

ARMOURY STREET DIG

BRITISH METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH



A key discovery on the new Toronto courthouse site were the foundations of the British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church. The church served as a religious and cultural centre for Toronto's early Black community. Counting former enslaved persons among its founders and congregants, the BME Church was a meeting place for Toronto's abolitionists. A symbol of spiritual and political freedom for the oppressed, the BME site is a significant remnant of the early Black presence in Toronto. Over time, the building expanded to meet the needs of a growing Black congregation, which continues to worship today at Eglinton and Dufferin.



In the 1950s, the Church began serving Toronto's first Chinatown. Renovated as the Chinese United Church, the building hosted religious services and cultural programs until its demolition in 1988.



When archaeologists uncovered the BME Church basement, they found the original inscription stone set into the concrete floor. The 1856 date represents when Canada's BME churches amalgamated as a Conference (a legal church grouping), separating from the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. An AME Church had been founded on the site around 1838, and many Black Torontonians had worshipped there. The 1871 date marks when the BME congregation replaced their first wood church with a new brick building – information that was previously unknown. The inscription stone graced the building's façade until the Chinese United Church's renovation in the 1950s, when it was placed in the basement for safekeeping.

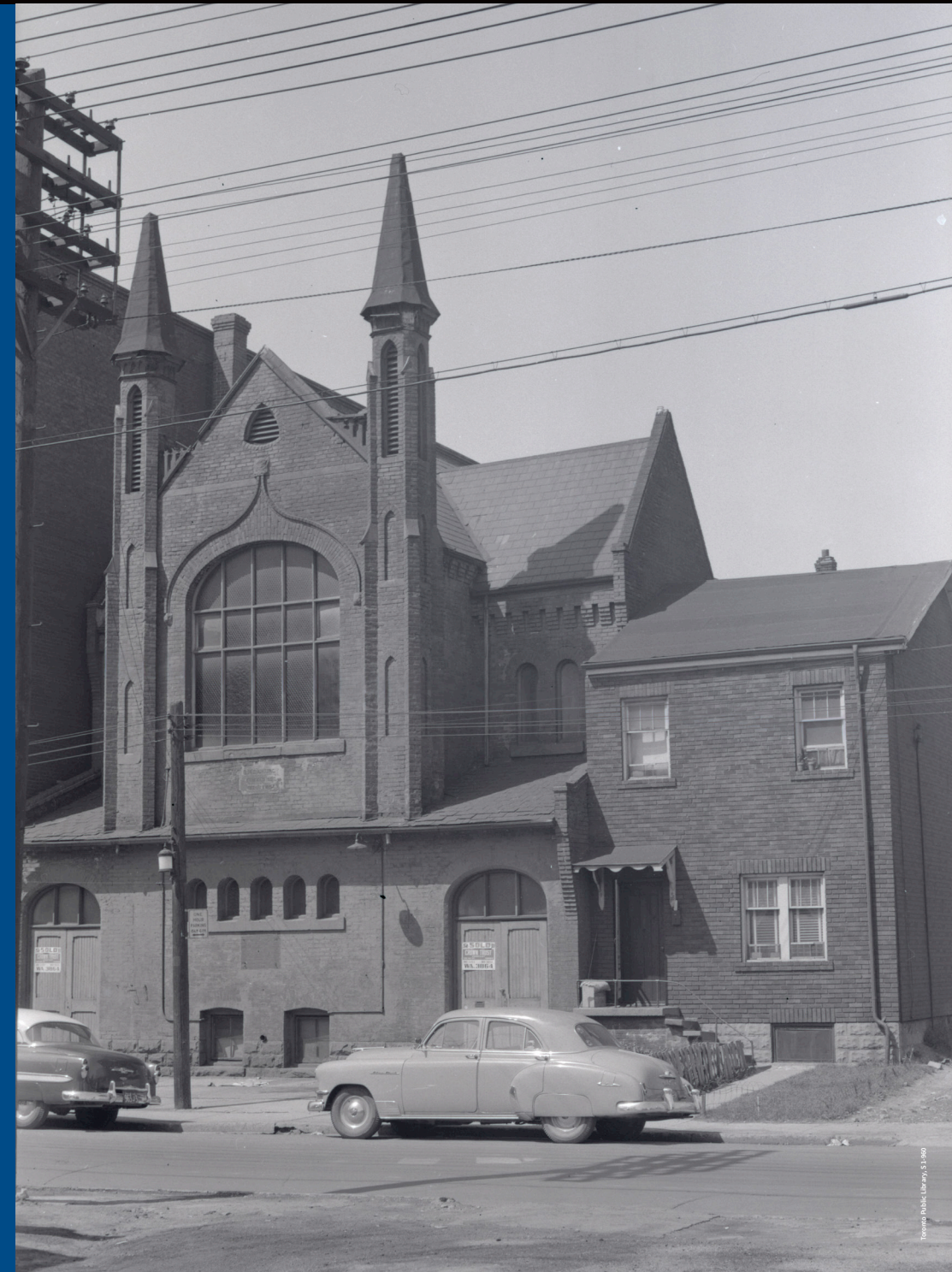
The foundation blocks in this case came from the British Methodist Episcopal Church on Chestnut (formerly Sayer) Street. They were part of the Church's second rebuild in 1894.

"Come Poor distress men women and come to Canada where colored men are free. Oh how sweet the word do sound to me yeas when I contemplate of these things, my very flesh creeps my heart throb when I think of my beloved friends whom I left in that cursid hole. Oh my God what can I do for them or shall I do for them. Lord help them."

John H. Hill, formerly enslaved African American in Toronto, writing to William Still, an Underground Railroad conductor in Philadelphia, October 1853.

"I had the distinct privilege and honour to be able to walk through the footprint of the BME Church, to know that I was on the space where others had been, to know I was on the ground that my ancestors had touched. There was a special warmth to the space, especially around the dated stone found there... there was a special excitement when [we] realized that the stone was in fact the date stamp of the church. The enormity of the find, likely the last finding of a first Black church outline in Toronto, was overpowering—the church was everything for a group that had little. Its presence underscores their resilience, our resilience then and now."

Rosemary Sadler,
Member, Order of Ontario, and BME Church congregant



This exhibit is presented in partnership between Infrastructure Ontario, on behalf of the Ministry of the Attorney General, and the City of Toronto.



This exhibit shares a selection of the artifacts and stories unearthed in the archaeological assessment of the new Toronto courthouse site on Armoury Street, originally part of The Ward and just steps from City Hall. With thanks to the New Toronto Courthouse Heritage Interpretation Working Group, Timmins Martelle Heritage Consultants, ERA Architects.