

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, RIVERTON 1855

In 1851, Riverton was constituted, laid out with proper boundaries and set on the road toward becoming a thriving, forward moving community. Its founding fathers were men of foresight and good judgment who planned carefully and kept their standard well in view, looking always to the quality of what they did. Granted, Riverton was a small town with a population hardly significant enough in numbers to cause the inhabitants to be boastful of size, but through the good offices and hard work of those who had come there to establish their homes and businesses, things were indeed moving forward in an orderly, admirable style.

In the natural order of things, the citizenry began to consider the spiritual needs of the town. By 1855, the need to establish a place of worship for those of the Episcopal faith was much in the thoughts and hearts of the people. They were being well served by Trinity Episcopal Church in Moorestown it is true, but while we consider Moorestown a near neighbor to Riverton, a mile is a very relative thing especially when the only way to cover the distance was either in a horse drawn buggy or by railroad cars that only traveled according to a set schedule, as was the case in the middle of the nineteenth century. An 1855 mile is much longer than a 1976 mile!

This being the case, the Episcopal Community of Riverton approached Father H. Hastings Weld, then the Rector of Trinity Church, Moorestown, who agreed to conduct a worship service in Riverton. This took place in a private home at 102 Main Street, loaned for the occasion by Daniel L. Miller. The date of this first service in Riverton is recorded as December 23, 1855. The service was so well attended that the Reverend Weld was much encouraged by the response. He continued to come over from Moorestown once a month throughout the winter.

In the spring of 1856, the Bishop of the Diocese arranged for a weekly Sunday afternoon service to be conducted with the local clergy officiating. However, most of the work of arranging and conducting these services seems to have fallen on the Reverend Mr. Millett, who was at that time serving as the principal of St. Mary's Hall in Burlington.

One of the professors at St. Mary's Hall took Father Millett's place in 1857 and by 1858 Sunday morning services were being held every week. There was also a once-a-month evening service at which the Reverend Mr. Weld officiated.

A parcel of land was bought in 1859. It was directly opposite the Riverton Station. Straight away the matter of constructing a church on this lot got underway. The construction was concluded successfully in a fairly brief period of time. The building was erected without any debt being placed upon it and the first service held in the new structure was the Consecration Service. This took place on June 8, 1860, with the Right Reverend W. H. Odenheimer, D.D., Bishop of New Jersey, officiating. He was assisted in this service by the Reverend Marcus H. Hyde and the Reverend H. Hastings Weld. During the early years of this congregation a church graveyard surrounded the first church building. When the church was removed in 1871, the interred remains were exhumed and transferred to Morgan Cemetery in Palmyra.

This building, which was located on the corner where Klipples Bakery is now serving the public, was later moved to what is now the present site of Christ Episcopal Church in Riverton. It remained there until December of 1884 when it was turned over to the newly established Palmyra parish. It took forty days for the building to be moved to the site it now occupies in Palmyra. It arrived at its new home in Palmyra in January of 1885. On Friday, May 8, 1885, it was rededicated by the Right Reverend John Scarborough. The first service in the rededicated building was conducted by the same Reverend H. Hastings Weld who had been instrumental in establishing the Riverton parish that built the church in the first place!

Going back again to Christ Episcopal Church in Riverton, the incorporation of the church took place in the year 1860 and two Wardens and five Vestrymen were elected to hold office.

In 1862, the Reverend Levi Johnston, who had just been ordained Deacon, became the first resident missionary. His charge covered only one year and in 1863 the Reverend H. Palethorp Hay was elected to be Rector.

As one year passed into the next the church continued to grow. New members were received and the programs offered to the congregation were expanded. When the Reverend Hay resigned from Christ Church in February of 1866, his successor was the Reverend R. T. Roach, who entered into his duties some time in July of 1866. During this same year a rectory was purchased.

A stone rectory was built on property located at Fourth and Main Street in 1868.

In 1869 the Reverend Roach resigned and once again the congregation came under the care of the Reverend H. Hastings Weld, S.T.D., who had held the first Episcopal Service in Riverton. He was elected Rector and entered into his duties in January 1870.

In 1871 the church was moved from its original site near the railroad and placed on a lot adjoining the rectory. This was done primarily for reasons of geography. Riverton had grown out in many directions and what had once been a central spot, readily accessible to the inhabitants of Riverton, Palmyra and Cinnaminson, was now seen to be less convenient than it had seemed in the first place.

When the church was moved it was also enlarged somewhat and in 1876 a frame Sunday School building was erected and presented to the Parish by William P. Ellison as a centennial offering, since the year 1876 marked our national 100th birthday. This building did noble service until 1895, when the present Parish House was erected at a cost of \$25,416.14. In the centennial year the church membership was one hundred.

In 1883 the new stone church was built at Fourth and Main, adjacent to the rectory. It was consecrated by the Right Reverend Dr. Scarborough on July 10, 1884.

In the fall of 1888, the Reverend Dr. Weld, so long a part of the Episcopal Community in Moorestown, Riverton and Palmyra and loved and revered by all those who had known him and benefited by his devotion to the work of the Lord, passed on to his eternal rest.

On November 1, 1888, the Reverend C. Heathcote Hills succeeded the Reverend Weld. He remained as rector for three years and during that time enlarged the work and built up the parish in many ways.

The Rector John H. Converse was called to Christ Episcopal. During the two and a half years he served, steps were taken toward the building of a Parish House which was becoming more and more needful because of the growing work in which the church was involved.

The Reverend R. Bowden Shepherd took charge in 1894. In June ground was broken for the new Parish House and the cornerstone was laid on August 1, 1894. The new building was opened and dedicated on Saturday, April 20, 1895. The history of Christ Episcopal is long and punctuated with many stories that tell much of the life and activities that have taken place within these walls.

The Rectory, built in 1868, is still in use. Mrs. Anna Lippincott, who very recently passed on to her eternal rest after having celebrated her 100th birthday, was the granddaughter of H. Hastings Weld. Mrs. Lippincott remembered how, as a child, she was brought to the Rectory to live with her grandfather in hopes of keeping her safe from an outbreak of Scarlet Fever, which had struck Moorestown. Her memory of spending Christmas in the Rectory was clear and sweet.

Records show that Miss Salley Seckel was the first superintendent of the Sunday School Department. Today, as in the past, the young people of the church still come for their basic Christian education. The current superintendent of the Sunday School is Mr. Walter Smith and the number of children in attendance are twenty boys and forty girls.

The church itself is an especially beautiful building. It seats three hundred people and is designed to incorporate those classic features that lend quietness and peacefulness, both to the interior and the exterior. On the occasion of the Centennial Anniversary of Christ Church, Riverton, a beautification program was instituted. This Chancel Improvement was designed and overseen by William Hayl Thompson and, upon completion, was dedicated by the Right Reverend Alfred L. Banyard, Bishop of New Jersey. It included the installation of a glorious white limestone altar. At the same time the sanctuary walls were lined with the same kind of stone.

The original hand-pumped organ was replaced with a Moller pipe organ in 1916. This was rebuilt in 1935. Mr. Amos Heacock, church organist for twenty-four years beginning in 1947, did further rebuilding and added an entire section to the instrument at his own expense. His artistry and devotion enriched the lives of all those who were served by his ministry of music.

On May 2, 1976, a new organ, custom built by Brantly A. Duddy, Inc., was dedicated. It has approximately 3000 pipes, three manuals and forty-five ranks. It was installed in the original housing of the old organ. Approximately half of the pipes in use with the new organ are from the old instrument. The present organist at Christ Episcopal Church, Riverton, is Mr. George Tobias. He is also in charge of all the music activities. There are two choirs, a senior group made up of adult members of the congregation, and a Junior Choir comprised of the elementary age children. Every Sunday the congregation is blessed with the music that lends so much to the service of worship and on the first Sunday of every month there is an Evensong presentation at 7:30 p.m.

Mr. Tobias composed a special "Te Deum" dedicated to the current Rector, Father Salmon, and the Choir. This was performed for the first time at the dedication of the new organ. The concert, given by Mr. Tobias, at which this original composition was heard for the first time, will always remain a warm and uplifting experience for those who heard it.

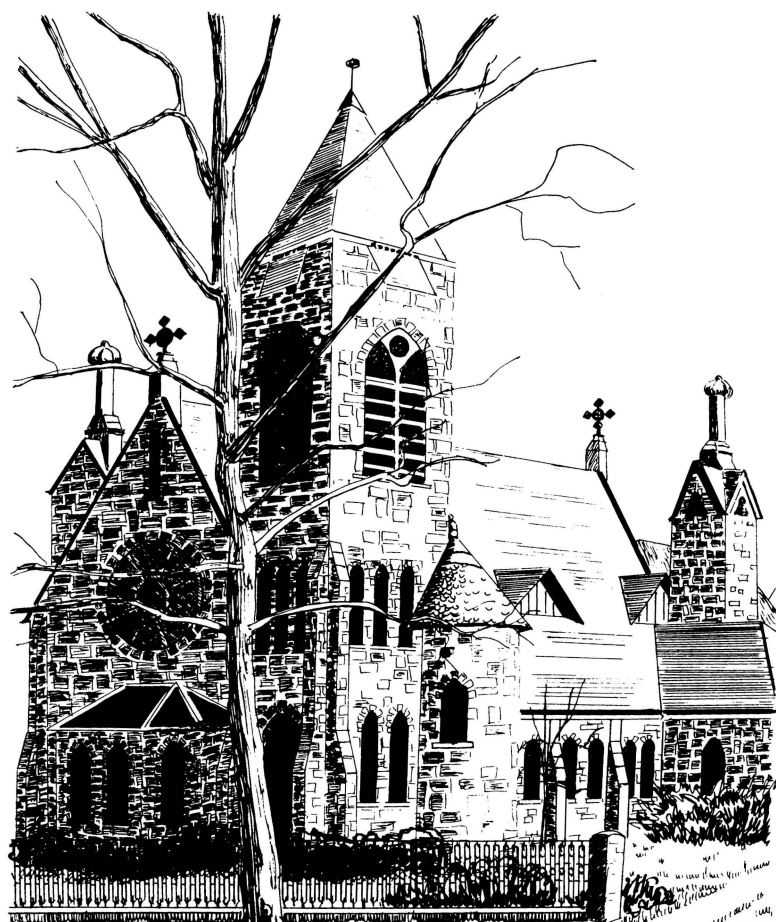
The lives of Christians are continually touching, mingling with us and strengthening us in our faith. It is not, for example, common for one pastor to serve neighboring parishes, but now and then it does come to pass. As one looks back over the years and delves into the history of this area, history reveals the Reverend H. Hastings Weld acted as Rector for Trinity Episcopal Church in Moorestown, Christ Episcopal Church, Riverton, and briefly, Christ Episcopal Church, Palmyra. The Reverend John R. Crockett also served as Rector to both the Riverton and Palmyra congregations.

So, too, one finds on the current rolls at Christ Episcopal the names of many whose parents and grandparents were also constituents. The generations pass, one to another, times and customs change, but man continues to turn to God and God remains always ready to receive him and bestow upon him His love and saving grace.

One hundred and twenty-one years have come and passed into history since the first Episcopal service was held in a private home in Riverton. It is not too difficult to record the passage of that time in numbers or in the retelling of significant facts, or in the recollection of landmark accomplishments. But a church is not numbers, nor dates, nor events, nor even names. It is a thing of the spirit, the soul, the heart of man as he comes to his God, offering himself to his Creator and asking in return that God use him, direct him, and lead him in the way he should go. Within the church, man is safely folded in the sure knowledge that he is eternally under the care of Almighty God in all he does, in all that befalls, in sorrow and in joy, in temptation and in strength, in times of peace and times of tumult.

A commemorative plate, made up to celebrate an anniversary of Christ Episcopal Church, carries this inscription: "Oh, how amiable are Thy Dwellings, O Lord of Hosts."

Christ Episcopal Church is one of the dwelling places of our Lord of Hosts. It is indeed, to the spirit of all, a most amiable meeting place for God and man.



Christ Episcopal Church
Riverton, N.J.