

Town Hill Methodism

It has been said that there is only one thing more destructive to Christianity than a split – and that's a merger. One can make a case that even when congregations or denominations divide for reasons that are less than noble, the resulting multiple ministries are sometimes able to reach a more diverse population and create opportunities for growth that were not possible in the former unified body. One can also see evidence that even when congregations or denominations unite under the friendliest circumstances, the membership and ministry of the unified body is often less than the sum of the former parts.

The formidable Luzerne County transition at Town Hill, however, from seven congregations to a single congregation was one that occurred with remarkable smoothness and lack of many of the usual problems. That vision that was agreed upon in 1967 and completed in 1971 is now examined in this issue of *The Chronicle* dedicated to faith transitions within the Susquehanna Conference.



Town Hill UMC, dedicated 1971

The Town Hill Charge

Methodism was introduced into the area by traveling local preacher Thomas Bowman¹ of Briar Creek, Columbia County, in 1793 and became permanently established when Epaphras Wadsworth², a Methodist layman from Connecticut,

¹ See the preceding article on the Bowman family, beginning on page 72.

² Epaphras A. Wadsworth (1755-1841) is the father of local preacher Rev. Epaphras Wadsworth (1794-1871). Both are buried in the Dodson cemetery. The present Patterson Grove camp ground began southwest of Town Hill in Rev. Wadsworth's grove in 1830 before moving to

settled in Town Hill the following year – forming a class, and opening his home for worship services and as a lodging place for Methodist circuit riders.

When the work prospered to the point of outgrowing the holding of meetings in homes, an annex was built onto the Town Hill School House in 1809 for the purpose of worship. A door hinged to the ceiling in the middle of the building was dropped when a smaller room was desired for school purposes and raised to accommodate a larger group for worship. The arrangement lasted for twenty-seven years.

By 1800 organized circuits had begun to take shape, even though conference boundaries were still in transition, and the following table, showing the placement of the Town Hill area over the years, gives a mini-history as to how the circuits were divided off from one another.

<u>years</u>	<u>circuit</u>	<u>conference</u>
1800-01	Wyoming	Baltimore
1801-04	Wyoming	Philadelphia
1804-06	Wyoming	Baltimore
1806-08	Northumberland	Baltimore
1808-10	Northumberland	Philadelphia
1810-20	Northumberland	Genesee
1820-31	Northumberland	Baltimore
1831-43	Berwick	Baltimore
1843-58	Bloomingtondale	Baltimore
1858-68	Bloomingtondale	East Baltimore
1868-82	Bloomingtondale	Central Pennsylvania

In 1882, one “final” split resulted in the formation of the Town Hill circuit of the Danville District of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Town Hill circuit formed in 1882 consisted of the following seven appointments: Town Hill, Huntington Mills, McKendree, New Columbus, Dodson Chapel, Waterton and Register – essentially the same congregations that agreed in 1967 to unite into a single congregation. The only difference is caused by the fact that in 1884 McKendree was returned to Bloomingtondale circuit and Cambra was transferred from Blomingdale to Town Hill.

While this article intends to relate the story of the transition from a seven-point charge to a single congregation, and not to give a detailed history of each of the seven congregations, some brief historical comments are in order. Although Town Hill is the mother congregation of the charge, it was not the site of the first building erected specifically for Methodist worship. The individual congregations will be presented in the order in which they erected their first church buildings.

Harvey’s Woods in 1847 and Headley’s Grove in 1867 – which was re-named Patterson Grove in 1878.

1. Huntington Mills (1822)
2. Cambra (1833)
3. Town Hill (1836)
4. New Columbus (1857)
5. Dodson Chapel (1876)
6. Waterton (1887)
7. Register (1889)

There is one additional wrinkle in the make up of the Town Hill circuit. For 30 years, from 1897 to 1927, Dodson Chapel³ was on a three-point charge with two Columbia County churches: Asbury and Jonestown. During that period the Town Hill circuit still had seven appointments, as a class at Sunshine which met in a building that was not owned by the Methodists was added to the charge.

Unlike the situation in many of today's multi-point charges, the assigned pastors at Town Hill had no assistant and did all the preaching at all the churches – which meant preaching 3 or 4 times each Sunday and each church typically having Sunday School each week and preaching every other week. In the 1920's, for example, the charge was visualized as having east and west components, and the Sunday preaching schedule was as follows:

Week A: Waterton 9 AM, Huntington Mills 11 AM, Sunshine 3 PM, Town Hill 8 PM

Week B: Cambra 10:30 AM, Register 3 PM, New Columbus 8 PM

On September 1, 1947, Rev. William L. Price began serving the Town Hill charge. This was a mid-year change of appointment. At the April 1947 annual conference, Town Hill had been left “to be supplied” and William Price had been assigned for a fifth year as the part-time supply pastor at Helfenstein in extreme southeastern Northumberland County – but he was a 32-year young lay pastor with a desire to serve, and Town Hill was a struggling circuit that needed such a person. Mr. Price had proved himself by serving at Helfenstein, and upon his departure that appointment was added to the responsibilities of the pastor serving Centralia.

William Price was born and raised in Shamokin, and it was the Lincoln Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Shamokin that recommended him for a local preacher's license in 1940. He began working in the food industry after graduating from high school and had worked his way to being a supermarket manager. When his part-time supply work convinced him that he was being called into full-time ministry, he resigned his position with American Stores and accepted the challenge at Town Hill. After completing his studies at Westminster Seminary, he was ordained a deacon in 1950 and an elder in 1953.

Rev. William L. Price would serve Town Hill until he retired in 1985 – his 38 years at one location being a record for the Central Pennsylvania Conference. And it was during his tenure there, that the seven congregations on the charge envisioned and successfully completed becoming a single congregation in a brand

³ Of the church buildings on the Town Hill charge, Dodson Chapel was not the closest to Asbury and Jonestown. At this point, the reason the Dodson Chapel appointment was the one that was re-assigned can only be conjectured.

new facility. Here are the stories of the seven individual congregations that moved into the new Town Hill UMC building in 1971.

Huntington Mills (1822)

The first church erected on the circuit exclusively for worship purposes was the Pine Grove Meeting House, erected in 1822 and located within the present Pine Grove Cemetery on Cemetery Hill Road. When that building was destroyed by fire in 1871 the congregation relocated about one mile to the southwest in the village of Huntington Mills in a new structure named Nelson Chapel in honor of Reuben Nelson, then president of Wyoming Seminary, who presided at the dedication. In 1971, this was the largest of the seven churches with a membership of 178.



Huntington Mills

Cambra (1833)

The Pine Creek Meeting House was erected in 1833 just east of the village on Cambra on the road to Register. This congregation erected a new building in 1869 and another one in 1889. When the 1889 building was destroyed by fire in the 1940's, the congregation relocated to a donated plot of ground several hundred yards nearer to the village of Cambra and erected a block building that was later remodeled and covered with siding. The membership in 1971 was 61.



Cambra

Town Hill (1836)

This congregation erected its first building in 1836, at the crossroads about one mile southwest of town.⁴ Eventually a second Methodist Episcopal class (Dodson's) was formed for the people living in the Southdale area, and both classes shared the Town Hill building. About 1874 the building was moved into the village of Town Hill – under the peculiar circumstances related in the words of Rev. William Price, soon after his arrival on the charge in 1947, in the footnote below.⁵ The membership in 1971 was 85.



Town Hill

⁴ The exact location of the 1836 structure is given in the 1873 Luzerne County Atlas.

⁵ Word came to me that the Town Hill church at one time had been stolen. When I protested, the individual said, "The next time you see Abe Huff, ask him."

One day while waiting in the post office for the incoming mail, I said to Abram Huff, postmaster, then in his eighties, "Uncle Abe, what is this I hear about stealing the Town Hill church?"

After a great seizure of laughter – Mr. Huff had many of the characteristics of the proverbial Santa Claus, including 'a tummy that shook like a bowl full of jelly' – with tears rolling down his cheeks, he said, "Rev. Price, why would you ask me a question like that? Just because I happened to be there that night doesn't say that I know anything about it."

Then he began to tell the story of how when he was a boy of about thirteen years of age, Mr. Putnam Wadsworth (a direct descendent of Epaphras Wadsworth, the Connecticut man who was the first Methodist at Town Hill), Mr. George W. Huff (father of Abram), Mr. H. Edson and several others took a team of horses and under cover of darkness put skids under the Town Hill church, then located about a mile outside the village, and dragged it down into the center of the village where it now stands. This happened about 1874. Mr. George W. Huff gave a grant of land 50x40 feet upon which the church could be erected.

This came about because of differences with the members of the Dodson Chapel group and the Town Hill group, which used the building jointly for services. The following year the Dodson Chapel people built a new church in their village and dedicated it the same year – 1875.

New Columbus (1857)

The first building of this congregation was erected in 1857.⁶ The present building was erected in 1912 and Stevens Memorial Chapel – having been paid for by Mrs. E.D. Stevens as a memorial to her husband. In 1971 it was the second largest congregation on the charge with a membership of 101.



New Columbus

Dodson Chapel (1875)

This structure was erected in the village of Southdale in 1875 when the church building shared by this class and the one at Town Hill was removed to the village of Town Hill. The membership in 1971 was 38.



Dodson Chapel

⁶ A view of the 1857 building is given in 2005 volume of *The Chronicle*, page 33, as part of an article featuring one rare postcard from each county within the conference.

Waterton (1887)

This class was organized in 1842 and met in Good's school house until 1887 when, under the leadership of Wesley Benscoter, the present building was erected and named Wesley Chapel in honor of the class leader. The membership in 1971 was 72.



Waterton

Register (1889)

The class at Register worshiped in the Methodist Protestant⁷ building until 1888, when a dispute arose over the materials used in the Sunday School. The membership in 1971 was 55.



Register

⁷ The 1873 Luzerne County Atlas mistakenly identifies the church in the village as a Methodist Episcopal Church. While both Methodist groups used the structure, it was the property of the Methodist Protestants. That building, which is no longer standing, had been several hundred yards south of the present Methodist Episcopal building.

One Congregation – Town Hill UMC

When congregations merge there are almost certain to be conflicts and hard feelings about the name of the new congregation, the positions of leadership (from layleader and trustees to organist and ushers), the times of worship, etc., etc. In addition, the membership and attendance numbers for the merged congregation are typically less than the sum of their pre-merger counterparts. Such was not the case at Town Hill.

The 1971 membership figures given above for the seven churches on the Town Hill charge total 590, and the 1971 conference journal indicates a combined average weekly attendance of 249. The following chart compares those figures to those 5 and 10 years after the mereger, and at the retirement of Rev. Williams Price in 1985.

<u>year</u>	<u>membership</u>	<u>weekly attendance</u>
1971	590	249
1976	644	240
1981	626	237
1985	642	230

It appears that this particular church merger, despite involving seven congregations, did not produce the drop in membership and attendance that might have been expected. The details behind this successful merger are given in the following paragraphs, adapted from the November 14, 1971, booklet for the consecration services of the new facility.

The momentous decision to unify the seven congregations into a single church was reached in 1967 – motivated in part by the fact that many of the aged church structures were in need of repair. Unity within the charge had been demonstrated by participation of all the churches in Easter and Christmas Cantata programs, Holy Week services, Pentecost Services, Vacation Bible School and MYF meetings. Long range economics, improved educational opportunities, the burden of a pastor ministering to seven churches, and the ease of modern transportation left little doubt that a new single unit was not only practical but necessary.

In the fall of 1967, a site committee was chosen, and fourteen locations were considered. The one recommended by the committee and later approved by a charge-wide conference was a five acre tract of land donated by Oliver C. Cotterman of Town Hill – located on a hilltop overlooking the entire valley.

In 1969 an extremely successful “Partners in Progress” financial campaign was conducted – led by personnel of the Department of Finance and Field Service of the United Methodist Board of Missions. Ground was broken in July 1970, and the spirit of cooperation continued as scores of members offered time and talent

and gifts to paint the church interior, landscape the grounds, lay the floor coverings, and equip the kitchen.

That 1971 consecration service booklet continued with an impressive list of ministerial sons and daughters, with dates and other information added as researched by *The Chronicle*, as follows:

twenty-one persons from the charge who had entered fulltime Christian ministry

Azima Vallerchamp (1805-1854), Evangelical Association

Benjamin B. Emory (1828-1872), Wyoming Conference

Isaac Austin (1828-1993), Wyoming Conference

John C. Laycock [aka Leacock] (1836-1922), Wyoming Conference

Earl Lockhard

Zebulon S. Rhone (1844-1887), Central Pennsylvania Conference

Seth A. Creveling (1836-1911), Central Pennsylvania Conference

Edward Snyder

George M. Larned (1834-1905), Central Pennsylvania Conference

Elijah L. Santee (1848-1934), Wyoming Conference

Joseph B. Santee (1842-1922), Wyoming Conference

Crawford L. Benscoter (1845-1905), Central Pennsylvania Conference

R.R. Bellas

Almon Wadsworth Hontz (1861-1898), Central Pennsylvania Conference

William F. Tucker (1918-2005), Church of Christ

F. Wayne Yapple (1924-1997), Central Pennsylvania Conference)

Franklin Hayman

Leland Hayman

Larry H. Saxe (1934-1988), Wyoming Conference

Stephen B. Bidlack (1875-1966), Central Pennsylvania Conference

Frank O. Monroe (1935-2009), Central Pennsylvania Conference

seven persons from the charge who served as local preachers

Epaphras Wadsworth (1794-1871), buried in Dodson

Septimus Bacon (1794-1867), buried in Pine Grove Cemetery

William W. Trescott (1830-1905), buried in Pine Grove Cem. [Columbia Co.]

John Sullivan

Israel B. Cook (1789-1868), buried in Pine Grove Cem. [Columbia Co.]

John Holmes (1811-1885), buried at Broadway PA

Shadrach B. Laycock (1795-1882), buried in Pine Grove Cemetery

and one deaconess

Miss Emma Trescott, Slavonic Mission in Hazelton PA

Finally, the booklet concluded with the following statement: "Based on the past history of the Town Hill Charge, The United Methodist Church of Town Hill now stands on the threshold of a bright and glorious and highly successful future following and serving Christ the Lord."

Epilog

In an era when the merging of congregations appears to be happening more and more – and perhaps should be happening even more than many in the pews would care to admit – a look at some of the reasons for the successful merger in Town Hill seems appropriate. Unfortunately, however, many of the conditions that prevailed on the Town Hill charge do not apply to the charges of today.

1. The merger was associated with a long pastorate. William Price began his ministry at Town Hill in 1947 and had been the pastor of record for twenty years when serious talks about merging the congregations began in 1967. The pastor was someone who had gained trust over a long period of time and was seen as a facilitator of an idea rising from within the charge – and not as someone sent by the conference with visions of using the charge as a stepping stone to greater appointments and/or with a mandate to consolidate the congregations.

2. The merger was preceded by a significant period of the congregations involved working together in joint services, Vacation Bible School, youth fellowship, etc. This may well be the most necessary and significant ingredient for successful congregational consolidations.

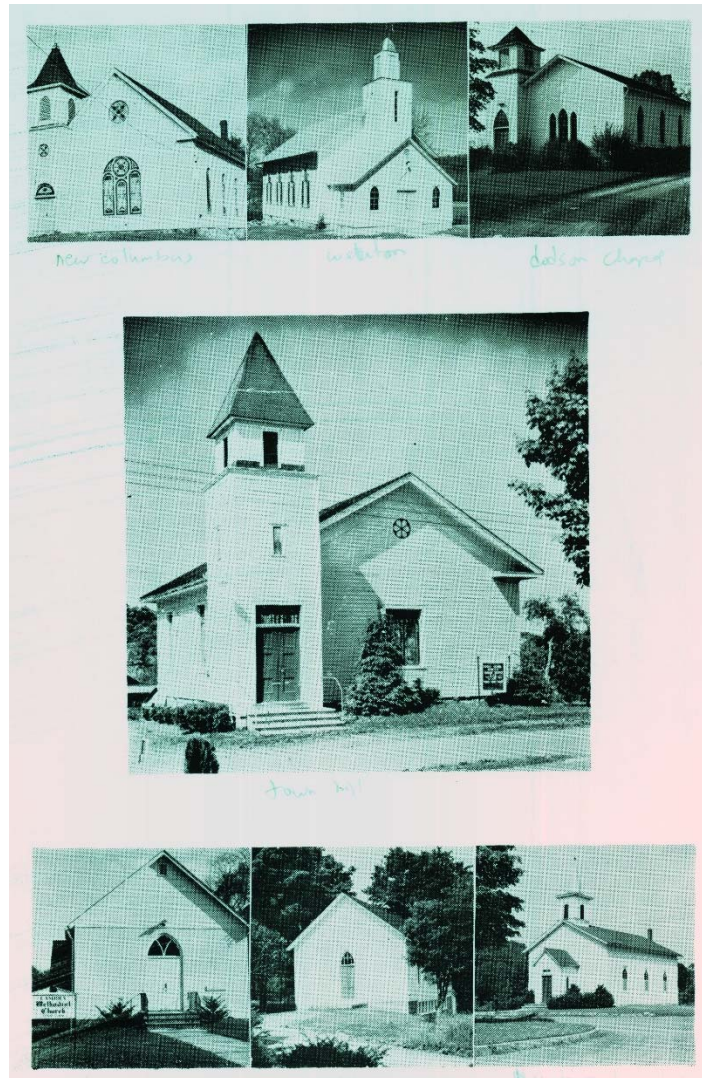
3. Each of the congregations involved was entering the discussion from a position of strength. None of the congregations was struggling financially or numerically – or was in danger of being closed if something was not done immediately. Too often congregations today wait to discuss consolidation until that is the only alternative – until there are no more young families and not enough income to meet the budget. The mindset at that point becomes one of survival and not one of vision.

4. Each church found itself with a healthy congregation, but with an aging building – thus it became an easy decision to abandon the existing buildings. Today's churches seem to find themselves with healthy buildings, but with aging congregations – and it seems that no one wants to abandon a building with so many possibilities and into which so much energy has been poured over the years. In short, the Town Hill charge allowed its ministry to shape its building instead of its buildings to hamper its ministry.

5. The name and location of the new building were decided objectively. Neither of the two larger churches (Huntington Mills or New Columbus) insisted on the others merging into its building, or for the new building to be erected in its community. The name of the charge had been the Town Hill charge, and the new building was to be erected essentially in the community of Town Hill, and so the name chosen was “Town Hill United Methodist Church” – even though that had already been the name of one of the churches on the charge. That certainly made

the most sense, and there was no effort to choose the kind of creative/inclusive name that is often used to avoid offending anyone and/or to pretend that such a new name will somehow make all things new. The congregation is to be commended for not becoming “Seven Sisters UMC” or “Greater Eastern Luzerne UMC” or even another “New Creation UMC.”

No, the merger at Town Hill was not perfect; and yes, the congregation has not been immune from many of the recent problems and developments that continue to affect today’s churches. But this issue of *The Chronicle* presents the story of the transition at Town Hill from seven congregations into one both as an historical account of God’s handiwork in the past and as an inspiring vision of God’s possibilities for the present.



back cover of the consecration booklet showing each building as it appeared in 1971