

A Moment in Time: Selected Events in Worcester's African American Community in 1886

Compiled by Thomas L. Doughton

Feb. 7, 1886: Rev. M. A. Bradley, The Presiding Elder of the AME Zion New England Conference, of Norwich, Connecticut officiated at quarterly meeting services at AME Zion. During the same month, the Zion Ladies Sewing Circle hosted a Valentine festival in the church vestry and later in the month.

Feb. 18, 1886: the Zion choir gave a public concert at Reform Hall on Main Street in Worcester. Published reports claimed the choir event was a “grand success; the different parts were performed according to programme. The hall was crowded with friends of the choir. A solo by Miss Marion Jenkins was encored. Mr. E. S. Mason was the accompanist, after which refreshments were served, and enjoyment prevailed until a late hour.”

March 8, 1886: George Shannon, a thirty-year old member of the congregation died at his residence, 5 Pembroke Street, in Worcester on March, 1886. His funeral at AME Zion on Sunday, March 8. Rev. Frank K. Bird officiated, assisted by Rev. Wm. B.

Bowen, taking for his text: ‘And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle; neither light of the sun, etc.’ Rev. xxxii, 5, in which he gave a very interesting meaning.” According to one newspaper, the floral tributes were “very fine, among them being a very handsome across and wreath. The church was draped in mourning. Twenty-five of his fellow-workmen, stone-cutters, were present in a body The remains were taken to Hope Cemetery. He leaves a wife and four children. The choir was assisted by a male quartette.”

June 6, 1886: Rev. F. K. Bird of AME Zion preached his farewell sermon, taking for text, 2 Corinthians, 13, 31 “Finally, brethren, be perfect, be of good comfort; be of one mind: live in peace; and the God of love, and peace shall be with you.” According to one newspaper account, “He gave a very interesting illustration, which was appreciated by the audience.”

Sunday, Sept. 4, 1886: Rev. Biddle exchanged pulpits with Rev. George H. Simmons of Attleboro, Simmons preaching at a outdoor service on Abbott Street which “drew a large audience,” the minister presenting subjects that were “very interesting, and which gave great satisfaction.”

Sept. 6, 1866: At a Tuesday service, Prof. C. L. Haskell, a phrenologist, lectured at the Hanover Street church or Bethel AME, offering a presentation that “did not appear satisfactory to all.”

Sept. 6, 1886: The U.S. Grant Commandery [of Odd Fellows], installed officers, J. Mabray invested with authority by Sir Knight J. D. Kelly, Supreme Deputy Chancellor. The following were installed:

P.C. Wm. Frazier
C.C., Jas. A. Swan
V.C., William P. Perkins
L. S. Gillam, Prelate
M. of E., Geo. J. Lindsey
M. of F., Geo. Harding
M of A., David Martin

R. of J., R[obert] Jones
 I. G., Charles Dyer
 O.G., R[obert] Tolson

Sept. 13 - 14, 1886: the Daughters of Conference held a harvest festival in the vestry at Zion Church.

Sept. 20, 1886: Officers of the Mount Zion Commandery No. 5, Knights Templar of Worcester were installed by P.E. G. C., Sir Charles F.A. Francis of Boston, an affair that “closed with an entertainment which lasted till a late hour.” Those elected included:

R[oswell] B[lake] Hazard, E.C.
 R. T. Lee, generalissimo
 William A. Barker, capt. general
 James H. Young, prelate
 John H. Waller, treasurer
 Amos Webber, recorder
 Percy Leftridge, S.W.
 Charles I. Dyer, warden
 A[braham] T. Hennesey, standard bearer
 Henry Washington, sword bearer
 William Bostic, sentinel

Sept. 26, 1886: A Sunday service at Bethel “well attended,” Rev. Whaley officiating, and “the success of the church continues every Sunday, especially in the evening large and interesting audiences assemble to hear the Gospel, and many are anxious about the salvation of the soul.” A Worcester resident of the time claimed Bethel was

“in a prosperous condition, the number of scholars enrolled is about 100 and the teachers are enthusiastic over their work, and God has blest them.” Rev. A. W. Whaley, “A.B., his college title, will resume his Theological and Philosophical studies in Boston University,” on Oct. 6, 1886, where “he is highly esteemed by the best white citizens in the school,” but Whaley would be filling the pulpit on Sundays, attend Friday night classes and “other weekly meeting as often as possible.”

Oct. 1886: Rev. Eli Biddle “reintroduced” the Formula of Service by former A. M. E. Zion pastor Rev. J. Wesley Brown, the service “generally used in the churches of the Zion connection in New England”

Oct. 5, 1886: A delegation from Worcester traveled to the national Grand Odd-Fellows’ Convention held at Philadelphia, from Oct. 5 through Oct. 9, 1886. Those attending from Worcester included:

Mr. and Mrs. William Anderson
 Mr. and Mrs. Charles W. Scott
 Mr. and Mrs. Charles W. Bulah
 Mr. and Mrs. Peter Hood
 Mrs. George Wiggins
 Amos Webber

Oct. 13, 1886: there took place a “grand literary entertainment” on behalf of Zion

Church. At this time, A.M. E. Zion had 123 students enrolled in its Sabbath School. Miss Caroline Gimby resigned as Zion church organist and was replaced by Miss Addie Oswell.

Oct. 14, 1886: Taking as his text, Leviticus, xvii, 2, “For the life of the flesh is...I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls,” Rev. Biddle delivered an “excellent” evening sermon. He urged the congregation to understand that, “All acceptable sacrifice or offering to God must be founded upon a surrendered life. It is the blood that maketh atonement for yours souls.” Afterwards, “quite a number shared in the sacrament and one man was admitted to Zion church on probation.

Oct. 20, 1886: Carrie [Caroline] Gimby, daughter of Edward B. and Laura Reed Gimby, was married at Zion Church to William Morrison of Springfield, in a service performed by Rev. E. George Biddle. Carrying “a very handsome bouquet,” Miss Gimby wore “a very fine white satin dress with train and white veil,” the ceremony witnessed “by a large circle of her colored and white friends.” Ushers were her brother Fred Gimby, her cousin Fred Hector, Mendell Jones and John Taylor. A reception followed at her parents’ home on Palmer Street where the newly weds received “numerous valuable presents.” Later,

the couple set out for their future home at Springfield.

Oct. 24, 1886: On this Friday evening, as Mr. and Mrs. James Nott, “tendered a reception to a few friends” in honor of their niece Miss Gertrude Nott of Boston. The list of individuals present included: Mrs. C. Stone of Providence, Misses H. Jones, J. Oswell, M. Robinson, E. & M. Jankins, Miss Taylor and Messrs. G. Busby, D. Willis, W. Sampson of the Telegram, W. Bush of New London, M. Jones, C. Water of North Brookfield, W. Scott, H. Bowman, and J. Quow. “The evening was very pleasantly enjoyed by the people. Dancing and other amusements were in order. During the evening some very fine music was rendered on the piano by Mr. C. Stone and Mr. W. Bush and the enjoyment was kept up till a late hour.” Also, Miss Profit of Providence was in Worcester as a guest of Mrs. Thomas Smart

Fall-Winter 1886: a series of revival meetings were taking place at Zion. Events over several days, the revival meetings involved all Worcester’s African American clergymen and some white ministers like Rev. Edward Hale.

Nov. 1, 1886: following the last Sunday gathering of revivals which was “well attended,” the Zion Sunday school, later in the evening had a “grand harvest

home concert.” Proceeds the evening were earmarked for the Zion Wesley college. Organizing committee for the event included:

Mrs. William Anderson
Mrs. Christopher Bryant
Mrs. Arrington E. Clough
Mr. J. Williams
Mr. R. Higginss,

Perhaps related to the success of revival meeting, Rev. E. George Biddle announced a series of four evening lectures “on vital Biblical questions” for the Sundays in November:

- Nov. 7, “Will a man rob God?”
- Nov. 14, “Who is on the Lord’s side?”
- Nov. 21, “If the righteous be saved, where shall the ungodly and sinner appear?”
- Nov. 28, “Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?”

Nov. 4, 1886: about forty friends of Mr. and Mrs. James H. Clark gave them a surprise party at their residence at 4 Bowdoin St. Place and presented them with “a handsome tea set and other presents of value.” Alexander F. Hemenway made the presentation speech. “The Company amused

themselves until a late hour with singing, games, etc.,” Mrs. Clark at the piano.

Nov. 6, 1886: The Sixteen Associates, a community service group, elected officers including

Mr. W. R. Anderson, president
H[enry] A. Bowman, vice-president
G[eorge] A. Busby, secretary
A. F. Clark, treasurer

Nov. 7, 1886: Bethel held their regular quarterly meeting, the pastor assisted by Rev. C. Roberts, an evangelist.

Sunday, Nov. 7, 1886: Rev. E. George Biddle of Zion preached to the Mt. Olivet congregation. On the same day, the congregation’s Sunday school gave “a grand musical and literary concert” under the direction of their superintendent, James H. Clark. It was reported “a grand success” at which “verses of Scripture were nicely spoken by the scholars.” Described as a “friend” of the school, Miss Flora Simmons “spoke a very nice piece,” while the “church choir rendered some very good singing.” Selections were also read by William A. Hemenway, Mrs. Mary R. Johnson, and Mrs. L. A. Powers.

Monday, Nov. 8, 1886: at an evening service, Presiding Elder Rev. George H. Washington was present for the second quarterly meeting at Zion church, after

which he and quarterly conference members joined revival services in the church. Speakers for the event included Rev. George Whittaker who spoke “powerfully and eloquently” of the hopes and glory of the Christian life and Evangelist Rev. Christopher Roberts who led the meeting.

Nov. 14, 1886: The Zion church service and quarterly meeting which took place began with a Love Feast in the morning, for which “there was a very large attendance. It was the largest and best given in the church for years.” Evangelist Christopher Roberts mounted the pulpit in the afternoon to deliver an exhortation entitled “New Birth.” In the evening Rev. Biddle pursued the question “Will a man rob God?” During the evening service forty-four individuals received communion and five persons were admitted to Zion church on probation.

Nov., 1886: The Mt. Zion Commandery, No. 5, Knights Templar held a Thanksgiving entertainment at G. A. R. Hall, complete with an exhibition drill and promenade. Dancing took place from 10 p.m. to 3 a.m. The committee for the event included:

Roswell B. Hazard
Amos Webber
Isaac Mason
Charles T. Dyer

Henry Washington

Nov. 21, 1886: Supposedly, Sunday, November 21st was “a day long to be remembered in this church’s calendar” for its successes. The morning school held at the pastor’s residence since August 1st of the year, had its largest attendance, some forty-nine persons present. At a 10:30 morning service, Rev. Hugh Montgomery, Worcester’s “great temperance advocate,” delivered “a very powerful sermon,” urging Zion members to work for a no license vote in upcoming city elections. The congregation, according to a published report, “listened very attentively and were much pleased” with Montgomery’s remarks. The afternoon Sabbath school “also tended to make it a red letter day...there being 84 members present, which is the largest number for years.” The combined afternoon attendance at Zion was 150 persons, who were part of the revival meeting, at which “a large number of those recently converted testified to the love of God in their hearts.” Rev. Biddle, however, preached a temperance sermon illustrated by a large original chart representing, “The Steps from the Social Wine Glass to Destruction.” Later, at the evening service the Zion pastor delivered the third of his “Vital Bible Questions.”

Inspired by Evangelist Roberts and “two young men in temperance work,”

congregation members formed the Zion Church No-License League, organized “to secure a no-license vote in the municipal election; to cultivate total abstinence principles; to restore the inebriate, and to prevent the sale of intoxicating liquors.” Officers of the Zion Church No-License League included:

Jeremiah Williams, president
Richard Wilson, vice-president
Henry Whitfield, treasurer
John Waller; secretary
R. Higgins & J. D. Smith, members of
the executive committee.

Nov. 27, 1886: The revival meetings at Zion had “continued with marked success,” Pastor Biddle claiming, “at this church meetings...will continue as long as souls can be brought from darkness to light.”

Thursday, Dec. 9, 1886: The Sixteen Associates held a “special dance” at their hall, attended by “about twenty-five couples,” who danced to the music of Prof. D. T. Oswell’s orchestra and “all seemed to enjoy themselves very much.”

Dec. 9, 1886: The Knights of Pythias gathered for election of officers and annual turkey supper at Natural History Hall on Foster Street. The following were elected officers:

W. Swan, C.C.

Alexander Johnson, V.C.
 C.I. Dyer, P.
 David Martin, M.A.
 George Linsey, T.
 James Mabrey, K.R.S.
 George Harden, M.E.
 George Wilson, I.G.
 Roberts Diggs, O. G.

They were installed by Dr. Williams, S.V. C. of New Orleans, who presented W. Swan, C.I. Dyer and R. Diggs with “an insurance policy of the Knights of Pythias.” A reception committee chaired by George Linsey with the assistance of R. Folson and Mr. Thompson staged the event, at which also spoke R. Kennedy “of a white Knights of Pythias order.” Subsequently dinner was “served” by the ladies and “all had a pleasant time.” It was also reported that Dr. E. A. Williams was the houseguest of Mr. and Mrs. C. I. Dyer

During the same week, a surprise party was given Henry Whitfield by “a large party of his young friends,” an evening “spent in playing games, after which supper was served, and all departed well pleased with the evening’s enjoyment.” Asa Hector and John Potter had been drawn jurors for the January terms of the supreme court convening in Worcester. Mrs. D. T. Oswell was “doing very well” and “will soon be out.” Richard Frazier had returned from Washington, D.C. after a five year absence and was residing

with Mrs. Mary Anderson. Fannie Jenkins of Taunton was visiting her mother, Mrs. William H. Jankins. And Mrs. Hattie Edmundson had fallen on Dec. 9, 1886 breaking her wrist in two places.

Dec. 16, 1886: Rev. Biddle directed Zion Sunday services, taking for his text “Husbands love your wives, even as Christ has also loved the church, and gave himself for it,” [Ephesians, 5:25], for the second of his teachings on marriage and divorce. Biddle attempted to demonstrate “how Christ loved the church, in the time of Noah and in the time of Gomorrah,” admonishing husbands “to love their wives as Christ loved His Church, and having this love, their influence would spread over all the community.” Following Rev. Biddle’s sermon, thirty-two members and officers received communion, and two persons were admitted to the congregation on probationary status.

Additionally, at its December 16, 1886 gathering the Zion membership was addressed by Rev. J. J. Smallwood of Virginia on temperance. Described as “a very fluent speaker and an able temperance orator,” Rev. Smallwood had spoken to “many of the white churches” of Worcester, delivering twenty-two speeches during a seventeen day engagement.

Dec. 16, 1886: At the regular Bethel service, Rev. Whaley preached on “Christ’s Victory,” taking for text, “I have glorified thee on earth, I have finished my work which thou gavest me to do.” He told his congregation of the great work Jesus had to do and which was accomplished, the manner in which it was accomplished and the victory for all the world realized through his work. After the sermon, Bethel members and officers received communion. Still continuing studies in Boston “with marked success,” Rev. Whaley was “enjoying a little vacation for the purposes of visiting the sick of his congregation and friends.” The church then presented the pastor, after services, “a neat sum of money,” the gift “a complete surprise, it being outside of his regular salary.” The pastor responded “in a few well-chosen remarks.”

Sunday, Dec. 16. 1886: At 32 Front Street, Mt. Olivet held services, “well attended” under the direction of Rev. Hiram Conway, preaching “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ,” from Romans, 1.16 Olivet’s Sunday school was also “largely attended,” Rev. Conway preaching from 2 Kings 12-14 at the Olivet evening service.

Christmas Season 1886: This was a festive time at Zion church. For much of the holiday season, in the vestry, the “ladies of the church” sold refreshments

as part of a "Rainbow Festival". A few days after Christmas, in the morning, Christmas tree exercises were held for the children of the Sunday school at the pastor's residence. As organized by Joseph Rollins and Mrs. Ida Horace, the youngsters "rendered songs, prose and poetical selections. Following their presentation, there was "the distribution of the gifts from the heavily laden tree," so that "every member of the Sunday School was presented with a Christmas reminder." The parsonage was "crowded," and after giving gifts to the children, "refreshments were served freely to all present." Mrs. Lydia Dyer, Susan Williams, Susan Shannon, Jane Mero and the "rest of the officers." were mentioned deserving "especial praise" for their "free offerings of serve to make the entertainment a success."

Christmas 1886: Santa Claus and friends visited the home of James Williams, 17 Hollywood St. A 'handsome tree of some nice presents" was "stripped." The Williamss' daughter, Pinkie., for example, received "an elegant rosewood piano, of Hunt manufactory, Boston" as well as "a handsome rocking chair and an elegant plush box., and many other valuable gifts." At the same time "friends of the family" also received "many handsome gifts." Mr. and Mrs. John Louden were given an elegant chair, Mrs. Louden a chain. Mr. and Mrs. [Dorange] Francais were given "a great many things," while

"numerous other very valuable reminders" were provided "to many friends."

Miss and Mrs. Morse from North Brookfield were guests of Mr. and Mrs. Percy Leftridge along with Albert Allen making a visit on the way to Richmond, Virginia. Mrs. James Young had "a very valuable collection of different sands" from the earthquake at Charlestown, S.C., brought to her by her sister Jennie Holmes who was making a visit. A Miss Mary Lewis of Lowell was visiting Edward and Laura Gimby.

Misses Laura and Lucy Bias of Providence were visiting Mrs. T. A. Hale. George Chapman of Boston, formerly of Worcester, paid a visit to town; he was the guest of Mrs. Anna E. Bosley. Mrs. George Wiggins and Mrs. P. Hood were soon expected to return from a visit to Washington, D.C. Phoebe Ardent of Providence was paying a visit to Worcester, spending time with her sister Mrs. Gloster Wanso.. Among friends gathering at the Wanso residence were: Mr. and Mrs. Charles Clark; Mr. and Mrs. Gillam; Mr. James Mabrey; Miss Edna Brown and "many others." Together, they spent an evening "very enjoyable."

Mr. Waters of North Brookfield was visiting Worcester as a guest of Mr. and Mrs. D. Oswell and John Ringolds

returned to Worcester after an absence of eight years, staying with "his brother and sister on Mason Street."

Jackson Scott had returned to Jewett City, Connecticut "much to the regret of his many friends."

Dec. 28, 1886: J. H. Clark, superintendent of the Mt. Olivet Baptist Sunday School, offered an "exceedingly nice Christmas tree" and oyster supper, which was a "grand success both socially and financially." At the Christmas tree event, "each child of the school was presented with a handsome and useful present," while supped "netted a handsome sum to the school."

Dec. 29, 1886: a surprise party was given for Miss Lottie Allen at her Glen Street home, "successfully managed" by Agnes Gimby, so that "the guests spent a very nice evening playing games and there was music furnished by the Puritan Quartette." Mrs. Hattie Edmundson, recently suffering from a broken wrist, was doing better.

W. H. Jenkins who had been ill, was "improving;" Mrs. R[oswell] Hazard had gone West to join her husband in Kansas; Miss Jessie Coleman spent Christmas with her mother in Boston; Mrs. James Giles was ill; Alexander Hemenway suffered "severely from a bad cold;" there was a party given for

William Moore and Mrs. J. Bowman had an affair at her home from which guests left “with flattering praise to their hostess.”

Dec. 31, 1886: New Year’s Eve, “Watch Night” at Zion had a “particularly large” attendance, with Rev. Biddle preaching on the “End of Time,” drawing his inspiration from verses in the Tenth Chapter of Revelations. Next were “exhortations, testimonials, singing and prayer” until almost midnight, when “a large part of the congregation gathered on their knees at the altar rail.” They prayed in silence, afterwards singing the consecration hymn.

Jan. 2, 1887: At AME Zion, Rev. Biddle preached afternoon and evening services, at which he was presented with a “\$33.50 suit of clothes,” Addie Oswell providing a speech on behalf of the choir and “other friends.” The Zion choir was “doing splendidly,” on this first Sunday of 1887 and was joined by Mr. Waters of North Brookfield and George Chapman, former Zion member and part of a choir at Boston, both providing “very valuable assistance.” At the day’s services, for example, Water had taken on two solos, in response to which, “the congregation was very much pleased”

Sunday, Jan. 9, 1887: There was no preaching at Bethel since on that Friday, Rev. Whaley’s mother died and “he was

called home very suddenly,” with the “sympathy of a large circle of friends.”

Sunday, Jan. 9, 1887: Services as Mt. Olivet were “well attended and the pastor preached very eloquently morning, afternoon and evening,” with the Sabbath school also “very well attended.” At the time the congregation was involved in a week long revival service. In the evening, a sermon to preached to the Johnson Fife & Drum Corps on text taken from Romans on the subject: “For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself.” A special collection was subsequently taken, “for which the pastor returned thanks to the friends in a few well chosen remarks.”