

# THE EPIC OF ST. PAUL AME CHURCH

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## I

Old Noah walked-him fifty miles  
Through gator-barks and rattler-smiles  
Through broiling daylight, freezing dark  
To a place where he would build his Ark. . .  
A covenant he made with God  
That every tiresome step he trod  
Would be rewarded, by-and-by  
With a church whose hat would touch the sky!  
A tabernacle God could see  
Wherever Jehovah happened to be!  
And a congregation that would make  
Even John the Baptist's poor heart break!

## II

But Noah was not his given name  
For, in his likeness, others came  
From out of the silence that replaced  
the sound of a land that had lost its grace.

### III

T'was Reconstruction, or so they claimed.

Black folks were free in all, but name!  
And at the end of a tiresome week,  
Folks had no place to hear God speak. . .  
Not here in Tampa, 'till the strong  
And able preacher Thomas Long  
Walked down from Brooksville, all alone,  
'cross burning asphalt, sticks and stones,  
past all the people who could swear  
Ol' Pastuh Long was not-all-there!/  
But  
They could not know, that in his soul,  
Lived a Zulu warrior, stout and bold!  
His father's spirit walked by his side.  
'Said, "Son, don't let us be denied!"  
The Holy Ghost walked with him, too,  
And gave his tired feet brand-new shoes!

### IV

And up from Slavery, ten years dead,  
Was born an AME church, instead  
The first Black church to find its place  
in the City of Tampa's lily-white space.

Bush Harbor Mission, it was called. . .

Doors-open-wide, COME ONE AND ALL!

V

And the first to come was Issac Howard

Following him was his own sweet flower

Better known as the love of his life,

Sis. Howard, Bro. Howard's wife!

Then came Bro. Benbow and his wife

Who joined Brush Harbor, the very first night.

By ones and twos, they trickled in,

Till the fledgling church was packed! "A-men!"

They worshipped in the open-air

For, the spirit of the Lord was everywhere!

And they used palmettos for their roof

But the Lord's prayer made it water-proof/

A-men?

#### IV

You tell'em, Saints of the Dead!  
Come down and tell them what was said  
and done within those sacred walls  
of the first Black church to heed God's call  
in the City of Tampa, just before  
the eleventh year after the Civil War,  
on the corner of Harrison and Tampa Streets  
where Black folks rested weary feet  
and filled their souls with down-home food  
and a Holy Gospel attitude!

#### V

But you remember, just the same,  
That Noah has had many names  
For, his was a tale of many men  
Who served Jehovah without end  
And built an Ark for stormy seas,  
And would name it St. Paul AME!  
But it didn't happen, in one day  
or in one lifetime, by the way!

## VI

In Nineteen Hundred, the church was moved  
For, the Trustee Board said it approved  
to replace Brush Harbor on Marion Street,  
as Mount Moriah, short and sweet!  
Rev. John H. Dickerson was the pastor,  
Married to the church, which there-in-after,  
He would shepherd, for the good,  
in a Holy temple built of wood  
What had it seen? What did it know,  
of a City whose dreams were white as snow  
yet, somehow managed to install  
Black leadership in City Hall? /  
So,  
as Mount Moriah's roof of tin  
Was laid, the voices of Black men  
Were heard, in City Council Chambers,  
Overlooking hooded strangers!

## VII

And Mt. Moriah said, "A-men!"

But in Nineteen-O-Six, she spoke again  
when the leadership changed to S. T. Tice,  
who upon his trustee board's advice,  
decided that the time was nigh  
to build a church that touched the sky!  
So, ground was broke; foundation laid  
And church folks labored unafraid!  
They did not worry about the cost  
For, their church was paid-for, on the Cross!  
The sons and daughters of former slaves  
Built them a church, their souls to save!  
A Tabernacle built of brick  
No time was lost. They built it quick,  
From the memory of a great design. . .  
Cathedral from a forgotten time  
From Timbuktu, where learned hands  
Of people from the Motherland  
constructed Wonders of the World. . .  
St. Paul was a copy . . . An African Pearl!  
And folks could not believe their eyes  
This church whose finger poked the sky. . .

That recalled a time of Gold or Bronze. . .  
Of Imhotep to Prestor John!  
Great fabled king of Africa  
The richest man folks ever saw!  
In motorized lines, they came to look  
At what defied most history books!  
For, Black folks built it, with no plan  
save a memory from the Motherland  
A brick cathedral done so well,  
it outdid the Henry Plant Hotel!

### VIII

At a cost of barely thirty-grand.  
with S. A. Williams' steady hand,  
the Church of St. Paul AME  
received its immortality,  
and in Nineteen Fifteen, stood complete  
on Harrison and Marion Streets!  
Its membership, 400 strong,  
Gave a prayerful thanks to Pastor Long  
And all the Noahs who had seen  
this Ark be built from Black folks's dreams. . .  
This Sanctuary, Womb-of-God  
Our brick refuge. . .Our lightning rod

Whose pulpit welcomed Dr. King  
Whose spirit made the world take wing  
Inside these walls, our plans were made  
To cross life's bridges, unafraid  
Blueprints were hammered out and pressed  
in place for sit-in strikes, at Kress  
Department store where clean and neat  
Black customers could not sit and eat  
While voices raw from weeping, raised  
their prayers as Central Avenue blazed  
And brave young men in white pith hats  
used St. Paul's basement to recap  
the day's events and what to do,  
when morning brought the men-in-blue!  
A sea of prayers and an ocean of tears  
at St. Paul's altar tugged God's ears  
And sermons fit to rouse the dead  
Uplifted hearts and woke-up heads,  
in this safe-haven where t'was found,  
The angel Gabriel, kneeling down!

## IX

And in this Ark, we spied God's eyes  
Of rainbow colors, soft and wise  
Great cut-glass windows' Heavenly light  
that cleansed a-many in God's sight!/ and  
Through whose panes the light of day  
Could wash the blight of sin away!  
And cause a city to decree,  
"I once was blind, but now I see!"

And in this church, a majestic-throated  
Organ, piped with perfect notes,  
Once helped Paul Robeson when he took  
his place to sing. And the rafters shook!/ and  
Who counterbalanced many a choir  
whose gospel songs made souls catch fire!  
And when it roared, the weather-vanes  
Of Heaven trembled, in refrain!

X

But this is what we remember most  
St. Paul ablaze with the Holy Ghost!  
An ark of light-bulbs all a-blaze  
While at the pulpit, Benjamin Mays  
Gave an Urban League message that made folks cling  
to the man who once taught Martin Luther King!  
Bill Clinton spoke here, tousle-haired  
and vibrant, wrapped in the pulpit's glare!  
And Hillary sat, but never said  
What dreams for the future were in her head!  
Roy Wilkins, NAACP,  
Rev. Lowery of SCLC,  
And immortal Mary McLeod Bethune  
Brought pride and splendor to this room!  
It was here that Jackie Robinson spoke  
And the thunder clouds of Heaven broke  
As saint and sinner rose to stamp  
Their feet and cheer their immortal champ!  
A. Phillip Randolph took these stairs  
to the pulpit, and the balcony chairs  
began to groan as if the strain  
of Randolph's words was a Southbound train!

Bob Saunders spoke here, prayed here, too!  
Bob Gilder exhorted a restless pew/ who  
jumped to its feet and with a note  
of solidarity, pledged to vote!  
For, there was magic in this place  
The will of God was in every face  
Of every one who came to speak  
From St. Paul's pulpit, strong or meek  
And every politician knew  
They could not win unless the pew  
Of St. Paul AME approved  
That by their words we should be moved!  
For, on this altar, decades past,  
Rank Segregation breathed its last  
And all God's children, woman and man,  
Communed together, hand-in-hand!  
And the Hargretts had a special seat  
Right across from where the Prides would meet  
And the Griffins and the Ferrells, too  
Ms. Rowena Ferrell Brady made sure folks knew  
That sacred St. Paul AME  
was a citadel of Black History!

The AME's presiding jewel. . .  
That once ran the famous Harlem School  
whose school bells rang, long years before  
either Blake or Middleton opened their doors,  
became the place you had to go,  
if you lived in Tampa, high or low!

## XI

Great Freedom songs were practiced here,  
Where boys and men out-sang their fears  
Where women stood for the world to see  
Henceforth, and forever, they would be free!  
In this great Ark, strong seeds were sewn,  
The Trumpets of Human Rights were blown  
And from these doors a Human race  
went out to meet Hate, face-to-face!  
And at day's end, the day was won!  
God said, St. Paul, "Our will is done!"  
If walls could talk, these walls would scream  
For, they've been witness to a Dream!

## XII

And the names of Noah bear witness, too  
For, they have not stopped, though times are new.  
Rev's. A.J. Covington, R.A. Jackson,  
Jesse L. Glover, and S.M. Peck, / Rev.  
J. S. Braswell who always took  
His very famous little Black book  
that had the names of all the men  
and women, who no longer sinned!  
There was J. A. Brown who was the first  
to build a parsonage for the church  
then Murray, Braboy and Sutton who  
had kept St. Paul forever new!/ And  
They were followed by Charles S. Long  
Who did his best to keep the church strong.  
And during the Depression, Rev. Pape  
Kept St. Paul open for Jesus' sake!  
And many others, on the way  
kept St. Paul from the miring clay!  
Young Leroy Kennon came to preach  
and extended St. Paul AME's reach  
beyond its sanctuary walls  
To the streets and alleys-ways where God calls,

while Pastor Washington would maintain  
St. Paul's historic, holy name!  
For, the Social Gospel would not stop  
Nor Hoopology wind down St. Paul's clock!  
George Champion, Pastor, was well-known  
To kick up heels to bring God home!  
And the Line of Noah has not ceased  
nor left society's sins in peace,  
but remains a Tampa lightning rod,  
Rev. Bryant Fayson, current Man of God!

### XIII

And the echoes here, will not abate  
From Sunday Schools to Heads-of-State!  
The crowds that always pressed these walls. . .  
Congesting a basement dinner hall  
Where meals were served that were so fine  
Even disbelievers changed their minds!  
Great revolutions here were planned  
amidst this pyramid of hands  
and Bible-verses in the style  
and substance of our own Christ-child!

#### XIV

To the Temple of St. Paul AME,  
Who helped a Southern town get free!  
Who withstood the stormy seas of war  
and a national Depression's great downpour!  
To the Noahs, them who built this Ark  
That rescued us from the turbulent dark,  
We thank you and this much we pledge:  
Though we totter on a razor's edge  
of reversal and catastrophe,  
St. Paul is a church that will always be  
The rock on which strong feet have stood  
Who believed God's word is always good!  
For, where the roots of a tree are strong  
The tree's lifespan will be green and long!  
And the fruit it bears will grow ripe and sweet  
For, God's tree shall be a haven, on a weary street!

XV

So, we take up hammers, tape and saw  
We gather up nails and without pause,  
Repair those places where the walls  
Would seem about to crack and fall!  
We'll replace light bulbs long-since blown out  
Put in new Faith; remove old Doubt!  
And when new coats of paint have dried  
There will not be a tearless eye!

XVI

For, in that future, we shall keep,  
on Harrison and Marion Streets  
what Pastor Long would walk to see:  
A re-born St. Paul A.M.E!

XVII

So, Brothers and Sisters, Christian Friends,  
With God's good grace, we say,  
A-men!

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