

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN SHREWSBURY AND THE NORTH PRECINCT

Examining the Evidence

**Research and compiled by
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**Packet 4
2021**

The Cornerstone Contents at Fairlawn Community Methodist Episcopal Church Shrewsbury, MA

Discovered in February, 2020

On the following few pages, you will discover just exactly what material was found that was so troubling to the members of this church. Today, we would have never thought that this was possible, but that was then.

There has always been differences of opinion between the people who believed in slavery, and those who actively tried to abolish it. During 1927 in the town of Shrewsbury, it seems like it was the same old story. For those who had taken a stand against Catholics, Jews, Blacks, Irish and Organized Labor, their title was the Ku Klux Klan. And yes, they were active in Shrewsbury! This organization was founded in 1866, and by 1870 they were present in almost every Southern state. They were made up principally of white resistance people, mostly in the Republican party, and from the Protestant faith.

Through the years, it has been determined that the KKK was far more active in the Northeast than previously thought. Here in New England, they focused on the politics of ethnicity and labor. The resistance to the Klan was particularly fierce in Massachusetts, many of whom were Catholic targets of the KKK.

By 1923, an anti-Klan group formed calling itself "Les Vigilants," also known as "PPP." This stood for Progress, Protestation, Punition, and was mostly made up of young men recruited from Catholics, Jews and Blacks. Each organization was secret and operated outside of the limelight.

Violent altercations between these two groups occurred in Bolton, Berlin and Worcester, all communities very near to Shrewsbury. Many other towns in the area experienced similar fighting.

In May of 1924, there was a KKK meeting held at Wilson's Farm in Spencer. The number of people hurt went unreported, but the police presence there prevented a riot. In August of the same year, 1300 members of the KKK gathered at a farm in Shrewsbury! Police averted a riot by keeping the anti-Klan sympathizers some distance away from the highway so the KKK could leave the premises without being attacked.



PRIDE, SHAME, & PAIN:
METHODISM'S HISTORY WITH
RACISM AND EFFORTS TO
DISMANTLE IT
HERITAGE SUNDAY 2021

GENERAL COMMISSION ON ARCHIVES AND
HISTORY OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

¹ Logo borrowed from the General Commission on Religion and Race. Kelly Fitzgerald, ed. *Racism: The Church's Unfinished Agenda, a Journal of the National Convocation on Racism* (General Commission on Religion and Race, 1987).

The below document was written by Rev. Patricia Thompson who serves as the conference historian for the New England Annual Conference of the UMC. She wrote this piece after racist materials were found in the cornerstone of a local church in her conference. It is presented here as a case study and a point of discussion for those of you who might be interested in doing this work and provides another perspective on how to begin researching your church's past.

WHAT'S HIDING IN YOUR CHURCH'S HISTORY?

Recently, we heard about the discovery of a cornerstone, originally belonging to the Fairlawn UMC in Shrewsbury, MA, which closed its doors in 1997. Wellspring UMC, the successor to Fairlawn is closing its doors this year – 2020. When District Superintendent, Rev. Megan Stowe, went to collect the records from this church, she learned that the cornerstone of the Fairlawn UMC which was included among the records actually contained items related to activities of the KKK in the 1920's and 1930's. This was the result of a resurgence of such activity in relation to European immigrants and Roman Catholics, who were moving into the United States during those years. These items, a part of the history of Fairlawn, had literally been buried in their cornerstone and might never have surfaced if the church had not closed.

This, then, raises the question. What might be hiding in your church's history? Is there any history of KKK activity in your church? Or, on the other side, any evidence of anti-slavery activity? Often, when we write the history of our churches, we want to celebrate all of the positive, uplifting parts of that history, and we would often rather not talk about any of the negative parts of that history – whether it might have been the activities of the KKK, a pastor who may have run off with the choir director who was the daughter of one of the leading members of the church, or events which may have ended up splitting the church or, at the very least, caused a rift among members.

Yet, it may be those very events that continue to shape the functioning of the church in the present day, for they are often there, just under the surface, causing anxiety or even anger. And comments are often made now and then, that reinforce the need for more conversation or clarification about what really happened. Sometimes, because the events have never been brought out into the open and discussed, there has never been the option for the rumors about what happened to have been corrected or for repentance and healing to take place.

Thus, it is important to know as much about your church's history, as possible, so that you can deal with both the not-so-positive pieces as well as celebrate all that has been done well, and then allow the whole history to enable you to move forward into the future.

So, how do you go about finding out about your church's entire history? First, of all, you should consult with your local church historian and determine if a comprehensive history of your church has ever been written. If you do have a written history, read that document thoroughly to see what you might learn.

If you do not have a local church historian, this might be the time to think about identifying someone for that role, since it will soon be time to elect officers for your church for the coming year soon. Although our United Methodist *Discipline* strongly recommends that every church





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Church's painful past leads to new anti-racism initiative



The former Fairlawn Community Methodist Episcopal Church exterior and interior along with a pamphlet from the Women of the Ku Klux Klan found in the church's cornerstone. Undated interior photo used by permission from Historic New England.

September 15, 2020

"Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. ..."

— Revelation 2:5 (NRSV)

"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

— James Baldwin

A new initiative to dismantle racism and white privilege is beginning from one church's painful, long-buried past.

Cornerstone: Claiming our past, building a better future will seek to do the work of ending racism and dismantling white privilege in our Conference in collaboration with existing conference commissions and committees.

The funds to support this work will come, in part, from assets from the Wellspring United Methodist Church in Shrewsbury, MA.

Wellspring members voted to close in February 2020. In July, Commonwealth West District Superintendent Megan Stowe retrieved items from the church that were to be placed in the district archives.

Among them was a cornerstone laid on Jan. 16, 1927 by what was then the Fairlawn Community Methodist Episcopal Church. In it, Rev. Stowe discovered some unexpected – and troubling – materials.

Much of the cornerstone's contents were what you might expect: New England Conference Journals, 1926 coins (a wheat penny and buffalo nickel), newspaper articles, a church bulletin, a list of founding members. But the cornerstone also contained items that were inappropriate for commemoration: multiple pamphlets and magazines published by the Ku Klux Klan.

Rev. Stowe shared her discovery with Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar, who gathered some conference and denominational leaders to discuss how to respond.

"Fighting racism requires truth telling, confession and repentance from us all," Bishop Devadhar said. "We lift up this church's history not to shame them, but as a lesson for all of us in the importance of facing the past and reconciling with it. We must start by understanding our past; that is the only way we can hope to create a present where there is true racial justice."



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Wellspring's predecessor congregation was Wellspring Community Methodist Episcopal Church. That congregation was a Lazarus Congregation started in late 1997 after the closure of the Fairlawn Community UMC earlier that year.

The contents of the cornerstone were known to some. It had been dug up on Nov. 23, 1996 as the Fairlawn Community UMC congregation was preparing to move to a new building; the church building at 10 Stanley Road had been deemed unsafe.

The contents of the cornerstone were the reason the congregation sought to have this new church deemed a Lazarus Church; they wanted a fresh start.

At the time the Administrative Council "considered this information better buried, and not resurrected with a new church," according to a letter from the pastor, Miriam Chamberlain, dated Jan. 7, 1997.

"We know that was not the best response," Rev. Stowe said. "We cannot hide from our past – even when it is painful. It is important to name our sin, to repent and find a better path forward. That is what the Cornerstone initiative is about: a tangible act of repentance through work that is focused on racial justice and reconciliation."

A resolution (RS-20-203) officially closing this church will come before the Annual Conference on Oct. 17, 2020.

If approved, that resolution directs any assets and property belonging to the Wellspring UMC, which are not otherwise designated, to the *In Our Time Fund*, (<https://www.umfne.org/in-our-time-fund>) a partnership initiative of the United Methodist Foundation of New England.

Foundation President Rev. Ted Crass said, "The Foundation is committed to the movement for racial and social equity, and we have made a significant commitment of Foundation-owned assets to seed the Fund. Our collective partnership with the NEAC, churches and individuals will help sustain this work."

There is \$900,000 (without Wellspring assets) in the newly created *In Our Time Fund*, and the goal is to raise at least an additional \$1 million for the fund, so that income from the fund can provide \$100,000 annually to support and sustain anti-racism work in the NEAC and beyond.

Some of that work within the Conference would be:

- Supporting anti-racism training among NEAC pastors and laity
- Building the leadership capacity of pastors and laity to lead local congregations in anti-racism education - including learning events and action around dismantling white privilege and white supremacy
- Engaging advocacy initiatives to address income inequality and systemic injustice in education, healthcare, criminal justice, and other sectors of society
- Providing grants to impact structural change for individuals and communities, including early childhood education

As part of *Cornerstone: Claiming our past, building a better future*, Bishop Devadhar, along with Cabinet members, will offer a four-week Advent Bible Study using *It is Enough: A Racism Bible Study* by Rev. Michael C. Johnson (Sunday evenings, Nov. 15, Nov. 22, Dec. 6 and Dec. 13). The Cabinet will lead a Lenten Bible Study, *Roll Down Justice*, with materials from the General Commission on Religion and Race which will be followed by an Act of Repentance. All members of the Conference are invited to participate.

"The churches of the district will also work intentionally with interfaith and ecumenical groups in Worcester County as we seek to dismantle racism in our congregations and in society," Rev. Stowe said.

Details will be announced in the coming weeks and months. Watch the news for more information about the Cornerstone initiative – including some information and techniques to help all churches uncover and explore their own histories as a path to reconciliation and healing.

"It is my hope and prayer that this discovery and our corporate response will begin a time of healing for our Conference," Bishop Devadhar said. "When those in the future look back on this moment, I hope that they will be proud of this undertaking and be rewarded with the many fruits it will bear."

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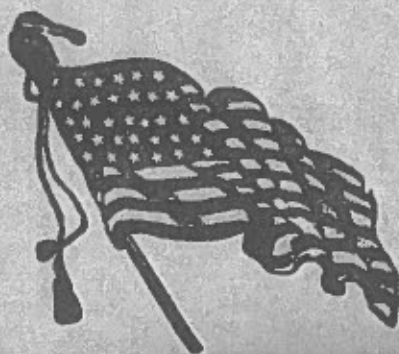
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*Transformed by the Holy Spirit, united in trust, we will
boldly proclaim Christ to the world*


THE CODE of the FLAG

*As Adopted by the National Flag Conference
Washington, D. C., June 14-15, 1923*



We stand for the American flag against enemies without and within. We emphasize devotion to the flag of our country as the ensign of our American nationality and the emblem of our national honor. A man or woman stands wholly for the Stars and Stripes or else to them their country's flag is only a dirty rag. We insist that no flag shall fly above our flag, and that no flag shall float by its side.—Ideals of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan.

***Women of the Ku Klux Klan, Inc.
Supreme Headquarters
Little Rock, Ark.***



français parmi les adversaires du Klan” (some French names among the Klan’s opponents), noted *L’Etoile* in its description of the event. Arrested for throwing stones at Klan vehicles as they departed from their meeting on the Wilson farm in Spencer and thereby causing an estimated fifteen thousand dollars in damage were the Spencer residents Léo Gagnon, John Daoust, Julius Durnowski, Charles McGrail, William J. Sullivan, and John Demetre. Each received a three-month jail sentence at the Worcester House of Corrections.³⁹

Several individuals involved in the Lancaster clash were also arrested. Charles A. Schumacher Jr., who owned the land where the riot took place, admitted firing his gun into the air to dispel the rioters, and police charged him with disturbing the peace. Arrested on the same charge for throwing stones were Louis Draleaux, David Salvatore, and Constantino Sommi.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the available evidence sheds little light on the men who constituted the opposition to the Ku Klux Klan in Massachusetts. But the last names of the arrested opponents in Lancaster and Spencer suggest that Franco-American, Irish, Italian, and other ethnic Catholics joined forces to combat the Klan in their communities. The variety of ethnic surnames also suggests that the Irish were not the Klan’s primary opponents (or targets) in the Bay State.

Following these encounters, *L’Etoile* observed that the Klan members who had been carrying firearms at Haverhill and Lancaster had had permits to do so. The newspaper said that the state representative Roland D. Sawyer, a Democrat from Ware, complained that many civic authorities who were authorized to grant gun permits were either Klan members or individuals sympathetic to the society, and he announced plans to introduce legislation to restrict the issuance of permits. Sawyer’s bill, as amended, stipulated that licensees keep detailed records of the firearms they leased and sold and of the individuals who acquired them; it also required licensees to share their records with licensing authorities as well as the commissioner of public safety and police. Approved in April 1925, the legislation called for prison sentences for those who carried without permit such dangerous weapons as “a pistol or revolver, loaded or unloaded” and “any stiletto, dagger, dirk knife, slung shot [*sic*], metallic knuckles or sawed[-]off shotgun.”⁴¹

ANTI-KLAN RESISTANCE: WORCESTER AND ELSEWHERE

After the Lancaster and Haverhill riots, the state police cut short or postponed the department’s vacations so that all officers could be called to duty and at least fifty could react within an hour’s time to disturbances in any part of

Massachusetts. In addition, Commissioner of Public Safety Alfred F. Foote issued orders on August 1 requiring state police to disarm all Klan members attending meetings along with those who were watching the gatherings. "I have pointed out that we cannot forbid the Ku Klux Klan from lawful assemblages, under the Constitution," Foote stated, "but we can and will prevent any and all assemblages of men bearing arms." The individuals with permits would be able to retrieve their firearms the following day, and those without permits would face arrest. "These instructions apply equally to klansmen and anti-klansmen," Foote announced. "I want it understood from one end of this state to the other, that Massachusetts will not tolerate armed warfare between any factions whatsoever," he emphasized.⁴²

When some thirteen hundred Ku Klux Klan members gathered at a farm in Shrewsbury on August 1, state and local police searched all vehicles within one mile of the meeting site and confiscated the weapons they found.⁴³ The final take included five loaded revolvers, eleven clubs, one lead pipe, and an unspecified number of rifles, shotguns, slingshots, blackjacks, and rocks. The police arrested two Klansmen, one of whom had a rubber hose filled with zinc filings in his car and another who had two clubs in his. Police averted a riot by keeping anti-Klan sympathizers, estimated at half the number of Klan members, some distance away from the highway so the KKK could leave the premises without being attacked.⁴⁴

In September seventy-five Klan opponents showered over seven hundred Klan members with rocks as they met in the field of Arthur Mystrom in Millbury. Only after the police arrived and Klan foes took off did members of the hooded society leave the site. There were no known injuries.⁴⁵

Such hostilities did not deter the Ku Klux Klan from gathering about the state. In October an estimated fifteen thousand Klansmen and Klanswomen from throughout New England assembled at the New England exposition grounds in Worcester, where they initiated up to twenty-six hundred candidates into Klanhood. The hooded society thrilled its members with an air show. The hired pilot flew a Curtiss biplane over the crowd that was painted with the letters "K.K.K." on its underside and the words "100 per cent American" on its topside. When the plane descended suddenly and disappeared, a Klan spokesperson purportedly announced that the aircraft had been "forced down by a rifle bullet which punctured the fusilage [*sic*] and crippled the engine." This announcement must have created high drama at the fairgrounds and stirred up sentiment against the Klan's opponents. Called to the scene, the police discovered a bullet hole in the plane's hood. But the pilot claimed the hole had been made prior to the event and that a