

Rev. Peter Williams Cassey ancestors

“Peter Williams, the Old Colored Sexton of the John St. Methodist Church.” Engraving by Alexander H. Richie in J. B. Wakely, *Lost Chapters Recovered from the Early History of American Methodism* (New York, 1858).

The New York slave Peter Williams was purchased by the John Street Methodist Church in 1783, where he was a trusted worker and served as sexton and undertaker. He purchased his freedom in 1796 and set up as a tobacconist and undertaker, acquired property, and became a leader in the free black community. Also in 1796 he and other blacks formed a separate black worship group and in 1801 established their own African Methodist Episcopal Church. In conferences in 1820 and 1821 they joined with other independent black Methodists to form the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, independent of Richard Allen’s group. <http://librarycompany.org/blackfounders/section5.htm>

Peter Williams, Jr. (1780? – 1840), the son of an indentured mother and enslaved father who had fought in the American Revolution and protected white patriots, was born in New Jersey but matured in New York City, where he attended the New York Manumission Society’s famous African Free School. Ordained as an Episcopal priest in 1826, Williams headed St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, which had been organized in 1819 as an autonomous congregation within the Episcopal Church hierarchy.

A member of the African Society for Mutual Relief, he also helped form mutual aid groups, including the African Dorcas Association and the New York Phoenix Society (which was dedicated to creating a black manual labor college). One of the early supporters of New York’s Freedom’s Journal, the first black newspaper in America, Williams also wrote *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (New York, 1808). During the 1830s, when St. Philip’s grew to over 200 families, Williams became a member of the American Antislavery Society’s board of managers (from 1833 and 1836) and served as one of a handful of free blacks on the Society’s executive committee in 1834. He received a passport to travel to Great Britain in 1836, a milestone in his struggle to be formally recognized as an American citizen.

<http://www.blackpast.org/aah/st-philip-s-protestant-episcopal-church-new-york-city-1809>

Peter Williams



Rev. Peter Williams, Jr.



Rev. Peter Williams Cassey



BLACK FOUNDERS The Free Black Community in the Early Republic. Essay by Richard S. Newman. Phillip S. Lapsansky, Exhibition Curator. The Library Company of Philadelphia:43.

“Joseph Cassey. No. 36 South Fourth Street,” advertisement in United States Directory for the Use of Travellers and Merchants (Philadelphia, 1823).

Joseph Cassey was an emigrant from the French West Indies, established here as a barber by 1808. By the early 1820s his business expanded and he became a prosperous supporter of civic and antislavery activities. Like Forten and other blacks of some means, he expanded his wealth with real estate investments in the growing city. Cassey was an agent for *The Liberator* and a founding member of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. A close friend of Forten, Cassey and other affluent blacks like Robert Douglass, Jacob White, and William Whipper, helped underwrite black civic and educational societies and the antislavery movement. <http://librarycompany.org/blackfounders/section9.htm>

Among our recent acquisitions are three 19th-century African American women's friendship albums by **Amy Matilda Cassey** and the sisters Mary Anne and Martina Dickerson. The three volumes, of only four of their kind known, provide unique insights into the culture, politics, and gender relationships of free African American women of the antebellum era. Cassey, the Dickersons, and the women in their circles studied drawing manuals, decorative floral works, women's periodicals, and the “language of flowers” literature, while at the same time they challenged slavery in public meetings, defied public opinion with their racially integrated organizations, published antislavery pamphlets, held antislavery fundraising fairs, and petitioned Congress for the immediate abolition of slavery. The albums contain essays, poetry, sketches, and floral watercolors contributed by figures prominent in the antislavery movement, including Sarah Mapps Douglass, Margaretta Forten, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips, to name a few. <http://www.librarycompany.org/treasures/ad12.htm>

***A fragile freedom: African American women and emancipation in the antebellum city* by Erica Armstrong Dunbar (Yale University Press, 2008) has extensive material about Amy Matilda Cassey,**

The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké (The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers) – April 14, 1988

by Charlotte L. Forten Grimké (Author), Brenda Stevenson (Editor)

life with the Remonds in Massachusetts; the death of Amy Matilda Williams Cassey Remond in 1856 as seen by Charlotte Forten while attending high school, the only African American student (valedictorian).

BLACK FOUNDERS

The Free Black Community in the Early Republic

Essay by Richard S. Newman

Phillip S. Lapsansky, Exhibition Curator

The Library Company of Philadelphia

Philadelphia

This publication accompanies an exhibition of the same title on view at the Library Company from March to October 2008.

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As New Yorker Peter Williams put it on July 4th, 1830, recalling his enslaved father's struggles during the Revolutionary War, "We are natives of this country. . . . Not a few of our fathers suffered and bled to purchase its independence. . . . We have toiled to cultivate it, and to raise it to its present prosperous condition; we ask only to share equal privileges with those who come from distant lands to enjoy the fruits of our labor." 69

69 for Williams quote, see Albert Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York, 2001), 27.

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THE HISTORY OF THE NEGRO CHURCH

BY

CARTER G. WOODSON, Ph.D.

*Editor of the Journal of Negro History, author of A Century of
Negro Migration, and of the Education of the Negro
Prior to 1861*

SECOND EDITION.

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The Episcopal Church, moreover, could hardly attract Negro churchmen of very much ambition, when it did not require very much reasoning to reach the conclusion that inasmuch as that church had too often neglected the poor whites, it would hardly be inclined to proselyte Negroes. Prior to the time that Absalom Jones was made priest, the St. Thomas Church, according to the Protestant Episcopal convention, was not entitled to send clergymen or deputies thereto nor to participate in the general government of the Episcopal Church. In the year 1795 they declared it was only for the present. The same position, however, was taken in 1843 and it was adhered to throughout the period of slavery; for the Episcopal Church persistently refused to make slavery a matter of discipline.

It is little wonder then that Episcopal churches among Negroes have much difficulty in their development, and only in a few large cities did we have churches even so successful as that of St. Thomas in Philadelphia. Among these may be mentioned the St. Phillips Church in New York. This prosperous church was organized in 1818 and incorporated in 1820. Peter Williams, the first Negro to be ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church, served as its rector until 1849. He was a man of unusual beginnings. His father, Peter



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A Protestant Episcopal priest in New York City.

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Williams, Sr., was for a number of years the sexton of the John Street Methodist Church, in which position he became distinguished among the white communicants for his fidelity and piety. He joined with other Negroes desirous of independent church action and established the Zion Church, out of which emerged the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Peter Williams, the son, however, became an Episcopalian, was educated for the ministry and served for years as the rector of St. Phillips Church. In this position he maintained himself as a man of usefulness and influence, touching the life of his people whenever the opportunity presented itself. Bishop Daniel A. Payne, who first came into contact with him in New York in 1835, considered him well educated, for his day, hospitable and generous. Bishop Payne said: "He loved to see talented young men educating themselves and substantially aided more than one in his efforts. Above all he valued an educated minister."

In this position of subjection to a church control in which he himself as a man of color did not largely figure, Peter Williams was handicapped and could not serve his race as he desired. At the time of the intense agitation during the great crisis when the Negroes were called upon to decide where they would stand on the questions of colonization and abolition, Peter Williams at first took an active part in pleading the cause of his people. Seeing, however, that this might bring the church to

the position of having to declare itself on this important question, the bishops of the Episcopal Church, in keeping with the custom of that denomination, silenced Peter Williams with a decree that he should preach merely the gospel without interfering with the political affairs of the times. It does not appear that he had that moral stamina to impel him to renounce his connection with a church seeking to muzzle a man praying for the deliverance of his people. It may be, however, that, as he was too far advanced in years to make any radical change in his course, he followed the orders of his superiors.