

A History

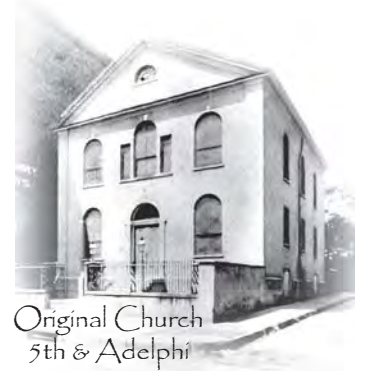
The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas

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The Rev. Fr. Martini Shaw, 17th Rector

The Rev. Fr. Isaac Bonney, Assistant

Originally established as the African Church, The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas was founded in 1792 by and for persons of African descent to foster personal and religious freedoms and self-determination. The original African Church was an outgrowth of the Free African Society -a mutual aid organization established in 1787 by Absalom Jones, Richard Allen and others -to assist the Black population in Philadelphia. The early religious services were held in private homes and in a school. Within the congregation were many who -because of growing racial tension and insults -had followed the lay preachers, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, in an historic walkout from St. George's Methodist Church. Affiliation with the Episcopal Church was ratified in 1794. The Reverend Absalom Jones became the first Episcopal priest of African American descent and the first rector of St. Thomas' Church.



Original Church
5th & Adelphi

The original church house was constructed at 5th and Adelphi Streets in Philadelphia, now St. James Place, and dedicated on July 17, 1794. Subsequent locations of the church included: 12th Street below Walnut; 57th and Pearl Streets, (uniting with the Church of the Beloved Disciple); 52nd and Parrish Streets; and the current location, Overbrook and Lancaster Avenues (formerly St. Paul's Overbrook) in Philadelphia's historic Overbrook Farms neighborhood. The congregation has continued to be predominately African American.

The parish's Eucharist-centered liturgy has evolved over the years from a traditional Anglican/Episcopal high church worship experience to one that is enriched with an evangelical Afrocentric focus.

St. Thomas has been in the vanguard of action to sustain the legacy of humanitarianism and community outreach passed down from its founders. St. Thomas' clergy and parishioners have played key roles in the abolition/anti-slavery/

12th Below Walnut St.

underground railroad movements and the early equal rights movement of the 1800's. Over the past fifty years, St. Thomas has figured prominently in the civil rights movement, The NAACP, Union of Black Episcopalians, Opportunities Industrialization Center, Philadelphia Interfaith Action and The Episcopal Church Women. Paramount, however, has been the movement to uphold the knowledge and value of the Black presence in the Episcopal Church. Today, that tradition continues with an ever-growing membership and through a host of ministries such as Christian Formation, the ChancelChoir, Gospel Choir, Jazz Ensemble, Men's Fellowship, Young Adult and Youth Ministries, a Church School, Health Ministry, Caring Ministry, and a Shepherding Program.



57th & Pearl Sts.

On November 10, 1996, the church dedicated the Absalom Jones Chapel with a Festal Eucharist and enshrined his ashes in the altar. In addition, the Absalom Jones Memorial Stained Glass Window was installed and dedicated in July 1997. A stained glass window featuring Black Saints, and Black Bishops past and present was also installed in 2000.

Today, the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas flourishes as an open, Christ-centered community of faith where the Gospel is taught, lived and spread.



52nd & Parrish Sts.



Current Location
Overbrook & Lancaster Aves.