Henry Mansfield Dillard: Pillar of Spring Hill

Early Life and Arrival in Tampa

One of four children, Dillard attended Lee Street Academy and resided in Valdosta until at least 1906, when he married Adella Winn in Tampa. The Dillards made their home on Estelle Street and Henry worked as a laborer in a saw mill. Later, he attended the Florida Seminary in Lakeland. In 1908, Dillard established St. John’s Missionary Baptist Church at 905 Governor St., Tampa. By 1910, the Dillards also lived on Governor St., a few blocks away, where they welcomed a daughter, Carrie, and a son, Mansfield.

The Dillards Arrive in Spring Hill

Oral histories have long reported the Dillards’ arrival in the newly-developed Spring Hill subdivision around 1911; the first written documentation is in the 1918 Tampa city directory. Though some believe Dillard was the first pastor or founder of the Spring Hill Missionary Baptist Church, WPA records of around 1940 dispute that. The current Church history reflects that under Dillard’s leadership in 1915, the church moved into a new facility on W. 3rd St. (now Humphrey Ave.) solidifying it as a fixture in Spring Hill.

The Beginnings of Education in Spring Hill

In 1913, the Dillards welcomed another daughter, Sallie, and two years later, a third, Madeline. They had two more sons – Henry D. W. and Willie. Like the Dillards, Spring Hill families in the early 20th century were growing, and feeling the absence of an acceptable school. Schools in neighboring Sulphur Springs would not accept Black children. Around 1925, Rev. Dillard decided to start a school for African American children in Spring Hill. By most accounts, the school was housed in the Spring Hill Missionary Baptist church in its first year, moving to W. 4th Street (now Okaloosa Avenue) between Taliaferro Street and Central Avenue in 1926.

Rev. Dillard lost his wife, Adella, in 1933. By 1934, he had moved with his sons to the College Hills area, making their home just two blocks south of the cemetery where Adella was buried. Sometime between 1937 and 1938 Dillard remarried, and his new wife Luella (Nellie) joined him in the ministry as the Church Secretary at St John’s.

The Dillards and World War II

This draft card registered Henry’s eldest son, Mansfield, for the draft in 1940. There is no record that he ever served in WWII, although Dillard’s son, Henry D.W., served four years in the U.S. Army, and was honorably discharged at the rank of TEC 5 in 1945, one year after his father died.

Rev. Dillard’s Legacy

Henry Mansfield Dillard died in 1944 at age 66. He is buried next to Adella in the Memorial Park Cemetery in Tampa. In Dec. 1949, the Hillsborough County School Board renamed the Spring Hill school the Dillard School, a name that remained when a new facility was built a few years later.

Truth in Media?

This article, published by the Tampa Times, April 18, 1932, offers unique insight into the challenges faced by African Americans in the early 20th century. The arrest of Rev. Dillard, a respected church and community leader, for reckless driving, is described in language that is far from respectful. Modern readers will note descriptions like “Negro preacher,” “church militant,” and “jesu,” along with a mocking reference to the “Pahson.” Sadly, no report of the incident in an African-American publication has been discovered that might offer any counterpoint.