



OLD KENT

A Publication of The Historical Society of Kent County, Inc.

P.O. BOX 665, CHESTERTOWN, MD 21620 • (410) 778-3499

VOLUME 9, NO. 2 - SUMMER 1992

Janes United Methodist Church, Then and Now

Three decades before Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves in the southern states, free blacks in Chestertown had united to establish their own place of worship. The roots of Janes United Methodist Church go back to April 28, 1831, when land for the original church was conveyed to the Trustees of Zion Methodist Episcopal Church of the Colored People of Chestertown by Thomas Cuff, "free man of color." Cuff had purchased the property for \$25 from Washington College Professor Peregrine Wroth three years earlier.

The first church was located at the lower end of Princess Street (now Queen Street), on the way to Quaker Neck. The first trustees were Samuel Rogers, Elimus Turner, Shadrack Browne, Thomas Cuff, David Jones, Philip Jones, William Smith, Peregrine Chambers, and Thomas Smith.

By the time of the Civil War the congregation had outgrown its first church, and plans were made to build a larger structure. Nearby land, on which the second Janes Church was to be built, was purchased from James A. and Matilda Pearce. On May 19, 1865, Chestertown business man George B. Westcott conveyed an acre of his land to Janes Church to be used as a burial ground. The first church was converted into a parsonage, *continued on page 2*

"My Dear Nannie" Society and the Role of Women in 19th Century Maryland and Washington D.C.

By Jenifer Grindle

The Historical Society recently acquired copies of the Smythe-Willson letters belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Strong, Sr. of Trumpington, the ancestral home of the Smythe family near Eastern Neck Island. The collection consists of over two hundred letters, most of them dating to the mid-1800s. This potentially valuable group of documents were studied by Jenifer Grindle during her spring internship and are currently being added to the catalogue in the Historical Society's library. They will soon be available for research.

Letter writing was one of the greatest occupations and pleasures of upper class women in the nineteenth century. Julia R. Compton, a teacher who conducted a private school near Holy Trinity Church in Georgetown, D.C. kept up a faithful and enduring correspondence with her former pupil, Anna Martha Young, who later became a governess herself. Separated for most of the year except for occasional "retreats" and "vacations," Julia and Anna relied on one another for "news of family, friends and events."

It is obvious that Julia had more than a mentor's interest in her former pupil, though her letters contain much didactic *continued on page 3*

Educational Outreach

The winners of the essay contest, "My Favorite Old Building in Kent County" are as follows:



ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

First Place:

Richard Shoge
Jamar Benard

Honorable Mention:

Doug Goodall
Tiffany Pelczar
Katie Kaylor
Melanie Sigler

MIDDLE SCHOOL

First Place: Ann Collier

Second Place: Peyton Beachy

GLENN TOSTEN was presented with the 1992 book award, given by the Historical Society to a graduating senior from Kent County High School who shows the most promise in history.

Janes Church

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and the second church was completed in 1866. In later years, the first church was used as an annex to the elementary school. It has since been moved from its original location on Queen Street to Calvert Street, where it is now a private residence. A plaque on the building marks it as the "First Church Building of the Janes United Methodist Church, formerly known as the Methodist Episcopal Church of the Colored People of Chestertown and as Zion Methodist Episcopal Church, established 1831."

The Delaware Annual Conference of the Methodist Church was organized on July 28, 1864. Bishop Edmund S. Janes

convened the fourth session of the Delaware Annual Conference at Zion M.E. Church in Chestertown on July 24, 1867. In the Bishop's honor, the second church was named Janes United Methodist Church.

Methodism flourished in Kent County in the 1860s and 1870s. In 1883, Janes reported a membership of 275 and a Sunday School of 180. At the 24th session of the Delaware Annual Conference in 1887, the Rev. William Frisby reported: "At Chestertown, we have a model church — fully up to the requirements of the times. In this church, system controls the work. Their meetings are good, and the members are filled with zeal and love for the welfare of the church." The report described "an excellent Sunday School of old and young,

with a good corp of teachers."

Economic depression in the 1890s produced some lean years for residents of the Eastern Shore. Fruit crops failed and oysters were scarce. When the Rev. John R. Holland began an eleven-year pastorate at Janes in 1904, the church was in debt and desperately in need of repairs. Under his leadership, the church was thoroughly renovated. Stained glass windows were added, a new carpet was installed, and an organ was purchased. A 1,000 pound bell, affectionately named "Big George," was acquired in 1909.

In 1914, plans were made to build a third Janes Church at the corner of Cross and Cannon Streets. The cornerstone for the new Janes United Methodist Church was laid on March 1 amid much celebration. Joy quickly turned to sorrow as fire consumed the second Janes Church one week later on March 8, 1914. The entire church building, including all records, was destroyed with the exception of "Big George."

Despite the loss, the people of Janes moved ahead under the Rev. Mr. Holland's leadership. On November 8, 1914, the third Janes United Methodist Church was dedicated.

Today, Janes Church stands on a prominent corner of Chestertown's Historic District. As such, it is the only black institutional building on a main street in any of Kent County's towns. At the intersection of Cross and Cannon Streets, Janes is a focal building for three distinct neighborhoods: the Cross Street commercial district, Scott's Point, and the Cannon Street neighborhood.

In addition to traditional church functions, Janes has been a center of community activity. Recently it has housed the Neighborhood Food Program and Community Action Program. The Vista Volunteer for Housing and Housing Crisis Task Force both operates from offices within the Church. Janes is the site of the quarterly meetings of the Hospital Auxillary, the monthly meetings of the NAACP, and the annual dinner for elderly people sponsored by the Warriors Social Club.

Three years ago, it was discovered that



The roots of Janes United Methodist Church go back to April 28, 1831, when land for the original church was conveyed to the Trustees of Zion Methodist Episcopal Church of the Colored People of Chestertown by Thomas Cuff, "free man of color." Methodism flourished in Kent County in the 1860s and 1870s.

Janes Church was in danger of structural collapse. When architectural analysis confirmed that the church needed extensive structural repair, the congregation immediately began to raise funds for its renovation. The "Friends of Janes" Committee was quickly formed to involve the entire Chestertown community, black and white, in the fund-raising effort.

Construction work at Janes began in March of this year. A new steel truss system has been added to support the roof framing. All exterior windows will be restored, a new roof will be added, and exterior walls and safety railings will be repaired. All of the restoration work is essential to preserve the building from continued deterioration and for public safety.

When the renovation work on Janes is complete, the lower floor will serve as a Family Resource Center. After school activities, including help with homework, will be available to the children of Chestertown. Volunteers will offer learn-to-read instruction. Counseling will be available for family issues such as parenting skills and financial matters.

Janes United Methodist Church had its beginnings as a grass roots community-wide effort, involving both black and white citizens of Chestertown. It is appropriate that the renovation effort taking place more than 160 years later is following much the same pattern. With our help, Janes will be preserved for many future generations to enjoy.

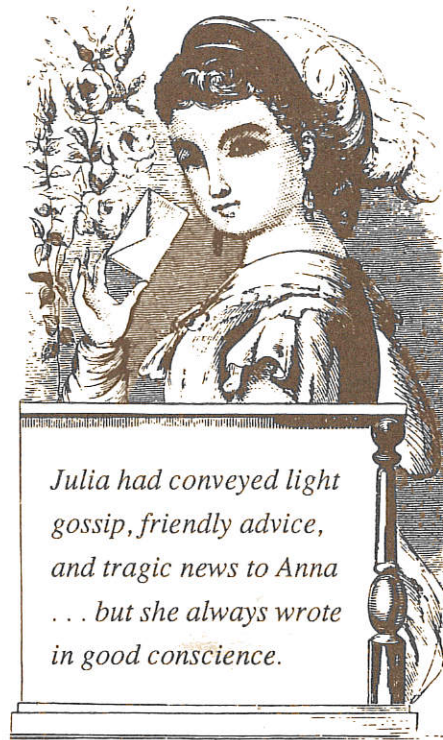
OLD KENT

Vol. 9, No. 2

Summer 1992

Editor: Nancy Nunn

OLD KENT is published and mailed quarterly by the Historical Society of Kent County, Inc. as a benefit of membership in the Society. Address inquiries or contributions to Old Kent, Historical Society of Kent County, P.O. Box 665, Chestertown, MD 21620. Tel. (410) 778-3499



Letter Writing

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advice. She seems to have also assumed a motherly role toward the seventeen year old Anna, whom she affectionately calls "Nannie." In 1838, Julia writes: "I have not yet resigned my office of Mentor in your regard, but indeed you are as dear to me now as when I first saw you a little pale orphan in your mourning habiliments." Anna's own mother had died in 1833, and while her father was still living, he evidently did not maintain a household where his young daughter could reside.

Out of touch with her family and relatively secluded both at her Uncle's estate in Prince George's County, Elmlly, and at Trumpington where she later served as a governess, Anna depended on letters for information on the well-being of her loved ones.

Letter writing was also the dominant means of communication because travel was difficult, even in the water-oriented Maryland region. Inclement weather conditions often prevented river and Chesapeake travel, postponing visits indefinitely. Collecting "news," much of it harmless gossip and detailed descriptions of societal events, was consequently

an important task for a dutiful correspondent. Julia spends much time relating to Anna which of the young ladies in church were considered prettiest and the most fashionable.

She also has her share of complaints about the cumbersome fashion of the day, particularly the large bustle or padding worn at the back to puff out the skirt, which had become stylish.

Commenting on the bustle she says, "in my humble opinion the ladies appear to a much greater advantage when seated than when walking, which may be attributed to the enormous hump, which greatly disfigures their persons and the manner in which the length of the drepes has been curtailed: it is by no means unusual to see a lady support by really ugly feet (excuse me for not using the polite term of Doct. W)."

This passage hints at several views generally held at that time. Women's fashion in this period was characterized by ridiculous demands which resulted in the "enormous hump" Julia mentions, and which later caused women's skirts to extend to five yards in circumference and led fashionable ladies to cinch their waists unnaturally with whalebone corsets to eighteen inches.

A general conservativeness of dress also marked the Victorian period, when arms and legs were called limbs, when indecent piano legs were covered in bloomers, and when it was scandalous for a young woman like Anna to consider shortening her dress length, thus showing her feet.

The figure of wife and mother was exalted during the nineteenth century. A woman was expected to be a submissive and loving servant to her husband, and was given little independence. Julia shares this view of the wifely role. While she has reservations about the new wife of a male friend, she writes that the woman "improves upon an intimate acquaintance and her attachment to her lord naturally draws the affection of his relatives to her."

One wife she idealizes is described as a "silly thing" who appeared to be "a spoiled and consequently a selfish child"