

NOMINATION REPORT



Centennial A.M.E. Zion Church
Closter Historic Preservation Commission
November, 2011

NOMINATION REPORT FOR CENTENNIAL AME ZION CHURCH

Description

The Centennial AME Zion Church is a small rectangular, gable roofed, single nave, one story frame building. It is vernacular with Renaissance Revival features, including leaded glass round arched windows in the front with an oculus centered above. The front doorway is a replacement entrance with a gable pavilion. The belfry has vertical board-and-batten siding. Three flat windows are on the sides. Around 1940, a back wing was built, which includes a kitchen and office.

History

In 1896, this small frame church was built by descendants of freed slaves, next to a swamp on the edge of the town of Closter. Originally started in 1894, the church came together through the leadership of Rev. R.S. Cottene (pastor of the Englewood AME Zion Church), Mrs. Sarah Oliver (great-granddaughter of James Oliver, a resident of the Mountain or Skunk Hollow), and Rev. P.H. Tinsen. Services were held in different homes until space in Hammond Hall was rented.

A deed dated June eight of 1896 was given to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church by the Pelhamdale Land Company for two lots for a church building not to cost less than five hundred dollars. The deed was signed by I.W. Maclay, vice president, and William E. Davies, Secretary. Isaac Walker Maclay was also the president of Maclay and Davies Real Estate Company and very active in different organizations. Mr. Davies lived in Demarest and was a charter member of the New York/New Jersey Real Estate Exchange.

The service for laying the cornerstone was held in July of 1896, with Rev. J.T. Tillman as leader, and E.M. Stanton preaching the sermon. "Rev. Henry Ward of the Reformed Church made an able address, as also did Rev. Wm. Walton and Rev. C.A.S. Dwight," all local ministers.

The church was built by J.C. Gruben, a local builder, who held a mortgage for part of the construction cost. Mr. Gruben had just built Closter's St. Paul's Lutheran Church in 1888, for \$2,300. It took three months to construct the building. In October 1896, the church was dedicated with the well-known civil rights leader, Bishop Alexander Walters, officiating.

Mrs. Bertha Smith gave fifty dollars as the first donation for the mortgage balance and steadily the debt was paid. According to the "Closter News," a Fourth of July lawn party with "good music for dancing" was held in 1899. In September 1906, the "Tenafly Record" reported that the AME Zion Church paid \$100 on its mortgage. Also in 1906, the church showed a moving picture show for a fundraiser, probably not as popular as the well-attended pot-luck dinners. The members also raised funds for finishing the interior by sponsoring a "not to be missed" Tennessee vocalist and having outdoor camp meetings. The church mortgage was burned Sunday April 5, 1908. Bishop Alexander Walters favored the church again by preaching that day.

Around 1940, church school superintendent, William Franklin, worked to enlarge the area behind the sanctuary, adding a kitchen, dining area and bathroom. He helped finance this construction by

making small replicas of the church to use as banks, and he later collected any funds deposited in these banks. Mr. and Mrs. Henry Mandle donated money for a kitchen remodeling in 1955, and in 1969, a stained glass window and pastor's study were added.

The church, designated a mission church in 1896 by Bishop James Walker Hood, has been in continuous use for over one hundred years, on its original site, now known as 5 Lewis Street, Closter. The name "Centennial" was added around 1948 to the AME Zion name in honor of the 100th anniversary of the national African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. The Centennial AME Zion Church now shares the building with a Korean Church, Ellim Korean Presbyterian Church.

Association with Freed Slave Community of "the Mountain" (aka "Skunk Hollow")

The Centennial AME Zion Church in Closter is significant for its direct association with the 19th Century African-American freed slave community of "the Mountain" or "Skunk Hollow". This colony, which started in 1806, had a peak population of seventy-five in 1880. Rev. "Willie" Thompson was a mainstay of the community which had a "colored" Methodist Church and a burying ground. Reverend Thompson held "camp meetings" in the Summer and "protracted meetings" in the Winter. Closter resident, Maria Ferdon, in her 1860s diary mentions being impressed by hearing Reverend Thompson preach with no notes. After Thompson died in 1886, many members moved from the Mountain to surrounding towns, especially Closter and Sparkill, New York. The Closter AME Zion Church was built in 1896 and the St. Charles AME Zion Church was built in Sparkill in 1897. Closter congregation members included Mrs. Thompson and many Oliver family members.

The Mountain (Skunk Hollow) was located atop the Palisades about four miles north of Closter. (Near exit 3 on the Palisades Interstate Parkway - in present day Alpine.) From 1806 to 1905, it provided a haven for free blacks. The Mountain community was founded by a man named Jack Ernest. Born in 1770, Jack Ernest had been a slave and was later freed by Jacob Conklin of Rockleigh. Mr. Ernest purchased five acres and thirty square rods in 1806 for \$87.50. By 1822, he owned eleven acres. Jack Ernest died tragically in a fire in 1841. He left no heirs. Two other settlers of the Mountain, Jim Oliver and Reverend Thompson, continued to lead the community. Mr. Oliver started buying land after 1811 when he was freed upon Johannes Blauvelt's death. He left a five-acre tract in his will when he died in 1855. (Bounded on the North by Gifford Agnew, East by E.W Thompson and Susan Sisco, South by Wm. Ferdon dec., and West by Martin G. Parsols dec.) Descendants of the Mountain families with names such as Thompson, Oliver, Brown, Sisco, Jackson, and Williams have been members of the Closter Centennial AME Zion Church.

Reasons for Historic Designation

It is significant that the church is directly associated with the 19th Century African-American freed slave community of the Mountain or "Skunk Hollow." It is also significant for its association with the famous civil rights leader, Bishop Alexander Walters. Thus, the Centennial AME Zion church meets the criteria of the ordinance known as Chapter 35, Section 54 subsections (1) and (2). Subsection (1) states that buildings are eligible for historic designation. . . "that are associated with

events that have made a significant contribution to the Borough of Closter by reflecting or exemplifying the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state or community. Slavery, its abolition and the success of the freed slave community are very significant to the history of this entire nation as well as Closter and the state of New Jersey. The proud institution of this AME Zion Church by the freed slave community is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Subsection (2) states that buildings are eligible for historic designation “that are associated with historic personages important in national, state or local history.” Bishop Alexander Walters (1858-1917), in partnership with W.E.B DuBois, was a member of the 1908 Niagara Movement from which he helped in organizing the founding conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Walters became vice president of the NAACP in 1911. The NAACP is still today the leading national organization whose purpose is to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination. Bishop Walters was also a leader in the women’s suffrage movement to give women the right to vote.

Methodology

Source materials used in researching the history of the Centennial AME Zion Church are listed in the Resource Bibliography at the end of the report. A title search was performed at the Bergen County Records Vault. An interview with and lecture by historian Arnold Brown, who specializes in African-American history, proved invaluable. Notes and materials from Pat Garbe Morillo were very helpful as was information from Commission member, Orlando Tobia.

Resource Bibliography

Bergen County Historic Sites Survey Report: Borough of Closter, N.J., Bergen County Office of Culture and Historic Affairs and the Bergen County Historic Sites Advisory Board 1981-2

Centennial AME Zion Church Program, 87th Anniversary Celebration Oct. 28, 1983

Closter Community Guide 2007, Northern Valley Suburbanite 2007

Closter News, June 29, 1899 Burton H. Albee editor and manager

Englewood Press, various dates starting in 1896

50th Anniversary Borough of Closter 1904-1954, 50th Anniversary Committee Borough of Closter 1954

Garbe Morillo, Patricia, Closter and Alpine: Images of America, Arcadia Press 2001

Geismer, Joan H., The Archaeology of Social Disintegration in Skunk Hollow, Academic Press NY 1982

Kaplan, Laurie, “Back In Time,” Northern Valley Press, May 11, 2009.

McMahon Reginald, Jack was Earnest, Bergen County Historical Society 1984

Sykes, Kathleen, Palisades Newsletter, issue #192 March 2006 Palisades Interstate Park

Tenafly Record, various dates starting 1895

www.books.google.com

www.amez.org (website for African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church)

www.blackpast.org

www.naacp.org

Maps

1884 Serviss map of part of the Palisades

1891 Beers Atlas of the Hudson River Valley, section 6

PROPERTY REPORT

Property ID: **-1029667174**

Property Name: Centennial A.M.E. Zionist Church
Address: 5 Lewis ST
Apartment #:
Ownership: Non-profit
ZIP: 07624

PROPERTY LOCATION(S):

County:	Municipality:	Local Place Name:	USGS Quad:	Block:	Lot:
BERGEN	Closter borough		Yonkers	1310	1
BERGEN	Closter borough		Yonkers	1310	2

Property Photo:



Old HSI Number: BCHSS 0207-21

NRIS Number:

HABS/HAER Number:

Description:

This is a vernacular one-story, three-bay, rectangular plan, gable front church with a short belfry that surmounts the front part of the roof ridge upon a very slight hip roof structure. The church has a random ashlar stone foundation with a cornerstone that reads "MEZ Church Founded A.D. 1896." The church also has a centered enclosed gabled portico that has a set of double panel doors with rosettes in the panels, a brick and concrete slab stoop with wrought iron railings, aluminum siding, an asphalt shingle roof, and stained glass windows that include borders of smaller rectangular lights. The front windows flanking the portico are round headed and the side windows are flat headed. There is an oculus above the portico. The belfry has board and batten siding, large louvered openings and a steep pyramidal cap. According to the Sanborn Insurance maps, the church received a one-story addition constructed laterally to the rear of the building between 1923 and 1930. Wall mounted air conditioners protrude from the façade. An historic photograph shows that at one time the church had a board and batten exterior and ordinary divided light wood sash windows.

According to the Bergen County Historic Sites Survey, the church is significant as an early church for African American residents. It is situated on land donated by the Pelhamdale Land Company and maintained in continuous use to the present. According to Patricia Garbe Morillo, the church was built by J.C. Gruben and the first minister was Reverend T.J. Tillman. The cornerstone was laid on July 26, 1896 and the dedication ceremony took place on October 18, 1896. The church is now shared with another congregation, the Korean Fellowship Church.

The church is in good condition and has a medium level of integrity. It has been a vital site in Closter used for religious purposes for just over a century. Because of its age and local significance, this church can be considered to be a contributing resource to the Closter Historic District.

Survey Name: Closter Borough Historic District

Principal Investigator: Jeanne M Kolva

Organization: McCabe & Associates, Inc.

(Primary Contact)

Property ID:
-1029667174

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church immediately to the east. The parking lot for the shopping center is located across Lewis Street south of the church. A contemporary office building is located to the north and Closter Borough Hall is to the southwest of the church.

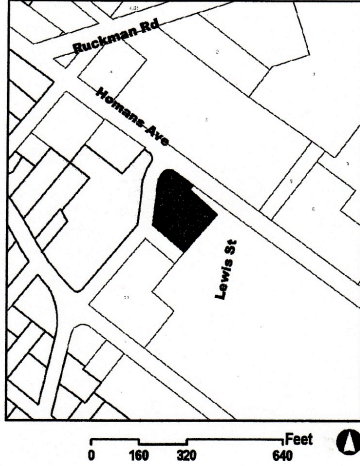
Registration and Status Dates:

National Historic Landmark?:
 National Register:
 New Jersey Register:
 Determination of Eligibility:
 Certification of Eligibility:

SHPO Opinion: 05/16/2002
 Local Designation:
 Other Designation:
 Other Designation Date:

Eligibility Worksheet included in present survey? Is this Property an identifiable farm or former farm?

Location Map:



Site Map:

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Author:	Title:	Year:	HPO Accession #: (if applicable)
Bergen County Board of Chosen Freeholders	Bergen County Historic Sites Survey--Borough of Closter	1982	
Sanborn Map Company	Sanborn Maps 1908, 1913, 1923, 1930, 1949, and 1959		
Garbe-Morillo, Patricia	Closter and Alpine	2001	
Fiftieth Anniversary Committee	Closter: The First 285 Years	1954	

Additional Information:

More Research Needed? (checked=Yes)

INTENSIVE-LEVEL USE ONLY:

Attachments Included: Building Bridge
 Structure Landscape
 Object Industry

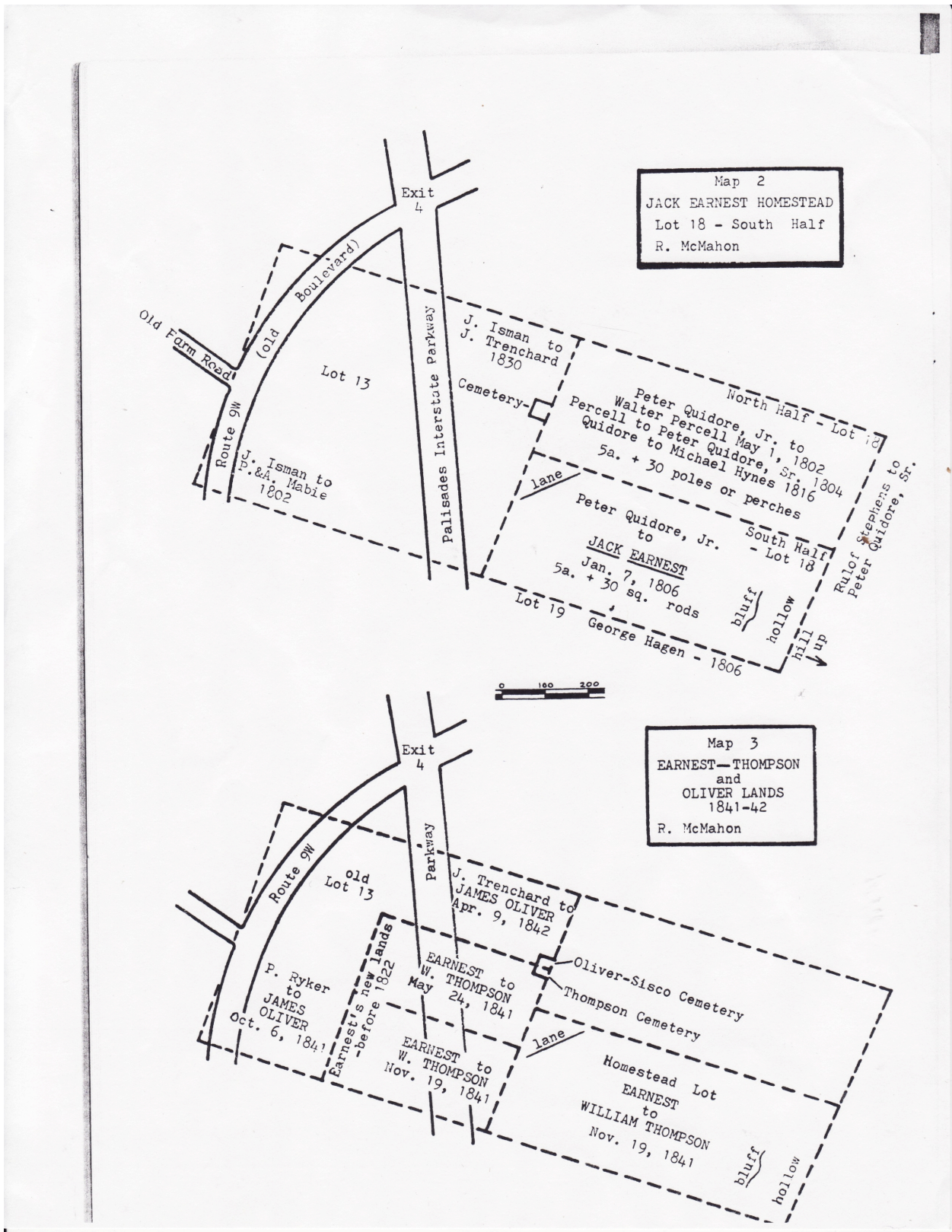
Historic District ?

District Name: Closter Historic District
 Status: Contributing

Associated Archeological Site/Deposits?
 (known or potential sites. If Yes, please describe briefly)

Survey Name: Closter Borough Historic District
 Principal Investigator: Jeanne M Kolva
 Organization: McCabe & Associates, Inc.

(Primary Contact) **Property ID: -1029667174**



Map of "the Mountain" aka "Skunk Hollow"



BISHOP ALEXANDER WALTERS.

Born in Kentucky, August, 1856.—Graduated in the Common Schools of that State.
—At thirty was elected Bishop of the A. M. E. Zion Church, Parkersburg.
Held rank as a Theologian, Oratorian and First President
of the National A. M. E. Church, until 1900.
Orator and Leader.

Bishop Alexander Walters

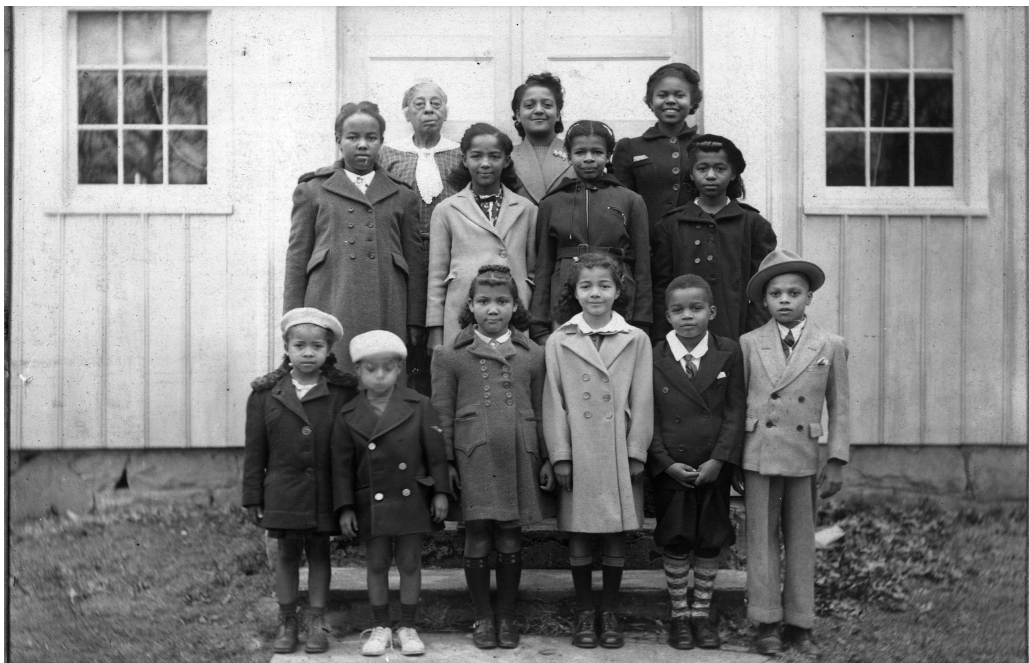


Closter A. M. E. Zion Church

AME Zion Church, 1929, as shown in "The Bergen Review" newspaper



Group Photograph in front of Church, 1933, after Sunday Service



“Sunday School” from the Oliver collection of photos, no date indicated



Painting the Centennial AME Zion Church (mid-twentieth century)