



The Mrs. Bishop Simpson Memorial Window in the Jane Henry Chapel, Simpson House. The central panel depicts the figure of Charity. Christian Charity was considered her most striking personal quality. The scroll contains a modified version of Matthew 25:40, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto me."

Simpson House Becomes a United Methodist Heritage Landmark

by Rev. David R. Adam (2013)

Editor's note: Rev. David Adam is an ordained Deacon and clergy member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. He is now retired from his many years as Executive Vice President at Simpson House, but remains active in its work, and in preserving its history. It was largely through Rev. Adam's efforts and persistence that Heritage Landmark status was attained for Simpson House in 2012.

In September 2012, history was made again at 2101 Belmont Avenue! For the first time in its history, the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church selected a retirement community to be designated a United Methodist Heritage Landmark. In conferring the designation, the Rev. Dr. Robert J. Williams, General Secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History acclaimed, "The Olde Main Building at Simpson House has served faithfully for more than a century. If the walls could talk we could learn so much from the people who have lived and served here. It is only fitting and timely that the distinguished history and ministry of Olde Main be designated a Heritage Landmark."

Simpson House was founded June 14, 1865 and is the oldest Continuing Care Retirement Community, historically related to the United Methodist Church. One hundred and forty-eight years later Simpson House continues its ministry in the city in which it was born. The campus is a wonderful melting pot of diversity. The idea to create a home for aged and infirm persons came from Mrs. Jane Henry, widow of the Rev. John Henry of the Philadelphia Conference. Mrs. Henry approached Bishop and Mrs. Matthew Simpson with her idea.

Bishop Matthew Simpson was a highly respected religious leader. He was also a close personal friend and confidante of President Abraham Lincoln. His knowledge of the American people and his political thinking were greatly valued by Lincoln. Ultimately, it was Bishop Simpson who delivered the eulogy at the tomb of President Lincoln on May 4, 1865 in Springfield, Illinois. He was also called upon to help the nation to heal after the loss of its leader.

Ellen Holmes Verner Simpson had a great concern for children, the elderly and those sick or in need. Much of her time was given freely in ministry to human need. The Ladies' Christian Commission of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia worked tirelessly to meet needs brought about by the Civil War. At the close of the war, Jane Henry and the Simpsons inspired this group of churchwomen not to disband, but to change their name and focus. On June 14, 1865 the group became

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

The first residents were received into a rented house. A building was built in North Philadelphia in 1871. It soon became clear that more ground and a larger building would be needed in the future. Ground was secured at the edge of the city near the Belmont Plateau. In 1898 and 1899 our beloved "Olde Main Building" was constructed, dedicated, and occupied. It was well designed, well-built and is still in use one hundred and fourteen years later.

The Olde Main Building of Simpson House contains seventy-five independent living apartments. It is known for its Victorian charm. A highlight of the building is the Jane Henry Chapel. This sanctuary is over two stories high and is complete with balcony and beautiful stained glass windows. Olde Main was designed by the architectural firm of Hales and Ballinger and is of English Gothic style. In 1972 it was recognized as being among the city's most notable architecture as designated by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Philadelphia Chapter of The American Institute of Architects.



“Olde Main”

This building was truly a leader in 1899. It had one hydraulic elevator and both gas and electric lighting. Electricity was generated in the building. The original forced air heating system lasted for ninety years. Provisions for water were also interesting. City water was filtered as it entered the building. There were two reserve tanks, which contained a day’s supply of water, and there was a working well on the property.

Located on the grounds is a statue of Bishop Matthew Simpson, which was the work of sculptor Clark Mills, who was best known for his equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson across from the White House in Washington, DC. The Simpson statue had been designed to be included in an early version of the Lincoln Memorial, which did not materialize. This significant statue was brought here and dedicated in 1902.¹

¹For a more detailed history, see David R. Adam, “Rays of Light and Comfort: A History of Simpson House,” *Annals of Eastern Pennsylvania* 3 (2006), 3-15; see also James E. Kirby, “The Bishop Who Almost Stood with Lincoln,” *Annals of Eastern Pennsylvania* 1 (2004), 41-47.

THE CASE FOR LANDMARK STATUS

Simpson House was previously awarded Historic Site status in 2005, a designation granted by an annual conference to a church or church-related institution which has local historic significance. Heritage Landmark designation, however, can only be granted by the General Conference, for sites which have played an important historic role in the development of the entire United Methodist movement. Heritage Landmarks which have been recognized previously within Eastern Pennsylvania are St. George's Church, Mother African Zoar Church, Albright's Chapel, Boehm's Chapel, and Long's Barn.

In the application submitted to the General Commission on Archives and History, the following summary was included to make the case for designating Olde Main as a Heritage Landmark:

- Simpson House is the oldest Continuing Care Retirement Community historically related to the United Methodist Church. It was born of Philadelphia Methodism. The Olde Main Building has been devoted completely to the ministry of provision and care for persons as they age, and ministry with those aging persons, for all of its one hundred and fourteen years. These ministries have been a vital component of the fabric of Methodism and our legacy of social justice ministries.
- Historically, the building was innovative and a leader of its time.
- Architecturally, the building is designated as among Philadelphia's most notable buildings.
- The significant leadership of Bishop and Mrs. Matthew Simpson in the organization had enormous impact on it, both philosophically and in a very practical sense. Mrs. Jane Henry was astute in seeking their assistance. Mrs. Simpson was the first president of The Women's Board of Managers. She herself secured the gift ground on which Olde Main was built, from Philadelphia philanthropist Joseph M. Bennett.
- The statue of Bishop Simpson on the property for one hundred and eleven years exists because Simpson was known worldwide as a religious leader and because he was a friend and confidant of President Abraham Lincoln. It is most fitting that this historically significant statue graces the grounds of Simpson House.



An early 20th century photograph of residents.

HOW THE DESIGNATION WAS ACHIEVED

In 2004 The Eastern Pennsylvania Conference Commission on Archives and History (CAH) decided to attempt to have the Olde Main Building of Simpson House recognized by the conference as an Historic Site. The forms were completed and approved, and the Historic Site designation was granted at the 2005 Eastern Pennsylvania Conference session. On Saturday, May 20, 2006, during the annual Simpson House “Anniversary Day” celebration, there was a ceremony during which Olde Main was dedicated as United Methodist Historic Site #425.

Encouraged with this progress, the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference (CAH) decided to press on and attempt to obtain a Heritage Landmark designation for Olde Main. All the forms were completed and submitted in 2007. However, due to changes which occurred within the General Commission on Archives and History (GCAH), the question of Heritage Landmark status for Olde Main did not come before the General Conference of 2008. The next possible chance for this to happen would be in 2012. Therefore, the subject fell into the shadows.

On September 16, 2010, the retired clergy and spouses of Eastern Pennsylvania Conference held their annual meeting at Simpson House. The speaker of the afternoon was noted Methodist historian, Kenneth E. Rowe. Dr. Rowe spoke about the beginning of Methodist involvement in caring for the elderly.²² During the course of his remarks, he declared, "Simpson House is the mother home of our kind." A number of those present were interested in Simpson House and its history, and lent their support to renewed efforts to petition the General Conference. In due course, the EPA Conference Commission on Archives and History decided again to pursue Heritage Landmark status for Olde Main at the 2012 General Conference.

The local Commission on Archives and History presented a resolution to the 2011 Annual Conference, which was unanimously approved. In the resolution, the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of The United Methodist Church and the Conference Commission of Archives and History jointly requested that the General Commission on Archives and History recommend the Olde Main Building of Simpson House to the General Conference of 2012 for recognition as a Heritage Landmark. With the assistance and recommendation of the GCAH, the General Conference granted the designation.

The General Commission on Archives and History held its 2012 annual meeting in Philadelphia, September 13–16. The all-day business meeting was held at Simpson House in the Olde Main Building on Friday, September 15. Part of the program that day was a Service of Celebration, held in the Jane Henry Chapel, to recognize the designation of the Olde Main Building as a United Methodist Heritage Landmark. During the service, the Heritage Landmark plaque was presented and a prayer of consecration was offered for the newly created Archives Room. This room is located near the Jane Henry Chapel in Olde Main, and contains all of the written records of Simpson House dating back to June 4, 1865. In addition, there are numerous artifacts on display.

A final highlight of the service was the presentation of a nearly life-sized portrait of Ellen Verner Simpson for display in Simpson House, which she was instrumental in founding. The portrait was presented as a long term loan by the Drew University Library, in collaboration with the General Commission on Archives and History.

²²The paper Dr. Rowe gave that day was later published in this journal. See Kenneth R. Rowe, "'Three Great Charities': Philadelphia as the Cradle of Methodist Health Care Initiatives in Victorian America," *Annals of Eastern Pennsylvania* 8 (2011), 23-41.



A photo taken at the dedication, September 14, 2012. Left to right: Rev. Dr. Robert J. Williams, General Secretary of the GCAH; Rev. David Adam, Director of Church Relations, Simpson Senior Services; Roseann M. Smith, Simpson House Executive Director; Kim W. Williams, Simpson Senior Services President and CEO; Bishop Jeremiah J. Park; and Rev. Bob Walk, Simpson House Chaplain. The communion table is the original from 1898, with Landmark Heritage plaque on the left and one of two original communion plates on the right. The plates are engraved with the words “HOME” and “1868” (in those days Simpson House was referred to as “The Home”).

September 14, 2012 was truly a wonderful day in the life of Simpson House, where spirits were already elevated by anticipation of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary in 2015. Planning has already begun for celebrating that milestone.

It has always been said that Simpson House stands on “hallowed ground.” On the occasion of the one hundred twenty-fifth anniversary, Bishop Susan Morrison declared that Simpson House is truly “holy space” on “holy ground.” As we consider the history, mission, and ministry of Simpson House, it is truly fitting that the Olde Main Building is now a United Methodist Heritage Landmark.