

## IN THE SOURLANDS

### *African American Museum Planned for the Sourlands*

By Caroline Katmann

The charming one-room AME Church on Hollow Road, known as the Mount Zion AME Church, is one of the most historic buildings in the Sourlands. Constructed sometime before 1850 on Zion Road near the Province Line on Sourland Mountain, the African Methodist Episcopal Church served the black population of the East Mountain area. When the peach bight at the turn of the century took away their livelihoods, members of the church moved to Skillman, at the base of the Mountain. They brought their church with them, disassembling the structure and rebuilding it where it stands today.

As depicted in the photo here, the building had fallen into disrepair and was in danger of falling into dilapidation. The Sourland Conservancy conducted a special fund-raising drive to repair and paint the church, and completed the work in March, 2012. The Montgomery Township Landmarks Commission provided a grant to pay for the materials needed for the project.

Today, the Sourland Conservancy and the Stoutsburg Cemetery Association are partnering on two exciting projects centered on the AME Church.

In 2016, the Conservancy's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year, the two nonprofit organizations will host a traditional "Camp Meeting" on the site of the original "Meetings" in the late 1800s and early 1900s. An effort will be made to replicate the dress, food, music and community spirit of the original meetings. "Everyone wore his best clothes, with some women in wide petticoats and great hats...The pulpit and organ, taken from the church, were set up on a wooden dais, where the choir was seated...The vegetables served at the dinner were largely the produce of summer; the main course was chicken and dumplings...Desserts were hand-cranked ice cream and fresh pies..." ("New Jersey's Sourland Mountain" by T.J. Luce, 2001.) The festivities will also include a good deal of music and singing! Watch for more details about this event (tentatively planned for late summer 2016) at [www.sourland.org](http://www.sourland.org) and [www.stoutsburgcemetery.com](http://www.stoutsburgcemetery.com)).

The Sourland Conservancy and the Stoutsburg Cemetery Association are working to create the only African-American museum in central New Jersey at the site of the Mount Zion AME Church in Skillman. The Museum will be a place where (1) residents and visitors will learn about the history of African Americans in the Sourlands and Hopewell Valley, many of whom who rose from slavery to being men and women of valor who are now lying in their final resting place at the Stoutsburg Cemetery in Mercer County; (2) school and community groups will have educational, cultural and community-building experiences; (3) the identity and special character of the Sourland region will be enriched and expanded to include the "African-American story."

The Stoutsburg Cemetery Association has received written approval for this project from Bishop Gregory G.M. Ingram of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, First Episcopal District, in Philadelphia. The Sourland Conservancy has applied for grant funding for the project. Both organizations also plan to conduct a special fundraising appeal as the project gets underway.

One of the most exciting features of the planned African American History Museum is the placement of sculptures depicting an African American family in the interior of the church. A Request For Proposals soliciting a scale model from individuals with experience in producing sculpture in various media is now available at [www.stoutsburgcemetery.com](http://www.stoutsburgcemetery.com) and by emailing [director@sourland.org](mailto:director@sourland.org). Of particular interest will be the integration of these figures with the design and aesthetics of the existing building and its surroundings with an emphasis on reflecting the African American experience. These sculptures will be the centerpiece of the museum. This concept is inspired by the work at the Whitney Plantation in Louisiana: <http://whitneyplantation.com/the-children-of-the-whitney.html>.

For more information about the African American History Museum project, contact the Stoutsburg Cemetery Association at [bmills72@verizon.net](mailto:bmills72@verizon.net) or Sourland Conservancy at [director@sourland.org](mailto:director@sourland.org).

On Thursday, October 8, the Sourland Conservancy is hosting a program entitled "African American History in the Sourlands and Hopewell Valley," as part of its 2015 Train Station Series. Presenters Beverly Mills and Elaine Buck, of the Stoutsburg Association Board, will discuss African American history in the region from the late 17th Century through today. Back by popular demand, this presentation will include a display of artifacts as well as a taste of traditional African American food and song from the Sourlands. Additional information about the Camp Meeting Revival and the African American Museum History Project will also be available.

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