

A History of Mount Pleasant Meetinghouse

Philadelphia Pike, Bellevue, Delaware

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A. HISTORY OF MOUNT PLEASANT MEETINGHOUSE

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When completed in 1839, Mount Pleasant Meetinghouse was the only place of worship between Wilmington, Delaware, and Marcus Hook, Pennsylvania. Farms stretched in all directions. Wilmington, five miles away, still had fewer than eight thousand inhabitants. Whaling and silk worm culture were budding Delaware industries. There were only twenty-six states in the nation and Martin Van Buren was the eighth President.

The meetinghouse had its beginning on March 3, 1838, when a group of men from "The Methodist Society" bought an acre building site on the Philadelphia Turnpike from George Cartmell for forty ^{country gothic} 40 dollars. As part of the deal, Cartmell gave all the stone that was needed from his quarry at the foot of the hill.

The building committee, Samuel Lodge, William R. Weldin, and Joseph Grubb, spent several months in "drawing thaire drafts for the McKanacks" before letting a contract to George Harvey for a one room stone building, forty by fifty feet, without basement. Their completed work was plain, almost austere. The interior walls were white plaster and the woodwork was white. The only semblance of decoration was a narrow red line painted around the wall at chair height. A balcony around three walls was reached by winding stairs in the front corner. Small clear paned windows were squeezed under the unlighted balcony. A low rostrum extended across the end of the room opposite the double-hung front door. Furnishings were meager: benches with ten

inch seats and four inch rail backs, two iron stoves, whale oil lamps, and a nine dollar pulpit. The communion table on the rostrum was closed off by a fence and gate to exclude the unworthy.

The building was dedicated on March 28, 1841, by George Lybrand, preacher at Asbury Church, and Solomon Prettyman, of Wesleyan Female Seminary in Wilmington. It had cost \$1,133.80, but the builder was docked forty-five dollars for not finishing up on time. The mortgage, held by Farmers Bank of Delaware, was paid off, mostly by two and three dollar pledges. Five men gave \$50.00 each, which was a lot, considering that "hired hands" in the factories on Brandywine Creek earned less than a dollar a day. Week to week finances were not burdensome. Ministers were paid, if at all, in kind. In the year 1848, expenditures totaled only \$11.93 for fire wood, lamp wicks, oil, communion wine and a song book at sixty-three cents. Bills were met through yearly pledges, probably set to coincide with the sale of crops. It was not until 1855 that it was voted "that a collection be taken up every time there is public preaching to defray the expenses of the house."

Originally, Mount Pleasant was called a meetinghouse rather than a church; it was not referred to in the records as a church until 1855. Meetinghouses differed from churches, the choice of a title and architectural style being determined by one's religious beliefs. The meetinghouse was just that -- a plain house. It was not considered Holy and could be used for

all types of activities. On the other hand, a church's architecture was distinctive; its furnishings were symbolic, and it was looked on with reverence as a House of God.

As the century wore on, the building was remodeled a little at a time, the changes reflecting evolution in the religious thinking, tastes, and affluence of a new generation. For example, the lamps were changed from whale oil to camphene in 1852, to kerosene chandeliers in 1883, and to electricity in 1910. The first major changes were made in 1866 when they worshiped the entire summer "amongst wood shavings." A vestibule was partitioned off under the rear balcony and the windows were made twice as tall. The vaulted ceiling was squared off. Three massive roof trusses having forty foot spans that were installed then are still in use. They are made from pine, fourteen inches square with joints mortised together and secured by wooden pegs. More comfortable scroll armed pews in mahogany and white replaced the crude benches. Outside, the stone walls were white-washed and the inside plaster painted chocolate brown! The cost of \$2,899.36 no doubt reflected inflation brought on by the Civil War. The building was dedicated for the second time on October 21, 1866.

The village of Bellevue, described in 1891 as a "town of importance," grew up around Mount Pleasant. Besides the meeting house, it boasted of "many fine residences, a good school, a railroad station and Delaware Extract Company which employs forty people." The old simple place of worship would no longer do and in 1893, in the heart of a depression, it was embellished with \$1700 worth of Victorian "elegance." The balconies were removed

and stained glass windows installed. A basement was dug for central heating and a vestibule built onto the front. The granite walls were stuccoed and lined to resemble more expensive marble. Fortunately the 1838 date stone high in the gable was not covered. In an article about the dedication, at which State Chief Justice Charles B. Lore was speaker, the "Wilmington Every Evening" of December 11, 1893 described the auditorium: "The walls and ceiling are delicately colored, the walls pale yellow and the ceiling blue-gray. The pulpit furniture and chancel rail are of oak and ash, the pews of ash and poplar finished in natural color. The chancel rail sweeps around the pulpit platform in a semi-circle, the ends of which almost touch the west wall, and the pews conforming to this form make a succession of curves and bright colored highly finished woodwork."

Over the years various improvements were also made to the property. A cemetery was started in 1842 and now contains about a hundred graves. In 1855 the trustees decided that "strangers hereafter brought to the church yard for burial shall be buried in what shall be called 'Strangers Row' on the lower side of the grave yard in the corner furtherest from the church." Stone walls, protected from the weather by wood shingle roofs, were started around the lot in 1849. Sheds for horses of the worshipers were built about 1860. A ten room preacher's house costing \$2,359. was built in 1894; Lewis Springer of Wilmington was the architect.

Activities at Mount Pleasant reached their peak around the turn of the century, but in time the congregation drifted away

and all but vanished in the early thirties. A few people returned for annual services until the fifties, then these stopped. When the property was bought by the Church of Christ in 1961, it looked, except for the ravages of time, much as it did in the 1890's. The present restoration has attempted to recapture the "country Gothic" appearance of 1893. The exterior colors, "Quaker buff" and "railroad brown", are typical of public buildings of the time. Foundation plantings are sparse; the profuse use of shrubbery came into vogue only with modern transportation and the garden nursery. Furnishings are for the most part original. Oil type chandeliers are similar to a single lamp found under the building. The carpet was especially woven from a nineteenth century pattern at a cost far greater than the \$0.62 per yard paid for the original. The "schoolhouse" clock, like the original, was made by Seth Thomas before 1860. The building was rededicated on October 9, 1966, at which time it was designated a Delaware Heritage Building by the Society for the Preservation of Delaware Antiquities.

The history of the Mount Pleasant building, as such, is just a history of stone, wood and mortar; its people gave it life. Worn boot scrapers by the door are mute witnesses to those who braved mud and snow, not only to worship, but to eat together, to swap news or just to be neighborly. Excerpts from Robert Bird's diary kept during meeting reflect early congregational life:

July 12, 1840 -- "Clear and warm about 78^o, wheat harvest gathered.. The neighborhood terrible healthy. Seventy-one present."

August 21, 1842 -- "Fine weather. Suppose the folks have gone to Quaker meeting or somewhere else. Some care very little. Twelve present."

July 7, 1846 -- "Afternoon clear after a storm that upset large ships, demasted others, blew down houses, killed two men dead. Accompanied by hail and rain. Forty present."

July 2, 1848 -- "Good love feast, good preaching, good meeting time too."

The church could also rise in righteous indignation. On February 5, 1866, it appointed a "committee to punish by law the person or persons who took the Buffalow robe from the pastor's horse during the protracted meeting."

The people loved Mount Pleasant. When they built a school, they called it Mount Pleasant. When a group migrated westward in 1849, they named their church in Illinois Mount Pleasant. Most are gone now, but their names live on in the community -- Lea Boulevard, Beeson Street, Weldin Road, Penny Hill, Todds Cut, Grubbs Landing, Lore Avenue, and Talleyville. As Mount Pleasant shelters future congregations, it is to be hoped that they will come to love it as did those in the past, not because of the building itself, but because of the Christian associations it brings to mind.