

Harriet left Columbia following the death of her husband in the late 1880s, and lived with a daughter in Allentown, Pa. There, in 1900, at age 71, she erected at her own expense a building whose first floor auditorium served as the Gospel Union or Bethel Mission (later St. James AME Zion Church) while the second story became her residence.



*Harriet Baker started a mission which eventually became the St. James AME Zion Church. Pictured is the Church today at 410 Union Street in Allentown, Pennsylvania, dedicated in 1987*

For the next thirteen years, Harriet conducted weekly and Sunday services while continuing to travel throughout the region, preaching special sermons, giving lectures, and leading revivals. These activities helped raise funds to support her activities and assist in paying the mortgage. The proceeds from her friend John H. Acornley's

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1892 biography, *The Colored Lady Evangelist*, also served this purpose. Harriet Baker, died at her Allentown home in 1913 at the age of 83. She labored for three decades to convert thousands of people to Jesus Christ while providing a model for later, more prominent female evangelists.

Note: *The Colored Lady Evangelist* is available at Morgan State University (reference only) and Johns Hopkins University (with Hopkins ID). Because Harriet (Cole) Baker is an important figure in local history, the Harford County Public Library system will add a copy to its collection sometime after mid July, 2016.

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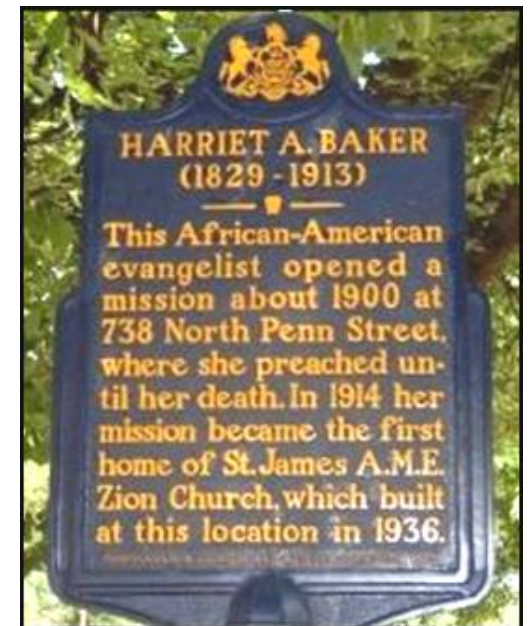
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## African-American History of Harford County, Maryland A Weekly Publication

### Harriet (Cole) Baker Pamphlet 0027 Part 2 of 2 July 8, 2016



Bringing Communities  
Together Through  
Sharing History

*Cover: Historical Marker located at St. James AME Zion Church on Union Street in Allentown Pennsylvania.*

Despite the end of the Civil War, the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment's legal halt of slavery in 1865, and the relative economic prosperity experienced in Columbia, Pa., life for Havre de Grace's Harriet and William Baker was never easy.

Married life proved especially difficult for Harriet. In 26 years she bore twelve children and saw seven of them die. In the spring of 1872 daughters Hannah and Rulletta, ages fifteen and thirteen, died within two weeks of each other. Tragically, nine years later, the Baker's youngest child, 11-year old Eva, was the victim of a rape. The financial burdens of buying William's freedom and rebuilding their burned down house were stressful. Throughout this time, Harriet suffered from periodic bouts of assorted ailments involving her heart, kidneys, liver, and even an accidental poisoning. As always, the formidable Mrs. Baker set a good example by keeping a positive attitude in the face of the hardships that plagued her life.

As consolation Harriet relied on the religious faith she had enjoyed since that fateful evening years earlier in Havre de Grace. Over several decades, as she taught herself to read the Bible and strengthen her relationship with

God, Mrs. Baker concluded that the Lord willed her to undertake a life of evangelism. Her husband, pastor, family, friends, and members of the church responded with vehement disapproval of a woman, especially a wife and a mother, being involved in such activities. According to her biographer, however, Harriet experienced a series of vivid dreams that deepened her resolve and intensified her prayers in seeking to diminish the continuing resistance she encountered.

Harriet held the 1872 deaths of her two daughters as being providential and thus convinced her of the need to act on becoming a preacher. That winter she poured out her beliefs at a church meeting, and boldly announced her intention to set out in search of souls. Her sincerity gradually so disarmed the opposition that she embarked on her new life, despite lacking official church approval. At the time Harriet Baker was 43 years old with an aging husband and three minor children at home, the youngest of whom was two years old.

During the following quarter century, while maintaining her residence in Columbia, Harriet traveled throughout Pennsylvania and much of the Northeast. In the mid-1870s the Philadelphia Conference of the AME Church formally authorized her to preach. Mrs. Baker labored in towns, small cities, and even

in urban centers such as New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Churches of various evangelical denominations, black and white, sought her out. These included Methodist Episcopal, Primitive Methodist, United Brethren, Baptist, Methodist Protestant, and AME Zion churches. She preached from pulpits, participated in camp meetings, conducted revivals, wrote hymns, led song services, and assisted at Sabbath schools. She aided in the conversion of thousands of people, raised impressive sums of money, and generally assisted pastors with the varied responsibilities of ministerial work. In 1889, St. Paul's Church, on 10th Street, in Lebanon, Pa., chose Mrs. Baker as its pastor. She was the first woman to hold such a position in the AME Church.

Baker's sermons stressed her belief in standard Biblical Truths and the need for personal conversion and sanctification through the working of the Holy Spirit. Historian Bettye Collier-Thomas (1998) contends, moreover, that Baker's fundamentally orthodox sermons also revealed a social message regarding the status of blacks and women. She maintains that Baker used the life of Jesus Christ to argue the need for sinners to lead lives of holiness, no matter the pain caused by social alienation and opposition from earthly and Church leaders.