Hurlbert (then pastor at Rumford) and Gerry Talbot (the first Black State Legislator in Maine) and the three of us met with the Town Manager and the Police and Fire Chiefs of Rumford to let them know we were planning a counter clan rally at the high school. Of course, the Town Manager and the chiefs were not eager to have all that publicity, but as soon as we explained a counter rally was going to happen whether we did it or not, they agreed a controlled rally was better than an uncontrolled event. Net result, we filled Rumford High School auditorium with lots of peaceful and positive messages. The Clan

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<sup>25</sup>Rev. Edgar F. Clark, A.M., *The Methodist Episcopal Churches of Norwich, Connecticut* (Norwich: 1867) Appendix C

showed up and marched around inside the auditorium -- we invited them to speak, but they simply carried their flags and left. That night the New York Times, Boston Globe, local papers and national TV showed our rally and the few folks who gathered to watch a handful of KKK members wearing robes and hoods speak and burn a cross.

They had come to Maine when International Paper hired replacement workers at the mill at Jay, Maine. The KKK figured Black workers would be enough cause to generate fear and membership for them. It did not work and as far as I know, it was the last major public KKK event in Maine in the past twenty years.

## 12) Winooski United Methodist Church, Winooki, Vermont

**Among the many donors to this church were members of the renowned Tenth Cavalry, who were stationed at Fort Ethan Allen from 1909-1913. Known as the "Buffalo Soldiers," a number of these heroic soldiers settled in Winooski. Two of their descendants still worship here. Their current website ([www.winooskiunitedmethodistchurch.org](http://www.winooskiunitedmethodistchurch.org)) states that:**

In mid-summer 1909, the Tenth United States Cavalry Regiment arrived in Vermont, for a four-year tour-of-duty. The "Fighting Tenth," as they were known, had charged up San Juan Hill with Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders and fought bravely in the Philippines. In July they arrived in New York City, where they were toasted as heroes in a ticker-tape parade ending in City Hall Park. The next morning this remarkable force would set off to Vermont, where their welcome would be met with fear. Why? The "Fighting Tenth" were one of four all-African American regiments created in 1866 and called the "Buffalo Soldiers" for their distinguished service on the Western frontier, a name, some say, given to them by Native Americans for their ferocious fighting skills.

In 1900, the entire African American population of Vermont was 826. Now, the State was to receive a force of 750 enlisted men with a large camp following, notably their families, that would bring the total number of new African Americans in Vermont to around 1500. The Burlington Free Press disapproved, saying that the town was "up in arms." In fact, residents had mixed opinions about the arrival of these new residents. As in other towns where the Buffalo Soldiers were stationed, "wherever they went, the black soldiers faced fear and suspicion and had to demonstrate good behavior to win the acceptance of the white population," according to historian David Work.

Quickly, the Tenth Regiment became active in the community—demonstrating their superb drilling and horsemanship skills, playing band concerts and baseball, and generally just being good neighbors and members of the community. Because of this, the regiment's veterinarian—S.W. Service—reported "a friendly and almost confidential feelings has sprung up between the townspeople and the soldiers."

Such community ties ran deep for some of the soldiers and their families, so much so that they decided to retire in Colchester and what is now Winooski when their next assignment in Arizona was announced. Of these retirees, at least four went on to become members of the Winooski United Methodist Church, which was then called the Winooski Methodist Episcopal Church—Sgt. Willis Hatcher (wounded in action in Santiago, Cuba), Sgt. Silas Johnson (farrier, served in Cuba), Pvt. John Ralph Lyons (awarded a certificate of merit for saving a comrade from drowning in Mallets Bay), and Cpl. Beverly Thornton (cook).

These church members played an active role in rebuilding the church, donating both time and money. Two of their descendants—Reg Wells (grandson of Silas Johnson), a retired New Jersey newscaster, still actively supports the church and plays the pipe organ when he makes his annual pilgrimage to Vermont; and Bee McCollum (granddaughter of Willis Hatcher), attends church regularly and preaches on occasion, most recently on “White Privilege.”

The Winooski UMC has been approved for an Historic Roadside Marker honoring the Buffalo Soldiers and will then also be added as a site on the Vermont African American Heritage Trail, as well. At their next meeting, the Commission on Archives and History will be considering the possibility of recommending to the annual conference that the church be recognized as an official Historic Site of the UMC.

Throughout the twentieth century the number of African Americans, Africans and other people of color has increased in many of our churches across the annual conference. We have not attempted, however, to trace all their history to date.

Prepared in 2001/2002 by:

Patricia J. Thompson, Historian  
PO Box 538  
Morrisville, VT 05661-0538  
(802)888-2185  
Email: [pajt8817@aol.com](mailto:pajt8817@aol.com)

Stephen Pentek  
Boston University School of Theology Library  
745 Commonwealth Ave. Room 208A  
Boston, MA 02215

*Updated in 2020 by Patricia J. Thompson. For questions/more information, please contact Pat Thompson.*