



Telling Our Stories

250 Years of United Methodism
in the New York Area

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Civil Rights Pioneer and First Bishop of the AME Zion Church

1750-1827

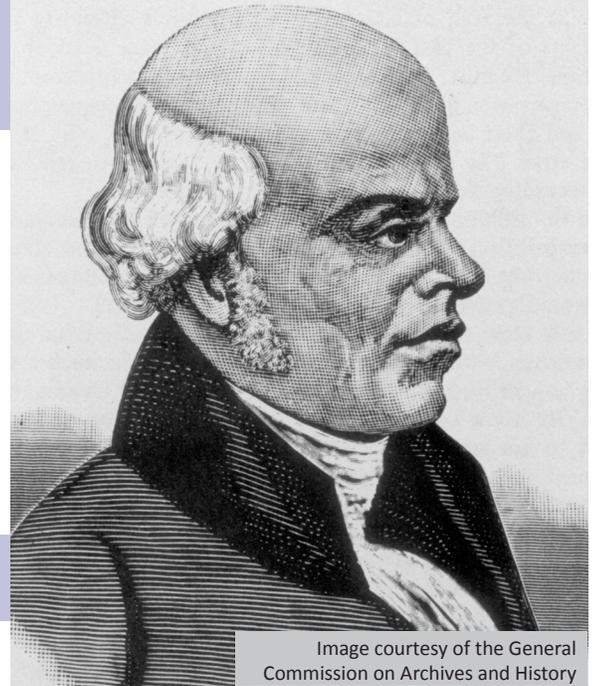


Image courtesy of the General
Commission on Archives and History

James Varick

Born in Newburgh, NY, Rev. James Varick began attending Methodist services at the famed Rigging Loft in New York City as a teenager. In time, he became a licensed local preacher in John Street Church. However, racist attitudes among New York's Methodists limited Varick's opportunities to serve and lead the congregation.

Varick's frustration with his congregation inspired him to take bold action. In 1796, after securing Bishop Francis Asbury's blessing, Varick organized several of John Street's African American members into the city's first church for people of color. Meeting first in his home, the new congregation moved into a new building—Zion Church—in 1800. Six years later, Varick and two of his colleagues became the first African Americans ordained in New York State.

An abolitionist, educator, and organizer, Varick worked tirelessly to lift persons up from oppressive social institutions. His efforts produced a connection of congregations that formed the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1822. To no one's surprise, the Church elected Varick its first bishop.

On July 4, 1827 a thanksgiving service for the abolition of slavery in New York State was held at Zion Church. Varick died just 2 weeks later at the age of 77.

For Discussion

- James Varick fought against racist attitudes in the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and in the wider society. How are racist attitudes still in evidence today, and what do you believe should be the church's response?
- Varick spent forty to fifty years working to give African-Americans an alternative to the subservient status they had in the MEC. What characteristics are needed to dedicate oneself to a goal/cause over such a long period of time?

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