



Pictured above is the main entrance to Simpson House, on Monument Avenue near Belmont, Philadelphia, as it appears today. Founded in 1865, Simpson House is the oldest United Methodist-related retirement home in the United States.

“Rays of Light and Comfort”

A History of Simpson House

Rev. David R. Adam (2006)

Editor’s note: Rev. David R. Adam is a clergy member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference, having first joined the Philadelphia Conference as a probationary member in 1968. In 1975, David left pastoral ministry to enter the field of nursing home administration, which he regards as his ministry to God’s older children. After the 1996 General Conference approved the permanent order of deacon, which allows persons in specialized, non-pastoral ministries to enjoy full clergy status, David pursued this track, and in 2003 was ordained a permanent deacon. He has worked for many years at Simpson House, not only as an administrator, but also leading worship services and preaching.

During the 219th Session of the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference meeting in Philadelphia in 2005, the Commission on Archives and History presented a resolution “Designating Simpson House as a United Methodist Historic Site.” The assembled delegates approved resolution #2005-016, as follows:

- WHEREAS, it is within the jurisdiction of the Annual Conference meeting in session to request the designation of particular Historic Sites; and
- WHEREAS, Simpson House was established in 1865 and is the oldest Continuing Care Retirement Community in the United States, historically related to The United Methodist Church; and
- WHEREAS, the Olde Main Building was constructed in 1898-99 and remains in service on its original site; and
- WHEREAS, Olde Main is recognized locally and regionally as notable architecture as designated by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in cooperation with the American Institute of Architects, Philadelphia Chapter; and

WHEREAS, the ministry of provision and care for persons as they age and the ministry with those aging persons has been a vital component of the fabric of Methodism and our legacy of social justice ministries, and

WHEREAS, the campus of Simpson House is the location of the statue of Bishop Simpson which was considered for inclusion in the Lincoln Memorial;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of The United Methodist Church designates Simpson House as an Historic Site within United Methodism.

At the time of the 141st anniversary celebration in 2006, a plaque which designates The Olde Main Building of Simpson House as United Methodist Historic Site No. 425, was affixed to the building near the entrance. Beside Long's Barn, this is the first time such a designation has been made to a building other than a church.

BIRTH OF A MINISTRY AMONG THE AGED

The building which was constructed between 1898 and 1899 is itself historic, but also represents a history that can be dated to an earlier era. The roots of the Simpson House ministry are traced back to the year 1865 and the end of the Civil War. The ladies of Philadelphia were noted for giving care to the sick and wounded from the battlefields. With the return of peace, these energies could be channeled into other directions.

Mrs. Jane Henry, the widow of the Reverend John Henry of the Philadelphia Conference, focused the attention of the ladies upon the needs of older Methodists in the City of Philadelphia. After the death of her husband, Mrs. Henry had joined the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church, a leading congregation of that era, located at Lombard and Juniper Streets,¹ which her husband once had served as pastor. Even in 1865, that center city location was an active and well-populated area.

Jane Henry was mindful of the needs of some of the older persons in Salem Church and in other area congregations. It was that concern which created her vision of a home for older people within the Philadelphia Conference. When she approached Bishop and Mrs. Matthew Simpson to

¹Founded in 1819, Salem M.E. Church was a 630-member congregation in 1865. By the 1890s, however, the church had declined, and in 1894 it closed and merged with the Western ME Church, to form and build the Covenant ME Church at 18th and Spruce Streets. Covenant closed in 1921. See Harold C. Koch, *The Leaven of the Kingdom: The Amazing Growth of Methodism in the Philadelphia Conference* (Ephrata: Science Press, 1983), 21.

Jane Henry (1812-1889), widow of the Rev. John Henry (1787-1856), who was a preacher with the Philadelphia Conference for 34 years. According to an 1889 tribute, during the Civil War, Mrs. Henry "aided largely in providing for the relief of the wounded soldiers brought to our city... And when the war was over, it was she that conceived the idea of providing a home for aged Methodists, and took the first steps looking to the organization of such a home." *The Philadelphia Methodist*, May 18, 1889.



share her vision, she selected two eminently qualified listeners. Not only were they well-equipped to help, but they were sympathetic and willing to work in every possible way to help Mrs. Henry bring her vision to reality.

Bishop Matthew Simpson was educated as both a teacher and a physician before he entered the ministry, and was well acquainted with ministering to human need. He was a respected leader and close personal friend and confidant of President Abraham Lincoln. It was Matthew Simpson who had delivered the eulogy at the tomb of President Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois on May 4, 1865.

Mrs. Ellen Holmes Verner Simpson, known in her day as Mrs. Bishop Simpson, was educated by parents deeply devoted to the Methodist Episcopal Church. She was of great assistance to her husband in his ministry and also maintained her own strong interests in visiting and assisting the sick and poor.

Through the help of Bishop and Mrs. Simpson, Mrs. Henry was able to interest many in her dream. The Ladies' Christian Commission of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia had worked diligently to meet needs created by the Civil War. On June 14, 1865, through the efforts of Jane Henry, the Simpsons and others, a special meeting was convened. At that



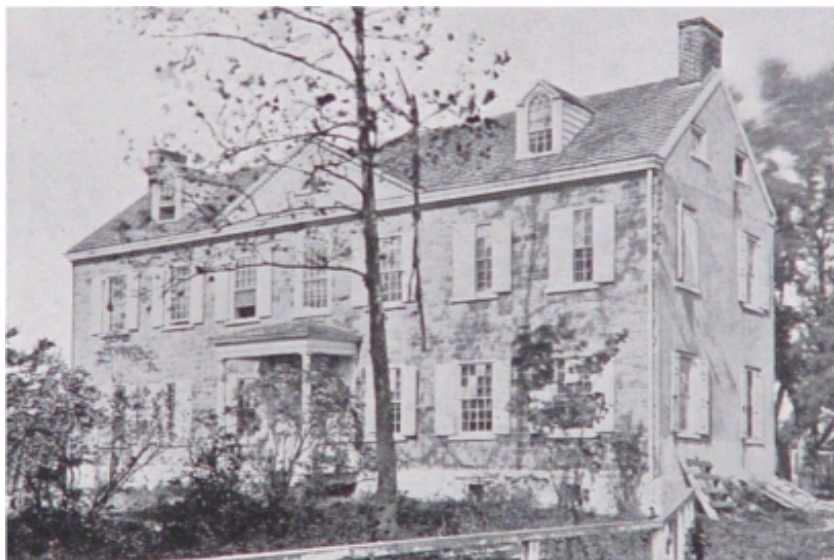
Bishop Matthew Simpson and his wife, Ellen. Mrs. Simpson took a lead role in founding both the Methodist Home for Children and Simpson House.

meeting the Ladies' Christian Commission came to an end, and a new organization was created and named:

The
LADIES' UNITED AID SOCIETY
of the
Methodist Episcopal Church
in the
City of Philadelphia
for the benefit of
AGED AND INFIRM MEMBERS

This society became the founding mothers of Simpson House.

The first page of minutes is headed with the words of Psalm 71:9, "Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth." In the body of that page, it is explained that the Ladies' Christian Commission had completed its task as the war had come to an end. The question is then raised: "And now at the joyous proclamation of peace where do we find ourselves? Sitting down and folding our hands in quietude? No, we are as ever ready to pour forth rays of light and comfort wherever we can illuminate." It



The colonial mansion on Lehigh Avenue, an early site of The Home

was with these words of love, dedication and determination that Simpson House was born.

On October 12, 1865, the facility was incorporated under the name of “The Ladies United Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the City of Philadelphia.” It was, however, stated in the constitution of the society that the institution would be called “The Methodist Episcopal Home.” Often it was referred to as “The Home” or “Home.” This is evidenced by two silver communion plates engraved with only the word “Home” and the date 1868. These plates can still be seen at Simpson House today.

The first charter established a Board of Directors composed of women, and a Board of Trustees composed of men. The women addressed the majority of issues with regard to the facility while the men dealt mostly with financial concerns. By 1889, the name “directors” was changed to “managers,” and the group became lovingly known as the Women’s Board of Managers. The term was actually quite descriptive, as the church women of Philadelphia truly managed and operated The Home. Mrs. Simpson was the first president of the Board of Managers and held that office until her death in 1897.

The first location for the new organization was a rented house on Tenth Street near Poplar. Next was a colonial mansion located on six and one half acres of ground on Lehigh Avenue, bounded by Twelfth and Thir-

The Great Fair of 1868

The following article appeared in the denominational newspaper, *The Christian Advocate* (New York) in its issue of December 10, 1868, under the heading, "From our Philadelphia Correspondent."

There opened on Monday, November 30, for the benefit of the aged and dependent members of the ME Church in this city, the grandest fair that has been held here since that which occupied one of the largest squares during the war, in aid of the funds of the "Sanitary Commission." The present fair fills the "Horticultural Hall," the largest available place for such a purpose. Twenty churches have tables richly crowded with useful and fancy articles, besides which there are five others by individuals or parties not exclusively connected with any one Church: the "Santa Claus," at which Mrs. Hannah Bangs seems to be the presiding genius, with Mrs. Rev. James Neill and Mrs. Burk; "The Home," in which articles principally made by the beneficiaries are for sale; and the Book Room table, furnished by Rev. S. W. Thomas of 1018 Arch Street. A few churches are not represented in a specific table, but it is presumed so great and popular a benevolence is not overlooked by them, and that in some other way they are co-operating.

On the evening of the opening day, Bishop Simpson delivered an appropriate address, commending the cause to a benevolent public, and invoking God's favor upon the ladies engaged in it. Two years ago they held a similar fair, and succeeded in realizing a profit of some twenty-one thousand dollars, net. They hope to exceed their former effort in profits, as they have thus far in the rich display of valuable articles.

Mrs. Bishop Simpson is the President of the Society, which has adopted this means of replenishing their treasury, and takes a deep interest in its management. Besides the tables there is an art gallery, a museum, and a restaurant, all of which are valuable tributaries. No one can visit the scene, especially at night, behold its beauty, and the unwearied industry of hundreds of ladies, toiling as they mean to do for two weeks, night and day, in selling what it has cost them time, toil and money for many weeks to provide, without thanking God for the Christian religion. It has not only elevated woman from the almost brutal degradation to which she is doomed without it, but has sent her as an angel of mercy to train the child for usefulness, to enlighten the benighted, and to provide for the aged a home of comfort, joy and gladness.

A neat little sheet, entitled *The Fair Times*, chronicles the daily progress of the enterprise with incidents and facts; and, like the little fire-fly in summer, every evening flashes its light in every part of the densely crowded hall.



The Home's second site, located at Thirteenth Street and Lehigh Avenue. The building accommodated about 100 residents.

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teenth Streets. Renovations to the mansion were required. Upon completion the house became home to twenty-five “inmates” (as the residents were then called). The original admission cost was \$100.

A long waiting list soon made it obvious that a larger building was required. A plan was created to raise funds for a new building on the Lehigh Avenue site. In 1870, the cornerstone was laid for a building which was specifically designed as a home for older persons and which would accommodate one hundred residents.

As time passed, it was determined that yet a larger building would be needed. Mrs. Simpson was instrumental in securing a gift of land from Colonel Joseph M. Bennett, a wealthy layman who owned and operated a large clothing business on Market Street, where he had once employed a young John Wanamaker. Bennett had extensive real estate holdings, and in the 1880s had donated property near the Belmont Plateau for the Methodist Episcopal Orphanage. He now decided to give an adjacent parcel to provide a new site for The Home for the Aged. On June 25, 1898, the cornerstone was laid for a new building, which was dedicated in November of 1899, by Bishop Cyrus D. Foss. This building has over the years become known as “Olde Main.”



Joseph M. Bennett (1816-1898). In addition to donating the ground for both Simpson House and the Methodist Home for Children, Bennett purchased a closed church at 12th and Melon Streets, and gave it to local African-American Methodists. This building remains the church home of Zoar United Methodist Church to this day. An advocate of women's education, Bennett also donated property to the University of Pennsylvania to endow a college for women. Today's Fisher-Bennett Hall at Walnut and 34th Streets sits on land that he provided to the university.

Olde Main was designed by the architectural firm of Hales and Ballinger in the English Gothic style. It was constructed of granite from the Port Deposit Quarry in Maryland, with trimmings of Indiana limestone. In all ways, this building was a leader in its time. It had both gas lights and electric lighting, with electricity generated on the premises. Heat was supplied by a central boiler, and was distributed by two large blowers located on the ground level, through a metal ducting system. This heating system was in operation for more than ninety years. The building was also equipped with a hydraulic elevator. The water system was also worthy of note. City water was filtered as it entered the building and was then stored in reserve tanks located in two of the turrets of the building. The tanks contained a day's supply of water in the event that city water service was interrupted.

A large surprise was discovered in 1989 during excavations in front of Olde Main in preparation for the new ground level entrance. An old well about five feet in diameter and forty-two feet deep was located. The well was constructed of hand laid stone and still contained the original brass lift pipe. It is unknown whether the well water was used for only certain purposes or whether it was considered as an additional backup for city water.



Olde Main, as it appeared shortly after its completion

EXPANSION AND GROWTH

Over the years new buildings were added to the campus. The Bennett Building was built in 1927 and the Carson Building in 1959. In 1966, the Barnes Building was added behind the Bennett Building. In 1972, the Flanagan Building was added to house a state-of-the-art nursing care facility. All of these buildings are connected with inside walkways. The trip from one end of the complex to the other is nearly a quarter mile.

A major renovation of Olde Main began in 1989. The original rooms were small and lacking private bath facilities. These have been replaced with modern studio, one and two bedroom apartments, many with their own kitchens. The former main lobby, with its lovely terrazzo floor, is now a beautiful sitting room, graced with some of the building's original furnishings, and is now known as the Terrazzo Room. Behind it is the library which occupies the central portion of the original main dining room and is of considerable architectural interest. The focal point of the room is its leaded glass ceiling, which for many years was hidden by a suspended ceiling. Also in this room is an original fireplace and mantel, which was a gift in 1898 from Hales and Ballinger, architects, for the building.

In 1993, church offices were created in a small building annexed to Olde Main, which is part of the original 1898 construction. Currently, the first floor suite houses the Office of Urban and Global Ministries for the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church. The second floor houses the office of the Central District Superintendent.

Tributes to those involved in the founding of this facility are noteworthy. The Jane Henry Chapel is a grand Victorian sanctuary. An

important part of the chapel is a beautiful stained glass window in memory of Mrs. Simpson, who sadly did not live to see the building completed. The center panel of the window depicts a figure of "Charity" holding a scroll with Mrs. Simpson's favorite quotation from scripture: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these ye have done it unto me." (Matthew 25:40) The chapel has its own grand entrance directly from the outside of the building which was provided with the thought that houses might be built near The Home, and one day the chapel would serve as a neighborhood church. This particular plan never became a reality.

Outside on the corner of the property at Belmont Avenue and Edgely Road is the statue of Bishop Matthew Simpson. An article on that statue, which was originally designed for inclusion in the Lincoln Memorial, appears in *Annals of Eastern Pennsylvania*, Number 1, published in 2004. Lastly, there is a tribute to the original building on Lehigh Avenue. In 1965, as the One Hundredth Anniversary of The Home was being observed, the 1870 cornerstone of the Lehigh Avenue building was located and placed in the granite wall of the Olde Main Building, next to the 1898 cornerstone.

CHANGES OVER THE YEARS

The Methodist Episcopal Home, The Methodist Home or, simply, The Home, were common designations. These came to an end in 1970 when the facility became Simpson House of the United Methodist Church and later Simpson House Inc. In 1972, a change in governance came when the Board of Managers and the Board of Trustees were merged into a single Board of Directors. In that same year, as an outgrowth of the former Board of Managers, the Simpson House Society came into being. Women from many area churches who had served as managers for The Home created the society, which began to function as an auxiliary for Simpson House. The purposes of the society are to encourage volunteer services to residents and to contribute to the financial well-being of Simpson House. The Simpson House Society maintains three seats on the current Board of Directors. In 1999, The United Methodist Association recognized the Simpson House Society as the "Volunteer Group of the Year." At this time, the society was commended for being part of a 134-year unbroken succession of church women volunteers pouring forth rays of light and comfort.

Simpson House is a testimony to all those who have given so freely of time, talent, and substance over the years for its benefit. The facility has remained proudly in the city where it was born, ministering to human need. Today, it is a modern continuing care retirement community, with 122 independent living apartments, 56 assisted living apartments and 154 nursing care beds. The community is truly a melting pot, ethnically, racially



A photograph of the ribbon-cutting ceremony for Simpson Mid-Town, held on October 10, 2005. Those holding the large scissors are, from the left, Kim Williams, President of Simpson Senior Services; Rev. David Powell, former President of Simpson House; Josie Kingsly, chair of the Simpson Senior Services, and Bishop Marcus Matthews.

and religiously, and has a unique and friendly spirit of its own.

In an age when people are living and remaining active longer, it is not surprising that some persons live beyond their savings. Through generous gifts, bequests, and skilled management, Simpson House provides more than three million dollars in benevolent care and unreimbursed care to its residents each year. The organization is proud of this commitment to an economically diverse population.

SIMPSON SENIOR SERVICES

Looking into the future, Simpson House worked between 1996 and 1998 to create its own parent corporation, which would oversee Simpson House and other facilities with a similar purpose and mission. Thus, Simpson Senior Services came into being.

The first community created by Simpson Senior Services is Simpson Meadows. This facility is adjacent to the Downingtown United Methodist Church and opened early in 2000. It is a fine community which offers 94 independent living apartments and 56 assisted living accommodations.

Simpson Senior Services acquired Jenner's Pond in 2002, a continuing care retirement community in West Grove, Pennsylvania. The campus is comprised of 162 independent living cottages, 119 independent living apartments, 60 assisted living units, and a 38-bed skilled nursing facility.

In 2004, Simpson Gardens opened in Lansdowne, Pennsylvania. This is an affordable senior living community composed of 41 independent living apartments. It is the fulfillment of a dream shared by Simpson Senior Services and the Garden Church, a United Methodist congregation.

The newest member of the Simpson Senior Services family is Simpson Midtown, located at Tenth and Green Streets, just blocks away from the Tenth and Poplar location of the rented house in which Simpson House began in the 1860s. Simpson Midtown is a 40-unit, independent living apartment community, and is a partnership between Simpson Senior Services, Mid-Town Parish United Methodist Church, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the City of Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority. This building is a first step toward fulfilling the need for affordable housing in the Philadelphia neighborhood where Simpson House had its beginning.

How wonderful to reflect that an organization which began pouring forth rays of light and comfort in 1865, continues to do so today.

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Simpson House

Words: B. Warner Shay

Music: Materna

Above fair Belmont's broad plateau
And hills of emerald green,
Stands Simpson House whose turrets tall
Lend glory to the scene.
O Simpson House, O Simpson House,
With pride we honor thee,
As we acclaim thy worthy name
And hail thy ministry.

Thy mindfulness of human need,
For those in sunset years,
Concern for them, and love for them
Dispels their haunting fears.
O Simpson House, O Simpson House,
Through thee their lives are blest,
Thy love and care beyond compare
Confirms thy Christ-likeness.

Thanks be to God for Simpson House,
Achieved through work and prayer;
Sustained by selfless sacrifice
Through friends who do and dare.
O Simpson House, O Simpson House,
Thy work must still go on,
Till faithfulness and nobleness
Enjoy God's word, "Well done."

Rev. B. Warner Shay (1900-1986) was a clergy member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference for 59 years, and a resident of Simpson House in retirement. He was often called the "Poet Laureate" of the Conference.

The editor would like to express his appreciation to Daniel R. Simrak of Simpson Senior Services for scanning and enhancing the photographs used in this article.