

History of the Mt. Carmel Baptist Church North Main Street Lambertville, New Jersey

By Carla Cielo May 2019

This is a story of perseverance and a drive towards independence by a group of about 70 African Americans in the city of Lambertville throughout the 20th century.

A small number of African Americans lived in Lambertville at the period of the Civil War but by the 1870s, a large number of African Americans had begun to move into New Jersey from the southern states. Options for religious pursuits were limited to sporadic camp meetings which generally lasted about 10 days in the summer months, or a white congregation, which, after 1868, were prohibited from discrimination on the basis of race. African Americans including the young newlyweds Mr. and Mrs. Leonidas Oscar and Clara Jones attended the First Baptist Church that was founded in 1825 on Bridge Street in Lambertville. In 1893, the Jones's withdrew from the First Baptist Church to join others from Lambertville at the Mt. Zion Colored Baptist Church in Germantown, Philadelphia that was founded in 1871. The Reverend Morton Winston (1857-1927) who became pastor of Mt. Zion in 1890 was a dynamic speaker who attracted prominent African Americans from places as far as Lambertville. Under his tutelage, that congregation grew from 27 members to nearly 4000.¹

Reverend Wilson organized a mission in Lambertville that was led by Mrs. Clara Jones. It met on Main Street "over Farley's store." By 1895, about seventy African Americans were connected with the mission. In July of 1895, the group formally organized themselves as the "Mt. Carmel Baptist Church of Lambertville." It was the "only body of colored Baptists in Lambertville" "endorsed by the First Baptist Church of Lambertville." Mr. William A. White, a licentiate of the Mt. Zion Church in Germantown became the first pastor.²

A second African American church - the Mt. Olive Baptist church of Lambertville - was also organized in July of 1895. It was led by the Reverend S. Benjamin Jones (the relationship to Leonidas Jones is not known). Meetings were held at the corner of Coryell and George Streets. The Delaware River was used for baptisms. In August of 1895, the Mt. Olive Baptist church organized a "great colored camp meeting" - a ten-day Baptist encampment with preachers and jubilee singers.³ This church appears to have been short lived. It is not know if an actual church building was constructed and no records beyond a few newspaper entries are known to exist.

The first pastor of the Mt. Carmel church, Reverend William A. White (1857-?) resided at 193 George Street in Lambertville. Mr. and Mrs. Leonidas Jones were neighbors - living directly across the street. Reverend White was born in Pawhatan County, Virginia and studied at the

¹ A Brief History of Mount Zion Baptist Church of Germantown 1871-2017. Unpublished.

² Lambertville Beacon August 2, 1895

³ Lambertville Beacon July 26, 1895 and August 2, 1895

Wayland Seminary in Washington, DC. He received his license March 2, 1890 and was ordained at the Mt. Camel Church on March 17, 1897.⁴ The 1900 census shows White working as a “day laborer” while being pastor. He was married and had four young children (newborn to age 7) at that time.

Reverend White led the congregation through the construction of their own edifice on a lot that was purchased on North Main Street, which, at that time, would have been considered the outskirts of town. Groundbreaking services were held on September 5, 1897.⁵ The entire brick church building was completed within four months. On January 20, 1898, a benefit supper was held in their new church with tickets costing 25 cents and ice cream and candy for sale.⁶ A debt of approximately \$2500.00 was assumed to finance the construction of the church. Periodic fundraisers allowed the debts to be paid off by 1920.

The simplistic gable-fronted church building was constructed with dark red brickwork with a contrasting central marble name panel and foundation date stone. The minimal ornamentation consisted of a semicircular arched entry flanked by triangularly-shaped indentations and a blind, seven-course, segmental arch a few feet above the entry. There also appears to have been a blind, segmented arch above a notification board that flanks the entry and arched headers above the basement windows. Arch-topped, four-panel, double-leaf entry doors were approached by a few steps (remaining). The roof was slate. The rake eaves extend about a foot at the facade and were lined with trim (remaining); the side eaves concealed Yankee roof gutters. Wood windows with 2-over-2 sash and opalescent glass lined the sidewalls (remaining). Steam heat and electric lighting were original to the building. The only known historic photograph of the church appeared in the 1949 Lambertville centennial supplement of the Hunterdon Republican.



1949 view of Mount Carmel Baptist Church

⁴ the Ministerial Director of the Baptist churches in the US, George William Lasher 1899

⁵ Lambertville Beacon September 5, 1897

⁶ Hunterdon Republican January 19, 1949

By 1900 there were still only 126 African Americans living in Lambertville and this total included children. The congregation of Mt. Carmel Baptist church represented more than half of that population but the church also attracted African Americans from as far away as Burlington County. The members included former slaves and Civil War veterans. One of the first funerals at Mt. Carmel was for John W. Hill who was born into slavery in Warsaw, North Carolina. During the Civil War, John worked as a cook and servant for his master who was a surgeon in the confederate army. He escaped north to the Union army and married Maggie G. Mifflin of Stockton. He and his wife both worked as servants in Lambertville. Their daughter, Clara Louise Hill, married Leonidas Jones. John Hill died in 1898 from stomach cancer.⁷

Mt. Carmel was the center of community life and offered social gatherings, a Sunday school, annual events such as the Sunday school picnic, a choir and a women's committee. They also started a mission that led to the formation of the First Baptist Church of Pennington in 1902.

Maintaining a pastor proved to be difficult throughout the first decade of the church's existence. In January of 1901, Reverend White resigned as pastor and returned to Philadelphia.⁸ Reverend C. H. Anderson briefly assumed the role of pastor but he was replaced in November of 1901 by the Reverend J. H. Bailey of Elizabeth.⁹ Bailey was ordained in 1884 in Jersey City and was instrumental in building several new churches including the Bethel Baptist church in St. Augustine, Florida, the Shiloh Baptist Church in Elizabeth, NJ and the Union Baptist Church in Elizabeth, NJ. In 1900, he accepted a position as state missionary for the Afro-American association, which he held for one year.¹⁰ Bailey's wife apparently assumed the position of state missionary after her husband became pastor at Mt. Carmel. Deacon Moseley assisted Bailey.

Reverend Samuel L. Bush of Washington D.C. succeeded Bailey as pastor of the Mt. Carmel Church in September of 1903¹¹ and Bailey became the pastor of the newly formed First Baptist Church of Pennington in 1902.¹² Samuel Bush remained pastor for about two years but was replaced by the Reverend R. M. Johnson (1871-1918) of Trenton in November of 1905 who had been a guest preacher the previous year.¹³ Johnson was born in Virginia in about 1872. He spoke about the "Railroad to Hell" at one of his prayer and praise meetings. His time at Mt. Carmel was also short lived. The 1910 census lists Rubin M. Johnson as a 38 year old, single, black minister at another church and living in Trenton. Johnson's successor is not known.

⁷ Lambertville Beacon August 12, 1898

⁸ Trenton Evening Times, January 21, 1901 p. 3

⁹ Trenton Evening Times, April 27, 1901 p. 3; Trenton Evening Times, Nov 26, 1901 p3

¹⁰ Trenton Evening Times, November 26 1901 p3

¹¹ Trenton Evening Times, September 26, 1903 p3

¹² Trenton Evening Times, April 22, 1902

¹³ Trenton Evening Times, November 7, 1905 p 13

Founding members Leonidas and Clara Jones remained active in the church since its inception. In 1904, Leonidas also became a founding member and treasurer of the Negro Baptist Preachers' and Deacons' Association. Mrs. Jones led prayer meetings. In 1908, Leonidas was ordained to the "colored Baptist ministry." He served the Mt. Carmel congregation as pastor from about 1914 to 1919. In 1915, while pastor of Mt. Carmel, he organized a "candle rally" with members of the congregation holding lit "angel of light" candles and others unlit "angel of darkness" candles. He also held pastorates at South Bound Brook, Yardley and beginning in 1919, at the First Baptist Church of Pennington.¹⁴

Leonidas "Lee" Jones was born in Hertford, North Carolina July 5, 1861. At the age of 18, he began moving northward, stopping first in Richmond Virginia where he worked as a waiter in a hotel, then Baltimore, then Sunbury, Pennsylvania where he gained employment with the Pennsylvania Railroad. He was transferred to Lambertville in 1889 and married a local girl by the name of Clara Louise Hill the same year. Clara's father John Hill (referenced above) had just passed away and the couple went to live with her mother and younger brother on George Street. The 1920 census shows Leonidas working in the mail department, while serving as pastor and Clara worked as a janitress. Tragedy hit the Jones family twice. In 1890, the couple suffered the loss of their first born - Leonidas Jr - at age 7 months. In June of 1918, their 13 year old daughter Gertrude died from a long illness.¹⁵

Leonidas retired from other pastorates in 1928 after 20 years of service and from the Pennsylvania railroad in 1931 after 44 years. He continued to serve as Deacon at Mt. Carmel through the 1940s (well into his 80s) and as pastor emeritus to officiate marriages and funerals. By 1930, Clara and Leonidas cared for young African American children - presumably orphans - in their home. The 1940 census shows Clara and Leonidas living with 6 unrelated African American children between the ages of 1 and 10. Leonidas was 79 years old at that time and his wife was 69. They were truly a remarkable couple.

According to secondary sources, the Reverend Liggins was the pastor of Mt. Carmel in the early 1920s. No information has been found about him.

The Reverend George Wallace Pugh was pastor from 1925 or earlier to about 1931 or later. The Reverend Leonidas Jones assisted the Reverend Pugh with funerals etc. Pugh was born in Alabama in 1882 and relocated to Trenton, NJ where he worked as a laborer at the J. A. Roebling Co. wire mill before becoming a Baptist clergyman. He owned his home on Montgomery Place in Trenton and took in boarders. He remained living in Trenton during his time as pastor at Mt. Carmel. The reverend was married and had one child. In 1925, while pastor of Mt. Carmel, he spoke at the 34th anniversary celebration for the colored Odd Fellowship in Lambertville, which included a parade that led up Main Street to the church. Reverend Pugh left Mt. Carmel to

¹⁴ Trenton Evening Times, April 21, 1940; June 18, 1919; December 12, 1915; September 6, 2000

¹⁵ Trenton Evening Times, April 21, 1940; June 18, 1918; March 24, 1915. census records

become the pastor of the First Baptist church of Yardley, Pennsylvania by 1935 or earlier.¹⁶

According to a directory of NJ churches, the Reverend Thomas Jones was pastor in 1940. No information has been found about him and the length of his tenure at Mt. Carmel is not known. In the mid-1940s, the church was expanded with a two-story rear addition that housed an assembly hall and vestry on the second floor and a kitchen and bathrooms in the lower level. This was the first time the church had in-door plumbing.

The Reverend Jacob B. Stevens began his 26-year pastorship at Mt. Carmel in 1945 and led the congregation into a period of growth and prosperity. Born June 17, 1897 in Denmark, South Carolina, he was called to minister at an early age. He moved to Philadelphia where he joined the Thankful Baptist Church, which was founded in 1923 and by the 1940s had a congregation of about 700. He remained pastor of Mt. Carmel until his death October 4, 1971. At the time of his death he was survived by his wife, one son, 5 step sons, three daughters, four step daughters, 42 grand children and 12 great grand children.¹⁷

Deacon Jesse Mason and his wife Beatrice, of Franklin Street in Lambertville were committed parishioners of the Mt. Carmel Church and are worthy of being noted. Jesse Mason (1881-1967) was a quarryman from Richmond, Virginia. He relocated to the Lambertville area shortly after 1900 and in 1904 married Beatrice McFadden who was from South Carolina. He worked as a horse dealer in the 1920s and 30s and later owned "Mason's bar" on Franklin Street in Lambertville. At Mt. Carmel, Jesse worked as a pallbearer at funerals and later became a deacon. Beatrice his wife was the secretary of Mt. Camel Church in the 1930s and 40s, and served as the superintendent of the Sunday school, vice president of the Missionary Circle and was a member of the Willing Workers club. The couple had two daughters and three sons, and resided with their extended family, which in the 1930s, included four

Funeral Friday



Mrs. Jesse Mason

LAMBERTVILLE — Funeral services for Mrs. Beatrice Mason, 71, of 72 Franklin Street, who died Sunday in the Hunterdon Medical Center, will be held Friday at 1 p. m. in Mt. Carmel Baptist Church with the Rev. Jacob B. Stevens officiating. Interment will be in Riverview Cemetery under direction of S. J. Newsome. Friends may call at the church Thursday from 5 to 11 p. m. and Friday morning.

Mrs. Mason was secretary of Mt. Carmel Church for 20 years. She also served as superintendent of the Sunday School and vice president of the Missionary Circle. She was a member of the Willing Workers Club.

Surviving are her husband, Jesse Mason; three sons, Clarence, Jesse Jr. and Raymond; two sisters, Mrs. Addie Burgess of Coatesville, Pa., and Mrs. Conyes Williams of Sumter, S. C.; a brother, Major McFadden of Manning, S. C.; 10 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

Trenton Evening Times,
February 2, 1955

¹⁶ Trenton Evening Times, May 10, 1925, March 11, 1931 and Feb. 20, 1935; census records

¹⁷ A church notebook

grandchildren, his 90-year-old mother and two nephews.¹⁸ Their son Jesse Mason Jr. (1912-2007) served as trustee and treasurer of the Mt Carmel Baptist church. He operated Mason's Bar for 67 years. He was 95 when he died in 2007.¹⁹

In 1963 there were 84 "church roll members" and four exempt members. This included 25 children and 55 adults. Most members paid \$2 a month but some paid \$1.50, \$1 or .50 cents. The Reverend Jacob B. Stevens was pastor, Harvey Miller was the associated pastor and Joesfine Hustinger was "the Mother" at that time.²⁰ Members were called "sisters" and "brothers."

In the 1960s, a vast community life at Mt. Carmel included a senior choir, a junior choir, the St Stevens chorus, the Steppen chorus, a program committee, a Sunday school for children, a missionary circle, and a helping hands club. There was the "pastor aid club" which gave the pastor money for holidays and his birthday (\$25 in 1966) and a "sick committee" which distributed money from the "poor saints" fund to members who remained "sick in bed for three weeks." (\$5.00 in June of 1966 to sister Maybell Coney). Club meetings were often held in private homes. Several clubs recorded their meeting minutes in hand written, un-edited ledgers.²¹

Benefit diners and socials with B-B-Q ribs and fried chicken occurred often. The missionaries organized evening programs with speakers and singers including the "Great White Throne Singers of Philadelphia", "Ronnie and the soul gospel singers" and the "well-known" "sisters Barbara and Little Trent" of Lambertville.²² There was something for everyone to be involved with beyond the Sunday service.

In addition to all the major holidays, the church celebrated a "men's day" a "women's day" a "children's day" "helping hands day", "Deacon day" and "Deaconess day". At one time the church owned a 1965 International model school bus that facilitated trips to places like Philadelphia. The Sunday school took trips to Wildwood. All of the church singing groups sang at other area churches periodically. The church also owned the house next door at 245½ North Main Street.²³



Steve Wonder, 1966, from the Music Circus website.

In the summer of 1966, from June 28 through July 3, Steve Wonder performed in Lambertville at the famous Music Circus with the "Supremes"

¹⁸ Trenton Evening Times, March 11, 1931, February 15, 1955 and November 9, 1967; census records

¹⁹ The Trentonian August 9, 2007.

²⁰ Church notebooks and ledgers.

²¹ Church notebooks and ledgers.

²² Church notebooks, The Times, September 6, 2000

²³ Church notebooks and ledgers.

“Red Buttons” and “the Wellingtons”. During his stay in Lambertville, Steve Wonder attended a Sunday service at Mt Carmel to worship and “played a few songs” on the piano during the service. He also got his hair cut at a local barbershop which was a “big deal for Lambertville”.²⁴

A church remodeling campaign took place during the 1960s and 70s. During the 1960s, a basket for the building fund was circulated on the first Sunday of every month. New flooring was purchased in 1965 for \$412. Sister Futch donated money for the church pews; Sister Frankie Conners donated money for remodeling the women’s room. There was a benefit musical program in the spring of 1972 to raise funds to purchase new pews that included the Trent Sisters. The cost of the new pews was \$2,650.00. The cost to refinish the old pews was \$1000. New pews were chosen. The wooden interior entry doors were replaced. An artist was commissioned to paint the mural behind the pulpit.²⁵



View of the church shortly after it was remodeled
From the 1979/80 historic sites inventory form

The Chairman of the Deacon Board, Brother Melvin Lee, stuccoed and painted the church, and remodeled the women’s room. The original slate roof with built-in gutters was removed and replaced with plywood and asbestos shingles in 1980. The “front porch” and “side shed” received a new “hot roof.” The cost of the job was \$2,170. The original chimney was removed and replaced with a new block and stucco chimney which cost \$690.00.²⁶

On April 6, 1972, after the death of the Reverend Stevens, the members who were “paid up” voted for Pastor Reverend Cleve T. Cook (1926-2003) as their new pastor.²⁷ Cleve Theodore Cook was born in Reidsville, North Carolina

and was the second eldest son of Cleve Cook Sr. and Frances Carter. Cleve’s family relocated to Trenton in the late 1920s where his father worked as a truck driver at a junkyard. Cleve was in the Navy during WWII. He and his wife Ethel (1928-2018) had four sons and one daughter. Their son Gary Cook, an eight-year member of the air

**“WHOSOEVER WILL LET HIM COME”
MOUNT CARMEL BAPTIST CHURCH**
Sunday School 10:45 A.M.
Morning Service 11:45 A.M.
Prayer Meeting & Bible Study
7:30 P.M.
Rev. Cleve T. Cook, Pastor
247 N. Main St. Lambertville, N.J.

Trenton Evening Times Dec 30, 1989

**PASTORAL
ANNIVERSARY**
Rev. Cleve T. and Ethel Cook
will be celebrating 19 years
of service at the
Mount Carmel
Baptist Church
in Lambertville, NJ on
April 21st at 3:30 P.M.
Rev. Felton D. Rowe and the
Bethlehem Baptist Church
will be their honored guest.

Trenton Evening Times
April 20, 1991

²⁴ Personal communication with Mrs Sheila Bellamy, May 2019; Music circus web page.

²⁵ Church notebooks and ledgers.

²⁶ Church notebooks and ledgers.

²⁷ Church notebooks and ledgers.

force and a college graduate, became the assistant pastor of Mt. Carmel in the early 1980s.²⁸

Final years

Reverend Cleve T. Cook remained pastor for 41 years until his death in 2003. After which his son Gary Cook continued as pastor until the church closed.²⁹ He is believed to be alive today but was not contacted. One of the last funeral's was for parishioner Ruby D. Williams who died at age 68 in 2006.

Note A booklet commemorating the history of the Mt. Carmel Baptist church 1897-1888 is believed to have been printed but was not found. According to Mrs Sheila Bellamy, who was a co-chairman of the committee that prepared the booklet, an earlier history book also once existed. She described it as a 5 x7 hard bound book that told the early history of the church. This also was not found.

²⁸ Trenton Evening Times, January 23, 1977, October 6, 1981

²⁹ Personal communication with Mrs Sheila Bellamy, May 2019