

Delaware Historical Society

Peter Spencer, 1782-1843

Born a slave, Peter Spencer's master died sometime in the 1790s. On his death, Spencer was freed, and moved to Wilmington. He took advantage of the city's Quaker school and learned to read and write. From this modest beginning, Peter Spencer became recognized as one of the great leaders of the African-American community in Delaware.

Peter Spencer joined Asbury Methodist Church, a church for both black and white members. In 1805, Peter Spencer along with William Anderson led a group of about 40 African-Americans out of Asbury to start their own church. Ezion, the new church, was still a part of Asbury, but here the African-Americans were allowed a few more responsibilities. In Asbury Church, all the black members had to sit in the balcony, and could not take communion with the white members. They felt that they were being treated like children. Not long after starting Ezion, though, the two men and most of the members became frustrated by their continued limited freedoms. They left to start their own, independent church, the Union Church of Africans. This new church was the first one in the United States to be started and run just by African-Americans.

Peter Spencer was determined to show all people that the African-American community could manage its own church, and affairs. He wanted to prove, that with God's guidance, the community could rise above racism and oppression. This new church also gave women greater responsibilities than other churches did. He encouraged each new church in the faith to begin its own school because, he believed, that knowledge was the key to a better life.

Peter Spencer also began the Big Quarterly, a large, public celebration of the African-American community. This festival, which is still celebrated today, brought together both free blacks and slaves from Delaware and the surrounding states to celebrate their faith, their culture, share political ideas with each other.

Peter Spencer, a man of great integrity, courage and vision left a legacy which demonstrates the power of love and justice in our world.