

# *History of St. John's Presbyterian Church*

*Devon, Pennsylvania*



*Compiled and Written by Eva Noll*

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In England on April 13 and 14 in 1682, William Wood, of Derby, and William Sharlow, of Spithfield, Middlesex, purchased two thousand acres in Chester County from William Penn. The lands were surveyed in 1684. In 1704, they were divided into two tracts. One thousand acres (including the area of present-day Berwyn) went to the descendants of William Wood and one thousand acres (including what is now Devon) went to William Sharlow. In 1746, the latter tract was sold to Richard Harrison and Samuel Harrison.

For almost 200 years, the area remained primarily farmland, affected only by changes in methods of transportation. Nearby were churches, mills, taverns at the crossroads, and, by the nineteenth century, a few villages. The Philadelphia-Lancaster Turnpike, completed in 1794, was the primary road used by farmers to send their produce to market in Philadelphia.

In 1832 the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad was formally opened, with its eighty-one miles of track. With it, the population began to increase. The Pennsylvania Railroad purchased it in 1857. After the Civil War, it really began to develop the area, building new stations and large, elegant hotels. People came out from Philadelphia to spend their summer vacations in the country. By 1874 there were fifty-four boarding houses between Philadelphia and Downingtown that could accommodate thirteen hundred people. The area continued to be popular for summer homes and vacations until the Jersey Shore took over.

The Devon Station, named for Devonshire, England, was first built in 1866 and rebuilt in 1881. The fashionable Devon Inn, a frame structure with a tree-lined boulevard leading to the new station, was also completed in 1881. When it burned down two years later, it was replaced with a stone and brick building. (map, Figure 1)

As the area became more fashionable, real estate developers arrived. By 1883, the Messrs. Coffin and Altemus, of Philadelphia, owned 617 acres in the Devon area. By the 1890s, lots had been sold, large estates had been built, and the grand Devon Inn was flourishing with rooms for 250 guests, illuminated with electric lights!

This is a detailed street map of the Overbrook area in Philadelphia, dated 1887. The map shows a grid of streets including Chester Ave., Berkeley Ave., Arlington Ave., Fairfield Ave., Pennsylvania Ave., Lancaster Ave., Station Ave., and E. Station Ave. Various property lots are numbered, and several buildings are labeled, such as the Devon Inn, Wm. B. Mann, and the Jas. C. Brooke property. A legend in the bottom right corner explains the symbols used for different types of buildings: a solid rectangle for 'Brick or Stone', an outlined rectangle for 'Frame Building', a rectangle with an 'X' for 'Brick or Stone', and a rectangle with a cross-hatch pattern for 'Frame Stable'. A scale bar indicates a distance of 400 feet to the inch. The year 1887 is printed at the bottom right.

On June 14, 1893, they received the “Charter of the Devon Chapel,” a corporation under the laws of Pennsylvania. It was signed by Mr. J.H. Jefferis, Mr. F.E. Hastings, Mr. J.L. Twaddell, Mr. Louis Warner, and Mr. S.D. Walton. A plot of ground was donated by Coffin and Altemus, and on it a building was erected in the fall of 1893. The cost was \$3,500. (Figure 2)

*Figure 2: The Devon Chapel, Christmas 1893*



The Chapel grew in membership and during the summer of 1895, Mr. Edward Keigwin, a student at Princeton Seminary, conducted services. That same year, a church bell was purchased with the inscription, "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, Devon Chapel 1895."  
(Figure 3)

By 1897 the work of the church had prospered, and it was felt that a full time minister could be in charge. The Reverend Joel Schwartz, D.D. was called and became the first pastor.

*Figure 3: The Devon Chapel, 1895*



Hoping to become affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, thirty-one charter members organized the Devon Church on June 10, 1900. The first elders were Mr. J. Lewis Twaddell, Mr. J. Herbert Jefferis, Mr. H.O. Hildebrand, and Mr. Frederick H. Treat.

Early in 1903 a petition was presented to the Presbytery of Chester. It was approved and the Devon Church became St. John's Presbyterian Church of Devon (the congregation had voted unanimously to change the name). Mr. Jefferis, Clerk of Session, wrote, "The Presbytery appointed a Commission of five ministers and the elders to come to Devon Thursday April 3<sup>rd</sup>, to install our pastor and to congratulate our people, and to offer their good wishes for our future. For thus 11 years are ended as a union in the work of the church. We shall start off as a full-fledged Presbyterian Church under the brightest of auspices, and we look for God's richest benedictions upon this part of His vineyards."

During the early years of St. John's, the members showed a great concern for the local community. Many Italians had arrived in the area, as gardeners on the large estates and as workers in the local quarries. Until they acquired their own church in Strafford, they used St. John's for worship on Saturday nights.

The women of the church organized a Women's Society in 1903 for the purpose of assisting in the work of St. John's, and especially to help with the Italian community. In that year, 132 families were visited and the women gave out 50 bibles and 75 tracts.

Other concerns of the times were the gangs working on the railroads and the boys playing baseball on the Sabbath.

Under Dr. Schwartz, the church continued to grow and prosper. In 1907, he resigned and went to live with his son in Webster Grove, Missouri.

The next year the congregation called the Rev. Hugh W. Rendall from Elwood City, Pennsylvania. His father was also a minister and the very popular president of Lincoln University. By 1912, the membership at St. John's had increased to 138. Mr. Rendall enjoyed a prosperous pastorate of eight years. He resigned in 1916, and was succeeded by Dr. Charles S. Stevens of Philadelphia who, after serving two years during the First World War, left to accept a call to a larger church.

In December of 1920, the church called the Rev. Warren J. Johnson as pastor. The membership continued to increase and, in 1925, extensive additions were made to the church building, including the transepts, and thus creating basically the present sanctuary. Mr. William C. Kirk gave a new pipe organ in memory of his wife, and Mr. and Mrs. Henry C. Wilt presented a beautiful stained glass window in memory of their only daughter, Ethel.

Reverend Johnson died in 1927 as a result of an accident, and was succeeded by the Rev. Theodore Brown Williams, who served until his death in 1936.

During the Second World War, many young men from St. John's enlisted in the armed forces. Four boys who had grown up in the church were killed: Norman Porlaman, William Cunningham, Robert Penlington, and Edward Benner.

In 1945, the Rev. B. Frank Moss, Jr., who had been the pastor for the previous eight years, resigned to accept a call in Huntington, Long Island, New York. The Rev. John Dwight Pentecost served St. John's 1946, leaving in 1951 to teach at the Philadelphia Bible Institute. The Rev. Charles E. Olwine came in 1952.

During the early 1950s, numerous building and expansion projects were completed to provide room for the fast-growing membership of the Church and the Sunday School. The first step in the building program was a one-story addition at the rear of the church structure, enlarging the Sunday School area. It was completed in 1951, with the Nursery, Junior, and Young People's Departments housed in the new addition while the Primary and Beginners Departments continued to meet in the renovated part of the older church building. In addition to its service for the church, the new building also served a community need by providing a home for the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts and Brownies.



In 1955 the second story of the Sunday School building was added. The Carriage House (built in the 1890s for Henry C. Davis' estate) and additional grounds were purchased.

The Rev. Olwine was pastor at the time of St. John's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 1953, commemorating fifty years as a Presbyterian Church and sixty years as an organization. At the time, the enrollment of the church was the largest in its history. Because the congregation had already outgrown the recent addition, the church sanctuary was completely remodeled and rededicated that fall. At the fiftieth birthday dinner on November 18, the Rev. Henry L. Woll, pastor of the Havertown United Presbyterian Church, was the speaker.

In 1954 Mr. Olewine left for the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Pennsylvania, and in October 1955, the Rev. W. Edward Jordan was installed as pastor of St. John's. He served until his death in 1959. He and his wife, Jeanette Kinnear Jordan, were very interested in the missions supported by the church, both national and international. In November 1957, the church held a three-day Fall Missionary Conference.

On February 10, 1960, the Rev. Ernest L. McMillan was installed as the tenth pastor of St. John's Presbyterian Church. He and his wife June and their four children had recently returned from Abadan in South Iran, where he had organized a new church under the auspices of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions and Great Britain. The Rev. McMillan served St. John's for thirty years.



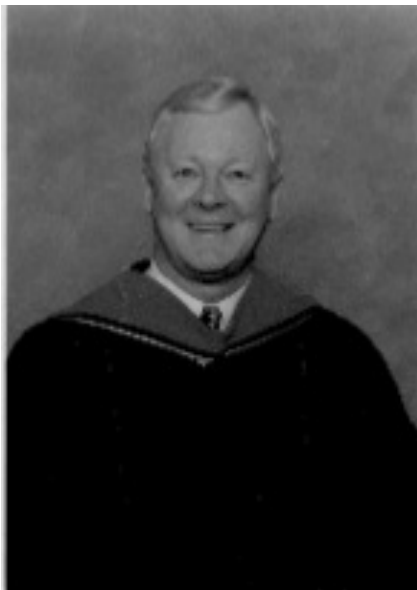
*Reverend McMillan*

During this time, two more anniversaries were celebrated. In 1973, at the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner, members of more than thirty years were honored, along with Mr. Arch McQuilken, who was the first lay member to be elected the president of Christian Endeavor International, a position he held for two terms. Long-time members were again honored at the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner, with the Rev. Hugh W. Rendall, D.D. (St. John's second pastor from 1908-1916), and his wife as very special guests.

In the 1960's, the organ chamber was rebuilt, the choir loft extended, and the twin pulpits installed. At the same time, the library room was created. A large piece of property, in the shape of a "T," was purchased and a new parking lot and driveway built, as well as a circular drive in front of the church. In addition, the porches on both sides were enclosed, and the Carriage House was rebuilt.

Upon the retirement of Rev. McMillan in June 1990, 300 members gathered for a dinner held at Paoli Presbyterian Church. Bagpipers led the group from the reception to the dinner in celebration of the McMillans' Scottish heritage. Soon after his retirement, the congregation of St. John's, with the approval of the Presbytery of Donegal, named Rev. McMillan Pastor Emeritus. By this title, the members express affection and gratitude for their pastor and continue their close association with him in an honorary relationship.

In January 1992, the Rev. Victor M. Wilson began his ministry at St. John's Presbyterian Church. Shortly thereafter, he received his doctoral degree from Emory University. He had previously served as the pastor for congregations in Ayden, North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina and Pensacola, Florida. Under Dr. Wilson's leadership, the church continued to grow and once again, there was a need for additional classroom space.



*Reverend Wilson*

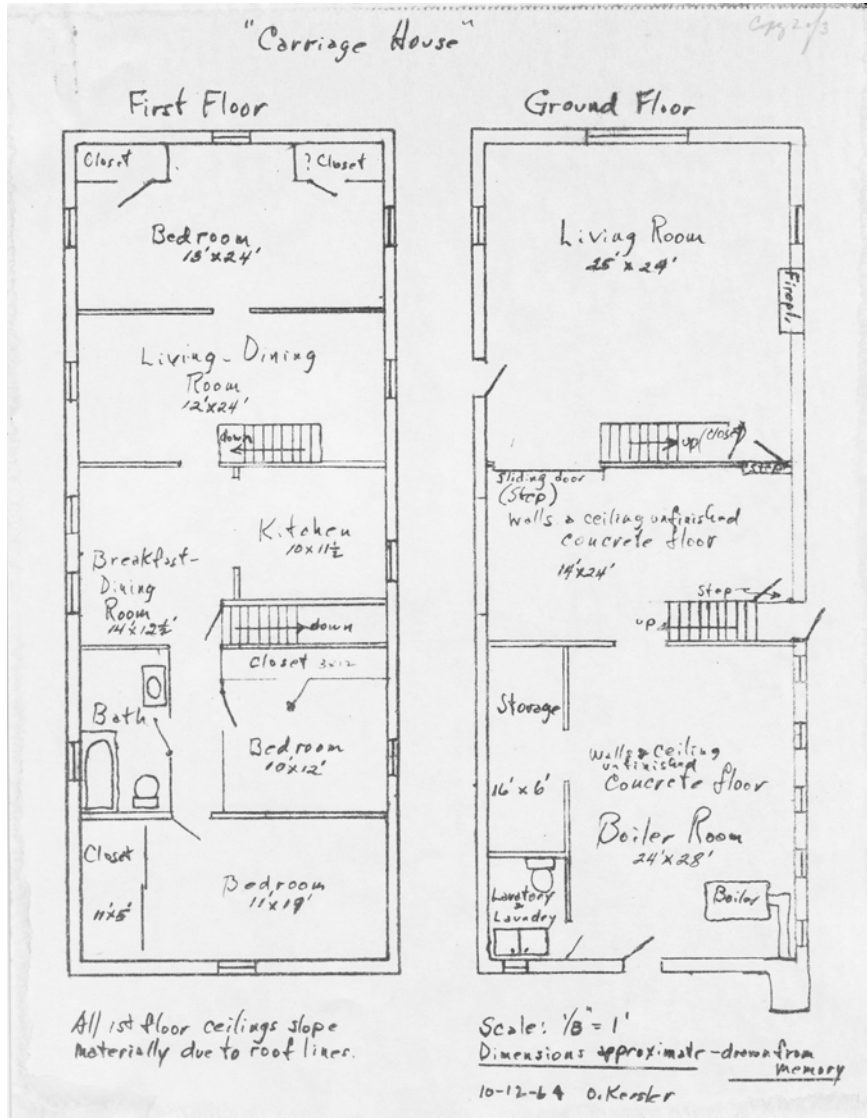
A committee was formed to develop plans to improve existing spaces and completely renovate the Carriage House again. At that time, two ground floor classrooms were available, but the second floor of the building was used as a rental apartment. (Figure 4) In the fall of 1997, renovation of Fellowship Hall was completed. The newly remodeled Carriage House, which featured several new classrooms and two group gathering spaces, was dedicated on September 27, 1998.

The most recent addition to the property is the Memorial Garden, dedicated in a ceremony on October 30, 2005. This garden was the result of a generous donation from a former member. It was created to offer "a simple, tranquil spot ... where families and friends could pause and remember their loved ones."

After twenty years of ministry, Dr. Wilson announced his plans to retire at the end of July, 2012. In May of that year, church members and friends gathered for a dinner at Berwyn United Methodist Church. Once again, the guests entered to the sound of bagpipes and the evening featured warm recollections and expressions of gratitude for the Wilson Family.



## Carriage House Floor Plan, 1964-1997



In preparation for the arrival of a new pastor, and with the generous help of an anonymous donor, work on sanctuary and manse improvements began during the summer months. Sanctuary projects included painting, refinishing of hardwood floors, and the installation of an improved sound system. The manse underwent extensive repair and renovation as well.

Session approved the decision to hire the Rev. Dr. Nicole Duran as Temporary Supply Pastor for St. John's in September 2012. The congregation was blessed by her leadership and she continued at St. John's until April 2013.

After nine months of intensive effort, the Pastor Nominating Committee selected the Rev. Patrick W. Marshall as their unanimous choice for candidate for Pastor of St. John's. The congregation voted to call Rev. Marshall on April 21, 2013 and

he began his ministry here in June. Rev. Marshall received his Masters in Divinity from Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia in 2005. He previously served the congregation of First Presbyterian Church in Wahoo, Nebraska for eight years. He was installed at St. John's on September 8, 2013.

From this church, over the past 100+ years, thirteen members have entered the ministry as of 2013. St. John's is the easternmost church in the Presbytery of Donegal, which comprises the Presbyterian Churches (USA) in Chester, Lancaster, and York Counties.

In a 1983 folder prepared for the church, the following description is given:

*"To this day St. John's retains much of the charm of a small country church. Its white clapboard exterior, stained glass windows, and warm fellowship remind many in our community of the church of their childhood while its renovated interior, with oak pews, pulpit and choir loft, offers a quiet dignity for worship in this space age."*

*"St. John's offers many related services to its members and to the community. Boy and Girl Scout troops meet weekly in the Christian Education Building. The Church School provides classes from the nursery department to the adult Groups. A youth program is conducted by dedicated leaders for Junior Highs and Senior Highs. The volunteer adult and youth choirs and bell choir provide excellent music for the Sunday worship services. The Women's Association groups, comprised of morning and evening circles, meet monthly in St. John's Carriage House or in the members' homes. At stated times during the year several series of Wednesday evening programs are held to study current concerns of the Christian point of view."*

In 2013, many of these programs and opportunities are still in place, but St. John's continues to adapt to the needs of the congregation. There is a weekly time of adult fellowship and education in *Supper at St. John's*, and a monthly *Carriage Club* meeting featuring lunch and speakers on wide-ranging topics. The *Joy Messengers* and *Devon Brass* enhance our worship with their music and we offer many ways to serve those in need in our community.

But the true history of a church is not to be found in earthly records. These written words contain only the appointments of ministers, acquisition of property, erection of buildings, and other external events. They do not tell of the prayers said by the people, of the influence and direction given by ministers and members of the Church, the spirit of Rally Days, the Sunday School Picnics, and the Vacation Bible Schools. Nor do they tell of the weddings, baptisms, and funerals, the joys and the sorrows, the sacrifices and the generous donations, the full religious life of the members of St. John's Presbyterian Church of Devon, Pennsylvania.