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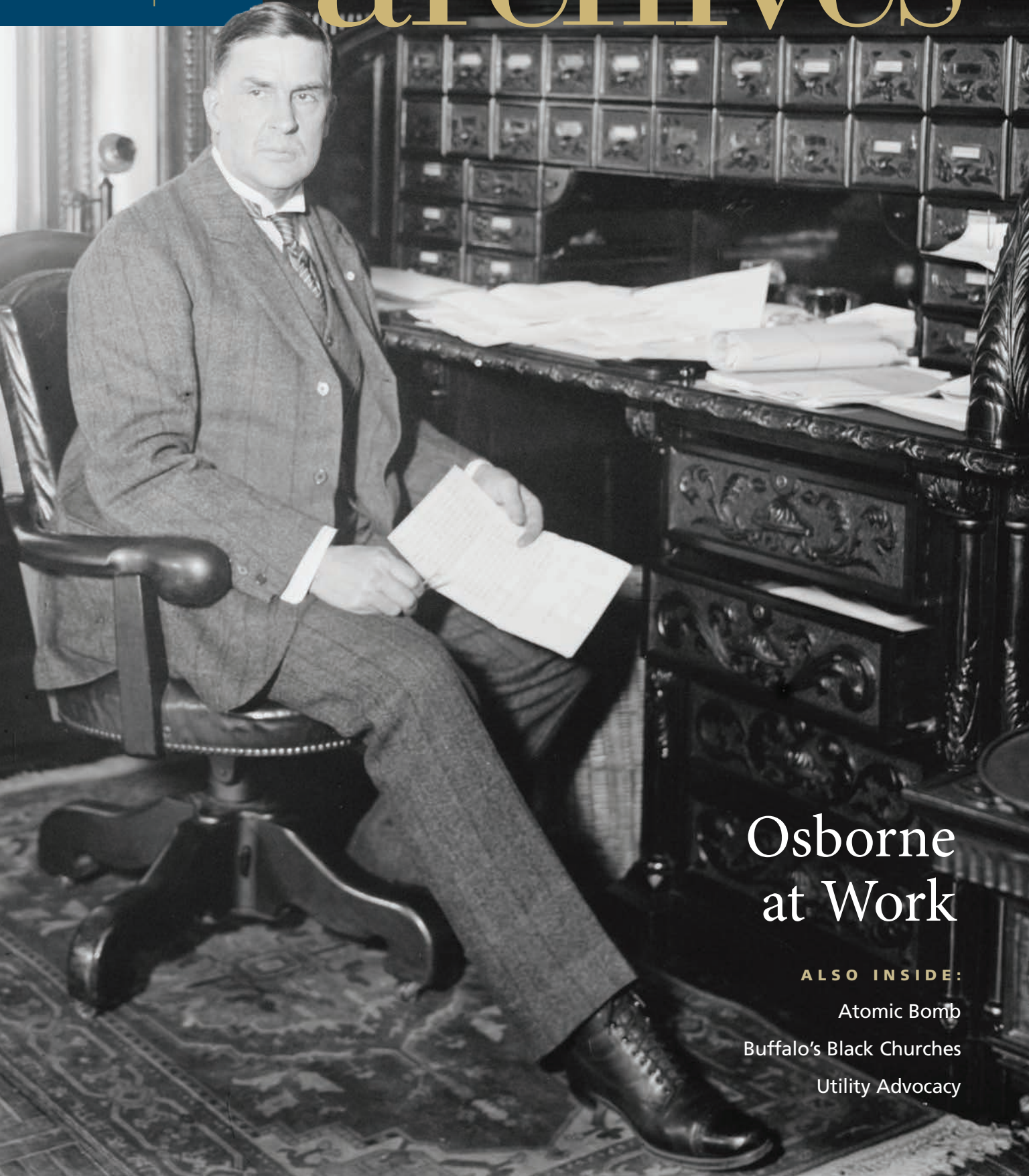
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# archives



## Osborne at Work

ALSO INSIDE:

Atomic Bomb

Buffalo's Black Churches

Utility Advocacy

# FAITH *and* PERSEVERANCE

BY BARBARA A. SEALS NEVERGOLD

The history of St. Philip's  
illustrates the religious  
diversity of Black churches.



ST. PHILIP'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH.

When he arrived in Buffalo in 1916, the Rev. E. Robert Bennett found a congregation in crisis at St. Philip's Episcopal Church. Many of its members had "defected to Rome," a colloquial expression for the Catholic Church. Further, he had inherited an old, poorly lighted, and poorly heated building in disrepair and in debt. This was a sad state of affairs for the city's only parish founded by African Americans. Established in 1861, the parish also had the proud distinction of being the seventh "colored" Episcopal congregation in the nation.

Buffalo's Black history is firmly embedded in the city's early history. In 1791, Joseph Hodge, an escaped enslaved person and trader, was reportedly one of only two non-Indigenous inhabitants living in the Buffalo area. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Buffalo was a hub of abolitionism and civil rights activism, hosting the 1843 National Convention of Colored Citizens. In 1905, W.E.B. DuBois held the foundational meeting of the Niagara Movement, to fight for human and civil rights, at the home of prominent Buffalonians William H. and Mary Burnett Talbert. The Talberts' home was next to their church, the Michigan Street Baptist Church.

### Community Life

Michigan Street Baptist and Vine Street African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the earliest established houses of worship, were significant centers of community life for Buffalo's Black residents. Many US cities had AME and Baptist churches that served as centers for Black community life, but there were other denominations that did the same that are often overlooked. One such in Buffalo was St. Phillip's, a church whose legacy not



*Reverend E. Robert Bennett*  
ST. PHILIP'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, BUFFALO, NEW YORK



*Mary Burnett Talbert*  
BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

only includes its contributions to Black community life but also the present organization of the Episcopal Church in the US. Its current presiding bishop, Michael Curry, is the son of a former rector of the church. The history of this church illuminates the religious diversity of Black churches in the US and the ways in which various denominations assisted each other in building Black communities, providing a snapshot of how such cooperation may have taken place elsewhere. It is also a story of the determination of Buffalo's Black community to have a viable Protestant church, even if they had to switch denominations to make it happen.

Beginning in 1917, Bennett's annual sermons commemorating the

anniversary of St. Philip's included a chronicle of its development. While copies of these sermons have not been found, it is likely that Bennett received information from some of the old timers, in addition to parish and diocesan records.

In 1923, when Bennett tendered his resignation, he wrote a brief church history, which he placed in the parish ledger. However, this account focused primarily on listing the ministerial leadership and citing Bennett's own record of accomplishment in stabilizing the church and restoring its stature. For over a century, the extent of the origin story of St. Philip's has remained unknown. Even current members of the local diocese and the national church, including the Most Rev. Michael Curry, were unaware of its full history. This article reconnects St. Philip's with its foundational roots, documenting the unknown narrative of one of Buffalo's most venerable African American religious institutions.

Between 1831 and 1850, Buffalo's Black population doubled to 678. During this period, African Americans established two houses of worship. In 1836, the Colored Methodist Religious Society, the first exclusive religious organization founded by African Americans, affiliated with the AME Church. The resultant church became popularly known as the Vine Street AME Church in 1839. Meanwhile in 1836, thirteen African Americans left the white Washington Street Baptist Church in the city to launch the Second Baptist. The members purchased land on Michigan Street in 1843 for a new edifice and name that reflected their location and autonomy. This became known as the Michigan Street Baptist Church. For two decades, the Vine Street AME and the Michigan Street Baptist Church served the spiritual and secular needs of Black Buffalo.



- **AME** – African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first Protestant denomination to be founded by Black people. Includes members of all ethnicities.
- **Baptist** – a branch of Protestantism that is distinguished by baptizing only professed believers through total immersion in water.
- **Presbyterian** – a Protestant denomination generally known for its liberal stance on social issues and their place in the church.
- **Episcopal** – a Protestant denomination most closely aligned with Catholicism in its hierarchical structure and liturgical rituals.

### Unknown Rift

This religious landscape was altered, however, by disruption at the Vine Street AME. In 1849, a schism in the congregation resulted in several dissidents leaving the mother church. The cause of the rift is unknown, but the group was determined to form a new religious organization. They chose the Buffalo Presbytery as their spiritual home, forming a Presbyterian church. It is evident that the founders had support from several of the Presbytery's leading clergy.

The East Presbyterian Church was consecrated in a public dedication on March 18, 1850. The service included singing, sermonizing, and the ordination of three deacons. At least twenty-

seven worshippers formed the nucleus of the congregation. Participants from the Presbytery included the pastor of the First Presbyterian, Rev. Dr. Thompson, who performed several baptisms. Rev. Dr. Heacock, pastor of Lafayette Presbyterian, ordained the deacons and Rev. Dr. Chester offered the sermon. Local newspaper articles covering the proceedings noted that East Presbyterian was the "third church formed for colored people in the city."

East Presbyterian was without a pastor for more than a year until Rev. Jacob Prime arrived in December 1851. His investiture was an elaborate event, attended by white parishioners, as well as the members and friends of East Presbyterian. An attendee was so impressed by the young minister that he wrote to the editor of a local newspaper:

"It was deeply interesting to see one of their own number, who seems so well qualified for the station, thus solemnly set over his downtrodden and neglected brethren, to endeavor to instruct and exalt them."

### New Construction

With a dynamic leader at its helm and the stewardship of seasoned community builders, East Presbyterian took its place alongside Vine Street AME and Michigan Street Baptist. In 1853, church leaders purchased property on Elm Street between North and South Division Streets. They hired C.N. Otis, a noted local architect, to design and construct a brick building at a cost of \$7,000. The cornerstone was laid in 1854 and, per the custom, parts of the church were occupied as building construction proceeded. By 1857, East Presbyterian's new structure was fully open, serving as a house of worship capable of seating 300 and as an active community center. Church membership was reported to be at 100.



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<i>Merriam D. Thompson,</i>	<i>David Gaubler,</i>	<i>Wm. J. Kincaid</i>	
<i>Wm. George Peak,</i>	<i>Henry Stollere,</i>	<i>George Leggett,</i>	<i>Augustus Campbell</i>
<i>George Washington,</i>	<i>James Wells,</i>	<i>Thomas Harrison,</i>	<i>Abraham</i>
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<i>Benjamin Rugg,</i>	<i>Perinella,</i>		
<i>Miss M. E. Walker,</i>	<i>Jessie Bullett.</i>		
* <i>Worship heads of families &amp; seven individuals which should ever be held</i>			
<i>read and inscribed on some fitting tablet, placed in a conspicuous place in the</i>			
<i>Church, not to be handed down as immutal to future generations.</i>			
<i>First register 1876.</i>			
<i>" Baptism recorded July 23, 1876.</i>			
<i>" Confirmation Class of 13, Oct. 9, 1876.</i>			
<i>" Marriage - Sept. 21, 1876.</i>			
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<i>with</i>			
* <i>Clergy</i>			
<i>The Rev. Mr. Witherspoon, J. Robert Love, Louis B. Vanduyck,</i>			
<i>L. Van Rookhalsey, William Shelton, H. Sidney Dealey,</i>			
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<i>Antheanon Ayres, E. Robt. Bennett, D.D.</i>			
<i>Some of these clergymen were not in residence as rectors,</i>			
<i>being their parish as needed. The majority however were</i>			
<i>found the pastor or minister in charge of the parish for a</i>			
<i>long or short period, chiefly short.</i>			
<i>Rev. Dr. Cox &amp; a number of laymen also served the</i>			
<i>parish during intervals.</i>			
<i>Each of these ministers contributed more or less to</i>			
<i>the real status of the work to-day and we must be just</i>			
<i>enough to give them one and all, their full share of praise</i>			
<i>and credit for what they did, and the many years of the</i>			
<i>journey toward they helped the parish to pass over</i>			
<i>successfully.</i>			
* <i>Excerpt from Historical Memoirs of The Rev. E. Robt. Bennett, D.D.</i>			
<i>on occasion of the 57th Anniversary of Parish</i>			

In 1923, when Bennett tendered his resignation, he wrote a brief church history, which he placed in the parish ledger.

COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

1281  
1861

The completion of the new church appears to have been both a pinnacle of the success of East Presbyterian and a precipitating event leading to its dissolution. The congregation took full possession of the building in 1858, the same year that Prime announced his resignation. He had served nearly seven years of the ten-year existence of East Presbyterian. On September 30, 1858, the trustees posted a public notice that announced the appointment of Rev. E.J. Adams as pastor, who left after only one year.

As they struggled to meet fiscal demands, the trustees hired a professional "to aid them in paying off a pressing debt due from the church." The building project's financial burden appears to have been a prime, although not the only, factor leading to the demise of East Presbyterian. Even as the congregation faced major challenges, they signaled their determination to continue the church's mission. They sponsored the appearance of abolitionist luminaries like Frederick Douglass, held conferences, social events, and other communal activities, in addition to worship services.

East Presbyterian's leaders worked persistently to maintain the church following Prime's departure. By 1860, facing mounting fiscal pressures, a new partnership with the Episcopal Diocese helped them to move seamlessly from one ecumenical partner to another, becoming St. Philip's Episcopal Church. Gaps in the East Presbyterian story exist, however, including the questions of why they left the Presbytery and how the relationship was formed with the Episcopal Diocese.

The partnership with the Episcopal Church seems to have happened through the efforts of one man, who is identified in several documents. Rev. Orlando Witherspoon, the young pastor of St. John's Episcopal, arrived in

Buffalo in 1860 to assume the leadership of that prestigious congregation. In 1862, Witherspoon's annual missionary report to the diocese described his activities with a group of African Americans during the previous year: "In addition to my parochial work reported above, I have officiated twenty-five times for a congregation of colored people. At my request, Rev. Drs. Shelton and Ingersoll, and Rev. Messers Wood, Stevens, Ernst, and Henderson, have kindly officiated for the same congregation." Witherspoon assumed responsibility for the fledgling congregation of St. Philip's, in addition to St. John's.

He was twenty-four years old, energetic, charismatic, and, for a while, capable of ministering to two culturally different congregations. From 1861 through 1865, Witherspoon was cited in the minutes of St. Philip's vestry as the rector. On the inside cover of the oldest journal, a handwritten entry headed "History" established May 30, 1861, as the date that a group of "19 heads of families" and seven individuals "met under the auspices of St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church for the first time." However, it took an additional five years for the officers and founding rector of St. Philip's to work

through legal and canonical requirements before the congregation was fully consecrated as a parish. The parish ledgers from 1861 to 1866 document the life of an active congregation.

St. Philip's occupied the building erected as the East Presbyterian and also inherited the debts. The vestry's minutes of August 6, 1861 are illuminating. Witherspoon, who was white, offered to assume responsibility for the mortgage and, consequently, ownership of the church. Witherspoon proposed "... holding such papers in trust as the property of St. Philip's Colored Episcopal church until the mortgage now in the hands of Mr. Tilden shall be satisfied..." It was moved "...that we have entire confidence in the honesty of Mr. Witherspoon and that we authorize him to hold the deeds...making him for the time, owner

August 6<sup>th</sup> at a meeting of the vestry of St. Philip's Church held in the basement of said building the Pastor, Mr. Witherspoon acting as Chairman stated the object of the meeting to be to take into consideration the disposition of papers of possession of said title to wit: the Deeds &c. and asking to be empowered by said Vestry to assume the responsibility of holding such papers in trust as the Property of St. Philip's Col. Episcopal Church until the mortgage now in the hands of Mr. Tilden shall be satisfied and said Church shall be formed into a parish at which time said property will be turned over to the Vestry as the property of St. Philip's Church he promising also in the event of his death to make provision in his will so that the said building might be secured to the Congregation against all efforts of his heirs or assigns. A motion was made by Mr. H. Moxley that we have entire confidence in the honesty of Mr. Witherspoon and that we authorize him to hold the Deeds and such other papers belonging to the Church thus making him for the time Owner of the Church. Said resolution was agreed to by the following vote. Affirmative Mr. H. Moxley - Mr. Thompson John L. Dallas Negative Augustus, J. Bishop and John Simpson after which a motion was made to adjourn - Carried

Augustus, J. Bishop, Secy

COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



Vine Street AME congregation, date unknown

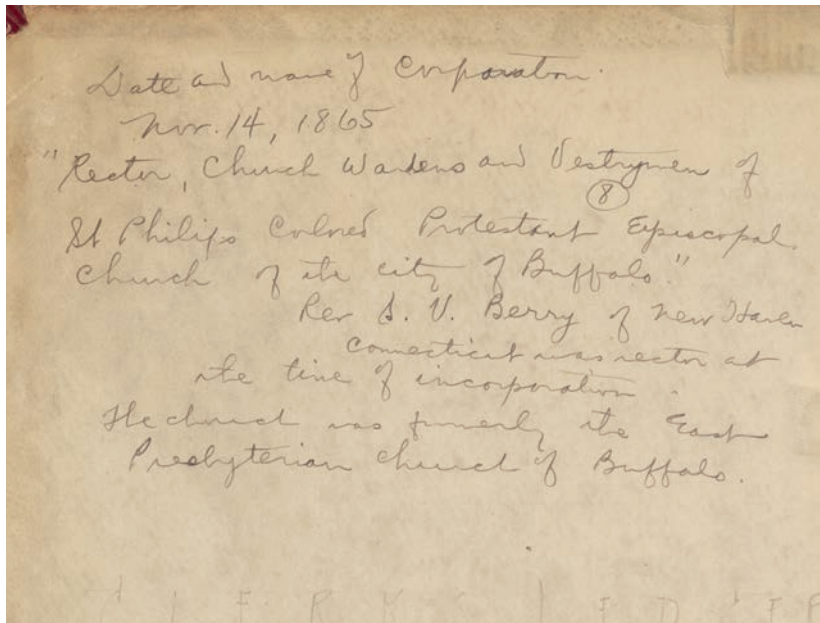
of the church." The motion passed on a three-to-two vote. For the next four to five years, Witherspoon continued to shepherd St. Philip's as its pastor, although the vestry minutes rarely mention him.

A significant meeting involving Witherspoon's tenure as the rector was dated September 4, 1865. The minutes are terse and suggest a thinly veiled sign of discord between Witherspoon and members of the St. Philip's vestry.

The vestry's minutes of August 6, 1861, placed ownership of St. Philip's Church in Rev. Witherspoon's hands.

Witherspoon presented a written proposal that indicated he was not ready to end his pastoral duties at St. Philip's. The vestry received a "communication from Rev. Mr. Witherspoon, rector of St. John's Church, containing a series of resolutions proposing to place the church in his charge." The resolutions were not included in the minutes, which offered no detail of the language of these resolutions. The minutes were succinct: "... motion made for its adoption, which was voted in the negative and lost." The specifics of the discussion were not recorded, and this sentence was followed by: "On motion, the meeting adjourned." Rev. Witherspoon was not reported as attending this meeting.

BETHLEHEM AME CHURCH, BUFFALO, NY



The church's minutes record its incorporation as St. Philip's Episcopal in November 1865.

### New Rector

The vestry moved quickly to call an African American rector. Rev. Samuel V. Berry had officiated at St. Luke's in New Haven, Connecticut, the fourth Black Episcopal Church in the US. Newspaper articles placed Berry's arrival in Buffalo circa November 1865. He served as the rector for five years. Throughout his tenure, he was recognized as an able leader, who led St. Philip's through the next stage of its development. Berry is also credited with co-founding the Protestant Episcopal Society for Promoting the Extension of the Church Among Colored People. This organization is the precursor of the modern-day Union of Black Episcopalians.

The incorporation of the church, previously filed under the East Presbyterian organization, was formally changed to St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal in 1866. A newspaper article announced the change in incorporation. St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church was "legally and canonically organized and incorporated under the rectorship of the Rev. S.V. Berry, as a regular

parish of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the city of Buffalo." An extraneous inscription on the inside cover of a St. Philip's clerical ledger provides the only confirmation of the connection to the Presbyterian predecessor: "The church was formerly the East Presbyterian Church of Buffalo."

At best, East Presbyterian is footnoted as a "doomed" congregation. Yet, its founders exhibited fortitude and resilience by refusing to abandon their goal of establishing their own congregation and their resolve to chart their own spiritual course. As St. Philip's became firmly entrenched as an influential religious institution in Buffalo, knowledge of its connections to Vine Street AME and East Presbyterian has been forgotten. However, the latter's substantive achievements contributed to a decade of extensive community building that continued in the new church. St. Philip's has encountered numerous challenges throughout its 162-year history, suggesting that comprehensive research will yield additional little-known history about this remarkable church. ■

## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

The microfilmed records of St. Philip's Episcopal Church, which date to the founding of the congregation in 1861, are maintained in the archives of the Monroe Fordham Regional History Center, Buffalo State, the State University of New York. However, for this research, access to the original records was granted by St. Philip's leadership. These early records were housed in the office of the St. Philip's rector. The church's history and minutes of the vestry were the primary documents used in this research. Concerns were raised about the preservation of these records. With the assistance of Dr. Lillian S. Williams, University at Buffalo, I helped convince the church leaders to permit the University at Buffalo Archival & Manuscript Collections to collect the original records for conservation and preservation. The university is also digitizing these records. Information was also obtained from the Episcopal Diocese of Western New York Archives. Newspapers.com was used to access local newspapers of the period.



For classroom activities related to this article, see our *New York Archives Jr!* at <https://considerthesourcenry.org/magazine-educator-guides>



For more on Black history in Buffalo, see "As No Other Woman" by Lillian Serece Williams, Spring 2021.