

FESTIVITY AND CELEBRATION IN A BLACK METHODIST TRADITION, 1813-1981

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It was widely held in the nineteenth century that black Americans were incorrigibly religious. Given certain considerations, this was by no means an exaggerated assumption. Many blacks of that period had come out of West African backgrounds where they had been born into religions, where religion for them was a daily preoccupation, and where there was no sharp dichotomy drawn between religion and other departments of life.¹ That firm attraction toward religion was clearly reinforced in the experience of slavery, because in religion blacks found not only salvation, but freedom — freedom to be themselves, and freedom to be celebrative, festive, and responsive. They also found a profound sense of community which was invariably strengthened by the exigencies of slave life. Nowhere is this more evident than in the worship tradition forged by black slaves. That tradition — characterized largely by prayer, sermon, song, and the frenzy — has survived to this day in some measure, prompting Harvey Cox, the eminent Harvard scholar, to contend that blacks have “a more festive and feeling-oriented approach to life.”²

The historic relevance and significance of Cox's contention, when viewed within the context of the black religious experience, becomes remarkably clear when the history of Wilmington, Delaware's Big August Quarterly is considered. This annual observance has the distinction of being Wilmington's oldest folk festival, black America's first major religious festival, and African Methodism's only denominational festival.³ It was started in 1814 by Peter Spencer, a Maryland ex-slave, who, after breaking with the predominantly white Methodist Episcopal structure, had organized the Union Church of

¹Leroi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1963), p. 34.

²Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (Cambridge: The Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 17, 25, and 51.

³“Wilmington's Oldest Folk Festival,” *The Big Quarterly Program Booklet* (August 27, 1978), pp. 1-4; and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, *Big Quarterly in Wilmington* (Wilmington: published by the author, 1932), pp. 1-5.

African Members in 1813.⁴ Spencer chose the last Sunday in August as the most appropriate time for the festival because the end of the harvest season was in sight. Most of the grain and hay had been harvested, fruits were ripening, subsistence was cheaper, and black Methodists, slave and free, could take the weekend off to congregate at the Mother Union Church of Africans on French Street for a day of social intercourse and religious celebration.⁵

Many of the black people who established Big Quarterly were slaves, some of whom were not far removed from Africa. In the pre-Civil War days scores of Africa's dark children, bearing identification papers and orders from their masters for articles of clothing, walked from lower Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia, arriving in Wilmington foot sore and dusty.⁶ Others came aboard steamboats, in hay wagons, in ox-carts, and on mule-back. The strong slave-retrieving efforts exercised in parts of Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania gave masters the necessary confidence to allow their slaves the freedom to attend Big Quarterly.⁷ *The Delaware State Journal*, an early Wilmington newspaper, gave this descriptive account of those who appeared at the festival in 1845:

Colored folks — Our town, on Sunday last was pretty well filled by "colored folks," who came to attend a religious meeting, called, generally, "the Big Quarterly." All sizes, of both sexes, and all ages, and we might say all colors, for there was a sample from the jetty African to the almost white-faced mulatto, were present. The aged came with their gray heads and bowed forms, and little infant children were carried in the arms — some chuckling forth their pleasure, others squalling out their dissatisfaction. Some were clad in plain habiliments, others, both male and female, reached at the bon ton, and moustaches and imperials, bowed and smiled complacently at the side of full skirts and flounces. Many of these people came from a great distance, and it is believed that Philadelphia furnished about 1,000. The whole company were well dressed, and with a few exceptions, as far as we can learn, conducted themselves in an orderly manner. The services at the "Union" Church were performed with proper decorum and gravity.⁸

Once in Wilmington, slaves and free blacks mingled with some degree of freedom despite the almost ubiquitous presence of overseers, slave catchers, sheriffs, and U.S. Marshals. Some spoke of the daily hardships inflicted by the system of unpaid labor, and plotted their escape into Philadelphia and other free territories. Others rejoiced in the promise

⁴*The Morning News*, Wilmington, Delaware (August 26, 1889), p. 1.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*The Delaware Gazette and Peninsula Advertiser*, Wilmington, Delaware (September 26, 1816) pp. 1-2; *The Delaware Gazette*, Wilmington, Delaware (September 1, 1857), p. 2; and *The Evening Journal*, Wilmington, Delaware (August 30, 1967), p. 29.

⁸*The Delaware State Journal*, Wilmington, Delaware (September 2, 1845) p. 3.

of freedom which they felt was somehow ingrained in the religion of Jesus Christ. Still others engaged in storytelling as they partook of the large quantities of chitterlings, collard greens, roasted ears, spare-ribs, watermelons, and other so-called "soul" foods.⁹

From the beginning, the Big August Quarterly was primarily a religious festival held in commemoration of the founding of African Union Methodism. It was comparable in many ways to the enthusiastic revivals and camp meeting services of the white Methodists. This was obvious in the decorum of the celebrants who engaged in "the old-time religion."¹⁰ The order of services always followed a set pattern, beginning with the early Sunday morning love feast celebrated in traditional Methodist fashion. Prayer, testimony, and song were commonly a part of this ceremony. Emotions often reached fever pitch as the celebrants, breaking bread and drinking water, tightly embraced each other while singing songs inspired by the slave experience:

One more time, Lord,
 One more time,
 Lord I'm glad to be in the Service,
 One more time.

and:

And are we yet alive,
 To see each other's face.¹¹

In the typical Big Quarterly worship experience, love feast was followed by a period of informal fellowship. Dark faces would beam with happiness and eyes would fill with tears as the worshippers shared their common joy in God's acceptance of their personhood. Oftentimes as they engaged in informal chat their emotional cup would run over, and uncontrollable shouting would result. This was all in accord with their manner as a spiritual and emotional people.

The remainder of Big Quarterly Sunday was commonly given to preaching, singing, and shouting. Services were generally held at Ezion M.E. Church, which was organized by Spencer in 1805, and at the Mother Union Church of Africans. Tents were constructed at times to accommodate the throngs of worshippers. Spencer, William Anderson, and Isaac Barney — the most powerful leaders of African Union Methodism in the antebellum period — almost always conducted the services. One can imagine that the sermons they preached, and the consoling words they spoke, were always of immense importance to a bruised and battered people who were confronted daily with the question

⁹*The Morning News* (August 26, 1889), p. 1.

¹⁰*The Sunday Morning Star*, Wilmington, Delaware (August 27, 1933), p. 10.

¹¹*The Morning News* (August 26, 1889), p. 1.

of the meaning of their existence. Undoubtedly, the spirits of many were lifted into a transcendent moment, and some were thus prepared to endure another year of hardship, toil, and struggle.¹²

A new twist was sometimes added to the services by those who injected ceremonies and practices which obviously came from Africa. One such ceremony, which took place at Big August Quarterly celebrations throughout the nineteenth century, bore a striking similarity to the "ring shout" which has been practiced for centuries among Gullah blacks of the Georgia-South Carolina Sea Coast areas. A nineteenth century Wilmington newspaper reporter gave a brief description of the ceremony, which usually drew a crowd of curious white observers:

Several circles were formed, consisting of about a dozen persons each. They sang words of their own composition, but they, however, had the effect of making the participants happy. Their feelings were expressed by clapping of hands in chorus. A recognized leader was placed in the circle who made the desired gestures and he was promptly imitated. Large and curious crowds gathered around the circles.¹³

After 1843, the year of Peter Spencer's death, the festival became a lasting tribute to his memory. Spencer's tomb became "the shrine of every lover of freedom," and throngs of African Methodists went to great lengths to "make this annual pilgrimage to the cradle of African Union Methodism, and to help the memory of Father Spencer to live on and on."¹⁴ Each year thousands marched up the hill on French Street to the rear of the Mother Union Church of Africans and stood at the grave which "was covered by old-fashioned marble slabs lying on brick piers."¹⁵ The deep silence of the occasion was often broken as the pilgrims lifted their voices:

Father Spencer's body lies molding in the clay,
Father Spencer's body lies molding in the clay,
His Church is marching on.

And there were these lines:

Oh, where is Father Spencer?
I wonder where he's gone?
The Church is all in mourning,
And he cannot be found.¹⁶

The pilgrimage to Spencer's grave was of such significance that

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*The Morning News* (September 1, 1884), p. 1; and *The Morning News* (August 31, 1885), p. 1.

¹⁴*The Tomb of Peter Spencer: A Pamphlet* (Wilmington: T. E. Bolden, Printer, n.d.), pp. 1-2.

¹⁵*The Morning News* (August 26, 1889), p. 1.

¹⁶Lewis V. Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism: A History of the African Union Methodist Protestant and Union American Methodist Episcopal Churches, 1805-1980" (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980), Chapters IV and VI.

Wilmington soon earned an enduring reputation as "the Mecca of people of African descent." A nineteenth century Wilmington newspaper editor observed:

For nearly a century this city has been the Mecca of the African race in the United States. A pilgrimage to the Church and to the grave of Peter Spencer was to them as sacred a duty as is the visit to the prophet's tomb, to the pious Mohammedan.¹⁷

The Big August Quarterly remained an unbroken tradition through most of the pre-Civil War years. Between 1851-56, the spirit of the festival waned as a result of serious internal bickering among the leaders of the Union Church of African Members. The dispute, which focused on the right of one Ellis Saunders to discharge duties as a presiding officer of the church, led to a schism. Thirty-one of the forty congregations broke away under Saunders and Isaac Barney and formed the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church. The remaining nine continued as the African Union Church. In 1866, this small body merged with the First Colored Methodist Protestant Church. The resulting body became the African Union First Colored Methodist Protestant Church, commonly known as the African Union Methodist Protestant Church. Interestingly enough, both the U.A.M.E. and A.U.M.P. Churches continued to support Big Quarterly after the split.¹⁸

The festival was abandoned for a brief time during the Civil War for obvious reasons. Blacks as well as whites were caught up in civil conflict, and had little time to engage in the kind of festivity and celebration traditionally associated with Big Quarterly. After the war, the festival was revived as "a day of reunion, feasting, and jubilee."¹⁹

Late nineteenth century Wilmington newspapers — such as *Every Evening*, *The Evening Journal*, *The Morning News*, and *The Sunday Morning Star* — consistently contended that Big Quarterly declined in attendance and enthusiasm after plantation slavery was abolished. Alice Dunbar-Nelson, writing about the festival in the early 1930s, challenged this contention and showed how Big Quarterly "was re-established with even more fervor and brilliancy immediately after emancipation."²⁰ The great attendance and excitement associated with the festival reached higher levels, despite a growing number of blacks and whites who attacked it as a relic of slavery times, and who urged black Methodist leaders to work toward abolishing it.²¹ The 1865 celebration, the first held after emancipation, was not only very spirited and animated, but drew a very large crowd. Five thousand visitors were present for the festival in

¹⁷*The Morning News* (August 26, 1889), p. 1.

¹⁸Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapters VI and VII.

¹⁹Anna T. Lincoln, *Wilmington, Delaware: Three Centuries Under Four Flags, 1609-1937* (Rutland, Vermont: The Tuttle Publishing Company, 1937), p. 167.

²⁰Nelson, *Big Quarterly in Wilmington*, p. 2.

²¹Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapter VI.

1867.²² A record crowd of 20,000 appeared at Big Quarterly in 1879. Ten thousand participated in the festivities in 1892. The overwhelming majority of those who supported the festival during these years were black, but whites also appeared in considerable numbers.²³

The religious dimension of Big Quarterly remained its most noticeable feature. The churches with roots in the Spencer tradition — Ezion M.E. Church, Mother U.A.M.E. Church, and Mother A.U.M.P. Church — were frequently filled to their capacities with worshippers.²⁴ These churches stood in close proximity to each other in the vicinity of French Street in Wilmington, and this made them the centers of Big Quarterly religious services. Of these churches, the Mother A.U.M.P. Church remained the principal point of attraction because the graves of Peter Spencer, William Anderson, and the other saints of the church were on its property. Each year tents had to be constructed to accommodate the vast crowds who appeared. The day always began with the early morning love feast, followed by services that would continue well into the night.²⁵

Many of the rituals and ceremonies that characterized the festival in the nineteenth century were vividly described in Wilmington newspapers. The songs heard at the 1889 celebration left an indelible mark on the memory of one of the reporters for *The Morning News*. He wrote the following: "One voice began in a low tremulous tone while others joined in with voices hardly louder than whispers":

Jesus has not shut the gate,
Somebody dying every day.
I know that I am not too late,
Somebody dying every day.²⁶

The editor continued:

As the volume increased, the sound rose to an exuberant shout. The singers bodies swayed up and down and back and forth, like the levers of a mighty engine. The stamp of their feet was like the thud of steam against a piston, and the clapping of their hands was like the clatter of the rackets and springs of machinery. In themselves the sounds were harsh and thumping, but somehow it was all in harmony with the scene and music. . . . Streams of perspiration ran down their faces, their voices grew husky and the music became mere guttural sounds, not words. It seemed human endurance would fail, but they held on until with a shout, a scream, and a face that shone with joy, a woman came leaping from the midst of the crowd, made her way easily where others had been blocked, and reached the street still shouting.²⁷

²²*The Morning News* (August 27, 1888), p. 1; and *The Evening Journal* (August 26, 1895), p. 1.

²³Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapter VI.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*The Morning News* (August 26, 1889), p. 1.

²⁷*Ibid.*

His impression of the prayer that followed was equally striking:

The prayer which follows is a passionate appeal for aid. It is fervent. It may be ungrammatical in its construction, but it is eloquent. The supplicant tries to bring Divine Power to the earth and tries to lift the penitent to the skies. He implores aid, confesses sin and exhorts to the exercise of faith. His brethren around him aid with responses. Shouts of "No!" "Yes!" "Amen!" and "Do Lord!" coach him and augment his effort until it often seems as if the man's heart would leap from his throat in excess of emotion. There are comical sides and shades to such a scene and such activities, but no one laughs, no one scoffs. Everyone looks with intense interest at the actors, fearing that some great thing will happen and they not see it.²⁸

The pivotal point of the services was always the preaching. Simple Bible-based sermons, which were typical of the Methodist tradition generally, were the rule. Certain preachers were noted for their oratorical and homiletical skills, and were almost always designated to deliver the keynote sermons. One such preacher was Abram George of the A.U.M.P. Conference, whose sermons frequently electrified the celebrants. One reporter of Wilmington's *The Evening Journal* was literally captivated by George's powerful sermon at the 1880 Big August Quarterly:

His style was very graphic and exceedingly dramatic. He referred to the "Kingdential throne" in glowing terms, and eulogized Moses in his original way. After telling of the wonderful crossing of the Red Sea, he said "It was not Moses' Rod what did it, but the power of God." The colored brethren would urge him on by crying out, "preach it!" "preach Jesus!" One old fellow in a white linen coat stood up in the aisle in front of him and by his exclamations and antics made himself almost as conspicuous as the preacher.²⁹

Another such preacher was Daniel Russell, Sr., who was known as "a pulpit actor and genius." His keynote sermon at the 1883 festival attracted the attention of an editor of *The Delaware State Journal*:

He took a running text on "True Belief," and delivered his address without notes. His manner was earnest and enthusiastic, and the points of his sermon were emphasized by grotesque gestures. He divided his attention between the audience and brother ministers sitting in the pulpit, frequently turning to them for signs of approval.³⁰

The most interesting part of the services was always the "ring ceremonies," which obviously reflected a strong African influence. *The Delaware Gazette and State Journal* offered an extensive description of these ceremonies as they occurred at the 1889 Big August Quarterly:

In the basement of the church a hundred or more men formed a circle and swayed to and fro, sometimes fast and sometimes slow, according to the metre of the hymn sung. . . . Those who formed the inner line of the human ring were the most violent in their movements and most of the time perspired so freely that they could not have been more wet if a hose had been turned upon them. Frantically they urged one

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Every Evening*, Wilmington, Delaware (August 30, 1880), p. 1.

³⁰*The Delaware State Journal* (August 30, 1883), p. 1.

another to more violent feats of gymnastic devotion, clapping their hands, jumping and shouting, and occasionally groaning. When they grew weary they dropped upon their knees and prayers were offered. The women were modest and did not help form rings. Instead they sang and watched the proceedings with interest.³¹

Some of the ceremonies and practices associated with the Big August Quarterly in the nineteenth century were discontinued in the twentieth century. The "ring ceremonies," and other practices linked to the African background, were largely abandoned at the turn of the century. Early morning love feasts were no longer held annually after 1955. Beginning in the late 1950's, Gospel songs slowly displaced the slave spirituals as the most popular type of black sacred music heard at the festivals.³²

The Big August Quarterly also changed in other ways. The invention of cars and other modern and more convenient means of transportation brought larger crowds from distant states like Virginia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. Wilmington newspapers provided fairly accurate estimates of the increases in attendance. Some 15,000 visitors were present for the festival in 1925; 14,000 attended in 1940.³³ Such figures render absurd the claim, made by some Wilmington newspapers, that the Big August Quarterly dropped significantly in attendance in the twentieth century.³⁴ However, this was the case in the 1960's. The 100 or so who appeared for the festival in 1969 were an all-time low. This dismal showing was due primarily to the fact that this was to be the last Big August Quarterly held on French Street. The Mother A.U.M.P. Church at 819 French Street, which had been the main focal point for the festival since 1814, was relocated to Franklin Street in Wilmington in accordance with urban renewal plans.³⁵

Between 1969 and 1979, the festival amounted largely to an annual founder's day, attended by the few blacks who made up the A.U.M.P. Conference. Early in 1980 this writer completed the first extensive work on the history and cultural significance of the Big August Quarterly, and this gave rise to a movement to return the festival to French Street.³⁶ The 1980 and 1981 celebrations were held on French Street, where an average of 3,000 celebrants gathered in what has recently become known as "The Peter Spencer Plaza." Interestingly enough, attempts to revive the festival have received the support of some of Delaware's most prominent white public officials, such as Wilmington's mayor William T.

³¹*The Delaware Gazette and State Journal*, Wilmington, Delaware (August 29, 1889), p. 3.

³²Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapters VI-VIII.

³³*The Evening Journal* (August 31, 1925), p. 9; and *The Morning News* (August 26, 1940) p. 1.

³⁴Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapter VII.

³⁵*Ibid.*, Chapter VIII.

³⁶Baldwin, "Invisible Strands in African Methodism," Chapters IV and VI-VIII.

McLaughlin, and Delaware's State Senator Joseph Biden.³⁷

A most disturbing development in recent years has been the lack of strong support given Big Quarterly by Ezion United Methodist Church and Mother U.A.M.E. Church. This signals a radical departure from their actions in the past with respect to the festival. In the nineteenth century these churches worked closely with the Mother A.U.M.P. Church in supporting the festival as a lasting tribute to Peter Spencer and African Union Methodism. One can only hope that in the future these churches will once again unite in making Big Quarterly an exciting day of festivity and celebration. Otherwise, African Union Methodism could lose a vital part of its rich tradition.

³⁷Mayor William T. McLaughlin to the Mother A.U.F.C.M.P. Church, Wilmington, Delaware (January 12, 1981); and *The Delaware Valley Star*, Wilmington, Delaware (August 26, 1981), pp. 2-3.