

EPWORTH UNITED METHODIST CHURCH 1840

The American Revolution was some sixty years past, and the Civil War more than twenty years away, when the railroad came in 1834 to the area we know now as Riverton and Palmyra. Up to that time the territory was occupied by a scant handful of farm owners whose lands stretched along the river and the creek.

By 1840 there were approximately twenty houses, and the inhabitants numbered at most, seventy persons. But with transportation available, people from Philadelphia were moving in, and with them they carried the news of a Methodist movement in the city. Now and then visitors from as far away as New York would journey down to the little village settlement that lay along the Camden and Amboy tracks. They spoke of John's Street Church and told stories of how it was growing and serving its members.

Just beyond Pompeston Creek, along the Burlington Turnpike, a church had been built and named for Bishop Asbury, who had landed in Philadelphia in 1771 after a voyage from Bristol, England. Asbury was one of the preachers sent out by John Wesley, and after having been in the colonies for only a year had been charged by Wesley to act as his "Assistant in America."

The Episcopalians of the riverfront village worshipped in the Colestown Church. The few Swedish Lutherans followed in the footsteps of their forebears and crossed the Delaware by boat to worship at Old Gloria Dei Church in Philadelphia. The Quakers had their Westfield Meeting House. The rest, including a few Methodists, simply managed as best they could. So it came to be that a few members of what was to be called a "Methodist Society" came together to begin the business of setting up a place of worship in the riverfront village. They were what might be called, denominationally, a rather mixed bag. Some had broken away from their original affiliation with the Church of England, having left the Church because of bitter feelings engendered by the Revolution. Others were Baptists or Lutherans who had no nearby place of worship.

In the beginning, there was no meeting place, as such, nor was there a minister, not even on a part-time basis. The society met in the homes of its members, and it was a special occasion of rejoicing when a circuit rider from Moorestown paid a call. The Bethel Methodist Society, near Camden, took a special interest in the new Methodist project on the riverfront.

The most immediate and pressing concern was the establishment of a Sunday School. Thirteen years passed from the time of the first meeting, which was held in the home of Isaiah Toy in 1840, until the beginning of the first church building program in 1853. During most of these years a small brick building located along the railroad tracks was used as the Sunday School.

This simple building standing at the foot of what is now Elm Terrace was also used as a public school, and later it became a blacksmith's shop.

If one were trying to determine who might best be remembered as the key mover and shaper of the Methodist movement in this area, the name of Isaiah Toy would surely be the one most readily called to mind.

Toy's sister, Julia, was a missionary serving the Lord in the vicinity of Palmyra in Asia Minor, which may have in part accounted for his interest in starting a Methodist endeavor here. It certainly accounted for the naming of the town, which was given the name "Palmyra" about 1849, in honor of the missionary.

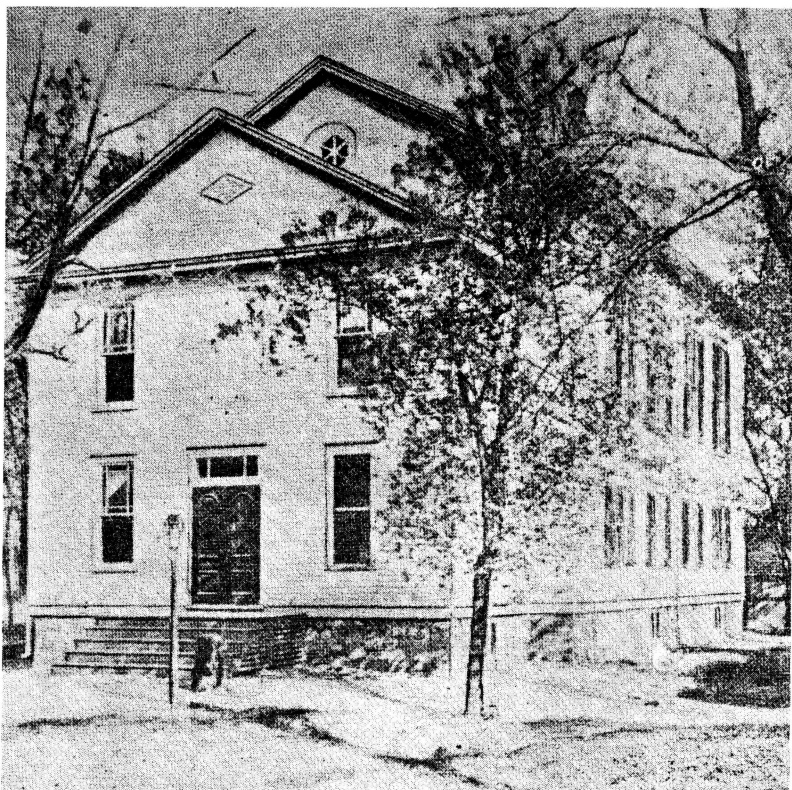
The riverside farmhouse in which Mr. Toy and his family lived had been built in 1761 on land taken up by their ancestor Elias Toy in 1689. It was in this house, which still stands and is the oldest house in Palmyra, that the first Methodist meetings were held.

The second name on the list of those who played a vital part in the Methodist work would doubtless have to be John Springer, who ran a store that in later years was to become the Post Office. Next door to the store there was a hotel operated by John Wallace. The town pump stood in front of the hotel and provided a convenient gathering spot for folks stopping to get their mail or to water their horses.

It is safe to assume that in 1853, much of the discussion carried on around the town pump had to do with the fact that the Methodists had decided to build a church. The decision must have caused much excitement among the populace, since this church was to be the first organization of any kind in the town.

The site chosen for the building was a triangular piece of land near the railroad tracks. It was bought from Elias Morgan, cost \$285, and is today the intersection of

Broad and Cinnaminson Avenue, where the Borough Hall stands. The building was completed in 1854 at a cost of about \$3,000. Everyone turned out for the dedication in September of that year. The Reverend C. K. Fleming was the new minister serving this young 40 member congregation until his departure in 1855.



"The original Methodist Church, built in 1854. It became Society Hall in 1893, and Palmyra Borough Hall in 1941."

The frame building itself was quite austere. There was no spire, no bell, no stained glass windows, no finery of any kind. The meeting room used for worship was on the second floor and was furnished with pews of the simplest straight-back design. The pulpit was against the rear wall, the choir sat on one side, and for musical accompaniment there was a small pump organ. The outside of the church, which was more often than not referred to as a "Meeting House," was painted white. It stood in a grove of trees, which was gradually cut down as the years passed to enlarge the burial ground behind the church.

A scant seven years after the time of the dedication the Civil War broke out, and the heartbreak of the strife of brother against brother caused sorrow to be visited on the populace. The Palmyra Methodists grieved for one of their own whose body was borne home for burial. The stone that marks the grave of George Van Sciver is almost unreadable now, but one can still make out enough of the letters to find that he died from wounds suffered in a battle fought in Louisiana.

When the war was finally over and the troop trains no longer passed through Palmyra bringing wounded home on their way north and taking recruits south, the membership of the Methodist Church was still small but the congregation could look forward with high hopes. For one thing, they had become a full-fledged charge with a

full time minister whose name was George Reed. Though few in number, they were able to pay their minister a salary of \$410 a year and in 1865 they managed to give \$106 in benevolences.

When our nation celebrated its Centennial in 1876, the members on roll at the Methodist Church had risen to seventy-two persons with several "on probation." A most significant jump in enrollment took place between 1886 and 1887. In these two years more than eighty new members were added and the total rose to 160 members. A parsonage was built on the southwest corner of the lot in 1888. It came as quite a surprise when, a scant three years later, the congregation decided that the church was located too close to the railroad tracks. The trains did make a frightful racket as they passed, fairly drowning out the choir and requiring the minister to shout out his sermon. There might, too, have been some element of denominational rivalry involved in the decision. The Baptists had built a church in 1886, as did the Presbyterians in 1879.

In 1885, the original Episcopal Church building in Riverton was presented to the Episcopalians of Palmyra and moved to the site of Parry Avenue, making way for a new Episcopal Church in Riverton. These new buildings were more in the style of the 1880's. Even the most conservative of the Methodists had to admit that the plain frame building with its second floor sanctuary was somewhat outdated.

A committee was selected and after studying the matter, issued a brochure in which they made a strong case for relocating and enlarging the facility. The following are paragraphs excerpted from the original, which indicate the clarity and directness with which they analyzed the matter: "It is apparent to all that personal comfort, the present and future prosperity of Methodism and above all the glory of God demand the erection of a more commodious Methodist Episcopal Church in Palmyra." Still further along we find these words pertaining to the noise problem: "The principal reason that influenced the Quarterly Conference to reject the present site is the growing disturbance to our services by passing trains. This will increase rather than diminish. The church is near the station where the noise of whistling, ringing, escaping steam and starting and stopping trains is a frequent annoyance."

In conclusion they summed up: "Any person weighing these considerations and guided in judgment by reason and a desire for the future well-being of Methodism, must surely see the necessity of building on another site."

On June 21, 1892, a lot was purchased on the corner of Morgan Avenue and Fifth Street. It measured 100 by 150 feet and the price was \$800. Between June and August bids were accepted on construction of the building. The contract was ultimately let to Joseph Bishop with the stipulation that the "builder is to erect the new church according to the plans and specifications for the sum of \$11,130, to be completed by June 1st, 1893." The cornerstone of the church was laid on October 21, 1892. The work continued through the remainder of that year and into the spring of 1893. Excited anticipation was mounting, funds were coming in, the building was rising! It rose high indeed, its spire reaching far above any building in the town.

On February 12, 1893, the Trustees finalized the sale of the old church to the Society Hall Association for \$4,000. Surely the sale was tinged with some sadness, but the future had to be served and the past had to be left behind, including the Methodist Cemetery which remained at the old location and continued to accept burials up to as recently as 1976.

The church was dedicated on September 10, 1893. Bishop Mallalieu preached the dedicatory sermon, choosing for his text the ninth verse from the first chapter of the book of First Corinthians reading, "God is Faithful."

Activities, postponed until the completion of the new building, were now renewed. There were church suppers, socials sponsored by the "Department of Social Works," as well as a "moonlight excursion" and an excursion to Wildwood. The following year, the strawberry festivals were resumed, as was the custom of going up-river to Burlington Island Park to picnic. The Delaware River Navigation Company provided the steamboats for these picnics. The entire church family got aboard the boats at Riverton wharf and one can only imagine the fun they must have had on these special days of fellowship.

The church in the grove had been known simply as the "Palmyra M. E. Church." It seems probable that the name of the Foundry Church in Millville, after which the new Palmyra Church was modeled, may have inclined the congregation to seek a name identified suitably with early Methodism. Thus the local Methodists decided to name their new church for the parish in which John Wesley was born, and the name was formalized as Epworth Methodist Episcopal Church.

The parsonage as well as the cemetery were still at the old location. The pastor "commuted" between the new church and the old parsonage. In 1903, at the time the

church was observing its Golden Jubilee, it was decided to place the Man of God and the House of God within earshot of each other by building a new parsonage on Morgan Avenue. This was completed in 1904 at a cost of \$5,000 including the price of the lot, directly across the street from the church, and the old parsonage was sold for \$1,700.

The new Epworth Church was a frame building including a large church auditorium, a "lecture room," and a few Sunday School rooms in the basement. This became inadequate rapidly, for the membership was climbing. The Sunday School listed 700 members by 1913, with 350 average attending. The classes were shifted about endlessly in an effort to find space in which to function. The Official Board of the Church began to discuss in vague terms a possible enlargement of the Sunday School quarters. The installation of electricity had to also be considered for the existing church, and the plans for enlargement were laid on the table.

By 1915 the plans were off the table and a plot of land next to the church was purchased, including a double house, for \$4,300. Ground breaking for a new Sunday School Temple occurred in the fall of that year.

The original Trustees of 1853, Isaiah Toy, John Springer, George Smith, J. L. Hale, and Charles Lowden, had all gone on to their reward, most of them being buried in the old Methodist Cemetery. The leadership after their time, until 1913 devolved upon such men as Edward H. Pancoast, Isaac Evalul, William Rudduck, and W. O. Wolcott.

The new stone Sunday School building, including a gymnasium, was dedicated in 1916. A thunderstorm of some violence blew in on the day of dedication, but it would have taken far more than this to dampen the spirits or drown out the sound of the orchestra and the hundreds who gathered and sang: "O for a thousand tongues to sing My great Redeemer's praise, . . ."

The "thousand tongues to sing" became a reality by 1919 when, after the conclusion of the First World War, the membership came up to the 1,000 mark to make the Epworth Sunday School the largest in the County. Later on the Sunday School numbers declined while church membership, running for a long period at about 700, moved up in the 1940's and 1950's to a top figure of 1,200 constituents. Today, after much trimming of the rolls and in an increasingly transient society, the church membership stands at 800 and Epworth remains the largest church in Palmyra.

To this long record the women of the church have largely contributed, as members of numerous organizations including the early Ladies Aid, the later Women's Society for Christian Service, and the present United Methodist Women. Through many special occasions and money-raising efforts, the women have added greatly to the spiritual and temporal life of Epworth.

Their names are legion. One of the present-day members, Mrs. Ethel Hubbs, is the great grand-daughter of an original founder and Trustee of the church, George Smith.

The music of the church, so much a part of a Methodist service, came in for its share of improvement in 1921 with the installation of a three manual Moller organ of nineteen ranks, including some 1,300 pipes and chimes.

The present choral program includes a Senior Choir, Chancel (Junior) Choir, and Men's Chorus. A total of fifteen pianos occupy various corners of the Epworth building, and a file of more than 800 anthems tells of the importance church music has occupied in the life of the church across its many years.

In 1953 the church observed its first 100 years. A treatise entitled "A Century of Stewardship" was prepared by Lloyd E. Griscom of Epworth, who in passing years has become an acknowledged authority on nearby history. Lloyd has been an inspiration to those of us associated with the task of documenting these past 200 years of religious experience in the community.

After major renovations to the stone Church School building in 1956 and 1963, and several renovations to the church sanctuary to create a worshipful divided-chancel arrangement, the structure is valued today at more than \$600,000. The pipe organ after various improvements carries a valuation in excess of \$40,000 and the parsonage following recent renovations is valued at \$48,000.

Over the years, following Methodist custom, adult classes have been an important part of Epworth life. The Wesleyan Class for men, founded in 1910 and led for many years by the late Raymond Warner, continues to meet regularly. So likewise does the Friendship Circle Class for women, founded in 1915. Others have come, such as the Shining Hour Class for women and a new couples class led by the present Assistant Pastor, Robert Brown.

In the early years pastors were re-assigned every two years, later, every three years, and still later remained for four or five years. A total of forty-nine ministers have served the parish.

In 1968 Dr. J. K. Helms, then the pastor of Epworth, envisioned the ecumenical organization which has now undertaken this milestone history — the Cinnaminson-Palmyra-Riverton Council of Churches.

At his suggestion Mr. William Braidwood convened a meeting of interested lay-people, and during succeeding months a constitution was drafted and Bill Braidwood took the leadership role as the first President of the Council. The community also owes a debt of gratitude to Bill for establishing the community-wide "Walk A Christmas Mile" observance conducted the Sunday evening following Christmas each year.

Epworth has exerted continual community leadership, not only through its program of spiritual growth, but also in such areas as Scouting, and through the sharing of its gymnasium for basketball and other purposes.

The projects across the years have been many, ranging from Missions and Evangelism to church suppers and a large program of Youth activities. The hours of worship are conducted in a formal atmosphere, but emphasis is placed upon informal Christian fellowship.

Dr. Leon W. Gibson is entering his seventh year as the pastor of the church, marking the longest pastorate Epworth has known. Patience A. Griscom has been the organist and choir director for the past eighteen years; and Mary Ellen McCurdy has led many innovative church school activities as the Superintendent of the Study Program.

The present Lay Member of the Annual Methodist Conference, representing Epworth, is Arthur Mandeville; and the Chairman of the present Board of Trustees is Richard Schwering. The congregation is happy to have within its ranks a number of young married couples who are assuming leadership roles in the church. A new Memorial Chapel, dedicated on Palm Sunday of 1976, was largely the result of their efforts.

More than a century and a quarter have passed since the time of Methodist beginnings on the local scene. Whether the member of today looks back or looks up, following the line of that tall Epworth spire, he or she will be conscious of communion in company with a large host, past and present, moving on in faith toward a City of God, a house not made with hands.

Epworth Methodist Church
Palmyra, N.J.

