

A Pictorial Record of Great Valley Presbyterian Church

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During the 74 years that the Tredyffrin Easttown History Club/Historical Society has published its *History Quarterly*, there have been no less than six interesting and informative articles written about the Presbyterian Congregation in Tredyffrin, the original designation for the now 300-year-old Christian gathering today referred to as the Great Valley Presbyterian Church. This body of collected work is well done and compelling, and deserves a second look by parishioners and historians. The articles are as follows:

Ruth Moore Styer, "The Great Valley Presbyterian Church," Vol. 8, No.1 (November, 1953)

Emily Wilson Nassau, "Early Memories and an Historical Sketch of Great Valley Presbyterian Church," Vol. 14, No. 4 (October, 1967)

Mary Robertson Ives, "Great Valley Presbyterian Church," Vol. 22, No. 4 (October, 1984)

Eleanor D. Chworowsky, "The Wilsons and Great Valley Presbyterian Church," Vol. 22, No. 4 (October, 1984)

Mary Robertson Ives, "Great Valley Presbyterian Church," Vol. 32, No.1 (January, 1994)

Then ... and Now: "Great Valley Presbyterian Church Carriage Sheds," Vol. 45, No.1 (Winter 2008)

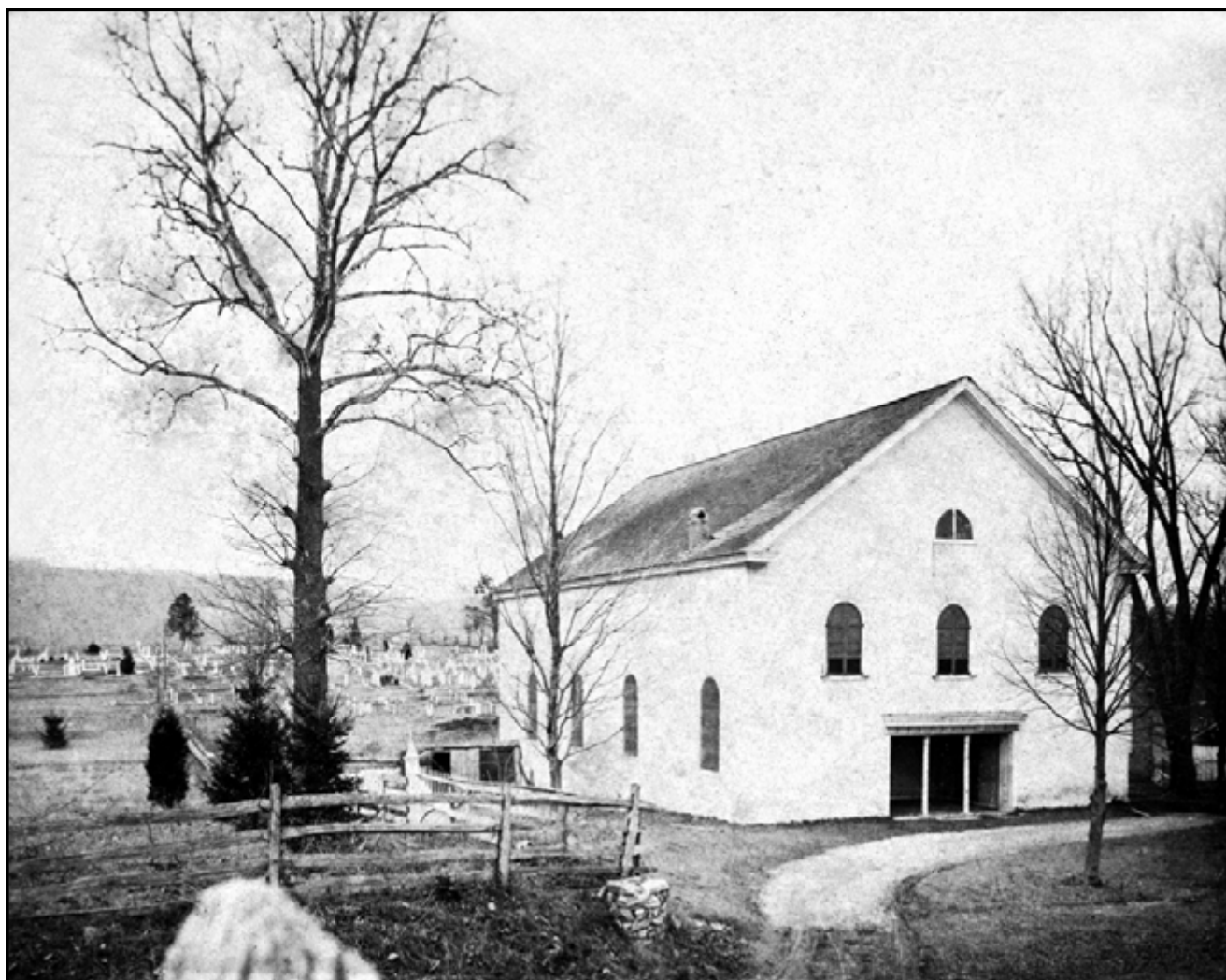
Each article can be easily found on the website of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society (www.tehistory.org; click the Publications tab), or in hard copy at one of our local public libraries.

But, with the exception of the last-named *Then ... and Now* feature, what the articles lack are images from those bygone times to illustrate the details and changes occurring over the generations. Therefore, instead of writing another textual piece on this historic congregation to acknowledge its 300th year, it was decided to

choose some of the best images from among the scores that exist in the church's excellent archives, and couple each with captions useful to the reader's understanding.

I spoke to Mrs. Mary Robertson Ives, active member of the Great Valley Presbyterian Church for almost nine decades and its former church historian, as well as a long-time contributing member of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society. Mrs. Ives invited me to visit her, and together we created captions for each of these classic images from the church archives that we hope will be equally informative to long-time congregants as well as the freshest newcomer to the community.

I must also thank the following individuals without whose help this project could not have been accomplished: Church secretary Karen Bittenbender for locating all necessary archival materials for review; Church historians Betty Colmery and Craig Erickson, and Sexton Steven Leach, for enthusiastically sharing their knowledge of their church; and Sarah Yake and Mrs. Norma Kouba Diem, daughter and sister respectively of Mrs. Doris Kouba Yake, featured in one of the images.

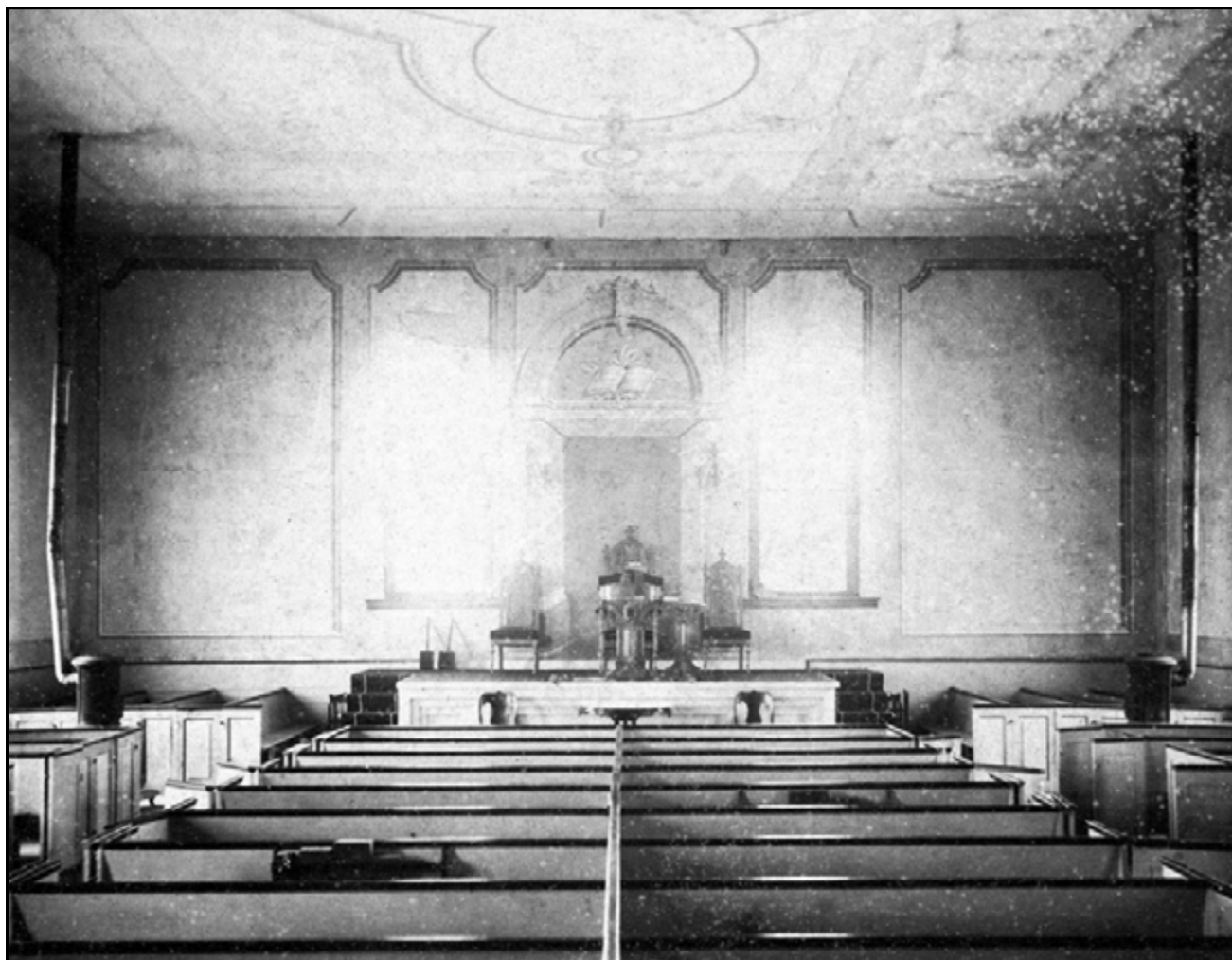


All images are courtesy of Great Valley Presbyterian Church

The earliest exterior image of the Great Valley Presbyterian Church, 1886, the “Second Church.”

On November 3, 1724, a 1-5/8 acre plot of ground in the Welsh Tract, Township of Tredyffrin, was deeded to an existing congregation of Presbyterians with “an intent for a burying place and for the building of a house or houses for the publick worship of God and teaching a school of literature.” The original meeting house (they were not called churches at that time) was a humble log structure, but it adequately served the growing congregation, which was initially organized in 1710. The current congregants refer to this original structure as the “First Church.”

Early in 1794 a second, much larger, stone sanctuary building - the “Second Church” - was completed and dedicated along what was then called the Swedes Ford Road. And by 1886, when famous local historian Julius F. Sachse recorded the image on the previous page, the church had been further extended some twelve feet at the south end (facing the viewer), and the entire structure pebble-dashed and whitewashed, thereby providing a severely plain appearance not dissimilar to that of the nearby Episcopal parish called the Church of Saint Peter in the Great Valley. Looking northward, with the expanding churchyard and the North Valley ridge behind, the Second Church was a sanctuary of prominence in the Great Chester Valley.

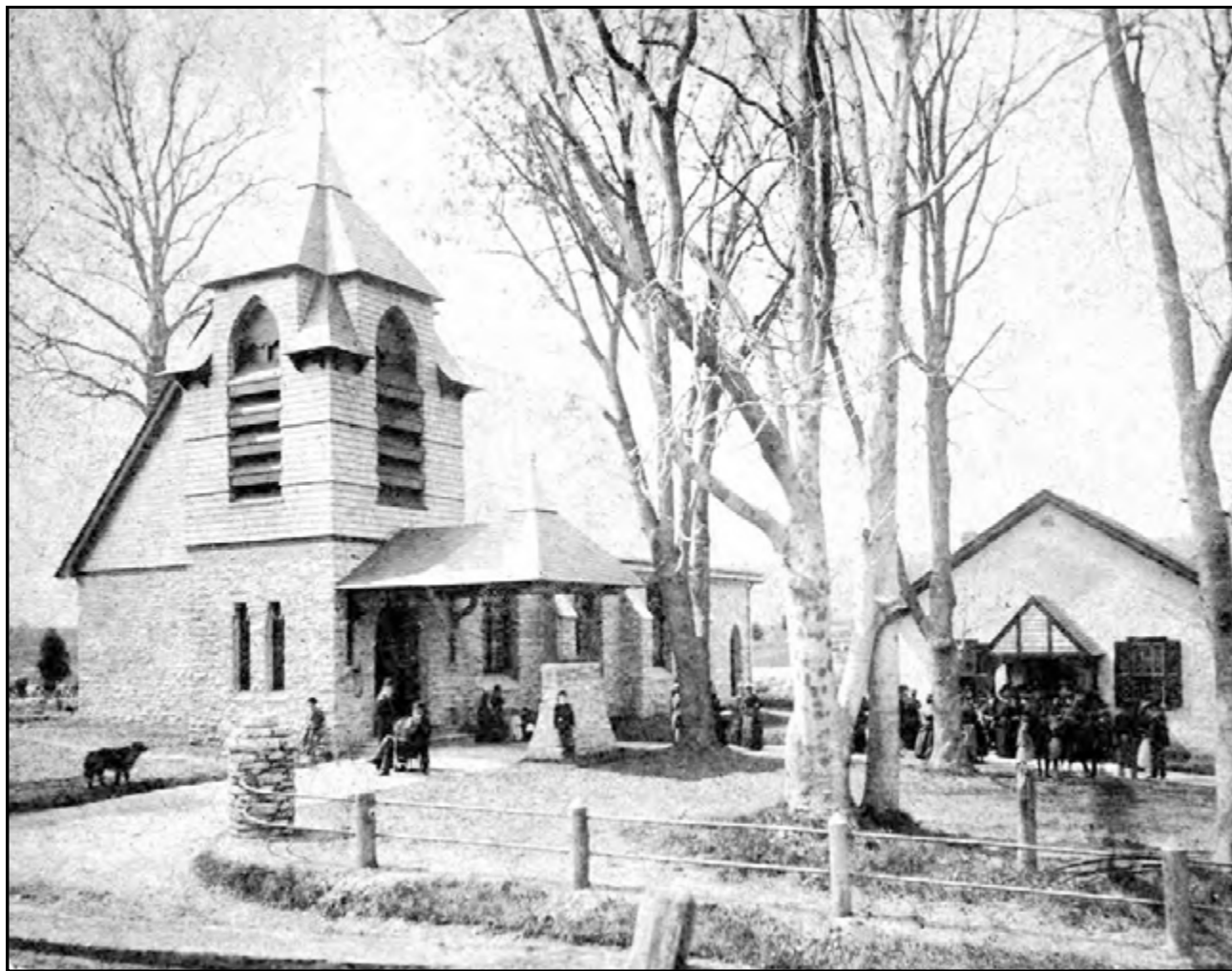


The earliest interior image of the Second Church, 1886

When completed in 1794, the original pews or benches from the log meeting house were placed in this building, separated by the two aisles which were floored with mortar. In 1828, the church was entirely refur-

nished, with a new pulpit erected upon the north end as shown (the first pulpit being on the south end, with seating arranged facing the entrance), and new box pews with hinged doors providing permanent seating. As was customary, members were charged pew rents, and those fees increased the closer one's box was to the room's middle. By 1861, the building was heated by four coal stoves, one in each corner (as shown), with exhaust stacks running up through the ceiling into chimneys built on top of the walls. In 1868, the Chapel was erected to the east of the church, on the site of a 1795 Session House. The church was again renovated in 1873, with the walls and ceiling "frescoed in good design and colors," and with new sashes installed with stenciled glass in the windows. By 1886 a gallery had been built in the new south extension for use by the choir, and a pipe organ had been introduced.

But in the 1886 interior image recorded by historian J. F. Sachse, the Second Church had less than four years of service remaining before its destruction and replacement.



The Third Church and Chapel, 1890

The cornerstone of the "Third Church" was laid in the northeast corner of the present building on June 13, 1889, and dedicated on May 8, 1890. The structure was erected on the exact site and foundation of the Second Church, and the builders thoughtfully melded the history of the former into the new by incorporating one of the walls of the Second Church. Its blue limestone exterior, with a slate roof, its bell tower covered with shingles, its graceful porte-cochere on the east side, and its semi-gothic interior, drew over 500 people to an impressive dedication ceremony.

During the interim period while the Second Church was being razed and the Third Church constructed, the Chapel served as the focus of worship.

In the photograph on the preceding page, one can discern the churchyard and the valley between the sanctuary and the chapel. These structures remained unconnected until 1927, when Dickerson Hall finally bound the two as one.



The Third Church and Chapel, 1910

In the succeeding twenty years from the previous image, the sanctuary and the chapel have acquired a look of permanence still recognizable a century later. In the center of the Chapel's east-facing wall is a stained-glass window of *Christ the Good Shepherd*, then beautifully illuminated by the morning light.

One can see four prominent trees (described by some as extremely fragrant, and by others simply as "smelly") called "Trees of Heaven." Tradition tells that these trees were brought to England from China in 1751 by Catholic Jesuit missionaries, and planted by an unrecorded benefactor in the yard of the Second Church.

Beyond the front of the church, looking west into the adjacent burial ground, one sees the stone monument commemorating the Harris family. Prominent residents and early settlers of the Great Valley, numerous members of the Harris clan are interred in the church graveyard. See the accompanying sidebar for a brief history of Joseph Harris, one of the more notable family members.

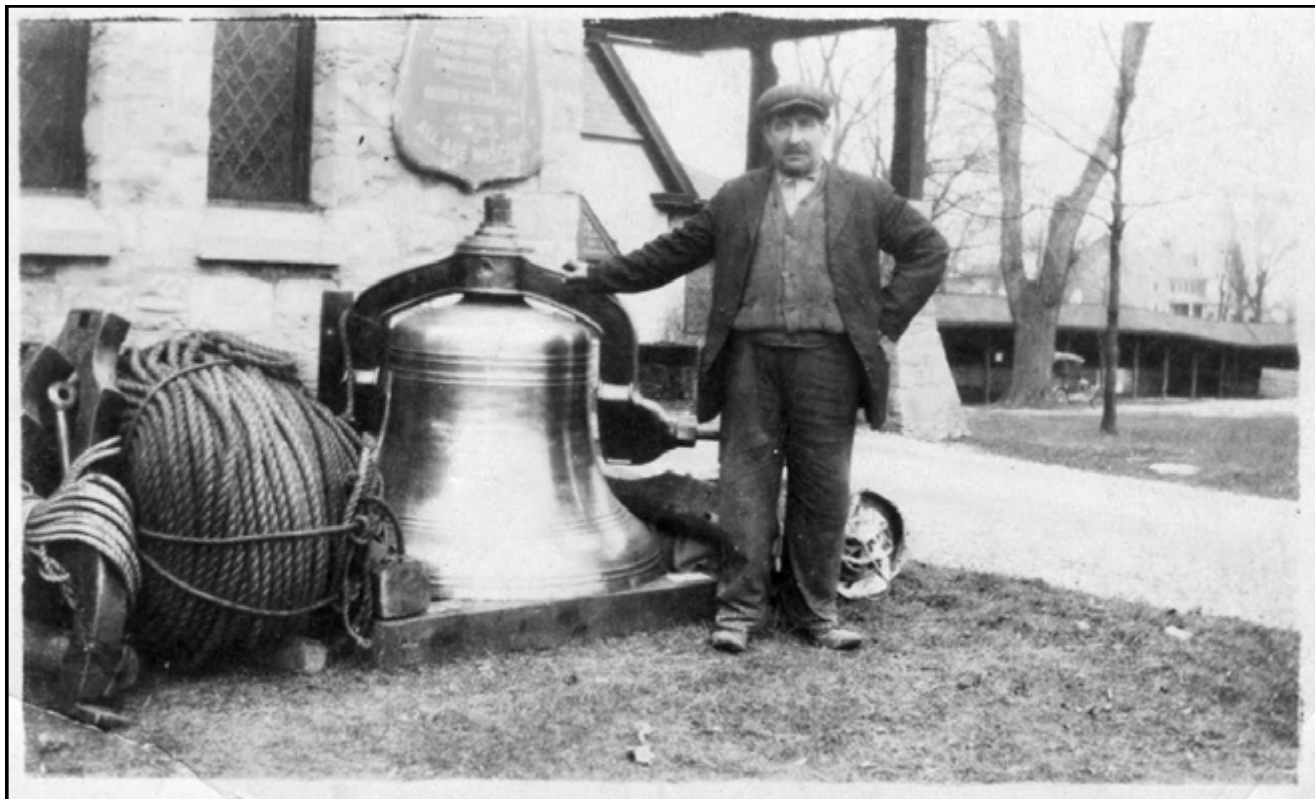


The interior of the Third Church, 1910

Looking north, the front of the new church “was finished in hard pine and oak, the walls frescoed in subdued colors, predominantly brown. The panels in the ceiling were done in blue, with narrow gilt edges. The floor was carpeted, and the oak pews, arranged in semi-circular style, were upholstered and silken in finish. Over the new reredos, in rectangular pattern, were the words: THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE. LET ALL THE EARTH KEEP SILENCE BEFORE HIM.”

The pulpit, table and chairs were transferred from the earlier sanctuary, as was the 1861 Stainbridge organ, shown on the left in the northwest corner of the sanctuary. The organ required manual pumping to fill its bellows. A boy, positioned behind the screen to the immediate right of the instrument, was hired for \$12 per year to provide for this task.

On the northeast wall to the right of the platform, one sees the Tablet, dedicated on June 25, 1907 to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Presbyterian Congregation of Tredyffrin, the Mother Church of the Presbytery, organized in 1710.



Sexton James Gordon with new church bell, December 1926

Mr. James A. Gordon, the church's sexton, caretaker, and friend for almost 50 years (1905-1952), had a most comprehensive job description. Jim maintained all equipment, cleaned the buildings, "stoked-up" the coal furnaces for all services and meetings, lighted the oil lamps, filled the water coolers with water carried from the neighboring spring (water was not pumped into the Chapel until 1930), rang the bell, mowed the grass, and shoveled snow from the paths and drives. He also oversaw the expanding graveyard, digging each grave by hand, resetting fallen and broken gravestones, and hand-mowing around every gravestone, while possessing an encyclopedic memory of who was interred where. For the entirety of Mr. Gordon's employment at Great Valley Presbyterian Church, he and his family resided in the church-owned "Sexton's House," located a short quarter-mile west of the church on the north side of Swedesford Road, adjacent to the Chester Valley Railroad's Cedar Hollow Spur.

The bell in the steeple was a dream of Dr. Arthur Willis Spooner, pastor from May 25, 1918, to October 14, 1930. The bell, cast by the Meneely Bell Company of Troy, NY, weighed 2000 pounds, and required the tower to be reinforced before it could bear the weight. The bell was actually affixed within the tower in December of 1926, very soon after this image was taken. The bell was so heavy that, according to church lore, at least one deacon, while pulling the rope to ring the bell, failed to let go of the rope as it recoiled, and almost went flying up into the tower! Once it was situated properly, however, sisters Mary Robertson Ives and Janet Robertson Gerow, who grew up on a dairy farm a mile and a half west on Swedesford Road in East Whiteland Township, remember often hearing the bell's insistent peeling announcing worship services on Sunday mornings.

To the right behind Mr. Gordon are the picturesque carriage sheds, used in former years by members who arrived for services by carriage and sheltered their horses therein from inclement weather. The sheds in that location were originally constructed in 1832.

Church and Chapel, 1956

In this mid-20th century image, looking west, is the 1868 Chapel and the 1890 sanctuary. Of particular interest, in the right foreground, are two remaining carriage sheds, c. 1885. The original sheds, which extended in a west – east configuration, were replaced in 1885 to seamlessly connect to supplemental sheds added



in a north – south configuration, thereby abutting Swedesford Road and forming an “L” arrangement. But as the family automobile replaced the horse and carriage as the conveyance of choice to services, the north – south sheds were razed in 1931.

Then, on the night of May 21, 1947, in one of numerous, fearful arson attacks which plagued the Great Valley during the spring of that year, an unbalanced volunteer fireman torched the remaining wooden carriage sheds, completely destroying all but the two shown. These remaining sheds remained in use for storage until 1959, when construction of a new Christian Education building was begun.



Sunday School Primary class in the lower chapel, 1958

In this period gem from 1958, long-time Sunday School teacher Miss Doris Kouba has the attention of most of her Primary class, children in grades 1-3. Miss Kouba was the youngest of four sisters who began attending Great Valley Presbyterian Church with their parents in 1940, and Doris enthusiastically taught Sunday School until 1966 when she married Paoli dentist Dr. George Yake. Both she and Dr. Yake are now deceased, and rest together in the churchyard.

The chapel basement shown on the previous page was not part of the original 1868 building. In 1952, a group of men from the church began excavation and construction of a basement under the old chapel in order to accommodate the church's growing education ministry. That Herculean task was completed in 1957.



Great Valley Presbyterian Church campus, 1960

With a peaceful Swedesford Road in the foreground, one observes the connection of the 1890 Third Church with the 1868 Chapel by means of the Dickerson Room, built in 1927 to honor the lives of John and Blanche Dickerson of Paoli. In this image the Chapel remains detached from the newly-constructed Christian Education building, which has an architectural style reminiscent of the old carriage sheds, and is still to be dedicated on April 10, 1960. Not for another twenty years, in 1980, would another expansion finally link the church with the Christian Education facilities by means of a direct connection through the east end of the Chapel.

The beautiful stained-glass window of *Christ the Good Shepherd* remains today, but must be artificially illuminated because of the connection. And of the four "Trees of Heaven" planted in the yard of the Second Church 200 years before, only the shadow of one remains in this image . . . and it not long for this world.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the elders decided that when they called a young pastor to minister to the church, it was incumbent that a home be provided for him and his family. Therefore, a lot of two acres was purchased in East Whiteland Township from John Bartholomew in 1853, less than two miles west of the church, on the south side of Swedesford Road near Valley Store (today the intersection of Route 29 and Swedesford Road). Upon this acreage was built a substantial house of local blue limestone, with a frame stable behind, which would serve the pastors of the church for over a century. The original residents relied upon a privy, and a coal stove, until around 1907. The manse remained on well water for many years. The first telephone for the use of the pastor was installed in 1907. Electricity was added in 1920, and a new heating plant was installed 11 years later.

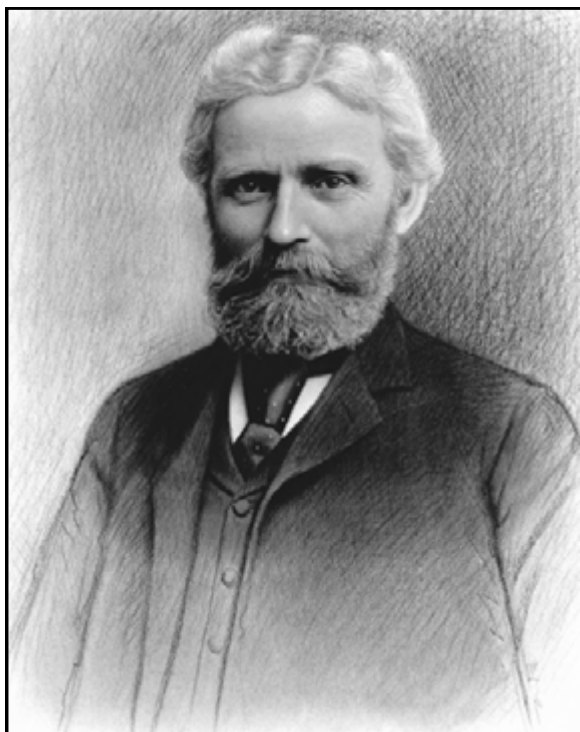


The parsonage (or manse) of the Great Valley Presbyterian Church, 1966

The fence line extending on the left edge of the driveway represents the western perimeter of the dairy farm of the Robertson family, faithful parishioners of Great Valley Presbyterian Church since 1922. Today the former parsonage serves an administrative function as part of the Penn State Great Valley campus.

On the following pages are a sidebar about Joseph Harris, member of a family with deep roots at Great Valley Presbyterian Church; and an article by Mike Bertram on what Tredyffrin was like when the church was founded. Mike gave a presentation on this subject at the church as part of the Tercentennial celebration.

Joseph Smith Harris



Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library

Joseph Smith Harris was born April 26, 1836 on the family farm near Frazer in East Whiteland Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania. The property today is part of the Chester Valley Golf Club. His father, Stephen Harris (1798 -1851) was a local physician; his mother was Marianne Smith (1805-1890). Joseph's uncles included career military officers Thomas Harris and John Harris. Joseph's paternal grandfather, William Harris (1757-1812), was an army officer in the American Revolutionary War, while a great-grandfather on his mother's side was Persifor Frazer, a Lieutenant Colonel under General Anthony Wayne in the Revolution.

When Joseph was a young teenager, his father Stephen became gravely ill. In 1850, Stephen sold the farm and moved the family to Philadelphia, purchasing a boarding house for his wife to run after his death, as that was one of the few business occupations available to respectable women of the time. Stephen's death in 1851 left his family short of money, but his children were able to finish high school. Joseph attended Philadelphia's Central High School, graduating in 1853.

In April 1853, Harris got a job as a rodman and topographer for the North Pennsylvania Railroad, which was then under construction between Philadelphia and Bethlehem, and would later become part of the Reading Railroad. The following year, 1854, he left the railroad and went to work for the United States Coast Survey. Living aboard the survey ship *Phoenix*, Harris endured the hardships of disease, tropical heat and insects, hurricanes, and brawling shipmates, as the crew surveyed the coastal shores of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. In March 1857, just before his 21st birthday, Harris left the Gulf region to join the Northwest Boundary Survey which was laying out the border between the U.S. and Canada (then still a British colony) along the 49th Parallel to the Pacific Coast. At the time, that territory was still wilderness, populated by Indians, buffalo, and a few traders.

When the Civil War began in 1861, many of the men of the Coastal Survey, including Harris, offered their services to the Union war effort. With his detailed knowledge of the Confederate coastline, Harris was placed in command of a survey ship, and departed New York City for the Gulf Coast in February 1862. The Union Navy was planning to bombard and capture the Confederate Forts Jackson and St. Philip which guarded the Mississippi River approach to New Orleans. The task of Harris and the other surveyors was to mark navigable channels in the river and put markers on the shoreline to guide the shelling from the Union mortar boats. Harris and his crew carried out this survey work while under Confederate fire. During the subsequent bombardment, Harris climbed the mast of one of the Union mortar boats to help pinpoint the accuracy of their firing. While on the mast, Harris himself was narrowly missed by a Confederate cannonball, but he remained in position. This April 1862 bombardment weakened the forts enough to allow Admiral Farragut to capture New Orleans.

Harris participated in further military surveys, but once the Gulf Coast and Mississippi River were under Union control, Harris returned north to finish his work with the Northwest Boundary Survey. In 1864, Harris left government service and returned to Pennsylvania, settling in Pottsville, where he joined his older brother in private practice as a civil and mining engineer. At the same time he also did engineering work for the Lehigh & Mahanoy Railroad which served the coal fields. Over the next two decades, Harris took on jobs of increasing responsibility as he moved among a variety of mining companies and railroads, including the Morris & Essex Railroad, the Central Railroad of New Jersey, the Philadelphia & Reading Coal & Iron Company, and the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company, where he was President from 1882 to 1893. By this time, Harris had become widely respected as one of the most knowledgeable and fair-minded men in the anthracite coal industry.

In February 1893, due to decades of mismanagement, the Reading Railroad declared bankruptcy, helping to trigger the Panic of 1893. The Reading was the largest of the anthracite railroads, and its subsidiary, the P&R Coal & Iron Company, was the biggest mining company in the anthracite territory. J. P. Morgan took charge of the Reading's financial restructuring and recruited Harris to be the Reading's new President, charged with overseeing the rehabilitation of the railroad and mining operations. Backed by Morgan's investment money, Harris within a few years had the railroad running smoothly and profitably, and the mines' efficiency much improved. The stress of the work exacted a toll on Harris' health as he took extended leaves of absence in 1898 and 1899. In April 1901, just shy of his 65th birthday, Harris stepped down from the company presidency, but retained his seat on the Reading Company Board of Directors, which he held until his death.

Back in 1865, Harris had married Delia Silliman Brodhead (b.1842), and the couple had five children; Marian Frazier (Harris) Perry (1866-1960); George Brodhead Harris (1868-1952); Frances Brodhead (Harris) Brown (1870-1925); Clinton Gardner Harris (1872-1910); and Madeline Vaughn ("Sally") (Harris) Brown (1873-1966). Delia died in August 1880, and Harris married Emily Eliza Potts (1843-1890) in 1882. After Emily's death, Harris married her sister Anna Zelia Potts (b.1850) in 1896.

In his retirement years, Harris continued serving on numerous corporate boards. He had been a Trustee of the University of Pennsylvania since 1889. Harris was also a member of the American Philosophical Society, the Pennsylvania Historical Society, and the Contemporary and Germantown Cricket Clubs. He was a vestryman of the Calvary Protestant Episcopal Church of Germantown where he taught a popular Bible study class. He was very interested in genealogy and compiled a history of the Harris and Smith families, while also writing his autobiography. On June 2, 1910 at the age of 74, Harris died of apoplexy at his home on School Lane in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. On June 6, the Reading ran a special funeral train out its Chester Valley Branch to Cedar Hollow station, carrying the mourners and Harris' remains for burial in the cemetery of the Great Valley Presbyterian Church, thus returning him to the home territory of his boyhood.

Rick Bates

Information sources for this article are the Wikipedia entry on Joseph Smith Harris and other on-line sources, the Reading Company Collection at the Hagley Museum and Library, and the author's other research notes. The author also thanks Bill Stafford for information on Harris' Civil War experiences.