

Landmarks Preservation Commission
July 13, 1993; Designation List 252
LP-1849

MOTHER AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL ZION CHURCH

140-148 West 137th Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1923-25; architect George W. Foster, Jr.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1921, Lot 51.

On July 15, 1991, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Mother Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 16). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three speakers testified in favor of designation. Eight additional speakers were in favor of the designation of this and the other items on the calendar at the hearing but urged the Commission to continue its work in Harlem. Numerous letters have been received expressing the same sentiments. Representatives of the church have indicated their support for this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, built in 1923-25, is the sixth home of New York City's first black congregation and the founding church of the A.M.E. Zion Conference of churches, which spread throughout the United States and Canada. Established in 1796, under the leadership of James Varick, Mother Zion has a long and illustrious history of religious and social activism. In the nineteenth century, the A.M.E. Zion conference was popularly known as the "Freedom Church" because of its important role in the abolitionist movement; many conference churches, including Mother Zion, served as stations on the Underground Railroad. The movement of the Mother Zion congregation northward, beginning in lower Manhattan, to the present location in Harlem, reflects the residential patterns of New York City's black population. At the time the present church was constructed, Harlem contained the majority of New York's black residents. A distinguished composition in the neo-Gothic style, reflecting the tradition of Protestant church design in the 1920s, the church building was designed by George W. Foster, Jr., one of the first black architects to be registered in the United States. During the twentieth-century leadership of Pastor James W. Brown and his successor, Dr. Benjamin C. Robeson, Mother Zion rose to even greater prominence as a religious and social institution. Robeson's civil rights crusade attracted such notable Harlem residents as Langston Hughes and W.E.B. DuBois, and the Zion pulpit was often a platform for the social and political activism of Robeson's brother, Paul Robeson. Mother Zion has continued its almost two-hundred year tradition of service to its congregation and community, not only addressing the spiritual needs of its members but also providing an array of social programs.

History of Harlem 1658-1920s¹

Harlem, originally called Nieuw Haarlem, takes its name from the Dutch city of Haarlem. The first permanent non-native settlement in Manhattan's northern region, the village was established in 1658 by Gov. Peter Stuyvesant about ten miles north of New Amsterdam along the "Harlem Road" (Boston Post Road), a Lenape Indian trail widened by the enslaved black workers of the Dutch West India Company. Following the English takeover in 1664, the Harlem village ranked with New York (formerly New Amsterdam) as the second largest European immigrant community on Manhattan Island. From the colonial period through the nineteenth century the distance from lower Manhattan to Harlem -- a three- to four-hour journey by horse-drawn carriage -- shaped the region's development and prosperity as a farming community of large estates, owned by some of New York's early wealthy families and labored upon by the city's black population.

Harlem suffered economic decline in the 1830s when many of the great farms failed and estates were sold at public auction. The area attracted those who sought cheap property and housing, including speculators and many poor immigrants who made homes in scattered shantytowns. The New York & Harlem Railroad was completed in 1837, but service was poor and unreliable.² Residential development in Harlem proceeded at a slow pace.

As the population of New York increased after the Civil War, development spread more rapidly. By 1881 three lines of the elevated railroad along Second, Third and Eighth Avenues opened new neighborhoods. In 1885, the introduction of electric cable car service on Amsterdam Avenue and along 125th Street made Harlem even more accessible. The Harlem Opera House was inaugurated in 1889 and new buildings were constructed, lining the newly paved avenues and streets. Elegant homes, such as the King Model Houses built in 1891 along 138th and 139th Streets (later known as Striver's Row, located in the St. Nicholas Historic District), helped establish Harlem as a fashionable community.

The character of Harlem again changed

dramatically during the early years of the twentieth century. A proposed subway route to Harlem in the late 1890s ignited a new round of real estate speculation, leading to highly inflated market values. Many new residential buildings were constructed; however, excessive vacancies forced a collapse in the Harlem real estate market prior to the completion of the subway. Taking advantage of the deflated real estate market was Philip Payton, a black realtor who founded the Afro-American Realty Company in 1904. Promoting easy access to Harlem via the new West Side subway (I.R.T.) to 145th Street, Payton negotiated leases on white-owned properties and rented them to blacks. Despite the fact that they were charged higher rents than were whites, New York's black middle class -- long denied access to "better" neighborhoods -- seized the opportunity for decent new comfortable housing and moved uptown. In 1906, the demolition of homes in the Tenderloin District, a predominantly black neighborhood near 34th Street, for the construction of Pennsylvania Station uprooted hundreds of families, sending them north to Harlem where good housing was plentiful and affordable. Soon black immigrants from the Caribbean and the American South joined the migration to Harlem. By 1914, most of the major black churches which were once located in lower Manhattan and midtown had moved northward along with their congregations. By 1925, New York City's black population was over 250,000 and most lived in Harlem.

Early History of the Mother A.M.E. Zion Church 1796-1925³

The Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, familiarly known as Mother Zion Church, was founded in 1796 in New York City when black members of the predominantly white John Street Methodist Church chose to form an independent congregation. Though appreciative of John Street Methodist's strong stance against slavery, many blacks were dissatisfied with church policy on other matters. Recalling the discontent of black members with John Street Methodist, a nineteenth-century Zion Church historian wrote, "the colored members were not permitted to come to the sacrament (Holy Communion) until all the white members, even children, had communed."⁴

First choosing the name "African Chapel" and

later Zion -- "because it is the name most frequently used in the Bible to designate the church of God"⁵ -- the founding members, led by the first Zion prelate, James Varick, established an official doctrine that "no distinction should be made in the church on account of race, color or condition."⁶ In 1796, the first Zion Church conducted Sunday services in a rented house on Cross Street, between Orange and Mulberry Streets. By 1800, enough money was raised by the congregation to erect a permanent house of worship. On July 30th, a cornerstone was laid on the southwest corner of Church and Leonard Streets for a new thirty-five-foot by forty-five-foot wooden church which served the congregation until 1864. Zion was the only black church in the city of New York until the founding of the "African (Abyssinian) Baptist Church" in 1808. By 1819, the growing Zion membership raised \$11,500 to construct a larger stone edifice over the small wood church.⁷

On July 26, 1820, led by Varick, all but sixty-one of Zion's 751 members voted formally to withdraw altogether from the white "Mother" Methodist Church denomination and form a separate "conference" of African Methodist Episcopal Zion Churches. Within a decade, more than a dozen affiliate Zion churches were formed in Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and also Canada. In 1822, a branch, called "little Zion," was founded in Harlem to serve the local black population, and the founding church at Leonard Street began to be known as "Mother" Zion. The present name of the church was officially approved in 1848.⁸

Early nineteenth-century Zion Church history was characterized by outspoken activism in the abolitionist movement,⁹ and some of the most famous names in the struggle against slavery were members of the A.M.E. Zion denomination. Sojourner Truth, born a slave in New York State and freed upon the state's Emancipation Day, July 4, 1827, was a member of Mother Zion, speaking often at the Leonard Street pulpit against human bondage. Nationally, the A.M.E. Zion Church Conference became popularly known as the "Freedom church." Harriet Tubman, a champion of the Underground Railroad, and abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass were both

Zion Conference members, Douglass being a pastor of the A.M.E. Zion Church in Rochester, N.Y. Many Zion Conference churches were part of the network of Underground Railroad "stations," including Mother Zion.

After 1827, Mother Zion's location in a "free state" did not prevent the church from being attacked by local anti-abolitionist forces. In the aftermath of a three-day riot by a gang of anti-black demonstrators that left several windows smashed at Mother Zion, and five other black and white churches attacked and set ablaze, the *Evening Post* editorialized on July 12, 1834, that the assaults were a "disgrace."¹⁰

At the church's fiftieth anniversary (1846), ninety-nine churches located in the United States, Canada, and Caribbean were members of the Zion Conference of Churches. By the advent of the Civil War, "Old Zion," as the originating church was often called, was also known as the "'Mother' of African Churches."¹¹

By the conclusion of the Civil War, New York City's black population, always at the outermost edge of the city's expansion northward from lower Manhattan, was pushed further uptown. Mother Zion moved also, selling its valuable one-half block lot at Leonard Street in 1864 for \$90,000 and purchasing an existing church edifice from the Dutch Reformed Church at West 10th and Bleecker Streets for \$45,000; this was Zion's third home until 1904 (the building is no longer extant). During the late nineteenth century, termed the "The Flourishing Period" in a publication commemorating Mother Zion's 100th anniversary (1896), the Zion Conference of Churches had spread throughout the newly free black population of four million ex-slaves in the South, as well as to African and Caribbean countries. At the century's end, Zion's worldwide membership claimed nearly half a million members.¹²

Meanwhile, as the twentieth century dawned, the European immigrant population grew even more, pushing the segregated black population further uptown. In 1904, Mother Zion was "pushed" further than ever before in its 108-year history,¹³ settling on a new plot of land on the Upper West Side where it constructed the fourth

"Mother" church at Columbus Avenue and West 89th Street (later demolished). However, by then, the attraction of northern Manhattan for African-Americans was so great that within ten years the church was forced to follow its own migrating congregation to Harlem. In 1914, Mother Zion purchased its fifth home, a former Episcopal church on West 136th Street, between Lenox and Seventh Avenues.¹⁴ And, during the pastorate of the Reverend James Walter Brown (tenure 1912-1936), Mother Zion moved in 1925 for a third time in the twentieth century to the church's sixth and present location at 137th Street.

On Monday, Sept. 21, 1925, the *New York Times* reported, "more than 7,000 negroes attended the opening yesterday of the new \$450,000 church of the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Congregation at 140-146 West 137th Street." Mother Zion, which at the time claimed 3,000 members, had moved once more, continued the *Times*, "each time moving further uptown with the negro colony."¹⁵

The New Church Building and Its Architect

In 1914, when Mother Zion moved to Harlem, the black population of that community was centered on the streets of the West 130s, between Fifth and Eighth avenues. Not just Mother Zion, but others of New York's most prominent African-American churches followed their congregants to Harlem and opened new churches in the heart of this new black settlement. Among the prestigious congregations that moved to the area were St. Philip's Episcopal Church which erected a new building on West 134th Street between Seventh and Eighth avenues in 1910-11, and Abyssinian Baptist Church which moved to West 138th Street between Lenox and Seventh avenues in 1923.

In addition to the historic black churches that moved to Harlem, new congregations were founded in the community. Both the old and new congregations grew rapidly in Harlem and, as the number of congregants increased, larger sanctuaries were needed.¹⁶ As Mother Zion had done in 1914, many of the congregations purchased the imposing church buildings that had been erected in the late nineteenth century by white congregations, but were being abandoned by

those organizations as their members fled from Harlem.¹⁷

In the early 1920s, Mother Zion purchased three buildings (a pair of small three-story rowhouses and a one-story frame building) on West 137th Street, immediately north of its 136th Street church. These buildings were demolished and architect George W. Foster, Jr., was commissioned to design a new church building.¹⁸ George Washington Foster, Jr. (1866-1923) was one of the first professional black architects registered in the United States and one of only 59 black architects (of a total of 16,613 architects) recorded in the 1910 United States census.¹⁹ Very little about Foster's early life and career can be stated with certainty. His descendants believe that he was born in Newark, New Jersey, the son of a carriage striper.²⁰ Foster is said to have studied architecture at Cooper Union in New York in the late 1880s.²¹ He is then believed to have worked for some years as a draftsman in the office of Henry Hardenbergh, one of New York City's leading late nineteenth-century architects. During that period, the Hardenbergh office was responsible for the design of such prominent buildings as the Waldorf (1890-93) and Astoria (1896) hotels on Fifth Avenue between 33rd and 34th streets (both demolished), the American Fine Arts Society Building (1891-92) on West 57th Street, the John Wolfe Building (1894-95; demolished) on Maiden Lane, and the Manhattan Hotel (1895-96; demolished) on East 42nd Street. He is also said to have worked, in 1903, for Daniel Burnham & Co. on the Flatiron Building.²² Early in the twentieth century Foster apparently established his own architectural practice in New Jersey. In 1902, he moved into a house of his own design at 102 Colony Avenue in Park Ridge. In 1908, when New Jersey began registering architects, Foster became one of two black men to be so registered.²³ Foster was registered in New York in 1916.

From about 1908 to about 1915, Foster was in partnership with Vertner Tandy. Tandy, who was nineteen years younger than Foster, received his architectural degree at Cornell in 1907; he is generally considered to be the first black architect registered in New York State.²⁴ The most important building designed by the firm of Tandy

& Foster was the neo-Gothic style St. Philip's Episcopal Church (1910-11) on West 134th Street. After the partnership with Tandy ended, Foster continued to work independently.²⁵ Mother A.M.E. Zion Church was the most important commission of Foster's late career. Sadly, he died shortly after the design was completed.

For Mother A.M.E. Zion Church, Foster designed an impressive church building in the neo-Gothic style. The choice of a Gothic-inspired design reflects the popularity of this mode for early twentieth-century church design in America. In the mid-nineteenth century, many Protestant denominations in America had rejected the Gothic and its associations with Roman Catholic and Episcopal doctrine, in favor of designs based on Romanesque precedents. However, by the turn of the century, the popularity of the Romanesque Revival had waned and most Christian denominations returned to an exploration of the Gothic.²⁶ Architects such as Ralph Adams Cram and Henry Vaughan promoted a return to the use of medieval design by all Christian denominations as the architectural means of reflecting a return to universal Christian values.

The new Gothic-inspired buildings, often referred to as neo-Gothic in style, adopted modern construction techniques, but incorporated traditional Gothic features modeled on forms found on twelfth- and thirteenth-century European churches and cathedrals. In New York City, among the many extant examples of churches in the neo-Gothic style erected by Protestant denominations are the Washington Heights Baptist Church (now Convent Avenue Baptist Church, Lamb & Rich, 1897-99) on the corner of Convent Avenue and West 145th Street; St. James Presbyterian Church (Ludlow & Valentine, 1904) on the corner of St. Nicholas Avenue and West 141st Street; South Reformed Church (now Park Avenue Christian Church, Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson, 1911) on Park Avenue and East 85th Street; the Park Avenue Baptist Church (now Central Presbyterian Church, Henry C. Pelton and Allen & Collens, 1920-22); the Abyssinian Baptist Church (Charles W. Bolton & Son, 1922-23); and Mother Zion.

Although these neo-Gothic Protestant churches are designed with traditional architectural

detail, they are not always laid out with a traditional cross plan with a nave intersected by transepts and a deep chancel. Many of these churches retain the auditorium plan that became popular for Protestant churches (other than Episcopalian) in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁷ In this type of plan, seats are arranged in arcs as in a theater; the focal point of the interior is the pulpit which is raised on a shallow platform. This seating arrangement permitted all members of the congregation to see and hear the preacher, an indication of the central role played by the minister and the importance of the sermon in the service. Mother Zion is one of many Protestant churches erected in the first decades of the twentieth century with a street elevation in the neo-Gothic style and an auditorium plan.²⁸ Since the sanctuary at Mother Zion is relatively shallow, the auditorium plan is somewhat modest. The auditorium has a central aisle and two side aisles, with the seats arranged in a subtle arc. Above the main floor of the sanctuary is a curving balcony.

The Contemporary Role of Mother A.M.E. Zion Church 1925-1993

In the late 1920s, economic and social conditions changed for the worse in Harlem.²⁹ The demand for more housing continued; however, high rents for existing living spaces led to the subdivision of single-family homes into boarding houses and single-room-occupancy residences. Building ownership changed often and upkeep declined steadily. Thousands of residents who had been attracted to Harlem to enjoy a better life -- "ordinary, hardworking people," as author and resident James Weldon Johnson wrote in 1930 -- were soon struggling in the Depression. Unemployment and crime rose swiftly.

The Reverend James W. Brown, who served Zion between 1912 and 1936 both at 89th Street and in Harlem, is remembered for his many sermons against the emerging social "evils" which seemed to overtake Zion's Central Harlem community.³⁰ The pastor preached with frustration against crime, gambling, pool-playing, "improper" dancing, and alcohol abuse. Mother Zion's prominence as a leading religious and social institution continued. Brown and his successor, Dr. Benjamin C. Robeson, who served until 1963, appealed also to influential and notable Harlem

citizens. Robeson's civil rights crusade attracted Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois, Marion Anderson, Roland Hayes, and Joe Louis. Often, the Zion pulpit was a platform for the social and political activism of the pastor's more famous brother, Paul Robeson.³¹

At Mother Zion's 150-year sesquicentennial (1946), two weeks of daily celebrations attracted national attention. A one thousand voice choir was assembled and a parade drew thousands of participants along Seventh Avenue. Commemorative events were held at several locations. New York Gov. Thomas E. Dewey addressed church members at Carnegie Hall, and at Madison Square Garden, congratulatory speeches were made by Mary McLeod Bethune and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. (who was also the minister at neighboring Abyssinian Baptist Church). A Mother Zion delegation was also received at the White House by President Harry S. Truman.³²

Harlem's economic and social downslide continued into the 1950s and '60s. Under the tutelage of the Reverend George W. McMurray, who took up the pastorate in 1963, the church began a sustained program of economic and social revival. In 1972, the James Varick Community Center, constructed on the site of the former church building on 136th Street, was completed at a cost of \$1.6 million. The center makes complete use of its four floors of facilities, from the full service kitchen and basketball courts in the basement to the rooftop (rubber matted) playground for children.³³ Through the Varick Center, Mother Zion administers day care, daily after-school youth programs, a relocation and education program for formerly homeless women, and mental health services and youth counseling under the auspices of the Graham-Windham Family Services Center. Today, a single-page handout to church visitors describes Mother Zion's Seven Day Ministry and Outreach Program as "continuing in the tradition of the founding fathers who sought to address not only the spiritual needs of their members, but their temporal needs as well."³⁴ Dr. Alvin T. Durant came to Mother Zion from East Chicago, Indiana, as the pastor on July 4, 1993.

Building Description

Mother A.M.E. Zion Church is a symmetrically designed building set on a smooth granite base above which rises a facade of rough blocks of gray stone laid in random ashlar; the building is trimmed with white terra cotta.³⁵ The building is set at the lot line and stretches for the entire length of its ninety-five-foot wide lot. To either side of a tall, wide central gable are pairs of narrow buttressed wings that step down from the height of the gable. The openness of the central gabled section, which is pierced by a large pointed-arched window and a triple-arched entrance portico, contrasts with the austerity of the stone wings with modest window and door openings.

The central gabled section is the focal point of the church design. With its entrance porch and large window, this is the most ornate portion of the building. The church is entered through a shallow projecting terra-cotta entrance portico that is pierced by three pointed-arch entrances. Each entrance is reached by a short flight of granite stairs and is flanked by granite wing walls. Within each arch is a pair of multi-paneled wooden doors with Gothic-style hardware and a pointed-arch transom divided vertically into seven lights. The spandrel panels of each entrance arch are ornamented with quatrefoils and the entire triple-arched ensemble is set below a long drip lintel. Above the lintel are a series of blind pointed arches with shield embellishments. The roofline of the porch is crenellated; the crenellated roofline has a projecting cap molding.

Above the entrance portico, the facade is pierced by a large pointed-arch window with ornate tracery. The window is filled with stained glass. The sides of the window are marked by keyed blocks of terra cotta, while the spandrel is a large terra-cotta expanse articulated by blind pointed arches. A projecting terra-cotta beltcourse extends above the spandrel panel, marking the base of the gable's pediment. The lower portion of the pediment is faced with rock-faced stone, while the peak is faced with terra cotta ornamented with blind pointed arches. Terra-cotta foliation caps the pediment. The steep sloping peaked roof, extending behind the gable, is clad in slate.

The end wings, which step down as they extend from the central gable, are far more austere than the gabled central section. The end wings are visually tied to the central section by three modest projecting beltcourses. The lower beltcourse is a continuation of the cap molding on the crenellated roofline of the entrance porch. A second beltcourse extends from the base of the spandrel panel of the large central window across the inner wings. The third beltcourse is the terra-cotta cap stone running along the edge of the central gable and continuing along the stepped roofline of the end wings. The gable is flanked at each side by two buttresses; similar, but shorter, buttresses flank the end wings. Each of the six buttresses has a single step with terra-cotta coping. The four inner buttresses are further ornamented by terra-cotta panels with blind pointed arches. All six buttresses contain triangular terra-cotta panels with blind-arched ornament and crowning finials. Terra-cotta pinnacles, embellished with crockets and bouquets, rise from the four inner buttresses.

Each end wing has only one opening, located at or near the base. The inner wings are articulated by single pointed-arched openings set slightly above the base of the building. Each opening is divided into two windows; the openings have keyed terra-cotta enframements. Each end wing has a pointed-arched, street-level entrance with a wooden door and terra-cotta enframement.

To either side of the end buttresses on the front facade is a small stepped buttress that visually supports the corner of the side elevations and separates the church building from the apartment houses located to the east and west.

The Mother Zion Legacy in Today's Church

Upon entering the church, the recognition of Mother Zion's almost two-hundred year history is immediate. Exhibited in the vestibule are several of the church's historic plaques and mementos. High on the narthex walls are two large white marble tablets, dating from the nineteenth century, commemorating the founding church leaders and the first church edifice erected in 1800. On the walls of the spacious 1,000-seat sanctuary hang the portraits of the twenty-eight pastors who span the church's history. In the church basement a "Children's Chapel," seating one hundred, displays the wooden pulpit that served the Greenwich Village congregation on Bleecker Street. In the church's administrative office is preserved the cornerstone of the 136th Street church. Beneath the sanctuary, entombed in a crypt, are the remains of James Varick, Mother Zion's first bishop. Buried in 1827 at the Colored Union Cemetery in New Windsor, N.Y., Varick's remains were moved and reinterred in 1926 shortly after completion of the present church.³⁶

*Report prepared by
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Andrew S. Dolkart
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NOTES

1. For the overall history of Harlem: James Riker, *Revised History of Harlem: Its Origins and Early Annals* (New York: New York - Harlem Publishing Co., 1904), 185-187; I.N. Phelps Stokes, *New York Past and Present 1524-1939* (New York: Plantin Press, 1940), 78-85; James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1930) 281-284; John Henrik Clarke, *Harlem, Community in Transition* (New York, 1969), 57-86; Berthold Fernow, *The Records of New Amsterdam* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1976) vol. 6, 296; John Romeyn Brodhead, *History of the State of New York: 1609-1664* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1853) vol. 1, 641; Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
2. Richard Brooks, ed., *The Diary of Michael Floy, Jr. 1833-1837* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1941). Floy lived in the Bowery Village (near 11th Street and Broadway) and traveled regularly to the family farm in Harlem, normally making the long trip by carriage. On July 22, 1836, he lamented his decision to return home by train, "the nine miles have not so much work in them as nine yards in some parts of the Harlem Railroad." On May 19, 1834, Floy wrote about a full day of "Spring planting" of potatoes, lima beans and scarlet runners.
3. For the overall history of Mother A.M.E. Zion Church: John Jamison Moore, *History of the A.M.E. Zion Church* (York, Penn.: Teachers' Journal Office, 1884), 28-36, 156-160; William J. Walls, *The African*

Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (Chapel Hill, N.C.: A.M.E. Zion Publishing, 1974), 26-43, 255; J.W. Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (New York: A.M.E. Zion Book Concern, 1895), 10-15, 276; A.T. Hatwood, *The Story of Zion's Sesquicentennial: 1796-1946* (New York: A.M.E. Zion Church Publishing, 1948), 36-39.

4. Moore, 28.
5. By 1800, the church at Leonard and Church streets was called "Zion", see C.R. Harris, "Concerning the Naming of the A.M.E. Zion Church," *Historical Catechism of the A.M.E. Zion Church* (New York: A.M.E. Zion Church Publications, 1922). [The Schomburg Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.]
6. "Doctrines and Disciplines of the A.M.E. Zion Church," published by the A.M.E. Zion Connection in America, June 3, 1848. [Collections of the New-York Historical Society.]
7. The *Evening Post* ("Great Fire") Sept. 24, 1839, p. 1, details severe damage to Mother Zion during fire that engulfed several neighborhood buildings. Damage to Mother Zion was estimated at \$12,000.
8. Walls, 124. Jonathan Greenleaf, *A History of the Churches of All Denominations in the City of New York from the First Settlement to the Year 1846* (New York: E. French, 1846) gives an account of "Little Zion," a branch of the "Mother" Church on Leonard Street, at an unspecified location in Harlem in 1843. That year, according to Greenleaf, membership was 1,196 at Mother Zion and sixty-six at "Little Zion." According to Osofsky, 83, 114, "Little Zion" worshipped on East 117th Street in the mid-nineteenth century; in the twentieth century it became an independent church and moved to the west side in 1911. See also: Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1951; 9th ed., 1990), 159-160.
9. "An Address Delivered Before the New York African Society for Mutual Relief in the African Zion Church," March 23, 1815 [Collections of the New-York Historical Society]; "Report by the Anti-Slavery Committee of the A.M.E. Zion Church, 1863," *The Black Abolitionist Papers: The United States 1859-1865*, C. Peter Ridley, ed. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).
10. *New York Evening Post* ("Riots and Continued Disturbances of the Peace"), July 12, 1834, p. 1.
11. Hood, 85.
12. *Ibid.*, 56.
13. See Walls, 255, for illustrations and photos of Mother Zion's migration from lower Manhattan to "uptown."
14. The church building on 136th Street housed a succession of Episcopal congregations. It was apparently erected by the Church of the Holy Innocents in 1884. By the mid-1890s, the church housed the congregation of the Church of the Holy Nativity. The last congregation to occupy the church before Mother Zion was the Church of the Redeemer.
15. "Negroes Open New Church," *New York Times*, Sept. 21, 1925, p. 12.
16. Osofsky, 113.
17. Sometimes black churches were hindered in acquiring property because of discriminatory covenants. Osofsky, 116-117, reports that the Rev. Hutchens Chew Bishop of St. Philip's Church had offered the Church of the Redeemer \$50,000 for the church building on West 136th Street, prior to Mother Zion acquiring it. However, the vestrymen felt bound to their agreement to not sell the church to blacks, even though many of white church's congregants were moving away, and rejected the offer. In 1914, the Church of the Redeemer sold the church for \$22,000 to a white woman, who immediately resold the property to Mother Zion.
18. New York City, Department of Buildings, Plans, Permits and Dockets [Block 1921, Lot 51]; New Building Permit 351-1923.
19. The major source for Foster is Schuyler Warmflash, "George Washington Foster, Jr.: An Early Black Architect," in Bergen County Office of Cultural and Historic Affairs, *Bergen County Historic Sites Survey, Borough of Park Ridge, Appendix A* (Paramus, 1983), 32A-32F. Foster is discussed briefly in Michael Adams, "A Legacy of Shadows," *Progressive Architecture* (Feb., 1991), 85-86. The Commission would like to thank

Bob Craig of the Office of New Jersey Heritage, Giles Wright of the New Jersey Historical Commission, and historian Gretchen Soren for their assistance in providing information on Foster. All of these individuals have been involved with the New Jersey Black Historic Places Survey.

20. According to Warmflash (pp. 32B-32C) biographical information on Foster was provided to architectural historian Carson Anderson by Foster's granddaughter, Mrs. A. Leon Higginbotham.
21. Warmflash (p.32C) and the New Jersey Black Historic Places Survey note that Cooper Union has no official record of Foster. Adams (p. 85) states that Foster studied at Cooper Union in 1888-89.
22. Warmflash, p. 32C and Adams, p. 86. The Flatiron Building was completed in 1903. Thus, if Foster was employed by Burnham in that year, he probably had little design input.
23. The other black architect registered in 1908 was Robert L. Robinson of Westfield. The fact that Foster and Robinson were registered in New Jersey does not necessarily indicate that the state was open-minded on racial issues. The law had a clause that allowed anyone who could demonstrate, by training or practice, that he or she had experience as an architect to be registered.
24. From 1910 to 1916 the firm of Tandy & Foster had offices at 1931 Broadway (Broadway and West 65th Street); see James Ward, *Architects in Practice New York City 1900-1940* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1989), 76.
25. Ward (p. 25) only lists Foster as maintaining a New York City office for one year (1917); Warmflash (p. 32D) states that business directories from 1915 to the early 1920s list a New York City office address for Foster.
26. Exceptions include denominations with their roots in colonial New England (such as Congregationalists and Unitarians) which built in the Colonial Revival as well as neo-Gothic styles, and newer denominations, such as the Church of Christ Science (Christian Scientists) and the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), which sought a design aesthetic that would set themselves apart from older, more established Christian groups.
27. Early examples of auditorium plan churches in New York City include Plymouth Congregational Church (now Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, Joseph C. Wells, 1849), Hanson Place Baptist Church (now Hanson Place Seventh Day Adventist Church, George Penchard, 1857-60), and Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church (Grimsted & Morrill, 1861-62), all in Brooklyn.
28. Abyssinian Baptist and the Washington Heights Methodist Church also have auditorium plans.
29. Racial unrest intensified during periods of the 1930s and '40s in Harlem. On March 19, 1935, a major riot followed the arrest of a black teenager by white policemen (for allegedly stealing a pocketknife from a five and ten cent store on 125th Street). Three people were killed and more than 200 injured; damages were estimated at \$2 million. See "The Harlem Riot of 1935: Publication of the New York City Mayor's Commission Report," *Amsterdam News*, April 1, 1935.

In 1943, a major racial disturbance was precipitated by the shooting of a black soldier by a white police officer. Some bystanders said the soldier had been protecting his mother from verbal abuse by the officer. Six people were killed during the violence and 185 injured. See Dominic J. Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1977).
30. Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), 146.
31. According to the *New York Times*, January 28, 1976, p. B1 [photo], thousands of mourners arrived at Mother Zion for the funeral of Paul Robeson.
32. Hatwood, 39.
33. The *New York Times*, August 26, 1981, p. C1, prominently featured Mother Zion in an article about the Sunday church supper tradition.
34. *Mother A.M.E. Zion Church*, Informational Brochure (New York: A.M.E. Zion Church Publication, 1992).
35. The stone appears to be Manhattan schist.
36. The church interior is not subject to this designation.

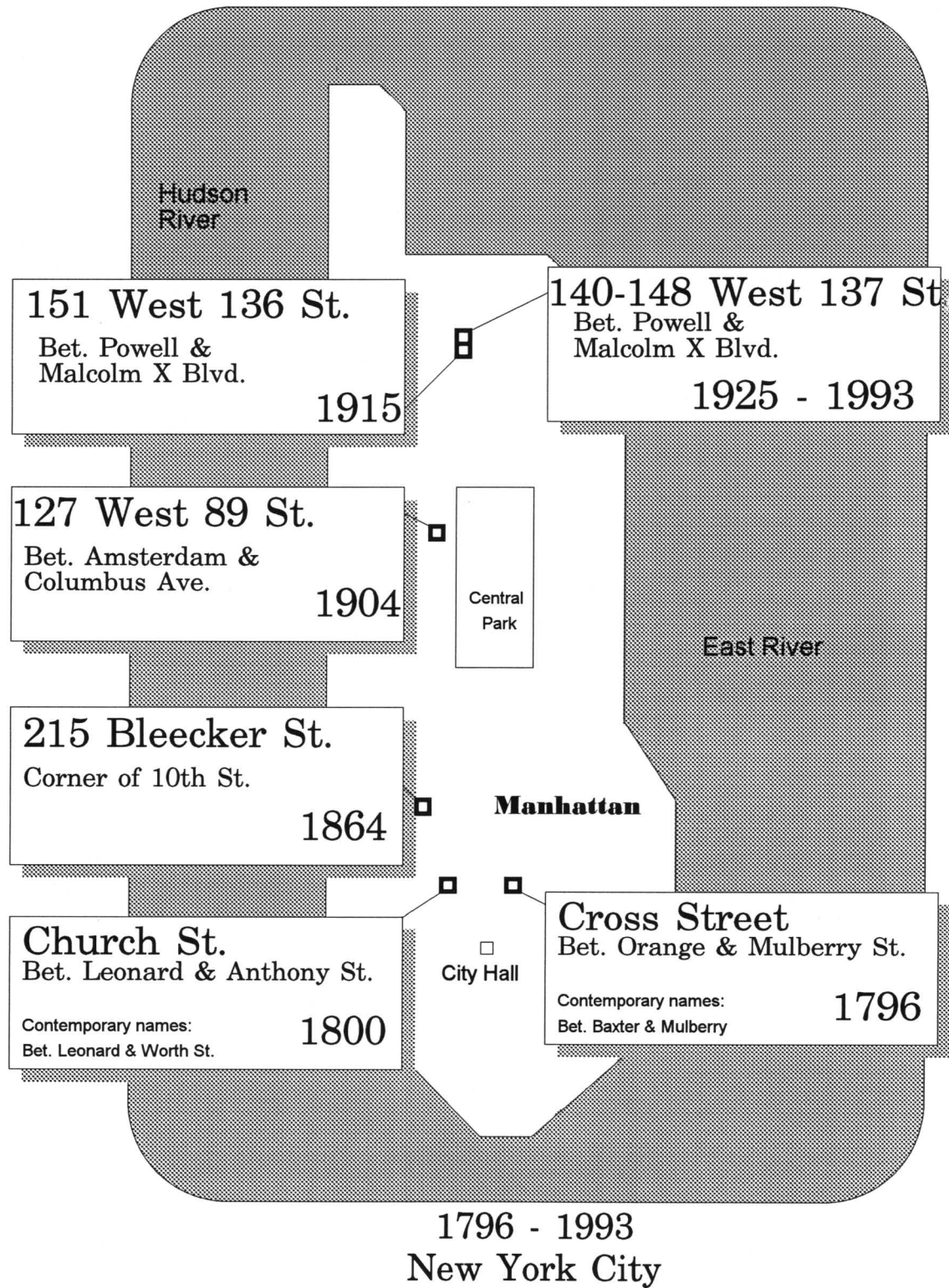
FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church has a special character, special historic and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, built in 1923-25, is the sixth home of New York City's first black congregation and the founding church of the A.M.E. Zion Conference of churches, which spread throughout the United States and Canada; that established in 1796, under the leadership of James Varick, Mother Zion has a long and illustrious history of religious and social activism; that, in the nineteenth century, the A.M.E. Zion conference was popularly known as the "Freedom Church" because of its important role in the abolitionist movement, and that many conference churches, including Mother Zion, served as stations on the Underground Railroad; that the movement of the Mother Zion congregation northward, beginning in lower Manhattan, to the present location in Harlem, reflects the residential patterns of New York City's black population; that at the time the present church was constructed, Harlem contained the majority of New York's black residents; that, as a distinguished composition in the neo-Gothic style, reflecting the tradition of Protestant church design in the 1920s, the church building was designed by George W. Foster, Jr., one of the first black architects to be registered in the United States; that during the twentieth century Mother Zion rose to even greater prominence as a religious and social institution, particularly due to the Reverend Benjamin C. Robeson's civil rights crusade and the use of the Zion pulpit as a platform for the social and political activism of Robeson's brother, Paul Robeson; and that Mother Zion has continued its almost two-hundred year tradition of service to its congregation and community, not only addressing the spiritual needs of its members but also providing an array of social programs.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, 140-148 West 137th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1921, Lot 51, Borough of Manhattan, as its related Landmark Site.

The Migration of Mother A.M.E. Zion Church



EVOLUTION OF THE MOTHER CHURCH OF THE DENOMINATION
NEW YORK CITY

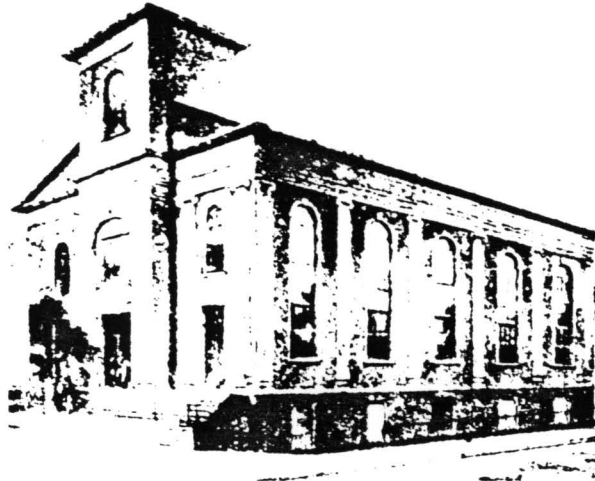
First Church built in 1800.
This structure built in 1820.
Destroyed by fire, 1839.



Artists' Concept John White



Larger edifice built in 1840.



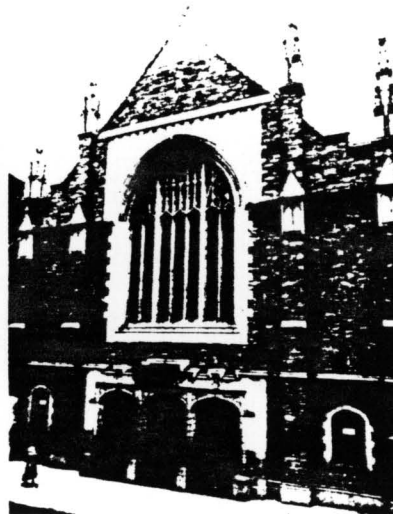
Purchased church at
West Tenth and Beecker
Streets. 1864



Moved uptown to West 89th
Street. Church built, 1904



Moved to Harlem in 1914. Purchased Church
of the Redeemer on West 136th Street.



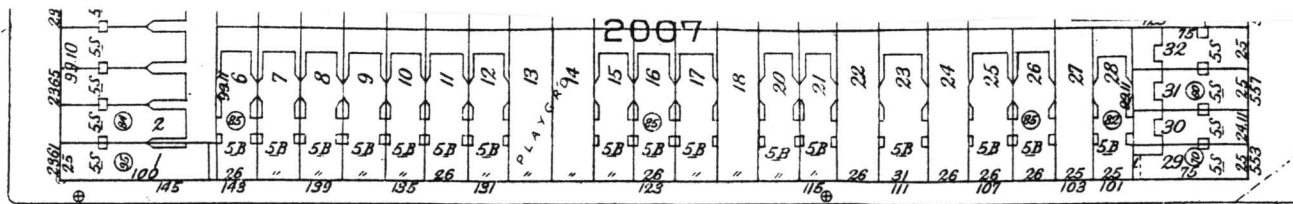
Built the above present structure on West
137th Street in 1925.

Mother A.M.E. Zion Church

Source: William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*.



ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR. BLVD.

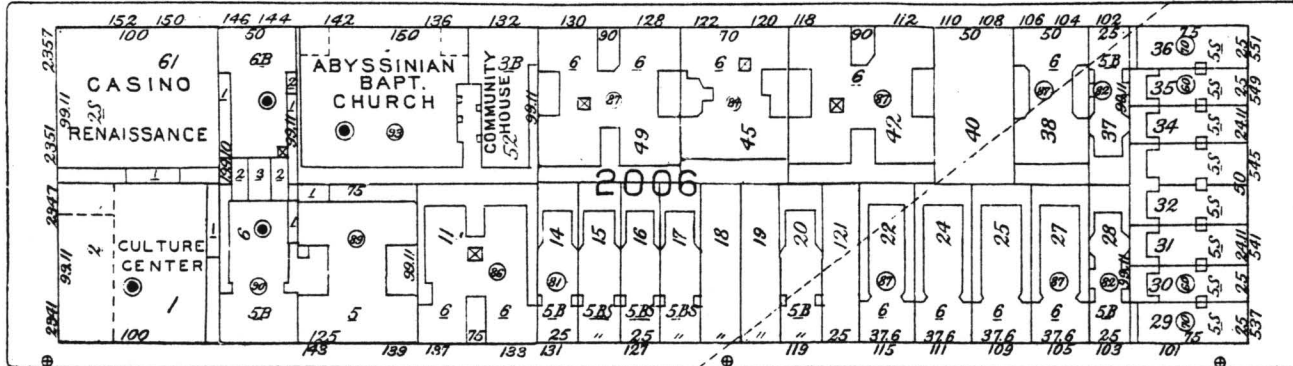


W 138th St

ODELL M. CLARK PL.

PL.

15.9

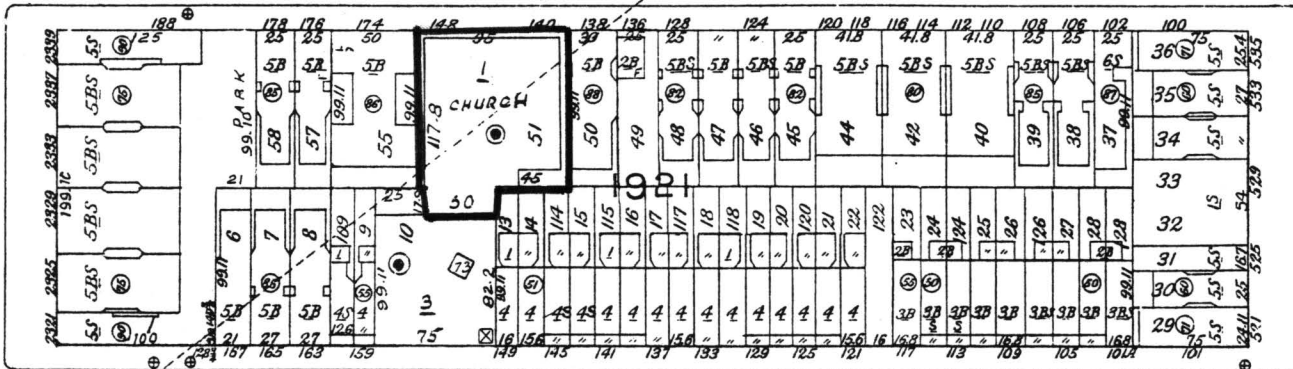


W. 137th St

ST.

AVE. LENOX

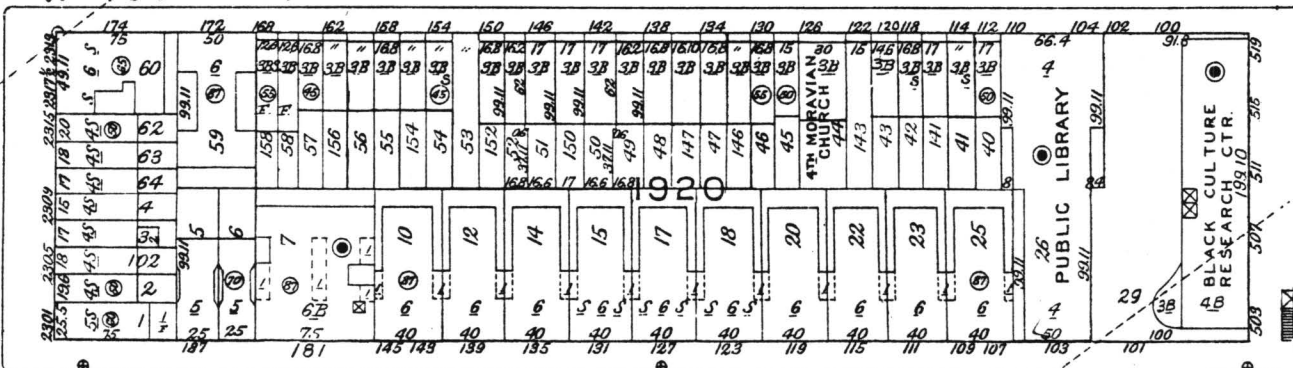
16.5



W 136th St

ST.

17.8



Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
140-148 West 137th Street, Manhattan

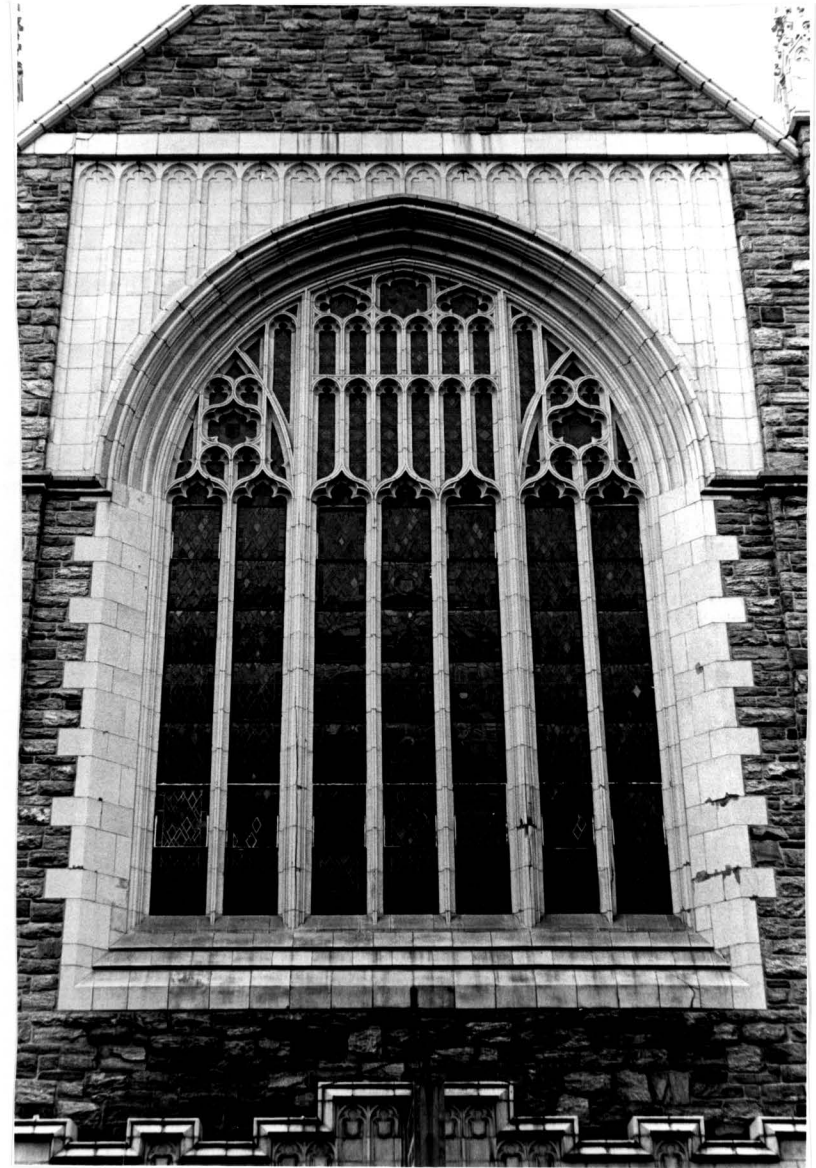
Landmark Site: Manhattan Tax Map Block 1921, Lot 51

Graphic Source: Sanborn Manhattan Land Book, 1988-89.



Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
140-148 West 137th Street, Manhattan

(Photo: Carl Forster, LPC)



Mother A.M.E. Zion Church
Details, pinnacles and stained-glass window

(Photo: CF)