



Detail of an 1884 watercolor of the original Zoar ME Church home on Brown Street above Fourth. Note the “for sale” sign above the door, as the congregation had moved to its new site at 12th and Melon Streets the previous year. *Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.*

# *African American Identity and the Sunday School at Zoar ME Church*

by Dr. Carolynne H. Brown (2011)

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When Absalom Jones and Richard Allen led a group of African Americans out of St. George's ME Church in Philadelphia sometime around 1787, a small group who did not agree with their decision to leave stayed behind.<sup>1</sup> St. George's African American members had already been worshipping in various homes separately from the white members during

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<sup>1</sup>Several dates are significant in the chronology of African American religious independence in Philadelphia and the variation of these dates has led to some confusion for historians seeking to identify a singularly decisive moment when an independent black church was formed. To complicate matters, Allen does not give the exact date he, Jones and the others walked out of St. George's in his account of the events leading up to the founding of the AME Church, but simply discusses it in his explanation of how the Free African Society, a mutual aid society, was formed. My decision to use 1787 as the approximate date they left St. George's is based on both AME tradition and black Protestant Episcopal tradition and documentation, which place the event in 1787. However, in her research on African Methodists in Philadelphia, Dee Andrews argues 1792 as

the week, but joined them for worship at the church on Sunday mornings. Those who chose not to leave with Jones and Allen continued this practice until 1794 when they were organized for separate Sunday worship under the auspices of a mission church known as Zoar.<sup>2</sup> The often-told story of Jones' and Allen's departure from St. George's is regarded as an epoch in black history. It is frequently hailed as a defining moment when black men and women determined to stand against racial discrimination and re-imagine Methodism for their own purposes. Jones became the first black Protestant Episcopal priest, but Allen, loyal to his Wesleyan heritage, eventually founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC), to be controlled solely by and for African Americans. Unfortunately, the historical emphasis on Jones' and Allen's departure minimizes the steps African Americans in Philadelphia were already taking toward liberation prior to 1787, and nearly eliminates the tale of Zoar's members and their equal, albeit different, fight for the freedom to worship how and where they pleased. Though Zoar's members reacted in the same manner as the followers of Allen and Jones – by pulling away from the white congregation to meet on their own for worship – little attention has been given to their history because no new movement was formed, and frankly, because its early records and activities were intertwined with a white church that deemed it insignificant.<sup>3</sup>

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the departure date, based on financial records at St. George's and a comment in Asbury's journal. Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen. To Which is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Containing a Narrative of the Yellow Fever in the Year of Our Lord 1793: With an Address to the People of Colour in the United States* (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, 1833); George F. Bragg, Jr., *The First Negro Organization: The Free African Society Established on April 12th, 1787* (Baltimore: G.F. Bragg, 1924); Dee Andrews, "The African Methodists of Philadelphia, 1794-1802," in Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, eds., *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1993), 145-155; and Alfred T. Day III, "Creaking Timbers and Conflicting Traditions: Richard Allen and the St. George Walkout," in *Annals of Eastern Pennsylvania*, 4 (2007), 2-11.

<sup>2</sup>When Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of their wickedness, God allowed Lot and his family, because of their righteousness and that of Abram's, to flee to the small nearby town of Zoar (Genesis 19:18-22).

<sup>3</sup>In *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African American Methodists* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), J. Gordon Melton provides a general description of Zoar's early history, which does not need to be repeated here. Melton primarily draws from secondary sources and the unpublished works of Joshua E. Licorish, Zoar's pastor from 1957-1981, and Janet Harrison Shannon who in 1988 presented her paper, "Faith of Our Mothers and Fathers: Resurrecting the Histories of Early Black Churches," to the 11th Annual Conference on Black History at Wilkes Barre,

Called “the oldest continuing black United Methodist church in the United States,” early Zoar initially might appear antithetical to Afrocentrism.<sup>4</sup> In form and practice, Zoar followed Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) prescriptions for worship, teaching and meeting. On the surface, Zoar’s nineteenth-century class leader reports, Sunday morning worship services, women’s benevolent organization events, Sabbath school programs and countless other activities are practically indistinguishable from their white counterparts. They used the same hymnals, *Discipline* and Sunday school materials as the white churches. Zoar’s first members could be construed as non-progressive because they did not express solidarity with Allen’s group by leaving St. George’s and the Philadelphia MEC Conference. Indeed, their decision to stay within the borders of a white-led denomination cost them the respect of some of their black Methodist peers and made them vulnerable to the charge that they willingly subjugated themselves to whites. A deeper look, however, reveals that Zoar’s members were advocates for change and black humanity. On May 9, 1822 Robert Green, a member of Zoar, wrote a letter to the MEC Bishops and conference stating,

that after being a member of Methodist Society upwards of thirty years and a Trustee a[nd] member of Zoar Church and after applying to Conference for the liberty of Transacting our own Temporal business in Zoar Church which they readily granted to us 21st May 1821, I was fully disowned by Mr. James Smith. I lay this before [you] for your consideration.<sup>5</sup>

The record is unclear as to how Green’s case was resolved, but it is known that Rev. James Smith, a white minister who played a key role in the agitation with Richard Allen contributing to Bethel’s separation from the Methodist Episcopal Church, was expelled from the ministry in

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Pennsylvania. Melton has filed copies of these papers at the Institute for Study of American Religion in Santa Barbara, California; they can also be found in “Zoar File,” in the archives at St. George’s, Philadelphia. Licorish was an astute historian and civil rights activist. Some of his works can be found at African Zoar UM Church, Philadelphia, the Schomburg Center in Harlem and the United Methodist Archives at Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. A short description of Zoar’s origins is included in J. H. Graham, *Black United Methodists: Retrospect and Prospect* (New York: Vantage Press, 1979), 57-58.

<sup>4</sup>Graham, 57.

<sup>5</sup>Green’s letter was duplicated in *African Zoar United Methodist Church 175th Anniversary Program*, in “Zoar File,” in the Archives at St. George’s Church, Philadelphia.

1839.<sup>6</sup> Members of Zoar – people like Green – were not passive in their relationship with the larger MEC, and asserted their right to govern themselves. They separated for worship, but they maintained their connection with the MEC, believing God would use them as agents of reform from within. Zoar’s members were firmly tied to their American Methodist heritage, which began as an egalitarian movement, initially opposed slavery, cultivated lay leaders, and ministered to social needs. They refused to abandon the communal identity and spiritual memory Methodism had helped them to foster.

In order to explore some of the creative ways Zoar’s early members used their Methodist identity to nurture a liberating religious community for African Americans, this article specifically examines how Zoar members used Sunday school and MEC Sunday school materials not only to further their objectives as Methodist Christians, but to advance as a race, particularly in the difficult and oppressive aftermath of emancipation and civil war. Using Sunday school as an historic lens, we can look into a range of important topics related to both African American and Methodist experience.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUNDAY SCHOOL

When Zoar established its Sunday school in 1842, only five years after they became a fully independent church, they were establishing what they saw as the primary agency for teaching their children skills needed for their “elevation.” This included reading skills, but also “decency, honesty and industry and above all the great and all important duty of the salvation of the[ir] souls.”<sup>7</sup> For this purpose, they were “convinced of the importance of the Sunday School as a great reforming and Christianizing agency, and an indispensable auxiliary to the Church.”<sup>8</sup> Certainly white churches of the era placed great value on the Sunday school; however, unlike their African American peers, white children were not denied access to public schools. From the time they were organized, black churches run by free Blacks always saw the church, the center of black community life, as the place to educate their members. In his social study, *The Philadelphia Negro*, W. E. B. Du Bois explained, “The Negro churches were the birthplaces of Negro schools

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<sup>6</sup>Melton, 100, 121.

<sup>7</sup>“Sunday School Report,” 1866, *Delaware Conference Minutes, 1864-1888*, 48.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, “Sunday School Report,” 1865, 27.

and of all agencies which seek to promote the intelligence of the masses.”<sup>9</sup> One of their primary concerns was teaching people, and especially children, to read. The Committee on Education told the Delaware Conference in 1866,

We regard the higher attainments of literature to be of such paramount importance to our youths and the disciples of the Gospel, that we will do all in our power to aid this cause, for without it our race, must forever remain in ignorance and go to destruction... the instruction and elevation of the youth depends on their education in a great measure.<sup>10</sup>

Nineteenth-century ideas about moral and intellectual development were tightly entwined, so church leaders put great stock in literacy. But the powerful motivation to read was inherited from an African value system “established in Islamic Africa and in areas touched by Christianity” where literacy was prized “as a means of acquiring the knowledge stored in books.”<sup>11</sup> Thomas L. Johnson, a slave who became a Baptist minister after slavery, remembered his mother “would talk of Africa” and the freedom black people had there before they were stolen and sold into slavery. He reminisced, “My mother’s heartfelt desire seems to have been that I should be taught to read and write; and no opportunity was lost in trying to inspire me to look forward to freedom and an education.”<sup>12</sup> Most African Americans were eager to read; during slavery many were forbidden from reading and writing, so understandably, these skills were esteemed as a privilege of freedom. As Mary James, an ex-slave from Virginia put it, “No one was taught to read or write. There was no church on the farm. No one was allowed to read the

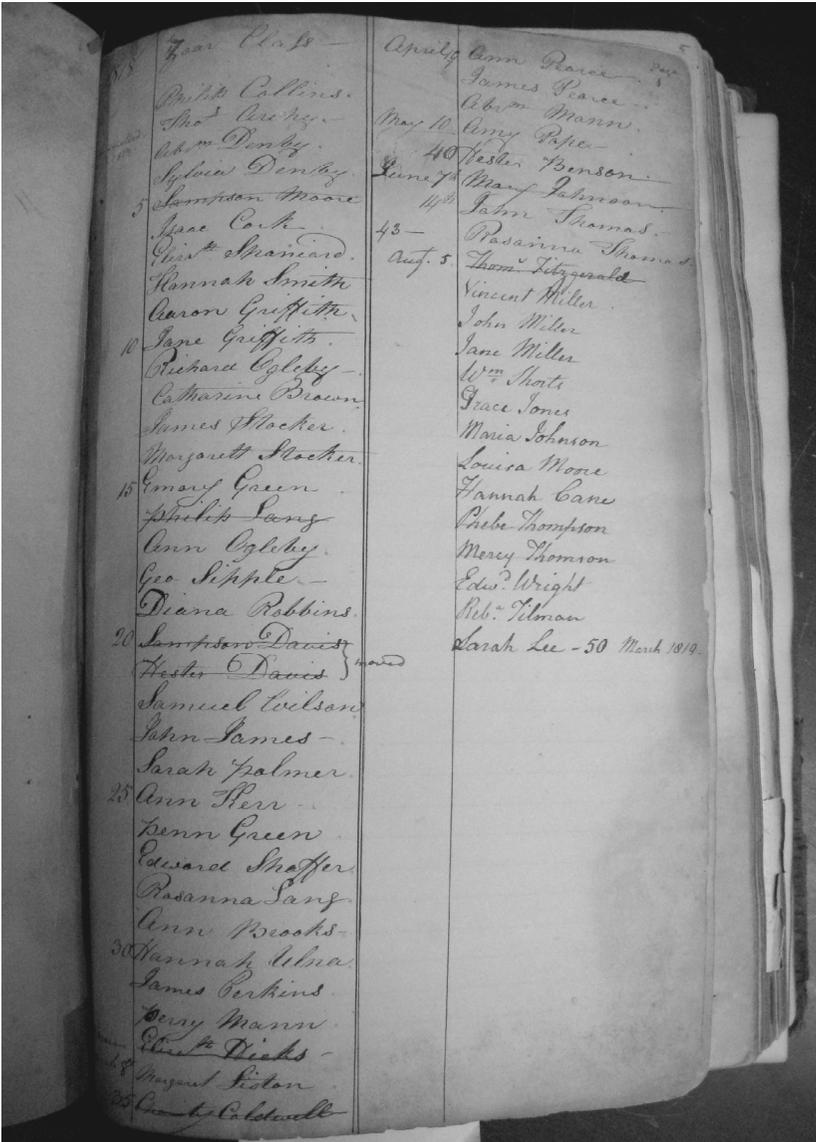
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<sup>9</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study. With a New Introduction by Elijah Anderson, Together with a Special Report on Domestic Service by Isabel Eaton* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899), 207.

<sup>10</sup>“Report of the Committee on Education,” 1867, *Delaware Conference Minutes, 1864-1888*, 80.

<sup>11</sup>Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 85.

<sup>12</sup>Thomas L. Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave, or the Story of My Life in Three Continents* (Bournemouth: W. Mate & Sons, Limited and London: Christian Workers’ Depot, 1909), 4. Documenting the American South, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/johnson1/johnson.html> (accessed November 15, 2008).



List of members of "Zoar Class," 1818. This list was found upside down at the back of a book of class members from St. George's for the same year.

Courtesy of historic St. George's United Methodist Church, Philadelphia.

Bible or anything else.”<sup>13</sup> Black ME churches held the conviction that they were directly responsible for “the great and important worth of evangelizing and instructing millions of fellow beings, a majority of whom have heretofore been deprived of an intelligent knowledge of the revelation of the Gospel of the Savior.” Consequently, they felt it was

the duty of ministry first, as a body in conference assembled, and second, as individual Pastors and preachers, having in charge, measurably, not only the spiritual but also the temporal well-being of our People to recognize, sustain, and extend the principals of a liberal and practical education among the masses.<sup>14</sup>

In the years that followed the Civil War, they would unequivocally state, “education is of the most essential entity for the elevation and salvation of our people, both in this world and in that which is to come.”<sup>15</sup> At Zoar, like many other nineteenth-century black churches, the Sunday school was the primary means for educating their flock.

In 1863, Zoar’s Sabbath school boasted “14 teachers, 84 Scholars, [and] 400 Volumes.”<sup>16</sup> Books were an important acquisition for Sunday schools; as one black Methodist put it, “it has been said that the true university of our days is a collection of books.”<sup>17</sup> According to Isaiah Broughton, Zoar’s pastor and a local preacher, Zoar was “in a very flourishing condition,” at this time with “173 members and 12 probationers.”<sup>18</sup> As southerners made their way to Philadelphia in the 1870s and 1880s,

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<sup>13</sup>Interview with Mary Moriah Anne Susanna James, ex-slave, by Rogers at 618 Haw St., Baltimore, September 1937, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938*, Maryland Narratives, Volume VIII, 39; [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=080/mesn080.db&recNum=39&itemLink=D?mesnbib:19:/temp/-ammem\\_8Sq:](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=080/mesn080.db&recNum=39&itemLink=D?mesnbib:19:/temp/-ammem_8Sq:) (accessed January 20, 2009).

<sup>14</sup>“Report on Education,” 1876, *Delaware Conference Minutes, 1864-1888*, 336.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, “Report on Education,” 1874, 288.

<sup>16</sup>*Minutes of the Seventh Colored Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Held at Wilmington, August 6, 1863*, (Philadelphia: Collins, 1863), 8. Zoar’s 400 volumes were most likely used by the Sunday school and for a lending library. An 1844 catalogue of the Zoar Sabbath School Library and a circulation record are included in the *American Negro Historical Society Collection, 1790-1905* at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP). HSP also contains an independent study done by Margaret Jerrido on April 27, 1981 entitled “Sabbath Schools of the African Methodist Episcopal Church: History, Purpose, Accomplishments,” which provides 19th-century library lists from several black churches.

<sup>17</sup>Mifflin W. Gibbs, *Shadow and Light: An Autobiography* (Washington, DC, 1902; repr., New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968), 167.

<sup>18</sup>*Minutes of the Seventh Colored Annual Conference*, 5.

Zoar's membership increased at a significant rate, increasing the size of the Sabbath school as well. By 1870, it had grown to "195 members and 28 probationers" with "16 Officers and Teachers" and "128 Scholars."<sup>19</sup> These numbers continued to climb over the next fifteen years.

## TOOLS FOR TEACHING

To organize such an entity, particularly one with such high aims, the proper materials, structure, tools and training were needed. While black ME churches had different if not more difficult goals to achieve through Sunday school than whites did, they nevertheless found the MEC Sunday school materials beneficial to their purpose. Church records indicate that by the 1870s Zoar was using a uniform-lesson system developed by John Heyl Vincent for the Methodists called *Berean Lessons*.<sup>20</sup> These lessons "were predicated on the assumption that students would remain in school for many years, that they would grow gradually in religious knowledge, and that conversion would be a minor aspect of the overall experience."<sup>21</sup> These type of lessons ushered in a new style of teaching to Sunday schools in the 1870s, leading to what has been called the "second birth" of the Sunday school movement.<sup>22</sup>

Perfectly timed for black churches like Zoar whose classrooms were swelling with recently emancipated slaves who had migrated from the south, these lessons utilized the techniques of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi who advocated a teaching style that was nurturing, required students to participate actively and learn through the senses, and began with the simple elements of a subject before progressing to abstract concepts. His method has been called "the education of the people as people, an education reaching all classes."<sup>23</sup> Pestalozzi emphasized early childhood learning and believed women, with their thoughtful insight and ability to nurture, were natural educators. This idea coincided well with an Africanized Christianity descended from traditional African religion, which "accorded greater recognition to the mystical power of

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<sup>19</sup>"Statistical Table," 1870, *Delaware Conference Minutes*, 1864-1888, 145.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, "Presiding Elder Report, Philadelphia District," 1880, 60.

<sup>21</sup>James E. Kirby, Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, *The Methodists* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 211.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>Roger De Guimps, *Pestalozzi: His Life and His Work*, trans. J. Russell (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), viii.

women” and maintained that women’s “special inspiration qualified them for various leadership positions.”<sup>24</sup>

For an African American culture based in oral tradition, a teaching method founded on sensory experience was ideal. Learning through singing was an important aspect of Pestalozzi’s method, one that Vincent readily incorporated into the *Berean Lessons*. In Sunday school, music was used to engage students and balance out the literary and cognitive aspects of learning. To a people long treated as mere bodies without souls, the popularity of Pestalozzi’s holistic method and its incorporation into the church’s teaching was an affirmation of black humanity. Music was used as a means for uniting black feeling with learning, upholding what James H. Cone has called “the inseparable bond that exists between black life and black art.”<sup>25</sup> Practically speaking, Sunday school lessons alternated singing with other learning activities to both reinforce lessons and refresh the pupils. As one songbook put it, “singing, when it can be properly introduced, forms an interesting addition to the other exercises, in whatever form they may be conducted.”<sup>26</sup> With Pestalozzi’s method, teachers were never to “permit dull, lifeless singing,” and students were urged to clap or make some other percussive movement with their body to internalize the beat of the music.<sup>27</sup> These musical practices in the Sunday school were in keeping with West African religious practice where

Religious beliefs are carried into action through ritual. Closely interwoven with the ritual experience of West African peoples is the vibrant pattern of music. Dancing, drumming, and singing play a constant and integral part in the worship of the gods and ancestors.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 12.

<sup>25</sup>James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972, repr., Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 5.

<sup>26</sup>George W. Pratt and J.C. Johnson, *Pestalozzian School Song Book* (Boston: Geo. P. Reed & Co., 1855), 6, School of Theology Archives, Boston University, Boston.

<sup>27</sup>Edward L. White and J. Edgar Gould, *The Wreath of School Songs; Consisting of Songs, Hymns and Chants, with Appropriate Music: Designed for the Use of Common Schools, Seminaries, &c. &c. to Which Are Added the Elements of Vocal Music. Arranged According to the Pestalozzian System of Instruction; with Numerous Exercises, Intended to Supersede (in Part) the Necessity of the Black-Board* (Boston: Benjamin B. Mussey & Company, 1848), 74, School of Theology Archives, Boston University, Boston.

<sup>28</sup>Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 15.

The Sunday school design of using music to promote learning was well-suited to black churchgoers. Sunday school music was a powerful tool in African American hands working to promote their own unique goals.

Another aspect to Vincent's lessons for the ME church were tools available to help teachers master the Pestalozzi technique, develop their teaching skills and learn to use "blackboards, illustrations, objects, and music in teaching."<sup>29</sup> He developed a teacher training course to be taught during the Sunday school hour and granted diplomas to those who completed it. Teachers could attend conventions to hone their skills and bolster their enthusiasm, could subscribe to magazines, which "offered detailed instructions on how to teach Sunday school classes using the techniques borrowed from the new state teachers colleges," and could access teaching guides, advice books and newspapers.<sup>30</sup> In addition, students received leaflets with each week's lesson, which was published weekly in secular newspapers.<sup>31</sup>

The superintendent or director of the Sunday school held a position of honor, generally reserved for a man known for his administrative skills in the business world. In 1870, William H. Thomas, Zoar's Sabbath school superintendent, served alongside some of the most well-known superintendents of the period: "Lewis Miller, the inventor and industrialist, John D. Rockefeller, the oil magnate, and John Wanamaker, the Philadelphia department store tycoon."<sup>32</sup> The Methodist Episcopal Church Sunday school movement of the 1870s offered a fountain of resources for aspiring African Americans learning to teach and administrate, as well as to read. Further, it provided nearly endless opportunities for success, achievement, personal growth and the development of self-confidence.

When white people tried to "dehistoricize black existence, to foreclose the possibility of a future defined by the African heritage," African Americans turned to commemorative services, replete with music and recitation, to tell and preserve their story.<sup>33</sup> An extant program entitled, *Twenty-eighth Anniversary Celebration of the Zoar ME Church Sabbath School (1870)* provides a great example of how Zoar dovetailed its Sunday school ministry with its love for communal memory-making

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<sup>29</sup>*The Methodists*, 207.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 23.

events.<sup>34</sup> Though space precludes analyzing the program here, artifacts like this reveal how Zoar's members filtered Methodist resources like teaching methods and songs through a race-conscious sieve, re-appropriating them to serve the needs of the African American community. It also gives insight into how Zoar nurtured a culture of participation. As part of an oral culture, church leaders knew Sabbath school singing was a valuable tool for engaging church members and parents in the educational process and for fostering a sense of joint ownership in church activities. In keeping with an African storytelling tradition, Zoar's Sabbath school celebration was an opportunity for members of Philadelphia's black community to come together to acknowledge common goals and sustain "black cultural solidarity in the context of a racist culture."<sup>35</sup> Through the songs and ritual of the Sabbath school program, members of Zoar articulated a community identity that valued the needs and accomplishments of black people.

Zoar's members used Sunday school, like all aspects of church life, to forge a religious community that simultaneously held tight to a Methodist heritage while remaining true to an African American identity. Du Bois expressed this type of duality in terms of a "double consciousness," saying African Americans live in "the world of the white man" but can also step "within the Veil," to explore "the recesses – the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls."<sup>36</sup> Zoar's pastors and leaders chose to use MEC forms and materials in Sunday school, however, they did so sensitively and purposefully, powerfully reinforcing their own views and ideals and that of their congregation. Behind "the Veil," they celebrated themselves and bared their souls.

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<sup>34</sup>Twenty-Eighth Anniversary of the Zoar ME Sabbath School, *Sunday Afternoon, April 24, 1870 at 2 1/2 O'Clock, PM In the Church, Brown Street, above Fourth* (Philadelphia: Senseman & Son, 1870), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

<sup>35</sup>Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., "Of the Black Church and the Making of a Black Public," in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 340.

<sup>36</sup>W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903, repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 1-2.