



Who Is Really Buried in the Timbuctoo Cemetery . . . and How Do We Know?

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ABSTRACT

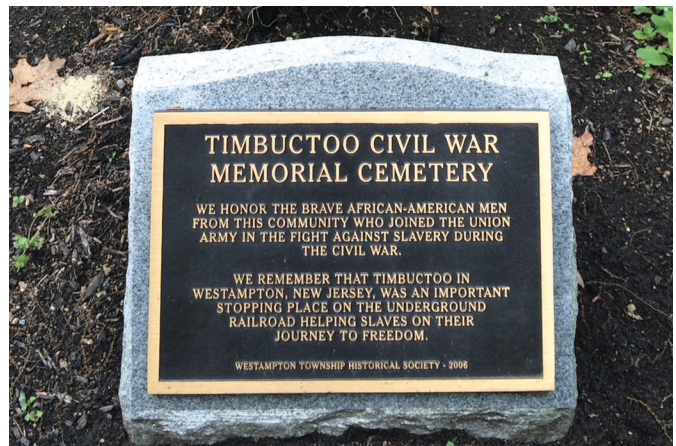
Timbuctoo was settled by formerly enslaved and free Black people, beginning in 1826, and was a very visible Black community in Burlington County, New Jersey during the Nineteenth Century. Today the only visible remanent of Timbuctoo’s historic past is the cemetery, which was established c.1840s. This paper discusses efforts to preserve and protect the cemetery.

KEY WORDS

Timbuctoo; free Black people; cemetery preservation; US Colored Troops; AME Zion Church; Underground Railroad

Timbuctoo is a historic community in southern New Jersey established by formerly enslaved and free Black people.¹ Its first settlers arrived in 1826. We say our cemetery is the only above ground evidence of Timbuctoo’s historic past. Eight of its eleven extant gravestones are US Colored Troops (USCT) that fought in the Civil War. The last marked interment is dated 1922. For as long as anyone can remember, the cemetery has been

known primarily as the resting place of US Colored Troops. Ninety-five-year-old Sophronia Boyd Demby, who came to the area with her parents and siblings in 1938, remembers playing in the area as a child. She said she knew the cemetery was associated with an abandoned church building but did not know it had been an AME Zion church or who was responsible for upkeep of the parcel, which was usually overgrown with weeds.



Figures 1 and 2 Cemetery markers. The word “cemetery” was deleted to acknowledge the correct historic name.

For most of the thirty-one years since my family returned to Timbuctoo after moving to Philadelphia two generations earlier, I've known the cemetery as a resting place for Civil War soldiers. Among various volunteer efforts, American Legion Post 509 and local Boy Scout Troop 117 have been the primary caretakers, doing landscaping work and laying commemorative flags and/or wreaths on holidays. Community descendant Alexander Franklin, who appears on the cover of this issue as a child in a horse-drawn buggy, had become the go-to historian, working with the New Jersey Historical Commission to conduct tours to raise community awareness. In 2006, the Westampton Township Historical Society installed a historic marker, with the name "Timbuctoo Civil War Memorial Cemetery."

The Boy Scout Troop followed suit about three years later. The historic marker was bronze and rather substantial, costing about \$2,500. The Boy Scout sign was a thoughtful tribute hand-painted on plywood by one of the Troop members.

In this era, the township public works department, which cut grass on several acres of township-owned land in the area, took responsibility for keeping the grass cut at the cemetery as well. In 2009, a collaboration between the Westampton Township government, Temple University, and the National Park Service (NPS) raised the profile of Timbuctoo as a historic site through archaeological research and its resulting publicity.

Temple archaeologists excavated a small parcel behind the cemetery, which had been the homesite of USCT Sgt William Davis. To identify subsurface features of archeological interest, ground-penetrating radar (GPR) was conducted.² The cemetery was included in this investigation. From this work, we learned that as many as 150 unmarked gravesites were in the cemetery. A prior NPS deed-transcription project had identified the cemetery's original owner as Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church.³ This congregation had purchased the cemetery parcel in 1854



Figure 3 Commemorative sign by Boy Scout Troop 117

and was incorporated the same year. However, the oldest grave marker is dated 1847!

Eventually, the advisory committee that had been formed to plan archeological efforts and assist with interpretation of the archeological findings evolved into a formal advisory committee of the township government and was charged with conducting educational programs. These programs included installation of interpretive signage in the cemetery. Surprisingly, the township's zoning official raised questions about authorization from the cemetery's owner for installing signs. These questions had not been raised with the Boy Scouts or the Westampton Historical Society. I was still surprised at this bureaucratic response, given our affiliation with the town's governing body. In any event, there was some negotiation among senior officials, the most senior official sided with us, and the signs were installed.

I researched the process of creating signs, consulting colleagues familiar with interpretive signage. I learned I could make the signs myself using Microsoft Publisher. I wrote the text of three signs based mostly on my prior research. I recruited Gail Astle, who had extensively researched our US Colored Troops, to do the sign honoring the troops. I created the graphics in Microsoft Publisher, saved them in PDF format, and emailed them to a sign

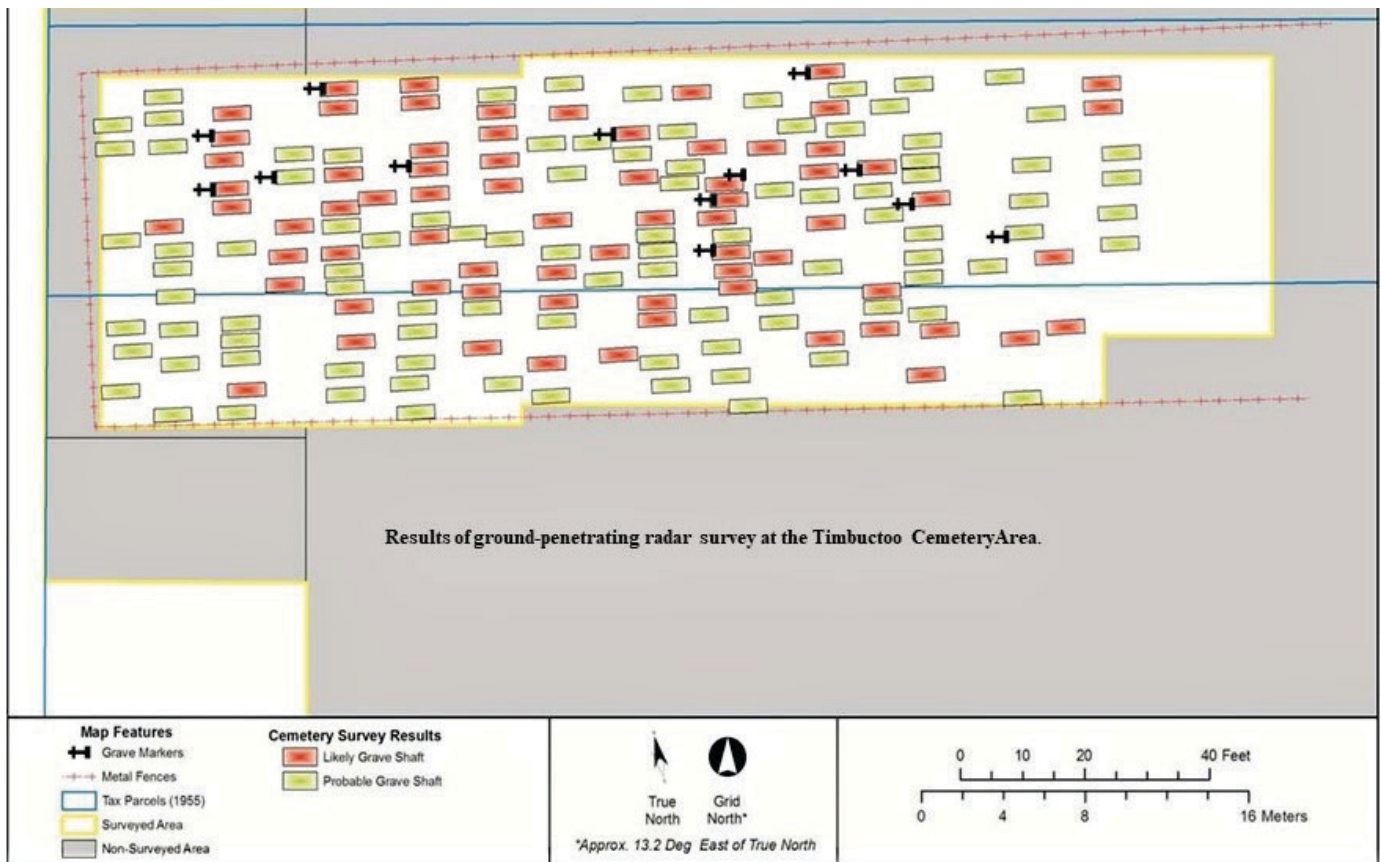


Figure 4 Ground-Penetrating Radar of the Timbuctoo Cemetery

fabricator. About three weeks later, the completed signs were delivered. We organized a group of volunteers to install the signs in the cemetery and had fun doing it! A grant from our county provided partial funding. Wesley AME Zion Church

of nearby Burlington, which had been a sister congregation of the Timbuctoo church, paid for a second sign to commemorate the church's history. The balance was raised through a fundraiser on Facebook.

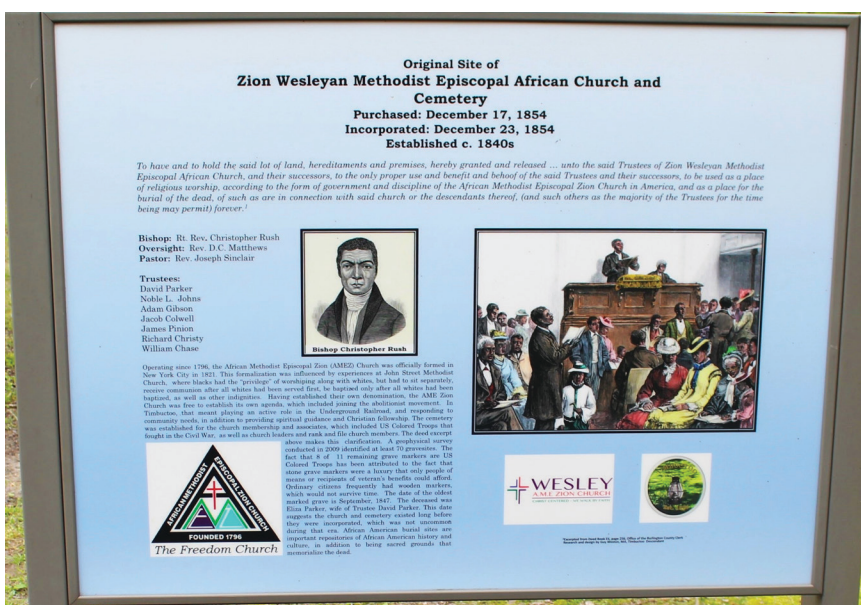


Figure 5 Interpretive sign describing the cemetery's founding church

The unusual bureaucracy around sign installation inspired me to investigate the cemetery ownership question in earnest. I started with the County Clerk's Office. This is where deeds are recorded in New Jersey. The County Clerk's Office is a tremendous resource for any history enthusiast. Until recently, original deed books going back to the late 1700s were available for perusal. Now they have all been digitized, and many records are available online. However, their indexes are not always complete. Without indexing, I could not find the deed

without a book and page number. Interestingly, the owner of record for that parcel was “Colored Cemetery.” To me, that suggested that at some point, fifty or more years ago, some official needed a name for the cemetery and couldn’t find one. Next, I turned to the town government, where deed records are kept in the Tax Collector’s Office. Again, the owner was “Colored Cemetery.” This time, I got a faded photocopy of a handwritten deed. I was astonished to learn that the deed of record in 2019 was the from the 1854 purchase I was familiar with.

I had only seen a very limited transcript of this deed before. It describes the parcel boundaries, the buyers, and the sellers. There were some paragraphs missing from the limited transcript, so I set out to transcribe it myself. I found it time consuming, but not difficult, except when it came to archaic technical terms like behoof (benefit or advantage) or enfeoff (to surrender or yield). I would spend many minutes on one word, only to find out the combination of letters would never make sense to me because they represented words I had never seen.

Perhaps because laws providing for incorporation of churches and charitable organizations were a new phenomenon during this era, deeds frequently include fascinating details one might expect to find in a corporation certificate. This deed says:⁴

. . . to have and to hold the said a lot of land hereditaments, and premises here by granted and released or mentioned or intended to be with the appurtenances unto the said Trustees of Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African church and their successors to the only proper use and benefit and behoof of the said Trustees and their successors to be used as a place of religious worship according to the form of government and discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in America and as a place for the burial of the dead of such are

in connection with said church or the descendants thereof (and such others as the majority of the Trustees of the time being made permit) forever

From this brief paragraph, I learned the following information.

Rules for Interment

The deed clarifies that the cemetery was established by this AME Zion Church for use of its members, associates, and others determined by the church’s trustees long before the Civil War when it says, “*a place for the burial of the dead of such as are in connection with said church or the descendants thereof, (and such others as the majority of the Trustees for the time being may permit). . .*” We had already concluded that it was more than a Civil War cemetery given the 1847 date of the oldest marked gravesite. Moreover, the fact that wooden grave markers were common during the nineteenth century could explain why most extant grave markers were US Colored Troops. Like today, veterans were eligible for stone grave markers as a benefit of military service. These are obviously more durable. By contrast, wooden markers would not survive time. On this basis, it is logical that the stone markers of the USCT would outlast the civilian markers that comprised the majority of interments.

However, there are also three civilian grave markers in our cemetery. All have the last name: Eliza Parker and Matilda Parker were the first two wives of community leader David Parker. Frisby Parker was born to David and Eliza. David Parker, was, in fact, the most prominent community leader in Timbuctoo, and likely the wealthiest. His 1877 obituary describes him as “an aged colored man who for perhaps a half-century has occupied prominent position with his race in this vicinity, and who has commanded the respect and esteem of a large number of white friends,” . . . who was possessed of more than ordinary intelligence and a determined will, which made him a natural

leader among his people so long as it physical strength lasted, and he was generally at the head of any movement among them.” Certainly, seeing the Parker name on all the civilian grave markers calls attention to the prominence of this family, inspiring further investigation. Nevertheless, news coverage and commemorative activities frequently ignored them until recently.

Origin of the Cemetery

Given the episcopal government⁵ of AME Zion churches, we can say this congregation was a local affiliate of a national organization. What does this affiliation tell us about the mission and activities of this congregation? It is noteworthy that the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME Zion) church is a national denomination founded in New York City in 1821.⁶ David Henry Bradley Sr.⁷ describes the early years of this denomination as having an “antagonism to slavery.” He also notes that renowned abolitionists Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass were members of the AME Zion Church. He goes on to explain the AME Zion church’s position of leaving “no stone unturned”⁸ in efforts on behalf of Black people

remaining in bondage, “that churches were borne out of a grave necessity to bring . . . [a] new interpretation of Christ⁹ into the hearts of men who merely wondered about God’s interest in men of low estate,”¹⁰ and that “Zion ministers were expected to take an active part in this struggle for freedom.”

Put simply, the AME Zion Church had a call to action focused on emancipation of enslaved people and facilitating their resettlement in northern states where legislation had been passed to end enslavement. These elements of AME Zion discipline and interpretation of the bible are critical to understanding why this church was so important to the social history of Timbuctoo, and Timbuctoo’s association with settlement of formerly enslaved Black populations in southern New Jersey.

The pastor of Timbuctoo’s AME Zion church, Joseph Sinclair, was born in Maryland,¹¹ while its Bishop, Christopher Rush, was born enslaved in North Carolina.¹² While less is known about Sinclair, Bradley also points out that ministers were often motivated by their own experiences with enslavement. The AME Zion Church became known as the Freedom Church as a result of these activities.¹³ Although no specific documentation



Figure 6 Additional interpretive signs

of Underground Railroad participation by Timbuctoo's AME Zion congregation has been identified, the words "according to the form of government and discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in America" in the deed indicate this church would have included social justice in its interpretation of the bible, and therefore would be an active participant in the antislavery efforts, such as the Underground Railroad. On this basis, acknowledgement of the AME Zion origins of the cemetery is critical, while focus solely on the US Colored Troops excludes an important "chapter" in the history of Timbuctoo.

Thanks to information in the deed, military pension files which describe USCT as well as sometimes referencing family members' interment in the cemetery, we now have a better understanding of who is buried in the Timbuctoo cemetery. In addition, a future research project focusing on other records, such as burial permits and death certificates may identify additional interments. However, based on the deed language alone, we can anticipate the cemetery is a resting place for AME Zion church members and their associates, and we know some of those members and associates are US Colored Troops that fought in the Civil War. We also know the church was an activist church by virtue of its AME Zion affiliation.

We say cemeteries are important repositories of history, genealogy, and culture, in addition to memorializing the deceased. In this case, our cemetery contributes substantially to our understanding of the community's history, the role of the church in this history, as well as the role of military service. We have honored the memory of those soldiers with an interpretive sign that has a QR code that directs visitors to our website for further information. We also honor them here with their abridged biographies in the appendix. Moving forward, we will add a single memorial honoring names for some unmarked graves through ongoing research.

Guy Weston's current work encompasses research and public history initiatives to raise the profile of Timbuctoo, New Jersey, where his fourth-greatgrandfather purchased land in 1829. These have included interpretive signage in Timbuctoo, coordination of a curriculum development project in collaboration with local teachers, and preservation efforts for the Timbuctoo cemetery, where the oldest gravestone is dated 1847. He currently serves as managing director of the Timbuctoo Historical Society, is the editor of *Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (AAHGS) Journal*, and is a visiting scholar at Rutgers University. He has contributed articles about his research to *AAHGS Journal*, *AAHGS News*, *National Genealogical Society Magazine*, and *New Jersey Studies*. He maintains a website at www.timbuctoonj.com.



APPENDIX

US Colored Troops Interred in the Timbuctoo Cemetery

Researched and written by Gail Astle

Three infantry regiments of the United States Colored Troops and one infantry of a state Colored Troop are represented among the eight marked gravestones described below. These include: 22nd USCI, 6th USCI, 29th USCI and 29th Connecticut Infantry (Colored). Most of these soldiers mustered into service at Camp William Penn near Philadelphia to serve for a three-year enlistment. They served as privates, corporals and sergeants in various companies. Most were free born, some could read and write, but all were eager to fight for freedom and citizenship. Charles Love reenlisted in the regular army after the Civil War and served as a Buffalo Soldier until 1894. The body of information for soldiers comes from military records and pension files.

Louis B. Armstrong (Private) of Company D, 22nd USCT, enlisted in December 1863 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was mustered the same day into Company D at Camp William Penn. He was hospitalized for typhoid fever, pneumonia, pleurisy, bronchitis, mumps in March and April 1864. He served in the Ambulance Corps. He was wounded in his left leg by a saber slash and gunshot. He was honorably discharged as a private in October 1865 in Texas. Armstrong was born about 1833 in Medford, New Jersey. He died on May 11, 1903, in Timbuctoo. He testified on behalf of many veteran soldiers and their widows and was an important affidavit witness for the Pension Bureau.

Edward Chapman (Sergeant, Private) of Company G, 22nd USCT, enlisted December 1863 in Northampton, New Jersey. The same day, he was mustered into Company G at Camp William Penn. He was hospitalized in October 1864 for several months with an undiagnosed illness. He was honorably discharged as a private in October 1865 in Texas. Chapman was born around 1834 in Burlington County, New Jersey. He died on May 2, 1882, near Mount Holly, New Jersey. His death from tuberculosis was reportedly due to the ill effects of exposure and sickness contracted in the war.

William H. Davis (Corporal, Sergeant, Corporal, Private) of Company D, 22nd USCT, enlisted in December 1863 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The same day, he was mustered into Company D at Camp William Penn. He was wounded by a musket ball to the chest June 15, 1864, in Petersburg, Virginia. He was honorably discharged as a private in October 1865 in Texas. Davis was born on April 6, 1836, in Northampton, New Jersey. He died on April 4, 1914, in Timbuctoo. He could read and write and, after the war, was a school board trustee for the Timbuctoo school.

John Johnson (Private) of Company B, 6th USCT, enlisted in July 1863 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was mustered into Company B at Camp William Penn. He suffered illness from digging the army canal in Dutch Gap, Virginia. He was hospitalized for frostbite and typhoid fever in Fort Fisher, North Carolina, in December 1864. He was honorably discharged as a private in October 1865 in North Carolina. Johnson was born around 1840 in Stanton, Delaware. He died on April 10, 1895, in Westampton, New Jersey. He could read and write and after the war was principal of the Timbuctoo school.

Charles H. Love (Private) of Company F, 22nd USCT, enlisted in December of 1863 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was mustered into Company F at Camp William Penn. He was honorably discharged as a private in October 1865 in Texas. Love reenlisted in September 1867 in the post-Civil War regular army, where he served as a private and later was promoted to sergeant of Troops G and E of 10th US Cavalry. Love served for twenty-seven years as a Buffalo Soldier in Indian Wars. He received a medal for the Indian Wars campaign. He honorably retired as a sergeant in June 1894. Love was born on December 20, 1844, in Maryland. He died on July 16, 1922, in Timbuctoo. When he returned home to Timbuctoo in 1894, he was remembered for his sergeant's uniform that he wore all the time.

Ephraim Marshall (Private, Corporal, Private) of Company G, 22nd USCT, enlisted in December 1863 in Northampton, New Jersey, and the same day, was mustered into Company G at Camp William Penn. He served in the Ambulance Corps from May 1864 to September 1865. He was hospitalized in October 1865 in New Orleans, Louisiana. He was honorably discharged as a private in October 1865 in Texas. Marshall was born about 1840 in Mount Holly, New Jersey. He died before 1877 near Mount Holly. He was nicknamed "Eph."

He died young. After his death, an imposter collected his pension for several years.

Theophilus W. Pinion (Private) of Company I, 29th Connecticut Infantry (Colored), enlisted in January 1864 in Norwich, Connecticut. He was mustered into regiment in March 1864 in New Haven. He was severely wounded by minié ball to his hip and thigh on October 27, 1864, in Kell House, Virginia. He was honorably discharged as a private in October 1865 in Texas. Pinion was born in 1847 in New Hope, Pennsylvania. He died on December 14, 1904, in Timbuctoo. After the war, he was a young invalid with a limp. His left leg was two inches shorter with shrunken muscles and decreased range of motion. He could only work light-duty jobs.

William H. Sullivan (Private, Corporal, Sergeant) of Company D, 29th USCT, enlisted June 1864, in White House, Virginia. He was mustered into the regiment near Petersburg, Virginia. He was wounded in his hand by gunshot on July 30, 1864, Battle of the Crater, Virginia. He was honorably discharged as sergeant in November 1865 in Texas. Sullivan was born about 1842 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He died on March 20, 1895, in Mount Holly, New Jersey. He claimed that another William Sullivan in his company caused discrepancies in his army record.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Guy Weston. "Timbuctoo and the First Emancipation of the Early Nineteenth Century," *New Jersey Studies*, Vol. 8 No. 1, p. 224
- 2 William Chadwick and Peter Leach. "A Geophysical Survey of Timbuctoo, Westampton Township, New Jersey." Unpublished report prepared for Westampton Township in 2009.
- 3 National Park Service, "Timbuctoo, Burlington County," Katherine Turton, Philadelphia: National Park Service, 2008.

- 4 Burlington County, New Jersey, Deeds, A:77. Trustees of the Zion Wesleyan ME African Church -Timbuctoo, 23. December 1854: Burlington County Clerk's Office, Mount Holly.
- 5 Not to be confused with the Episcopalian church as a denomination, the word "episcopal" in church government refers to the fact that a hierarchy of bishops establishes policy and governance that each congregation must adhere to. By contrast, in congregational church government, the final authority in each congregation is its board of trustees and/or pastor.
- 6 New York passed a gradual manumission law in 1799, and a subsequent 1827 law ended legal enslavement altogether. In this context, many or most Black people could choose to worship elsewhere independent of an enslaver's approval. New Jersey passed a gradual manumission law in 1804.
- 7 David Henry Bradley, Sr. *History of the AME Zion Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020).
- 8 Bradley, p. 107.
- 9 Bradley, p. 108.
- 10 Bradley, p. 108.
- 11 The National Archives in Washington D.C.; Record Group: Records of the Bureau of the Census; Record Group Number: 29; Series Number: M432; Residence Date: 1850; Home in 1850: Philadelphia Pine Ward, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Roll: 813; Page: 325b.
- 12 Carroll, Grady Lee Ernest, "Rush, Christopher." In *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, edited by William S. Powell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).
- 13 Williams, Wiley J. "African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church." In *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, edited by William S. Powell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).