



A History of Saint Barnabas by-the-Bay Episcopal Church

The wild blackberry bushes that once grew profusely on the corner of Rutgers and Bates Avenues in the Villas well over 60 years ago helped establish an Episcopal mission in the late 1940s. Despite the thorns and brambles, the blackberries were picked and made into jams, jellies, and pies that were sold to help raise money for the new church.

The Wildwood Villas, as the neighborhood then was known, stretching along Delaware Bay, was a thriving community in the 1940s. Small summer bungalows sprang up quickly along with some year-round homes on the streets that branched off Bayshore Road, the main street through the town. Low taxes and affordable housing attracted families from the Philadelphia area, anxious to enjoy the shore lifestyle, especially during the summer.

In the months after the end of World War II, the country still faced gasoline shortages and conservation measures often meant that people in the Villas could not get to an Episcopal church in Cape May or the Wildwoods. The idea of a new Episcopal church in the community started to take shape.

Bertha and William Garner, parishioners of Saint Thomas Church in Whitemarsh, Pennsylvania, and residents of West Delaware Parkway in the Villas, and Charles Leslie Carr from Saint Simeon's by-the Sea in North Wildwood, often talked about a mission church for the Villas and by spring 1946, the Very Reverend William Charles Heilman, rector of Saint Simeon's, had given his permission.

The first service was held on Sunday, June 16, 1946, the Sunday closest to the Feast Day of Saint Barnabas, the name given to the new parish. Since the mission was so close to Delaware Bay, the name was expanded to Saint Barnabas by-the-Bay.

During those early years, services were held at the Villas Fire Company, which, at that time, was located on Bayshore Road between Atlantic Avenue and Delaware

Parkway. Volunteers arrived at 5 o'clock on Sunday mornings to set up chairs, start the heat in cold weather, and do other needed chores before church school from 11 a.m. to noon and services from noon to 1 p.m. Hymnals and prayer books were donated by Saint Simeon's and on most Sundays services were conducted by lay readers. Once a month, Father Heilman or another priest would come to celebrate the Eucharist.

The congregation worked diligently raising money for a church and when a tract of land at Rutgers Avenue and Bates Avenue just off Bayshore Road became available in 1948, the church had enough money for a down payment. The transaction included a six-room house, a two-car garage, and a chicken house for \$6,000.00. Two rooms were combined into one room for an auditorium and the rest of the house, the residence for visiting priests, was quickly transformed for services each Sunday.

After about two years, the Diocese assumed the oversight of the mission and the suffragan bishop appointed Arthur Sheets, one of the first confirmands, as the Lay Reader in Charge. Mr. Sheets served until September 1949 and was succeeded by Fred W. Burgess who served until his death in 1954. Early licensed lay readers included Robert Bright and Otto Grieseman.

The women of the church started selling building blocks for a dollar to raise money to build a church. That project was augmented with lawn parties, dinners, strawberry festivals, rummage sales, and other events until \$10,000.00 had been raised and the congregation was close to realizing its dream of a real church building.

The cornerstone of the church was laid on October 31, 1954. As part of the ceremony, a cross, Bible, Book of Common Prayer, and newspaper articles about Saint Barnabas were placed in the cornerstone. The first service in the new church was Christmas Eve with the parishioners using candles for light and no doubt wearing their coats since the electrical and heating systems had not been installed.

In 1955, Harry Hart came to the mission as a seminarian followed by the Reverend R. Lee Page, another young priest, who was assigned to Saint Barnabas in 1958 and stayed until 1960. With an active membership of between 50 and 60 families, the church had a women's group, a men's group, a newly organized acolyte group, altar guild, and plans to start a junior altar guild.

The Reverend William W. Shelton, a 27-year-old seminarian, came to the mission on Whitsunday (Pentecost), 1960. He was ordained on November 5, 1960 and spent his priesthood of 40 years at Saint Barnabas until his death on February 27,

2000. One of Father Shelton's first major projects after he arrived at the mission was the acquisition of a bell for the church. When the bell arrived as promised from the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, the exterior was highly polished and the interior and clapper were painted a brilliant scarlet. The bell, a collector's item, was cast from silver, brass, and bronze and had, in its day, been atop a deluxe railroad engine.

A bell tower, 12 feet above the church roof, was built to accommodate the bell. The belfry, a hexagonal design with six archways, assured the bell could be seen as it tolled. A parishioner donated the rope suspended from the bell and inches on the bell rope were sold and dedicated.

Under the leadership of Father Shelton, Saint Barnabas prospered. Bazaars, dinners, and other fundraising events helped support the church and added to the fellowship of the mission community. In 1985, Father Shelton celebrated his 25th ordination anniversary with a special Eucharist and dinner at Saint Raymond, marking a quarter century of service at Saint Barnabas.

The original Bates Avenue house served both as the church and the vicarage until the church was built in 1954 and the house became the vicarage. Later, property on West New York Avenue, just a few blocks from the church, was purchased for a vicarage and the original house was consecrated as the Chapel of Saint Theophilus.

In 1972, the house was moved to make room for the construction of a parish hall, built at a cost of approximately \$63,000.00, a giant leap from the \$6,000.00 the parish had invested in the Bates Avenue house 20 years earlier. The Edith N. Carroll Memorial Hall was dedicated on June 23, 1974 by Bishop Albert Van Duzer, giving the mission needed space for the Sunday School program and fundraising projects. A small room between the church and parish hall was dedicated as the new Chapel of Saint Theophilus.

The congregation of Saint Barnabas by-the-Bay continues, as it has for more than 70 years, to work, pray, and sacrifice to ensure that the mission church established in 1946 will continue to provide for the spiritual and corporal needs of its parishioners and the surrounding community.