St. Philips Episcopal Church Papers
[bulk 1940-1978]

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Biographical Note:
St. Philip’s was founded in the same year as the start of the Civil War and one year before the Emancipation Proclamation and only 23 years after the Diocese of Western New York was established. This ranks St. Philip’s as the seventh most senior African American congregation in the United States, following the historic African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, Philadelphia; St. James, Baltimore; St. Luke’s, New Haven; St. Philip’s, New York City, St. Mathews, Detroit and The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepard in Alabama.

During this period of much northern migration of emancipated slaves, Western New York, while a haven from slavery, was not without its racial conflicts. In 1863 One week before the infamous Civil War Draft Riots in New York City, Buffalo shippers tried to replace Irish longshoremen with African Americans. Angry mobs attacked and slew Blacks on the docks of Lake Erie and other parts of Buffalo. It was within this historical climate that about 30 parishioners met as the first Negro Episcopal Congregation of Buffalo.

The congregation selected and adopted the name St. Philip’s on July 9, 1861. From 1861 to 1865 St. Philip's was under the supervision of a white clergyman - Reverend Witherspoon, who conducted services and led the congregation until the congregation was able to call a full-time Rector.

The Reverend Samuel L. Berry of St. Luke’s, New Haven, Connecticut became the first black full-time Rector of St. Philip's Church, an independent colored congregation, in September of the year that the Civil War Ended - 1865. St. Philip's was incorporated in September 1866 and canonical consent was given by The Right Reverend Arthur Cleveland Coxe. The second Bishop of the Diocese of Western New York.

In 1865 Rev. Samuel Berry along with the Rev. James. T. Holly founded the “Protestant Episcopal Society for Promoting the Extension of the Church among Colored People”, this society eventually became the Union of Black Episcopalians, an organization that
fights to remove racism and encourage the growth of members with African roots in our church today. In July 1876, Reverend Joseph Robert Love became the rector of St. Philip's.

In the roaring twenties, the steel and automobile industries were booming in Buffalo. Airplanes were being built on Seneca Street and grain mills were helping to feed the country. St. Philip's grew steadily, and after the turn of the century felt the need for expansion. In 1921, under the leadership of The Reverend Edmund Bennett (1916–1923) and the vestry, our congregation moved to Goodell Street where we remained until 1974. Due to urban renewal projects in the neighborhood, the building on Goodell Street was scheduled to be demolished, and we were forced to relocate. We moved to our present location at Sussex Street and Fernhill Avenue. The property currently consists of the Church, its adjoining parish hall, the adjacent rectory and two adjacent vacant lots. The parish survived a parish hall fire in 1975, and in 1988 funded the restoration of its organ.

St. Philip's from its inception has been and continues to be a predominantly African-American congregation; and it remains the only parish in the Diocese of Western New York that can be so described. The congregation is a working class to middle class/professional and draws members from all over Buffalo and the immediate suburbs.

The story of St. Philip’s is God working through its people. St. Philip’s has always been the church home of many a humanitarian, artist, community leader and trail blazer. One example is Buffalo’s first African American Architect; John E. Brent. In 1926, Brent became the second African-American in history to design a YMCA for blacks; the Michigan Avenue YMCA. This now demolished edifice was the cultural center of Buffalo's African-American community at the time. Brent lived on Glenwood Avenue in Buffalo with his wife Neeton, and was active in St. Philip's Episcopal Church, earning the Bishop's Medal for meritorious service.

Another example is the late Geneva B. Scruggs, who in 1950 was confirmed as a member of St. Philip's and served the parish in many capacities including Church School Teacher, member of the Episcopal Church Women, and The Acolyte Mother's Guild. In 1968, Mrs. Scruggs became the first woman elected to the Vestry. She also served on the Board of St. Philip's Community Center and as its executive director. On the diocesan level Mrs. Scruggs was a member of the Committee for Restructuring the Diocese, Standing Committee and served as Secretary of the Central Erie Deanery. She was awarded Woman of the Year; Brotherhood Award; Community Award; Citizens Award. She was cited as Outstanding Church Woman and bestowed the Bishop’s Cross.

Yet another great example is the late Wilhelmina McAlpin Godfrey - a magnificent artist and humanitarian. As a youth Mrs. Godfrey took all the art classes available at Fosdick Masten Park High School, (now City Honors High School) but the Depression interrupted her art education until the mid-1940s, when she won scholarships to the Art
Institute of Buffalo and the Albright Art School. Her paintings from that era documented life on Buffalo's east side. In 1951, she organized and taught painting and drawing classes at the previously mentioned Michigan Avenue YMCA. She organized the weaving department at the University at Buffalo and was an instructor at its Creative Craft Center from 1967 to 1970. She was a founder and director of the Langston Hughes Center, organized and taught creative craft classes at St. Philip's Episcopal Church's Community Center. Her commissions included a triptych altar painting for St. Philip's Episcopal Church (destroyed in a fire) and a five-panel altar painting for St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Buffalo. In December 1994, the Burchfield-Penney Art Center's Art Committee voted to accept Wilhelmina's City Playground, 1949-50 for inclusion in the permanent collection. Mrs. Godfrey commissioned the artist to create our magnificent Christus Rex.

Mrs. Godfrey was a seventy-year member of St. Philip's Episcopal Church. She was married for fifty-eight years to another stalwart pillar of St. Philip’s, William Godfrey, Jr. Mrs. Godfrey organized the church's Girls Friendly Society in 1951, and was a past president of St. Philip's Episcopal Churchwomen. She also was a member of St. Philip's Community Center, past member of the Episcopal Diocese of Western New York's Church Mission of Help, and chairwoman of Episcopal Churchwomen for the Central Erie Deanery from 1968 to 1970.

We are proud of our heritage and a tradition influenced significantly by the late Father Osmond Brown (1923 – 1956). This patriarch became the first black Canon in the Episcopal Church of the United States. We strive to maintain our tradition of "High Church" worship and this tradition as a means of expressing our love of Jesus and our parish.

Father Kenneth Curry succeeded Father Brown in 1957 and continued to provide the leadership and guidance needed to take us through some very difficult years. Father Curry, for a period in his tenure, served as Dean of the 13 parishes in the Central Erie Deanery. During his rectorship, he started the St. Philip's Community Center with an after-school program for neighborhood children. The St. Philip's Community Center has been in continuous operation since its founding more than forty years ago.

The Right Reverend E. Don Taylor, in 1973 was invited by the Right Reverend Harold B. Robinson, Bishop of Western New York, to become the Rector of St. Philip's Church, Buffalo. He served the Parish for five years and during that time he started and developed the St. Philip's School of Music and Boys' Choir. His arrival at St. Philip's 1974 coincided with the move to our present location. He worked long and hard to reorganize the parish and to his credit began a movement of new outreach programs. Included in these was the Music School which operated for 10 years. At its prime, the Music School's Boys Choir toured Europe and placed 5th out of 16 at an international boys’
choir competition in Vienna, Austria. Fr. Taylor went on to become the Bishop of the Virgin Islands and presently serves as the Assistant Bishop of New York City.

The Reverend Walter Bryan (1979-1981) was active in community organizations and was particularly effective in programs for youth and Christian education for adults. The Food Pantry, established under his tenure, is still maintained today.

Under the leadership of The Reverend James Manning (1982–1987), the traditional "Sung Mass" flourished, vestments were restored, and new lay leadership was developed in the area of acolyte training and liturgical participation.

The Reverend Julius Jackson (1989–1995), remembered for his ministry to the sick and bereaved, trained and enhanced the role of Lay Eucharistic Ministers in the parish. During his tenure, African American hymns became a regular part of weekly worship through the use of the hymnal "Lift Every Voice and Sing II."

The Reverend D. Antonio Martin (1998–2001) worked to re-organize the ministries at St. Philip’s to more effectively carry out the mission. During his tenure our great sign greeting the community was constructed and placed on the corner of Fernhill and Grider Avenues.

St. Philip's is a predominantly African-American congregation and is the only parish in the Diocese of Western New York that can be so described. The congregation is a working class to middle class/professional and draws members from all over Buffalo and the immediate suburbs. During the 1920’s to 1940’s, people who had emigrated from the West Indies dominated the congregation, but today the congregation is predominantly native born African-American. There is still a West Indian flavor present, which makes St. Philip's a unique and interesting congregation. –History taken from the St. Philips Episcopal Church webpage.

Scope and Contents:
Baptisms; confirmations; communicants; burials; marriages; and minutes.

Inventory: See below.
Index and Introduction to

The Microfilmed

St. Philips Episcopal Church Papers
Buffalo, NY

(one roll)

Part of

The Buffalo Afro-American Collection
A joint project of
The Afro-American Historical Association of the Niagara Frontier Inc.
and
Buffalo State College

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*The Buffalo State College Regional History Collection

Copies of the microfilmed titles are housed at
The North Jefferson Branch Library
*The Buffalo State College Archives and
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The 16MM film was filmed with a 34X lens

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St. Philips Episcopal Church, Buffalo, New York, was organized in 1861. With the founding of St. Philips, Buffalo had three Afro-American congregations. The other two churches — one African Methodist and the other Baptist, were founded during the mid-1830s. The St. Philips' records which appear on this microfilm were obtained for filming through the offices of Father Robert G. Pope.

**Book No.** **Contents**

1. Minutes of Vestry Meetings, 1861 - 1867.


