

**A Toolshed from Gate #4:  
The Dominion Iron and Steel Company  
and the Formation of an African American Church**

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In 1900, as part of an industrial boom in Cape Breton Island, the Dominion Iron and Steel Company began production in Sydney, NS. As a result of a program of active recruitment on the part of the company, a number of African Americans were induced to emigrate from the economically ravaged islands of the West Indies and to settle in Sydney. Relocated by the company in a area separated from the rest of the city (Whitney Pier), the community numbered 600 people by 1923,<sup>1</sup> and had become the most visibly segregated community in Sydney.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 1920s, black immigrants in Whitney Pier created a number of community organizations;<sup>3</sup> and, carrying on a pattern of church affiliation established during the previous decade, attended various churches and missions without demonstrating a firm communal commitment to any. In 1928 a fledgling congregation succeeded in erecting St. Philip's African Orthodox Church, and almost overnight St. Philip's became the fulcrum of the black community.<sup>4</sup>

Historians have attempted in a variety of ways to account for the failure of other churches in Whitney Pier and the success of St. Philip's in becoming the focus of this immigrant community. Robin Winks perceived a direct relationship between the politics of the UNIA and the emergence of St. Philip's, to the extent of describing the church as "the most militant of the Canadian Negroes' religious expressions."<sup>5</sup> Nothing could be further

from the truth. Although the two organizations shared certain key individuals, St. Philip's was from its inception an institution dedicated to a peaceful and accommodating relationship with the dominant white population of Sydney.<sup>6</sup> James W. Walker, while avoiding any suggestion of militancy, nonetheless interpreted the establishment of the African Orthodox Church in Sydney as simply an offshoot of the UNIA.<sup>7</sup> Other explanations have drawn direct links between the church's success and its capacity either to incorporate "the African and West Indian background of its congregation" into its ritual and organizational structures, or to resist "the majority culture and its capitalist symbols."<sup>8</sup> All of these explanations betray a commonality of interpretation in their tendency to reduce this religious phenomenon to social or economic factors; and I wish to suggest that it may be impossible to arrive at a fuller explanation for the prominence of St. Philip's without taking seriously its religious significance.

St. Philip's is a church, after all. Further, it is a church in which a majority of Sydney's early black population chose to carry on some form of relationship with God. In addition to considering social and economic factors, then, we must take seriously the meaning of God if we wish to arrive at an explanation for the church's central role in that community. Ultimately, I wish to suggest that this explanation lies, to a substantial degree, in St. Philip's tangible capacity to reflect the nature of religious consciousness of Sydney's black population.

The experience of God contains both a material and an ontological structure. Mircea Eliade directed attention to this structure when he suggested in *Patterns in Comparative Religion* that the forms or materiality of the world are religious phenomena. When appreciated in consciousness, these forms present the human with the stark understanding of its finitude. For Eliade this meant, for instance, that the experience of the sky corresponded with a primary encounter with the infinite; or again, that of stone with the understanding of negation – that which cannot be overcome. The forms of the world then, as apprehended in consciousness, present us with both the knowledge of our finitude and the necessary correlate of an oppositional structure. For Rudolph Ott, this structure was "wholly other;" and for Gerardus van der Leeuw, it was a nebulous "Somewhat" that he identified as opposing itself to the human as "being Something Other."<sup>9</sup> The experience of this ontological "other" is directly related to the experience of those forms of the world that force the human being to confront its finite nature. The "other" – or God – simultaneously presents

itself as an oppositional structure and an affirmation of the “concrete modalities” of our existence.<sup>10</sup>

Turning to the subject of a church (in this case, one particular church), the experience of such a God – in a sustained and localized manner – may necessarily require that the oppositional structure God represents be placed in relation to the material forms of the world from which the knowledge of human finitude emerges. In other words, a church – as a locus for God – must be an arena that reflects the material and ontological structure of religious consciousness. St. Philip’s was the only church in Whitney Pier that provided such an arena for its immigrant black population.

The community for which St. Philip’s was to become the focal point was born in the industrial boom that occurred in Cape Breton at the turn of the twentieth century. More specifically, this community was created out of steel. Active overseas recruitment on the part of the Dominion Iron and Steel Company (DISCO), which opened in 1900, resulted in immigration of African Americans from the West Indies to Sydney. Coming principally from Barbados (but also from Grenada, St. Vincent, and British Guyana), the immigrants settled in Whitney Pier – a district on the east side of the DISCO plant and set apart from the rest of the city of Sydney by the plant itself and a large creek. By 1923, there were 600 such immigrants living in the area, along with an ethnically mixed population of Italians and eastern Europeans from Poland, Hungary, and the Ukraine.<sup>11</sup>

For the most part, early black immigrants from the West Indian British colonies gravitated to St. Alban’s Anglican church. Yet, over the next quarter century, the community exhibited what one historian has characterized as an “ambivalence of affiliation,” attending various churches and missions, but lacking a collective and affinitive relationship with any.<sup>12</sup> A small number of blacks attended Holy Redeemer (Sydney’s largest Roman Catholic church), while others appeared at the Ukrainian and Polish Catholic churches; the United Mission, a joint creation of Whitney Pier’s Presbyterian and Methodist churches attracted some members of the black community, as did St. Cyprian’s, a mission of St. Alban’s Anglican church.<sup>13</sup> The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) attempted to establish itself in the area in 1923, but after an initial demonstration of support from the community, interest waned; late in the decade, land was purchased by a Toronto interest group on which to construct a church but the project was never begun.<sup>14</sup> Records indicate that

when St. Cyprian's was closed in 1932, a few of its parishioners moved to Victoria Methodist church, and then on to the United Church.

In spite of this erratic pattern of affiliation, most of the black population eventually settled at St. Philip's African Orthodox church so that by 1930 nearly all African Americans in Sydney were firmly associated with the AOC.<sup>15</sup> The establishment of this church in Sydney was undertaken in a manner that differed from the other churches and missions that attempted to serve the black population of Whitney Pier. St. Alban's, Holy Redeemer, Holy Ghost, and St. Mary's were established institutions in which blacks, to varying degrees, were unable to gain acceptance. The work of St. Cyprian's and the United Mission were undertaken by groups outside the black community; and even the AME, a strong institution in the United States and central Canada<sup>16</sup> did not receive its impetus in Whitney Pier from the African American population. Rather, the AME presence was a result of the church itself seeking to establish a foothold in Sydney.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike all these churches and missions, the AOC in Sydney was a product of an impulse from within the community itself. At the request of a group of steel workers, George Alexander McGuire (then Chaplain-General of the UNIA) sent William Ernest Robertson to establish an "independent episcopal" at Whitney Pier in August of 1921. McGuire resigned from the UNIA around the same time and proceeded to establish the African Orthodox Church, which officially came into being on 2 September 1921. The independent episcopal in Sydney subsequently became St. Philip's AOC in November of that year. St. Mark's (a former Presbyterian church) was used initially by the fledgling congregation, which subsequently moved to a number of other buildings (including the home of one of its pastors<sup>18</sup>) before settling in 1928 in the structure that became its permanent location.<sup>19</sup> The opening of St. Philip's appears to have signalled a shift in church attendance, as most members of the black community became affiliated with the AOC shortly thereafter.

The question, of course, is why this occurred. The fact that St. Philip's was a product of an impetus from within the community was undoubtedly a factor; and yet, the AOC did not become a focus for the community until after the building itself was constructed. It is my contention that St. Philip's' success was related to its capacity to reflect the structure of religious consciousness of Sydney's black population – that it constituted an arena in which God could be experienced in direct relation

to those forms of matter that were implicated in the knowledge of finitude that is presupposed by the experience of the “wholly other.”

The principle form of matter in this case was steel or, more precisely, the steel company; since the steel company was associated, in one manner or another, with myriad impositions of limitation on the black community that were specific to the time and space in which it was situated. In its early years of operation, DISCO owned all the land and residences in its vicinity. All immigrants who came to Sydney to work its mill were consequently located by the company in a two square-mile area separated from the rest of Sydney by water, the plant itself, and a web of railroad tracks. In the case of African American immigrants, the separation was more complete, creating what would become “the most obviously segregated group in Whitney Pier.”<sup>20</sup> These immigrants were located in the area closest to the plant – the loudest and most toxic area due to its proximity to the tar plant and coke ovens that filled the air with clouds of pollutants.<sup>21</sup> In the first instance, this position impacted on the health of the community, particularly in respect to an early preponderance of fatal lung diseases.<sup>22</sup>

In a variety of other ways, the black steel-working population was subjected to imposed limitations that were virtually impossible to counter. The somewhat nomadic patterns of church affiliation that characterized the community until the late 1920s, for instance, were to a substantial degree a result of a refusal by whites in the area to extend the parameters of their congregations to include African Americans. As one woman recalled in 1993, “The coloured people used to go to the churches down the Pier and remarks were passed . . . they didn’t want Blacks in their church.”<sup>23</sup> A Diocesan Report of 1924 referred to a “problem” at St. Alban’s Anglican church, for instance, resulting from the fact that all the pews in the church had been bought by whites and so blacks, in the words of a later archbishop of the AOC, “found the church doors to be open, but there were no seats for them.” An Anglican minister during the same period refused to perform the rites of burial for a deceased member of the church who was black. The community fared little better at the Roman Catholic church where, in the 1930s, the priest (Father Kiely) was forced to castigate members of his congregation for refusing to sit beside West Indian immigrants at Mass. The United Mission and that of St. Cyprian’s, while providing arenas that encouraged full black participation, discouraged both the immigrants’ movement into the wider community, and their participa-

tion in the administration of the churches.<sup>24</sup> St. Cyprian's, in particular, was established to solve the seating problem at St. Alban's by removing blacks to their own congregation; and by 1927, the archbishop for the Diocese was lamenting the fact that the Mission congregation was not supporting "the work which has been undertaken [by whites] . . . among the coloured people."<sup>25</sup>

This ghettoized community, living in the shadow of the coke ovens was sufficiently distant from the field of vision of Sydney's white population that it became, in the eyes of the dominant population, a monolithic community defined for the most part in relation to the steel plant. This was starkly illustrated in the city's newspaper, the *Sydney Post*, during the period. An article concerning the AME building campaign in 1923, for example, assured the public that there was "steady work" at the steel plant, and the headline said nothing of the building of a church. Rather, it pointed out that the "Coloured People at Whitney Pier are Industrious." Readers were assured by the press that support of the campaign was desirable because it would provide local blacks with "an opportunity to attain a high level of Christian Citizenship." In other articles, the immigrants were described as "a colony of colored people" who, when "taken as a whole," were "capable of the very highest social, religious, and intellectual development," "when afforded the proper facilities and environment." It was conceded that "As everyone knows, living conditions out where the colored folks are situated are not what they ought to be," but the public was reassured that "campaigns for social and religious betterment" would nonetheless be fruitful.<sup>26</sup> West Indian blacks, from the perspective of whites, were defined as members of a socially, religiously, and intellectually underdeveloped colony, firmly connected with the steel mill. The image clearly did not reflect the actual community, but the limits within which whites were prepared to accept a West Indian presence in Sydney. Foremost, this meant that the community had to be defined as socially and intellectually inferior.

There is no question that the latter part of the equation was a white fabrication. The community's social and intellectual character, by no stretch of the imagination, rivaled that of any other contemporary group of people in Sydney. The African American population in 1923 numbered a mere six hundred; yet within that population there were school teachers, professional musicians, skilled tradespeople, owners of small businesses, two physicians, and seventeen men studying – among other professions –

law and medicine at Dalhousie University in Halifax.<sup>27</sup> The tendency to reduce this multifaceted community to an inferior appendage of the Dominion Iron and Steel Company had dramatic repercussions for members of the black community. Principally, they were forced to accept the fact that the most densely polluted sector of the city was the only physical space they were permitted to inhabit. Those who so much as ventured from the area after 8:00 p.m., for instance, were routinely beaten.<sup>28</sup>

There is no doubt that the African American community in Whitney Pier emerged out of a relationship with steel. Blacks immigrated to the area in order to meet DISCO's need for labour, and were subsequently accepted by whites only in terms of that relationship. The lives of these early immigrants were defined substantially by physical segregation, pollution, alienation from establish churches and their administrations, and derogatory images created and propagated by whites. Steel was the physical substance that gave rise to a series of imposed limitations that could not be altered – limitations on health, association, mobility, and self-determination in Sydney. Steel created, for this community, an experience of finitude that was absolutely new – a product of a particular people's situation in an equally particular temporal and spatial context.

Returning to the initial discussion of religious consciousness, it is possible to expect that an experience such as that of Sydney's African American immigrants would relate specifically to the experience of God. God, as a structure of opposition, can be known only through a knowledge of finitude created by a confrontation with the concrete. Such a structure, while presenting itself as absolutely "other," simultaneously affirms the temporal and spatial realities that make its apprehension possible. One would consequently expect that in Whitney Pier in the 1920s, God – to be experienced as God – would have had to be in some manner situated both in relation to and in opposition to steel – that very particular configuration of matter that presented the black population with a form of limitation specific to that context.

Of all the churches in Whitney Pier, St. Philip's African Orthodox was the only one that presented the black community with an arena in which this could occur. Like the community itself, St. Philip's was also a product of steel. The church was originally a shed, which was moved by the community to its permanent location in the Coke Ovens area in 1928. It was reconstructed out of materials that were ready and affordable –

spruce and pine boards, and gold paint, for instance; but more importantly, much of it was acquired from the steel company. The building itself was purchased from the company where it had been used as a storage shed inside Gate # 4 of the plant. The altar rail and crosses were constructed of wrought-iron pipe, and the bell was acquired from a steel company engine.<sup>29</sup>

This was a church that starkly reminded black residents of the Pier that steel was an inescapable reality. Steel presented these people with constraints and limitations; and yet, this church, constructed substantially out of steel company materials, became the focus of their religious and cultural lives. The experience of God in this context confirmed the concrete modality of their lives in Whitney Pier.

In a sense, St. Philip's was an architectural mirror of religious consciousness. Steel confronted West Indian immigrants with an understanding of finitude specific to their situation. Because a sense of finitude born in confrontation with the materiality of the world correlates with the ontological experience of a structure of opposition, it is clear that steel in this case was not simply related to limitation; it was also related to the experience of God. To put it plainly, God was present at St. Philip's not simply as an ontological structure, but as an affirmation of the concrete reality of life lived in relation to particular constraints.

No other church in Whitney Pier provided a context in which the dual nature of God as being both prior to and known only through concrete forms of life in time and space could manifest itself. St. Philip's did not become the focal point of Sydney's black population after 1928 principally because of West Indian cultural continuity, militancy, nor capitalist symbols. Rather, St. Philip's provided a space in the shadow of the coke ovens in which the material and ontological structure of a people's religious consciousness was afforded authentic expression.

### ***Endnotes***

1. From the *Sydney Post*, 20 January 1923; cited in Elizabeth Beaton, "Religious Affiliation and Ethnic Identity of West Indians in Whitney Pier," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 20, No. 3 (1988): 113.
2. Elizabeth Beaton, "A Tale of Three Cities: Ethnic Architecture in Sydney, Nova Scotia," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 16, No. 3 (1984): 91.



3. These included an active chapter of the UNIA (with its own hall and two bands), the Menelik Co-operative Society, and the Ethiopian Community Club (see A.A. MacKenzie, "The Irish and the West Indians in Nova Scotia." in *Work, Ethnicity and Oral History*, eds. Dorothy E. Moore and James H. Morrison [Halifax: International Education Centre, 1988], 47.
4. Beaton, "Religious Affiliation," 125; Elizabeth Beaton, "Case Studies: St. Philip's AOC, Holy Ghost Ukrainian Greek Church, St. Mary's Polish Church" (Sydney: Beaton Institute Reports); and MacKenzie, "The Irish and the West Indians," 47.
5. Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971), 354.
6. Each organization supported the other. When Marcus Garvey visited Sydney in 1938, for instance, the chairman who presided over his public oration was Father James Adolphus Ford, pastor of St. Philip's from 1936-1938. However, the "radical" elements of UNIA doctrine were not present within this African Orthodox community, and quite possibly absent from the UNIA chapter itself. Father George Anthony Francis, who became pastor at St. Philip's in 1940, wrote in his "History of the Black Population at Whitney Pier": "The Aims and object of [the UNIA] was to promote a better understanding between the Black and white races, and to give the Black people their right place in society." Father Francis' successor, Archbishop Vincent Waterman, later claimed that St. Philip's had never been a militant organization, but was simply an expression of people's desire to have "something of their own" (see "Marcus Garvey Speaking in Menelik Hall, Sydney, Nova Scotia: The Work that has Been Done," *The Black Man*, 3 No. 10 [July 1938]: 7; "Black Culture in Whitney Pier," Cultural and Recreation Project, The Beaton Institute, Toby Morris Collection, file # 5; George Anthony Francis, "History of the Black Population at Whitney Pier" [Sydney: Beaton Institute]; and interview with Vincent Waterman, cited in Beaton, "Religious Affiliation," 123, n. 44.
7. James W. Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada* (Hull: Canadian Government Publishing Centre, 1980), 123.
8. Beaton, "Religious Affiliation," 125.
9. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958); Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1938), 23; Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 25. Charles Long described the

“Wholly Other” as, “a power which is other than whatever kind of power one has . . . The power greater than any other which people usually talk about is called ‘God’” (“American Religion,” Course taught at Syracuse University, 1990).

10. Long, *Significations*, 25. Long suggests that “this manifestation has a double meaning: it makes itself known through some concrete form of cultural life, and its showing testifies to the reality of a mode of being that is prior to and different from the ordinary cultural categories” (27-28).
11. Beaton, “Religious Affiliation,” 112-113; Beaton, “Case Studies;”31; and MacKenzie, “The Irish and the West Indians,” 45.
12. Beaton, “Religious Affiliation,” 118, 124; and “The Black Settlement in Sydney, Nova Scotia,” *Scrapbook* of the Sydney Reunion Association (Sydney: Beaton Institute, 1985), 3.
13. Beaton, “Religious Affiliation,” 115-116, 188; and “Black Culture in Whitney Pier.”
14. “New Church to be Erected at Whitney Pier,” *Sydney Post*, 19 January 1923; cited in Beaton, “Religious Affiliation,” 117-118.
15. Beaton, “Religious Affiliation,” 118; and Beaton, “A Tale of Three Cities,” 101. One woman recalled in 1993: “Most of all, the coloured people went to the African Orthodox Church.” (Beryl Braithwaite, “A Woman’s View,” in *From the Pier, Dear: Images of Multicultural Community* [Sydney: Whitney Pier Historical Society, 1993], 84).
16. Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada*, 138; and Beaton, “Religious Affiliation,” 117.
17. “New Church to be Erected at Whitney Pier,” *Sydney Post*, 19 January 1923. The article stated that C. A. Stewart, “presiding Elder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church for the Maritime Provinces,” spent 4 months in Sydney during the latter part of 1922 garnering support for the establishment of a church in Whitney Pier.
18. The pastor was Archdeacon Dixon Egbert Philips, who served from 1925-1935 (see A.C. Terry Thompson, *History of the African Orthodox Church* [New York: The African Orthodox Church, 1956], 100; and “Black Culture in Whitney Pier”).
19. Charles Sheppard, Untitled manuscript, The Beaton Institute, Toby Morris Collection, file #32; Thompson, *History of the African Orthodox Church*, 100; and “Black Culture in Whitney Pier.”

20. Beaton, "A Tale of Three Cities," 91.
21. MacKenzie, "The Irish and the West Indians," 45; Beaton, "Religious Affiliation," 114; and "The Black Settlement in Sydney, Nova Scotia," 1.
22. Braithwaite, "A Woman's View," 83. Braithwaite refers to large numbers of cases of tuberculosis, pneumonia, and pleurisy.
23. Braithwaite, "A Woman's View," 84.
24. Beaton, "Religious Affiliation," 115, 125.
25. "Archbishop's Charge," 69. Also cited in a letter of D. G. Padmore to Elizabeth Planetta, 29 June 1983, Beaton Institute.
26. *Sydney Post*, 19, 20, 28 January 1923.
27. *Sydney Post*, 28 January 1923.
28. MacKenzie, "The Irish and the West Indians," 47.
29. Interview with Archbishop Vincent Waterman in MacNeil, "The AOC," 3, 11; Braithwaite, "A Woman's View," 84; and Beaton, "Religious Affiliation," 121.

