



Kensington United Methodist Church, "Old Brick," in the Fishtown section of Philadelphia, where it has stood for more than 150 years. The old church date stone is clearly visible beside the northbound lanes of I-95.

“Old Brick” UMC, Kensington After 200 Years

Methodism in the Kensington section of Philadelphia traces its origin to a split that occurred in St. George’s Church in 1801. That year about 60 leading members of the church withdrew to form what later became the Union ME Church a few blocks away on Fourth Street, in the old Academy building built for George Whitefield in 1740. The dissidents organized themselves into four classes, one of which consisted of members who lived in Kensington (then a thinly settled village on the outskirts of town). The Kensington class met in a building on “Sheep Hill,” at the corner of what later became Richmond and Crease Streets. Its leader was John Hewson, who had come to America in 1774 under the patronage of Ben Franklin, and later became a Revolutionary War hero and a prominent textile manufacturer and merchant.

In 1802, when Union Church was formally organized, oversight of the class in Kensington reverted to the leadership of St. George’s, and under the care of its preachers, who held early services under the branches of the Penn Treaty Tree, on the banks of the Delaware. In 1805, land was acquired and a brick building erected on Queen (later Richmond) Street. The third Methodist house of worship in Philadelphia, (after St. George’s and Ebenezer), it became known as “Brick Church,” and later “Old Brick” – a name that stuck.

By 1833, the membership had grown to nearly 500 members, and the church was essentially rebuilt, and dedicated July 21, 1833 by Rev. John P. Durbin. The membership continued to grow, and in 1853, an entirely new structure was erected on the same site, which was dedicated on May 24, 1854; this is the building that still stands today. A two-story building adjoining the rear of the church was built in 1872-73 as the hall of the Young Man’s Christian Association (YMCA).

Over the years, many well-known preachers ministered among the Methodists of Kensington, including: Henry Boehm, Bishop Asbury’s

traveling companion; Robert R. Roberts, who later became a Bishop; George G. Cookman, who later became US Senate Chaplain, and father to Rev. Alfred Cookman, another nationally known minister; and John S. Inskip, who became an international evangelist, and leader of the holiness and camp meeting movement.

For a time during the 19th century, Old Brick had the largest membership among the Methodist churches in Philadelphia, and it gave rise to a number of other congregations: Melody, Siloam, Summerfield, Port Richmond, Simpson Memorial and Johnson Memorial. Members of the church also were primary founders of the Kensington Soup Society, a feeding ministry among the poor; it is still a functioning institution today (as a philanthropic organization), and a history of the Soup Society was recently published by historian Kenneth Milano, with the support of Daniel Dailey, a trustee and historian for Old Brick, whose direct ancestor, Rev. David Dailey, was pastor of the church 1849-1851.

Another local site with historic ties to the church was the old Kensington ME Burial Ground (a.k.a. Hanover Street Burial Grounds). In 1826, the congregation purchased a lot at Hanover and Duke Streets (now Columbia Avenue and Thompson Street) for \$700. The cemetery was closed in 1922 to be turned into a playground (Hetzell's Playground) which still remains today. The bodies were removed to Forest Hills Cemetery (located at 101 Byberry Road in Philadelphia) to a mass grave with a single marker; the burial records were found in 2010 in a sealed safe at Old Brick.

Though Old Brick has declined in membership in recent years, and its future is uncertain, the congregation has had an enormous impact upon the neighborhood through a legacy of service and spiritual nurture stretching back more than two hundred years.