

Mayor Dickson, Council President Rubino, Members of Common Council, thank you for the opportunity to talk to you about an outstanding American. I want to particularly thank Councilwoman Sandra Lizza for inviting me to give this presentation about Florence Spearing Randolph. This is only a brief summary. However, at the conclusion of my presentation I have a detailed booklet for you about her that I encourage you to read.

Florence Spearing was born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1866. In 1886, she married Hugh Randolph who was employed as a train cook in the dining car service of the Pullman Company. They had one daughter. Florence Randolph's early life was influenced by her blind maternal grandmother whom as a child she would lead from house to house as her grandmother prayed with the sick and explained the scriptures to them. After Florence graduated from Avery Normal Institute in Charleston, she pursued a career in dressmaking and worked as a dressmaking instructor in Charleston for two years. At the age of 19, she moved to Jersey City to live with an older sister and to seek better job opportunities. She became a successful entrepreneur and operated a dressmaking business out of her home.

In the late 1880s, Florence felt a call to the ministry and began Bible and social work studies under the tutelage of a Yale University graduate, Dr. E. George Biddle, who was a Greek and Hebrew scholar. Although women in the ministry was not accepted at the time and met with resistance, she would not be deterred and she began her ministerial career in 1897 when she was licensed to preach in Jersey City. In 1898, she joined the New Jersey Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (A.M.E. Zion), which was the first Black denomination to ordain women as ministers (1894). (The Unitarian Church was the first denomination to ordain women). She was ordained a deacon in 1901 and in 1903 she was ordained an elder which allowed her to consecrate and serve Holy Communion also known as the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper.

Working without a salary for the first twelve years of her ministry, Rev. Randolph was appointed by the Bishop as Pastor of five churches during her lifetime, three in New York State and two in New Jersey. All five churches were small, poor, and struggling with few members and financial resources. Using her business acumen, Rev. Randolph helped to strengthen the churches until a nice young man would be assigned and she would move on to the next problem area. While pastoring, she completed Biblical Studies at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, pursued advanced theological training at Drew University Seminary in Madison, NJ and later received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Livingstone College, our A.M.E. Zion Church College in Salisbury, NC. The respect she earned from her Christian contemporaries led to her been selected as a delegate in 1901 to the Third World Wide Ecumenical Conference in Methodism in London, England.

In 1925, Bishop Paris A. Wallace appointed Rev. Randolph as temporary supply pastor of a small, struggling Methodist church named Wallace Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church in Summit, NJ. The church was organized on June 29, 1923 and was worshipping in the colored Y.M.C.A. in Summit. Its first Pastor, a man by the name of Rev. H. C. VanPelt, served for two years. Rev. Randolph's first sermon was "For the people had a mind to work" from Nehemiah 4:6. With her spiritual gifts and talents, vision and leadership, she led the people in a church building campaign in 1926. In 1928, she and the church trustees purchased three lots at the corner of Broad and Orchard Streets. Her vision was questioned but she did not waver. A duplex house was already on one of the lots. The first half of the duplex was renovated and was used as a chapel seating 100. The second half of the duplex was used as a community house where classes in English, practical nursing, music, dressmaking and cooking were taught by volunteers. Rev. Randolph lived on the second floor of the first half of the house which is now the church's parsonage. During the Great Depression, the church's \$16,000 mortgage was paid off in 1931 and ground breaking for the church building was held in 1935. The church was completed in 1937.

Although Rev. Randolph is best known and remembered as the Builder and second Pastor of Wallace Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church, she also had an equally outstanding public service career.

- In 1892, she joined the Women's Temperance movement and served as President of the Women's Christian Temperance Union of the Colored Women of New Jersey which was affiliated with the mainstream Woman's Christian Temperance Union led by Frances Willard.
- Her interest in helping others and in doing missionary work led to her convincing the General Conference of the A.M.E. Zion Church in 1912 to create a special department of the Women's Home & Overseas Missionary Society to be called the Bureau of Overseas Supply and she was the first General Secretary of the Supply Department. Florence Randolph Day is observed on any Sunday in June, July or August in the A.M.E. Zion Church worldwide in remembrance of her outstanding work.
- In 1916, she was elected as General President of the Women's Home & Overseas Missionary Society of the A.M.E. Zion Church and served for four years.
- In 1920, while focusing on the need for education, health care and services, she took an extensive tour of Liberia and Ghana. While there, she took an interest in a young African girl named Charity Zolema whom she brought back to Summit. Charity graduated with honors from Summit High School and Hampton University and returned to Africa to teach school.

- **Dr. Randolph organized the New Jersey Federation of Colored Women's Clubs whose goal was to improve the lives of African Americans and to help them to achieve full citizenship rights.**
- **She served on the Executive Board of the New Jersey Woman's Suffrage Association, an affiliate of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association, which focused on gaining the right to vote for women through amendments to individual state constitutions which eventually led to the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granting women the right to vote.**

After 21 years as Pastor of Wallace Chapel from 1925 to 1946, she retired as Pastor of Wallace Chapel (she is the second longest serving Pastor of the church) and moved to Montclair, NJ to live with her daughter and grandson. She died at the age of 85.

Because of her outstanding work, achievements, and contributions, in 2004, Wallace Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church was designated a historic site by the Alice Paul Institute and the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office and she and the church were listed on the "New Jersey Women's Heritage Trail." In 2007, the church was listed as a historic site on the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places and as a historic site on the City of Summit's Master Plan. In 2008, the General Conference of the A.M.E. Zion Church designated Wallace Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church as a Historical Landmark of the A.M.E. Zion Church, one of only three A.M.E. Zion Churches in the world to be given this designation.

The author, James Baldwin, said "Know from whence you came. If you know whence you came, there are absolutely no limitations to where you can go." Rev. Dr. Florence S. Randolph was practicing this before James Baldwin ever wrote it. These deceased members of Wallace Chapel - Oscar Dennis for whom Dennis Place in Summit is named after; Capitola Dickerson revered music teacher and social activist; and Lawton C. Johnson, church music director and office manager at the Middle School for whom the Summit Middle School is named after were influenced by her life and contributions. Her life and contributions continue to inspire me and others at the church as we do our part to make this world a better place.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to share some information about this great woman and also some information about the other Methodist Church in Summit, Wallace Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church. I recommend to you the book, "Daughters of Thunder" by Dr. Bettye Collier-Thomas in which you can read much more about Rev. Dr. Florence S. Randolph.

Rev. Dr. Denison D. Harrield, Jr. – Common Council on Mon., September 8, 2015 at 7:30 pm.