

Durham's Picturesque Churches

An Appraisal Of The Influence Of The Negro Church In The Progress Of Colored Durham

By REV. H. A. SMITH

An evaluation in tangible terms of the contribution our churches have made to the progress of the Negro in Durham is no easy task. This is true because the church as a religious institution is chiefly concerned with spiritual and moral values. Its sole reason for being is the function of bringing man into a redeeming reconciliation with God and providing the means by which he may find inward peace and satisfaction in the consciousness of an eternal security.

Implicit in this task of the church is the realization of the dual nature of man. He is a creature of two worlds, the physical and the spiritual, and must find satisfactory adjustment to each. He cannot live by bread alone; the elements which sustain the body and make for a comfortable physical existence. The church recognizes that man was made for God and his soul is restless until it finds

its peace in God.

In his present state of existence, man has formidable obstacles to surmount and difficulties to overcome. On the physical side, he faces such stark realities as hunger, thirst, disease, death, and an eternal struggle with natural forces. Living in a context of social relationships; that is, in contact with other people, he meets head on ignorance, greed, avarice, competition, conflict, inequalities, inhumanity, injustice, prejudice, and the like. Human progress is success in overcoming these hostile forces.

In this city, there are 27,000 Negroes in a population of 71,000. As a minority group, they have not found their environment any too friendly. Yet, this group has made a commendable progress over the years overcoming formidable odds and great difficulties. The secret of this triumph has been an unconquerable spirit, an invincible will to succeed, an inspired, efficient leadership, and cooperation.

In this progress, our churches

have played a major role. Increasingly, these institutions are making their impact felt. They have furnished the spiritual incentives, motivations, fortitude, faith, and moral strength, to a great extent, for the task. It is significant that names like Spaulding, Moore, Shepard, Merrick, Pearson, inseparably linked with the history of Negro progress in Durham, were church men. The source of their strength, vision, insight, and capacity to carry on in dark and forboding days was their faith in God.

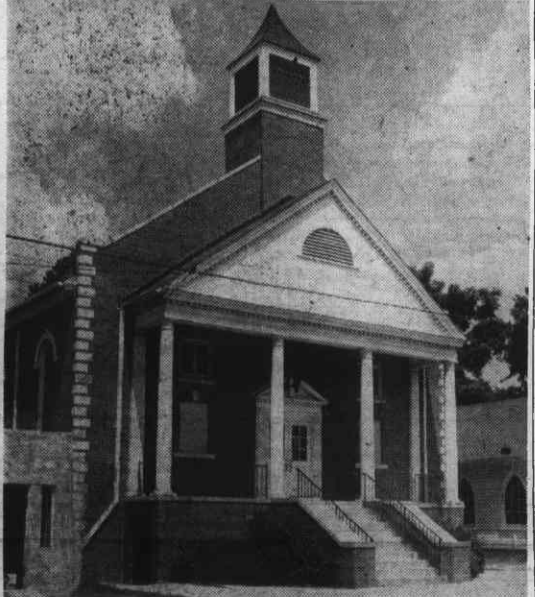
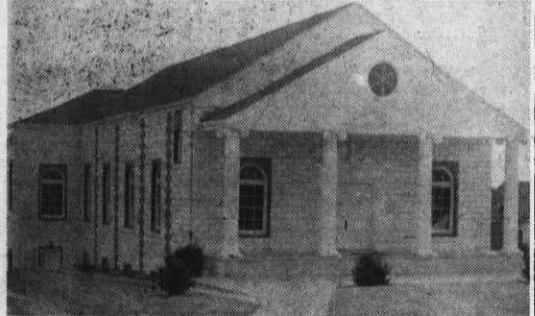
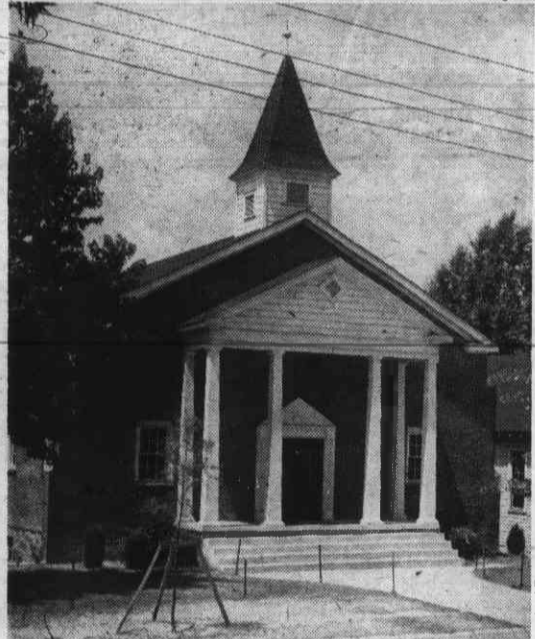
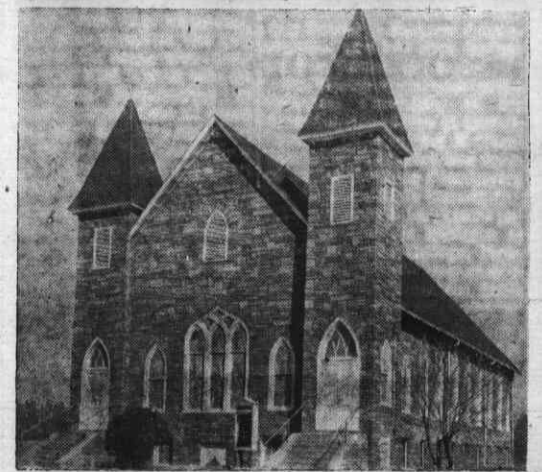
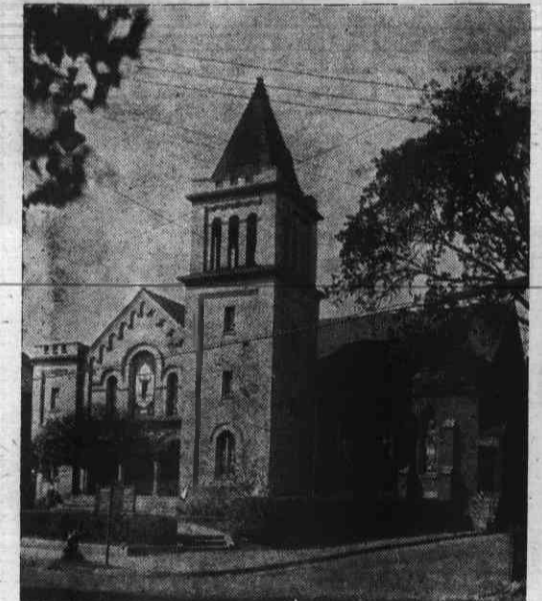
It is plainly evident that the space allotted for this article will not permit a detailed description of each church in the city. Alluding to some and not to others is not to be considered as due to bias, partiality, or prejudice; neither as strictly arbitrary. The scope or extent of the activities engaged in by some few churches, the nature of those activities, the length of time these churches have been functioning, the size of the membership, not to mention other factors, make reference to these churches necessary.

In Durham at the present time, there are some thirty-five or forty Negro churches representing not a few denominations—Missionary Baptists, Methodists, Free Will Baptists, assorted groups of the Holiness Church, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Seventh Day Adventists, Roman Catholics, etc.

From the point of view of size and physical equipment, the leading churches of the city are the White Rock Baptist, Mount Vernon Baptist, the St. Joseph AME and the Saint Mark AME Zion Churches. The combined membership of these churches total about 4,500 persons. The history of each of these spans many decades.

The leading churches from the standpoint of numbers and physical plants are the Baptists and Methodists. Aside from the Holiness connection, the other groups are relatively small. However, that is not to say, they are insignificant.

The question as to the oldest church in the city is left to others more competent than myself to decide. In his HISTORY OF DURHAM, Boyd says: "The first Negro congregation in point of time is St. Joseph African Methodist." (Please turn to Page Six)



DURHAM CHURCHES—Shown top to bottom, left are Durham's Churches. Right side are First Calvary, Saint John's Mount Vernon, White Rock, Mount Zion and West Durham Baptist. Ebenezzer and Morehead Avenue Baptist Churches.

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