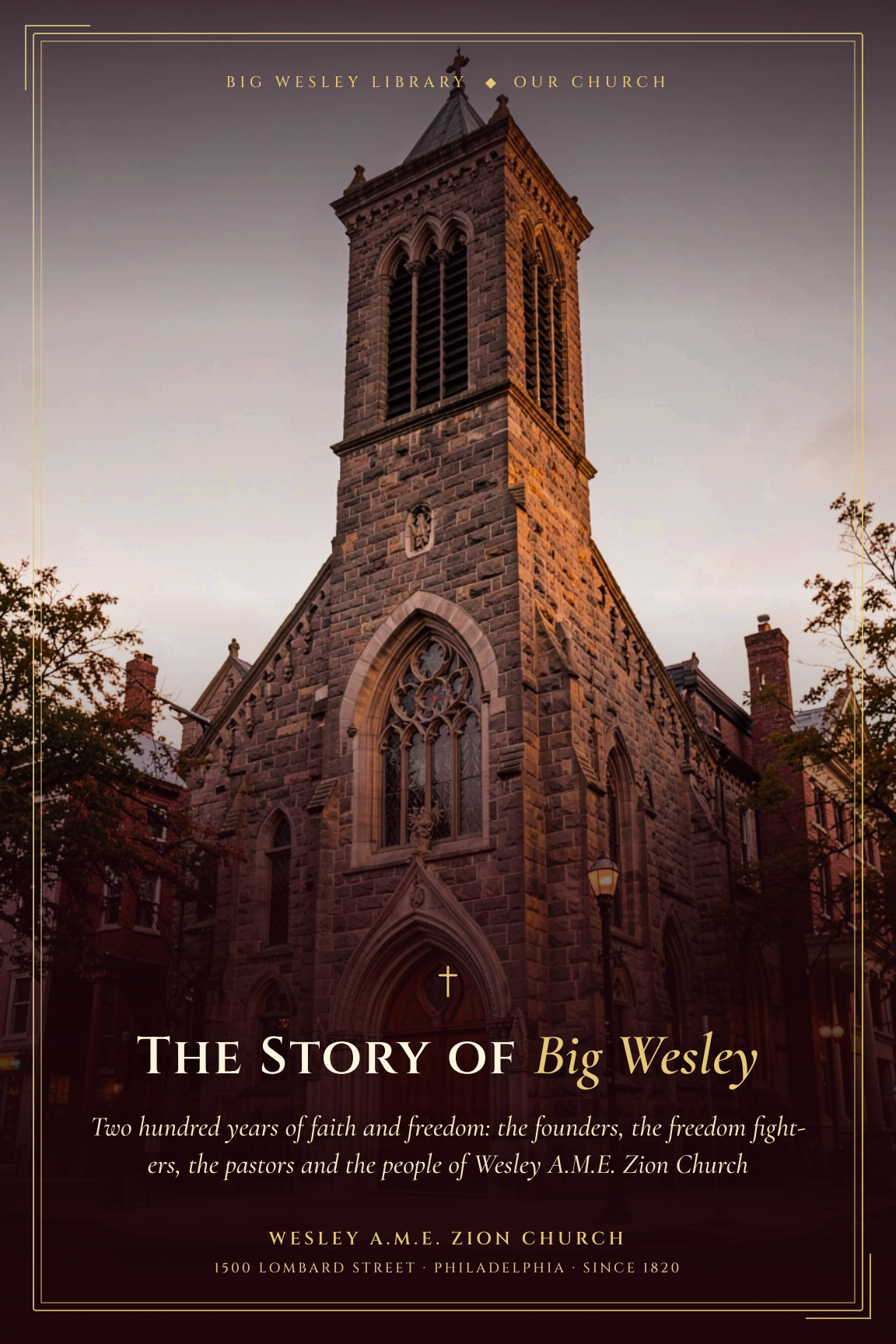




BIG WESLEY LIBRARY ♦ OUR CHURCH

THE STORY OF *Big Wesley*

Two hundred years of faith and freedom: the founders, the freedom fighters, the pastors and the people of Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church

WESLEY A.M.E. ZION CHURCH

1500 LOMBARD STREET · PHILADELPHIA · SINCE 1820

OUR CHURCH

THE STORY OF *Big Wesley*

*Two hundred years of faith and freedom: the founders, the freedom fighters,
the pastors and the people of Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church*

PHILADELPHIANS HAVE CALLED IT *BIG WESLEY* FOR GENERATIONS. Within the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church it carries another name: **the Freedom Church**. For more than two hundred years, this congregation has worshipped God and served its neighbors — through slavery and freedom, depression and war, segregation and civil rights — and it is still open every Sunday at the corner of 15th and Lombard.

This booklet tells that story. It is our family history. Read it, share it with your children, and add your own chapter.



Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church at 15th and Lombard Streets today.

1820: *A church of our own*



On **June 6, 1820**, about thirty members of Mother Bethel walked out and organized a congregation of their own. They called it the **First Colored Wesley Methodist Church of Philadelphia**, named for John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. They worshipped first in a carpenter's shed at 521-527 Lombard Street while a brick church went up.

Within a year, they had joined with five other churches to form what became the **African Methodist Episcopal Zion** denomination. Big Wesley is counted among the first five independent African American churches in Philadelphia.

WHY IT MATTERED

For Black Philadelphians in 1820, a church of their own was more than a place of worship. It was one of the few places where they could lead, own property, educate their children, organize, and be fully human in the eyes of God and one another.

ABOLITION AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

THE FREEDOM CHURCH



In **1848**, at its earlier home on Lombard Street, the church hosted an anti-slavery convention attended by **Frederick Douglass**, **Martin Delany**, **Henry Highland Garnet** and **Charles Lenox Remond** — some of the greatest abolitionists in American history. Douglass himself had begun his public speaking as a preacher in the A.M.E. Zion Church.

Since its inception, Wesley has been involved in action for the salvation, liberation and elevation of God's people.

THE MISSION OF WESLEY A.M.E. ZION CHURCH

A NEW HOME, AND A HOSPITAL NEXT DOOR

1885: *Fifteenth and Lombard*



In **1885** the congregation moved west to the corner of 15th and Lombard, the corner it still occupies, and became an anchor of the city's historic Seventh Ward — the neighborhood the scholar W. E. B. Du Bois studied in *The Philadelphia Negro*. Ten years later, in **1895**, the **Frederick Douglass Memorial Hospital and Training School** — Philadelphia's first Black hospital — opened next door at 1512 Lombard Street. Its opening ceremony was held at Wesley, and the congregation stood among its supporters, so that Black patients and doctors would have a place to heal and to practice.

In **1893** the pulpit was held by **Rev. John E. Price**: fifty years a minister, a hymn writer, an editor of church publications, presiding elder of the Philadelphia District, and founder of the Garnet Equal Rights League.

STONE BY STONE

1923 - 1926: *Building Big Wesley*



The present Gothic Revival church was designed by architect **George Espie Savage**, begun in 1923 and completed in **1926**: triple-portal doors, grand staircases rising on either side of the foyer, and a sanctuary one flight up, ringed by a great U-shaped balcony and lit by a century of stained glass.

THE STORY OF BIG WESLEY



What the walls and triple-arched entrance may have looked like going up, 1920s.



The sanctuary today, under the vaulted roof completed in 1926.

THE STORY OF BIG WESLEY

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

FEEDING A CITY

In **1932 and 1933**, in the depths of the Great Depression, by one account Big Wesley fed some **34,000 people**, gave out shoes and clothing, housed families free of charge in an apartment building it owned, and paid members' health insurance premiums. When the city's need was greatest, the church opened its doors wider.

JOB, JUSTICE AND CIVIL RIGHTS

THE 1950S AND 1960S



What Big Wesley may have looked like on a Sunday morning in the 1950s.

In **1952**, under **Rev. Alfred G. Dunston Jr.**, the church led a boycott of businesses that would not hire Black Philadelphians into better-paying jobs — and won. In **1955 and 1956** the congregation sent funds to sustain the

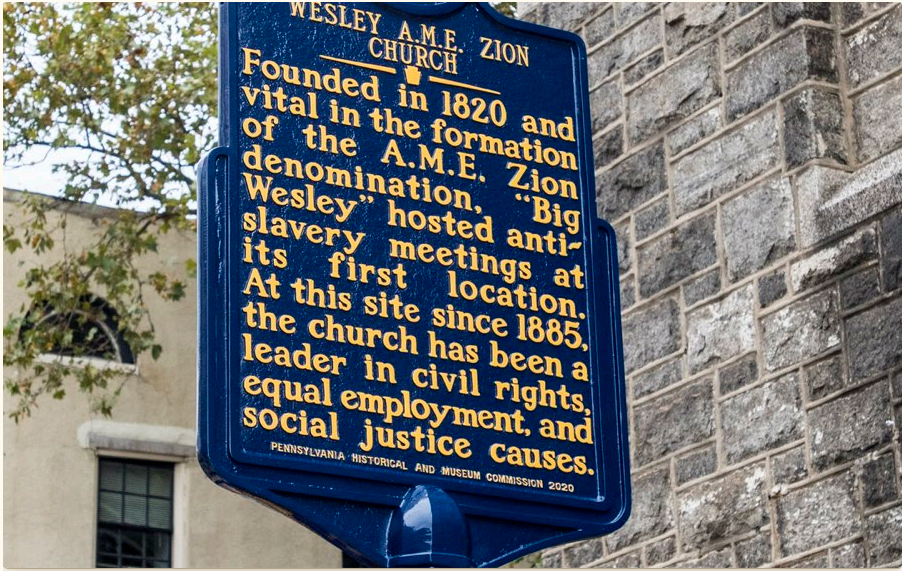
Montgomery Bus Boycott. In the early 1960s, Rev. Dunston joined fellow pastors in establishing the **Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC)**, the job-training movement that began in Philadelphia and spread around the world. In 1964 he was elected the 68th Bishop of the A.M.E. Zion Church.

1978 TO TODAY

HONORED AND REMEMBERED



YEAR	MILESTONE
1978	Listed on the National Register of Historic Places , December 1.
2017	Selected for the National Fund for Sacred Places , supporting restoration of the front facade and the stone tracery around the great window.
2020	The 200th anniversary . The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission dedicates a state historical marker at the church door.
2022	Part of the 1500 block of Lombard Street is ceremonially renamed Wesley Way at a June ceremony.
Today	Facade restoration under way, and a licensed early learning center being planned for the lower level.



The Pennsylvania state historical marker at the church door.

PASTORS OF BIG WESLEY

THOSE WHO LED

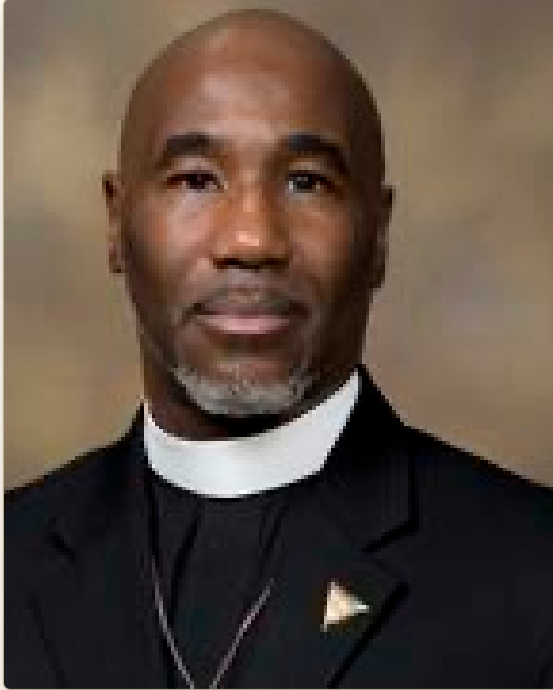
The full succession of pastors is being compiled from the church archives. If you can help fill a gap — a name, a photograph, a date — please contact the church office.

YEARS	PASTOR
1893	Rev. John E. Price — hymn writer, editor, presiding elder, founder of the Garnet Equal Rights League.
1950s - 1960s	Rev. Alfred G. Dunston Jr. — led the 1952 jobs boycott, backed Montgomery, helped found OIC; elected the 68th Bishop.
Former pastor	Rt. Rev. Louis Hunter Sr. — went on from this pulpit to become the 93rd Bishop of the A.M.E. Zion Church.
Today	Rev. Dr. Michael A. King — Pastor and Teacher.

THE STORY OF BIG WESLEY

REV. DR. MICHAEL A. KING

OUR PASTOR *today*



Rev. Dr. Michael A. King, Pastor and Teacher.

Rev. Dr. Michael A. King has served as Pastor and Teacher at Wesley for sixteen years, and his preaching ministry spans twenty-nine years, including two other congregations in the Philadelphia area. He serves as **Presiding Elder** of the re-organized Philadelphia District of the A.M.E. Zion Church, and is the founding director of **Share the Love, Inc.**, a Pennsylvania nonprofit. He is the immediate past President of the board of the **Pennsylvania Council of Churches**, and holds degrees from Penn State University, Eastern University, United Theological Seminary and Wesley Theological Seminary.

BIG WESLEY WAS NEVER ONLY A CHURCH

It has been a school, a pantry, a hiding place and a meeting hall — because the neighborhood needed those things and nobody else was going to build them. The next chapter is ours to write.

SIT WITH IT

What part of Big Wesley's story makes me most proud?

What do I want the next generation to say about our church?



“We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done.”

PSALM 78:4

WESLEY A.M.E. ZION CHURCH

“Big Wesley” · The Freedom Church · Founded June 6, 1820

SUNDAY SCHOOL	9:30 AM
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SUNDAY WORSHIP	11:00 AM
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