

Amanda Foster

1806-1904

**Commemorative Essay by  
Katherine Kachnowski, Tarrytown**



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Sleepy Hollow High School, May 22, 2013

# **Amanda Foster**

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## Summary

Amanda Foster was a Tarrytown entrepreneur and valued member of the community for over forty years. Her most tangible legacy is the founding of the A.M.E. Zion Church on Wildey Street, which remains active today. Equally important are the innumerable lives she touched when assisting runaway and newly freed slaves.

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## Amanda Foster

Amanda Taylor Foster was an ordinary woman who accomplished extraordinary things. Overcoming racial discrimination, the tiny lady left an enormous contribution in Tarrytown that still stands today.

Amanda Taylor was born on December 27, 1806, in the house of New York's governor, DeWitt Clinton, where her mother worked. As an infant, Foster was sent to the home of Flora Schuyler. She didn't see her mother again until she was six years old.

After working as domestic help until the age of fourteen, Foster became a stewardess on the *Consolation*, a steamboat that sailed on the Hudson River from Albany to New York City. At times, the passengers were disagreeable with Foster. Her personal philosophy was that even when people were curt or rude, it was important that she always remain pleasant.

Foster met and married John Bowman while she was working aboard the *Consolation*. They moved to Arkansas together, where Foster obtained her "free" papers, and was employed in the house of Governor Elias Nelson Conway. While living in Arkansas, Foster witnessed a slave auction, and was horrified by what she saw. Later, Foster lent her personal free papers to a fugitive slave, enabling the girl to escape.

Foster and Bowman moved to Tarrytown in 1837, where he opened up a barber shop, and she, a confectionary store on Main Street. Unfortunately, Bowman passed away in 1839. Foster had learned the barber trade from him, and began to cut hair in town and for passengers aboard the *Washington Irving* steamer. General James Benedict, and Washington Irving were loyal customers, and only allowed Amanda to cut their hair.

In 1845, Amanda met and married Henry Foster, who was also a barber. They eventually adopted two children, William and Amanda.

At this time, African Americans were relocating to Tarrytown from the South. With no African-American church in town, Foster and others established the A.M.E. Zion Church of Tarrytown in 1860. Originally, the church had no official building, so meetings were held in Foster's confectionary store. As the congregation grew larger, services eventually moved to the Silver Shoe Factory located on North Washington Street.

Foster considered it important for African Americans to have a permanent place of worship and worked tirelessly to raise funds to build a church. In addition, she donated earnings from her confectionary store to the cause. After Henry passed away in 1864, Foster was able to secure a lot for the church on Wildey Street. The cornerstone was finally laid on October 10, 1864, and the building was completed in 1865.

The Foster Memorial A.M.E. Zion congregation soon became a sanctuary for runaway slaves. The parish offered shelter and food to those who were settling in Tarrytown and those on their way further north. A crawl space beneath the floorboards in the entrance of the church may have been used to hide the fugitives.

Foster was a strong presence in the congregation and the village. She was known as the "mother of the church" until the day she died. Foster passed away at the age of 98, on July 27, 1904, in her home on Wildey Street. Her death had such an impact on the community that her obituary appeared in the next day's edition of The New York Times. The brief column was meaningful, but did not come close to conveying all of the wonderful things Foster had done for Tarrytown.

On the day of her funeral, the entire congregation walked behind Foster's casket from the church to her gravesite in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. Also in attendance were all of Tarrytown's Board of Trustees.

Foster was a woman who did not let her diminutive size, race or gender limit her ambitions, courage or generosity. She overcame many personal obstacles and social barriers to leave an imprint on her community that has lasted for over a century. Today, the Foster Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church is still active and is on the National Register of Historic Places. In addition to building a church, Foster touched innumerable lives by helping African Americans on their path to freedom. Amanda Foster and her story should be a source of pride throughout Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow. The world would be a better place if more people had her attitude, motivation, and perseverance to overcome obstacles.

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