

The Episcopal Church in Camden
Report of the Historiographer to the 225th Annual Diocesan Convention

History reveals the past and the past too often is mourned as the golden era now dead and gone. The closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, perhaps unwittingly, made the point that when one flame goes out the struggle begins for another flame to burst forth. That struggle to bring a future from a dead flame is a lesson our Church could emulate in our cities.

The "Golden Age" of the Episcopal Church in Camden began in the year 1830 when the first meeting of a congregation to be called St. Paul's was held. However, there was mention of the Episcopal Church as early as 1820 when, on May 21st of that year, Bishop Croes preached in the Academy of Camden to the "Episcopalians, and others, residing in that village."

Ten years after Croes characterized Camden as a village, it blossomed into a small city. On March 12, 1830, the first known meeting was held that led to the establishment of St. Paul's. The City Hall was made available to this small congregation for its worship. The Rt. Rev. George Washington Doane laid the cornerstone of the present structure on April 22, 1834 and, on June 1, 1835, consecrated the church. The influx of industrial and manufacturing businesses during the second half of the 19th century spurred growth both in both the city and the church. The zenith was reached for St. Paul in 1905 when it was the second largest parish in the diocese and the next thirty years or so saw St. Paul's continue to thrive.

In this lively era St. Paul's initially established three missions. The **first**, named St. John's, was located in the lower part of the city, according to the Rector of St. Paul's. It began sometime in 1850 and 1851, as a Sunday School Mission and by 1852 was admitted into union with the Convention. It grew rapidly and became, with St. Paul's, one of Camden's two strongest Episcopal Churches. The **second**, St. James', was located in North Camden at Coopers Point while the **third**, St. Stephen's, was located on 11th and Cooper Streets. Each of these was established as a Sunday School ministry. The strategy at that time appears to have been to start Mission Sunday Schools at appropriate locations and eventually develop them into mission chapels. This strategy was successful both in the city and, a few decades later, in the ministry to the Pines. The Dean of the Burlington Convocation reported in 1892 that St. James had acquired a building for services while the Bishop mentioned that the cornerstone of St. James' Chapel was laid by the rector of St. Paul's in October of 1881. There is confusion regarding congregations named "St. James." In the "*St. Paul's Helper*" of November 1891, we find the following: "St. James' Chapel inherits its title from a Mission of the same name, started about fifteen years ago by the Rev. [T]heophilus [M]axwell Reilly, a former rector of St. John's Church, but at that time without charge of a parish." The first services were in a private dwelling, at the corner of Fourth and Vine Streets. It later moved to a vacant store at Second and Main Streets. The location was unsuitable and the ministry was abandoned after two or three years. It appears that the St. James' that acquired a building in 1892 is the second congregation of that name and the one *St. Paul's Helper* reports as the inheritor of the title. By 1917 the St. James' Mission ended and the property at Front and North Streets was sold. In addition to these strong missions there was mention of a mission in 1841 located in North Cramer Hill

In 1886, the rector of St. Paul's mentioned two new works or missions; St. Wilfrid Mission Chapel of Cramer Hill and St. Paul Mission Chapel, location not given. St. Wilfrid Chapel was less than a year old and in September of 1885, Bishop Scarborough held the first service there. By 1887 St. Wilfrid's was no longer connected with St. Paul's Parish but the latter had opened a new mission somewhere in North Camden.

Bishop Scarborough's report to the Convention of 1897 told of a recently erected substantial stone Church, a mission of St. Paul's, now called St. Stephen's. It, too, grew steadily and by 1907 reported 152 families and parts of families. However, by 1926, at a Parish meeting, the church voted to close and sell its property and the 1927 Convention declared it to be extinct. There was a conflict between the Diocese and St. Paul's as to the ownership of the property. Evidently it took some years to straighten out the problem but St. Stephen's was once again declared extinct by the 1947 Convention. Funds from the sale of St. Stephen's were still in the hands of the Trustees of Church Property.

There were really two attempts to start St. Stephen's. The November 1891 edition of *St. Paul's Helper*, quoted above, also reports the start of a St. Paul's Mission Sunday-school in 1866 by the Rev.

T.M. Reilly with the assistance of two members of St. John's Divinity School on South Broadway. The Sunday-school started in a dilapidated building at the eastern end of Cooper Street. It later moved to Cooper Street above 11th where the stone chapel began

St. John's, too, was active in spreading the Gospel. By 1871 a mission was mentioned in the Stockton area to be known as the Church of Our Saviour and, in the appendix to his address of 1872, Bishop Odenheimer reported consent given to the formation of a new parish in Camden called Christ Church. The rector, in his 1886 report to Convention, mentioned four "branch Sunday Schools" in outlying districts of Camden that contributed 400 scholars to the 200 at St. John's!

The only one identified was St. Barnabas Sunday School that was meeting in a frame building. The work here began in September of 1885 and met in the old "Myrtle Club House" located on the southwest corner of Second and Clinton Streets (3rd Ward). The following December a temporary frame building was built on four lots totaling 80' by 105' on Washington Street west of Third and one month later, January 3, 1886, Sunday Services were begun there. The lots cost \$3200, \$1200 of which was donated by the rector and the building cost \$1,050, \$600 of which also was donated by the rector. In 1891 the daily Eucharist was instituted and the mission placed under the jurisdiction of St. Andrew's Church. Records in the Diocesan Archives show that St. Barnabas apparently was absorbed by St. Andrew's sometime in 1895.

St. Andrew's Sunday school, in the 5th Ward, was located at 233 Kaighn Avenue starting in September of 1885. So rapid was the growth that in a few weeks it was necessary to rent the 3rd floor at 249 Kaighn Avenue (Gour's Hall). A year later a structure was erected on Third Street below Kaighn Avenue and was first occupied about November 1, 1886. Sunday Services began in January of 1887. On May 1, 1889, St. Andrew's became an independent parish. The brief history of the St. Andrew's found in the Bicentennial History of our Diocese, *Forward With Christ*" (1885) clearly indicates that today's congregation was not a continuance of a previous St. Andrew's, but apparently was unaware of its existence. It is interesting to note that both St. Stephen's and St. Andrew's existed and were named after previously failed congregations.

In the same year plus a month after the start of both Barnabas and Andrew, October of 1885, St. Agnes' Sunday school began at 318 Spruce Street but soon moved to 239 Pine Street. Lay readers met the needs of this Sunday school that was seen as an extension of the St. John's Sunday school.

In the 7th Ward in the month of October 1885, St. Mary's Sunday school began operation at 714 Spruce Street and shortly later, moved to 619 Spruce Street. Due to a lack of proper quarters, the ministry ended on October 18, 1891.

The last outreach of venerable St. John's was that of St. Augustine. It was formed about June 1, 1888, and located at 744 Chestnut Street, a former school house. Although Sunday afternoon services were begun that August, Morning and Evenings Services, and an afternoon Sunday school began in earnest about June 1, 1889. The cornerstone was laid at the corner of Ninth and Sycamore Streets on August 7, 1899. The expansion of Highway I-676 caused the temporary merger with St. John's and, shortly after, St. Augustine purchased the property of St. John's and became sole occupants of that old and venerable building.

One of the lessons taught by the history of the Church in Camden is that small beginnings often lead to large results. The use of empty buildings for Sunday schools allowed the sponsoring congregations to spend their money on program and not on buildings. In addition, the strong emphasis on Sunday schooling at times led to the establishment of congregations as the adults followed the children. This lesson learned over a century ago just may be a lesson whose time has come again. The Sunday schools of the 19th century were invariably formed and led by lay people, another lesson that stands repeating. Hopefully, another "Golden Age" for the Episcopal Church in Camden is on the near horizon.

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