

NEW HOPE A.M.E. CHURCH: VISION OF A NEW TOMORROW

Written by W. Wright Mitchell

Slavery was a terrible institution. So it is a little unusual to find a group of African Americans who want to honor a former slave owner. But that is exactly what will happen at New Hope A.M.E. Church on May 3, 2009 at the 3 p.m. service.

During that service, New Hope and the Buckhead Heritage Society will celebrate the life of James H. "Whispering" Smith, a white farmer who owned 405 acres of land in Buckhead during the Civil War. Like many farmers in Buckhead at the time, Mr. Smith owned slaves, eight to be exact according to the 1860 Slave Schedule.

Upon Mr. Smith's death in 1872, he left two acres of his land on present day Arden Road to the African Americans in the area to be used for "church purposes", which is how New Hope came into existence.

Mr. Smith is buried nearby at Harmony Grove Cemetery, which is located at the southwest corner of West Paces Ferry and Chatham Roads. Harmony Grove Cemetery recently underwent an extensive restoration conducted by the Buckhead Heritage Society.

Mr. Smith's bequest, however, is just a small part of New Hope's interesting history. For many years before a church existed, large open air Camp Meetings were held on the site. Each year on the fourth Sunday in August, the church held an annual celebration that attracted attendees from all over the south. People prepared for the celebration months in advance by setting aside special livestock and chickens to be killed and cooked for the occasion.

Having traveled great distances to reach New Hope, many of the attendees camped overnight. During the day, children played in the woods while the adults ate, listened to sermons, sang hymns and engaged in fellowship. Occasionally, the children were called to pray with the adults.

Also present at the Camp Meetings were "sinners" who confined themselves to areas of the woods where "home brew" was available. The pastors and participants said special prayers for these "sinners" under a brush arbor.

As the Camp Meetings grew, the church became a center for spiritual growth and social contact for the African Americans in Buckhead and the broader Atlanta Community. Around the turn of the century, members built a plank tabernacle to provide shelter and a place to worship for the attendees of the Camp Meetings.

At the close of the Camp Meetings, worshippers marched around the tabernacle seven times singing "The Year of the Jubilee Has Come, Return Ye Ransomed Sinners Home". The acting reverend would then blow a horn at each corner of the tabernacle, signifying the end of the meeting.

Although the tabernacle burned in 1927, the New Hope Congregation continued to thrive. Shortly after the destruction of the tabernacle, the Reverend R.E. Lee led the Congregation in the construction of the basement of the church. A school was also built on the premises to educate African American children in the area.

New Hope's white neighbors also played a significant role in the early years of the church. In fact, the first Catechisms at New Hope were given by Mrs. Mary Howell, the wife of a prominent local attorney, Judge Clark Howell.

In 1936, the Reverend W.W. Stephens completed the Sanctuary of New Hope A.M.E. Church. But this was not an easy task since few members of the church possessed the financial resources to fund the construction. Two congregation members, Mrs. Beatrice Bogan and Mrs. Ana Jones put up their own personal property to secure loans to start the construction. A white contractor in the area, Mr. Alex Milt, took out a loan to finance the completion of the construction. Other local whites donated money to assist in the effort.

This spirit of cooperation between New Hope and its neighbors has endured through the years. "The cooperation between the community and the church has been wonderful. We enjoy a very supportive and collaborative relationship with our neighbors," said Reverend Philip Chisholm recently.

As the neighborhood has grown over the years, residents have always felt welcome at New Hope's services and have sought ways to be involved. Among other projects, neighbors helped raise funds to repair the church after a tornado in 1975, donated a lift for elderly and disabled members and assisted in a painting project.

In New Hope's written history prepared by Reverend Elizabeth Few in 1987, she cites the late poet, Langston Hughes who once wrote "Hold on to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken winged bird that cannot fly." Reverend Few concludes that New Hope has survived for so many decades because its people have always had a "Vision of a New Tomorrow".

Led by Reverend Philip Chisholm, New Hope's Congregation continues to grow and thrive to this day, some 130 years after Mr. Smith's gift. Since that time, New Hope and the Buckhead Community have worked together to ensure that there will always be a new tomorrow for this special church.

For additional information about the New Hope A.M.E. Church, please visit www.newhopeame.org. Information about Harmony Grove Cemetery and the Buckhead Heritage Society is available at www.buckheadheritage.com.

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