

Second Baptist Church of Wayne Pennsylvania: A Story of a Church and Change on the Main Line

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A woman rises from her bed and prepares a bite of breakfast. She dresses with meticulous care. She looks in her vanity mirror and applies a dusting of nut brown face powder and adds a touch of red lipstick. She fingers the pearls at her neck and recalls that they were an anniversary gift from her late husband. She adjusts her hat to a stylish tilt. She makes her way to her church. It's another Sunday morning. She grips her cane and slowly progresses toward her pew. She greets others of her circumstance. She wonders when did this become a church of old women. It was not always like this. She wonders what the future will hold for her beloved Second Baptist Church. It can be said that history becomes our collective way of looking at our past with eyes of acceptance and appreciation. It is natural to wonder what the future will hold.

Wayne Pennsylvania's Second Baptist Church has a proud history. Its Main Line existence touches three centuries. It had its beginnings in 1886. It witnessed all of the upheavals and uplifts of the twentieth century. It must redefine its current role as it faces the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Second Baptist Church is part of what scholars refer to as the "Black Church". The story of this church can tell us much about African American Main Line life.

The Black Church is the name scholars give this experience. Author Norma Jean Lutz reports that the term "the Black Church" does not refer to one institution; instead it applies to the many Christian churches and evolving denominations African Americans created to worship as they desired.

To better understand the history of Second Baptist Church we must examine the development of the Black Church. The book *The History of the Black Church* sheds light on matters relevant to our comprehension. Its authors report the global slave trade of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries generated enormous wealth for Europeans engaged in the barbarous practice. The process of enslavement was brutal and Africans were stripped of their complex cultures and



Second Baptist Church, Wayne, Pa., December 2017 *Courtesy of Roger D. Thorne*

religious customs. As the centuries progressed, sustaining the religious practices connected with their African homeland would become difficult, and in time, those life-affirming folk ways would become distant memories. The uprooted Africans who found themselves living in the New World would combine the remaining traces of those distant memories with an adapted form of Christianity, and fashion a hybrid religious culture unique to their own experience. This cultural combination became a spiritual amalgamation, a collective expression of an enslaved and disenfranchised people.

Slavery continued to grow throughout Colonial America, but nominally free Black communities, North and South, managed to exist. The city of Philadelphia would become an important center of Black autonomy. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones would found the Free African Society in the city in the 1780s. This mutual aid society later grew into the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Great Awakening is the name historians have given to the period in the eighteenth century when Christianity spread with renewed fervor throughout the land. Blacks and Whites would both be touched by this development. Numerous churches would be created during this time. In the nineteenth century, the National Baptist Convention would be formed in 1895 by African American Christians.

Emancipation from slavery allowed African Americans expanded opportunities to create religious institutions that would meet their educational, social, and political needs. The newly freed and those whose families had lived in freedom for generations would be helped by the developing churches.

The historical moment known as the Great Migration would touch the lives of African Americans living on the Main Line. The Main Line saw an influx of people moving from the South for better opportunities during the early years of the twentieth century. Between 1910 and 1930, it is estimated that 1.2 million African Americans left the South for an expanded life. The migrants sought aid and fellowship in their new environments, often found in churches like Second Baptist Church. Mildred Burruss, a long-time member of the church, has southern roots. "I came from Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi." Whether newly arrived southern migrants or long-time Main Line residents, the Black Church helped people with basic needs. African American churches have been tasked with meeting secular as well as spiritual needs. These churches have fed the hungry, cared for the sick, and educated generations. African American church leadership has developed strategies for carrying out their helping work. According to the book *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, Black Methodists first employed creativity in meeting their goals of serving God. They developed a range of auxiliaries, boards, and supportive clubs. In time, other Black denominations would adopt the use of such methods. A *Second Baptist Church Anniversary Booklet* (2005) notes the workings of Deacon and Usher Boards, Trustees, and various other clubs. It has been said that men may lead a church, but women run a church. Historically, the Black Church has been a training ground for leaders, as it was one of the few places where African American men and women could have leadership roles. Discrimination may have limited the options African Americans had, but cooks, maids and factory workers could head usher boards and serve as respected deacons, missionaries, or be presidents of clubs. For example, strong Christian women have been a big part of Second Baptist Church's progress, and have taught Sunday School, sung in choirs, and run various clubs.

The history of Second Baptist Church has been carefully recorded by church members Maggie Hall and Josephine Morgan. In 1886, several African American families met in the homes of others for the purpose of Christian fellowship. This practice continued until a building was secured for



Second Baptist Church interior, December 2017. Courtesy of Roger D. Thorne

worship purposes. Early worship took place in a building located on Conestoga Road, on the premises of the Rock Quarry. R.H. Johnson, owner of the site, donated the use of this building. Worship at this location continued for over two years. The people were resourceful, and in time, they purchased their first building, a residence located on Highland Avenue at Federal Street in Wayne.

Second Baptist Church has been blessed to have outstanding leadership. Early pastors included Rev. Benjamin Franklin, Rev. James W. Brooks, and Rev. William H. Waller. The current spiritual leader is Rev. Dr. Raymond Thomas who is known for his devoted study of the Bible and Hebrew.

Second Baptist Church members have been active in church programs throughout the decades. Programs of note have included a few ministries, and educational and music departments. Second Baptist Church has had a presence in the greater affairs of the Main Line community for some time. Its members have in years past supported causes that included Habitat for Humanity, the American Cancer Society and Montgomery County Children's Aid Society.

Second Baptist Church has long-established roots on the Main Line, but it is good to note that an antebellum African American church has long existed in our midst. The founders of Second Baptist Church could look to the example of the Mt. Zion A.M.E. house of worship in Devon for an example of what was possible. Research compiled by local A.M.E. Church historian Bertha Jackmon notes that as early as 1849, men and women connected with the church

began the work that would establish the congregation that endures today.

Devon's A.M.E. Church and Wayne's Second Baptist Church both share proud Main Line histories. Both churches must face the challenge of aging congregations. Both churches must find ways to engage young people if they are to remain relevant in contemporary times. Aging memberships and the difficulties of engaging young people are internal situations many churches must face. Gentrification of historic Main Line neighborhoods is also having an effect on older Black churches. One aspect of gentrification is the removal of young people from their traditional neighborhoods. This is the case in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood. Once, young African Americans remained in their longtime neighborhoods. Their presence energized their congregations. Their absence leaves a leadership vacuum. In years past, many of Second Baptist Church members called Mt. Pleasant home. Just as gentrification has affected Second Baptist Church, so has the natural aging process that the church's members face. Older church members have much to offer any institution, but for any institution to remain viable, it must have the input and resources of younger generations. Journalist Ytasha Womack's book *Post Black: How a New Generation is Redefining African American Identity* explores contemporary matters. She notes that many young African Americans are going to church by watching television or listening to podcasts. Technology even allows people to give online. Womack goes on to note that today many young African Americans attend mega-churches, leaving the traditional denominations of their families for pentecostal forms of worship. Other African Americans have turned to the Nation of Islam, and still others may be atheists. According to Kim Waller, an active church worker who speaks of the changes she sees at Second Baptist Church, "the younger people we used to mentor through church program have gone off to college. We work with all the young people we can these days." Assistant Pastor of Second Baptist Church, Howard Childs, knows the importance of young people. He says "we need them, they are the future."

The gains of the Civil Rights Movement have provided other leadership options for African Americans. Today churches like Second Baptist Church must attract and maintain relationships within and outside their congregations to move forward. Once, the church was one of the few places African Americans could meet. Within the walls of a church the life passages of birth, marriage, and death could be observed with dignity. African Americans used the church as a social gathering space. In a time of strict racial segregation, the church was the place where concerts, teas, plays, and community meetings were held. The church is no longer seen as one of the only social outlets in the community. Young African Americans live in an expanded

world. Today, finances and personal matters of taste are the only factors dictating options. Once, segregation limited Main Line African Americans' options of places to socialize. Places like the Robinson Welburn Elks Lodge of Berwyn and Devon's Maple Grove Inn no longer exist but in their time they were important places to the African American Main Line community. Long-time Main Line secular institutions like the local branch of the NAACP and the Negro Business and Professional Women's League, as well as Second Baptist Church, must cultivate relationships with the next generation if they are to have a future. The future need not be bleak. In fact, Second Baptist Church deacon Lorenzo Burch says, "With God all things are possible. God will provide a way." When speaking of the future, author Rebecca Solnit has said, "Nothing is certain except that we can sometimes, with enough will and enough skill, shape and steer it." Solnit was speaking of politics but a similar sentiment could be applied to Second Baptist Church. Its future is unknowable. With God's guidance, the people of Second Baptist Church can shape and steer their direction.

A woman returns home. Prayers, songs and a sermon have been offered up. One more Sunday has come and gone. She is thankful for the blessing of her beloved Second Baptist Church. Second Baptist Church is an important part of Main Line history.

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Oral Histories:

Lorenzo Burch	Howard Childs
Mildred Burruss	Kim Waller

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"Because Black History Matters"