



An old photograph of Bethel Hill United Methodist Church, in Worcester Township, Montgomery County. In the fall of 2010, the congregation celebrated its 240th anniversary.

Bethel Hill UMC

240 Years of Witness

In May 2010, the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference officially designated Montgomery County's Bethel Hill UMC an Historic Site of the United Methodist Church – a recognition long overdue. Bethel Hill is the second oldest Methodist congregation in Pennsylvania (behind Old St. George's). The earliest reference to the church is in the journal of Joseph Pilmore (1743-1825), who records that on March 3, 1770, he found “a fine congregation of serious, well-behaved persons, and God gave his word success.” On Saturday, October 13, 1770, Pilmore describes traveling with Edward Evans to dedicate Bethel's first house of worship: “About 3 o'clock I preached on 1 Kings 18:27... Mr. Evans gave an excellent exhortation, and I concluded with solemn prayer. In the evening we had a love feast, and the simple hearted followers of Jesus spoke with much freedom and life.”

Pilmore refers to the location of the chapel as “Matchin”, or “Metachin,” or the like – all variations of Methacton, an old Indian name that was applied to a local range of hills, which today survives in the name of the Methacton School District. On one of those hills stood the home of Hans and Magdeline Supplee, who hosted the first worship meetings. The Supplees had a large family, six sons and eight daughters, and in 1770, they set aside a portion of their farm along the Skippack Pike for a meeting house and burial ground. Hans was first to be buried in the new cemetery, in December 1770, just two months after the chapel dedication. For many years, the church was known as “Supplee's Chapel,” and for more than a century, members of the family would remain leaders, lay preachers, and benefactors to the congregation.

In October of 1777, during the Revolutionary War, Washington's army encamped around the chapel just before the Battle of Germantown; after its defeat the army retreated back out the Skippack Pike, once more

encamped on the site, and used the chapel as a hospital for wounded soldiers. A number of them are buried in a mass grave in the church cemetery, the location indicated today by an historical marker. Another monument stands over the resting place of Peter Supplee, Hans and Magdeline's son, who died in January 1778 during the Continental Army's Valley Forge encampment.

References to Bethel are in the journals of Rev. Thomas Haskins (in 1783), Rev. William Colbert (1796-1797 and 1804) and Rev. Henry Boehm (1802-1803). In his *Reminiscences*, written in 1865, Boehm says that when Hans Supplee determined to build a chapel, "he knew but little, if anything, of the Methodists, but believed that the Lord would raise up a people in his neighborhood to serve him. It was not long before the preachers found out [about] the place, being invited by the founder of the house; a society was raised up." Boehm also mentions healing a division among the people that threatened to wreck the congregation.

The man who introduced the Supplees to Methodism and connected their group with the early Methodist network of societies, was the soldier-preacher Thomas Webb (1725-1796). Writing in 1888, historian George Lybrand said that Margaret Supplee, the widow of Hans' son Abraham, was asked shortly before her death in 1841 at the age of 91 how long she had been a Methodist; she replied, "From the very first of my hearing Captain Webb preach." Bethel Hill would remain part of a circuit of some kind for nearly two hundred years, not receiving its first full-time pastor until 1959, the Rev. Robert Sanders.

In 1845, Samuel Supplee sold a portion of his land across the Bethel Road to the congregation for \$10; that year, a new stone chapel was erected and dedicated to the worship of God. This is the church building still used for worship in 2011. In the early 1860s, under the leadership of Rev. William Ridgway, the first parsonage was built. During the pastorate of Rev. A. G. Graham (1915-1919), stained glass windows were installed in the church, and an old public school house adjoining the property was purchased, which today houses the church office and a meeting hall. In the 1990s, under the leadership of Rev. David Shellenberger, a new fellowship hall was erected and dedicated, and the sanctuary thoroughly remodeled, reversing its interior, adding a narthex and making it handicapped accessible.

The pastor serving Bethel Hill since 2008 is Rev. John Bhajjan, who oversaw a gala 240th anniversary celebration, October 9-10, 2010.