

— HISTORY —

Churches trace the ethnic waves of Willimantic

An effective way of tracing the various ethnic waves that came to America's industrializing 19th century cities is to tour the streets of the community and note its wide range of churches. For example, those in Willimantic reflect its Yankee, European, French Canadian and Latino heritage. However, it was not until 1892 that the city's small African American population organized its first church, or mission.

The forerunner of today's Willimantic African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) and Calvary Baptist churches was organized in Willimantic in 1892. It was known as the Willimantic Union Methodist mission, and its 12 founding members included Emma Bentley, Hattie Tooney and Mrs. David Clark. Emma Bentley was the wife of Daniel Bentley, a mason and plasterer, and the couple lived at 31 Church St. Emma Bentley's sister, Harriet Tooney, came to Willimantic in 1908 after the death of her husband, and worked as a housemaid. Mrs.



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Clark's husband was a baggage handler at the Willimantic railroad depot.

Willimantic Union Methodist mission entered the AMEZ circuit in 1894,

but it remained a mission because it did not own its own building. On May 15 of that year, the *Willimantic Chronicle* reported that "the colored mission at Union Street," located in the Cushman Hall, had called upon the Rev. Charles H. Ringgold to become its first pastor. John Harris, a laborer who lived in rooms at 80 Chapman St., was the new AMEZ mission's treasurer. Emma Bentley was the clerk and secretary, and founding trustees included Mr. and Mrs. Pelham, Emma Wilson, Mrs. Emit Evans and Sarah Elder. Mr. Pelham was a carpet cleaner, and he and his

wife lived at 10 Babcock Court. Wilson was a cook at the Hotel Hooker, Mrs. Evans lived with her husband, a hack driver, at 122 Chestnut St., and Elder, a widow of 501 Jackson St., was the Rev. Ringgold's steward. Ringgold conducted his first service in the AMEZ mission hall on Union Street on May 21, 1894.

Three prominent local Yankees, John Asbel Conant, William Denison Grant and Allen Bennet Lincoln, generously supported the new AMEZ mission. Conant, the Holland Silk Co.'s superintendent, was the mission's Sunday School superintendent until 1909. Grant, the proprietor of a flour and gristmill, built the "Grant House" at the corner of Prospect and High streets. Lincoln, a distant relative of Abraham Lincoln, was the author of the two-volume "Modern History of Windham County" in 1920.

The AMEZ mission operated out of the Cushman Hall on Union Street until 1898 when it relocated to the Women's Temperance Union hall in the Valley Street armory. Later that year the mission's pastor, James H. Young, resigned and took a post at Great Barrington, Mass. The mission disbanded and did not reform until 1902. In 1904 the mission's trustees purchased a

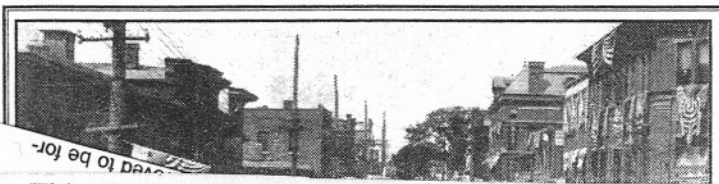
house on the corner of Chestnut and Summit streets to convert into a church. The mission failed to keep up the mortgage payments, and in 1905 its members returned to their original location in the Cushman Hall. In 1906, the Willimantic AMEZ mission became known as the Walters AMEZ church, but it remained a mission because it still did not own its own premises.

In 1915 the mission's trustees purchased a two-story, two-apartment tenement building at 74 Spring St., which was built in 1879. It was bought for \$2,000 from Leander Freeman, the manager of the T. R. Sudd Automobile Co. Workmen quickly moved in and remodeled its interior. The downstairs apartment was converted into the meeting room, and the upstairs apartment was redecorated and housed the incumbent Rev. Jefferson B. Wallace. Mortgage payments commenced on Jan. 31, 1917. The outstanding debt was reduced to \$900 by 1920, and finally settled in 1923, thanks to assistance from AMEZ's headquarters at Philadelphia, and the New England Conference of the AMEZ. The new church's trustees in 1915 included Stokes Watson and Nancy Robinson. Watson lived at 88 Chestnut St. and was employed at the Hotel

Hooker as a porter, and Robinson was a widow living at 26 Walnut St.

There may have been some disagreement about the purchase of the Spring Street house among church members because in July 1916, a group led by the Rev. Sinclair Grimstead broke away and formed the Willimantic Calvary Baptist Church. Grimstead, who had served as the Willimantic AMEZ mission's pastor between 1905 and 1909, led the Calvary Baptists' services in the old Franklin Hall theater until the church was able to purchase its own building at 54 Meadow St. in 1936. In 1966, the Calvary Baptists moved into the old Excelsior Hall Spiritualist Church on Bank Street, and worshiped there until building a new edifice on Valley Street.

In 1958, Walters AMEZ church changed its name to the Stanley Memorial Chapel AMEZ, in recognition of the hard work contributed by church member Cora L. Stanley. The Stanley Chapel has served the region's small but significant African American population almost continuously for 111 years. The 1916 Calvary Baptist Church rapidly outgrew its mother organization and it remains the larger organization of the two.



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