

Racial Justice in Otisville

In 1937, M.C. Owen, a successful, black businessman from NYC and his wife decided to look into upstate NY (Orange County) for a summer home. After visiting several locations, they decided on a property on Shoddy Hollow Road in Otisville. At the time, there was one building and a swimming hole. They then purchased the farm across the road and 200 acres from the railroad shortly thereafter.

The Owen's wanted a place for their family to enjoy the summers, but as more and more friends visited, they opened a guest house. The summer resort known as Kings Lodge, grew out of the realities of segregation and the desire for upper-middle class blacks to cut loose and enjoy time off with family.

Other Catskills resorts (Black, Jewish, etc.) declined in popularity after integration in the 1960's, however, two following generations continued to expand and keep the family tradition of providing friendly service, comfortable accommodations and excellent food a priority until Kings Lodge finally closed its doors in 2001.

Paradise Farms on Rte., 209, Cuddebackville, NY was a famous Negro resort owned by Sally Walker. Both Kings Lodge and Paradise Farms were listed in the 1956 Edition of Green Book. *The Negro Motorist Green Book* was a travel guide that listed lodgings, tailors and other businesses that welcomed black patrons during Jim Crow.

This guide, which was launched in 1936 and published for nearly 30 years, found a readership because while blacks knew which businesses were friendly in their hometowns, it could be difficult to discern which restaurants, beauty shops and night clubs were off-limits or hostile when they were on the road.

The manse for our church was located on Rte. 211 to the left of the VFW Hall which is next to the Otisville Firehouse. A previous manse was also on Route 22 on the curve, the house with the star window in the attic.

Grace and Archie House lived across the street from the Manse in a house which is now alongside of the hardware store. Grace House was our organist for 50 years and had 3 children, Eileen Siegel, Shirley Grebeldinger and Ralph House.

Eileen recalled a black family came every summer in the 1940's with 5 or 6 children. She believed the father was a pastor and attended our church and loved to sing.

During the war in 1943-45, several Mennonites attended our church while they worked on several farms in place of serving in the Armed Forces.

Grace House's brother, Blake Newkirk and his wife Myra owned and operated what is now Mick's Grocery. They lived in the house next to the village Hall on Highland Ave.

In July of 1906 the New York City Municipal Sanatorium of the Department of Hospitals at Otisville was established as a site for a tuberculosis sanatorium

The sanatorium was closed in 1955. This site was changed to the Otisville Training School with Superintendent Dr. Benjamin Hill.

Otisville was the home for several black families!

Rev. Small was serving as the pastor of the Otisville – Mt. Hope Presbyterian Church then.

According to Bettsye Hunter, Dr Benjamin Hill, the Superintendent at the new Boy Training school, and an elder at the Otisville church, recruited Wes and Bettsye to work at the Training School before it opened.

Her grandparents and family lived in Middletown for many years before relocating during the urban renewal. Wes and Bettsye were among the first to live on the “Hill”.

Also living on the “Hill” were Norm Catlett, Clarence Walker, Ben Graziano and Morris Weiner. Rev. Small asked them to join the Otisville Mt Hope Presbyterian Church.

Bettsye asked her parents, Goldie and Louis Mann, to join but told her mother that she couldn't yell out during the service. Goldie's other daughters, Geraldine Dolson and Berta Durkins also joined our church.

Superintendent Dr. Hill was the head of the PNC for Otisville Mt. Hope Presbyterian Church in search of a new minister and the PNC asked Rev. Ronald S. James to come to Otisville in 1957.

In 1958 there was a major expansion of the Otisville School for Boys which brought more employees among them were: Dick Cash, Sam Tucker, Adam Battles, and Ken and Emma Kendrick.

In summer, car loads of people would come from King's Lodge and Paradise Farms to the Otisville Mt. Hope Presbyterian Church for summer services. I asked Lois James why the people from the resorts started to come. She replied they came because they felt welcomed and loved Ron's preaching.

Once during the summer, Lois was playing the organ and during the offering she played “Sweet Hour of Prayer”. Lois said we never sang during the offering but people started to hum and then everyone joined in singing. That is what Lois meant by making them feel welcomed.

According to the NY Times the following nine Presbyterian ministers went to Hattiesburg, Mississippi: “Emil J. Hatton, Decatur. Ill.; Ralph Bohn, Garfield, N. J.; Doland Register, St. Louis, a Negro; Ronald S. James, Otisville, N. Y.; K. Stephen Parmelee. Roosevelt, N. Y.; Charles Yerkes and Robert F. Nichol, both of New York City, and Donald P. Scott and Charles Nelson, both of Hollis, N. Y.

According to the Hudson River Presbytery minutes many ministers did this without consent from their congregations. And they were arrested Jan. 29, 1964 in front of the courthouse among pickets supporting a Negro voter registration drive.

Each minister drew the maximum penalty—four months in jail and a \$200 fine. They were released from jail after posting \$750 each for bail. Articles also appeared in the Record and Kingston Newspapers. Lois James said the congregation had mixed thoughts on Rev. James' incarceration.

Just before Ron and Lois left Otisville Mt. Hope Presbyterian Church, a search PNC committee from Yorktown Presbyterian Church came 2 or 3 times to hear Ron preach. One of the oldest members of Yorktown who was on the search committee told Lois she was stunned to see Goldie Mann, a black women, serve communion as an Elder and worship leader and help with the service. Lois said we were way ahead of the times in our church and was delighted that they saw Goldie participating.