

NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM ON CD (MS WORD FORMAT)

1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE (must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)

Street address: **111 and 201 E. Tabor Road**

Postal code: **19120**

Councilmanic District: **9**

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: **St. James Methodist Episcopal Church**

Common Name: **Solid Rock United Methodist Church**

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Building

Structure

Site

Object

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: excellent good fair poor ruins

Occupancy: occupied vacant under construction unknown

Current use: **House of worship**

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach a plot plan and written description of the boundary. **SEE ATTACHED SHEET.**

6. DESCRIPTION

SEE ATTACHED SHEET.

Please attach a description of the historic resource and supplement with current photographs.

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach the Statement of Significance.

[See Attached Sheet]

Period of Significance (from year to year): from

1818 to 1989

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration:

1910-1912, 1922, 1958

Architect, engineer, and/or designer:

Morris & Erskine (fl. 1909-1942)

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan:

D'Ascenzo Studios (fl. 1896-1954)

Original owner:

St. James Methodist Episcopal Church

Other significant persons:

Samuel Felton

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- X (a) **Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,**
- (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- X (j) **Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.**

8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Please attach a bibliography.

SEE ATTACHED SHEET.

9. NOMINATOR: KEEPING SOCIETY OF PHILADELPHIA FOR REV. MARGRET MARIE POWELL

Author	Oscar Beisert, Historian	Email	oscar.beisert@gmail.com
Organization	Keeping Society of Philadelphia	Date	July 15, 2016
Street Address	1315 Walnut Street, Suite 320	Telephone	(717) 602-5002
City, State, and Postal Code:	Philadelphia, PA 19107	Nominators are not the property owners.	

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: 10 August 2016 / Revised 22 December 2016

Correct-Complete Incorrect-Incomplete

Date: 23 December 2016

Date of Notice Issuance: 23 December 2016

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: St. James ME Church

Address: 201 E Tabor Rd

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19120

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: _____

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

Designated Rejected

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

ALL THAT CERTAIN lot or piece of ground, BEGINNING at the corner formed by the intersection of the Northerly side of East Tabor Road (60 feet wide) with the Easterly side of North Water Street (40 feet wide), then extending along the Easterly side of North Water St North 283 feet, then extending East 99 feet, then extending North 10 feet, then extending East 131 feet to a point, then extending South 91 feet, then extending slightly Southeast 20.6 feet, then extending South 252 feet to a point on the North side of Tabor Road, then extending along Tabor Road 258 feet to the first mentioned point and place of beginning. Being 111 E. Tabor Road.

and

ALL THAT CERTAIN lot or piece of ground, BEGINNING on the Northerly side of East Tabor Road (60 feet wide) at a point 67 feet West of Ella Street, then extending along East Tabor Road West 118 feet to a point, then extending North 102 feet to a point, then extending East 113 feet to a point, then extending South 136 feet to the first mentioned point and place of beginning. Being 201 E. Tabor Road, and containing the church parsonage.



Figure 1. The boundaries for the properties at 111 E. Tabor Road and 201 E. Tabor Road are outlined in red. Base map source: Philadelphia Water Department.

6. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Situated on the north side of Tabor Road, St. James Methodist Episcopal Church is a significant religious complex in the Olney neighborhood of Philadelphia. The congregation has been on the site since about 1818 and at current, consists of the following physical features:

1. The Cemetery and Grounds
2. The Church
- 2a. The Sunday School
- 2b. The Sanctuary
- 2c. The Tower
- 2d. Porch
- 2e. The Addition
3. The Parsonage

The complex intended for historic designation includes both 111 E. Tabor Road and 201 E. Tabor Road, so that the parsonage is included as part of the proposed designation.

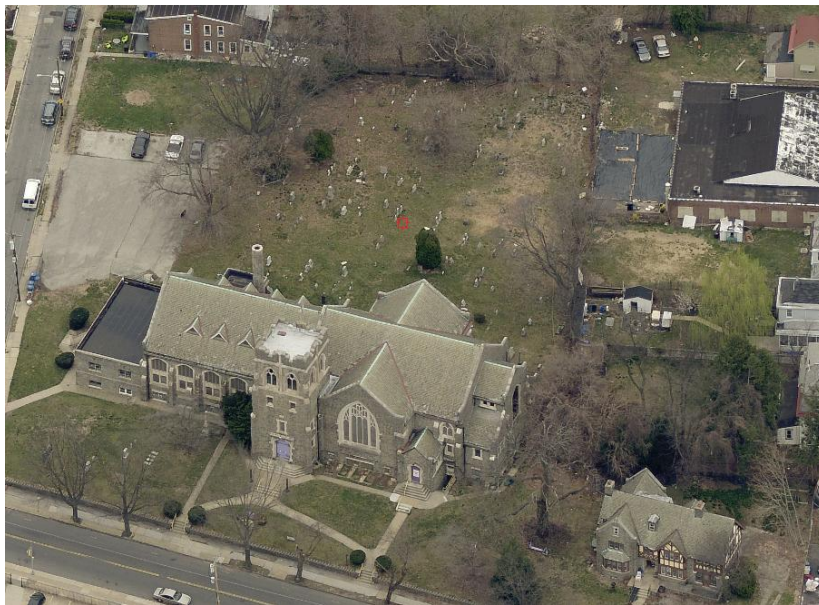


Figure 2. Aerial view showing the cemetery and grounds behind the church. Source: Pictometry, March 19, 2016.

1. The Cemetery and Grounds (Figure 2)

The oldest extant component of the site upon which stands the former St. James Methodist Episcopal Church is its cemetery and grounds. A spacious yard of several hundred graves surrounds the church edifice and the rectory at both the north and south. All of this is accented by a verdurous lawn that is shaded by mature trees and shrubs.



Figure 3. Looking north at the church. Photograph by Oscar Beisert.

2. The Church (Figure 3)

The church edifice of the former St. James Methodist Church consists of five distinct sections that conform to English architectural antecedents, including both Gothic and Tudor motifs. Each section of the church appears to be constructed entirely of stone, which is finished in a random ashlar.



Figure 4. Looking northeast, with the 1958 addition on the left and adjoining Sunday School. Photograph by Oscar Beisert.

2a. The Sunday School (Figure 4)

Completed in 1911, the Sunday school component is rectangular building, running east to west, which stands two-and-one-half stories upon a raised-basement. The building is of load-bearing masonry, stone construction, and the façade of which is finished in a random ashlar. Terminating at a large stone parapet wall at the west elevation, gable-end, the form of the Sunday school is indicative of its interior roof details, which includes collar beams and collar braces, tying together the exposed, unpainted

rafters. The side-gabled roof features a semi-regular pitch, which is pierced by eight chiens-assis—four at the south side and four at the north. Used originally during the Middle Ages, the chiens-assis are unusual apertures, likely included for aesthetic purposes, but also designed to provide light and/or ventilation. The roof is clad in the typical slate roofing material used in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

The north and south elevations of the building façade featuring two tiers of windows, which are symmetrically placed. Facing south, four square, squat windows light the basement level, being enclosed by Argus glass blocks. The apertures are enframed by smooth-faced stone architraves. Rising above, four large windows span the south elevation of the façade, being two full stories. Featuring stone architraves defined by a Tudor Revival arch, the original wooden windows feature decorative spandrels, among other details. These large, two-story apertures feature smooth-faced stone architraves. The apertures are further delineated by large stone buttresses, which are executed in the Early English style. The same number of apertures spans the north elevation, but are separated by a small stone addition with several small windows and a chimneystack.

Appending the west elevation of the Sunday school is a one-story addition with a large sanctuary rising slightly above at the east. Above the addition, the west elevation is divided by buttresses at the center of which is a large two-story Tudor-style window. The window features a smooth-faced stone architrave.



Figure 5. Looking northwest, showing the tower and sanctuary. Photograph by Oscar Beisert.

2b. The Sanctuary (Figure 5)

Completed in 1912, the Sanctuary is the largest built component of the former St. James Methodist Episcopal Church. While the building essentially runs east to west, it is of a distinct cruciform, standing two-and-one-half stories upon a raised basement. The Church is of load-bearing masonry, stone construction, and the façade of which is finished in a random ashlar. The cruciform is defined by dramatic gable-ends. Each gable-end features a massive, two-story window, the north and south of

which feature massive stained glass windows with gothic tracery. The apertures and the original windows emulate the Perpendicular style of the Gothic order of architecture. The west elevation of the cruciform adjoins and is fully consumed by the Sunday school.

At the east elevation of the cruciform, the Sanctuary extends beyond the primary form of the building to create an elaborate Chancel. Within the primary, center gable-end, there is a large stained glass window of an elaborate form. A similarly impressive window also of the Perpendicular style of the Gothic order was repeated within the east elevation of the cruciform, but features a replacement window.

The Sanctuary too features a roof clad in slate shingles typical of the second quarter of the twentieth century.

2c. The Tower (Figure 5)

Within the southeast corner created by the cruciform is a large three-story tower appending the front, primary gable-end. With Anglo-Saxon antecedents, the tower stylistically represents England's pre-Romanesque period prior to the Norman Conquest. The tower is of load-bearing masonry, stone construction, and the façade of which is finished in a random ashlar. The two-bay wide elevations of the tower are joined at the corners by impressive buttresses of the Early English style with lightly colored, smooth-faced stone capping. The tower is castellated with gracious embrasures and smooth-faced stone trimmings.

Facing south the primary entrance to the building is within the tower, featuring an original Gothic-inspired door within a stone architrave. The doorway is accessed by a short flight of stone steps. A single window rises above, also featuring a stone architrave. Beyond that is a small stone plaque and then two small windows with stone lintels and sills. The third tier of the tower features two apertures per elevation, which features double lancet windows serving as a belfry. All of the trimmings are in the same smooth-faced, lightly colored stone.



Figure 6. Looking northwest at the porch. Photograph by Oscar Beisert.

2d. The Porch (Figure 6)

Within the southwest corner created by the cruciform is a single-story entrance porch appending the front gable-end. Stylistically, the porch represents England's Gothic Revival period.



Figure 7. Looking east, with the 1958 addition at front. Photograph by Oscar Beisert.

2e. The Addition (Figures 4 and 7)

Completed in 1958, the addition a single-story building of load-bearing, stone masonry construction, the façade of which is finished in a random ashlar pattern. The addition is a simple, "modernistic" design, featuring stone to pay homage and respect the original design, but is simple to represent the present architectural forms and styles of the mid-twentieth century.



Figure 8. Looking north at the parsonage. Photograph by Oscar Beisert.

3. The Parsonage (Figure 8)

The Parsonage is a massive Tudor Revival style mansion that appears to be of load-bearing, stone masonry construction with a rusticated stone façade. The building stands two-and-one-half stories,

featuring a complex roof that is atop four generous sections of the wide expanse of the façade. From left to right, there is a gable-front section with windows at each floor. Beyond that section is the recessed entrance, which is accessed within the depths of an open Tudor arch. Half-timber details are beneath the mullion window on the second floor above. The third floor features a single dormer with a hipped roof. The third section of the façade is a slightly smaller gable front that is almost entirely half-timbered with four windows on the first floor and three windows on the second. The third section features a more modern façade for the time the building was constructed with an enclosed porch on the first floor. Chimneys are located at each end of the building.



Figure 9. Looking northwest from the intersection of E. Tabor Road and A Street. Photograph by Oscar Beisert.



Figure 10. Looking south, at the rear of the church. Photograph by Oscar Beisert.



Figure 11. Looking east at the parsonage. Photograph by Oscar Beisert.



Figure 12. Drawing of the first church building. Courtesy of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

St. James Methodist Episcopal Church complex is a significant resource that merits designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Located at the northeast corner of E. Tabor Road and Water Street in the Olney neighborhood, St. James Methodist Episcopal Church (now Solid Rock United Methodist Church) satisfies Criteria for Designation (a) and (j).

(a) Has significant character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth, or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past;

(j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

Historic Context: St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, The Oldest Church in Olney

St. James Methodist Episcopal Church was founded by a group of four women and three men in 1816 in rural Bristol Township, Philadelphia County. Bristol Township, a self-governing municipality until the Act of Consolidation in 1854, was the northernmost township of Philadelphia County. In 1816, the municipality was home to mostly wealthy Philadelphians who could afford to live beyond the periphery of the city on self-sustaining estates.¹

For the first three years, St. James was led by preacher Rev. Samuel Harvey and met at the Feltonville School, a small schoolhouse at the southeast corner of Rising Sun Avenue and Ruscomb Street, which is now the site of Feltonville Intermediate School in the Feltonville neighborhood.²

The first purpose-built church that the congregation would occupy was constructed in 1818 on the present site, which is located a half mile north of the schoolhouse, at the northeast corner of Tabor Road and Water Street.³ Until the mid nineteenth century, Tabor Road was the only east-west thoroughfare traversing the community of Olney. It stemmed from north-south running Rising Sun Avenue to the east.⁴ The site was donated to the church by George Wentz, who siphoned off a portion of his farm as a gift to his congregation in 1818.⁵

Wentz and his wife, Hannah, deeded a lot measuring seventy-two acres and sixty-five perches to “The Trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Bristol Township” on May 30, 1818 for the sum of \$1. According to the deed, the trustees were: George Wentz, Edward Gouge, George Shaeff, Michael Knorr, John Knorr, Hugh Evans, and Evan Evans. Wentz, who served the church as a trustee until son Jonah assumed the role in 1840, had acquired the land in 1811 from family.⁶ The land was again transferred on March 30, 1863 by John Knorr and Evan Evans, likely the only surviving trustees listed on the 1818 deed, to St. James Methodist Episcopal Church for \$1.⁷

¹ Felton, John S. Brief History of St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Tabor Road and Water Street. 1926. Collection of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Charles Ellet, Jr., *Map of the County of Philadelphia from Actual Survey* (Philadelphia: 1843).

⁵ The Guide Book, Philadelphia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. 15-22 March 1916. Collection of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

⁶ Recorded on 30 May 1818 in Philadelphia Deed Book M. R. No. 19, p. 493.

⁷ Recorded on 30 March 1863 in Philadelphia Deed Book A. C. H. No. 95, p. 35.

The first church, called the “St. James Meeting House,”⁸ was an “unassuming stone structure with but one room whose seating capacity was about 150.”⁹ No photographs of the building survive; however, an undated rendering indicates that the one-story building was topped by a gable roof, with a window flanking each side of the main entry and three windows along the eastern and western facades. The gable contained a Palladian window and below it, a name or date stone¹⁰ (Figure 12).

From its founding in 1816 until 1863, St. James Methodist Episcopal Church was part of a regional collective of congregations that shared one preacher. The collectives or “circuits” were the backbone of late eighteenth and nineteenth century Methodism. From 1816 until 1840, St. James was a part of the Germantown Circuit and from 1840 until 1863, it was a part of the Milestown Circuit. It co-founded the latter with Milestown Church (which was located in present day East Oak Lane), Milltown Church (located in present day Cheltenham), and Harmer Hill Church (located in present day Glenside).¹¹

In 1863, when the church reached nineteen members, it separated from the Milestown Circuit. It did this because had become able to hire a dedicated pastor. Its first would be Dr. Charles J. Little. Prior to Little’s tenure, the church—because of the nature of the circuit system—there was a transition in leadership every one to two years.¹²

By the mid nineteenth century, the community surrounding St. James had further developed. No longer the site of only the estates of those who could afford to live outside Philadelphia and their farms, it became home to two schools, a library, a tavern, and a store by 1849¹³ (Figure 13). Due to this growth as well as the continued growth of the congregation, construction of the second building began in 1860. By this time, the congregation numbered eighty-one members and eleven probationers and its Sunday school, which almost always outnumbered general membership, numbered one hundred twenty-five.¹⁴

⁸ The Guide Book, Philadelphia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. 15-22 March 1916.

⁹ Felton, John S. Brief History of St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Tabor Road and Water Street. 1926.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The Guide Book, Philadelphia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. 15-22 March 1916.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ M. Dripps, *Map of the Township of Oxford, Boroughs of Frankford and Bridesburg with parts of Bristol, N. Liberties, and Cheltenham Townships*. (Philadelphia: 1849).

¹⁴ Felton, John S. Brief History of St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Tabor Road and Water Street. 1926.



Figure 13. Tabor Road and Rising Sun Avenue, 1849. M. Dripps, Map of Oxford Township, Frankford, and Bridesburg Boroughs, part of Cheltenham. Source: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.

The second building was completed in 1869 under the pastorate of Rev. Nathan B. Durrell, nine years after the groundbreaking “owing to various and trying circumstances,” including the transition from circuit member to independent parish and the resource-draining Civil War.¹⁵ Photographs hanging inside the present church reveal that the three-story brick Greek Revival style building featuring a gable roof and tall windows on its eastern and western facades.

Three years after completion of the second building, in 1872, the church purchased a home located at the northeast corner of Tabor Road and Water Street, to the immediate east of and adjoining the church property (one hundred seventy-four feet from the northwest corner of Tabor Road and Ella Street, which was then Maple Avenue). The property, “a three story frame building, cheerful and commodious,” was purchased from Franklin Knight for \$1. Knight, a lumber merchant, was a trustee of St. James.¹⁶ This home replaced the previous parsonage, located about a block away from the church, at 5434 Ella Street.¹⁷

In 1898, the second building was remodeled to better reflect the popular styles of the period—specifically the Gothic Revival and Richardson Romanesque styles—and to accommodate the growing congregation that now numbered three hundred twelve. At this time, it received a granite façade with a corner tower, three Sunday school wings—one at rear measuring eighty-four feet by fifteen feet and two

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Recorded on 30 May 1818 in Philadelphia Deed Book J. A. H. No. 260, p. 82.

¹⁷ Felton, John S. Brief History of St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Tabor Road and Water Street. 1926.

on either side measuring twenty-eight feet by twelve feet—and stained glass windows (Figure 14). The contractor was Robert Beatty & Bro.¹⁸ The total cost of this work was \$14,000.¹⁹



Figure 14. Updated façade after 1898. Courtesy of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

The improvements made to the facility in 1898 proved insufficient for a congregation at the center of a neighborhood on the verge of full-fledged urbanization. It no longer reflected the church's standing in the community nor could it fully accommodate the still growing congregation. For this reason, the congregation began construction on the third and present building in 1910 under Rev. E. A. Bawden. This came just twelve years after its \$14,000 remodeling effort.²⁰

The architectural firm of Morris & Erskine (fl. 1909-1942), 1420 Chestnut Street,²¹ was commissioned to design the church's present building in 1910. Partners George Spencer Morris (1867-1922) and Richard Erskine (b. 1882), both Philadelphia born and educated (Morris at Drexel Institute and then the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; Erskine at Drexel Institute and then T Square Club Atelier), had established the firm only a year prior. The Philadelphia-based firm is best known for its residential work in Philadelphia, the Philadelphia suburbs, and New Jersey as well as a handful of institutional projects for institutions such as Friends Hospital, Germantown Friends School, and Cheyney Training School.²² St. James was the first and likely the only religious building designed by the firm.²³ The general contractor

¹⁸ "Building News," *Architecture and Building*, Volume 28, No. 26. New York: 25 June 1898.

¹⁹ Felton, John S. Brief History of St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Tabor Road and Water Street. 1926.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Philadelphia Building Notes," *The American Contractor*. Chicago and New York: 9 July 1910.

²² Penn Biographies, "Morris & Erskine (fl. 1909-1942)." Accessed April 1, 2016, http://www.archives.upenn.edu/people/1800s/morris_and_erskine.html

²³ Philadelphia Architects and Buildings, "Morris & Erskine (fl. 1909-1942)," by Sandra L. Tatam. Accessed April 1, 2016, https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/27062

was F. L. Hoover & Sons and the contractor that installed steam heat throughout was Robert Scott Engineering & Construction Company.²⁴



Figure 15. View in the 1960s of the present building. Courtesy of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

The cornerstone of the present building was laid on June 25, 1910 by Samuel K. Felton with Bishop Luther B. Wilson.²⁵ The one hundred sixty-seven foot by seventy foot building includes an Akron Plan Sunday school with a seating capacity of nine hundred and a Gothic Revival style sanctuary featuring ornate stained glass windows and hammerbeams carved to resemble flying angels. There are multiple points of entry, but the main entry is located within the bell tower, which serves as a vestibule at ground level. Inside the vestibule, an opening on the left side of the opposite wall leads to the Sunday school and an opening on the right side leads to the sanctuary.²⁶ The Sunday school was opened before the rest of the building on May 7, 1911. This is where the congregation worshipped until the sanctuary was completed in June of 1912. By 1912, the church numbered roughly one thousand and its Sunday school numbered twelve hundred.²⁷

Not long after completion, it was described in the following way: “The massive temple is 165 feet long and built of granite. Its beautiful auditorium is noted for its Quaker simplicity. It has a Sunday school room built for 900 people. In its basements are a recreation room with shower baths, a banquet hall, kitchen, and boiler room. The building is in use seven days a week and hums with the activity of many organizations seeking the glory of God.”²⁸

Notably, the church features intricate stained glass windows by D’Ascenzo Studios (fl. 1896-1954), one of the finest stain glass studios in the country. The studio, founded by Italian immigrant Nicola D’Ascenzo, contributed stained glass windows to important buildings such as the Architects Building, the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, John Wanamaker Department Store, and Washington Memorial Chapel

²⁴ “Philadelphia Building Notes,” *The American Contractor*. Chicago and New York: 9 July 1910.

²⁵ Felton, John S. Brief History of St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Tabor Road and Water Street. 1926.

²⁶ “Philadelphia Building Notes,” *The American Contractor*. Chicago and New York: 9 July 1910.

²⁷ Felton, John S. Brief History of St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Tabor Road and Water Street. 1926.

²⁸ The Guide Book, Philadelphia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. 15-22 March 1916.

(located in Valley Forge).²⁹ According to the studio's client catalogue, the studio designed, built, and installed "all windows in church" at a total cost of \$2,335 in 1910. This includes three large windows (one above the altar and one on either side of the altar) as well as a handful of smaller windows throughout the sanctuary.³⁰

The total cost of \$95,706³¹ was assumed by the membership with a great deal of help from Board President Samuel K. Felton, who made a gift of \$30,000 at the onset of the capital campaign and a second gift of \$15,000 during the course of the campaign.³² Felton was a principal of Felton, Sibley, & Company; a varnish house founded in 1863 with Edward E. Sibley and Conrad F. Rau. He had previously studied under C. Schrack & Company, the oldest varnish house in the country. Felton, Sibley & Company was located at 136-140 North 4th Street in Philadelphia while Felton resided in Olney, on the homestead he inherited from his father. It was located at 5424 N. 2nd Street Pike.³³

Samuel K. Felton was a third generation Olney resident. In 1832, his German-born grandparents settled just south of Olney, in the neighborhood that is now known as Feltonville.³⁴ As early as 1849, the community was called Feltonville—named for the Felton family, which lived in the pocket created by the intersection of Tacony Creek and Rock Run Creek, on a hundred acre estate called 'Greenfield.'³⁵

Upon Samuel Felton's death at the age of eighty-one in 1914, he was described in an obituary as having put Olney on the map in the Methodist community: "His cup was so full that it overflowed everywhere. The word 'Olney' he made famous in the Methodist world as the spot where missionary enterprises might tap a secret spring of financial resources."³⁶ Further, he was described as a beloved and humble man: "He might be titled 'The Great Steward' for his beautiful mansion he converted into a fireside for the neighborhood; his hot houses he used as flower dispensaries for the sick and bereaved; and his gardening products he shared with nearly everybody in town. The massive structure at Tabor road and Water street, known as the St. James Temple, is the crystallization of his dreams for Olney. Within five years he has put into this beautiful building nearly \$45,000. And such was his modesty that the public had no idea of his great munificence until after his death, the amount was revealed by his pastor."³⁷

A Methodist stronghold during a period in which the Methodist Episcopal denomination was among the largest and most visible in the United States,³⁸ St. James remained the only house of worship in Olney until 1897 (when St. Alban's Protestant Episcopal Church joined it on Tabor Road).³⁹ This is unusual because historically, Protestant denominations would race to establish congregations in Philadelphia's developing neighborhoods, closely following the path of residential development (which often followed

²⁹ Philadelphia Architects and Buildings, "D'Ascenzo Studios (fl. ca. 1896-1954)," by Sandra L. Tatam. Accessed April 1, 2016, https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/23357

³⁰ Philadelphia Architects and Buildings, "D'Ascenzo Studios – Card Catalog: Clients, 11/1910." Accessed April 1, 2016, https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pr_display.cfm/161996

³¹ Binns, John. "St. James Methodist Episcopal Church Building Fund Account, November 16, 1914." Memo, collection of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

³² The Guide Book, Philadelphia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. 15-22 March 1916.

³³ "Third Session," *Paint, Oil, and Drug Review*. Chicago: 1 July 1914.

³⁴ "Death of Samuel K. Felton," *Frankford Dispatch*. Philadelphia: 11 February 1914.

³⁵ M. Dripps, *Map of the Township of Oxford, Boroughs of Frankford and Bridesburg with parts of Bristol, N. Liberties, and Cheltenham Townships*. (Philadelphia: 1849).

³⁶ "Death of Samuel K. Felton," *Frankford Dispatch*. Philadelphia: 11 February 1914.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Hempton, David. *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 212-213.

³⁹ "Corner-Stone Laid: Another P. E. Church to Be Added to Those Already Built," *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Philadelphia: 18 September 1897.

the laying of the railroads). Residential development began to accelerate in Olney during the late 1860s, after the North Pennsylvania Railroad laid north-south running tracks several blocks to the west of St. James. By 1862, Olney was accessible via either the Lindley Station or the Fern Rock Station of the North Pennsylvania Railroad.⁴⁰

Samuel K. Felton is one of three men who were considered to be by the congregation its founding fathers. The others were George Wentz and George Bickley. Wentz donated the land upon which the church now stands while Bickley was a longtime member of St. James who dedicated his life to the Methodist Episcopal church. Bickley served as a minister, a pastor, a district superintendent, and a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church between 1890 and 1924—and through his work, inspired eleven of his children and grandchildren to become Methodist preachers. He is among the at least two hundred individuals buried at St. James, in its burial ground, which was established in 1818.⁴¹

Between 1926 and 1928, the present building was renovated at a cost of about \$50,000. During that period, memorial windows and doors were installed in the sanctuary and the altar and pulpit furnishings as well as the baptismal font were replaced.⁴²

The present organ was built by M.P. Möller Company of Hagerstown, Maryland according to the specifications of St. James member Forrest E. Newmeyer and replaced an organ installed by the Estey Organ Company of Brattleboro, Vermont. It originally contained fifty stops, thirty-three couplers, and over two thousand pipes.⁴³ It replaced the original organ, which had been built by the Philadelphia branch of the Estey Organ Company of Brattleboro, Vermont.⁴⁴

The Möller organ was the finest in the neighborhood, attracting visiting musicians from time to time. A program dated May 27, 1926 indicates that Belgian theater organist Firmin Swinnen performed at the church at least once.⁴⁵ Swinnen is best known for contributing lengthy improvisations to the scores of silent films showing in New York City theaters such as the Rialto Theater and the Rivoli Theater.⁴⁶

In 2008, under current pastor Rev. Margret Powell, St. James was renamed Solid Rock United Methodist Church. St. James (now Solid Rock) became a United Methodist Church in 1968 upon the merger of The Methodist Church (which had been formed by a merger of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Protestant Church in 1939) and the Evangelical United Brethren Church.⁴⁷

The present property—not including the property upon which the parsonage is located—encompasses two lots that were once discrete parcels. The provenance of the property upon which the building sits, is described above. The lot that contains a one-story granite education wing on the west side of the church building as well as most of its parking lot was deeded to the church on March 15, 1918 by unmarried attorney Frederick R. Gillinder for \$4,700. The lot extends thirty-two feet east on Tabor Road from the

⁴⁰ Samuel L. Smedley, *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia*. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1862).

⁴¹ The Guide Book, Philadelphia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. 15-22 March 1916.

⁴² Directory of Philadelphia Annual Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church. 20-27 March 1928. Collection of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

⁴³ Organ Recital by Firmin Swinnen, St. James M. E. Church, Tabor Road and Water Street, Olney. 27 May 1926. Program, collection of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

⁴⁴ Opening Recital, Estey Pipe Organ, St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Olney, Philadelphia. 1 October 1912. Program, collection of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

⁴⁵ Organ Recital by Firmin Swinnen, St. James M. E. Church, Tabor Road and Water Street, Olney. 27 May 1926.

⁴⁶ Burhman, T. Scott. "New York and the Cinema," *The Complete Organ Recitalist*. London: 1927, p. 347-354.

⁴⁷ Brief History of St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Tabor Road and Water Street. 1979. Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

northeast corner of Tabor Road and Water Street and one hundred eighty-four feet south on Water Street. At the time of purchase, the lot contained a two-story stone house.⁴⁸ The addition, added in 1958, contains classrooms and enabled the church to carve a small chapel out of the Sunday school section of the building.⁴⁹

The present parsonage, which is located on the north side of Tabor Road opposite the dead end formed by the terminus of A Street, was built in 1922 at a cost of \$20,000 (Figure 16). The previous parsonage, purchased from trustee Franklin Knight in 1872 for \$3,500, had to be demolished to make way for this building.⁵⁰ Unlike most purpose-built parsonages—which largely have been converted into offices or meeting space—St. James’ parsonage continues to serve its original purpose. It is home to Rev. Margret Powell, who has served the church since 2008. Rev. Margaret Powell is the first female as well as the first African American pastor to serve the congregation.



Figure 16. The parsonage upon completion in 1922. Courtesy of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, A Vibrant Center of Community

St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest church in Olney, was the focal point of the community during much of the nineteenth century and the entirety of the twentieth. Located at the highest point in Olney, the church was the neighborhood’s gathering place. An undated pamphlet that would have been distributed to the church’s membership and the community provides a snapshot of a typical month in the life of the congregation. Titled, “For Your Service at St. James in January,” it indicates that at least six groups operated within the church: Men’s Club, Woman’s Association, Young People’s Department,

⁴⁸ Recorded on 15 March 1918 in Philadelphia Deed Book J. M. H. No. 278 p. 368.

⁴⁹ Brief History of St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Tabor Road and Water Street. 1979.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Woman's Home Missionary Society, Young Woman's Home Missionary Society, and Woman's Foreign Mission Society.⁵¹

Though the names of the groups give little indication of what they did, each group played a role in implementing the community serving programming that made St. James the neighborhood's focal point. These groups, which were common to most other Methodist Episcopal churches throughout the country, developed and implemented initiatives that were particular to their respective communities they served and also participated in shared, conference-wide initiatives abroad.

The Men's Club's monthly "Fun-Nite" for children is an example of a community-serving program offered by the church. One Fun-Nite was described in the following way: "The next one will be held Friday evening, January 12, 7 o'clock sharp, at which time Mr. W. H. Smith will entertain with a Royal Punch and Judy Show. He will have with him his dog Toby, which dog has been styled 'The Dog with a Human Brain.' The kiddies will have a real time this evening."⁵² The other groups collected food that would be distributed to those in need; donated goods such as clothing and toys to local orphanages; put on plays, concerts, and basketball tournaments; and even organized occasional hikes.⁵³

A second brochure, which is also undated, indicates that St. James' building was hosting activities day and night, Monday through Sunday. For example, on an average Monday:

"3:45 PM – Week-day Church School for Juniors

7:30 PM – Boy Scouts

7:30 PM – Domestic Arts Classes, Dressmaking - Millinery

8:00 PM – Piece Auxiliary, Young Woman's Foreign Missionary Society."⁵⁴

During World War I and World War II, the church rallied round the troops. In part, this was because dozens of its young men were fighting on behalf of the Allies overseas. In order to ensure that their "boys" remained in touch with the church and their fellow servicemen throughout the war, St. James established a monthly newsletter that would detail church happenings and news involving their comrades. Included in its first issue, dated October 1918, was a message from Pastor Rev. Edward F. Randolph: "My Dear 'Boys'—Our Church misses you more than we can tell. Yet, St. James would rather have you now in Uncle Sam's army and navy of freedom than here in your home seats. Since the world needs you, we are glad to spare you. We believe in you: Here at home, through the years, you lived in an atmosphere of worship, truth, and love. This church furnished you a wholesome nursery for a noble life..."⁵⁵

⁵¹ Activities of St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Tabor Road at Water Street. Pamphlet, collection of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

⁵² For Your Service At St. James In January. Pamphlet, collection of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Activities of St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Tabor Road at Water Street.

⁵⁵ *St. James "Boys" Messenger*. No. 1, October 1918. Collection of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.



Figure 17. Breaking ground for a World War II memorial on site. Courtesy of Solid Rock United Methodist Church.

St. James played a role in incubating other congregations in Olney. In 1902, the church founded Lindley Chapel, a Methodist mission. First located at 5th and Ruscomb Streets, Lindley Chapel eventually built a church of its own at the southwest corner of 5th Street and Fisher Avenue.⁵⁶ 5th Street, located about six blocks to the west of St. James, had by then become Olney's main thoroughfare. It was lined with stores of all kinds—many serving the German community that flooded Olney during the early twentieth century—as well as communal spaces such as the theaters and banks.⁵⁷ Though the congregation of Lindley United Methodist Church no longer exists, the house of worship that it built is extant. It now houses nondenominational Oasis City Church of Philadelphia.

⁵⁶ Directory of Philadelphia Annual Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church. 20-27 March 1928.

⁵⁷ Marita Krivda Poxon, Rachel Hildebrandt, and the Old York Road Historical Society. Oak Lane, Olney, and Logan. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2009, p. 52-62.

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