

Council President Naidu, Mayor Radest and Members of Council:

Good evening. I am Betty Livingston Adams, a 30 plus-year resident of Summit,

Yale-trained historian, and associate minister at Fountain Baptist Church. This

month, marks Fountain Baptist's 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In commemorating this

milestone of continuous presence and service in our town, I wish to thank the

Mayor and City Council for the resolution supporting the erection of a historical

marker indicating the church's first permanent location at 19-21 Chestnut Avenue.

In 1897, twenty-seven year old Violet Johnson moved from Brooklyn, New York, to Summit, a place in the process of transformation from a country village into a New York City suburb. Within a year, the domestic servant had organized a Baptist church. The decision to create a sacred place for African American workers thrust Johnson into public space and on the path of Christian activism. Later others would extol her "genius for organization[:] religious, civic, social and industrial."<sup>1</sup>

In the 1890s, Summit's African American population barely exceeded one hundred out of nearly six thousand residents; and none owned real property.<sup>2</sup> Immediately following formal recognition as a Baptist church in 1898, the parishioners, though few in number, decided to establish a building fund, to construct "an edifice suitable for divine worship."

Eight years later, in 1906 the fledgling congregation purchased two lots, numbers 19 and 21, on the "westerly side of Chestnut Avenue" at a cost of

\$2,000.00. In August 1908, the church laid a cornerstone, and on Christmas Eve marched into its roofed-over basement. Ten years later in 1918, the congregation entered its completed building. The Fountain Baptist congregation worshiped at 21 Chestnut Avenue until 1989, when it sold the property to the City of Summit for the construction of our new City Hall campus; and subsequently, marched into its current house of worship at 116 Glenside Avenue.

Of course, relating the entire narrative of faith and courage of this congregation is not the purpose of the marker. Nor is it intended to remediate the erasure of an African American presence in downtown Summit. However, it is our desire that the marker convey an enduring presence and, one hopes, an enlarged vision of possibilities for our town. For one of our goals in this year of celebration is to acknowledge Summit's appreciation and respect for religious, cultural, racial, and class diversity, as well as interfaith cooperation.

We are grateful to the city's Director of Community Services, Paul Cascais, who not only worked with, but walked with us to reach this step; and, of course, to the City Council for helping to make this significant part of Summit's history visible.

I wish to acknowledge others who have walked with us as we mark this milestone in Fountain's and Summit's intertwined histories. First, Rev. Harrield, pastor of Wallace Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. As many of

you know, Wallace Chapel is listed on the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places by the United States Department of the Interior. Further, Wallace Chapel was designated a historic landmark of the A.M.E. Zion Church in 2008. The church is also a site on New Jersey's historical Women's Heritage Trail.

Next, Dolores Ward, chair of Summit's Historic Preservation Commission, who takes seriously, along with the Council, "a belief that our historic buildings, structures and streetscapes are an intrinsic part of the value of the community and are deserving of respect and preservation."<sup>3</sup>

I also wish to publicly recognize the pastor of Fountain Baptist Church, Rev. Dr. J. Michael Sanders, for his foresight. His 35- year tenure in Summit has been a benefit to those who worship at Fountain Baptist and to this community. Indeed, it was his interest in exploring the history of the congregation that led me to consider Summit as a site of scholarly research and the publication of my book, *Black Women's Christian Activism: The Struggle for Social Justice in a Northern Suburb*. Today, Summit, New Jersey, and Violet Johnson are being discussed in leading universities, colleges and theological schools around the country.

Thank you for joining us in this 120<sup>th</sup> celebration.

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<sup>1</sup> New Jersey State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, *Proceedings of the New Jersey State Federation of Colored women's Clubs Conference and First, Second and Third Annual Meetings, July 1915-1918, 1920*, 14, Florence Randolph Collection, MG 1321, Folder 2. New Jersey Historical Society, Newark, New Jersey (hereafter cited as NJSFCWC).

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<sup>2</sup> *Summit Herald*, 15 May 1923.

<sup>3</sup> City of Summit Official Website.