

Scranton's Watson Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church

“the little church that never was”

by Thomas Morgan¹

[author's note: This paper is made possible by, and relies heavily on, articles found on Newspapers.com. The citations are given as they appear on that website – and some articles are credited to the *Times-Tribune* of Scranton PA, which has existed by that name only since 2005. Since the *Times-Tribune* is the successor to all past Scranton daily newspapers, and it has led the efforts to digitize the past articles, it is sometimes listed as the newspaper of record. In the past, the *Scranton Truth* merged with the *Scranton Republican*, that paper with the *Scranton Tribune*, that paper with the *Scrantonian* and that paper with the *Scranton Times* to give us today's *Times-Tribune*. Be advised that some citations may use a newspaper name later than the one in which the article actually appeared.]

Watson Street, formerly known as Watson Avenue, is a small thoroughfare in west Scranton, south of Hyde Park in the hilly area between the Lackawanna River and Keyser Creek known as Lincoln Heights. In 1900, Scranton residents perusing the weekly lists of religious services were accustomed to newspaper announcements such as the following.²

WATSON AVENUE M.E. CHURCH, Lincoln Heights.

Sunday school at 2 p.m. Joseph Davis, superintendent.

Preaching service at 6.

But one will not find any mention of the Watson Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church in Chaffee's definitive 1904 *History of the Wyoming Conference*. Nor does any reference to such a church appear in Hitchcock's authoritative 1914 *History of Scranton and Its People*, or in any other known published secular or ecclesiastical history.

The work on Watson Avenue began just before the turn of the century as a mission outreach of the Hampton Street Methodist Episcopal Church, Hampton Street being approximately ten blocks north of, and parallel to, Watson Avenue. This 1899 newspaper announcement appears to be the earliest reference to the ministry.³

HAMPTON STREET M.E. CHURCH – Rev. James Benninger,
pastor. Preaching at 10:30; class meeting at 11:30; Sunday school
at 2; Epworth League at 6:30; preaching at 7:30. Lincoln Heights
Mission Sunday School at 2; preaching at 6 p.m.

¹ Thomas Morgan is a lay member of Embury United Methodist Church in Scranton

² *The Scranton Republican*; February 17, 1900, page 10.

³ *The Scranton Republican*; December 9, 1899, page 4.

When the southward outreach of Rev. Benninger and his congregation aroused interest and enthusiasm, plans were made to legally incorporate this new group of believers. The following announcement appeared in the local papers, beginning in mid-January 1900, and running for three consecutive weeks.⁴ The seven men named in the application to incorporate are more fully identified in the “Watson Avenue Seven” paragraphs at the end of this paper.

IN RE: INCORPROATION OF WATSON AVENUE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH. In the Court of Common Pleas of Lackawanna County. No. _____, March term, 1900.

Notice is hereby given than an application will be made to the said court, or a law judge thereof, on Monday, the 5th day of February, A.D. 1900, at 9 o'clock a.m., under the corporation act of 1874, and the supplements thereto, by William Parsons, Joseph A. Davies, John E. Irons, James E. Simons, William M. Burdon, Cornelius F. Davis and Charles Schlager for the charter of an intended corporation to be called “Watson Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church,” the character and object of which is the support of public worship according to the faith, doctrine, discipline and usages of the Methodist Episcopal church, and for the purposes to have, possess and enjoy all the rights, benefits and privileges afforded by the said act and its supplements.
J.E. Watkins, Solicitor

In conjunction with the first legal announcement, a news article appeared which specified the corporation would have seven trustees. The news article names the seven “applicants” in the legal notice as the seven “trustees” – except that the name of Cornelius F. Davis was inadvertently omitted (giving only six names, despite the fact that the article indicated there were seven), and applicant Joseph A. Davies has become trustee Joseph H. Davis – which appears to be the correct rendering of the name.⁵

LINCOLN HEIGHTS CHURCH

Applied to Court for a Charter Yesterday Afternoon.

The Watson Avenue Methodist Episcopal church, of that portion of Lackawanna township known as Lincoln Heights, applied to court yesterday for a charter. The application recites the purposes for which the corporation is formed and states that it will be governed by a board of seven trustees who are as follows: William Parsons, John E. Irons, Joseph H. Davis, James E. Simons, William Burdon and Charles Schlager.

The proposed name for the incorporation, “Watson Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church,” strongly suggests that a property on Watson Avenue had already been secured. And even as the scheduled incorporation date was still at

⁴ See, for example, the following: *The Times-Tribune*; January 15, 1900, page 6. *The Scranton Republican*; January 23, 1900, page 4. *The Scranton Republican*; January 30, 1900, page 4.

⁵ *The Scranton Republican*; January 16, 1900, page 3.

least a month away, as shown by the following article, the congregation had building plans prepared.⁶

LINCOLN HEIGHTS NEW CHURCH

Plans have been drawn up by Architect Lewis Hancock for the new church to be erected at Lincoln Heights. The building will be 36x42, with a stone basement and frame structure and steeple. The church will be heated by steam and illuminated by electric lights. Sunday school services will be conducted in the basement and church services in the upper part. Work on the building will be begun as soon as the weather shall permit. Rev. James Benninger, pastor of the Hampton Street M.E. church, who is conducting services in the Sunday school at Lincoln Heights each Sunday, will be pastor of the new church, and had made a canvas of the plot for the erection of the church, which all contributed freely towards.

The existence of a purchased lot is confirmed in the 1900 journal of the Wyoming Conference. The conference at that time was held in April, and the various reports covered either the previous calendar year or the previous April 1 to March 31 – depending on the reporting agency. The report of Austin Griffin, superintendent of the Wyoming District, includes the following statement.⁷

Two lots have been secured for new churches in the city of Scranton, one on Hyde Park Avenue, to which the Hampton Street Society will remove. A very valuable site. The other at Lincoln Heights.

At this point there appear to be two distinct Methodist Episcopal congregations meeting in south Scranton: the Hampton Street M.E. church which is planning to relocate to Hyde Park Avenue, and the Watson Avenue M.E. church which is planning to erect a building on Watson Avenue. This is confirmed by the weekly services listed in the local papers, typical of which is the following.⁸

HAMPTON STREET M.E. CHURCH – Rev. James Benninger, pastor.
Services on Sunday as follows: Preaching at 10:30 a.m., subject, “The Lame Man Healed at the Temple Gate;” baptism and reception of probationers before the service; class meeting at 11:30; Sunday school at 2 p.m.; Junior League at 3 p.m.; Epworth League at 6:30 p.m.; evening preaching service at 7:30 p.m., subject, “Christ Seeking the Lost;” revival service in the evening.

WATSON AVENUE M.E. CHURCH, LINCOLN HEIGHTS – Sunday school at 2 p.m.; preaching at 6 p.m.

⁶ *The Scranton Republican*; January 30, 1900, page 4.

⁷ *Journal of the Wyoming Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1900, page 71.

⁸ *The Scranton Republican*; February 3, 1900, page 4.

But in mid-March 1900, a dramatic change in plans began to develop, originating with the Hampton Street congregation, as detailed in the following article.⁹

On Thursday evening, at a congregational meeting of the Hampton Street Methodist Episcopal church, with Rev. J.P. Benninger presiding, it was decided by vote – only two dissenting – to join with the people of Lincoln Heights in the erection of an edifice, if arrangements can be made to sell the property on Hampton Street. The Keystone Land Company has offered to donate a fine lot, 55x140, conveniently located on South Main Avenue, in front of the Round Woods, as a site for the proposed church structure, the offer to remain open thirty days. A large Sunday school has been organized at Lincoln Heights and a fair-sized congregation, which had plans drawn for a chapel on a lot donated. The Hampton Street Methodist Episcopal church people have always been dissatisfied with the location of their edifice, and believe the church will not flourish as it should until it secures a more desirable location. A conference was held with leading members of the Lincoln Heights church, and it was thought the part of wisdom to have one strong church rather than two weak ones and if the Hampton Street folks can dispose of their edifice and parsonage, it is probable a fine new church structure will be erected on the Round Woods site.

The “people of Lincoln Heights” agreed to the joint effort, and within the month the following articles appeared on the same day in Scranton’s two leading newspapers. As the two articles give different information, and even disagree on the lot size, they are both given below. From *The Scranton Tribune*,¹⁰

LINCOLN HEIGHTS CHURCH

The promoters of the new Methodist church for Lincoln Heights have decided to accept the plot of ground donated by W.W. Watson and will build a new church at South Main Avenue and Breman¹¹ Street. The dimensions of the lot are 50x132.

Rev. James Benninger, pastor of the Hampton Street Methodist Episcopal church, will become the pastor. Plans and specifications are being prepared by several architects and will be decided upon as soon as possible.

⁹ *The Times-Tribune*; March 10, 1900, page 2.

¹⁰ *The Scranton Tribune*; March 21, 1900, page 8.

¹¹ This is an error, perhaps the result of oral transmission of the information. From the beginning of the projected Round Woods development, this road has been designated as Bryn Mawr Street. A similar article in the *Times-Tribune* gives the correct street name – see *The Times-Tribune*; April 17, 1900, page 2.

And from *The Scranton Republican*,¹²

ANOTHER NEW CHURCH

The Methodist people of Lincoln Heights and the members of the Hampton Street Methodist Episcopal church held a meeting in the Hampton Street church and decided to consolidate and build a new church on a plot of ground donated by Mr. W.W. Watson of the Round Woods Land Company. The plot of ground, which is 50x152 feet, is on the corner of Bremen Street and South Main Avenue. Plans and specifications are being submitted by the various architects in this city, and as soon as the plans will be decided upon the contract for the edifice will be let. Rev. James Benninger is pastor of the Hampton Street church, and through his efforts and the efforts of Rev. Mr. Powell of Lincoln Heights, the consolidation was effected.

It may be significant that the Republican article speaks of “the Methodist people of Lincoln Heights” and not “the members of the Watson Avenue M.E. church.” It appears that this group, likely because of this joint effort, did not follow through on their application for incorporation and never occupied the lot on Watson Avenue. That would explain the complete absence in the Journal of the Wyoming Conference of any reference to a “Watson Avenue” congregation – it never existed. In addition, the lot on Watson Avenue on which they had been planning to build was described in the mid-March article as having been donated. It is possible that the Lincoln Heights group never actually owned the lot – and indeed no such deed or exchange of property has come to light.

The same question may be raised about the lot “on Hyde Park Avenue” on which the Hampton Street congregation had been planning to relocate. Could this have been a donated lot which, in consideration of the subsequent events, was never formally transferred to the congregation – and indeed no such deed or exchange of property has come to light.

Another question involves the person and role of “Rev. Mr. Powell” of the Lincoln Heights group. He appears to be local preacher William Powell of Nanticoke, Luzerne County. While that may seem to be an unusual distance for a local preacher to travel to serve a congregation, such arrangements were not uncommon – and even today, similar arrangements are still made when the occasion seems to call for it. It appears as though the growing Hampton Street church and possible move to Hyde Park Avenue was enough for Rev. Benninger to care for without having to lead a building project on Watson Avenue – and with the Lincoln Heights people unready to support a full-time elder, local pastor Powell was called upon.¹³

¹² *The Scranton Republican*; March 21, 1900, page 11.

¹³ The “Rev. M. Powell” is clearly not the Joseph Wesley Powell who played a prominent role at the 1902 dedication service for the new church building. That Mr. Powell, from Buffalo NY, was a

But another article appeared three days later suggesting that “the Methodist people of Lincoln Heights” who met with the members of Hampton Street to effect the consolidation of the congregations did not represent the entire congregation. As the Watson Avenue ministry was still a congregation under construction, there was probably some confusion and/or disagreement about who had authority to do what. That other article reads as follows.¹⁴

LINCOLN HEIGHTS CHURCH

A public meeting of the residents of Lincoln Heights was held in the school house Thursday evening for the purpose of getting an expression of the people with reference to uniting with the Hampton Street church people in their effort to erect a new building on the Round Wood tract.

Mr. Parsons presided and outlined the work already done, and Rev. Mr. Benninger and trustees Davis and Simons also spoke. A vote was taken which resulted in a majority against the proposition.

This article provides some interesting fodder for speculation. First, there is the fact that the gathering was reported as “a public meeting” of “the residents of Lincoln Heights” – with no mention of the Sunday School or the Methodist Episcopal Church. Secondly, it appears that those speakers from the Hampton Street church – Rev. Benninger, a Mr. Davis, and James Simons – are invited guests with no special standing or authority. It is unclear whether William Parsons was presiding at the meeting as a trustee of the Hampton Street church or as the leader of the residents of Lincoln Heights. But the fact that the gathering was held in the school house, which stood at the southeast corner of Watson Avenue and Porter Street, suggests that building was likely the regular meeting place of the of Sunday School and the potential Watson Avenue congregation – as does an article cited later in this paper which states that the Sunday School was sponsoring a social on the lawn “opposite the school house.”

The new church building at South Main Avenue and Bryn Mawr Street – about halfway between Hampton Street and Watson Avenue) did indeed materialize. It was dedicated on May 4, 1902, as Embury Methodist Episcopal Church of the Wyoming Conference and is now Embury United Methodist Church of the Susquehanna Conference. But every printed history of Embury UMC, both secular and ecclesiastical, portrays it as the relocated Hampton Street Church – with no mention at all of either “Watson Avenue M.E. Church” or “the people of Lincoln Heights.” And so the question remains, what happened to that ministry?

While some of the individuals listed in the original petition for the incorporation of the “Watson Avenue M.E. Church” were involved in the new

noted speaker and the national organizer of the Brotherhood of St. Paul, one of several precursors of the present United Methodist Men.

¹⁴ *The Scranton Tribune*; March 24, 1900, page 8.

Embury congregation, it is unclear whether they had already been members at Hampton Street. The Lincoln Heights ministry seems to have continued meeting for a period, and then disbanded – and the building in which they had meeting, which was not necessarily on Watson Avenue, has not been positively identified.

After the March decision to consolidate the two groups, the Lincoln Heights group made at least three more appearances in the newspaper – with those appearances possibly suggesting a downward trend.

An early May 1900 announcement lists both Sunday School and preaching services.¹⁵

WATSON AVENUE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH,
Lincoln Heights – Sunday school at 2; preaching service at 6.

A late May 1900 announcement lists Sunday School, but no preaching, and drops the reference to Watson Avenue.¹⁶

LINCOLN HEIGHTS M.E. CHURCH – Sunday school at 2 p.m.;
no preaching services.

A late June 1900 article refers only to the Sunday School, and drops any reference to Watson Avenue or the Methodist Episcopal Church.¹⁷

The Lincoln Heights Sunday school will conduct a lawn social
opposite the school house this evening, commencing at 8 o'clock.

The Watson Avenue Seven

These seven men put forward as the incorporators of the Watson Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church appear to be a diverse group including members at Hampton Street, Methodists from other parts of Scranton, and residents of Lincoln Heights with no strong Methodist orientation.

William M. Burdon and his wife Cassie resided at 1302 Stratford Avenue,¹⁸ at the corner of Stratford and Porter, in Lincoln Heights. Burdon was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1865 and came to America with his parents in 1870. The Burdons appear not to have associated with the new Embury M.E. Church, as Mrs. Burdon's 1923 funeral was conducted in the family home by the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, and she was interred at the Langcliffe Presbyterian church cemetery in Avoca. Like fellow Stratford Avenue resident and co-incorporator Joseph H. Davis, Burdon appears to have been civic-minded but not necessarily a loyal Methodist. A 1905 article on the formation of a Republican Club in Lincoln Heights credits Davis and Burdon as being the secretary and president respectively.¹⁹

¹⁵ *The Scranton Tribune*; May 5, 1900, page 11.

¹⁶ *The Scranton Republican*; May 26, 1900, page 4.

¹⁷ *The Scranton Republican*; June 27, 1900, page 4.

¹⁸ Stratford Avenue was re-named Rundle Street in 1916.

¹⁹ *The Scranton Republican*; February 1, 1905, page 6.

Cornelius F. Davis is listed in Hitchcock's 1914 *History of Scranton and Its People* as a member of the official board at Embury. A list of those called for jury duty gives his occupation as "foreman." The 1899 journal of the Wyoming Conference places him at Scranton's Cedar Avenue M.E. Church, which was sold in 1902 when the congregation relocated and became St. Paul's. Nothing else is known about him except that he was a brother of the noted Scranton silk manufacturer William H. Davis.

Joseph Henry Davis and his wife, the former Mary Morgan, resided on Stratford Avenue in Lincoln Heights. He appears to have been active in civic and religious affairs, but lacking any denominational loyalty to Methodism. Newspapers mention him on various occasions²⁰ as an officer in the Keystone Lodge of the Loyal Knights of America – a Protestant group dedicated to "defending the Constitution and laws of the nation and the Commonwealth" and concerned about such issues as maintaining Bible readings in the schools. He is mentioned in connection with the Presbyterian church, as being the primary contact with one of its former pastors.²¹ And his daughter was married to an out-of-the-area man at the Raymond Memorial Universalist Church, now the University of Scranton's Smurfit Center for the fine arts, on Madison Avenue.²²

John E. Irons is unknown.

William Parsons (1879-1937) presided over the "public meeting of the residents of Lincoln Heights" when a majority of those present rejected the notion of joining with the Hampton Street church to erect the new Embury building. He appears to have been a respected voice in the community, and he was later an active member at Embury – serving as president of the trustees, speaking at Epworth League meetings, and filling the pulpit when the pastor was away. As a school director in Lincoln Heights, Parsons was caught up in an interesting controversy and legal battle that occurred during this time. In 1903, Lincoln Heights was taken from Lackawanna township and annexed to the city of Scranton. But that annexation was originally declared unconstitutional, and the matter was argued in court. Finally, in 1907, the annexation was declared valid and Lincoln Heights became a permanent part of the city. For technical reasons, Parson was removed as school director when the annexation was declared unconstitutional – but one account of the controversy makes a point of the fact that "the Supreme Court affirmed the action of the court here so far as the ousting of Parsons... declaring that is collateral issue."²³ He is buried in the Washburn Street Cemetery, in the nearby Hyde Park section of Scranton.

²⁰ e.g., *The Scranton Republic*; May 23, 1913, page 10.

²¹ *Scranton Republican*; September 27, 1900, page 7.

²² *Scranton Republican*; June 28, 1924, page 7.

²³ *The Scranton Truth*; December 9, 1907, page 1.

Charles Schlager (1849-1921), an active member and trustee of the Elm Park Church, was undoubtedly the most prominent of the Watson Avenue Seven. According to the multi-volume 1922 *Encyclopedia of American Biography* of the American Historical Society, “Throughout Eastern Pennsylvania no man is better known in the real estate world than Charles Schlager of Scranton.” He was an entrepreneur in business, industry, banking and retail interests that extended as far west as Michigan. One of his more personal passions was the development of the rural areas adjacent to the city of Scranton. He was one of the 1899 incorporators of the Stratford Cemetery Association in Lincoln Heights,²⁴ then a part of Lackawanna township, and is the namesake both of that area’s Schlager Avenue and of Schlager Street in the West Park section of West Scranton. Schlager’s name on the application for the incorporation of the Watson Avenue M.E. Church undoubtedly gave credibility to the project. He was born of immigrant parents²⁵ in Lake Ariel and died in Atlantic City NJ, where he had gone for his health. He is buried in the Dunmore Cemetery.

James E. Simons (1858-1940) became a member at Embury and, according to Embury’s 100th anniversary booklet, “supervised” the constriction of the church building. He was born in Wilkes-Barre and is buried in the Salem Cemetery, southwest of Hamlin, in Wayne County – with his first wife, the former Jennie V. Kipp (1874-1904) and his second wife, the former Mildred Chambers (1877-1959).



Embury UMC as erected in 1882

²⁴ The Scranton Tribute; December 30, 1999, page 6.

²⁵ His father John Schlager was a zealous member of Scranton’s German Methodist Episcopal Church.