

CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH OF RIVERTON AND PALMYRA, NEW JERSEY 1885

By 1885, the sleepy little towns along the river, once given over to only a few families who farmed the land, had begun to thrive and expand. The railroad had come to town and the steamboats also served as transportation from Philadelphia to New Jersey and on to the neighboring towns up river. As the population increased, the need for churches kept pace. Among the denominations who found themselves inclined to build and establish a congregation were the Baptists.

The Baptists were not newcomers to America. Indeed the first Baptist Church in America was founded by Roger Williams, a graduate of Cambridge University in England, who later became a Christian Minister in Salem, Mass. He was banished from the Colony because of his belief and teachings concerning religious liberty. He established the first local government in Providence, Rhode Island, whose cornerstone was religious liberty. In the charter were the words: "There shall be freedom from molestation, punishment or being called for any difference of opinion in matters of religion."

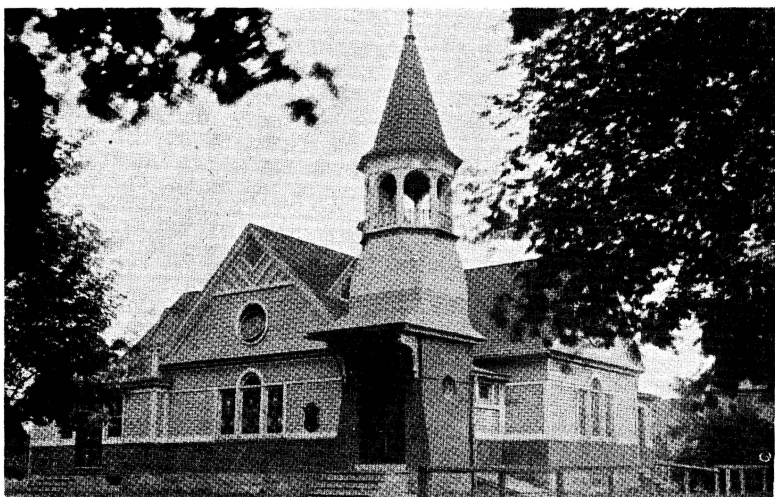
But in the Tri-Boro area there was no Baptist Church and the Baptists in the area felt the time had come to remedy this. On November 4, 1885, a group of believers met in the home of Mrs. Sidney Wilkinson, of Riverton. Their expressed desire was to establish a church of their own faith and order. The Baptist missionary for the State of New Jersey was the Rev. S. C. Dare. Under his guidance the matter was considered, and the brethren voted unanimously to call the new church "The Central Baptist Church of Riverton and Palmyra." It was constituted by twelve members — four men and eight women. Eleven came by letter of dismission from other churches and one was received in membership on revelation of his Christian experience.

On Sunday morning, they came together for worship services in the Riverton school house. The homes of the members were used for weekly prayer meetings which were followed by business meetings.

Mr. J. E. Sagebeer was a student at Crozier Theological Seminary, Chester, Pennsylvania, when he was called to be pastor for one year. He took the pastorate on December 23, 1885, and his salary was set at \$5 for each Sabbath.

1886 was an extremely eventful one for the fledgling church. In February, Mr. Joseph Morgan very generously donated to the congregation a 75 by 200 foot lot, located on the east corner of Maple and Fifth Street. Four months later, in June of that same year, a contract was given out for the erection of a chapel, the cost of which was set at \$2,800. The following month, in July, Central Baptist Church was formally recognized as a regular and independent Baptist Church at a Church Council attended by delegates from nineteen churches.

The new church was welcomed into the West Jersey Baptist Association on September 14, 1886.



"Central Baptist Church circa 1895."

In October, 1886, Mr. Sagebeer resigned as Pastor.

The first service in the newly-constructed chapel took place in February of 1887 and on July 12, 1887, the Rev. F. T. Firor was called as Pastor. The records show that his salary was \$700 per annum, \$200 of which was supplied from the funds of the New Jersey Baptist Convention.

Central Baptist Church was not the exception that proves the rule where financial matters were concerned. Her early years were difficult, and with some frequency the Treasurer concluded his monthly report with the words: "Leaving the Treasury Over-drawn." Frugality was the order of the day. The church sexton, for example, received \$52 a year in salary and the organ pumper, the not quite princely sum of \$12 annually. In 1892, the yearly collection for foreign missions came to \$5.53.

However, in numbers and effect, the church grew steadily. Pastor Firor, who came to serve in 1887, gave over the pulpit to the Rev. C. S. Powelson in 1889. Pastor Powelson stayed at Central Baptist until 1892. When he went on to his next calling he left behind a church which, after only a five year period, counted her membership at 95 and had a Sunday School enrollment of 138, proof positive of the results of the hard work and sincere witness of the congregation and their pastors.

In February of 1892, the Rev. Isaac D. Moore began a pastorate which lasted for four and a half years. In June of that same year the Men's Bible Class initiated a fund earmarked for use in the enlargement of the church and Sunday School facilities. During the next four and half years, while Rev. Moore ministered to the church the chapel was enlarged. The bill for the enlargement is recorded as amounting to \$2,278, and the church records show that the job took seventy-two working days. While the construction was going on, the congregation was invited to worship with their brethren at the Epworth Methodist Church.

Special meetings were held in the newly-enlarged chapel to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the church. The work of the Lord was being done. His House was growing, the witness and the work of the Baptists were continuing with fervor and faithfulness.

The Rev. Levi H. Copeland came to Central Baptist on January 24, 1898. He remained with the congregation for eight years. Changes took place during these years. Monthly meetings were discontinued in favor of a quarterly business meeting. Still another change was the adoption of individual communion cups.

When Rev. Levi left to accept another call, his successor was the Rev. George A. Sowell. His ministry was fruitful and rewarding, but was cut short by his death, the result of a tragic trolley accident at Broad Street and Morgan Avenue on August 14, 1907. Both the congregation of Central Baptist and the community at large mourned his untimely death.

Two short pastorates followed, with the Rev. William H. Clipman serving for one year and the Rev. Samuel Steinmetz for two years.

For the next twelve and a half years, the church was ministered to by the Rev. Charles W. Williams. He had been called from Palmer, Massachusetts, and during his long stay many changes were to take place. The church rolls increased under his leadership to 332 members. Not only did the numbers increase, but so did the activity within the church. Another significant forward step was the acquisition of what was called the "Roberts property" at 520 Elm Street. This home served as the parsonage.

1920 is another year that stands out in the history of Central Baptist. It was the year in which the church adopted its share of the New World Mission Movement within the larger framework of the Northern Baptist Convention. The church pledged to raise \$28,036 over a five year period to help build a better world through effective Christian Missionary service.

All the while the church continued growing and as its rolls were increasing the idea of building a new church began to take hold and be considered. With this in mind, the corner lot at Elm Avenue and Fifth Street was purchased in 1924. The deed shows the purchase price to have been \$2,000. The Rev. Frederick Blazer became pastor on January 4, 1925, but his time with the congregation was very brief. He died, in the church, on October 10th of the same year, but not without knowing that the interest in constructing a new church was becoming more and more a matter of discussion and hopeful consideration.

There was a newly-constructed Baptist Church in Ardmore, Pennsylvania. It was architecturally pleasing, and the hope was to design the new facility for Central Baptist in the same fashion. However, the practicalities of the undertaking had to be considered so it was agreed that construction would not commence until \$25,000 had been raised to be applied toward the project.

It is interesting to note that on January 18, 1926, the beginning of what was destined to be the longest pastorate in the annals of Central Baptist Church was instituted. The Rev. George Lockett came to the church from the New Berean Baptist Church of Philadelphia and served at Central for fifteen years.

The building fund for the construction of the new church continued to accumulate and, on May 13, 1928, the ground breaking ceremony took place. Mrs. Sarah Wiggins, who at that time was the oldest member of the congregation, was given the honor of handling the spade that turned over the first shovel full of dirt that announced the start of the project to raise a new church and to make alterations in the existing building to provide more adequate Sunday School facilities. The amount stipulated to accomplish this end was \$80,000. The cornerstone was put down on Sunday, July 8th, and once again Central Baptist was a congregation displaced by a construction program. This problem, however, was quickly and easily solved. The local P.O.S.A. Hall was put to use for both worship services and Sunday School. While hammer and saws were working away at building and renovating, the congregation continued to come together for spiritual renewal and friendship.

When the dedication service was held for the new church on March 17, 1929, the congregation, their friends and neighbors rejoiced greatly. A beautiful new house of worship had been completed. The work of the brethren, the generosity of spirit, the dedication and the willingness to share their worldly goods in order to provide a building where the work of the Lord could go on and be expanded to include the growing population, had proven once again that God worked his wondrous ways. God led, man followed, His will was done.

The mortgage on the new church was \$55,000. No one could foresee the coming stock market crash. Within only a few months, the economic disaster broke upon our nation and the years of the great depression pressed down on the populace. Now came the days of plodding ahead a small step at a time — retrenching, cutting back, struggling along became the pattern of life. But, in matters of the spirit, the church forged ahead, under the leadership of Pastor Lockett, believing always that "God would remain faithful." The burden of the heavy mortgage was slowly but continuously reduced.

Rev. Lockett died in service of the Lord on May 14, 1941. The Nations of the World were once again facing one another over firing lines and the bombing of Pearl Harbor was barely six months in the future. Many young men and women from Central Baptist heard their country's call and entered into military service. The prayers of the church followed them and their comrades to the far corners of the earth. A Liaison Committee was set up. Their aim was to establish and maintain frequent correspondence with those in the Service, telling them of the activities of the church in their absence, speaking of those things that were going on at home, and making them continually aware of the fact that no matter where the battle took them, the prayers of the people were being continually offered on their behalf.

Just six days before the bombing of Pearl Harbor — on December 1, 1941 — the Rev. S. Dan Morgan took the pulpit at Central Baptist. He came to the church from The First Baptist Church of Pedricktown, and one of the results of his arrival was a renewed interest in freeing the church from the encumbrance of its indebtedness. A Victory Club was organized. This was made up of church families working for the eventual liquidation of the mortgage. It took some time and a lot of hard work but it did come to pass, and with all due ceremony and great thankfulness, the mortgage on Central Baptist Church was burned on Sunday, November 21, 1948.

Miss Hattie E. Benner was one of the most faithful members of the congregation. She served as a Sunday School teacher, with deep love and concern, for many years. She passed away on March 21st, 1946, leaving behind, in her will, a gift of funds that made it possible for a new parsonage to be built. This beautiful home, built at a cost of \$22,832 stands on the corner of Elm Avenue and Fifth Street.

Pastor Morgan resigned on April 25, 1953, in order to accept the position of Pastor-Superintendent of the newly-organized Baptist home of South Jersey, located at 303 Bank Avenue in Riverton. The new parsonage was dedicated on Sunday, February 14, 1954, and an "Open House" was one of the events scheduled for that day. This enabled everyone to see the new house and also admire the changes made in the old parsonage that had been undertaken to make it suitable for use as a Sunday School Annex.

Local people often refer to Central Baptist Church as the "Church with the Chimes." It was a gift which the will of Mrs. Thomas C. VanOsten made possible. This electronic Schulermerich Carillon was dedicated on Palm Sunday, April 3, 1955, in loving memory of Mr. and Mrs. VanOsten. Since that day, Christian hymns have been broadcast to the community twice a day from the church tower.

The church observed its 75th anniversary in 1960. The Pastor at that time was the Rev. Lloyd P. Frederick. In a brief history, put together for this milestone, these words appear: "We have received a noble heritage and we thank God for it. Let us hold high the torch that has passed on down to us, confident that He who is the 'same yesterday, today and forever' shall strengthen both hand and heart as we seek to obey His great commission: Go . . . make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

Sixteen years have passed since Central Baptist Church celebrated its 75th Anniversary, and ninety-one years have come and gone since the church was constituted with a membership of 12 people. On Sunday mornings and again in the evenings, during mid-week services and on those days and nights when some activity is scheduled, cars and bikes fill the parking area where once horses and buggies stood, patiently waiting for the worshipers. Electric lights have replaced lanterns — winter temperatures are now kept at an even level by central heating, and new hymns and anthems have been added to the traditional music that the Baptists have long sung with great joy and enthusiasm.

The Church Rolls in 1976 include 491 members. The Sunday School Department, superintended by Mrs. Elouise Gerstmyer, has an enrollment of 150 boys and 225 girls, making a total of 375 young people. The Rev. Dr. John A. Holt is the present pastor. These changes are in numbers, conditions and physical fact. Now, as in the past, and on into the future, the "Friendly Church with the chimes" shows to all who enter in that the words of the traditional call to worship and the response of the people still lie at the center of the lives and hearts of Christians who seek the Lord and strive to do His will. "I was glad when they said to me . . . Let us go into the house of the Lord . . . Enter into His gates with Thanksgiving and into His courts with praise . . . be thankful to Him and bless His name . . . for the Lord is good and His mercy endureth to all generations."

THE BAPTIST HOME OF SOUTH JERSEY 1952

The Baptist Home of South Jersey, which has come to be a well-known landmark of this area, is located at 303 Bank Street in Riverton. It faces the Delaware River, and the view from the large porches is unobstructed and peaceful.

The Home came into existence through the hopes, dreams, and action of Miss Mary Leverich. During her lifetime she had expressed many times her desire to see such a facility, to aid older Baptist people, become a reality.

After the death of Miss Leverich on August 17th, 1951, it was determined that the bulk of her estate had been consigned to this concern. A meeting of twenty-seven members of the Camden Baptist Association was held on February 25th, 1952. The host church was the Central Baptist Church of Palmyra. The Reverend S. Dan Morgan acted as Moderator, and subsequently Pastor Morgan became the first Superintendent. The first order of business was to form a committee which would investigate whether it would be better to construct a new facility or purchase an existing building. It developed, after looking into the matter, that the wiser course would be to buy a building already in existence. At the first formal meeting held on July 2nd, 1952, at the Haddonfield Baptist Church, it was decided that the Home was to be known by the name "The Baptist Home of South Jersey."

Various properties were offered and inspections were made. Authorization was given for an offer of \$32,500 for a house and a carriage house, plus an additional \$5,000 for an adjacent lot. The property under consideration also allowed room for future expansion. Thus, the present property was acquired.

The needful formalities were carried forth. It was voted the Superintendent of the Home was to be an ordained Baptist Minister. Approval of the New Jersey Department of Institutions and Agencies was requested and granted. Mr. George Von Uffel was selected as the architect who would design and oversee what structural changes had to be made. Primary actions were taken regarding the acceptance of those who would be the residents of the Home. Repairs to the river wall were authorized. A contract was signed with the Van Sciver Company for furnishings. Discussions concerning an Auxiliary to the Home took place, and such an Auxiliary was organized in November, 1953, with seventy-five present at the organizational meeting. On October 1st, 1953, the State of New Jersey gave its authorization to operate the Home.

The actual opening of the Home took place on March 10th, 1954 — a brief two years and one month from the time of the first organizational meeting.

In July of that year, area churches were asked to embark on a three-month trial period of having Sunday services at the Home, and this proved a great blessing to all who participated.

The dedication service of the Home took place on Saturday, October 2nd, 1954.



"The Baptist Home along the River in 1976."

The growth of the Home and the expansion required by changing times have required the Home to make many changes and additions over the years. A new and larger infirmary has been added, as has a new chapel. The needs keep cropping up, and the people associated with this Home keep meeting them with alacrity and enthusiasm.

It would not be possible to list all the names of the contributors to the Home. Some that come most readily to mind are those of the Superintendents who have served with such faithfulness and loving kindness, beginning with the Reverend S. Dan Morgan, continuing with Reverend John B. Peterson, Reverend George E. Heggen, and Reverend Edward A. Elliot who began his service in October of 1964 and is still filling the post of Superintendent.

The medical needs of the residents have been tended to by Dr. Dean LeFevor, who was the first. He was followed by John Voss, who—until ill health required his resignation from the post—attended to the health care of the residents. Dr. Ernesto Trinidad was recommended to the post and is still serving. Dr. Joslyn Williams, a surgeon chiropodist, volunteered to work for the patients in May of 1961, as a contribution of Christian care, and has continued to do so to this date.

So much has transpired within the spacious rooms of the Home, so much consideration and physical, as well as spiritual, love and concern, has been shown between residents, volunteers, office personnel, and all those connected in any way. There have been many, many "firsts" . . . Christmases, services in the new chapel, even a first wedding between residents which took place on September 17th, 1974, when Miss Esther Yerkes and Mr. Joseph Ellis were joined in the Holy Bonds of Matrimony.

This work has been blessed and proved itself to be a blessing. Miss Leverich would surely be happy to know her dream did indeed become a reality.

Central Baptist Church
Palmyra, N.J.

