



Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

A History of the African American Community in Mount Clemens

by Pauline Wade Tyson

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Although Mount Clemens' first Negro resident, **Edward Freeman**, a violinist at the Park Hotel, lived on Union Street during the late 1870s, it was nearly 40 years later before others, in search of a better way of life, began migrating to the city. The real influx of black citizens began during World War I, as war-related businesses and industry offered work opportunities. Among the arrivals in 1917 were **John Shorts, Homer and Mamie Reid, Henry Gregory, Alberta Johnson, Austin Clemens Johnson, and Arebelia and William Pennington**. Most of the newcomers built tarpaper homes in the Anthony Beyne subdivision, later called **Kibbee Flats**. The area, which had been flattened by a tornado in 1897, usually flooded each spring when melting ice and snow caused the Clinton River to overflow its banks. The residents often had to be moved from their homes in boats. The Red Cross, Salvation Army, and other agencies came in to help clean up after the floods. Each spring flooding continued in Kibbee Flats until the building of the spillway in the river relieved the situation.

Soon the makeshift homes were bursting at the corners as the new residents were joined by relatives and friends looking for employment. Among these were **Effie Bell, Charles and Margaretta Price**, the Prices' son, **Alvin**, and his wife, **Georgia, Leo and Etta Niles, Sarah McDaniels, Walter and Alice Kitts, Roxie and Manuel Warren, the Reverend N. Cornelius Hall and his wife Bertha, and Caleb and Minnie Turner**. More continued to come during the World War I years, all through the Great Depression, and in the years that followed. Some found jobs with local employers; many others became self-employed. Among this latter group were **Lewis Stewart, Lucy Spears, Charles and Bertha Washington, the Rev. Safford, Mary Robinson, Harry and Lillie Williams, Wash Monroe, Barry Evans, Elizabeth Moore and Fred Jenkins**.

The first black Baptist church in Mount Clemens was organized in 1921 by the **Rev. William Ferrell** and was named the **Second Baptist Church**. It was renamed **Morning Star Baptist Church** in 1930, and in 1967, the name was changed again to the **Greater Morning Star Baptist Church**. Most of the black population coming into Mount Clemens following World War I joined this church.

The church continued to grow under the able leadership of the **Rev. J.C. Clayborn**, who came from Detroit in the early 1940s. Overcrowding was a big problem, and plans had to be made for a new place of worship. Fund-raising activities, the sacrifice of members and the generosity of friends and businessmen made it possible to erect a beautiful new edifice on Robertson Street. Dedication ceremonies took place in 1972. Mr. Clayborn retired in the spring of 1979.

Turner Chapel CME Church, an outgrowth of the East End Mission (a Salvation Army outpost), was organized in 1922 during a meeting in the Robertson Street home of **Caleb Turner**. The **Rev. N.C. Hall** was the first minister. Records and early minutes of the church indicate that **William Pennington** donated \$150 to purchase a site for the church building and the church itself was erected by the **Rev. Austin L. Harrell** and his flock. The current pastor is the **Rev. James W. Jenkins**.

When **Mrs. Muggie Jones** left Vernon, Alabama, in 1936 to make her home in Michigan, evangelist **Paul English** asked her to contact **Brother Bauser**, a teacher and Church of Christ leader who lived in the metropolitan Detroit area. Soon after her arrival, she asked Brother Bauser to consider conducting meetings in Mount Clemens, and within a few months he was holding sessions in a tent at Brooks and Prospect streets. During the 1940s, the congregation raised sufficient funds to purchase a building at 260 North Broadway Avenue. The church, named **North Broadway Church of Christ**, is presently under the leadership of **Brother James E. Thompson**.

World War II brought even more Negroes to Mount Clemens looking for work, as well as a number of servicemen who were attached to the 332nd Bomber and the 92nd Fighter squadrons at **Selfridge Air Force Base**. Negro servicemen had no recreational facilities off base, and Envoy Carroll of the Salvation Army secured a building to provide such an outlet for members of the 92nd Squadron. It was soon called the Cherry Street USO.

Housing was also at a premium until the government built homes in the Joy Boulevard-North Walnut Street area for civilian employees, servicemen, and their families. The section soon became known as "Splinterville." **Clarence Tyson** and his wife, **Pauline**, were the first Negroes to be housed there. Mrs. Tyson also served as housing manager for the New Haven Trailer Homes, the living quarters the federal government provided for those employed by the New Haven Foundry. Representatives of the American Red Cross, **Mrs. Alfred Thompson** and **Mrs. C. Harry Malbin**, taught first-aid classes. Sessions were held in Turner Chapel on Robertson Street, and many persons received certificates. After the war, many members of the 92nd returned to Mount Clemens to make their permanent home.

Elizabeth Benton and **Davie McFee** organized the **Apostolic Church** in 1944 and services were held in a building on Brooks Street. About the same time, the **Church of God in Christ** was formed with the **Rev. B.T. Stephens** as its pastor. **Everybody's Tabernacle AME Zion Church** was organized in 1949. **The Rev. Elizabeth Doles** is the current pastor. **Bethel AME Church** was formed in 1951, with **Sister Duckie Ford James** as pastor.

A congregation called **Zion Temple of Christ Jesus** was formed in 1952 by **Elder James Fletcher**, who still serves as its pastor. **Calvary Baptist Church**, organized in the late 1950s, held services in a building near Quinn Road. During the late 1960s, when an urban renewal project was underway in what is known today as Quinn Park, the church was moved to its current location at 35 North Avenue in downtown Mount Clemens.

Urban renewal came to the Splinterville area in 1952, and owners of substandard houses were notified that they must improve their homes to the city code or the buildings would be torn down. Some neighborhoods were demolished and the land sold to the city. The city planners then replotted the land and sold it to developers. Soon the swampy area became the showplace River Acres Subdivision. The custom-built brick houses were purchased by the prosperous black people of the area, by servicemen stationed at Selfridge Air Force Base, and by individuals from nearby towns. Alongside the impressive homes were other new structures to enhance the subdivision. Included were the new **Grant School**, later renamed **Martin Luther King Elementary School**, the new Greater Morningstar Baptist Church, Turner Chapel CME Church, now the home of the International Masons, and a new structure now known as **Stephens Temple**, occupied by members of the Church of God in Christ. A grocery store, barber shop, beauty parlor and other businesses prospered in the new subdivision.

Other improvements have also been made in housing for blacks in Mount Clemens. When the city's first public housing opened in 1956, a number of people were relocated into it. More recently, **Park Place Tower**, erected in 1975, and **Clemens Towers**, built in 1977, have provided a new environment for some black senior citizens.

As Mount Clemens enters its second century as an incorporated city, its black residents can look back upon their own history of achievement as part of the larger community. Today blacks operate a number of local businesses, such as cab companies, real estate offices, beauty shops, restaurants, bars and lounges, bakeries, auto washes, music studios and recording companies, contracting businesses and electrical shops. Well known, not only in their community but throughout the city, are a number of blacks who have had the distinction of being "firsts" in their professions or achievements. Among them are **Dolores Meadows**, teacher; **Daniel Hughes**, principal; **Alex Turner, M.D.**; **David O'Neal**, dentist; **Christine Dozier**, bank employee; **John Martin**, radio disc jockey; and **Frances B. Jones**, the first black beautician to own a shop patronized by whites. Other notable blacks include **Nora Johnson**, manicurist, pedicurist and masseuse; **Richard Pernel**, contractor; **Archie Simpson**, electrician; **Lee Williams**, city commissioner; **Dr. Lewis Rickman**, school board member; **Bonner Upshaw**, police officer and detective; and **Pepe Sutton**, radio station owner.

Among the many families that have worked hard for the betterment of the community is the **Whitsitt** family. Every member of this large family has been talented and has shared his or her gifts and talents with others. The father was pastor of Turner Chapel CME Church and his wife taught music, dramatics and fine arts. Their son **Terrell** was the first black graduate of Mount Clemens High School. He was the recipient of a scholarship to the University of Michigan and later distinguished himself in the field of urban renewal. **Anna**, the eldest daughter, made good on Broadway as an actress.

The black residents of Mount Clemens also have a history of involvement in a number of social and fraternal organizations, including the **Prince Hall Masons Excelsior No. 25**; **Fawn IBOOP Elks No. 1063**; **Bethlehem Chapter No. 37 P.H.A.**, **Order of Calante**; **Household of Ruth**; the **Golden Arrows**, a singing group; **Ten Man Social Club**; **Twenty Karats Club**; the **Macomb County Union of Choirs**; **Macomb County Sunday School Union**; **Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.**, **Eta Lambda Zeta Chapter**; **National Council of Negro Women**; **Sigma**; and the **NAACP**.

As Mount Clemens marks its anniversary, its black residents are proud of their progress from tarpaper houses on swampland to nice brick homes with green lawns, fine schools for their children, many nice churches, and all types of business enterprises. They are able to see that with faith, hope and fellowship, people can live together in unity and make their community prosper.