

Sunday, Dec 26, 2021

Jeanne Robson

Today we celebrate the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first service held on this site. Do you know how St. Peter's came to be? What was it like here in the mid 1800's? Who took those first steps in faith and why? Let's start by looking at what this area was like back then.

The town of Glenside consisted of a half-dozen houses surrounded by farm land. The early residents began to arrive in and around 1850, and, by 1855, a scattering of houses had also appeared in Weldon which was to the north of Glenside. In 1857, the North Penn Railroad was built and was later known as the Reading Railroad.

Although not well developed, there were roads that led through the area even earlier in history. Limekiln Pike bore its name prior to 1716 and Washington Lane was laid out in 1735 as a path between the Abington Meeting House and Germantown. Easton Road, known by various names such as the Germantown & Willow Grove Turnpike or Plank Road, was completed in 1852. A stagecoach ran from Germantown to Hatboro, and the Weldon Hotel, known later as Casa Conti Restaurant and now as the New Life Church, was a stopover for accommodations.

The first church in the area of Glenside was the Harmer Hill Methodist Church, built in 1852 in the vicinity of Limekiln Pike and Church Road. The church was torn down in 1899 and the ground purchased by W. W. Harrison for his home, Grey Towers. This became Beaver College's castle and the place now known as Arcadia University.

Episcopal Churches had already been started in the area. The oldest such church is St. Thomas' Church, Whitemarsh, which was first formed in 1702. Other churches formed between 1856 and 1861 included Church of Our Savior, Jenkintown, St. Paul's Church, Elkins Park, and Church of the Messiah, Gwynedd.

The Community Hall of the Ladies' Soldiers Aid Society on Easton Road had been built during the Civil War on ground purchased from Russell Smith. The Hall was first occupied for sewing, bandage making, cloth collecting, and even cooking for the men in hospitals at that time. In 1940, the Peter Muhlenberg Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution placed a stone marker in front of what was the old parish house.

The marker, which is still in front of our current parish hall, reads:

COMMEMORATING THE SKIRMISH OF EDGE HILL  
FOUGHT DECEMBER 7, 8, 1777 DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION  
ON THE RIDGE NORTH OF THIS GROUND.  
DURING THE CIVIL WAR 1861 – 1865, THE WOMEN OF THIS COMMUNITY  
MADE BANDAGES AND DRESSINGS  
HERE IN WELDON HALL WHICH STOOD ON THIS SITE

In the summer of 1873, Mrs. Ellen Davis with her husband Henry and Mrs. Emma A. Merritt, all members of the Church of Our Savior, started the Weldon Sunday School in the Community Hall with ten students. The first class was held August 31, 1873.

During the following year, two or three public services were held at the Hall by Rev. R. Francis Colton, Rector of Church of Our Savior. As attendance increased, additional services were held by different clergy until March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1880 at which time the Bishop Stevens asked Rev. William S. Heaton to take charge of the mission, which included holding a Service on Sunday afternoons and teaching a Bible Class to adults.

A year later, the Bishop visited the mission and confirmed seven adults. There appeared to be a growing need for an actual church in this area.

Ellen Davis so convinced her brother-in-law, Thomas Smith, of the need in Weldon that he promised to build a frame church at the cost of \$3,000 if Russell Smith would give the lot desired, just north of the Community Hall. The agreement between the Smiths was made and building began in July of 1881 and was completed by the first of December of that year.

The Sunday School, under the management of Mr. and Mrs. Davis, furnished the pews and heater. Mrs. Thomas Smith and two nieces presented a Communion Set, which we still use, fair linen, a Bishop's chair and two additional chairs for the Chancel. The chairs now reside in the Parish Hall entry from Easton Road. Ellen Davis could be considered our founding mother because of her vision for a Sunday School. Now I wish to give you a little background of our founding fathers, who had the same last name but were not related.

Russell Smith was born in Scotland in 1812. He came to America in 1819 with his parents settling in Pittsburgh. As an adult, Russell, who was already painting, was urged by Edwin Forrest, noted actor and Philadelphian, to come to Philadelphia to paint for the stage. He continued to study art here and became a scene painter at the Chestnut and Walnut Street Theaters. He then began to paint landscapes to such a degree that his painting, *Cave at Cheltenham Hills*, was exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876. He also became known as a draftsman and did work on geological studies of both Pennsylvania and Virginia. When the Academy of Music was being built, he was engaged to paint the scenery and the drop curtain. Russell Smith had designed and built a unique home and studio in Weldon on the hill above the Community Hall. The stone building became known locally as the "Castle." Russell Smith died November 8, 1896. His son, Xanthus, born in 1839, became a well-known artist as well, having work hung in the Academy of Fine Art and the Union League of Philadelphia. He remained at the "Castle" where he raised his children.

Thomas Smith, our third founder, was a wealthy, gentleman farmer from Philadelphia, President of the Bank of North America and a Lieutenant of the First City Troop. Although his main home was in the city, he owned a summer residence, called *Willieside*, which was located between Fairhill and Rosemore Avenues on Easton Road. *Willieside* was an imposing place, as one can tell from the following description. The entrance to the mansion was at Rosemore and Easton Roads. This entrance was guarded by immense iron gates with life-size lion heads fixed to the center of each. The main drive through the gates ran back to the house which was located at the triangle of Rosemore, Cliveden, and Roberts Avenues. On the main drive there was a first-class bowling green set in the shade of great trees. Farther along the main drive were apple orchards. To the left of the gates a second road went to the mansion but it supposedly went to a different entrance, possibly for tradesmen. To the right of the gates a third road wound through woods to a pond with a boathouse and boats. From the top of the mansion, on a clear day, Thomas Smith could see the ships on the Delaware River. The Rosemore Apartments now stand on only part of the original site. While staying in their Glenside home

during the summer, the Thomas Smith family attended the Church of Our Savior, until the church in Weldon was completed. The Weldon church was called St. Peter's, after Smith's home church at Third and Pine.

The first service was held Christmas Day, 1881, at 3:00 pm by Rev. Heaton. The first morning service was held in the church on Trinity Sunday, June 4, 1882. The Sunday School then met at regular intervals with a service and celebration of the Holy Communion once each month in the afternoon.

St. Peter's journey to become a member of the Diocese was different from our neighboring churches. In 1881, it was apparent that there were not enough members to support a church at that time. So, it was thought best to turn the church property over to "the Trustees of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Pennsylvania," a society, which was then being incorporated for the purpose of holding the titles of Mission Churches and looking after the interests of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State. Bishop Stevens appointed Russell Smith, Thomas Smith, Xanthus Smith, and Charles E. Kelly, as Trustees "to take charge of all the interests of the Church in connection with the Bishop of the Diocese," This transfer of property occurred on September 27, 1881 before the building was completed. Thereafter, St. Peter's was known as the "Bishop's Chapel." On May 22, 1882, Rev. Heaton officially became Priest-in-Charge of St. Peter's.

Thomas Smith died on May 29, 1883, and his widow, Mary E. K. Smith, stepped into the picture. On June 17 of that year, Bishop Stevens consecrated the church under the title St. Peter's Chapel, Weldon. The document of consecration hangs in our Library.

Mrs. Smith continued to generously finance the little church in memory of her husband. First she purchased additional land, approximately three-quarters of an acre, north and east of the church which included a farm house to be used by the minister. She offered to enclose the church in stone, added stained glass windows, and contributed more than half the money for a Pipe organ. A cornerstone was laid April 23, 1884. Mrs. Smith also had a pointed steeple or spire placed on the tower. The organ was used for the first time on Sunday October 26, 1884.

In December of that year, Mrs. Smith bought the land adjoining the church to the south where the Community Hall of Weldon stood. The old frame building of the Ladies' Soldiers Aid Society was razed in July 1885 and a new stone Parish House was erected at a cost of \$5,000.00. The cornerstone was laid August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1885 and the building was completed and occupied by December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1885.

As time passed and the property continued to change, so did the ministers. The ministers in charge were given the title Vicar because they were appointed by the Bishop and served by his wishes only. Some called themselves Rector. The first minister, Rev. Heaton has already been mentioned. He resigned in June 1885. The succession of Vicars continued with Rev. Alfred Rickert until 1892 and then Rev. David Lovejoy was here from 1893 until 1894. In the fall of 1894, the Bishop appointed Rev. Hugh Miller as Vicar. Mr. Miller was appointed a committee of one to draft bylaws and, with the help of Trustee Kelly, to find the money to supply the church with the authorized version of prayer books and hymnals. Bylaws were adopted in 1896 and these rules continued in operation until 1952.

As the end of the century approached, the Trustees discussed the needs of the church at their meetings. When reading the minutes, one realizes that some things rarely change. In the spring of 1899, the financial report showed a profit of \$136.86, considered to be the result of using the new envelope system. Later that

year, the Trustees declined to accept the assessment applied to St. Peter's. The Music Committee engaged an organist and a choir for the coming year.

Mrs. Mary E. K. Smith died July 9, 1900. She left a will that stated St. Peter's was to receive the income from a \$30,000 endowment. Without her direct financial support, the church suffered. The salary of the Rector was considerably in arrears and finally, Rev. Miller decided it would be better to relieve the church of the burden of his salary and he resigned October 1st. There was fear the church would have to be closed. The choir was dispensed with but the Trustees resolved to pay the organist \$22.50 per month with the understanding that he would organize a volunteer choir.

It was finally decided to hire a lay reader until such time as the church could afford to call a rector. Finally, word came from the Bishop that John Schunck would act as minister in charge for \$600 a year, but that he would have to be paid more when he was ordained. Mr. Schunck was called and remained for fifteen years. He came to St. Peter's when the parish was at a very low point in its existence. The normal Sunday attendance was six or seven worshippers. On December 1, 1901, the Trustees felt a need and hired a coach to run between Glenside and Weldon and approved a post light by the church steps to help with attendance.

In 1909, the minutes state that the Rector was empowered to take up the subject of the water supply for the Rectory with the necessary plumbing to make the water service effective. Also, a Bell telephone was installed. The salary of the Vicar was fixed at \$1,296 per year. In 1911, electricity for the Parish Building was discussed. The annual report for 1913-1914 showed there were 80 communicants with 6 teachers and 50 students in the Sunday School. By 1915, the church needed a new roof. Again, a period of depression and financial difficulty struck. There was a war going on. However, groups of people worked hard to help the little church. Different women's groups, especially the Altar Guild, raised money for expenses.

In September 1916, Rev. George Copeland was appointed Vicar. At that time there were 60 communicants and all were present at his first service. His first meeting with the Trustees resulted in the following notes: Firewood was needed for the church, the accumulated ashes needed to be removed, and the organ was out of order and needed repairs. It was then resolved that the Church Guild and the Altar Guild raise funds for the lighting of the church and rectory. They also discussed the printing of a monthly bulletin. The first bulletin was dated November 1916. In the April 1917 Bulletin, Rev. Copeland reported that electric lights were now installed in the church and the Rectory. He also spoke about the war and how life had taken on a new intensity.

Each Bulletin became a mini report of upcoming events, what had happened since the last Bulletin, and when meetings would be held. As the years progressed, the Bulletin listed choir members, the sexton or caretaker, the organist as well as baptisms, marriages, confirmations, and burials that had taken place.

Dr. Copeland decided to resign in 1950 after a long ministry. His time at St. Peter's coincided with two world wars and a depression. This made it a very difficult time, not just for the country, but for the church and its parishioners as well. His steady hand and his wife's welcoming heart made the church feel like a family.

My parents felt this their first Sunday in 1948. They had set out by bus to attend St. Anne's Church in Abington at a summer service. Arriving there, they found, due to a schedule change, they had missed the service. Someone on the grounds told them about St. Peter's and how to get there. They arrived in time and

were met by Mrs. Copeland. Once she found out how they arrived, she made sure they met some of the congregation and had a ride home to Roslyn. They never went to St. Anne's.

It was not until the church had grown into one of the largest churches in the area that the Trustees attempted to become a church independent of the Bishop and was finally admitted to Convention in 1952. Bishop Oliver Hart had supported St. Peter's in their endeavors both financially and spiritually for a number of years. Because of this continued support by this one special Bishop, there is a carved wooden plaque in the sanctuary that honors him.

The Bishop's Chapel, St. Peter's, Weldon, officially became St. Peter's Church, Glenside, with the ability to call its own rectors and making its own decisions as of 1952. Rev. Back became its first elected Rector. The Board of Trustees became the Vestry. The church was part of the Diocese and had a vote.

A seal representing St. Peter's was designed. The seal shows two symbols of St. Peter, the crowing cock signifying St. Peter's denial of Christ and the crossed keys signifying that Christ entrusted the keys of heaven to St. Peter. The three little blacksmith hammers represented the important role the Smiths played in the founding of St. Peter's Church. This helps us to remember where we came from.

The church continued to grow as did the community around it. Three services on Sunday mornings were well attended. A new house for the Sexton was built in 1953 for \$12,000. The house is where the stable had been built for the first rectors. The old church seated 144, and the new church was designed to seat 500. The new church was built from 1955-1956 and was consecrated in June 1958. A new Parish Hall was built and all spaces were in full use by the end of 1959. At that time there were 1000 communicants and 579 in Sunday School. Times continued to change and the church and the congregation did too. One thing stayed the same, a close community of caring people.

Now in 2021, we, the congregation, are taking the next steps in this new stage of our journey together. Just as we did when we called the last four rectors, we, will be asked to decide where we want to go with our newest rector. We do this by completing a survey which helps us see where we are now in our journey of faith and what kind of qualities and assets we would like to see in our new rector. The answers are used to compile a profile that is sent out to the Episcopal world to search for interested applicants. The results are also used to determine which applicants are kept and which are removed from further review. It is an interesting process. In our history, and not counting Rev. Copeland who stayed with us for 34 years, the average time for our rectors has been about ten and a half years. Each minister brings new ideas, different skills, and offers different opportunities to help us grow as a congregation and as individuals. For many of you, this is a new experience. I urge you to join with the Vestry in our next steps forward. Thank you.