

## CALVARY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

1874

In the early days Riverton, with its few farming families scattered along the river bank, could hardly be called more than a village. It actually became a community known by the name of Riverton in 1851 when a home was constructed by a gentleman named Daniel L. Miller. In that same year he and eight other men — Caleb Clothier, Robert Biddle, Dillwyn Parrish, William C. Biddle, William D. Parrish, J. Miller McKim, James Clothier and Rodney Wharton, purchased a tract of land from Joseph Lippincott, laid it out and drew lots for locations on which to build their homes.

The Riverton Improvement Company was created a corporation by the State of New Jersey and approved in 1852. At this time there was virtually no connection with Philadelphia by rail. The only facility in this line was a platform built on the property of a local resident by the name of Dreer. This platform, in the vicinity of what is now Fulton Street, served merely as a flag-down spot. Since better and more reliable transportation to and from the city was badly needed, the citizens of Riverton got together and built a wharf. They rented a steamboat, the "Wave," a seventy-five foot sidewheeler, and arranged for several regularly scheduled trips to and from Philadelphia each day.

Later on, in an effort to make the big city and the now thriving community even more accessible to one another, these same farsighted citizens built a house and a station. They presented these to the Pennsylvania Railroad, thereby assuring themselves and those still to come of an adequate railroad facility.

To everything there is a time and, in His own time, the Lord makes his presence known to those who seek to do His work on earth. So it was that on a cold and blustery evening in the month of February, 1874, a meeting was held in the home of one Lemuel H. Davis. In attendance were the Reverend H. L. Hofford, Misses Leavitt and Campbell, Mr. Davis and his son. They came together to discuss the advisability of establishing a Presbyterian Church in the steadily expanding community.

After prayerfully and earnestly deliberating the matter and comparing their views, it was decided that the time had come for such action to be taken. The first steps were more in the nature of an exploration into the practicality of the situation. It was decided that a few meetings for religious worship would be held in the public school building to make a firmer determination of the route that should be followed.

The first of these meetings was held on Sunday evening, February 15, 1874, with the Reverend Hofford officiating. The attendance and the enthusiasm voiced by those who came was sufficient to persuade Mr. Hofford and his fellow Presbyterians that not only was it their hope but indeed their duty to provide for the continuance and expansion of ministering to the spiritual need of the community. On July 18, 1874, the "congregation" agreed unanimously that they wished to become a church, formally organized and duly chartered.

A Certificate of Incorporation, complying with the laws of the State of New Jersey, and dated August 13, 1874, was recorded. It stated that the Trustees had been elected and declared to be a Board. The names were shown as being Joseph Campbell, Charles Leavitt, Louis Ourt, William P. Dreer, John Fraser, and Lemuel H. Davis. In a subsequent meeting, Mr. Dreer was chosen as Secretary and Mr. Campbell, Treasurer.

Formally organized and working under the guiding hand of the Reverend Hofford, aided and abetted by other clergymen from the area and with the supporting help and concern of sister churches of surrounding communities, worship services continued until 1876 when Reverend Hofford left for another calling.

In January, 1877, the Reverend J. R. Sanson was called to the charge of the congregation, and on October 11th, the organization was recognized and accepted into the Monmouth County Presbytery.

Within a month of their acceptance into the Presbytery, the members of the infant church had set themselves to the task of organizing what was then called "The Sabbath School of Calvary Presbyterian Church, Riverton, N.J." The minutes of the Session, dated November 5, 1877, and signed by the Moderator, J. R. Sanson, state that the officers elected to operate the Sabbath School were Charles W. Leavitt, Superintendent; William Gardiner, Assistant Superintendent; Willard Grant, Secretary; and Lewis Ourt, Treasurer. (These same minutes also state that on Sunday, November 4, 1877, Mr. Ourt was inducted into the office of ruling elder, making him the first ruling elder elected by Calvary Presbyterian.)

No record has been found of the number of "scholars" enrolled on that date in 1877, but the Tabular Statement sent to the Presbytery of Monmouth, dated April 10, 1878,

reports that the rolls included twenty communicant members, six Sabbath School officers and teachers and fifty scholars.

Much effort was expended and after some success and some reverses, the Trustees were able to report that a subscription figure had been reached which would justify the purchase of a lot and contracting for the construction of a building. This work was authorized and directed to take place by a meeting of the Trustees on June 21, 1878.

The design for the building, along with construction specifications, were drawn up by Mr. John Fraser, Architect, and presented to the Trustees at no charge. The contract for the actual construction was let to the James Wilson Co., Builders, of Burlington, New Jersey, and the lot, located at the northwest corner of Fourth and Lippincott Avenue, was purchased from Edward Lippincott for the sum of \$600. Mr. Lippincott also donated \$450 to the Board as a gift of Christian love at the time of the purchase.

The dedication of the new church took place on July 2, 1879. The building, as it then stood, was large enough to comfortably accommodate three hundred and sixty people and had been completed at a cost of \$8,000. It was a frame structure, attractive though rather simple in design, and could certainly be seen as a symbol of what the dedication and determination of a tiny group, comprised of only twelve in numbers in 1877, could bring to pass with the help and guidance of the Lord and their fellow Christians.



**"Calvary Presbyterian Church, Rectory and Chapel about 1898."**

While the years were passing and the work of the church was going forward, the women of Calvary Presbyterian were busily at work, lending their time and talents in many areas of Christian endeavor. Over the years they have been set up in various ways, under several different names, but a search of the minutes from 1905-1917, reveal that a group called the "Girl's Club" in their earliest days, changed their name to the "Golden Hour Club" in 1905. The projects of the Golden Hour Club seem to have been physical culture and literary meetings and sewing. To raise money for a building fund of the church, one of their undertakings was collecting, cutting and sewing rags to be made into rugs which would then be sold and the proceeds put into the building fund. They held a bazaar each December, with the net proceeds averaging about \$200. This money was donated to various church projects. Each November a missionary box valued at approximately \$50 was packed. During these years there was also a Missionary Society working within the church.

The original building served the congregation well and within its walls the Lord's work was faithfully and joyfully carried on. However, as the congregation grew in numbers, it became all too obvious that the structure was not truly adequate to meet the needs of its present and projected membership. The time had come when action had to

be taken to expand and make improvements. A meeting was called for April 1, 1925, and it was agreed that the congregation would proceed with this work. The improvements were not to exceed an expenditure of more than \$3,000, but scarcely a month later, the amount committed had been doubled and a new ceiling of \$12,000 was set. Within still another month, Mr. George T. Dold, President of the Board of Trustees, presented a set of rather ambitious plans for a new church building, and after due consideration, these received favorable attention.

Eight months later the congregation voted to proceed with the erection of a Sunday School building, as well as a program to remodel the existing church. This time the figure named was \$55,000. This figure remained a working number for exactly three months. Again the ceiling was elevated and the new amount put forth was \$75,000. By May of 1926, seventy-five percent of this sum had been pledged!

The contract for the new church building was given out on July 13, 1926. Nearly fourteen months passed before the work was completed, and during that time the congregation met in the Riverton Porch Club while Sunday School was once more held in the Riverton Public School.

The new building cost, at its completion, \$75,000. Its stone tower reached toward the sky, bearing visible testimony to all who saw it that here was the evidence of what the courage and conviction of a congregation, not vast in numbers, but strong in the faith, committed to building a church that would reflect to all who had eyes to see the real and tangible beauty of a place of worship, a House of the Lord.

The new facility was used to great advantage and a 15 classroom Sunday School building was added in 1952. This same addition was fully renovated in 1975 at a cost of \$25,000. The Sunday School program, superintended by Mr. Harry P. Landis from 1927 until 1942, was well attended. Currently Mr. Hugh MacDonald is superintendent. The music program enhanced the worship service and provided much opportunity for those whose talent lay in the "ministry of song." Mrs. Mary Fenwick is currently the organist and choir director. New projects were instituted and among these was the Semper Fidelis Bible Class, whose purpose was to bring together the older women of the church to study God's word and fellowship one with the other. This class, which was disbanded in 1959, worked as well as studied, and one of the beneficiaries of their fund raising efforts was the Burlington Home.

One aspect of life at Calvary Presbyterian Church was the "Good Fellowship Club." This was not truly a church group in the purest sense of the word, but the rules adopted at its inception do state that only a Presbyterian could serve as president. From its by-laws we learn that its object and purposes are to "Foster social, religious and civic activities within the local communities." Only couples could join and they served jointly in every office and committee capacity. The skits they started out producing soon became plays, then musicals, and also included were minstrel shows.

The Good Fellowship Club which started out in the early part of 1940, became so popular there was a waiting list of those who wished to join. The size limitation was set not by an intention toward exclusivity, it was a purely practical matter of space. The largest assembly room at Calvary at that time would accommodate two hundred and twenty people. The members of the club sewed their own costumes, did their own staging, provided their own sets, and wrote their own scripts in the beginning years, but toward the end they began to buy plays and rent costumes. Some of their productions were quite ambitious undertakings. "H. M. S. Pinafore" was one. Some others were "Gay Nineties" and "Show Boat." Toward the end of the 1950's interest began to wane, and in 1972 the Good Fellowship Club was disbanded.

As the depression passed into history, and during the early years of the Second World War, Calvary Presbyterian was bringing all its forces to bear in the financial aspect of the church's life. By April 1, 1943, the indebtedness had been reduced to \$16,000. On September 30th the indebtedness was declared to have been completely liquidated. With appropriate ceremony, great rejoicing and heartfelt thankfulness, the mortgage was burned on October 27, 1944.

The late forties saw the Sunday School program at Calvary Presbyterian achieve an all-time high in numbers with the average enrollment close to five hundred. One of the old time fellowship occasions that had lapsed for some years, the annual Strawberry Festival, was reinstated during these years. It continues to this time to be one of the special times that the community, as well as the congregation, looks forward to each year — a time of coming together for fellowship and friendship, as well as feasting!

Mrs. Virginia Fischer, the Choir Director in the late fifties, is credited with starting the Hand Bell Choir. It flourished, and in the 1963 Annual Report, Mrs. Lila S. Miller devoted a full page to the activities of the hand bell choirs, pointing out that in the fall

of 1962 there were eighteen members in the choir. In March of 1963, there was a gift of a set of new Schulmerich Handbells given in memory of Mr. Phillip T. Flack, Jr., and enough money was raised to permit the church to obtain seven more English Bells to complete the original set of fifteen. On June 23, 1963, the first full Handbell Concert at Calvary was given.

On July 4, 1963, the Handbell Choir, dressed in colonial costumes, made a guest appearance at the Independence Hall program. President Lyndon Johnson was the honored speaker on this occasion. Between January and July of 1964, the handbell choirs grew to four. The advanced group appeared on a television show, gave a program at Fort Dix for the protestant men of the Chapel, and seventeen of their members attended a two day annual Bell Choir Festival in Westfield, New Jersey.

Still another continuing opportunity for enrichment and service at Calvary is in the women's groups. One of these is The Friendship Bible Class. Its purpose is to study and learn about God's word, to fellowship and to enjoy the fun of being together.

In still another program, the United Presbyterian Women's Association, organized at the request of the Rev. Robert Stewart in January of 1952, is carrying forward other activities for the benefit of the church and the community. The funds raised by the U.P.W. are primarily realized from collections at circle meetings.

Still active is the "Thrift Shop" which was started in 1943 by Mrs. Nina Roney, Mrs. Read Meverly and Mrs. Joshua Atlee. It is located on Main Street in Riverton and members of the church and the community donate clothing and household items which are in turn priced and sold to anyone.

In the early days of its existence, the Thrift Shop rented various shops but eventually acquired the present shop through a loan from the church Trustees, which was then repaid out of the profits. This shop is the main contribution of the women of Calvary Presbyterian to the local community and is currently under the charge of Mrs. Jo Metzger, Mrs. Rosa Smith and Mrs. Eleanor MacCord.

Calvary Presbyterian Church, which began with meetings in the homes of a few dedicated people and had a total membership of twelve in 1877, now counts its congregation at six hundred and twenty-eight. Thirteen pastors have served over the years, including the current minister, the Reverend Richard C. Moore. It has served well, provided a church home and gathering place for those who would come together to worship and grow in faith and knowledge. We thank God for having brought it into being and pray for its continuance into the future.

## **WEST PALMYRA MISSION**

### **1895**

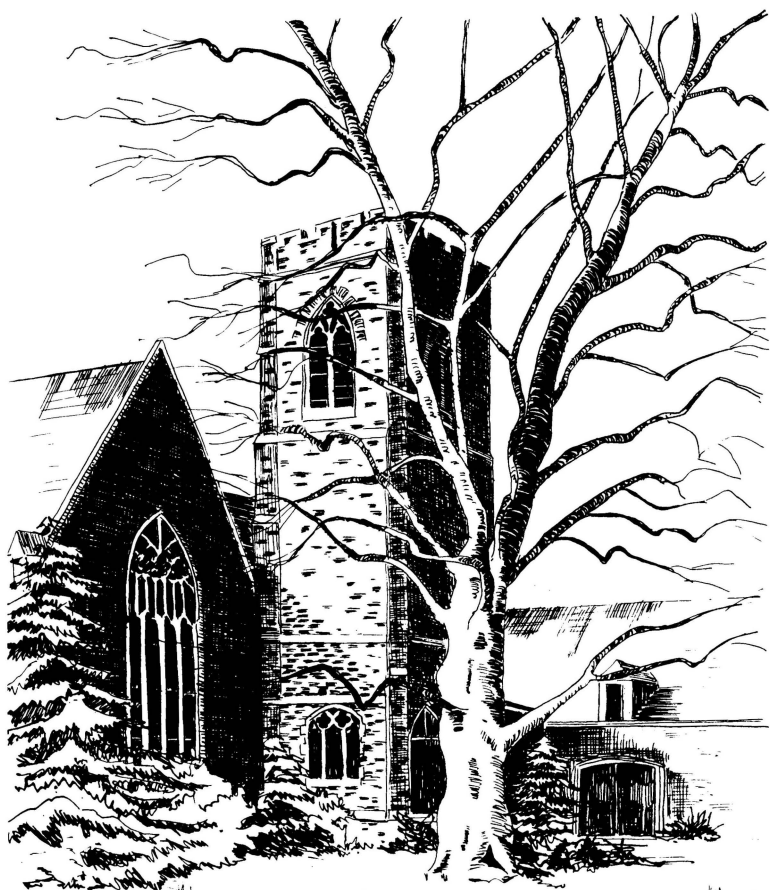
The West Palmyra Mission was established in 1895. It was located on Fifth Street below Market and had its beginning as an outgrowth of a heartbreaking tragic accident.

James and Elizabeth Hemphill were a very devout Presbyterian family. Their home was on the corner of Fourth and Lippincott Streets in Riverton and Mr. Hemphill ran a dry goods store on Broadway in Camden. Mr. and Mrs. Hemphill had a number of children. One summer day when they were vacationing at their summer cottage at Sea Isle City, their teen-age daughter was caught in an undertow and swept out to sea. In an effort to assuage their grief and in loving memory of this lost child, they established a mission. They conducted and financed it completely themselves and it attracted many of the children from nearby families. All were made welcome and served in equal measure regardless of race or creed.

Sunday School classes were held every Sunday afternoon. There was a prayer meeting each Sunday evening and again on Wednesday evening. The great hymns of the church were sung to the accompaniment of a small organ which was played by some of the Hemphill daughters or their friends.

The Sunday School group was divided into three sections — Mrs. Hemphill taught the children, Mr. Hemphill instructed the adults and there was still another group taught by the mother of Mrs. Esther Smith of Palmyra.

The profoundly good work done by the mission made a great spiritual impact on the community and it was sorely missed after its closing in the early 1920's.



Calvary Presbyterian Church  
Riverton, N.J.