



# Echoes of the

*The South Jersey communities built with the joy of freed slaves struggle to keep pace in a modern world.*

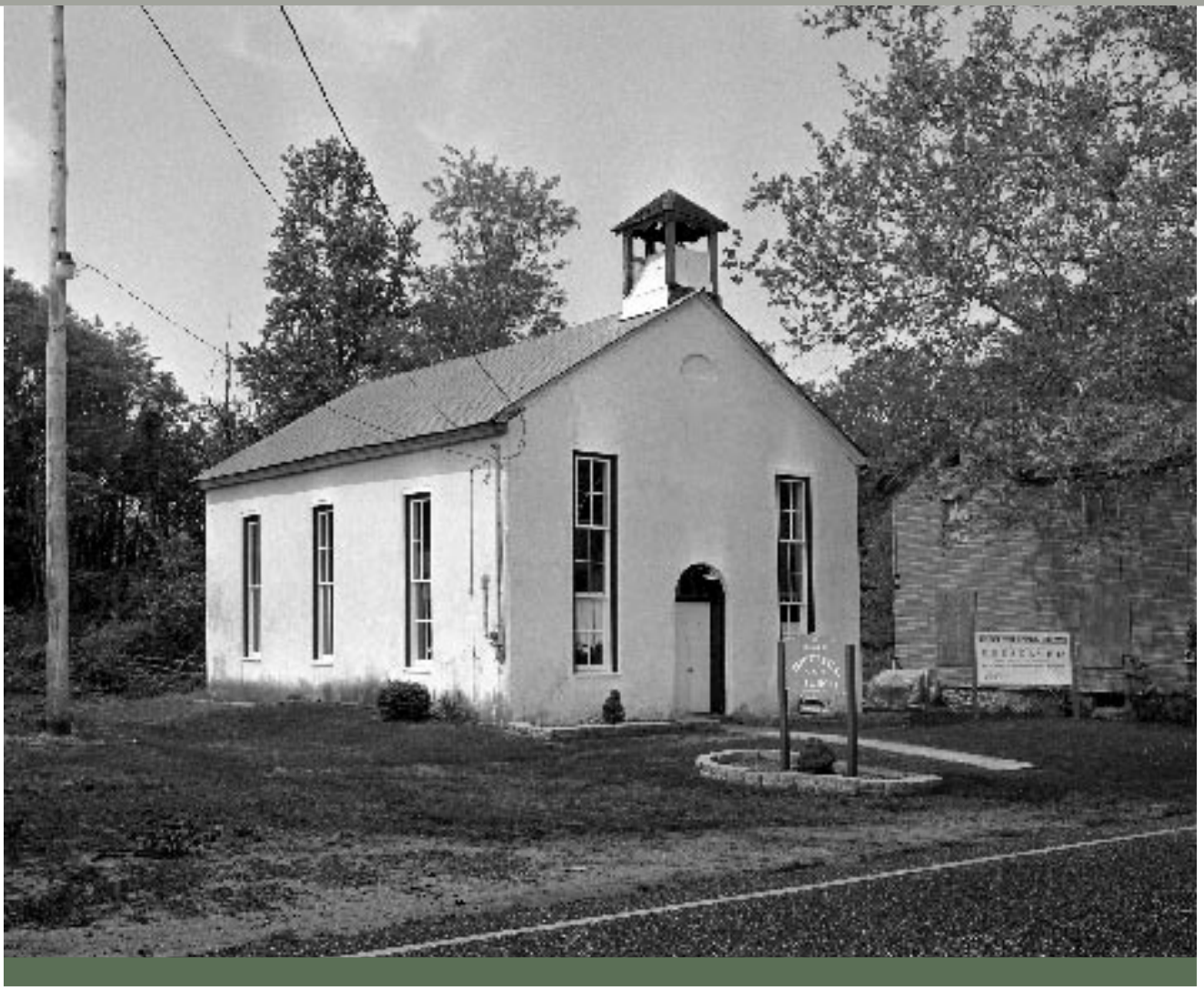
BY CLEMENT ALEXANDER PRICE

**N**OAMI MORRIS STOOD STURDY AND CONFIDENT at the center of Historic Bethel Othello African American Episcopal Church in the historic black settlement of Springtown in Cumberland County, New Jersey. It was July 17, 2005. Standing in front of the first pews she spoke about the history of the church, which was started in 1810. It was her church for sure, a sacred space where she had spent all of her life as a loyal and active parishioner.

# Past



As church trustee and steward, Ms. Morris, who is seventy, knew of the church's distant role as a humble place where blacks escaping enslavement along the Underground Railroad found safety and helping hands. She remembered it as the center of an area where local blacks forged a community that remembered the past and prepared them for uncertain future. Naomi Morris lamented the declining numbers who worshipped there or lived nearby. Springtown, she said, is



not what it used to be. Only five still attend Sunday morning service. It was an extraordinary and memorable presentation by a woman who symbolizes an important part of New Jersey's heritage through her strength of character and deep convictions about a community's faith in itself.

The journey that took us to Naomi Morris and her church began at Monmouth University. We were scheduled to leave the bucolic campus just after lunch on July 17, 2005. There were twenty-five us, mostly public school teachers from across New Jersey. Not knowing it at the time, we were





**FAR LEFT:**

**Bethel Othello A.M.E. Church  
Springtown, New Jersey, 2005**

Tat augait nis dolesse molorperiure euis  
duismolor sissis dui tet pratie min hendre dit  
exero digna feusmod magna conse.

**CENTER, TOP TO BOTTOM:**

**Audrey Lackey Real Estate Office  
Whitesboro, New Jersey, 1989**

Tat augait nis dolesse molorperiure euis  
duismolor sissis dui tet pratie min hendre dit  
exero digna feusmod.

**Michelle Washington Wilson  
Newtonville, New Jersey, 2001**

Tat augait nis dolesse molorperiure euis  
duismolor sissis dui tet pratie min hendre.

**Paul Reynolds**

**President, Male-Tones Gospel Singers,  
1989**

Tat augait nis dolesse molorperiure euis  
duismolor sissis dui tet pratie min hendre dit  
exero digna feusmod magna conse.

**RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM:**

**Adat Beyt Mosheh Congragation  
Near Elwood, New Jersey, 2002**

Tat augait nis dolesse molorperiure euis  
duismolor sissis dui tet pratie min hendre dit  
exero digna feusmod.



about to have a memorable day, the kind that can lead individuals onto a higher plane of understanding the power of place and the tenacity of memory. We were heading into territory unknown to most of us, into places and the lives of citizens that were forged by anonymous African Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We were about to discover places and people almost forgotten in contemporary New Jersey's rapidly changing way of life.

We boarded the bus during a driving rainstorm, one of those bad weather days, the kind that seems as if it would last for a week. I did not have an umbrella, but that was hardly a surprise. I never seem to have an umbrella when I need one the most. But that's another story. Mainly, I was pleased that I was not the tour guide on a rain drenched bus ride across a huge swath of Southern New Jersey. Everyone knows bad weather can imperil what normal people will put up with on a tour, even a tour as this one promised to be.

Our journey began on the fourth day of a weeklong, residential summer teachers' seminar sponsored by the New Jersey Council for the Humanities. For well over a decade, the Council has made it possible for thousands of New Jersey teachers to enroll in scores of seminars informed by new knowledge in the humanities on the human experience.

The teachers enrolled in my seminar were there, at Monmouth University, to explore the theme *A Reconsidered Past: New Scholarship in African American History*. Five young scholars conversant with what some still call the new African American Historical Scholarship had so far given lectures. Their approach to the past, which has been in vogue since the 1960s, emphasizes the cultural foundations of black life and its survival in slavery and freedom, the importance of gender and social class, as well as the centrality of memory and agitation in understanding the unique contributions of blacks to American civilization.

In tackling such issues, the teachers had read several articles and books and participated in critical debates on the distant past of West Africans caught up in the Atlantic slave trade, the rise and fall of American slavery, and the creativity of modern black American society. The teachers were diverse—they were intergenerational, inter-ethnic and interracial. In short, they were

remarkably representative of New Jersey's teachers. A lively group they were, as teachers tend to be. As the seminar leader, I claimed credit for deciding upon the visiting scholars, shaping the curriculum, and giving the seminar's keynote lecture on Sunday night. But, thank God, I was not the tour guide.

Within a half hour of our travel across rain soaked roads, through what was once farmland, we rode pass upscale residential subdivisions. Such housing has brought upwardly mobile families into South Jersey; it has also changed forever the geography and demography of the state's southernmost counties.

We picked up our guest speaker and tour guide, Wendel White and his colleague Ken Tomkins. Professor White is professor of photography at Stockton State College and a Guggenheim Fellow. His magisterial photography exhibition, *Small Towns, Black Lives*, has toured the state since it opened in 2003 at the Noyes Museum of Art. What better way, I thought, to personally encounter the resonance of the past than to have this distinguished scholar and photo documentarian guide us to places and people that symbolize the legacies of blacks in South Jersey. Such legacies reveal how the past endows the present.

Southern New Jersey is a part of a vast territory where the First Emancipation took place. When enslavement gradually began to end in New Jersey in 1804, two generations of blacks formed in communities of their own. By the end of the century, New Jersey had well over a dozen such clusters. Blacks escaping enslavement in the southern states joined northern born free blacks. Some places, most notably Whitesboro in Cumberland County, were founded by black entrepreneurs. They were all features of the Black Town Movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During that time black Americans in the south and north attempted to create what might be called a world within a world. It was, essentially, a response to a nation bent on racial separation. New Jersey was a part of that social and cultural trend.

Few New Jersey residents, south or north, are aware of this historical chapter and the places built and sustained by blacks over the years. Some of the settlements still survive in the memories of elders, though their memories are challenged by the pass-

ing of time. Other places no longer exist as old communities fade and become subsumed by the new, as elders pass on, as people move out, and as forgotten spaces are left to go to seed.

But, as Professor White's photos and oral testimony have shown, not all has been lost. What is left can be found throughout South Jersey and in Monmouth, Morris, Essex and Bergen counties. The history of New Jersey's historic black places is important to our understanding of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black group identity in the years before the Civil Rights Movement. They were places where blacks, not unlike others groups of Americans, tried to live out the American Dream on their own terms.

No one knows better than Wendel White of the legacy of this narrative. With microphone in hand, at times standing precariously at the front of the bus, he guided us into a region that seemed to some of the teachers quite unlike the New Jersey they know. South Jersey, in other words, seemed "southern," in appearance, an extension of the American South. I had a somewhat different take on what we saw: the subdivisions that punctuate the South Jersey landscape, where the Black Town Movement was once most prominent, means that the hinterland has been changed forever. Its counties are now among the fastest growing sectors of the state, providing residential and occupational opportunities for those seeking a future beyond Philadelphia, Camden, Trenton, and Princeton.

Our first stop was on Route 561, Elwood, New Jersey. We saw the physical remains of a small settlement of African American Jews who, in the 1960s, founded synagogue Adat Beyt Mosheh. The early congregants in the area answered a utopian vision of their rabbi, Abel Respes. He founded the settlement with parishioners from north Philadelphia. As Professor White put it, "His vision was to move from the crime and pollution of the inner city to a rural setting where his congregation could thrive." The community, which is the most recent example of a self-aware black settlement in South Jersey, is yet another indication that the region has been for the longest time a haven for sects and sectarians seeking quieter, more homogeneous living arrangements.

We headed south on the Elwood-Wey-

mouth Road, to Newtonville via Jackson Road, passing an old one-room schoolhouse and on to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center on 9th Street. It shares space with the African American Heritage Museum of Southern New Jersey. The effervescent Ralph Hunter, the founding director, greeted us. His enthusiastic affection for this wonderful little museum is infectious. He wanted all of our names. None of the teachers had a problem. At once museum director, development officer and docent, Mr. Hunter guided us through several rooms richly appointed with artifacts donated by families, individuals and community organizations throughout the region. It was all quite fascinatingly new to many of the teachers, in part because the museum is largely unknown outside of South Jersey.

We made our way to Springtown, traveling south and west along Route 54, past Bridgeton on to Greenwich and to the historic black settlement of Springtown. That is where we would meet Naomi Morris, in front of Bethel Othello African Methodist Episcopal Church, in what Professor White called “the middle of nowhere.” It felt as if we had left New Jersey and entered a rural part of the American South. Standing in front of one of New Jersey’s oldest black churches, I thought of Shakespeare’s great tragedy that is so much about the emerging importance of race in the modern era. I thought, too, of Paul Robeson, whose performances as Othello brought him such fame. I wondered if there were such connections with the architecturally simple church that stands along the road? I am still uncertain.

As Ms. Morris spoke, we sat on the age-enriched pews that have used by a congregation that is nearly two centuries old. It is now in small numbers, but I suspect those still active in the mission of Bethel Othello know of the commemorative power of place, specifically the power of their church’s direct link to slavery and freedom.

We left Springtown in a reverent mood. The sun had come out. The teachers and I spoke of the poignant dignity of a place so rich with history. Naomi Morris and her church are emblematic of what the new African American historical scholarship focuses upon: cultural survival, group agency, and the centrality of women in the hard won progress of black women.

Our final destination, Whitesboro, took us through Gouldtown, which is arguably the oldest historic black settlement in the state. It dates back to the eighteenth century as a community of mixed race people of color. The current residents that I saw were of color and not unlike other black communities that were of different hues.

We traveled south into Whitesboro on Route 50 in Cape May County. Ms. Shirley Green, an entrepreneur and the proprietor of Tiffany’s Beans, Greens and Birds, greeted us. She did so with enthusiasm and good cheer, not unlike that of Ralph Hunter and Naomi Morris’ pride in place. She knows of the history of her town. She invited us to sit at tables in the building she and her husband own along the town’s main street, Route 9. We heard from her and Professor White. And then, along with her enormously friendly staff, she fed us a soul food dinner. It felt like home!

Actually, it was more than a dinner; it was an opportunity for us to gather around aspects of an historic community’s cultural sensibilities and to learn something of that community’s vision of home. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Whitesboro did indeed become home to scores of blacks fleeing the violence against them in the infamous 1898 riot in Wilmington, North Carolina. White thugs sought to drive members of a relatively prosperous black community out of town. They were successful. The blacks who left Wilmington participated in the extraordinary effort by George White to create a black town in South Jersey. He was Booker T. Washington’s protégé and the last black elected official to the U.S. Congress as the nineteenth century closed. He brought to New Jersey an entrepreneurial spirit not uncommon for black migrants to the north in the generation after Emancipation. That spirit lives on in the work of Shirley Green and other contemporary residents in Whitesboro.

After dinner, we walked a few blocks along Route 9 to the Whitesboro Historical Museum. Its profusion of objects from the locale reminded us of the African American Heritage Museum of Southern New Jersey. We learned of George White and the early settlers who followed his lead in Whitesboro, and we learned that the comedian Flip Wilson was one of Whitesboro’s native sons.

With the exception of Lawnside, in Cam-

den County, the other black settlements in South Jersey did not become incorporated places. They are vulnerable to the political pressure placed on county governing bodies by developers and others seeking to exploit available land. Fortunately, there is a growing interest by preservationists, historians and residents of black historic places in maintaining what remains of these areas. Indeed, in recent years, New Jersey has increasingly acknowledged African American historic sites as places that help enhance public understanding of the state’s complicated and diverse past. That interest is evident when Wendel White, Ralph Hunter, Naomi Morris, Shirley Green and others took shed light on South Jersey’s past.

As night fell, our bus took us out of Whitesboro on the long ride back to Monmouth University. Professor White gave the teachers autographed copies of the book inspired by his exhibition. We bid him farewell at Stockton State College. I faintly overheard conversations about the day’s experience. As we rode on to the major roads that would take us to the campus, I heard laughter. I closed my eyes, but I could not fall asleep. At the time, so much was racing through my mind about the hallowed grounds on which we had walked and learned of the old and new African American experience in South Jersey. ■

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