

Soudersburg's 1902 Centennial Celebration

Editor's note: The following is an account of the 100th Anniversary services of the Soudersburg Church – apparently marking the centennial of the building, not the society – held October 26, 1902, at which the above paper was read. The account appeared in the Philadelphia Methodist, the conference newspaper, of November 15, 1902, and was written by Rev. L. D. McClintock.

The centennial of this Soudersburg Methodist Episcopal Church was celebrated on October 26th. The building has undergone a complete renovation – new flooring, wainscoating, papering, stained glass windows, and new carpeting so beautiful is as to give it the appearance of a new building, and with its solid walls and slate roof it promises to endure as a landmark of Methodism in Lancaster County another hundred years. A very pretty silver communion set was the gift of Mrs. Blanche May, of Philadelphia. This is evidence of her cherished remembrance of the old church of her childhood days.

The services of the day commenced with the Sunday school at 9 o'clock, George R. Smith, superintendent. This was followed by singing and prayer, offered by Rev. L. D. McClintock. After singing a solo, which was beautifully rendered by Miss Alice Bender, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered. Dr. Jabez G. Bickerton, Presiding Elder, preached the morning sermon, which was in every respect equal to the occasion.³¹ The doctor seemed imbued with the spirit of the fathers, and conscious that he was surrounded by walls that once echoed the voice of Asbury, Whatcoat, McKendree and many other great and good men, servants of the Lord. In the afternoon, Rev. J. G. Bickerton, presiding, services began with singing, after which Rev. Amos Longenecker offered up an earnest prayer. The history of the Soudersburg Church was read by Rev. L. D. McClintock. This was followed by an old-time love feast; this was truly a feast of love; a melting time. The love of God in human

³¹Rev. Jabez G. Bickerton (1856-1941) was born in England, and immigrated to America at the age of 12 with his parents. He attended Drew Seminary, and joined the Philadelphia Conference in 1881. He served as a pastor, Presiding Elder of the West District, 1901-1906 (which included Soudersburg), Secretary of the City Missionary Society, 1906-1916, and as a delegate to the General Conferences of 1904, 1908 and 1916. He was also a charter member of the Philadelphia Federation of Churches, and received an honorary doctorate from Ursinus College. Bickerton was a gifted preacher, whose "pulpit was his throne, and ...[whose] rich emotional nature made him the master of great assemblies." *Philadelphia Conference Minutes* (1941), 216-217.



Left: Presiding Elder Jabez G. Bickerton, who preached at the centennial celebration in 1902. Right: Rev. Lorenzo D. McClintock, who was pastor of Soudersburg Church, 1884-1887, and was related to some of its early members. McClintock compiled a history of the congregation which he read at the centennial, and which forms the basis of this article.

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hearts shone from many faces; tears flowed, and songs of praise went up to God. Testimonies went back to 1836, when a memorable love feast was held in that sacred place by Rev. Joseph Lybrand, Presiding Elder.

At 7:30 PM the house was again filled, and the interest unabated. The sermon was preached by Pastor J. F. Kingsley.³² His was an excellent discourse, delivered in his energetic and impressive style, and well received by the audience. In order that the people might remain who had come from a distance, a good dinner was provided at a barn nearby. This made the noonday a social hour while lingering about the time-honored church. This is not the first time a barn was utilized in relation to this church. When the Philadelphia Conference met in Soudersburg in 1804, there were one hundred twenty-five preachers there for five days, and they slept in Jacob Souders' barn.

³²Rev. John F. Kingsley (1865-1932), a graduate of Drew Seminary, gave 37 years to pastoral ministry in the Philadelphia area. He was recalled as having "unusual ability as a sermonizer," whose messages were "a wholesome combination of doctrinal and practical preaching." *Philadelphia Conference Minutes* (1933), 171-172.

The cost of improvements on the church was over five hundred dollars. This was presented to the several congregations, and they were asked for a free-will offering to liquidate the debt, and without any special pleading, they gave liberally. Enough was given to defray all expenses, "and the people rejoiced, for they offered willingly to the Lord."³³ Much credit is due to the pastor, Rev. J. F. Kingsley, the official brethren, members and friends of the church, for beautifying and making permanent this relic of the past.

Thy glory never hence depart
 Yet choose not, Lord, this house alone;
 Thy kingdom come to every heart,
 In every bosom fix thy throne.³⁴

Editor's Postscript: The hopes for another century would not materialize, as the Soudersburg church declined. A 1917 book mentions the building, saying, "It is now rarely used, though services are sometimes conducted in it by supplies from Lancaster."³⁵ In 1919 the church was disbanded, and most of its remaining members transferred to nearby St. John's United Brethren Church. The next year, the trustees sold the property for \$500 to a start-up congregation of the Assemblies of God denomination; proceeds were given to the Methodist Church in Bird-in-Hand. Soudersburg Assembly of God discontinued its services in 1925. The building apparently sat idle for some years, until it was sold again in the 1930s, and remodeled into a private home, which it remains today, at 2948 Lincoln Highway East.³⁶

³³1 Chronicles 29:9.

³⁴McClintock quotes from the hymn, "Here in Thy Name, Eternal God," by James Montgomery (1771-1854).

³⁵Charles I. Landis, *The First Long Turnpike in the United States* (Lancaster: New Era Printing Company, 1917), 31. The same source says that a tablet on the church read "M. E. Church. Built, 1802. Rebuilt, 1872." It also notes that stones in the graveyard dated as far back as 1803, and that "at the rear end of the graveyard, colored persons, who were then more numerous in the neighborhood, were interred."

³⁶The sale of the Soudersburg property is noted in the *Philadelphia Conference Minutes* (1920), 750. In 1928, a new deed was executed to the owner, Albert Brenneman, in order to remove old restrictions; Brenneman also agreed that he, "his heirs and assigns" would "keep and maintain the said cemetery lot in good order." *Philadelphia Conference Minutes* (1928), 866. See also A. Hunter Rineer, *Churches and Cemeteries of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania: a Complete Guide* (Lancaster Historical Society, 1993), 147.



St. John's United Methodist (formerly United Brethren) Church, in Paradise, which began out of a split within the Soudersburg ME Church in 1846, and therefore may be regarded as its successor. St. John's is located about a half mile east of the old Soudersburg building.

The graveyard today has only a few stones remaining. A number of them were moved to the basement of St. John's church; a record of those which remained on the site was made in 1940.³⁷ In the 1980s, an historical marker was erected roadside near the old church. This deteriorated, and in 2006, Paradise Boy Scout Troop 28 installed a new sign which may be seen there today. Funds for this sign were donated by the grandchildren of two members of the Soudersburg Church from the early 20th century: L. Clyde Smith and Henrietta Ida Martin. Smith's parents were Sarah Elizabeth Long and George Rudolph Smith – who is mentioned above as the Sunday school superintendent in 1902.³⁸

³⁷William F. Worner, *Tombstone Inscriptions from Graveyards in Lancaster County*, vol. 6 (1940), 78. This handwritten volume at the Lancaster Historical Society also describes the condition of the property on two visits: in 1935, when the building was empty and the grounds overgrown; and again in 1940, after it had been sold to a Ruben Denlinger "and was being converted into a dwelling and business place."

³⁸*Penny Saver* (Lancaster), August 30, 2006.