



The Seventh Street Methodist Episcopal Church, photographed about the time it was built in 1884. This church stood until it was destroyed by fire in 1919; the congregation rebuilt the next year.

Mid-Town Parish United Methodist Church

Phoenix of Philadelphia Methodism

Today's Mid-Town Parish United Methodist Church, with its property located at Seventh and Norris Streets in North Philadelphia, has a remarkable history of rising from the ashes, Phoenix-like, to continue a legacy of service that has reverberated well-beyond its immediate neighborhood.

The congregation traces its origin to the occasional visits of Methodist preachers to the village known as Cohocksink, long before it was made part of the City of Philadelphia. In 1827, layman John Riday opened his home there for Methodist prayer and preaching services, and in 1829 the fledgling body purchased an old church building, moving it to the corner of 5th Street and Germantown Avenue. This structure burned down in 1831, causing the society to disband for a time. The church was re-inaugurated in 1835, under the leadership of Rev. C. F. Steinman, a local preacher associated with the St. John's ME Church. Steinman formed and led a Methodist class meeting, and in 1837 organized a board of trustees, who met for the first time in the home of Mr. Riday. They soon acquired an old frame chapel that had been used by a Presbyterian mission and also an independent Methodist body.

In 1840, under the leadership of Rev. C. A. Lippincott, (who supplemented his meager preacher's salary by working as a dentist), a new structure was erected and dedicated. This, in turn, was replaced by a two-story stone church in 1858, under the leadership of Rev. Thomas A. Fernley, and dedicated by Bishop Levi Scott. The church grew in the mid-19th century, and in the early 1880s erected a grand new, stone church, at the corner of 7th and Norris Streets. The basement story was dedicated and opened by Bishop Matthew Simpson in February 1884, and the sanctuary dedicated by Bishop E. G. Andrews in July of the same year. Two years later, the congregation changed its name from Cohocksink to Seventh Street Methodist Episcopal Church. In June 1919, this building was also destroyed by fire, but the congregation was

determined to start over. A new stone church was rebuilt on the property, and dedicated to the glory of God in October 1920 by Bishop Joseph F. Berry.

As the neighborhood changed over the years, the congregation became an oasis of hope, with the building hosting many outreach and service programs among the poor. In the 1950s, Seventh Street became the central church of the cooperative "Mid-Town Parish," a name by which the congregation has been known ever since, though at the time it banded together several Methodist congregations in common ministry and leadership.

In 2005 the congregation lost its church home yet again, when the Seventh Street building was razed after being condemned as unsafe. Yet the people are again determined to rebuild, continuing to meet for worship in a local community center, and setting aside monies to start a new building fund. In 2008, a team of pastors and laypersons from a variety of churches in Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs banded together to create the "Mid-Town Parish Vision Table," to come alongside the congregation and assist them in finding the resources and expertise to build anew. The Central District, under the leadership of District Superintendent William Gary George, committed to embrace Mid-Town's rebuilding efforts as a district-wide effort, and a service of celebration to launch the effort was held October 19, 2008, hosted by Wayne United Methodist Church.

Outstanding pastorates at Mid-Town have included that of Rev. William B. Wood, who served three separate pastoral terms in the late 19th century, each marked by great numerical growth. In 1879, while serving the congregation, Wood became one of the founders and the first president of the Ocean City (New Jersey) Tabernacle Association, which founded the city, and continues to be in ministry today. Another remarkable pastor was the Rev. Frank E. Kensill, under whose four decades of leadership the congregation became a focal point for much of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference's ministry among the poor of North Philadelphia.

Noteworthy members of the church have included J. Lincoln Hall and Irvin Mack, who owned a popular gospel music publishing company for many years. Hall also composed the music for the still-popular hymn, *Does Jesus Care?* Another great hymn writer associated with the church was C. Austin Miles, who was the organist and choir director in the

early 20th century. Miles composed the popular hymn *In The Garden*, which the Seventh Street choir was the first ever to sing:

*And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.*

Mid-town’s heritage of outreach and service for Christ has endured many changes and challenges, including now three tragic losses of its church home. Yet today, this resilient people, led by Pastor Reginald Monte, is determined to arise from the ashes once more, and is working to reestablish its presence in the neighborhood, and see the day when they will once again have a center for ministry and mission at the corner of Seventh and Norris Streets.

Mid-Town’s building
at Seventh and Norris
Streets, erected in 1920
and torn down in 2005.

