

Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

Individual Landmark

140-148 West 137th Street

Designation Date July 13, 1993



Left: Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Photo: Solana Lynn Mahabeer

Right: Cornerstone of the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Church. Photo: Solana Lynn Mahabeer

The Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, built in 1923-1925, is the sixth home of New York City's first black congregation, and the founding church of the AME Zion Conference of churches, which spread throughout the United States and Canada. Established in 1796, under the leadership of James Varick, Mother Zion has a long and illustrious history of religious and social activism. In the 19th century, the AME Zion conference was popularly known as the "Freedom Church" because of its important role in the abolitionist movement. Many conference churches, including Mother Zion, served as stations on the Underground Railroad.

The movement of the Mother Zion congregation northward, beginning in lower Manhattan, to the present location in Harlem, reflects the residential patterns of New York City's black population. At the time the present church was constructed, Harlem contained the majority of New York's black residents. A distinguished composition in the neo-Gothic style, reflecting the tradition of Protestant church design in the 1920s, the church building was designed by George W. Foster Jr., one of the first black architects to be registered in the United States.

During the 20th century leadership of Pastor James W. Brown and his successor, Dr. Benjamin C. Robeson, Mother Zion rose to even greater prominence as a religious and social institution.

Robeson's civil rights crusade attracted such notable Harlem residents as Langston Hughes and W.E.B. DuBois, and the Zion pulpit was often a platform for the social and political activism of Robeson's brother, Paul Robeson. Mother Zion has continued its almost 200-year tradition of service to its congregation and community, not only addressing the spiritual needs of its members, but also providing an array of social programs.

[Read the full NYC LPC designation report here.](#)