

The Episcopal Church's Mission to Durham's African American Community, 1880-1910
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My goal this afternoon is to trace the 30-year history of our Church's mission to Durham's African American community from 1880—when St. Philip's, Durham became an organized congregation—to 1909—when St. Titus' was formally organized. Asheville and Wilmington (the other two communities we're profiling this afternoon) were well-established cities by 1860. But Durham on the eve of the Civil War was a hamlet of c. 100 people. By 1880 the population had grown to over 2000, approximately two-thirds of whom were white and one-third black. And the settlement pattern concentrated the black population in a neighborhood called 'Hayti' on the south side of Durham's central business district.

The founding of St. Philip's Church is due to the missionary efforts of Joseph Blount Cheshire, then a newly-ordained deacon living and serving in Chapel Hill, who began holding monthly services in Durham in May, 1878. In 1880 St. Philip's was officially organized, with a congregation of 20 members. By 1881, that number had grown to 35. The young congregation purchased a lot and built a church, which was ready for consecration in July, 1881. But in September 1881, Cheshire left for St. Peter's, Charlotte.¹

The story of the Durham mission to African Americans from 1880 to 1909 can be told in four chapters.

Chapter one: The first chapter comprises the period from the organizing of St. Philip's in 1880 to 1885. During this period St. Philip's had several black communicants who came to Durham as Episcopalians and were accepted into the parish. Cornelia Fitzgerald and her children were enrolled in the parish register in 1881; Miss Rhoda S. Ledgers in 1883.² The Fitzgerald family, of course, is now best remembered for Cornelia's granddaughter, Pauli Murray. In 1881, the Fitzgeralds were recent arrivals from Hillsborough and environs, where they had maintained a similar connection with St. Matthew's, Hillsborough. Miss Ledgers was a schoolteacher from Brooklyn, who may have come to North Carolina under the auspices of the Freedman's

¹ Harold T. Parker, *The History of St. Philip's Episcopal Church 1878-1994* Durham: 1996, pp. 6,7.

² St. Philip's Episcopal Church, Durham, North Carolina *Parish Register, 1878-1895*. I am grateful to the Rector of St. Philip's, the Rev. Jonah Kendall, for granting me access to the Parish Registers. I thank Sarah Woodard, Lynn Hoke, and Lynn Richardson for help in compiling the documentary support for this presentation.

Commission or a successor organization. Most of what we know about her we learn from Pauli Murray's *Proud Shoes* and other Fitzgerald family papers. We know that Pauline Fitzgerald, the oldest of the Fitzgerald daughters, was enrolled in Miss Ledgers's school before she went off to St. Augustine's. And we know that Miss Ledgers was invited to stay with the Fitzgeralds during school holidays. The close connection is confirmed by the evidence of the St. Philip's parish register, where we find recorded that on July 12, 1885, the youngest of the Fitzgerald children, Annette Roberta Fitzgerald, was baptized, and that Miss Ledgers was one of the baptismal sponsors, along with William Lewis Wall and Mrs. Robert F. Webb.³

This acceptance of a select number of black members in a predominantly white congregation is actually fairly typical of the period and consistent with antebellum patterns of race relations within the church. By virtue of status, education, and even family connections, Cornelia Fitzgerald and her family were relatively easy to assimilate and had longstanding connections to the Episcopal Church; presumably the same could be said of Miss Ledgers, whom Pauli Murray referred to as "a refined young woman from Brooklyn, New York, who had been trained and sent south by the Episcopal Church."⁴ So even though the Fitzgeralds and Miss Ledgers were identified as "(col.)" in the parish register, they were worshipping alongside white members: in the same building, at the same time.

In addition to black membership drawn from the ranks of Episcopalians moving to Durham and joining St. Philip's, there was also an intentional outreach to the African Americans of Durham. In January, 1882, an Episcopal priest relocated to Durham, and although not formally put in charge of St. Philip's, began conducting services there. His name was Charles J. Curtis, and in 1882 his principal occupation was being the owner, publisher, and editor of the diocesan newspaper, the *Church Messenger*. Curtis was already familiar with the Durham area because he had served as rector of neighboring St. Matthew's, Hillsborough from 1872 to 1880. In February, 1882, after just one month in Durham, Curtis published an account of his outreach to Durham African Americans in the *Church Messenger*.

Curtis asked for and received permission to hold a special service for African Americans at St. Philip's on a Sunday afternoon. At the service, which several members of the regular St. Philip's congregation "attended to testify to their interest in this work," Curtis offered a few prayers, a passage of scripture, plenty of hymns, and an extemporaneous sermon during which he came down from the pulpit and preached in the aisle. So well received was this service, that Curtis was asked to preach in the African Baptist Church in Hayti the following Sunday, at 3:00 and

³ *Parish Register 1878-1895*

⁴ Pauli Murray, *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family*, Harper & Row: 1956, 1978. p. 237

7:30 p.m. The account of these services ends with these words: “We hope others who are doing the same work may be encouraged to go on, and still others may be induced to undertake it. The Church’s opening for doing good is a grand one, and most urgent and promising.”⁵ Unfortunately, Curtis remained in Durham for only a year, so his outreach produced no sustained efforts at the time.

Chapter two: The second chapter begins during the tenure of the Rev. T.M.N. George (1886-1890), when St. Philip’s did initiate a much more robust mission to the Hayti community of Durham. We first read about the mission in the 1887 annual parochial report the Rev. Mr. George submitted to the Diocese: “I have secured the use on Sundays of a public schoolroom in ‘Hayti,’ a colored quarter of Durham, and have there begun work among the colored people. A colored student from St. Augustine’s Normal School comes up every week to assist me in the work. We pay his expenses. Regular services are held, and a Sunday School numbering 25 scholars has been gathered. Thus far the work is something of an experiment, but I hope much from it. We need help to build a chapel and to push on the venture to success.”⁶

The following year, George filed an update on his mission experiment. “By the consent of Miss Ledgers, the teacher, who is a communicant of the Church, and with the approval of the “trustees” (colored men), I have been enabled to practically turn a flourishing colored school into a Parish school. By paying the tuition of 16 scholars, I obligate them to attend the colored Sunday School, which I conduct on Sunday afternoons. But the entire school, ranging in numbers from 30 to 60 scholars, are, during the week, taught the Church Catechism and the use of the Prayer Book. I trust that ere long a colored Deacon may be sent to assist in this important work.”⁷

The fruits of this initiative can be seen in the parish register and parochial reports. On November 13, 1887 the register contains an entry for the baptism of Lessie Williams (colored infant) at the “Public School House at ‘Hayti.’” The baptismal sponsors were Miss R.S. Ledgers, Mrs. Dunstan[sp?], and Mrs. F.P. Capps, all three described as ‘colored.’ The clergyman conducting the baptism was T.M.N. George.⁸ This sets the pattern for subsequent mission baptisms registered at St. Philip’s in 1888 and 1889. They all took place in the Hayti school

⁵ The *Church Messenger* 3, no. 41 (February 23, 1882). For an earlier account of Curtis preaching to an African-American congregation in Hillsborough, see the *Church Messenger* 2, no. 21 (October 5, 1880).

⁶ *NCDJ 1887*, p 86

⁷ *NCDJ 1888*, p 91

⁸ *Parish register 1878-1895* p. 50

room; they all had Miss Ledgers for one of the sponsors. What is more, on Trinity Sunday 1888, Bishop Lyman visited the Hayti school room and confirmed Emma Hall and Zachariah Taylor Ivins as part of his Episcopal visitation to St. Philip's that day.⁹

For his 1889 parochial report to the diocese, Mr. George let statistics tell the story. He listed 3 colored families within the parish and 12 colored members; 4 baptisms, 2 confirmations, and 6 colored communicants; a colored Sunday School with one teacher, two officers, and 40 children (10 male; 30 female), and a colored Parish School with 5 males and 34 females.¹⁰ A similar report filed for 1890 by George's successor, the Rev. C. J. Wingate, indicated an increase in the total number of black members to 20 and 5 additional baptisms, with the school statistics holding steady.¹¹

What, then, can we say about these early years of mission activity in the Hayti neighborhood? For one thing, we can see that the mission conformed to the longstanding pattern and priorities set forth by Bishop Atkinson and others. It focused on educational uplift; it drew on Northern help; it sought to cultivate black leadership. For another, we can see that a good beginning had indeed been made; one crowned with evidence of early success. The mission enjoyed the personal leadership and initiative of the rector, who invested his Sunday afternoons in teaching and holding services. Moreover, it built upon the good work already being done by Miss

⁹ *Parish register 1878-1895* pp. 52, 56, 58. Service of Confirmation recorded p. 80; additional communicants listed, p. 90. Note that not all these numbers are attributable to the missionary efforts in Hayti: the Fitzgeralds removed temporarily to Southern Orange County in 1887; the Smiths (Benjamin and Minerva) and Lina McCracken were black Episcopalians who joined St. Philip's from Tarboro and Fayetteville respectively.

Here is a listing of the names of the black members of St. Philip's in the 1880s recorded in the Parish Register:
 Cornelia Fitzgerald and her children Mary Pauline, Mariah, Charles Thomas, Sallie, Agnes, and Annette Roberta Rhoda S. Ledgers
 William H.A. & Diana Williams and their child Lessie
 Benjamin & Minerva Smith and their child Arie; also Nora Williams, Arie's child
 Wilson & Magnolia Banks and their children William, Cannon, Rixie Lula, Wilson, Edgar, Lillie, and Napoleon
 Emma Hall
 Ada Richmond
 Zachariah Taylor Ivins
 Lina McCracken

¹⁰ *NCDJ 1889* p 85

¹¹ *NCDJ 1890* p 125

Ledgers, the schoolteacher, who evidently forged an active and effective partnership with the rector in the conduct of the mission.¹²

But in retrospect the inherent weaknesses of the mission effort were likewise apparent. To be sure, this effort was being done in the name of St. Philip's, but none of the activity was located at St. Philip's and did not significantly engage the ongoing life of the parish itself. All the classes and all the services, including confirmations, were conducted in the Hayti neighborhood, and it is not evident from the record whether any of the new black members of St. Philip's were ever actually welcomed there. Equally telling is the fact that the mission failed to gain the necessary support from the parish for a building of its own. Although the rector identified it as a mission priority from the outset, it never happened. And as we shall see in the next chapter of our story, it was a critical factor in the decision to abandon the mission altogether in 1895.

Chapter 3: The 3rd chapter comprises the period from 1890 to 1895. For St. Philip's, this was a time of flux, with three different rectors and extended interims over a six-year span; for the mission in Hayti, it was likewise a time of flux. The difference was this: the parish revived after 1895 and sported new growth; the mission was allowed to wither.

Important changes were signaled in the reports filed for the 1891 diocesan convention. Although the Rector, C.J. Wingate, reported three confirmations of blacks, he gave no other statistical indication of mission growth; indeed, the number of scholars listed for both the Sunday school and the Parish (day) school, had dropped from 40 to 25. The numbers enrolled in the day school dropped again in 1892, this time to 17.

Perhaps even more fateful for the future of the Durham mission was the creation in January, 1891 of the position of Archdeacon for Colored Work in the Diocese. Durham, indeed, was the first place that the new Archdeacon, William Walker, came to see. He filed the following report: "On the first Sunday in Lent [1891] I visited Durham, celebrated the Holy Eucharist in the morning, and in the afternoon said Evensong and catechized the children of the Sunday-school. The next day I visited the day-school taught by Miss Dancey."¹³

¹² A 1911 report about the early efforts to establish a black mission in Durham acknowledges, in addition to the work of Miss Ledgers and the Rev. Mr. George, that "Mr. W. L. Wall for a long time acted as layreader and superintendent of the Sunday school." William Lewis Wall was a founding member and officer of St. Philip's. Unfortunately, his involvement did not translate into a more widespread parish support for this effort. See Robert J. Johnson, "St. Titus Chapel" *The Carolina Churchman*, May, 1911 p. 11.

¹³ *NCDJ 1891* p 140

Having an officer of the diocese devoted to supporting work among African-Americans could be seen as a positive step. It allowed for coordinating and marshaling resources beyond existing local efforts. Durham, indeed, was one of the direct beneficiaries of this change. In 1892, Archdeacon Walker reported that the National Church's General Missionary for the South, W. H. Wilson, had been assigned to North Carolina and had spent his first six months in Durham.¹⁴ The following year saw an even greater commitment on the part of the diocese for this particular work. The Rev. Franklin L. Bush agreed to extend his efforts in black ministry to include Durham as well as Pittsboro. Bush, a Harvard-educated priest from Massachusetts, came south in 1878, and after serving white congregations in Lenoir and Oxford, NC, committed himself in 1883 to work with black congregational development, principally at St. James, Pittsboro, which grew during his tenure into one of the largest black congregations in the diocese.

A priest of Bush's commitment and experience brought immediate attention to the mission effort in Durham. In 1893, Bush filed the first separate parochial report for what was titled "St. Philip's Mission (Colored)." He reported 8 families, 12 communicants, and 35 total members; the Parish School retained its one teacher and 25 scholars. He went on to explain that he was holding services in Durham twice a month, still in the small room rented for a day-school. "The Rector of St. Philip's Church has held a Sunday-school or service on the alternate Sunday evenings in the same place."¹⁵

Alas, this renewed effort was not sustained. Bush died unexpectedly at age 49 in July, 1893, just ten months after beginning his work in Durham. For 1894, the Rector of St. Philip's, Stewart McQueen, simply filed a paragraph about the Colored Mission in Durham at the end of his parochial report. He did not include the work in his parochial statistics, but stated for the record that "[t]he Colored Mission in Durham has had a day-school of twenty-two scholars and a Sunday-school of twenty. There are about eight communicants connected with the work."¹⁶ The end came soon thereafter. We read in the Archdeacon's report for 1895 that "[t]he work at Durham was of such an unpromising nature that, with the consent of the Bishop, the teacher of the day school was removed to Pittsboro. While we had no property at Durham, and were obliged to rent a very small and inconvenient room, we had at Pittsboro a schoolhouse which

¹⁴ *NCDJ 1892* p 138

¹⁵ For Bush's life and career, see notice in *NCDJ 1894*; for St. James, Pittsboro, see statistical chart of black missions in *NCDJ 1893*, p 149; for St. Philip's mission, see *NCDJ 1893*, p 104.

¹⁶ *NCDJ 1894*, p 107

was unused, and we thought best to utilize it. We hope to revive the work in Durham in the near future with better prospect of success.”¹⁷

Chapter 4: Those hopes for revival would have to wait 14 years, until Henry B. Delany became Archdeacon for Colored Work in 1908. Delany made it a mission priority to secure the services of a black clergyman in Durham, appointing recent St. Augustine’s graduate Robert J. Johnson to the post. Johnson met with the remnant of black Episcopalians in Durham, beginning in 1909, to form what would be called “St. Titus Chapel.” These included Delany’s close personal friends, the Fitzgerald sisters, Pauline and Sallie. The Archdeacon had known and worked with Pauline for almost 30 years, from their time together at St. Augustine’s in the early 1880s.¹⁸ By 1910 the fledgling congregation had secured an option on a site at the corner of Pine and Proctor Streets, containing two buildings: one of which was converted into a chapel and the other into a rectory.¹⁹ Thus began the 4th chapter in the story of the Episcopal Church’s mission to Durham’s black community.

In the intervening years, the eyes of the Diocese and St. Philip’s were directed elsewhere.²⁰ In 1895, St. Philip’s entered into a period of growth and prosperity and looked to the burgeoning mill communities of East and West Durham as its principal mission fields. The Diocese

¹⁷ *NCDJ 1895*, p 128

¹⁸ The close connection between Henry B. Delany and the Fitzgeralds (and the founding of St. Titus’s) is described in Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* New York: 1987 pp 48, 49; 70.

¹⁹ The following account of ministry at “St. Titus Chapel” appeared in *The Carolina Churchman* for May, 1911, p.11, authored by the Priest in Charge, the Rev. Robert J. Johnson. He wrote: “The inability to raise funds and erect a mission building in this town caused the work to fail. The nearest attempt to build was during Archdeacon Pollard’s administration, but he died before he could accomplish it. His successor, the Rev. H. B. Delany, planned as soon as he was inducted into office to revive this work. He sent the Rev. Robt. J. Johnson to this field as soon as he had finished his course at the Divinity school. The work was revived in 1909. The present rector visited Durham immediately after his ordination at St. Augustine’s School, Raleigh, and met the members at the residence of Miss Kate R. Truman. Nine people were present at this meeting. . . . In September [1910] we secured an option on a site that contained two buildings, one two room building that was later converted into a chapel and five room house now used as the rectory. This site is a corner lot [at the intersection of Pine and Proctor] in the heart of a negro community and cost \$1700.”

²⁰ In 1903 and 1904, Archdeacon John Pollard included Durham in his statistical report published in the *Convention Journal*, reporting 4 families and 7 communicants both years. There are no reports for Durham in the *Journals* for 1896 to 1902, nor in the years 1905 to 1908. The Archdeacon wrote the following notice for 1903: “The Durham Mission came through the earnest request of a number of communicants living in that town who felt the need of Church services. To succeed we must have a chapel as a permanent place of worship.” See *NCDJ 1903*, p 81; 125 and *NCDJ 1904*, p 133.

continued to support African-American missions, but the work generally remained poorly funded. After only one year on the job, Archdeacon Walker had this to say about the state of mission work with African-Americans throughout the diocese:

It appears to me that no such opportunity for missionary work has ever been given to the Church to do anywhere as is presented to the Church in the work amongst the colored people that is flung right at her doors. This work has never yet been touched by this Diocese, and there can be no great advance made, and no aggressive work undertaken, until it is recognized as a part of the missionary work of the Diocese. If each Parish could feel its responsibility to reach all the souls within its borders, an impetus would be given to this work which it never yet has had, and cannot have until the responsibility is recognized and acted on.²¹

The Archdeacon could have been speaking directly to St. Philip's. But the charge was not heeded, in part because it was increasingly easy to marginalize this work throughout North Carolina; to make it just one option for mission and ministry among others—and a poor one at that. The 1890s were the decade when Jim Crow became the law of the land throughout the South and efforts at biracial coalition-building were ruthlessly crushed. The Diocese, perhaps inadvertently, only strengthened these tendencies by consigning this work to an Archdeacon who would work exclusively in this field. As Walker himself was aware, true success would only come when white congregations made this a mission priority. Instead, it was treated separately—and unequally—from other local and domestic mission work.

Looking back, Historian Harold Parker called the demise of St. Philip's black mission efforts “a casualty of the incessant turnover of clergy at St. Philip's [in the early 1890s].”²² Parker's assessment does remind us of the crucial role that clergy leadership can play in effective mission work. The enterprising Mr. George and the dedicated Mr. Bush showed what could be done in Durham. But Parker's comment overlooks the importance of lay leadership and support. Any early success and stability that the St. Philip's mission enjoyed should also be attributed to the work of the black schoolteacher and communicant of St. Philip's, Miss

²¹ *NCDJ 1892* p 139. Walker issued a similar assessment and appeal in his 1896 report: “It is a source of deep anxiety that this work is so little extended throughout the Diocese, and that so little interest is taken in it by the Clergy and people of the Diocese. If the Parishes as well as the Diocese would adopt it as their own legitimate work, which it is for their best interest to do, and would look upon it as a missionary work of paramount obligation, much could and would be done. Its importance has not been adequately considered by the Diocese as a factor in its life, and until this impetus shall be given to it we cannot expect wide-spread results.” *NCDJ 1896*, p 113.

²² Parker, *History of St. Philip's*, p. 11

Ledgers, who made the Church credible to black Durham by her loyalty to the Church and its mission.²³ Likewise, we must celebrate the remarkable persistence of the Fitzgerald family, who also remained loyal to a Church which frequently rebuffed them and marginalized the exercise of their talents, but who seized the opportunities afforded them by Archdeacon Delany in 1908 to finally build something durable in Durham.

Indeed, it was the absence of a decent gathering space that did more than anything else to contribute to the demise of the mission effort. What, we might ask, would have happened if St. Philip's had started this mission in its own church building, instead of a schoolroom in Hayti? Or if steps had been taken early on to do what Mr. Green said needed to be done, to build a chapel in the black community? Pursuing either of these options would have increased direct parish involvement in the enterprise, and a better opportunity for the work to flourish. Where white parishes did make that investment, as at Trinity, Asheville, black congregations prospered.²⁴

Let me conclude with the prescient words of Walker's successor as Archdeacon for Colored Work, the Rev. John H. M. Pollard, who said at the close of the 1890s:

Neat, comfortable, and substantial churches would do more for the cause than any amount of preaching. Indeed we must first get hold of the people and then instruct them, and to do this we must have comfortable houses wherein we can invite them and *then* the way will be easy.

But some may say that the colored people are not prepared for the *Church*. We believe that is true, and for that very reason are the more urgent to carry the Church to them. If the Holy Apostles had waited till the people were prepared for the Church, this whole Western world would still be in heathen darkness. The world was not prepared for the

²³ The details of Miss Ledgers's life and career are not currently well known. Researching the 19th-century Brooklyn Episcopal churches and the various organizations that helped send black teachers to the South might reveal more. The mention in Archdeacon Walker's 1891 report (cited above) of meeting with the Durham schoolteacher "Miss Dancey" could indicate that Miss Ledgers left Durham about the same time as the Rev. Mr. George. Manuals of the Corporation of the City of New York and Annual Reports of the Board of Education of the City & County of New York show that in 1859, 1862, 1864, 1865 and 1869 she is listed as **RHODA S. LEDGERS** teaching in the Girls' Department of Colored School No. 1 in Brooklyn's Fourteenth Ward at 135 Mulberry Street. In 1862 her salary is listed as \$175. In 1862 her address is listed as 71 Tillary Street, Brooklyn; in 1865 it is 22 Chapel Street, Brooklyn.

²⁴ For the story of Trinity, Asheville see S.F. James Abbott, *Unfinished Journey: A Brief Racial History of the Diocese of Western North Carolina* Asheville: 2011 pp 34ff; 46f

coming of the Son of God, the blessed Saviour of man, and yet He came—came to seek and to save the lost. If they were prepared that would put an end to our work, as we were ordained to preach the Gospel to men who need the Gospel.

Jesus came to the world not because the world wanted Him, but because He wanted the world. And so, too, must the Church come to the colored people, not because they want the Church, but because the Church wants them.²⁵

AMEN.

For further reading

On the story of the Episcopal Church's African American mission and ministry, see Harold T. Lewis, *Yet with a Steady Beat: The African American Struggle for Recognition in the Episcopal Church* Valley Forge: 1996, and Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights* Kentucky: 2000. A helpful overview which focuses upon the Episcopal Church in North Carolina is S.F. James Abbott, *Unfinished Journey: A Brief Racial History of the Diocese of Western North Carolina* Asheville: 2011.

On churches and race relations in Durham, see Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County (2nd Edition)* Durham: 2011 and Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* Chapel Hill: 2008.

On the political and social background of race relations in North Carolina, see (among many good works) David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, eds. *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and its Legacy* Chapel Hill: 1998, and Mark Elliott, *Color-Blind Justice: Albion Tourgee and the Quest for Racial Equality from the Civil War to Plessy v. Ferguson* Oxford: 2006.

²⁵ NCDJ 1899 p 115