

## Grace A. M. E. Zion Church



*This report was written on May 7, 1980.*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Grace A.M.E. Zion Church is located at 219-223 S. Brevard St. in Charlotte, N.C.

**2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner and occupant of the property:**

The present owner and occupant of the property is:  
Grace A.M.E. Zion Church  
219-223 S. Brevard St.  
Charlotte, N.C. 28202

Telephone: 332-7669

**3. Representative photographs of the property:** This report contains representative photographs of the property.

**4. A map depicting the location of the property:** This report contains a map which depicts the location of the property.



**5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property:** The original deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 55, Page 444. Tax Parcel Number: 12502404.

**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains an historical essay on the property prepared by Dr. William H. Huffman.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains an architectural description of the property prepared by Jack O. Boyte, A.I.A.

**8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria set forth in N. C. G. S. 160A-399.4:**

**a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance:** The Commission judges that the property known as the Grace A.M.E. Zion Church does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the building, dedicated on July 13, 1902, is one of the oldest

black churches in Charlotte and the only religious edifice which survives in what was once the largest black residential section in Charlotte, known as Brooklyn, 2) the church has contributed substantially to the evolution of the black community, especially through such members as Dr. J. T. Williams and Thaddeus L. Tate, and 3) the building is architecturally significant as one of the finer local examples of the late Gothic Revival style.

**b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship materials, feeling and/or association:** The Commission judges that the architectural description included in this report demonstrates that the property known as the Grace A.M.E. Zion Church meets this criterion.

**9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal:** The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply annually for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes "historic property." The current Ad Valorem tax appraisal of the .272 acres of land is \$59,210. The current Ad Valorem tax appraisal of the building is \$28,560 The property is exempted from the payment of Ad Valorem taxes. The building contains 4,254 square feet of floor space. The land is zoned B3.

**Date of Preparation of this Report:** May 7, 1980.

**Prepared by:** Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director  
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission  
3500 Shamrock Dr.  
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*Historical Overview*



**Looking westward toward the rear of Grace A.M.E. Zion Church shows that the building is a rare reminder of the pedestrian scale neighborhoods that once surrounded the intersection of Trade & Tryon Sts.**

*by Dr. William H. Huffman  
April, 1980*

In 1766, Philip Embury, one of the first Methodist lay preachers in the American Colonies, held a meeting at his home in New York City with four whites and one black slave present.<sup>1</sup> This small group developed into the John Street Church (Wesley Chapel) with its own building in 1768, and became a part of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America when it formally organized as a separate body from the English Methodist Church in 1784.<sup>2</sup> By 1786, the church had 178 white and 25 black members in the congregation.<sup>3</sup> As the popularity of the church grew, so did the dissatisfaction of the black members, because of two problems: their growing treatment as second-class members of the congregation; and the prohibition of licensed black preachers against preaching to members of their own race but occasionally, and never to whites.<sup>4</sup> By 1795, this dissatisfaction reached its peak among the 155 black members, who resolved to separate from the John Street Church. The following year, led by James Varick (1750-1827), who was later to become the first bishop of the A.M.E. Zion Church, a group of black members received permission from the head of the Methodist Church to meet as a separate society.<sup>5</sup> This first black church in New York adopted the name Zion "as the name most frequently used in the Bible to designate the Church of God."<sup>6</sup> In 1800, the church erected its own building in New York, and in 1801 incorporated under the name, "The African Methodist Episcopal Church (Called Zion) in New York," with a separate charter from the state.<sup>7</sup> They continued to be a part of the Methodist Episcopal Church, however, and were assigned white preachers.

Since they had experienced rapid growth in the succeeding twenty years, the Zion church began construction of a new stone building in 1820, which was completed the following year. Of greater importance, however, was the fact that the church also determined in 1820 to become independent of the white Methodist Church in order to achieve its goal of equality in religion.<sup>8</sup> By 1822, the original church in New York had combined with other black churches in the region to establish "The African Methodist Episcopal Church in America," with their own Discipline and officeholders, and had elected James Varick as the first bishop.<sup>9</sup> From 1822 to 1865, the A.M.E. Zion Church expanded in the North, and counted in its ranks a number of dedicated abolitionists and conductors of the Underground Railroad, including Frederick Douglass (1821-1895), Harriet Tubman (1821-1913), and Jermain Loguen (1813-1872).<sup>10</sup>

The A.M.E. Zion Church first reached the South in North Carolina during the Civil War. In 1863, a black Methodist congregation known as Andrew Chapel in New Bern, N.C., sent an appeal to former members in New Haven, Connecticut for help in connecting with the Zion Church. After commissioning one missionary that same year who was reluctant to embark, the Mission Board commissioned a second, Rev. J. W. Hood. Rev. Hood, later a bishop, left for New Bern in December, 1863, and arrived on the 20th of January, 1864. The 400 members of Andrew Chapel, previously connected with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, agreed to Hood's proposal, and joined the A.M.E. Zion Church. Within a short period of time, churches were added in Beaufort, Roanoke Island and Washington, N.C. The Union lines were only about 15 miles inland from New Bern at the time of this missionary activity. New Bern itself was subsequently attacked, but held by the Union forces, and Washington was recaptured by the Confederates. Further organizing efforts were planned during the remainder of 1864, but they had to wait until the end of hostilities in 1865.<sup>11</sup>

About May, 1865, an elder of the church named Edward H. Hill pushed west to Charlotte and organized Clinton Chapel, the first black church in the city. Reverend Hill licensed Bird Hampton Taylor, put him in charge of Clinton Chapel, and continued his organizing activities in the area. Before he died later that year, Hill had laid the groundwork for nearly twenty new churches within a fifty mile radius of Charlotte.<sup>12</sup>

Clinton Chapel, as did the A.M.E. Zion Church in general, grew rapidly in the post-war years. From 1863 to 1896, the national church membership increased from about five thousand to nearly half a million, primarily because of its organizing activities in the South.<sup>13</sup> By 1880, Clinton Chapel, located on Mint Street in downtown Charlotte, had a membership of 1193 and church property valued at \$3500.00.<sup>14</sup> Beginning in 1882, however, the Christian Temperance movement began to divide some members of the congregation from the rest. The small group labeled as prohibitionists came to the end of their patience over the issue in 1886, after they had been criticized for their views for some time by the majority, including the pastor. The temperance group decided to act on a suggestion by Mrs. W. W. Smith to organize their own church as the only solution to religious harmony over the problem. Thus in December, 1886, twenty-eight like-minded members met at the home of Jethro Sumner, 509 S. Davidson Street. There the eleven men and seventeen women selected a committee of three to write a letter of withdrawal from Clinton Chapel. The new society adopted the name Grace Chapel, and took as their motto "God, Religion and Temperance," which appears in Latin on the cornerstone of the present building.<sup>15</sup>



**Look carefully for the word "Temperance."**

The first meeting place for Grace was in an Episcopal Church building built as a mission for whites on West Stonewall Street. William W. Smith, one of the charter members, described the first days:

Brother John C. Davidson volunteered to preach. We had to work hard not to lose any time. Brother M.F. Young, Librarian of the Sunday school of the mother church, gave us Sunday school literature until we could arrange to buy some. This was the 12th or 15th of December, 1886. More than once did I roll wood on a wheelbarrow from my home on East Stonewall Street to the place on West Stonewall Street. <sup>16</sup>

Bishop J. W. Hood, who had led the pioneering efforts into North Carolina, accepted Grace into the A. M. E. Zion Church early in 1887, and appointed J. A. D. Bloice as interim pastor. A few months later, Reverend R. Haywood Stitt, who was studying at the Theological department of Livingstone College in Salisbury, was sent as station pastor. <sup>17</sup>

The new church moved to a series of temporary quarters before finding a permanent home. After a few months, they had to vacate the Episcopal Mission, and met for a short time at the Mayor's office in the old Market House on East Trade Street. Shortly afterward, they rented the former Samaritan Lodge hall on East Second Street near Davidson, and then moved again to the A.M.E. Zion Publishing House at 6 South College Street. <sup>18</sup> On August 16, 1887, the Board of Trustees of Grace Chapel bought a lot on S. Brevard Street (then called "B" Street), the present site of the church, to be used for their own building. The lot, purchased for \$600.00, measured 99 front feet on "B" Street, and was 198 feet deep. <sup>19</sup>

The first church built of the lot was a frame building of thirty by sixty feet, where the congregation worshiped until the present structure was built. <sup>20</sup> On September 2, 1889, the trustees sold half their lot to Jethro Sumner, who built his house on it next to the church. <sup>21</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, the congregation had outgrown the original frame building,

and the pastor, Dr. John Wesley Smith, began to raise funds for a new brick structure. In 1898, the frame building was moved to the back of the lot in preparation for construction of the new one. The young ladies of the church helped raise money by selling ice cream and fried fish on Saturdays. <sup>22</sup> By 1900, it was reported that Dr. J.W. Smith (who was also editor of the church newspaper, *The Star of Zion*, headquartered in Charlotte) had raised \$2,000.00 for the new church. <sup>23</sup> The general contractor and designer of the present building was W.W. Smith, a member of the church. Site preparation in July 1900, and actual construction began three months later, as reported by the pastor:

We commenced laying brick October 22 at 11 a.m. and we want to roof and slate it if possible before Christmas. It will be a handsome brick church 55 x 90 and ornamented with three towers. Until Dr. A.J. Warner (of Clinton Chapel) begins the erection of his great church, our church will be the largest negro church in Charlotte. In our rally last Sabbath, with 160 members we raised \$800, making over \$1000 that we raised for building purposes in the last six months. <sup>24</sup>

Dr. Smith's optimism is reflected by the dates on the cornerstone, 1900-1901, but the building was actually dedicated on July 13, 1902. That day was, as an article in the *Observer* noted, "a red letter day religiously with the members of Grace A.M.E. Zion Church." <sup>25</sup> On that day no less than three bishops of the church preached respectively at 11 a.m., 3 p.m., and 8 p.m., and the mid-day service included a number of white guests. The dedicatory services continued for seven days, which included preaching on successive nights by the pastors of the other black churches in Charlotte, who brought their choirs and congregations. <sup>26</sup> Grace Church continued to enjoy steady membership and prosperity during the first half of the twentieth century. Located in the then flourishing black community of Brooklyn in Charlotte's Second Ward, it was a focal point for religious and social activities for both young and old. <sup>27</sup> Its membership and pastorate have included a number of leading citizens who have contributed a great deal to the community, both black and white. Two of its outstanding members were Dr. J.T. Williams (1859-1924) and Thad L. Tate (1865-1951).



**This is an early 1900's photograph of Edna Rattley (holding baby), daughter of John and Sarah Rattley, with her cousins Estelle (front**

seat) and Cora (middle seat) Tate. The woman in the backseat is unidentified. In the background is Grace AME Zion Church.

Dr. John Taylor Williams was a highly respected educator, physician, businessman and civil servant of the Charlotte community. Originally an educator, Dr. Williams became the Assistant Principal of the Charlotte "graded" schools at the age of twenty-three in 1882. Resigning to study medicine, in 1886 he became one of the first three black physicians licensed to practice medicine in North Carolina. In addition to building a prosperous surgical practice in Charlotte and serving on the Board of Health of Mecklenburg County, Dr. Williams was twice elected to the Board of Aldermen, in 1888 and 1890. President McKinley nominated him for the post of consul to Sierra Leone, West Africa in 1898, where he served until 1907. After his service in Africa, Dr. Williams returned to Charlotte and resumed his medical practice. J.T. Williams Junior High School is named in honor of his service to the community. <sup>28</sup>



**The first house on the left was the home of Dr. J. T. Williams. Grace Church was in the most prestigious section of 2nd Ward or Brooklyn** "Courtesy of the Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room – Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County."

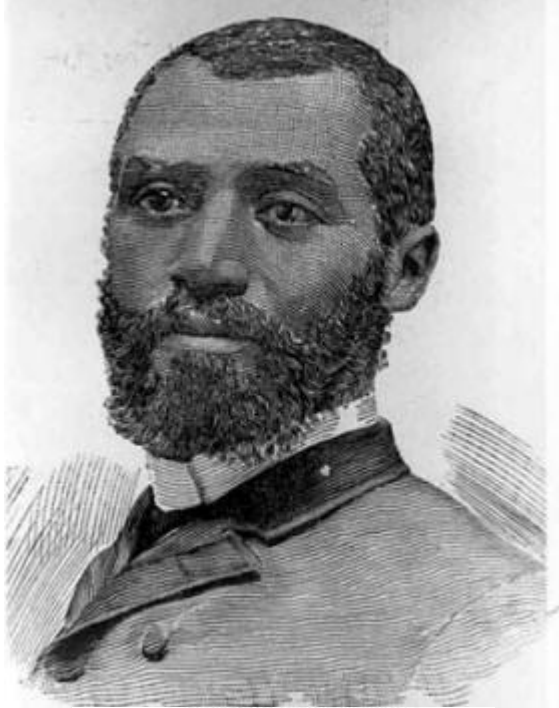


MR. AND MRS. THAD L. TATE



## **Two of the founding members of Grace Church.**

Thaddeus Lincoln Tate came to Charlotte in 1877 at the age of twelve. Eventually he owned and operated a thriving barbershop downtown which had as regular customers such figures as J.B. Ivey, William Belk, Governor Cameron Morrison and other prominent members of the community. During his very active civic life, Thad Tate, often with the support of his eminent customers, was instrumental in improving the quality of life for the black community. He helped establish the Brevard Street branch of the public library, was a founder of the branch of the YMCA for blacks, and was an original director of the investment company which built the first office building in Charlotte (at 3rd and Brevard) to be used by black businesses and professions. He was also instrumental in the establishment of the Morrison Training School in Hoffman, N.C. for black youths, where a building is named in his honor. <sup>29</sup>



**W. C. Smith, editor of the *Charlotte Messenger*, was among the founding members of Grace Church.**

In addition to the contributions of its members, the pastors of Grace Church have been continually active in the Charlotte community. Following their service there, seven of Grace's

thirty-six pastors have become bishops in the A. M. E. Zion Church, and they have always had a reputation for their high quality as insisted upon by the congregation.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of the destruction of Brooklyn during urban renewal of the 1960's when most of Grace's parishioners moved to the West Charlotte area, the church and its leadership continue to play a substantial role in the life of the city, and many of the former residents of Second Ward continue to identify with the church as part of their Brooklyn heritage. As well as representing the rich history of its contributions to Charlotte, the Grace A. M. E. Zion Church serves more than just the religious concerns of the area from the unique structure on South Brevard Street, as described by Rev. Smith Turner III, the present pastor:

The church is an instrument for expression of black concerns for education and civic and cultural needs; a voice that will articulate the need for jobs and to make people aware of their involvement in the life and structure of the city. It can't just serve to minister to the religious needs, but has to deal with those social needs and be an interpreter of them.

We also provide a platform for the development of leadership. Many of our young people go away to college where they develop their talents which were first brought out in programs that we have in our church.

The church also serves as a gathering place for black leaders, as well as a place for communicating to the wider community what has taken place and what will take place in the black community.<sup>31</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Emory S. Bucke, General Editor, *The History of American Methodism*, 3 vols. (New York: Abington Press, 1964), I, p. 77. William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church* (Charlotte, N.C.: A.M.E. Zion Publishing House, 1974), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> *The History of American Methodism*, I, pp. 185ff.

<sup>3</sup> Walls, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> *The History of American Methodism*, I, p. 610.

<sup>5</sup> Walls, pp. 45-47; Grant S. Shockley, "Negro Leaders in Early American Methodism," *Forever Beginning. 1766-1966: Historical Papers Presented at American Methodism's Bicentennial Celebration* (Lake Junaluska, N.C.: Association of Methodist Historical Societies, 1967), pp. 54-55.

<sup>6</sup> Walls, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-53.

<sup>8</sup> *The History of American Methodism*, I, pp. 611-614; Walls, pp. 71ff.

<sup>9</sup> *The History of American Methodism*, I, pp. 613-614; Walls, pp. 71-78. Since there was a rival African Methodist Episcopal Church organized in 1816, the word "Zion" was added to the official title in 1848 to distinguish the two.

<sup>10</sup> Walls, pp. 138-171.

<sup>11</sup> J. W. Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (New York: A.M.E. Zion Book Concern, 1895), pp. 85-88.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> *Minutes of the First Session of the Central North Carolina Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Monroe, N.C.: W.J. Boylin, 1881).

<sup>15</sup> W. W. Smith and Mrs. J. T. Williams, "Grace A. M. E. Zion Church History," *The Charlotte Post*, December 20, 1930, pp. 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "The History of Grace A.M.E. Zion Church," *70th Anniversary Program of Grace A.M.E. Zion Church* (Charlotte, N.C.: Grace A.M.E. Zion Church, 1970).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Mecklenburg County, N.C. Deed, Book 55 Page 444.

<sup>20</sup> Smith and Williams, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Mecklenburg County, N.C. Deed, Book 134, Page 567.

<sup>22</sup> "History," *70th Anniversary Program*.

<sup>23</sup> *Official Journal of the Daily Proceedings of the Twenty-First Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, 1900* (York Pa.: Dispatch Print, 1901), p. 130.

<sup>24</sup> *The Star of Zion*, November 1, 1900, p. 4. W.W. Smith was the general contractor and the designer of the building.

<sup>25</sup> *The Charlotte Observer*, July 13, 1902, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*; *The Charlotte News*, July 12, 1902, p. 2; *The Star of Zion*, July 31, 1902, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Smith and Williams, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Hood, 602-605; *The Star of Zion*, March 3, 1898, p. 1; *The Charlotte Observer*, June 9, 1924, p. 10; *The Star of Zion*, June 19, 1924, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> *The Charlotte Observer*, March 30, 1951, p. 22A, and March 31, 1951, p. 12; Interview with Mrs. Aurelia Tate Henderson, Charlotte, NC March 27, 1980.

<sup>30</sup> "History," *70th Anniversary Program*.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Reverend Smith Turner III, Pastor of Grace A.M.E. Zion Church since 1963, March 22, 1980.

### *Architectural Description*



Representative of the typical local and regional late nineteenth century church design, the Gothic Revival home of the Grace AME Zion Church is a highly significant building in Charlotte.

During the steady influx of settlers into Mecklenburg County in the decades immediately after the War of Independence, local church design was uniformly unadorned - in the mode of the simple rectangular meeting house style. Midway through the last century, however, designers adopted the increasingly popular Gothic Revival style. Most new congregations and many older

ones built elaborate versions of medieval Gothic architecture, whose origins were strictly Christian and reflected little if any pagan influence. For this obvious reason the style remained dominant until well into this century.

The Grace Church was started in 1886. In that year a small group departed from their old Clinton Chapel home to escape the divisive turmoil of local prohibition controversy. After meeting in various borrowed facilities for more than a dozen years, the growing congregation built their present home in 1900-1901. And the solid red brick structure is today one of the more important buildings among historic architectural remnants in the inner city.

The building is basically rectangular in plan, with projections here and there for gabled bays, corner narthex towers and the angular chancel appendage which houses the choir.

Exterior walls of deep red brick are sectioned by two and three tier shouldered pilasters suggestive of original Gothic buttresses. The masonry tone is enhanced with subdued red tinted mortar joints. American bond brickwork shows a header course for each seven courses of stretchers.

The western facade fronts on South Brevard Street, where turn of the century granite curbs and oval topped concrete lawn retainers remind one of earlier times. There are balanced corner towers at each side, one high and one low, sheltering matching large square narthex reception areas. Short walks lead to wide steps which rise to double eight foot high oak entrance doors set in heavily molded wood frames. Both entrances have intricate stained glass windows which follow the [pointed arch](#) form of the entry ways. The masonry openings are defined above by single brick headers courses crowned by rough cut granite [keystones](#).

The brick foundation wall rises three feet to a three course corbeled water table. This foundation brick surface is parged across the front and around each side tower with natural cement stucco scored to simulate coursed ashlar.

The left front tower exceeds forty feet and its four sides have corbel supported battlemented brick parapets. At upper tower corners projecting lanterns rise further to pyramidal metal pinnacles with crochets.

Each of the tower walls is ornamented with a soaring lance opening rising more than fifteen feet to a pointed Gothic arch. Wood trim inserts form trefoil patterns at the top. In these panels a high louvered vent provides a bell chamber space, while lower windows with diamond lights illuminate the tower interior. Four corners of this high tower have diagonal brick buttresses which step back in three stages with parged shoulders of simulated stone.

Below these lance openings there are recessed panels of diagonal "[herringbone](#)" brick courses which offer a contrasting texture in the brick wall surfaces. Centered in the front facade between the corner towers is a lofty three section stained glass window through which soft light floods the high ceiled interior nave. This wood framed window has tri-formed wood tracery in its pointed arch. The opening is outlined above with projecting brick headers terminating at a chisel faced keystone. Over this gable window molded wood rakes rise steeply to a decorated crest.

There are flanking corbeled lanterns which, again, terminate in pointed metal [pyramidal roofs](#) with pinnacles and crockets. Balancing the front facade at eye level, the right tower rises just a short distance above entrance doors and is less ornamented than the left. Simple corbeled parapet battlements and thin projecting belt courses define the tower. A front oval head window with diamond lights is the only tower opening.

In the left facade a triple nave window repeats the color and form of the front window. This pointed arch opening, again, has delicately molded wood tracery, and is defined above with a projecting header course and a chisel cut keystone. Smaller stained glass side windows have similar decorative brick and stone embellishment. A double corbeled band of brick headers runs horizontally through the length of the facade at the arch springline. In the wall of the gable a small pointed louvered vent rests on a granite sill which is supported on a corbeled brick ledge. At the rakes molded cornices rise to a crested ridge featuring a pinnacle spear. Further back in the left facade is a low battlemented tower over a secondary entrance door. This feature is a subdued version of the elaborately detailed front entrance and includes Gothic arch openings, stained glass transom, projecting decorative brick headers and corner buttressed pilasters.

The rear and right side facades continue the masonry, stone and wood detailing of the front and left. Windows and doors are strategically placed for light, ventilation, and access. The profuse period details continue to embellish these wall elevations. In a series of multiple surfaces of [hips](#) and [gables](#), the slate roof contributes a vital element in the design unity of the church. Ridges are molded tin and cresting occurs at primary intersections. Here and there the roof surface soars upward in an extraordinary series of elaborate pinnacles. The roof slate patterns are square edged courses with fish tail bands at third points.

The three separate entrances open to an expansive square form nave with a sloping floor and a raised corner chancel. Original curved oak pews, with delicately carved ornamentation, are placed in circle rows facing this raised pulpit and choir area. Enclosed by a low rail on closely spaced turned balusters, the chancel furnishings are also original.

Interior finishing details are consistently fine and represent the best of elaborate millwork produced in local planning mills at the turn of the century. In all areas there is a four foot [wainscot](#) of vertical beaded strips with a wide molded chair rail above and resting on a broad wood base. Walls above the wainscot are all smooth painted plaster. At the ceiling line a wide molded cornice forms a spring line for a vaulted, ribbed wood ceiling. This ceiling construction adds an impressive texture and scale to the large room. Rounded and beaded eight inch ribs bisect the ceiling in an angular and sloping pattern of rectangles and triangles. Intermediate surfaces are narrow beaded strips. In its original form this ceiling was likely natural stained wood, although it is now painted.

Adjoining the nave is a supplementary meeting room which was originally separated from the nave by high folding wood doors. The original paneled doors have been removed and are stored in an unfinished basement area, perhaps to be used again one day. Original strip pine flooring, typical of the time, occurs in all rooms.

There are many features of extraordinary charm and interest in the church appointments remaining from its original construction. Here and there, for instance, are gas jets, knob and tube wiring devices, and elaborate stamped metal hot air supply grills. All of these features add a special quality of architectural and historical significance to the building.

This structure is unique in the community. While Gothic Revival architecture has survived in many local churches, the Grace AME Zion building exhibits unusual embellishment. Details are executed with more than average skill, and a number of the elements are not repeated in this area.