

# AME ZION CEMETERY

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and its members were Seneca Village's foundational landowners. Known as the "Freedom Church" for its abolitionist work, AME Zion was the city's first Black church. It broke from the John Street Methodist Church in 1796, bought property on Church and Leonard Streets in 1800, and became independent from the white Methodist Church in 1820. Finding enough land for burials was an early challenge, prompting use of burial vaults in the small downtown churchyard. A prohibition on opening vaults during the 1803 yellow fever epidemic led to a second city-granted burial ground in Washington Square. When that closed in 1825, AME Zion looked north. Rev. William Stillwell of the John St. Church, a white ally, likely facilitated the purchase of Whitehead plots in what became Seneca Village. His uncle, Methodist lay leader Samuel Stillwell, had owned adjacent land for years. AME Zion's Seneca Village cemetery is a sacred site that was the final resting place for hundreds of Black New Yorkers.



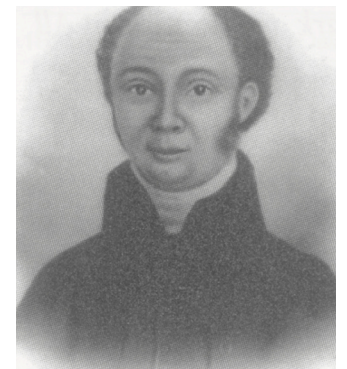
## Envisioning the AME Zion Cemetery

The *Envisioning Seneca Village* team created this model of how the cemetery might have looked by researching and comparing other roughly contemporaneous AME cemeteries in the northeast region, including in Rossville, Staten Island and Gloucester, New Jersey. We also considered African American burial practices more broadly, such as some uncovered at the earlier Manhattan African Burial Ground and others from oral histories.

This photograph depicts some of the gravestones at Mount Zion AME Church in Gloucester, NJ. The cemetery includes over 200 graves; some date back to the 1830s. Photo 1940.



**LAYING OF A CORNERSTONE.**—The corner stone of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church of Yorkville, was laid yesterday afternoon. It is situated in Eighty-fifth st., between Seventh and Eighth avs. The sermon on the occasion was preached by Rev. Christopher Rich, Superintendent of the African Churches, who also laid the corner stone. His text was a part of the 6th verse of the first chapter of the First Epistle of Peter. The box which was deposited in the corner stone contained a copy of the Bible, a copy of the Hymn book of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in America, a copy of the Discipline of the same Church, a letter with the names of the five trustees of this Church, and a copy of *The Tribune* and one of *The Sun*. The building will be 22x40 in size, will be built of wood, and painted white. The basement of it will be a school-room for the education of colored children. Toward fifty colored families reside in the neighborhood of this Church. There are thirty members in this Society, and the congregation usually numbers about 100 persons. Current preachers of the African Methodist Church, will supply the pulpit.



New-York Daily Tribune article from Aug. 5, 1853, describing the laying of the church building's cornerstone

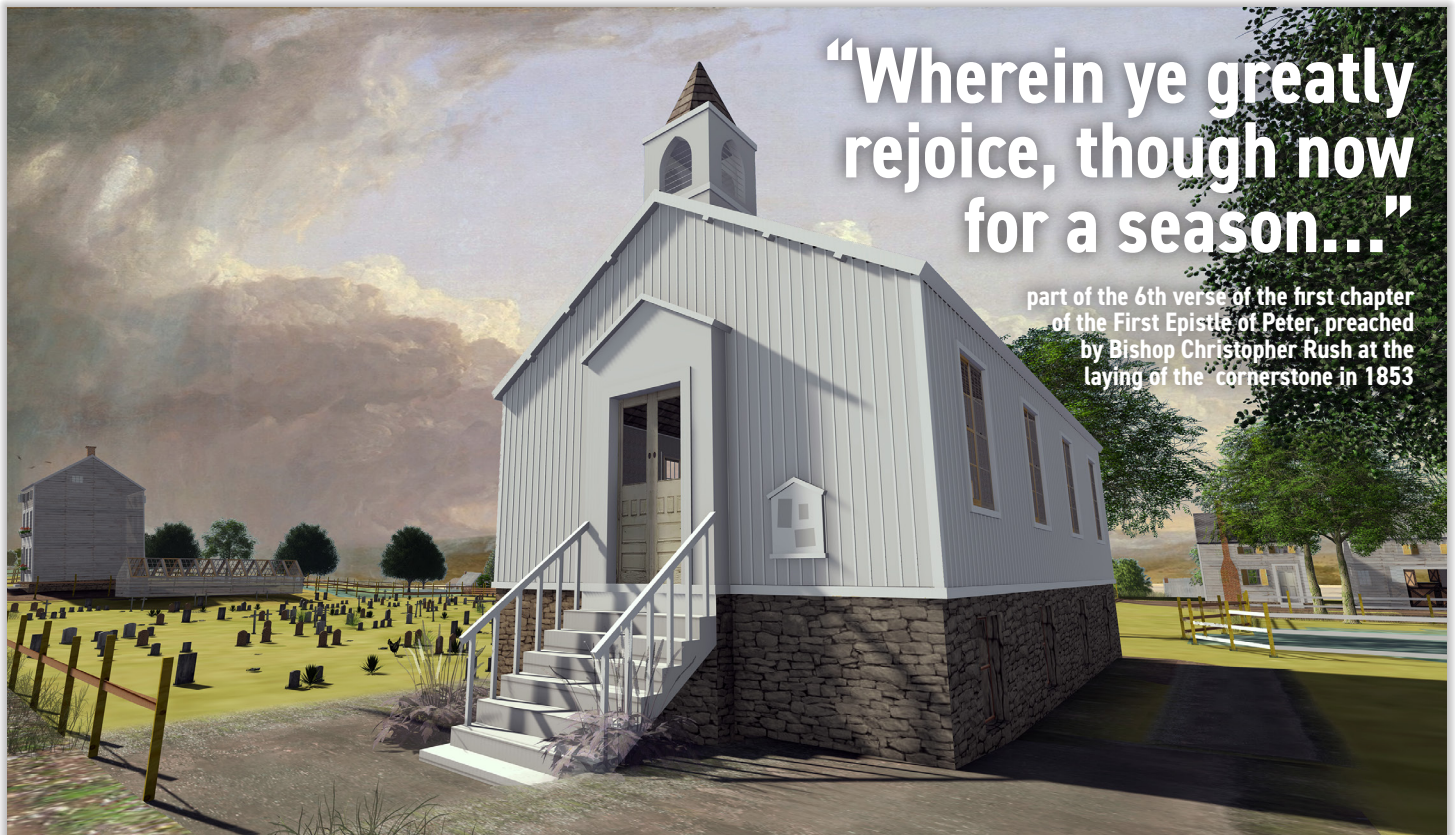
Drawing of Levin Smith, minister and trustee of the AME Zion Church. The only known portrait of a resident of Seneca Village (Collection of Mother AME Zion Church)

*Envisioning Seneca Village* combines historical and archaeological research with digital mapping and visualization to present an interactive 3D digital model of what Seneca Village might have looked like in 1855, about two years before its destruction to build Central Park. For more on the *Envisioning Seneca Village* project, please visit [envisioningsenecavillage.github.io](https://envisioningsenecavillage.github.io).



# AME ZION CHURCH

AME Zion purchased land in Seneca Village for a cemetery in 1825, but it was without a church building there for almost two decades. Members—including the Williams, McCollin, and Smith families—likely met for services in one another’s homes. Levin Smith (see reverse page) was an ordained minister, while lay people, such as the Williamses and McCollinses, were also important in the church. AME Zion’s democratic principles included women, who voted along with men on church decisions, unique among Methodist churches at the time. AME Zion finally constructed a church building in the village in 1853. This late date is strong evidence that residents did not anticipate the village’s coming destruction only four years later. A *New-York Daily Tribune* article (see reverse page) on laying the church’s cornerstone reported 100 congregants and described the future building as wooden, painted white, with a basement school room for the education of Black children. The 1856 Sage map, assessing properties the city would take to build Central Park, shows the building’s 22.4 x 40.4-foot footprint as well as a greenhouse on the western edge of AME Zion’s property, possibly owned by the neighboring Hampton family.



## Envisioning the AME Zion Church

To build the model of what the church might have looked like, the *Envisioning Seneca Village* team used information provided in the *New-York Daily Times* article and the 1856 Sage map, as well as comparison with other AME Zion churches constructed around the same time in the northeast. These included two featured in the photos here: St. David AME Zion Church, built in 1840, and Salem AME Zion Church, built in 1862.

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AMEZion.pdf](https://envisioningsenecavillage.github.io/pdf/AMEZion.pdf).



Salem AME Zion Church in Roslyn, NY, built in 1862. Photo circa 1900.



St. David AME Zion Church in Sag Harbor, NY, built 1840. Photo not dated.