

Harrisburg PA in the Methodist Episcopal Church

Editor's Introduction

Harrisburg United Methodism received an **unexpected disruption** like none other on December 8, 2018. That was the date of the meeting at the Camp Curtin YMCA at which a plan was announced to close ten United Methodist church buildings in Harrisburg, Penbrook and Susquehanna township in order to merge those congregations into a single, more efficient and more effective ministry.

That project, known as “Impact! Harrisburg” had an informal and inauspicious beginning earlier in the year as concerned persons began brainstorming about the decline of the United Methodist Church in the Greater Harrisburg Area. On September 9, 2018, the project was formally named and presented at a worship/celebration/challenge service at the Camp Curtin Memorial Mitchell UMC. At that time, the end result was seen to be a new working together of the Greater Harrisburg UMC congregations to reach the unchurched people in a metropolitan area undergoing demographic changes. The project was met by the congregations represented, however, with only modest enthusiasm and a general feeling that this would be another high-profile, image-saving effort that really wouldn't change anything at the local level.

When the representatives of the involved congregations and other interested persons met at the YMCA on December 8, 2018, they expected to hear a progress report along with the usual lip-service about reaching out to Harrisburg's diverse and unchurched population. It would be a gross understatement to say that those present were both shocked and angry to hear the ultimate plan and timetable placed before them. The printed material distributed at the meeting included the rationale for such drastic and unexpected action and a detailed plan of implementation which included the following, apparently non-negotiable, items.

- ministry and worship in the present buildings to cease on April 14, 2019
- keys to all properties turned over by April 20, 2019
- unified worship beginning April 21, 2019, [Easter] at Twenty-Ninth St. UMC

According to the UMC *Book of Discipline*, the standard procedure for closing a church is a vote of the congregation and not an edict from the Conference. Needless to say, there was much resistance at the local level and some negotiation was inevitable. In the end, some deadlines were relaxed – in particular, congregations were permitted to meet on their own at least through Easter – and two congregations were permitted to continue indefinitely: Rockville, as an extension ministry of Linglestown; and Grace, as the historic downtown flagship church of Methodism.

The conference archivist was present – as an interested observer ready to document any developments, but not in any official input capacity – at both the September 9 and December 8 meetings. After due consideration, the following letter was sent to several appropriate individuals and organizations.

**SUSQUEHANNA CONFERENCE
United Methodist Archives
700 College Place
Williamsport PA 17701**

Andrea Lowery
PA Historical and Museum Commission
300 North Street
Harrisburg, PA 17120
March 13, 2019

Dear Fellow Professional,

You may have heard that the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church is planning to close ten Harrisburg area church buildings in order to merge those congregations into a single, more efficient and more effective ministry. Specifically, those buildings are

Harrisburg Camp Curtin Memorial Mitchell UMC
Harrisburg Derry Street UMC
Harrisburg First UMC
Harrisburg Grace UMC
Harrisburg Riverside UMC
Harrisburg Twenty-Ninth Street UMC
Penbrook Grace UMC
Penbrook Trinity UMC
Rockville UMC in Susquehanna Township
St. Mark's UMC in Susquehanna Township

The Susquehanna Conference archives have been given the mandate to evaluate and preserve the records and artifacts of these congregations, keeping in mind that many such items are of personal and local value. As we work through this process, we ask your cooperation in dealing with any materials from these congregations that may be offered to your organization. We ask that you respect the first claim of the United Methodist Church on all such materials and not accept from any well-meaning groups or individuals any records or artifacts relating to the heritage of these congregations without first contacting the archives of the Susquehanna Conference.

We will attempt to identify any records or artifacts that our archives are not equipped to receive and/or that would be better presented to another organization or institution. In such cases the archivist of the Susquehanna Conference will be making those contacts, and we may be asking for your advice or assistance at that time. In the meantime, we ask your cooperation in seeing that all records and artifacts from these ten congregations are directed to the archives of the Susquehanna Conference.

Thank you for your understanding in this matter.

(signed)

Dr. Milton Loyer
archivist,
Susquehanna Conference UMC
717-766-9077

(signed)

Dr. John Piper
chairman,
Conference Commission on Archives and History
570-322-8278

The COVID-19 pandemic has complicated the implementation and the assessment of the *Impact! Harrisburg* project, and papers telling the whole story of that venture will have to be written by future historians. As of this writing, it may be stated that of the ten congregations projected to unite into a single body, two (Rockville and Grace) were able to continue, six chose to close without being part of any merger, and two (Riverside and Twenty-Ninth Street) united to form The Journey UMC meeting in the former Twenty-Ninth Street building.

The churches involved in *Impact! Harrisburg* included both former Methodist and former EUB congregations. In this issue of *The Chronicle*, whose theme is **unexpected disruptions**, we concentrate on the former Methodist congregations. The following article evolved from a presentation scheduled to be given at Grace UMC in 2020 (but canceled due to the pandemic) in celebration of its continued existence despite many unexpected disruptions. It begins with the founding of the Grace congregation [once known as Locust Street M.E.] in 1810 and examines all the Harrisburg Methodist Episcopal churches and their daughter congregations – whether or not they were actually within the city limits, and whether or not they survived until the 2019 *Impact! Harrisburg* project.

Harrisburg PA in the Methodist Episcopal Church

When Methodism's Central Pennsylvania Conference was created by the General Conference of 1868, its southeastern boundary was the Susquehanna River, keeping all of Dauphin and Lancaster counties within the Philadelphia Conference. In 1872, however, the next General Conference placed the city of Harrisburg within the Central Pennsylvania Conference – where it remained for the duration of the Methodist Episcopal and Methodist denominations. An account of the dynamics involved in those 1868 and 1872 decisions is given in Appendix I.

This paper examines, in the order of their organization, the Methodist Episcopal congregations established within the present Harrisburg city limits – and their daughter congregations, some of which were outside the city limits at the time of their organization. The congregations are grouped according to whether they were established before or after 1872, when Harrisburg became part of the Central Pennsylvania Conference.

A. Congregations established before 1872.

1810 – Locust Street [Grace]. While this congregation has owned and worshiped in buildings at several Harrisburg locations, it is here described as “Locust Street” because that was the site at which the congregation experienced the growth that established it as an influential and enduring religious force in the city.

While there was prior Methodist preaching in Harrisburg by Jacob Gruber and others, the first official class was organized in 1810 with five members. Meetings were held in private homes and at subsequent locations that were purchased, exchanged and/or repossessed until 1820, when the congregation

bought a lot on Second and South Streets and erected a two-story brick building. Used by the Methodists until 1839, the building later became, among other things, Second Street United Brethren Church (1839-1844) and Ohev Sholom Synagogue (1865-1919). Enlarged and remodeled, it still stands at 321-325 N. Second Street.

In 1839 the congregation purchased property and erected a brick church building on Locust Street. Here they grew and prospered and remained until building their present cathedral-like structure on West State Street. That Locust Street building was later demolished in order to erect a post office and is now the site of the Federal Building.

The State Street property was purchased in 1871, the cornerstone laid in 1872, and the chapel dedicated in 1873. The main building was completed and dedicated in 1878. The Calder Memorial Organ was dedicated in 1884, and the erection of the spire that marked final completion of the building occurred in 1888. The building's secular claim to fame came when it housed the state legislature 1897-1899, following the burning of the State Capitol. That use of Grace Church has been well-documented, and many pictures (including the one of the front cover of the issue of *The Chronicle*) exist of the remodeled sanctuary being used as the temporary chamber of the House of Representatives. But there is another part of the story involving prominent Methodist preacher Rev. Silas Comfort Swallow that is not so well-known, and that part of the story is told in Appendices II and III.

Grace UMC continues to this day as the only former Methodist Episcopal Church still active in Harrisburg, and as one of only two United Methodist congregations within the city limits.

1835 – Coxestown [St. Mark's]. This Susquehanna township church was never within the Harrisburg city limits, but it is included here because of its close identification with Harrisburg and its starting a daughter congregation within the city limits. The congregation dates from 1835 when it was the Coxestown appointment on Dauphin circuit, the land for the original building given by the Cox family. The original church stood just west of the present location – along River Road [Front Street] between the road and the river. In 1896 the congregation acquired a parsonage and became a separate charge.

In 1907, as Harrisburg expanded to the north towards Coxestown, the congregation established Harrisburg Riverside as a daughter church. Since Riverside was within the city limits of Harrisburg, however, this meant that the mother and daughter congregations would be in two different conferences [Philadelphia and Central Pennsylvania] for over 60 years – until the realignment following the 1968 denominational merger placed all of Dauphin County within the Central Pennsylvania Conference.

Just before WWI, a larger building was needed. The church was sawed in half, the back part was moved 12-15 feet toward the river, and the gap was filled in to match the front and back – causing the building to be known for years as the “telescoped church.” In 1928 the state widened Front Street, the old building was

demolished, and the congregation erected a new structure at the present location. Membership and attendance dwindled over the years, and the congregation voted to close in 2019.

1857 – Vine Street [St. Paul’s]. On October 4, 1857, a number of young men of the Locust Street Church met in a brick factory on Second Street and organized the “Young Men’s Home Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Borough and Suburbs of Harrisburg.” A weekly Sunday School was started with 42 scholars, and preaching services by local preacher Rev. J.C. Young from Locust Street were soon added. By January 1858, the Sunday School boasted 100 members. In May the meetings moved to the Jauss barroom on South Second Street between Vine and Washington – vacant because Mr. Jauss had failed to get a liquor license. When Mr. Jauss finally received his license, the meetings moved to an old meat shop on the opposite side of Second Street, where they remained until a church building was erected.

The lot on Vine Street was purchased in December 1858, and a frame building was dedicated there the following February. The existing brick church building was dedicated in 1898. Flooding was always a problem for that portion of Harrisburg. That and the population shift out of the area led to the church’s demise. It was served with Steelton Mt. Zion 1971-78 and with Manada Hill (former United Brethren) 1978-89. Services were discontinued in 2006, and the church property was transferred to Harris Street (former Evangelical) for possible missional use. When that ministry failed to materialize, the property was sold.

1859 – West Harrisburg [Ridge Avenue]. This property is located on the southwest corner of Sixth and Herr Streets. As there is no Ridge Avenue in present-day Harrisburg, the first order of business becomes explaining the name “Ridge Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church.” It turns out that Sixth Street was originally known as Ridge Road and was the major thoroughfare northward from the early city (and to the Dauphin County fairgrounds, which were pressed into service during the Civil War as the Union Army’s Camp Curtin training facility and supply center). It became a commercial corridor (with several taverns) and later an important trolley line. As Victorian homes were built and city development moved in that direction, Ridge Road became Ridge Avenue. Because it was on high ground, it developed earlier than the territory farther to the west along the Susquehanna River, which generally developed from 1915-1935. The latter was originally marshland susceptible to flooding and was for the most part undevelopable until improved technology allowed for substantial filling and grading in the 20th Century.

Since the class, as noted in the following paragraph, started in the northern part of Harrisburg and ended up in the eastern section of the city, a second order of business might be to explain the name “West Harrisburg Methodist Episcopal Church.” That designation comes from the railroad. The Pennsylvania Railroad was chartered in 1846 to construct a rail route between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh – which it completed in 1855. Leaving the station in Harrisburg, which was located

at its present site, to head west, the tracks actually went north until turning west to follow the Juniata River. And so persons traveling from center city to attend this appointment were heading west by the railroad's reckoning. The dominance of such railroad-oriented thinking is even more apparent in Altoona, where the western-bound tracks actually run almost due south – and the streets that run north-south are designated east-west, and the East End UMC is actually in northernmost Altoona (but “east” on the way to Harrisburg by railroad thinking).

This congregation actually has its beginning in a less auspicious location. In May 1859, local preacher J.C. Young from Locust Street and some of the young men from Vine Street organized a mission in the “Hardscrabble” neighborhood on North Front Street, just south of Broad. In 1860 the mission moved into a building at Front and Charles Street – but it soon became obvious that a better location was needed. In 1861 the building of a structure on Ridge Road was authorized. That frame building was dedicated in March 1862 – on part of the burying ground owned by the Locust Street Church. The property was eventually deeded to the new congregation, and a brick church was erected on the site in 1880.

In 1953, expansion of the capitol complex and changing demographics of the area prompted the sale of the property to the Bethel A.M.E. congregation – and funds from the sale were used to finance the building of the present Calvary UMC on Locust Lane in suburban Harrisburg. The building continued to be a flagship A.M.E. church in the area, used for conferences and special meetings, until it was destroyed by arson in November 1995. That A.M.E. congregation has since purchased and now occupies the former Fifth Street Methodist Episcopal Church.

The story of Ridge Avenue cannot be complete without an account of the fate of the Methodist burying ground once located there – which was actually two cemeteries, the Methodist Cemetery for Caucasians and the Wesley Union Zion Grave Yard for African-Americans. The whole story is difficult to reconstruct, but there are pieces – viz., the July 1867 announcement at the right¹ and a statement that appeared two months later.²

Notice to Persons Having Relatives and Friends Buried in the Methodist Cemetery and Wesleyan Union Zion Grave Yard.

By the opening of Herr street, the graves of the following persons will be removed from the Methodist Cemetery:

Mary Ann Collins, of Saratoga, N. Y., Hannah Mitchell, Keziah Gram, children of Cadwallader and Jane Evens, Samuel Hunt, M. G. Beatty, Hannah McGonigle, John C. Feltenberger (child), Leander Wilson, Sarah Reid, Ann Maria Hazleton (child), Jesse McQuaid, Ann Margaret Voris (child), Sarah Hoch, and from the Wesleyan Union Zion Grave Yard (colored): Samuel Lusk, Moses S. Chester, Lucretia Truman

As this street is now being opened, this notice is given that those who have an interest in the remains of their friends may remove them before commencement of the work at this point.

WEIDMAN FORSTER,
Street Commissioner.

jy30-5t

¹ *Harrisburg Telegraph* 7/31/1867, page 3.

² “The Street Commissioner is now engaged in removing the dead which lie in the part of the old Methodist graveyard which has for years obstructed the extension of Herr Street to its proper

1867 – Steelton First. This class was organized by the members of the Harrisburg Vine Street [St. Paul’s] congregation in 1867. Worship was held in the large dining room of the General Boarding House until a one-story church building was completed in 1869 between the canal and the Pennsylvania Railroad on land leased from the Pennsylvania Steel Company. In 1877 the steel company wanted the land and paid to move the structure to Front and Pine Streets, where it was used to form the second floor of a two-story building. The existing building at 4th and Pine Streets was dedicated by Bishop Joseph Berry on April 27, 1913, and sold to the Grace Temple Church of the Living God in 1994.

Since the congregation was founded before Harrisburg was placed in the Central Pennsylvania Conference, Steelton remained within the bounds of the Philadelphia Conference until the reorganization necessitated by the 1968 denominational union. That meant that after 1872 the mother [Harrisburg Vine Street] and daughter [Steelton First] congregations found themselves in different conferences for almost 100 years. This congregation merged into Steelton Centenary (former United Brethren) in 1993, and the building was sold as noted above.

1868 – Lochiel. Lochiel³ was a neighborhood between Harrisburg and Steelton, and the Lochiel Iron Works at one time were a major producer of railroad rails. In 1868, noted Harrisburg entrepreneur William Calder⁴ organized a congregation here, which met in a company-owned building. One of the prized artifacts on permanent display at the conference archives is a silver communion set presented to the Lochiel Church by Mrs. William Calder on September 13, 1868.

When the Lochiel furnace burned in 1872, the business was acquired by a Presbyterian who arranged for the services to be conducted by a clergyman of that denomination. Calder and most of the Lochiel members then transferred to the class which was meeting at the Mt. Pleasant schoolhouse.

1870 – Mt. Pleasant [Stevens Memorial]. This appointment was organized in connection with Locust Street in 1870 with 70 members. They met in the old Mount Pleasant schoolhouse at the corner of Mulberry and Crescent Streets and were designated the “Allison Hill” appointment until 1873, when their first building was erected and the name was changed to “Mt. Pleasant Methodist Episcopal Church.” That building was erected at Thirteenth and Vernon Streets on

width, and reburying them in another portion of the enclosure.” - *Harrisburg Telegraph* 9/25/1867, page 3. No notices of subsequent removals have been found.

³ The name Lochiel survives today in the form of two buildings once known as the Lochiel Hotel – an impressive structure on the National Register of Historic Places at 225 Market Street that is now an office building, and a frame structure at 901 Shanois Street that is now the 901 Lounge and located where the original community of Lochiel once stood.

⁴ William T. Calder (1821-1880) and his wife Regina Camilla (nee Greenawalt) Calder are counted among the most significant developers of the city of Harrisburg. Calder Street and Regina Street are named in their honor, as is the great Calder Memorial Organ at Grace. William Calder was chief among those who raised the capital to bring the steel industry to what is now Steelton.

land purchased by William Calder and conveyed to the congregation. In 1880, financial difficulties led to renaming the appointment “Grace Mission.” In 1886, the congregation was formally chartered as “Thirteenth Street Methodist Episcopal Church.” The present building was dedicated at the same site in 1909 as “B.F. Stevens Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church.”

The educational unit was added in 1950, and the membership of Stevens Memorial peaked at about 2300 in the 1960’s before the changing demographics of the area began to take its toll on the congregation. The congregation held its final service on April 25, 2004, after which its assets were transferred to the Central Pennsylvania Conference’s Iglesia Emmanuel UMC – which then renamed itself “Stevens Emmanuel United Methodist Church.” Stevens Emmanuel closed July 1, 2013, and the property was sold to an independent ministry.

1871 – Fifth Street. When a large revival at the Ridge Avenue Church during the winter of 1869-70 produced many converts living north of Reily Street, where there was no Methodist congregation, local preacher Robert McWilliams rose to the occasion. He obtained permission to hold services on a plot of ground at Fifth and Granite Streets during the summer of 1870. The seats were boards laid across trestles, and the “congregation” held festivals to raise money to buy the lot. With help from Ridge Avenue, the purchase was made and a small chapel was dedicated in March 1870 – and students from Dickinson College supplied the pulpit. The organization was formally chartered in March 1871 as the Fifth Street Methodist Episcopal Church.

The existing stone sanctuary was erected in 1890, and in 1903 the original chapel was replaced by an educational addition. In 1930, the entire complex was remodeled, improved and enlarged to its present condition. Following the 1995 fire that destroyed the Bethel A.M.E. [the former Ridge Avenue M.E.] building, that congregation was invited to share the Fifth Street building. As the Fifth Street congregation continued to dwindle, the property was sold to the Bethel congregation – with Fifth Street allowed to continue worshiping there until such time as they saw fit to disband. Within a few more years that time arrived, and Fifth Street UMC held its final service of celebration and remembrance on June 24, 2006.

B. Congregations established after 1872.

As the communities around Harrisburg identified strongly with that city, and as the Harrisburg city limits continued to expand to take in many of those communities, there was not always agreement between the Central Pennsylvania and Philadelphia conferences as to the establishing of and jurisdiction over new congregations – as illustrated by the following cases, each with a different twist.

1890 – Curtin Heights [Camp Curtin Memorial]. This property at 2221 N. Sixth Street was on the Ridge Road discussed in connection with the West Harrisburg church. A small village known as Schudemadgeville was laid out in the

area in 1884, and was annexed into the City of Harrisburg in 1895. The beginning of this congregation was announced to the public in the September 30, 1890, *Philadelphia Methodist* as follows:

For some months Rev. T.S. Wilcox, a member of the Central Pennsylvania Conference and agent for their Bookroom at Harrisburg, has been conducting a Sunday School at Schudemaddeville, a growing village northwest of Harrisburg, but outside the city limits; and more recently he secured the erection of a chapel and had it dedicated by the presiding elder of the Harrisburg District as a new charge in the Central Pennsylvania Conference.

As most of the members of the original board of trustees were members of Grace, Curtin Heights is often considered a daughter congregation of Grace. But the fact that the new building was outside the city of Harrisburg and officially within the bounds of the Philadelphia Conference did not go unnoticed. An effort was made by the district superintendents of the two conferences to reach an agreement, but Appendix IV gives the relevant portions from the 1891 journal of the Philadelphia Conference condemning such an agreement as violating and undermining the Book Discipline. The result was that it took special action by the 1892 General Conference⁵ to place Curtin Heights in the Central Pennsylvania Conference until such time as the area became part of the city of Harrisburg.

That 1890 frame chapel was destroyed by fire in 1894, and a new brick chapel was erected the following year. Realizing that its property was in the midst of the 80 acres that had been the noted Camp Curtin⁶ facility of the Civil War, the congregation changed its name to “Camp Curtin Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church” in 1914. In 1916, the present sanctuary, complete with the Civil War mural on the front wall, was added to the existing chapel.

In 1989, Mitchell Memorial Church merged into Camp Curtin Memorial to form the Camp Curtin Memorial Mitchell congregation. That congregation voted to close in 2019.

1890 – East End [Epworth]. On April 20, 1890, 88 persons met in the East End schoolhouse on Twenty-first Street to organize the Epworth Methodist Episcopal Sunday School. The District Superintendent presided at the meeting, and the group continued to meet in the school house until their first church building was dedicated in 1892. That frame building was erected on a plot at Twenty-first and Derry Streets purchased for such purpose.

Since this property was also outside the Harrisburg city limits at the time, the same objections were raised by the Philadelphia Conference that were voiced

⁵ *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1892*, page 409.

⁶ The 80 acres comprising Camp Curtin were taken possession of by order of Governor Andrew Curtin on April 18, 1861. It was then open land bounded by what is now Watts Lane on the north, the Pennsylvania Railroad on the east, Maclay Street on the south, and Fifth Street on the west. The statue of Governor Curtin was placed in the small park adjacent to the church in 1922, largely inspired by the pastor and members of the Camp Curtin Memorial Church.

about Curtin Heights. The material presented in Appendix IV and the General Conference action given in connection with Curtin Heights also apply to Epworth.

As the area developed and was annexed by the city, there arose a need for a more substantial building. The last service in the first structure was held August 14, 1921, and the congregation worshiped in a tabernacle erected at Twentieth and Derry Streets while the new building was erected. That structure was dedicated September 3, 1921, and used until the church closed because of dwindling membership and attendance in 2005.

1903 – New Benton [Bressler]. New Benton was the original name of Bressler, an unincorporated village between Steelton and Oberlin. The Methodist Episcopal work here is little-known and little-discussed, because it is yet another sample – perhaps the ultimate example – of the territorial feuding between the Philadelphia and Central Pennsylvania conferences. The congregation started as an outreach of Harrisburg Epworth, when some members opened a Sunday School in the schoolhouse and then proceeded by faith to purchase a lot and erect a building, which was dedicated April 26, 1903.

Unfortunately, that area was officially within the bounds of the Philadelphia Conference – which resented the incursion into their territory and refused to recognize or accept the congregation. It was served by supplies, students and retired persons and last appears in the Central Pennsylvania Conference statistics in 1924 with 28 full members and an average Sunday School attendance of 56. That year it was placed with Newville and served by a student from Dickinson College. After that, it no longer appears in the journal. The congregation was forced to become unaffiliated, and the building now houses the Bressler Bible Church.

1907 – Riverside. This congregation came into being May 1, 1907, when St. Mark's appointed a board of trustees who purchased three lots on the corner of Third and Lewis Streets for a new church. The congregation met in the Riverside School until their frame building was dedicated January 19, 1908. The congregation was formally organized with 21 charter members on February 2, 1908. In April 1956, continued growth prompted the congregation to vote unanimously to erect a new building. The old structure was demolished, and the congregation met in St. Paul's Lutheran Church until their building was opened in November of that same year. The Christian Education building was added in 1965.

In 2019, Riverside was one of the two congregations (along with Twentieth Street, which was originally United Brethren) that voted to join the city-wide *Impact! Harrisburg* project and is now part of "The Journey UMC." The Riverside building was sold to another congregation.

1921 – Trinity. This congregation began in 1921 with a nucleus of 13 members of Stevens Memorial who lived in the immediate area. The official charter was granted in 1922, with 140 charter members. They worshipped in the Fire House until the present building at 915 North Seventeenth Street was dedicated in 1923. In 1970, Trinity merged with the Sixth Street (former United Brethren)

and the old Paxton (former Methodist, in Susquehanna township) congregations to form the present Paxton UMC on N. Progress Avenue. The property on Seventeenth Street was sold to the Harris A.M.E. Zion congregation.

C. One Special Case

The preceding congregations were established either by the Philadelphia Conference or by the Central Pennsylvania Conference – and a few of them were involved in controversies between those bodies. But there was another conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church active in the Harrisburg area – the racially segregated Washington Conference – which had an enduring and historically significant congregation.

1882 – Asbury [Mitchell Memorial]. This congregation began in 1882 when the Washington Conference sent Rev. T.A. White to establish appointments in Shippensburg and Harrisburg. The first known church building of this African-American congregation was in the 1100 block of Herr Street. In 1925, the congregation moved to the northeast corner of Briggs and Cowden Streets, and in 1938, under the leadership of Rev. Elisha Mitchell, they relocated to 1322 Marion Street.

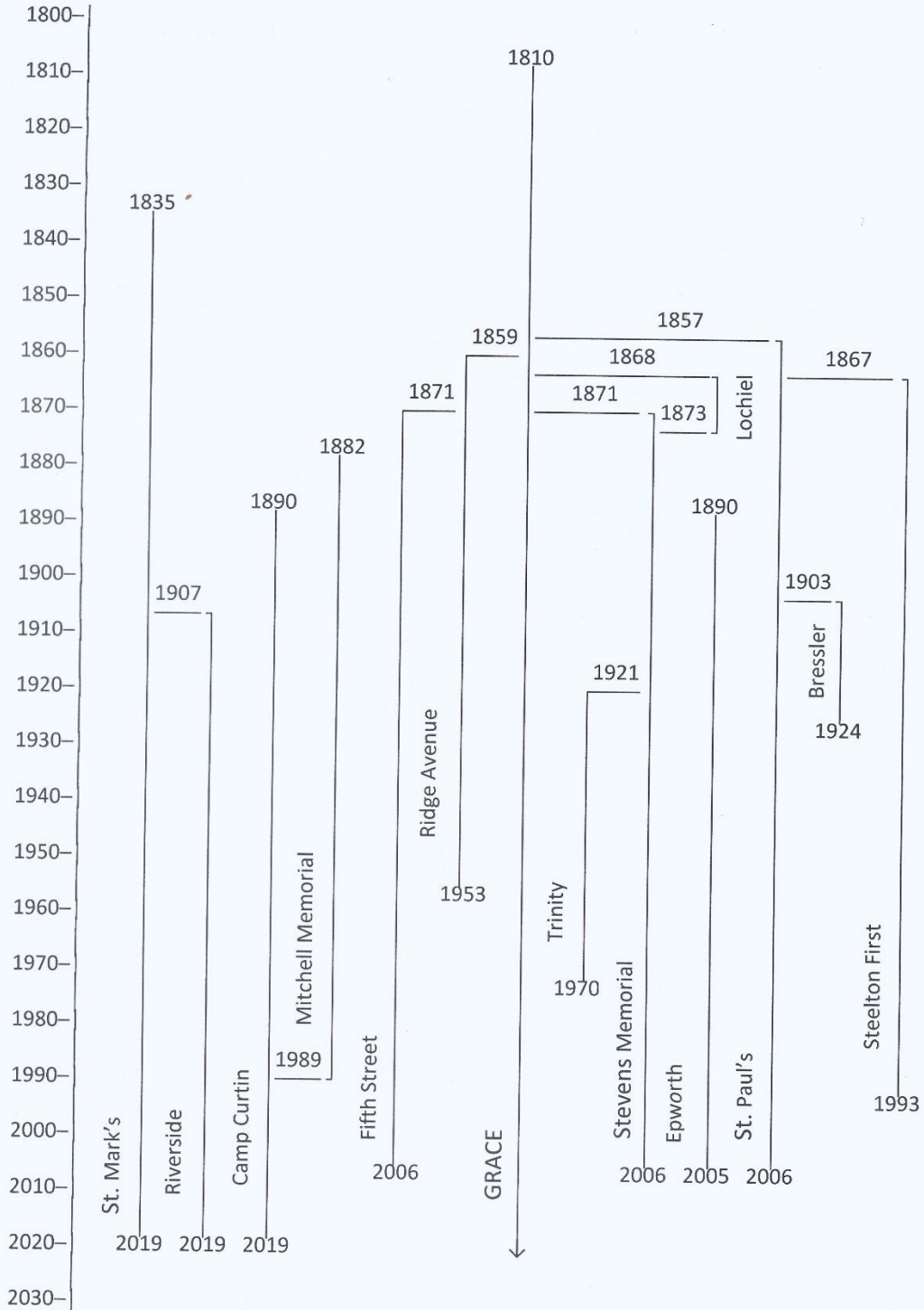
In 1956 this congregation made history when it became the very first Methodist Church in the entire denomination to transfer from a racially segregated “black” conference into its geographically appropriate “white” conference. In recognition of that accomplishment, the Mitchell Memorial congregation is an official historic designee of the Susquehanna Conference and registered historic designee #400 of the United Methodist Church. A detailed history of this congregation from 1882 to 1956, and the story behind its historic move from the Washington Conference to the Central Pennsylvania Conference is given in the 2019 issue of *The Chronicle*, pages 71-92.

In 1957 the congregation purchased and moved into the former Pilgrim Holiness Church at 1919 N. Fourth Street, and in 1989 they merged into Camp Curtin Memorial to become Camp Curtin Memorial Mitchell United Methodist Church. In the face of declining membership and high maintenance costs, that congregation voted to close in 2019.

Summary

The chart on the following page summarizes the information and relationships given in this article. The presentation is multi-dimensional in that the vertical axis provides a time line and the congregations are arranged horizontally from left to right as they existed from north to south when viewing the city of Harrisburg from the West Shore of the Susquehanna River.

THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN HARRISBURG PA



Appendix I – The Fight for Harrisburg

passages adapted from Frederick Maser's 1971
Methodism in Central Pennsylvania 1771-1969, pages 3-5

"Mr. Chairman!"

The place was Chicago. The year 1868. The occasion – the meeting of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church with representatives from every Annual Conference in the country. Henry Slicer, a delegate from the East Baltimore Conference, was trying to secure the floor.

"Bishop Simpson!" he shouted more insistently.

This time he attracted the bishop's attention.

"I move, sir, that we reconsider the question of the boundaries of the Central Pennsylvania Conference."

"No! No!" cried some of the delegates.

Several began to speak at once.

"Second the motion to reconsider!" shouted one.

"I move the motion be laid on the table," cried another.

"Second the motion."

"No! No! Let's hear what he has to say."

When Slicer eventually regained the floor he said, "Bishop, I move to amend the item whereby we laid down the boundaries of the Central Pennsylvania Conference so as to add the words 'including Harrisburg.'"

The motion would take Harrisburg out of the Philadelphia Conference and place it in the Central Pennsylvania Conference.

The delegates of the Philadelphia Conference, from whom the city of Harrisburg would be taken like a prize, sat as if stunned. The next moment they began leaping to their feet in opposition. They received unexpected help from Sanford Hunt of the Genesee Conference who opposed the motion. Then three delegates from Philadelphia spoke in rapid succession. They were gifted men and able speakers, and their speeches riddled the motion like bullets.

In the meantime there was no one to speak for Central Pennsylvania. The Conference had just been formed by the action of this session of the General Conference, and it had no elected representatives to combat the men from Philadelphia. When the vote was taken, the motion was lost, and Harrisburg remained a part of the Philadelphia Conference.

When the delegates left Chicago after the General Conference, they knew that the fight for Harrisburg would probably be renewed when the General Conference met four years later. They were right! This time, however, Central Pennsylvania was represented at the General Conference, meeting in Brooklyn in 1872, by some of its strongest preachers and spokesmen. Jacob S. McMurray led the attack to capture Harrisburg. He was tall, powerfully built, with quick black eyes, a stubborn mouth, and a shock of jet black hair. He was a ready speaker and possessed a humorous kind of sarcasm with which he often shattered his opponents in debate.

He came fully prepared to speak on a motion to "include Harrisburg" in the Central Pennsylvania Conference. Others supported McMurray; Stephen D. Brown of New York and Francis Hodgson, formerly of the Philadelphia, now of the Central Pennsylvania Conference. But Philadelphia was not to be bowled over. Their delegates had anticipated McMurray's move, and they were organized to oppose it.

Charles Albright, their first speaker, was a nationally known popular figure. A Union officer in the War Between the States, he had risen to the position of General. More recently he had achieved recognition in the press for quelling riots in the coal regions of his state. W.H. Elliot, a presiding elder, followed the General. An aggressive man, he was an able debater and a brilliant speaker, and he used every argument he could muster to answer the men from Central Pennsylvania.

Finally, like a football coach sending in his star quarterback at a critical stage of the game, Philadelphia put forth a man who at one time had been among the most outstanding men of the denomination. A noted orator, a former President of Dickinson College, a missionary secretary whose eloquent appeals has increased missionary giving in the denomination from \$100,000 to \$700,000, his name was John Price Durbin. But Durbin was old and worn – and it was generally known that he had decided to announce to the General Conference his retirement from his missionary position.

When Durbin finished speaking, Elliot of Philadelphia rose again to try a parliamentary maneuver. He moved table the matter. But his motion to table was defeated 117 to 68, and the original McMurray motion was adopted by a similar overwhelming majority. Harrisburg had been captured for Central Pennsylvania!

Appendix II – Political Corruption and the Real Cause of the Capitol Fire?

comments by the editor

passages from Silas Comfort Swallow's autobiographical *III Score & X*
comments by the editor

Rev. Silas Comfort Swallow (1839-1930) is considered by many to be the most prominent Methodist clergyperson ever to serve in central Pennsylvania. His Harrisburg service includes Ridge Avenue (1887-1892) and superintendent/editor at the Harrisburg Book Room (1892-1902). He was the 1904 Prohibition Party candidate for President of the United States. He was convinced that the 1897 fire which destroyed the capitol building was deliberately set by dishonest politicians covering their tracks – and he publicly made such accusations, for which he was later sued. The following pages from his autobiography give the gist of that story. A biographical sketch of Swallow appears in the 1974 *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*.

page 197 – We come now to February, 1897, and to a record of events and experiences wholly new to the author, as they have to deal with courts, legislators, judges, witnesses, verdicts, appeals and decisions. I had through my nearly sixty years, never sued nor been sued – had never appeared as a plaintiff, defendant, or witness.

My most convenient walk from my home on North Sixth Street to the Methodist Book Rooms, of which I had then been superintendent for five years, was through the State Capitol grounds, where I experienced extensive changes going on in both building and grounds. Daniel Hartman Hastings, named for a veteran Methodist preacher, had been elected Governor in 1894. He had appointed one to an important office in his cabinet, to be known here as Johnnie DeLancy, which was the signal for all sorts of changes – many of them utterly uncalled for in the estimation of thoughtful observers, and excusable only on the ground that the State was plethoric in cash, and the taxpayers needed further to be bled.

Four years before, \$125,000 had been spent on the House of Representatives, and now \$70,000 additional was put upon it. A rose house worth \$5000 cost nearly four times that amount. A flag pole for the Soldiers' Orphan School at Scotland, worth \$50, had cost nearly eight times that amount, and a private room at that school, well stocked with liquors at the public expense, was maintained where government officials drank to drunkenness and gambled for keeps. Granolithic pavements around the capital ground were costing two or three times their value. Expensive furniture slightly soiled was privately disposed of to favorite purchasers, I will not say how, and they divided the spoils with those who favored them. Other new furniture was receipted for the capitol, and then hauled to private houses. It cost \$200 to hang a picture and \$18 each for a large number of spittoons. Six men, political hangers-on, guarded one gallery door at \$6 a day each – or \$36 a day for guarding an unimportant hole in the wall. High salaries were being paid to subordinate officials, their duties being farmed out for one-third of what they themselves received, while they remained at their homes engaged in their own personal business. The pay rolls were padded at times with scores of party workers who were doing nothing for the State.

Taxpayers who had knowledge of the stealing congratulated themselves of the fact that about everything had been done, and every pretext exhausted, for grabbing the people's money. But alas, they did not know the depth of the villainy of the men into whose hands the government had fallen, for, on February 2nd, near the noon hour, the cry of fire was raised and soon the center building of the three was a mass of flames.

The odor of burning wood had been smelled and remarked upon for two days. The knowing ones suavely said, "Oh, it comes from the furnace." The fire was finally discovered over the Senate chamber, where the tell-tale books were stored, but the Senators sat undisturbed and then, amid jokes and laughter mingled with curses, adjourned on motion. One Senator more brave than the others had gone to the second floor, seized an axe, and chopped a whole in the surbase – which let in the air and thus expedited business. The alarm was sent in to the city fire department as to take it past the capital and five squares away – up to the Pennsylvania Railroad round-house. A fire had been kindled 125 feet away from the fire that burned the building in the basement of the extreme east wing – and as I proved by three witnesses, there was absolutely no connection between the two fires.

A few days after the fire we took four mechanics as witnesses, and about the time we gathered all the facts needed, Mr. DeLancy came and ordered us out on the pretense that our lives were danger. We offered to give bonds to indemnify the state against any claims for damages if Hastings and DeLancy would let us pursue our investigation. But though the application was frequently made, it was as often refused. A man claimed by them to be a fire expert was brought from Philadelphia, but instead of keeping him here to testify before the Senate Committee on the fire, before which I took my witnesses that very evening, the expert took an afternoon train to Philadelphia and DeLancy rushed into the afternoon papers to tell what would have been his testimony if he had remained – viz., that the fire came down a chimney. But we showed that the chimney was not in use and had been bricked shut just under the roof. Employees discharged in the ten years that have intervened have told their intimate friends that still other fires than the fatal one were kindled in other parts of the building. We could prove beyond a doubt that the fire was the work of an incendiary, but could not prove who the incendiary was.

The Grace Methodist Episcopal Church was rented for \$20,000 (it was used for five months) in which to house the most abandoned gang of lawmakers that ever disgraced a state. And this gang transferred their demijohns, euchre decks, and tobacco fumes to the house of God, the fixing up of which for their entrance had been done in four days and four nights at a cost to the state of nearly \$60,000. It will perhaps never be known how much of this was stolen and by whom. Certain it is that citizens of Harrisburg, and some of them Methodists at that, attempted and were caught in the grab. How many succeeded we know not. The chairman of the Legislative Committee on appropriations showed me a bill for \$2500, presented to pay for seats in the gallery of Grace Church. It was being lobbied not by the church trustees, but by citizens of Harrisburg who certified to its correctness. But the seats were [already] in the gallery and are there yet. Two days after I was shown the bill, I exposed the fraud to the daily papers and it was withdrawn under the pretense of amending it – but it was never heard of after.

As indicated by the newspaper account in Appendix III, Swallow was actually incarcerated for a while for refusing to divulge his sources and refusing to cooperate with the official "investigation." While he was originally convicted of criminal libel against J.V. DeLancy and Representative W.F. Steward, that conviction was later overturned by a state appeals court which ruled that citizens have the right to criticize state officials. Nominated by the Prohibition Party and endorsed by the Honest Government Party and John Wanamaker supporters who bolted the Republican ticket, Swallow ran for Governor Pennsylvania in 1898 and garnered 133,000 (13.7%) votes. The truth behind the capitol fire remains a mystery to this day.

Appendix III – Post-Fire Fireworks

clipped from the Harrisburg Daily Independent, April 6, 1897, page 1.

Rev. Dr. Silas C. Swallow appeared before the bar of the senate this morning to purge himself of contempt in not answering questions asked him by the committee that investigated the cause of the state capitol fire. Mr. Swallow was brought before the bar of the senate by Sergeant-at-Arms Eyre.

Senator McCarrell, the president pro tem., who occupied the chair, addressing Dr. Swallow, said: "The senate has been informed that you declined to give the names of the persons on whose information you wrote the article in the 'Pennsylvania Methodist.' I now ask you whether you are willing to furnish the names of these persons?"

James A. Stranahan, Dr. Swallow's counsel, was present, but in his behalf and for the prisoner, Senator Gobin, of Lebanon, said: "When Dr. Swallow was subpoenaed to appear before the committee, several cases were pending against him in court, and he believed that to divulge the names of his informants would be to prejudice his case. He therefore refused to answer the questions. One of these cases has not yet been tried, but Dr. Swallow is willing to go before the committee and testify and have his informants testify. He does not desire to be held in contempt, and he purges himself of all contempt by agreeing to testify."

The chair asked Dr. Swallow if he was willing to assent to the statement made by Mr. Gobin. The answer was in the affirmative.

At this point Senator Walton, of Greene, presented a resolution which stated that in purging himself of contempt Dr. Swallow state whether he is willing to appear before the committee and answer the questions propounded and that if he refused to so testify that he be recommitted to the custody of the sergeant-at-arms, and that he be kept in the Dauphin county prison until he answers the questions.

Mr. Grady moved to strike out so much of the resolution as had been embodied in the statement made by Mr. Gobin in behalf of Dr. Swallow. To this Mr. Walton vigorously objected. He said that his resolution should have been read before any statement had been made. "This prisoner," he continued, "has been adjudged guilty of contempt of the rights and privileges of this body. We must protect ourselves and thereby our constituents. I do not wish to persecute or punish the prisoner. Far from it, but we should make the legislative record perfect. This resolution, if adopted, should be placed first in these proceedings.

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Mr. Grady stated that in presenting the resolution he merely wished to have it conform with the proceedings. However, Mr. Gobin said he could see no sense in passing the resolution. "What we have sought to do," he declared, "has been accomplished. Inasmuch as Dr. Swallow has agreed to testify, I move to further amend the resolution of Mr. Walton by moving that Dr. Swallow be discharged from the custody of the sergeant-at-arms."

"I will not vote for this amendment," asserted Mr. Grady. "Dr. Swallow is in contempt, pure and simple. He has not purged himself, but he says he will go before the committee and do so. We must not back down. If we do our power in this direction will have been ended."

Then for nearly three-quarters of an hour the lawyers in the senate tried to determine whether Dr. Swallow was still in contempt, and whether he had really been in the custody of the sergeant-at-arms. No agreement was reached on this point, and, after a deal of talking, a vote was taken on Mr. Gobin's motion to discharge Dr. Swallow from the custody of the sergeant-at-arms. The motion was defeated by a vote of 20 to 27, the members voting as follows:

Yeas—Messrs. Cochran, Crawford, Crouse, Eby, Flinn, Gobin, Haines, Hardenbergh, Hertzler, Hummel, Hyde, Kauffman, Losch, Magee, Miller, McCarrell, Rowland, Scott, Stiles and White.—Total, 20.

Nays—Messrs. Andrews, Becker, Brown, of Philadelphia; Brown, of Westmoreland; Chisholm, Critchfield, Durham, Gibson, Grady, Heller, Kennedy, McQuown, Meredith, Merrick, Milleisen, Mitchell, of Jefferson; Moyer, Osbourn, Saylor, Shortt, Snyder, Sproul, Stine-man, Thomas, Vare, Vaughan and Walton.—Total, 27.

Mr. Grady withdrew his amendment, but Mr. White moved to amend the Walton resolution by striking out the words "that he be confined in the Dauphin county jail." This amendment was defeated by a vote of 23 to 23, and the original resolution was adopted by a viva voce vote.

Mr. Walton thereupon moved to place the resolution first in the day's proceedings. This was agreed to. This ended the proceedings, and the couple of hundred lookers-on left the chamber in a hurry.

Appendix IV – The Philadelphia Conference Journal

passages regarding Curtin Heights and/or Harrisburg East End [Epworth]

1891,67 – The conference year was not far advanced, when a chapel called “Curtin Heights” was dedicated, located within our bounds, but with the stipulation in deed and charter that it was never to belong to any other Conference than that to which the city of Harrisburg may be attached. The following attested copy from the records of the Bishops, dated November 29, 1890, contains information which this conference ought to have, to wit: “The Bishops having received communications with respect to the ‘Curtin Heights’ or ‘Schudemadgeville’ chapel, from Rev. Mr. Pardoe, a Presiding Elder of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, and Rev. Mr. Hargis, a Presiding Elder of the Philadelphia Conference, agree in the following statements, and request the Secretary to forward a copy thereof to the brethren above named:

“First – The provision of the deed whereby this property is forever connected with the Central Pennsylvania Conference is not according to the disciplinary provision concerning deeds, and may become a source of great future embarrassment in the event of the possible division of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, in such a way that the city of Harrisburg might fall within two conferences.

“Second – The Bishops have no right to modify the boundaries of Conferences, or to violate them in our administration.

“Third – We advise the parties in the interest to adjust their difference as prescribed in the discipline, by joint commission, or by referring to the ensuing General Conference; and meantime that they observe existing boundaries, which place this chapel within the jurisdiction of the Philadelphia Conference.”

On receipt of this official communication, I wrote to Rev. Mr. Pardoe, presiding elder of the Harrisburg District, this fraternal note: “In pursuance of advices from the Board of Bishops, which have doubtless reached you also, permit me to suggest an interview on Thursday the 11th December, any afternoon hour suited to your convenience, and wherever you may designate in Harrisburg.”

The Conference may be assured that down to the present hour I have been left awaiting a reply, with brotherly love, and since another organization, similarly situated, has been effected in the so-called “East End,” I shall ask the Presiding elder to recognize “Curtin Heights” and “East End” as on the list of appointments for the West Philadelphia District.

1892,44 – To the Philadelphia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in session at Philadelphia, March 9-16, 1892.

Greetings – The Central Pennsylvania Conference will ask the General Conference at Omaha, Nebraska, in May, 1892, to put Curtin Heights and Epworth Chapel in its Territory.

Edward G. Andrews, President

David S. Monroe, Secretary