

PRESENTATION TO THE HISTORIC PRESERVATION BOARD
City of Orlando
on June 6, 2007 and updated for the 130th Church Anniversary
by Lillian Lancaster, Church Clerk

In the last quarter of the 19th century in an area of Orlando that included Robinson Street and the East side of Division Street, a few believing Christians met together weekly to pray, to teach from God's word and to praise God for how He had brought them such a mighty long way. Many years later their story would be passed down to their children, and it would sound something like this.

These are the voices from the past.

The time was 1880, nearly 127 years ago. It was just five years after Orlando was incorporated as a town with 85 inhabitants. Later Mt. Zion would come to be known as the oldest African American Baptist church with continuous service of worship and teaching and serving in the Central Florida area.

The year 1880 there were just 8 families of us and we would gather together every Sunday and our minister, Rev. C.J. Scott would preach. Among our fellowship were Pa Phillips, Poppa Britt, Dapne Crooms, Gabriel Jones and Bernice Carr, to name a few. Rev. Scott had moved to Orlando from Monticello, Florida. He was the grandfather of one of our longtime members, the late Bernice Wheeler. He was the organizer of the Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Institutional Church. Rev. Scott was skilled with his hands so he built us a place of worship with the help of some of the men. Our place of worship was not a church building like the massive three story red brick

edifice that would exist in the future. Instead it was structure called a bush harbor or bush arbor, so called because it was an open area enclosed by lose bushes, vines and branches bent over to form the top giving it a canopy appearance. And it was a safe place where we could go and praise and worship God through our relationship with him and pray to be filled with His Holy Spirit.

THIS WAS OUR FIRST CHURCH BUILDING.

During the years from 1880 to 1910, Mt. Zion had the following ministers:

Rev. Scott, founder and pastor from 1880-1886

Rev. E.C. Jones, pastor, from 1886 and some years following

Rev. J.W. Stokes from 1897-1910

Rev. H.K. Hill from 1910

In 1910 when Rev. H.K. Hill was pastor the original Mt. Zion moved to the corner of Washington and Chatham Street. That property was given by Gabriel Jones who would later have a daughter named Eunice Jones. Jones was a member of Mt. Zion and a well known merchant of the city. The move from the early structure to the corner of Chatham and Washington was a time for rejoicing. We sang "We are marching to Zion, Beautiful, beautiful Zion, We are marching to Zion, the beautiful city of God." Mt. Zion continued in that building from 1910 to 1956, approximately 40 years.

THIS WAS OUR NEXT BUILDING.

Under Rev. Hill's leadership, the small church was made twice its original size. Also, under his leadership the church built a parsonage for the pastor and family located on the east corner of Robinson Street and Chatham. One of the outstanding features of this two story frame house was the winding

staircase. Mr. James T. Murrell was brought to Orlando from Gainesville, FL to build the church parsonage in 1911. He was the father of the late Mattie L. Starke who grew up in Mt. Zion and became church organist. She lived in what later was called the pink house next to the church parking lot on Terry Street. That house would become the Church office and administrative building.

Under the leadership of Rev. Hill who was known nationally along with his wife. Together they brought to Orlando's African American community such community activities as Boy Scouting and Girl Scouting and created singing groups and added special observances, such as Women's Day to the church calendar.

On April 24, 1928, two lots were purchased to build our first cement block church. The lots were on the southwest corner of Robinson and Parramore Street. The ground breaking and foundation was laid in May 1928. The death of Rev. Hill in September 1929 postponed the realization of that dream.

In April 1930, Rev. R.L. Jones became Pastor of Mt. Zion and served until 1940. He established the Department of Religious Education. The late Miss L. Claudia Allen served as the first director of Religious Education and Mrs. Mattie Rigell also served as director.

In April 1941, Rev. A.M. Means became the sixth Pastor of Mt. Zion. He continued the ongoing programs, and three rooms were added to the church. By the middle of the 20th century, the eight families that first met in the bush harbor church had multiplied—sixteen families, then 32 families, then 64

and many more through the years got on board the Old Ship of Zion. They came by letter, by baptism, by Christian Experience. They came from places like Live Oak, Winter Park, Eatonville, Plant City, Monticello and of course Orlando.

In 1946, our church called a dynamic pastor who was to lead Mt. Zion for the next quarter century. He was the late Rev. N.G. Staggers. Starting in 1952 under his leadership, the church had a full time secretary and church office located at the church parsonage. The late Georgia N. Woodley became the church secretary in 1952 and served the church and as a community leader in the Callahan area and larger community for 45 years.

Under the leadership of Rev. Staggers we undertook a most ambitious project, the building of the church we worship in today. He established a building committee in 1953. There were challenges from the ground breaking in February 1956 to marching in from the old church across the street to the new one in March of 1962. That building project took seven years at a cost of two hundred and fifty thousand (\$250,000.00) dollars. The Dedication service for the three story red brick building with towering white steeple at the corner of Washington Street and Chatham was held on May 27, 1962 and was conducted by Rev. N.G. Staggers and Rev. Leon Lowery. The property is now valued at over 1.5 million dollars.

During the tenure of Rev. Staggers, Mt. Zion was the first church to go outside the walls of the church and become actively involved in the community and the political arena to join the civil rights' cause. In the 1960's Rev. Staggers was an active member of the National Association for