

## SAINT PAUL BAPTIST CHURCH 1891

On the southwest corner of Bannard and Bellview Streets in East Riverton there is a building which is well-known to the citizens of the Tri-Boro area as Saint Paul Baptist Church. Since its earliest days the members of Saint Paul have come to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth. No finer thing can be said of any congregation. In order to properly understand what this church has meant to the people in the past, means to them now, and will continue to mean to them in the future, it is necessary to look beyond the building, into the heart and history of the church and examine how it came to be, and trace some of the events that have transpired from the early days to the here and now.

The earliest date of organization that can be placed on Saint Paul is 1891. This was the year in which the first organizational meetings were held in the home of Mr. Samuel Wade at Wrightsville. This same Mr. Wade, incidentally, remained a loyal and diligent worker until his passing on to glory in 1902, having not lived to see the church settled in its own building.

Among the early names associated with the founding of the church are those of Mr. John Taylor, William Gabbons, Adam Edgerton, all the members of Samuel Wade's family and Mr. Joseph Johnson.

The first minister to the congregation was the Rev. John Robinson of Virginia, who helped guide the founding fathers in 1891 as they set themselves to the labor of establishing a church.

For a time, the meetings were held in the A.M.E. Church in West Palmyra. Subsequently, and for a relatively brief period of time, the members gathered for worship at Joyce Hall.

Even though the records of the first ten or twelve years are somewhat sketchy, it is clear that the people were not lacking in zeal either in the service of the Lord nor in the practicality of finding and funding a place of worship.

Through the diligence they brought to the undertaking, and the grace of God, the lot on which the church now stands was purchased in 1904. This was made possible by a successful Building Fund which was kept active and enabled the congregation to construct the brick building that became their first church home. It was completed in the year 1905, and the cost for its construction is recorded at \$3,000.

Among those who labored long and with determination to bring to pass those things which God would have done in His name was Mr. John O. Poindexter. While Mr. Poindexter is not, in years, the oldest member now active at Saint Paul, he has the distinction of being the person who has been a member for the greatest number of years. Mr. Poindexter came to the church on Profession of Faith from Christian Experience from Louisa County, Virginia. He became a member of the church family on January 15, 1907, just two years after the first building was completed, and is still active today.

Listing Mr. Poindexter's activities over the past 69 years is almost like writing a history of the development of the different programs. He has served in so many capacities and is currently the Trustee of the Usher Board, an activity that has always been one of his favorite concerns.

Saint Paul is indeed a church of people. The oldest member of the church in actual years is Mrs. Theresa Mansfield. Mrs. Mansfield, who is the sister of Mr. Poindexter, is in her middle nineties, but she still comes to services and worships with the congregation as has been her custom for many years.

Mrs. Hattie Britt, who recently retired as a public school teacher of Mt. Laurel Township and who was honored for 50 years of service as teacher as well as principal, is one of the unique members. A school in Mt. Laurel, The Hattie Britt Elementary School, was named in her honor.

Mrs. Mary Garnett Morton, who will reach her ninetieth birthday this year, came to the fellowship of Saint Paul in 1914 on transfer of letter from the New Liberty Baptist Church, Caroline County, Virginia. She has been extremely active in many groups. She has served as a Deaconess and has put much time and interest into a program known as "The Willing Workers" who have as their aim and major concern devising and seeking out ways to involve as many hands as possible in the every day work of the church. She has served in the pastor's aid group and been a contributor to the Sunday School in various ways.

While these members were among the "young" people of Saint Paul, exciting things were going on. For instance, as the numbers increased, the building clearly became too

small to meet the demands placed on it. A Building Fund Drive got under way and the addition of a second story to the existing facility was begun in 1921. It was completed in 1922 and allowed the members more space for their expanding activities.

The Christian Education Department at Saint Paul has always been placed high on the priority list by its congregation. Mrs. Helen Skinner, now a member of the U.A.M.E. Church, remembered back to the days when she went to Saint Paul. She recalls going there as a little girl and receiving her Christian education in the Sunday School. Her mother, Mrs. Phobe Allen, was a charter member of St. Paul. According to Mrs. Skinner's recollection, when she first came to Saint Paul, around 1919, the Rev. Foster was serving as Pastor. There were wonderful times of fellowship as well as study, and the Church Picnic was something everyone looked to with eager anticipation.

No less emphasis is placed on Christian Education today. There is a group of youngsters, ranging in age from eight through twelve, who meet on Tuesday and are guided in their Bible Study by Mrs. Thelma Bracy. The 1976 Sunday School Superintendent is Kaven Garnett.

The Pastor, the Rev. Alvin A. Jackson, came to the Church on January 1, 1950, from the First African Church, Sixteenth and Christian Streets, in Philadelphia, and has been ministering to the church continually ever since. On the first Monday of every month he meets with a group of high school students for a "Rap Session" sort of meeting. They speak together of the issues that confront young and the not-so-young people in today's fast-paced and ever-changing world and try to find the answers in the Scriptures and in the enlightenment of past Christian experiences.

Saint Paul has always felt it was part of the Christian's job to reach out into the community and offer himself and his abilities to his friends and neighbors, striving to enrich and improve the lives of all God's children. With this in mind, one of the pastors at Saint Paul, the Rev. Madison A. Bowe, was instrumental in the organization of the Civic League of East Riverton. Out of this organization, a Civic Center came into being and still stands where it was originally constructed on James Street.

Inside the church, the beauty of the stained glass windows lend to the feeling of being in a place where reverence is all around. These windows were bought and installed in the church during the nineteen twenties and were paid for by Family Subscriptions. Some were bought in memory of loved ones, others as gifts of love to the congregation and expressions of thankfulness for God's grace.

The music of Saint Paul has been a joy to all who have had the wonderful experience of hearing the voices of the choir raised in hymns and anthems to the glory of the Lord. Mr. Walter Henry Moss, Jr., is the organist and choir master at the church, and the congregation is now blessed with a new organ which was purchased in 1975.

The Sanctuary Choir has concertized throughout the Central Northeastern seaboard of the United States. This is one of the ways through the ministry of music, that Saint Paul has served as a strong witness for the Lord Jesus Christ.

At one time Saint Paul was seen to be rather narrow with regard to denomination lines, but now they freely and warmly embrace the total family of God with all who believe in the total unity of the Body of Christ.

The church clearly has made great advancements from its early obscurity to become a spiritual organization that has changed the minds and subsequently the lives of the community of East Riverton, and many beyond those limits also, who have felt the loving warmth and concern of its people as they met in business, social and civic endeavors.

For the past sixteen years, Saint Paul has been one of the churches honored as the "Church of the Month" and services have been broadcast over radio station WCAM from 11 A.M. until noon.

Having looked at the past and seen the work that began with only a few Christian folk who felt themselves led by God to join together and form a church, having watched the progress as year followed year and dedication increased to fulfill the needs of an ever-expanding church and community, people are grateful for the existence of Saint Paul, where true Christian fellowship is offered to all.

The fact that Saint Paul has been a force for the good in the past sets our mind surely in the belief that it will continue to do, in the years to come, the same job of bringing God's Kingdom nearer to us all.

St Paul Baptist Church  
E. RiverTon, N.J.

