

Extract from

**DIAMONDS OF DELAWARE AND MARYLAND'S EASTERN SHORE:
SEVEN BLACK MEN OF DISTINCTION**

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Peter Spencer (1782-1843) *Church Founder, Businessman, and Educator*

Peter Spencer is heralded as the father of Delaware's Independent Black Church Movement. Spencer's biographer, Lewis V. Baldwin, informs us that:

"The literature on Peter Spencer is amazingly scarce. Despite his tremendous importance as a church leader and founder, he has been almost totally ignored by sincere and proven scholars who have spent most, if not all, of their lifetime recounting the history of religion in America."

It is only in the past decade that Spencer is beginning to gain the attention of scholars. The accounts of much of his life are scant, but the evidence attests to his abilities as an organizer and leader. While Richard Allen's church was generally viewed as the founder of the first black Methodist denomination (incorporated in Philadelphia on April 9, 1816), the Spencer church--the African Union Methodist Protestant Church laid its claim years earlier on September 18, 1813. Thus, Spencer is one of the key figures in the history of African Methodism.

Born a slave in Kent County, Maryland in 1782, he was set free when his master died. During the early 1800s, Spencer took up roots in Wilmington where he received a basic education and found some financial success as a mechanic.

Spencer had a high regard for marriage. His wife Anne, previously married, was from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He raised two stepdaughters, provided well, and directed their educational pursuits. In the Spencer home, industry and thrift were key values.

A well-known figure in Wilmington's emerging black community, he was affectionately called "Father Spencer." Aside from being a devoted family man, he was also a "father figure and friend to numerous blacks in Wilmington."

Several personal qualities gave Spencer the requisites necessary for effective leadership: he was versatile, persuasive, a gifted teacher, and an efficient mechanic by trade. And,

he had studied law and was able to assist his people in legal matters. His integrity and intellect also gave him credibility.

In the area of education, Reverend Spencer provided blacks in Wilmington with a valuable service. A strong believer that education was the responsibility of black leadership, Spencer provided "hands-on" training in teaching the illiterate to read and write. His role as an educator has often been ignored. For Reverend Spencer, education and religion were "twins"--with instruction the key to ethical principles. Spencer understood then that knowledge was power.

Although Spencer distinguished himself as an astute businessman, educator, and mechanic, he is best known for his work as a church founder and organizer. In 1813, after rejecting white clerical domination and control, Father Spencer established, in Wilmington, the first independent black church denomination--the Union Church of Africans--presently known as the African Union Methodist Protestant (AUMP).

Father Spencer inaugurated the tradition of establishing the last Sunday in August as a time for a general reunion and religious revival--popularly known as "August Quarterly"--the day of jubilation. It originated in 1814 and is Delaware's oldest folk festival. It is also one of 19th-century America's few black religious festivals. Black workers, slave and free, were given time off to attend the festivities. The occasion served as a "homecoming" for many from the neighboring states of Maryland and Pennsylvania. The celebration included preaching, singing, dancing, and offered opportunities to worship, meet friends and relatives, and commemorate the founding and founder of African Union Methodism.

In the quest to uplift his people, Reverend Spencer left a legacy of high ideals and devotion. In keeping with his mission as leader of his people, Spencer engaged in a host of pro-black activities, including his support of the Underground Railroad in Delaware under the helm of station master Thomas Garrett. It is reputed that Spencer's church was involved in the network to assist runaway slaves. During the "August Quarterly," slaves "used the Mother Church as the starting point for escape to all points North."

Spencer, along with other black leaders such as Abraham Schadd, was a leader in the movement to oppose the American Colonization Society's effort to get blacks to return to Africa. It is generally believed that without the strong opposition from Spencer and his forces, the colonization scheme would have met with little, if any, resistance. Spencer's standing in the community suffered from this action, but he continued to speak out against all forms of injustice.

On July 25, 1843, Peter Spencer died in Wilmington, Delaware. His final words were, "The battle is fought and the victory is won." Newspaper accounts all revealed a

reverent respect for the legacy he left behind. The July 28, 1843 issue of *The Delaware State Journal* wrote the following:

Died in this City on Tuesday last, Rev. Peter Spencer (colored) aged 61 years, and six months. He bore an excellent character, and was extensively known as the most active and influential minister of the Union Church (colored) in this City, branches of which are spread throughout several of the surrounding states. His death has produced a vacancy, and it will be difficult to find any person who will fill his station with the industry, ability and influence which he did.

During his lifetime, Father Spencer organized 31 churches and several schools. He left a legacy to be envied by all. His character, temperament, and commitment to his church were the hallmarks of a man with a vision.