

HISTORICAL REPORT
MOTHER BETHEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

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MOTHER BETHEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Description:

The present Mother Bethel was erected on the site of earlier churches and on the lot of ground in continuous Negro ownership since 1791. It is located in the area bounded by Addison Street, Addison Court, Lombard and Sixth Streets. Except for the store-dwelling at the northeast corner of Sixth and Lombard Streets, this area is occupied by the church and church property. The church property also includes two, three-story late nineteenth century dwellings with store fronts on Sixth Street above Lombard, two similar structures and a three-story brick residence on Lombard Street. The approximate dimensions of the church property are 145 feet by 115 feet. The church itself fronts 90 feet along Sixth Street and in depth on Addison Street 113 feet. A three-foot alley running the depth of the edifice separates the church from the two Sixth Street store dwellings. The church replaced three earlier structures. A brief history of each follows:

The First Church:

The establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia resulting from a Sunday service "incident"¹ in 1787 at St. George's Methodist Church (Fourth and New Streets) was the beginning of African Methodism in the United States.

For several Philadelphia Negro families St. George's was the house of worship. As early as 1784 Richard Allen, a Negro slave who purchased his freedom and was destined to found Mother Bethel, was licensed to preach from its pulpit.² With Allen's appointment, the number of Negro worshippers gradually increased. According to Richard Allen's autobiography, compiled some years later, the white elders of the church instituted in early 1787 a church seating plan whereby the Negro members were assigned seats in a specified section of the gallery.³

During the next Sunday service, as described by Allen, Negro Absolem Jones unwittingly seated himself away from the prescribed area. An attempt by the elders to remove Jones from his seat proved unsuccessful. However, at the conclusion of the prayers, the Negro worshippers were led from the church in a body by Allen and Jones.⁴ Henceforth this group abstained from attendance at St. George's.

On their exodus from St. George's, the Negro worshippers had an immediate need for a meeting house. Temporary quarters were acquired with the rental of an unoccupied storehouse.⁵ Here they worshipped and Richard Allen preached.

Having been furnished for the time being with accommodations, the congregation appointed a committee including Allen and assigned them the task of raising a building fund. Heading the subscription list as the highest contributor was Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, who espoused the cause, soliciting financial aid from leading Philadelphia citizens and providing guidance to

Allen and his associates.⁶ Robert Ralston, a Philadelphia merchant, and also a generous contributor, was appointed Treasurer of the Building Fund.⁷ The committee "met with great success."⁸

Whereupon the committee authorized Allen to purchase a piece of ground for building purposes. On October 10, 1791 he acquired from Mark Wilcox and his wife, for a yearly ground rent of 21 pounds and 18 shillings, the lot on Sixth Street 135 feet wide and extending along Lombard Street 73 feet.⁹ Afterwards, the committee itself selected a plot of ground on the west side of Fifth Street below Walnut Street as being situated "in a more commodious part of the city" and directed Allen to "forfeit" the first purchase.¹⁰ He refused to comply with the said directive and retained the lot for personal use.

Subsequent to the purchase of the Fifth Street lot, a majority of the congregation elected to accept the Church of England as its religious faith. On that site in 1793 St. Thomas' African Protestant Episcopal Church was raised.¹¹ Jones went with them reluctantly, and became their pastor. However, Allen and a group numbering about forty remained faithful to Methodism.

In 1791 Allen bought "an old frame shop that had been formerly occupied as a blacksmith shop from [a] Mr. Sims"¹² for thirty-five dollars and removed it to his lot at Sixth and Lombard Streets (Illustration No. 1). He hired carpenters to renovate the structure for use as a house of worship.¹³ Descriptive information concerning the building is most limited. The frame building was furnished with a crude,

wooden pulpit and wooden benches made by Allen, a Bible and an earthenware Communion Jug (Illustrations No. 2 and 3). (These items are on exhibit in the Historical Room, Mother Bethel Church.)

As soon as the alterations were completed, services were held in the renovated structure with minister Richard Allen preaching from his hand-made pulpit.

Richard Allen (Illustration No. 4), a Philadelphian born in 1760, was a slave in the family of Benjamin Chew, a Chief Justice in the courts of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. Sold with his family, a rare exception in this period of slavery, to a Mr. Stokely of Delaware, he subsequently purchased his freedom at the age of seventeen. During the years that he worked the Stokely plantation Allen provided himself with an informal education and was converted to the Methodist denomination.

On attaining his freedom, Allen supported himself with a number of menial laboring jobs. In addition he was actively engaged as an itinerant Methodist preacher. In 1784 Allen returned to Philadelphia and established a permanent residence. He joined St. George's Methodist Church and here he preached. That he was thus recognized suggests his force of character and ability.

Employed at first as a brickyard laborer, Allen turned to chimney-sweeping, a more profitable source of income. During the early 1790's the job of cleaning the chimnies of Independence Hall and the adjoining wing buildings was his responsibility.¹⁴ Following 1795 Allen was employed as a shoe merchant.

With the establishment of the African Methodist Church, Allen devoted much of his time to responsibilities and duties as administrator and pastor. In 1816 he was named Bishop of the Church, a position held until his death in 1831. His remains are entombed in the basement of the church.

The Second Church:

The former blacksmith shop served as a house of worship for less than three years. It as its counterpart, the storehouse, was employed as temporary quarters. The renovated structure did not provide adequate facilities as the number of worshippers increased. Allen awaited the completion of the African Protestant Church subscription drive before initiating another for his congregation. Again, Doctor Benjamin Rush headed the subscription list, and with John Nicholson among other white citizens, contributed liberally to the African Methodist's fund.¹⁵ Rush also provided Allen with counsel.

Construction of the new church was begun in the summer of 1793. Allen records in his autobiography that he "dug" the "first spade[ful]" of dirt for the cellar foundations.¹⁶ On August 22 a dinner was held and attended by Rush, "...a mile from town, under the shade of several large trees, with about an hundred carpenters and others who met to celebrate the raising of the roof of the African Church. ..."¹⁷

Shortly thereafter, work was curtailed with the outbreak of the yellow fever, an epidemic resulting in the deaths of thousands.¹⁸ Negroes, thought to be immune from the disease, were hired to nurse the

sick and bury the dead. Richard Allen and Absolen Jones assisted the physicians and at times were summoned to attend patients on their own, having been trained by Dr. Rush in the art of blood-letting and purging.¹⁹

By December there was little evidence of the disease and the city returned to normalcy. Construction of the church was resumed and completed the following summer.²⁰ The new meeting house (Illustration No. 5), designated the "rough cast" church, was a large, rectangular, two-story brick structure²¹ with a gabled roof. Approximately 70 feet in width and depth, it fronted on Sixth Street. Along the south side of the building was a three-foot wide alley running the depth of the structure.²²

The first-story front included two large doorways with pedimented frontispieces separated by a centered window. The second-story front had three windows. In the attic there was a circular window. The north side of the building included a plain doorway flanked by two windows on the first floor and three windows at the upper level. Its south side, believed to have been constructed in a similar fashion, included water spouts.²³ The windows had outside shutters. Along the front of the church was a six-foot, open wooden fence with entrance gates. Heat was provided with two chimnies on the north side of the structure and more than likely an additional pair at its opposite wall.

Little is known concerning the interior arrangement of the church and its furnishings. Windows were covered with venetian blinds.²⁴

The pulpit was located at the east end.²⁵ Movable wooden benches, separated by a middle aisle, and wooden chairs provided seats for the congregation.²⁶ Although the membership numbered but a few hundred persons, a notation in Allen's autobiography reads, "this church will...accommodate between 3,000 and 4,000..."²⁷ In 1891 the church was described by the octogenarian Bishop Payne, historiographer of the African Methodist Church, "as plain as a Quaker's coat and perfectly free from ornament."²⁸

Dedication of the church took place on July 29, 1794.²⁹ The American Methodist Bishop, Francis Asbury, preached the dedication sermon and Reverend John Dickins of St. George's led the prayers.³⁰ One of the recited Old Testament texts included the word "Bethel." Spontaneously and unanimously the congregation decided to designate its house of worship as the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.³¹ Later, as other Bethel congregations were established, the word "Mother" was added.

The day of dedication services was but one of several appearances by Bishop Asbury at the pulpit of Mother Bethel. During his periodic visits to Philadelphia between 1795 and 1810, he preached before this Negro congregation.³² Other Methodist clergymen, including Bishop Thomas Coke, followed suit.³³

In 1794 Richard Allen deeded the building and lot to the Trustees of Mother Bethel.³⁴ Two years later the church was granted its charter by act of the General Assembly of Pennsylvania.³⁵

In the closing years of the eighteenth century a quietude settled over the church. With the financial and administrative problems out of the way, Allen was able to apply himself to the religious and

spiritual needs of the congregation. On December 29, 1799 during Sunday services, he devoted his sermon to a "late mournful event,"³⁶ the death of President Washington fifteen days earlier. This excellent discourse was noted in the Philadelphia newspapers of the day.³⁷ In the same year Allen was ordained a deacon by Bishop Asbury.

Following 1800 very little is known of the history of Mother Bethel. Prior to 1811 a small churchyard was laid out in a plot of ground formerly owned by Allen, located to the rear and northeast of the church.³⁸ Although the burial ground was described briefly in a deed for 1830, no further information about it has been unearthed. It was here that Bishop Allen was laid to rest in 1831. His wife was also interred in the small burial grounds. Sometime during these early years, Allen as president of the church's Board of Trustees petitioned the City Councils to pave Sixth Street between Pine and Lombard Streets.³⁹ In 1815 financial difficulties were encountered and the church property was put up for auction at a sheriff's sale.⁴⁰ It was re-acquired by Allen, now a man of means. Two years later he sold the church and lot to the Trustees of Mother Bethel.⁴¹ In 1816 Deacon Allen had been elevated to the position of Bishop, the first so honored by the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Third Church:

In 1841 the eighteenth century church building was replaced by a new red brick structure.⁴² Limited information in the form of a contemporary representation of the church provides some details of the

building. Joseph Huffy, a copperplater and steel engraver in Philadelphia during the years 1835-1860,⁴³ made the drawing in 1843 at the site of the church.

The red brick structure fronted on Sixth Street. It was approximately seventy feet wide and deep. The church was three and a half stories high. The first story front included a centered window with shutters flanked by two entrance doors the height of the first floor. On the other side of each doorway was a window. The second story had three windows of double-hung sash and outside shutters. There were three smaller windows with shutters at the third floor level. A gabled roof formed a pediment above the third story. Here was placed a lunette window. Along the south side of the structure was the three-foot alley intact. A closed wooden fence separated it from the neighboring dwelling. The wooden fence in front of the church was replaced with an iron-rail one of the same height.

The one available and also limited description of the interior recorded by Bishop Payne fifty years following the erection of the church reads:

...it was [an] elegant [church]... the pulpit was the only imposing part of the edifice. It was made of three steps rising one above the other, and everyone shorter than the one below it, so as to give a pyramidal form. Mahogany [sic] columns with pentagonal sides adorned with globes of lights assumed a rather majestic appearance.⁴⁴

To date published material of any kind on the history of this third Mother Bethel has not been located.

The Present Church:

In 1889 the Trustees of Mother Bethel resolved to build a new church on the site of the old one. Plans for an enlarged edifice necessitated property acquisitions to the north and east of the original site. By the close of that year the cornerstone of the new church had been laid. Dedication services were held on the last Sunday in October, 1890.

The width of the church is 90 feet and the length is 113 feet. The facade is of rough stone. Surmounting the edifice on the north side is a tower whose style is best described "as plain Gothic."⁴⁵ (See Illustration No. 7).

Although, during the past seventy years, improvements have been made to the edifice's interior with the introduction of modern-day conveniences and facilities, much of the 1890 work remains intact.

Entry into the church is by the original front doors leading into a vestibule with a staircase to the upper floors. The first floor includes a large auditorium with the altar or pulpit at the east end and offices in the rear. The second story, formerly the galleries, has the original three large stained glass windows on the north and south walls. The windows are subdivided into smaller ones for ventilation and light. The basement includes a number of small rooms on each side of a hallway running north and south. In the northwest corner is located the tomb of Bishop Allen.

Information concerning the history of this fourth church, as with the earlier ones, is sparse. This church, as its predecessors, is a center of an active religious community. The present congregation numbers about 1500 members; not all reside in the immediate vicinity.

Status:

Mother Bethel is an independent church of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination. Ownership of church property is vested in a Board of Trustees. This covers the church and the five non-church occupied dwellings on Sixth and Lombard Streets. It is administered by the minister, Reverend Charles E. Stewart, D.D., LL.D. The church serves 1500 members and is under the immediate charge of Reverend Stewart.

NOTES

1. Wesley, Charles H., Richard Allen, Apostle of Freedom (The Associated Publishers, Inc., Washington, D.C., 1935), 52; Singleton, George A., The Romance of African Methodism (Exposition Press, New York, 1952), 10; The Life, Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen (Abington Press, Nashville, Tenn., 1960), 26; hereafter cited as Life of Richard Allen.
2. Rev. Bishop Carson, "St. George's Church," Historic Philadelphia (American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1953), 234.
3. See footnote No. 1.
4. Ibid.
5. Life of Richard Allen, 24.
6. Ibid., 26.
7. Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser, Aug. 30, 1791.
8. Life of Richard Allen, 27-28.
9. City of Philadelphia, Deed Book EF-2, 563-566, Department of Records, City Hall.
10. Life of Richard Allen, 28.
11. Roberts, Kenneth and Anna M., trans., Moreau de St. Mery's American Journey 1793-1798 (Doubleday & Co., Garden City, New York, 1947), 341-342.
12. Life of Richard Allen, 31.
13. Ibid.
14. "Caretaker's Voucher for 1793," State House Records, Public Records Office, Harrisburg, Pa.
15. "Letter, Benjamin Rush to John Nicholson, August 12, 1793," L. H. Butterfield, ed., Letters of Benjamin Rush (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N. J., 1951), II, 636.
16. Life of Richard Allen, 29.
17. "Letter, Benjamin Rush to Mrs. Rush, August 22, 1793," L. H. Butterfield, ed., Letters of Benjamin Rush (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N. J., 1951), II, 639-640.

18. "Letter, J. Barr to J. G. Blount, November 30, 1793," A. B. Keith, ed., The John Gray Blount Papers (North Carolina State Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, 1959), II, 335.
19. "Letter, Benjamin Rush to [Matthew Carey], October 29, 1793," L. H. Butterfield, ed., Letters of Benjamin Rush (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N. J., 1951), II, 731-732.
20. "There are lately erected two buildings by the blacks;... The other is called the African Methodist Episcopal Church." Thomas Hardie, Directory for the City of Philadelphia for the year 1794, 201; "Methodist Meeting House E[ast] side 6 St[.] near Lombard Street," Federal Tax Records for 1799, Manuscript Division, National Archives.
21. Sheriff Deed Book, District Court A, 367, Philadelphia Municipal Court Records, City Hall; City of Philadelphia Deed Book IC-15, 189-192, Department of Records, City Hall.
22. City of Philadelphia Deed Book IC-21, 708, Department of Records, City Hall.
23. Ibid.
24. "[Statement of Samuel Shoemaker,] December 31, 1815," African Church Papers, Edward Carey Gardiner Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Life of Richard Allen, 31.
28. "The New Bethel A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia," in Payne, Daniel A. A History of the A.M.E. Church (A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1891)., Villard, Harold G., "Daniel Payne," Dictionary of American Biography (Charles Scribners' Sons, New York, 1934), v. 14, 324-325.
29. Life of Richard Allen, 31.
30. Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury (Abington Press, Nashville, Tenn., 1958) II, 18; Life of Richard Allen, 31.
31. Wesley, Charles H., Richard Allen, Apostle of Freedom (The Associated Publishers, Inc., Washington, D.C., 1935), 78; Singleton, George A., The Romance of African Methodism (Exposition Press, New York, 1952), 18.

32. Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury (Abington Press, Nashville, Tenn., 1958) II, 64, 235, 567.
33. Corner, George W., ed., The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1948), 239 and 250; Wesley, Charles H., Richard Allen, Apostle of Freedom (The Associated Publishers, Inc., Washington, D.C., 1935), 87.
34. Ibid, 79.
35. Pennsylvania Archives (9th Series) II, 1162.
36. "The Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Advertiser, December 31, 1799," in Stout, Juanita Kidd, Richard Allen (manuscript, 1962), 10.
37. Ibid.
38. Robert Aitken, City of Philadelphia Directory for the Year 1811, 464.
39. "Petition to the Select and Common Councils, undated," American Clergy Papers, Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
40. Sheriff Deed Book, District Court A, 367, Philadelphia Municipal Court Records, City Hall.
41. City of Philadelphia Deed Book MR-15, 182-192, Department of Records, City Hall.
42. "The New Bethel A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia," Payne, Daniel A., A History of the A.M.E. Church (A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1891).
43. Groce, George C. and Wallace, David A., Dictionary of American Artists (Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., 1957), 333.
44. "The New Bethel A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia," Payne, Daniel A., A History of the A.M.E. Church (A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1891).
45. Ibid.

CONFIDENTIAL DATA

Suggested Boundaries, Development:

None.

Approximately nine-tenths of the area bounded by Addison Street, Addison Court, Lombard and Sixth Streets is church-owned. The northern two-thirds includes Mother Bethel Church. The other is in the main, residential. Plans to study this area by the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia preliminary to condemnation for renewal as part of the "Society Hill Project" have not been disclosed.

Historical Significance of Church

The present Mother Bethel Church was erected in 1889, replacing three earlier church structures: an eighteenth century frame shop, the brick building that supplanted it, and a mid-nineteenth century brick edifice. More significant, however, it was built on the original lot of ground in continuous Negro ownership since 1791.

The renovated blacksmith's shop, moved to the site in that year, was immediately opened for worship. Here, were held services for the first established African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States, founded in the year when the Constitutional Convention met in Independence Hall. In 1794 a new brick structure replaced the wooden one and was dedicated by Bishop Francis Asbury, Father of the American Methodist church. These two churches fall within the 1774-1800 focal period of Independence National Historical Park.

The early history of Mother Bethel and the figure of Richard Allen are inseparable. It was he who led the disaffected Negro Methodists out of St. George's to found the first Negro church in the United States. With his personal funds he purchased property and a building for it. Under his leadership, a new Protestant denomination was formed which has since grown to include 5,876 churches and missions and more than 1,000,000 members. Before his death the one-time sweeper of Independence Hall's chimnies was elevated to the position of Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. This is a chapter in the history of religion in America.

The Mother Bethel Church thus is associated with a figure of some importance in American religious history and his establishment of a Protestant denomination. Although the church building is nine decades removed from the Park's focal period, services of this denomination have been conducted without break on the site since 1791. The signer, Benjamin Rush, on several occasions was in attendance. This echoes the religious theme, shared by the several other churches of the area contemporary with Mother Bethel that have been recommended for recognition in relation to Independence National Historical Park.

The unique historical significance of Mother Bethel is perhaps to be found in the social rather than the religious theme. The founding of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination and the emergence of Richard Allen is one of the illuminating episodes in the story of the Negro in eighteenth century America. And, of course, its significance applies

not merely to that segment of the population designated "Negro." The incident of St. George's and its aftermath were in the mainstream of the social movement resulting from the American Revolution. It is the Richard Allens and Absolem Joneses that J. Franklin Jameson acknowledges in The Revolution Considered as a Social Movement:

...in many ways the successful struggle for the independence of the United States affected the character of American society by altering the status of persons. The freeing of the community led not unnaturally to the freeing of the individual; the raising of colonies to the position of independent states brought with it the promotion of many a man to a higher order in the scale of privilege or consequence.

Recommendation:

Mother Bethel Church meets the criteria adopted as a guide for granting Federal recognition to religious structures and sites in relation to Independence National Historical Park. It also has a claim to recognition for the unique significance attached to the circumstances under which it was founded.

It is recommended, therefore, that Mother Bethel be considered for recognition as one of the group of churches representing the religious theme, as a unique application of the social theme, and as the "mother" church of African Methodist Episcopalianism.

APPENDIX

POLICY AND CRITERIA FOR FEDERAL RECOGNITION OF
THE HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF CHURCH PROPERTIES
RELATED TO INDEPENDENCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
AND THE ENHANCEMENT OF THEIR SETTINGS

WHEREAS, the Act of June 28, 1948 (62 Stat. 1061) and the Act of August 6, 1956 (70 Stat. 1074) recognize the significance of religious association in the purposes of the Independence National Historical Park by providing respectively for Federal purchase of land and buildings adjacent to Christ Church, and for designation of Mikveh Israel Cemetery as a unit of the Park, contingent upon a prior satisfactory agreement being concluded in each case between the Secretary of the Interior and the Proprietors of said Church organizations for assuring the protection and physical maintenance of the Church property by the Church organization without any limitation of control over its use for customary Church and religious purposes, and

WHEREAS, during the Colonial period and the focal period of the Park Story 1774 to 1800, religion, as expressed, observed, and represented by various churches and congregations located in Old Philadelphia adjacent to the Park, constituted, in conjunction with the agricultural, economic, social, military and political, a vital and significant force in the social behavior and thinking of the period and in the development of the philosophy of government found in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and

WHEREAS, in addition to Christ Church and Mikveh Israel Cemetery several other churches, sites of churches, or related burial grounds dating from and associated with the life, social activity, and political events of the Old Philadelphia of the period 1774 to 1800 still exist in proximity to the Park, and

WHEREAS, these churches, sites of churches, or related burial grounds, may not, each individually possess national significance, collectively, because of their historical associations with and proximity to the Independence National Historical Park and the events which it commemorates, they merit recognition as subsidiary parts of the Park story, contingent upon continuing ownership, administration, care and maintenance of said church property by the respective church organizations without expense to the United States.

ACCORDINGLY, THEREFORE, the following policies and criteria are adopted as a guide for granting Federal recognition to religious structures, sites, or related burial grounds in Old Philadelphia and for the acquisition by the Federal Government of abutting properties as outlined in paragraph 2 hereunder:

1. THAT, Federal recognition of church structures, sites of church structures, or related burial grounds in Old Philadelphia shall:

a. Be limited to such structures and sites as date from the period 1774 to 1800; those which have been devoted continuously to such religious purposes from that period to date; and those which geographically are located in the Old City of Philadelphia of the period 1774 to 1800, more specifically described as the area bounded by the West side of the Delaware River, Vine Street, Ninth Street, and South Street.

b. Be effected through approval by the Secretary of the Interior of the placement of an official marker on the site or structure in recognition of its historical importance in relation to Independence National Historical Park, PROVIDED, THAT, the recognized church organization, through its duly authorized representatives, has executed an Agreement satisfactory to the Secretary of the Interior, providing for the continuing ownership, administration, preservation, and maintenance of said church property by the church organization, without expense to the United States.

2. THAT, Federal action to purchase and develop land adjacent to any church or site of church, recognized pursuant to one above and not embraced in the Park boundaries established by the original Act of June 28, 1948 (62 Stat. 1061) shall:

a. Be conditioned upon a determination by the Secretary of the Interior of the need and justification for removing existing non-historic structures, either because they constitute a fire hazard to said church or site of church or because their removal will provide an acceptable and dignified setting for each church or site of church, in harmony with Independence National Historical Park.

3. THAT, the actions contemplated in sections one and two above shall be accomplished only pursuant to specific Congressional authorization.

ILLUSTRATIONS