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A Bastion of Black History Amid Staten Island Development

By IAN URBINA

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There is a certain defiance in the new coat of white paint along the bottom half of the A.M.E. Zion Church in Rossville on Staten Island. All around it, development waits impatiently.

Just past the woods and weeds in the backyard of the church lies a fresh batch of town houses. Opposite the 19th-century church's front door is a row of tightly packed two-year-old homes.

The Rev. Janet Jones, pastor of the church, is undeterred. "We intend to be around for a while," she says.

The church sits in the center of Sandy Ground, a community built by free blacks who came to the southern end of Staten Island in the decades before the Civil War. It is the oldest continuously held settlement established by free blacks in North America, according to local historians.

"Few people know about Sandy Ground, even including some of those who actually live here," said Sylvia Moody D'Alessandro, one of the founders of the Sandy Ground Historical Society, a demure five-room museum down the block from the church.

Indeed, Doreen Cruz, 41 and white, lives across the street from the church but did not know its origins. "I had no idea about the history," said Ms. Cruz, who moved into the neighborhood from Brooklyn two years ago. "I did wonder what was the story with the church, since it sort of stands out in the neighborhood."

Though the church is historically black, less than 1 percent of the neighborhood's population today



Richard Perry/The New York Times

The historic cemetery in the Sandy Ground neighborhood of Rossville, Staten Island, is bordered by new town houses.

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is black. The oldest Sandy Ground homes, some of them dating back 150 years, stand as remnants of a history tracing to the early 19th century. "There is a sense of responsibility, to keep — as best we can — the heritage alive," said Olivia Moody, 56, a descendant of one of the community's original black families. "There aren't many of us left around here anymore."

The first blacks in Sandy Ground were vegetable farmers who came from New Jersey and from other parts of New York in the 1820's. But the biggest wave of settlers began arriving a decade later as black oystermen moved up from Snow Hill, on Maryland's eastern shore.

"Many wanted to escape laws in Maryland preventing free black fishermen from operating their own boats without a white man on board," Mrs. D'Alessandro explained.

One such oysterman was Robert Landin, the paternal great-grandfather of Lois A. H. Mosley, who recently published a memoir about Sandy Ground. "He didn't want to give up his profession," Mrs. Mosley said. So he unhitched Independence, his 30-foot sloop, and headed north.

Land in Sandy Ground sold cheaply, since it was not cleared for farming, or near any rail line, or close to the beach. According to Mrs. D'Alessandro, the area was home to many abolitionist Quakers and a stop on the Underground Railroad.

It was a tightknit community, from the outset. "You did not dare to fall too deeply in love with anyone before you checked them out," Mrs. Mosley wrote in her book. "You might find yourself in love with your cousin."

To this day, native Sandy Grounders, if given the chance, will recite their lineage all the way back to one of the community's founders, now resting in the cemetery near the church.

Sandy Ground was not the only community established by free blacks in New York City, but it has the largest number of direct descendants of its first residents still living in the neighborhood. Seneca Village was buried when Central Park was created, and Weeksville in Brooklyn was mostly destroyed with the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Ms. Jones, who was assigned to the church last June, is constantly made aware of the weight of local tradition. "For almost any question that arises, I hear, 'Well, there is a history to this issue,' and my parishioners sit me down for a talking to," she said.

Yvonne Taylor, like her mother and grandmother, grew up in Sandy Ground. "We have a long and special heritage," Ms. Taylor says, "and people take it very seriously."



Richard Perry/The New York Times
Nearby is the A.M.E. Zion Church, where the Rev. Janet Jones of Red Bank, N.J., is pastor.



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