

**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: **509-13 Diamond Street**

Postal code: **19122-1417**

Councilmanic District: **7**

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: **First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia**

Current Name: **Lewis Temple Church of God**

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

1881 to 1965

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration:

1881-82

Architect, engineer, and/or designer:

Unknown

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan:

Unknown

Original owner:

First Mennonite of Philadelphia

Other significant persons:

Nathaniel B. Grubb

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: THE KEEPING SOCIETY OF PHILADELPHIA

OSCAR BEISERT, AUTHOR

Name with Title **Daniel Sigmans, Author**

Email **Oscar.Beisert@gmail.com**

Organization **University City Historical Society**

Date **13 December 2016.**

Street Address **1315 Walnut Street, Suite 732**

Telephone **(717) 602-5002**

City, State, and Postal Code: **Philadelphia, PA 19107**

Nominators are not the property owners.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: December 13, 2016

Correct-Complete Incorrect-Incomplete

Date: January 5, 2017

Date of Notice Issuance: January 12, 2017

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: Lewis Temple Pentecostal Church of God

Address: 7509 Woolston Rd

City: Philadelphia

State: PA

Postal Code: 19150

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

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

Designated

Rejected

4/11/13

Nomination
for the
Philadelphia Register of Historic Places



Looking southwest at First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia. Photo by Arthur Bergey, c. 1940.
Courtesy Mennonite Heritage Center.

First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia
509-13 Diamond Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122-1417

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundary description of the proposed designation is as follows:

SITUATE on the North side of Diamond Street at the distance of fifty feet Westward from the West side of 5th Street in the 19th Ward of the City of Philadelphia. CONTAINING in front or breadth on the said Diamond Street Sixteen feet and extending in length or depth Northward of that width at right angles with the said Diamond Street Sixty feet.

AND

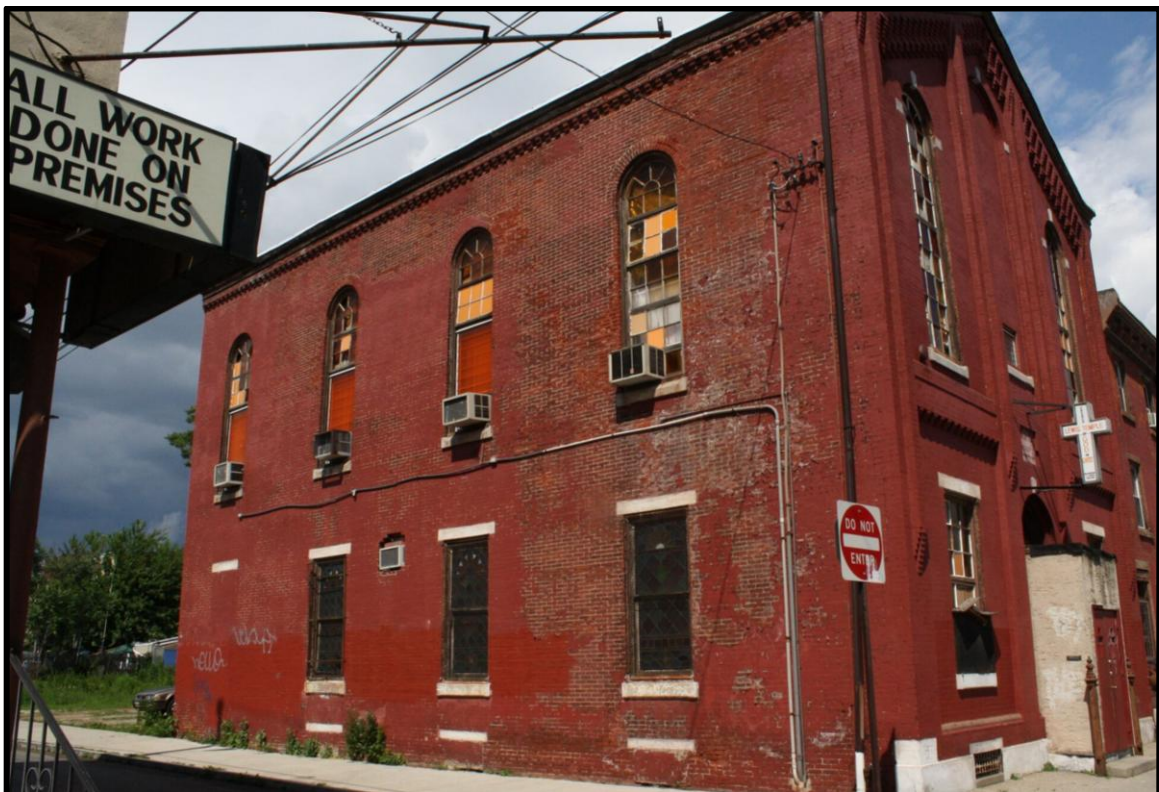
SITUATE on the North side of Diamond Street at the distance of Sixty six feet West from the West side of 5th Street in the 19th Ward of the City of Philadelphia. CONTAINING in front or breadth on the said Diamond Street Thirty-four feet and extending in length or depth North of that width along the East side of Manakin (formerly Party) Street and at right angles to said Diamond Street Fifty seven feet to a certain three feet wide alley leading West into said Manakin Street. BOUNDED North by said alley East by ground late of Parry and Randolph West by said Manakin Street and South by Diamond Street aforesaid.

Department of Records Parcel No. 028N20-0011

OPA/BRT Account No. 777113000



The boundary for the subject property is in red. Courtesy Philadelphia Water.



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6. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The former First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia is a two-story, red brick, gable-front preaching box that represents the later phase of Italianate revival architecture in the United States. Constructed between 1881 and 1882, the load-bearing masonry house of worship features a strong façade that is articulated almost entirely by brick corbeling and other related details.

The primary elevation is divided into three distinct sections by brick pilasters and corbeling that create a distinct space for each aperture. The façade of the first floor represents the Sunday school section of the building, but also serves as the lobby and/or entrance, stair hall to the sanctuary above. The fenestration of the first floor is centered on a round-topped double doorway that is partly concealed by a vintage, projecting frame vestibule. The round-topped opening features a smooth face keystone at center. The keystone is finished with simple floriated details that are carved into the stone. The entrance is flanked by rectangular windows with projecting stone sills and smooth-faced stone lintels. These windows are set within recesses created by the said brick pilasters and corbeling, which create strands of dentils above the windows. Delineating the first and second floor is a single course of oblong bricks that call to mind a single section of the ancient herringbone pattern. There is also an old-fashioned marble tablet directly above the entrance with the following inscription:

First
Mennonite
Church
Founded 1865

Representing the sanctuary, the primary elevation of the second floor is dominated by three large round-topped windows that feature the same smooth faced stone keystones and projecting sills, as well as stone springers. These keystones also feature simple floriated carving. These windows are also within three distinct sections also created by brick pilasters and corbeling with dentils. Original stained glass windows were replaced long ago with multi-light, Colonial Revival-inspired windows. The cornice is created by exaggerated spans of stepped brick corbeling that follow the roofline of the gable.

The side, west facing elevation mimics the fenestration and window types employed within the primary elevation—four per floor. However, this elevation is plain, an unadorned brick façade, lacking detail aside from a simple cornice of brick corbeling and dentils. The rear elevation is similarly of simple design and articulation with three rectangular windows at the first floor and two round-topped windows at the second. Each of the apertures are shuttered and/or partially enclosed with various materials. This elevation also features an old-fashioned fanlight at the attic level. The east facing elevation is largely obscured by an attached row house.



Looking north. Courtesy Janette Amstutz.



Looking north. The marble plaque as described. Courtesy Janette Amstutz.



Looking north. The "1881" cornerstone at the southwest corner of the building. Courtesy Janette Amstutz.



Looking southeast. The rear elevation features two arch-topped windows in the second floor and three rectangular openings that are shuttered. Courtesy Janette Amstutz.



Looking east. Original stained and/or leaded-glass windows remain in the side, west facing elevation. Courtesy Janette Amstutz.



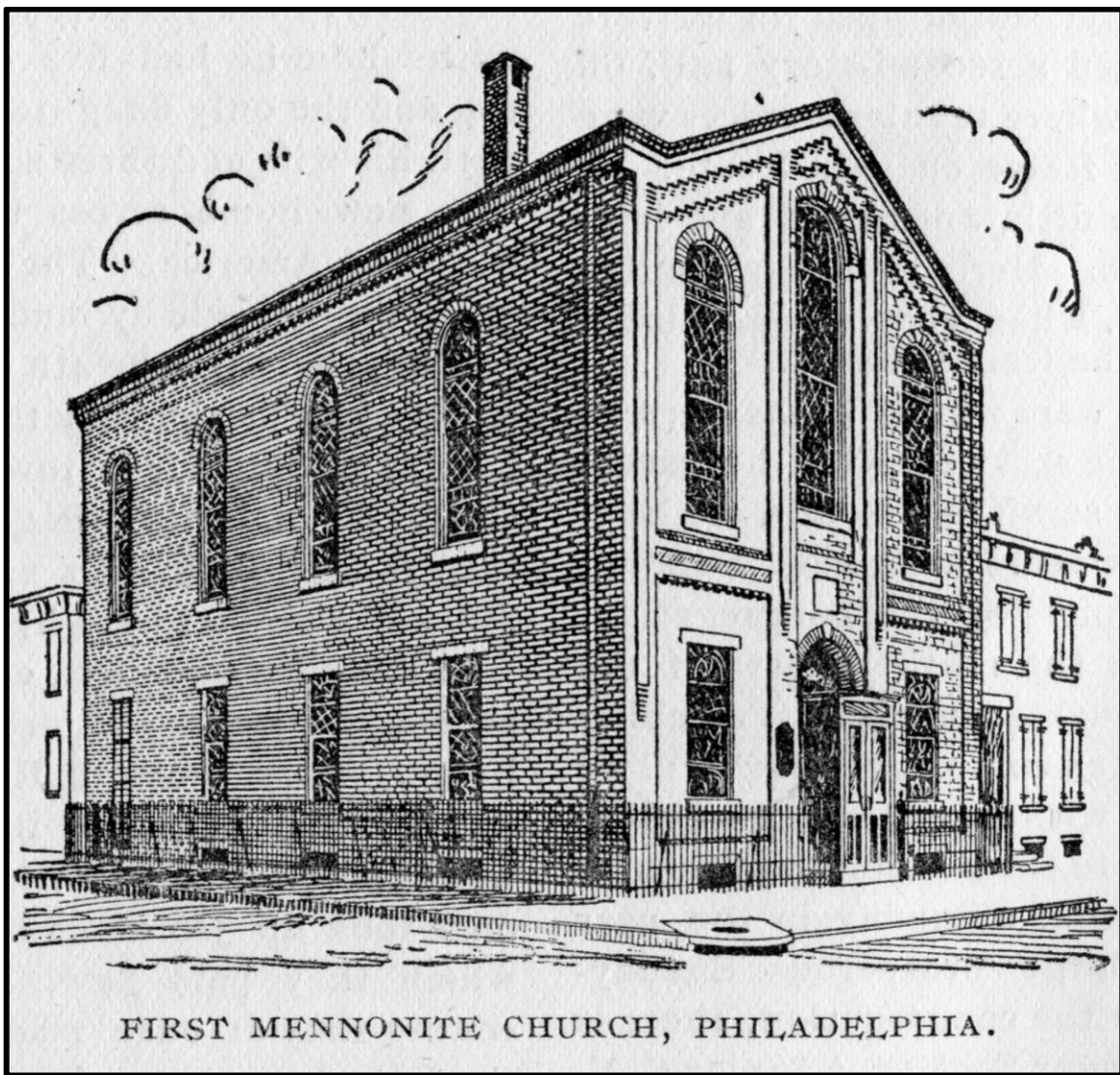
Looking north. Elements of the likely original cast iron fencing exist at the primary elevation. Courtesy Janette Amstutz.



Looking north. Within the recessions created by the ornamental brickwork are spans of bull nosed brick. Courtesy Janette Amstutz.



Looking north. Likely original, the basement windows are shielded by ornamental cast iron grills. Courtesy Janette Amstutz.



Rendering of First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia, c. 1898. Courtesy the Mennonite Heritage Center.

7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The house of worship at 509-13 Diamond Street is a significant historic resource that merits designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Located in North Philadelphia, the building satisfies the following Criteria for Designation as enumerated in Section 14-1004 of the Philadelphia Code:

- 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; and
- j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social, or historical heritage of the community.

The subject building may also be significant for architecture, but this area of significance was beyond the scope of this work.



The Interior of First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia, c. 1905. Courtesy the Goschenhoppen Historians.

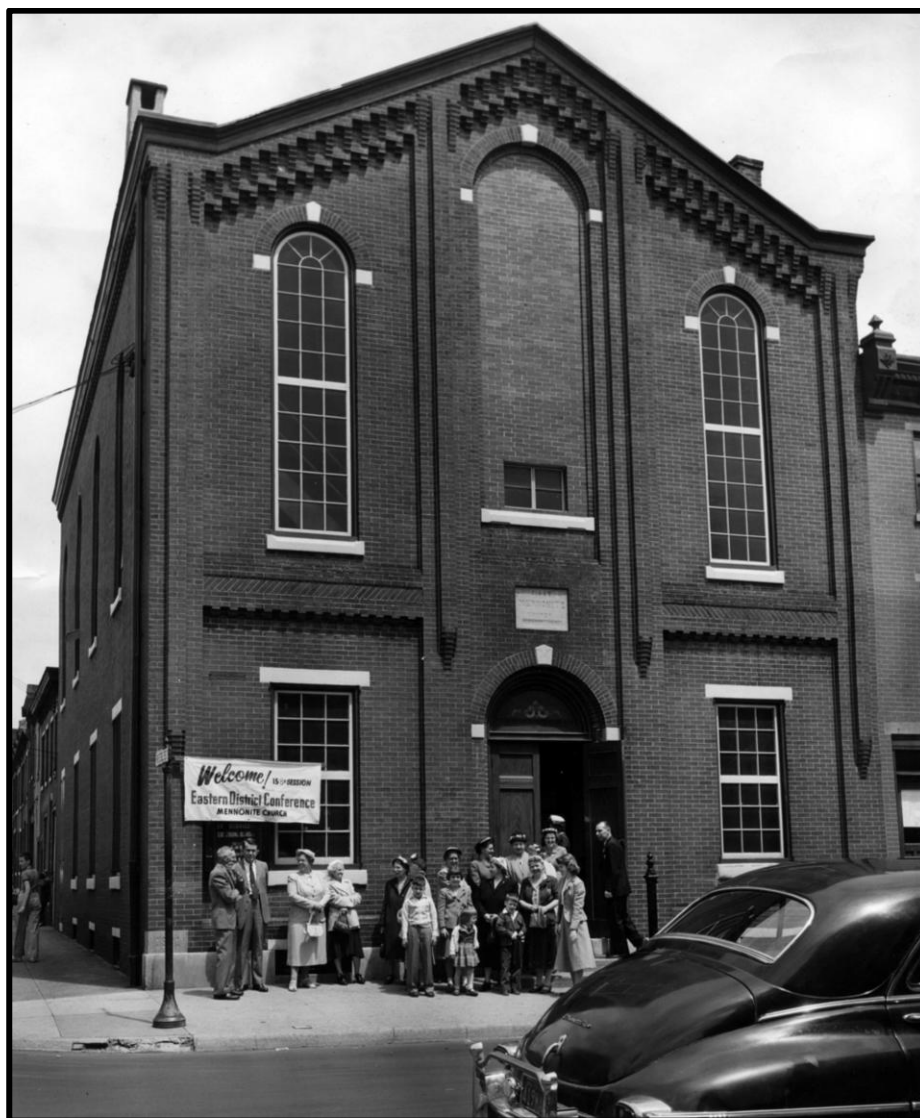
CRITERION J

The building at the northeast corner of Diamond and Reese Streets in North Philadelphia, now known as Lewis Temple Church of God, was once known as the First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia. The building exemplifies the cultural, economic, social, and historical heritage of the Mennonite community in the City of Philadelphia and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The building represents significant local history for that small denomination of sectarian Christians. First Mennonite Church represents the first Mennonite church started in the City of Philadelphia, the largest Mennonite congregation that has ever existed in Philadelphia, and likely one of the first urban expressions, in the US, of the otherwise quiet, agrarian Mennonite faith. It also represents the strongest progressive tendencies of the Eastern District Conference of the Mennonite Church, a product of an earlier schism with main body of Mennonites in Southeastern Pennsylvania, the Franconia Conference. One example of this progressive tendency was the ordainment of Anne Allebach and Wilhelmina Kuyf by the congregation of First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia, representing the Eastern District Conference. Allebach and Kuyf were ordained in the 1930s, which proved the congregation to be ahead of its time.

CRITERION A

The building represents the career and leadership of Nathaniel B. Grubb, a Mennonite religious leader and minister. Under his 38-year leadership, he grew the largest Mennonite congregation in the Eastern District Conference and the first Mennonite congregation to be located in the dense section of a major U.S. city. He also provided leadership for the Mennonite denomination he served, and the Protestant community in Philadelphia and around the country through serving on various boards and new initiatives. He and the congregation he led also planted two new congregations, Zion Mennonite

Church in Souderton, PA and Second Mennonite Church in Philadelphia, both of which still exist today.



The First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia, c. 1956. Courtesy the Mennonite Heritage Center.

Historic Context

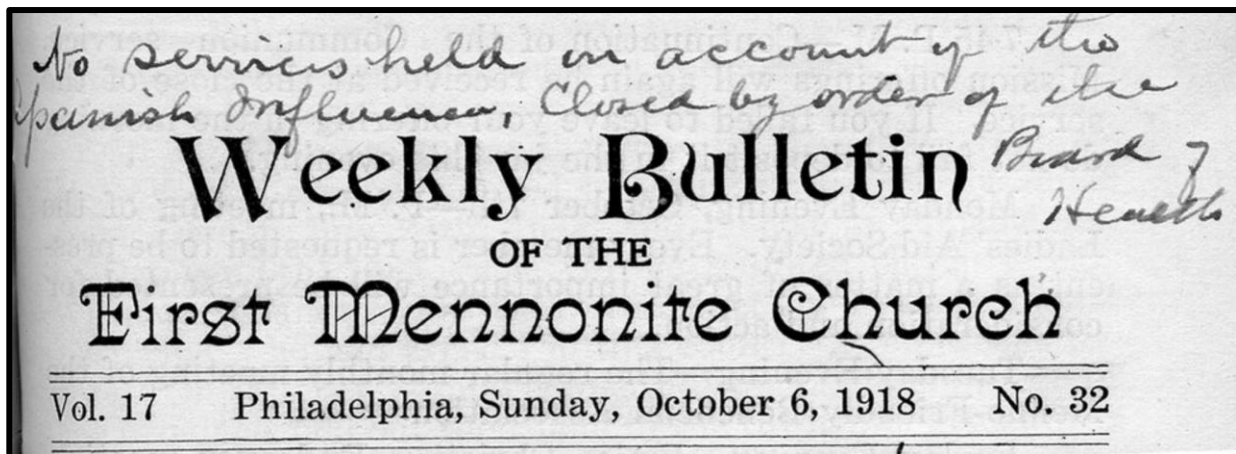
The First Mennonite congregation traces its beginnings to 1862 when a few “New Mennonite” families, who had their memberships in congregations in the northern countryside of Bucks and Montgomery counties, first held services in North Philadelphia Mennonite homes. Unlike the more conservative segment from which they split in 1847, these Mennonites were of a more progressive mind, having abandoned the farming life of many of their ancestors, and moved to the city to take advantage of new economic opportunities that came with the industrial revolution and the relative ease of train travel. Up until that point, only Germantown Mennonite, the first Mennonite congregation in the Americas, existed within the borders of Philadelphia. And it had struggled to continue as a congregation for many years, as most Mennonites coming to Pennsylvania from Germany and Switzerland had decided to bypass the original settlement for cheaper land to the north or west. First Mennonite was the first “mission” congregation of the Eastern District Conference, “although all of its original members were baptized Mennonites originally from the

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country.”¹

On October 27, 1865, what was to become the First Mennonite congregation, numbering 33 members, held its first official service in a rented chapel on Diamond Street, between Germantown Avenue and 5th Street. The first bishop (the singular head minister) of the congregation was Reverend Moses Gottshall of Schwenksville, PA. In January 1867, the congregation purchased a building and lot at the corner of Diamond and Reese Street from the Eastern Pennsylvania Eldership of the Church of God.² By 1872, the congregation ceased to be considered a mission congregation, bought the original chapel in which it had met, and officially joined the Eastern District Conference of the Mennonite Church with a membership of 64.³

In histories written about the congregation, some attention is always given to the use of the German language in services and Sunday school. There seems to have been a fair amount of contention between members in the congregation who wanted to continue using their traditional German language, while others, especially younger generations, rapidly assimilating with their neighbors in Philadelphia, wished to move to English. In 1872, a rule adopted by the congregation declared that English could be used only with the Pastor's consent, and should not be used for more than one half of the services. In 1874, the language issue became such an impasse that half of the members left the congregation to form a new one. This congregation only lasted a brief time and then merged with the nearby Fifth Moravian Church, while some members eventually returned to First Mennonite. In the years afterwards, German usage decreased in the congregation until January, 1914 when German ceased being used within the congregation's services.⁴



Weekly Bulletin of the First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia, c. October 6, 1918. Courtesy the Mennonite Heritage Center.

¹ John L. Ruth, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 349.

² Deed: Jacob Rife, treasurer of the Eastern Pennsylvania Eldership of the Church of God, to Michael Shoemaker, Joseph Beidler and Jacob S. Clymer, trustees of an unincorporated Religious Society Called The First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia, 12 January 1867, Philadelphia Deed Book J.T.O., No. 8, p. 434, City Archives of Philadelphia.

³ Ellen Jacobs Herr, "First Mennonite Church of Huntingdon Valley." *Mennonite Historians of Eastern Pennsylvania Newsletter* 18, no. 2 (1991).

⁴ Herr, "First Mennonite Church."



Nathaniel B. Grubb poses on the dais within First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia, c. 1902.
Courtesy Mennonite Heritage Center.

In 1880, under the leadership of Albert E. Funk, the congregation formed a committee to replace the original chapel they had been meeting in for over a decade with a new church building. A building permit for a new church was issued in August 1881.⁵ In January 1882, the new church building for First Mennonite was dedicated. The total building cost was recorded as \$9,000, of which \$5,000 was debt. Later that year, Funk rather abruptly left the church to move to New York. Though the church

⁵ “Diamond and Manakin Sts., two-st’y church, 84’ x 57’; H.M. Martin, contractor” (“Building Intelligence,” *The American Architect and Building News*, v. 10, no. 296 [August 27, 1881], xiii).
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had grown to 100 members, attendance was "very small," with "a great part of the membership ... scattered."⁶

It was in this discouraging situation that Nathaniel B. Grubb found himself when he took charge of First Mennonite in 1882. Grubb, much like most of the congregation he served, was a transplant from the Pennsylvania Dutch countryside, previously successfully serving a rural church. Mennonite historian John Ruth, in his stylized history of the southeastern Pennsylvania Mennonites, writes:

Finding only twenty-five to thirty Philadelphia Mennonites attending services in their stately debt-ridden building, he declined to promise to stay permanently. But as he got to work, preaching impressively in both German and English, and also on Sunday afternoons at the nearly helpless Germantown meeting, he seemed to come into his own element. Here the Mennonites had someone who could take on and enjoy the more complicated urban life...

Almost from the moment of his coming, the congregation began to grow.⁷

After some years, it became normal for the congregation to bring in as many as forty members in a year, both "ethnic" Mennonites migrating into the city from mostly Bucks County, and transferals from other denominations. Within two years of his arrival in Philadelphia, he became bishop of the church. In the years that followed, Grubb became something of a celebrity leader both within Mennonite circles, and the general Philadelphia Protestant community.

Unlike the sectarian outlook of most Mennonites in rural Pennsylvania, Grubb advocated ecumenical cooperation and a generally outward approach to his work. He was a board member of the national organization, the United Society for Christian Endeavor for 24 years.⁸ He is said to have given many sermons in other non-Mennonite congregations and for special occasions. In 1900, he was one of ten Philadelphia clergymen to be honored with a trip to Europe sponsored by the booming department store, Snellenberg & Co. His Mennonite identity was always of great importance to him, and he made a point of finding and interacting with European Mennonite churches when he was on the other side of the Atlantic. While he was away, First Mennonite bought and installed a new pipe organ and played it for the first time upon his return.⁹ This was undoubtedly the first instance (and likely one of the few times) a pipe organ was ever used for worship in a Mennonite church in the United States. It was in these years that the congregation's numbers would swell to over 400 members, becoming by far the largest church in the Eastern District Conference. The congregation became a point of pride for the fledgling "New Mennonite" conference. In his later years, John Oberholtzer, the leader who began the Eastern District Conference decades earlier, wrote to Grubb, "I take it for granted, that if our General Conference [larger denominational name associated with Eastern District Mennonite Conference] never would have been organized... no Mennonite congregation... might exist in the City of Philadelphia."¹⁰

6 Ruth, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship*, 378.

7 *Ibid.*, 378.

8 *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Grubb, Nathaniel B."

9 Ruth, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship*, 403.

10 *Ibid.*, 398.

Having found their strength, number, and relative wealth in the city, First Mennonite began its ambitions in church planting. In 1887, realizing that some of his congregants were traveling often to come to Philadelphia for First Mennonite's Sunday services, Grubb and some other members began the process of forming a new church back in Souderton, PA, the home to a large population of Mennonites. By 1892, a new building was built for Zion Mennonite Church.¹¹ In the twentieth century, Zion would become one of the largest New Mennonite churches in the region, with a membership numbering in the hundreds.¹² In 1899, the church would leave a lasting mark on the city of Philadelphia in planting a new "Second Mennonite Church" in north Philadelphia. With Nathaniel Grubb's son, Silas, at the pulpit of the new church with only 36 members, it was at first considered a mission congregation of First Mennonite. But it rapidly grew into its own and became independent in 1915 with a recorded membership of 190.¹³ In 1896, Grubb and his congregation were also instrumental in founding the Frederick Institute, which is known today as Frederick Living or Frederick Mennonite Home.¹⁴ Though it was located in the far off town of Frederick, First Mennonite contributed over half the funds for the purchase of the land and provided some of the first "matrons" for the home for the elderly.¹⁵

After decades of growth in the congregation's numbers and endeavors, in 1920, N.B. Grubb retired from his 38-year tenure at First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia. At 70 years old, he would soon be declared "Pastor Emeritus" of the 430-member strong congregation. The congregation sent two deacons to Trenton, Ohio in search of a specific pastor to take the place of legendary Grubb. They found Andrew J. Neuenschwander, a promising young man, full of energy, and ready to take on the challenges of a Philadelphia congregation that was beginning to feel the beginnings of changes that would drastically change Philadelphia in the years to come.¹⁶

11 Herr, "First Mennonite Church of Huntingdon Valley.

12 Ruth, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship*, 423.

13 *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Second Mennonite Church (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA)."

14 Ruth, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship*, 404-405.

15 Herr, "First Mennonite Church of Huntingdon Valley."

16 Ruth, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship*, 472.



Members of First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia, c. 1956. Courtesy the Mennonite Heritage Center.

The congregation, thanks to Neuenschwander's vitality and the organized members' persistent efforts to evangelize neighbors in North Philadelphia, maintained and even slightly grew the congregation's numbers well into the 1930s.¹⁷ During this time, the church became an early pioneer, among Mennonite congregations, in the area of women in leadership. From 1929 to 1930, Mary Bakewell, an Episcopalian educated at Hartford Theological Seminary, served as interim pastor of the church. Bakewell was the granddaughter of Henry A. Boardman, a fixture in the Philadelphia Protestant community and longtime Pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church.¹⁸

Two other women were ordained at First Mennonite around this time: Anne Allebach, who would serve a Reformed congregation in New York City, and Wilhelmina Kuyf. Kuyf, an immigrant from Antwerp, Belgium, became a member of First Mennonite when she was twelve years old. After working many years to pay for her education, Kuyf eventually attended the Hartford Seminary and, upon returning home to Philadelphia in 1936, was ordained as a minister for her home congregation. In the same year, she left to become a missionary in China and spent the rest of her life serving for international missions.¹⁹ After these women, the Eastern District Conference would not ordain another woman to ministry until 1980, proving that First Mennonite of Philadelphia was far ahead of its time in this dimension.²⁰

In the 1940s and onward, the membership declined steeply. Reverend J. J. Plenert, the pastor of the church from 1936-1946, saw a gradual but increasing exodus of members' to Northeast Philadelphia

17 Ibid.

18 Joyce C. Hedrick. "Mary Bakewell and Wilhelmina Kuyf: Women in Ministry at First Mennonite, Philadelphia," *MHC Quarterly* (1987): 7-8.

19 Ibid.

20 Judith N. Gorsuch. "Reverend Anne Jemima Allebach (1873-1918)," *MHEP Quarterly* 3:4 (2000): 3.

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and other suburbs. At the time, he advised the congregation to search for property for a mission congregation in those areas, however nothing became of it.²¹ In the 1950s, the fever pitch of suburbanization and white flight out of North Philadelphia provided the final incentive for the congregation to leave its home of almost a century to move to a new location in Huntingdon Valley, PA.



Members of First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia in the ground floor parish hall, c. 1956. Courtesy the Mennonite Heritage Center.

21 Herr, "First Mennonite Church of Huntingdon Valley."



Members of First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia at the front of the sanctuary, c. 1956. Courtesy the Mennonite Heritage Center.



Elders of First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia, c. 1956. Courtesy the Mennonite Heritage Center.

Some ministers in the conference, as well as some members, were a bit weary of the congregation's new parcel of land. The property's engineering flaws, the local neighborhood makeup (being mostly Jewish and Swedenborgian), and its accessibility drove them to question whether or not the new home would be a good fit for the congregation. Nevertheless, a new building was built on the site at the corner of Huntingdon Pike and Meetinghouse Road in 1963. In 1964, the Reese Street property ceased being used for services and was sold to the black congregation, Faith Chapel. Members who were unwilling to make the move into the suburbs were encouraged to attend Second Mennonite Church at the corner of Franklin and Indiana Streets.²² Interestingly, Second Mennonite, would choose a different path at this juncture and endeavor to become an integrated congregation. The church still exists today.

First Mennonite's membership would continue to dwindle in the years to come. Their relocation did not bring about the stability they had hoped for. By 1982, the average Sunday attendance was only 20 members and many questioned whether or not the church would live to see the new millennium. Reverend John L. Freed began serving the congregation as pastor in 1983 and worked hard to end the relative isolation of the congregation among other suburban congregations, and to strengthen its relationship with Eastern District Conference. During that time, the congregation went through a reevaluation of its purpose to consider whether or not to disband itself. The decision was made to

²² Ibid; Deed: The First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia to Faith Chapel of Philadelphia, 28 January 1965, Philadelphia Deed Book C.A.D., No. 382, p. 496, City Archives of Philadelphia.

continue into the future as long as possible.²³ In recent years, First Mennonite merged with another church, Korean Evangelical Church of Philadelphia. While remaining two separate ministries, the two entities worship together and both are affiliates of Alliance of Evangelical Mennonite Churches (AMEC).²⁴

First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia, while it remained in the city itself, was an experiment in many ways. Long a mostly isolated rural group, Mennonites of eastern Pennsylvania chose this building to take part in urbanization and the industrial revolution, which was changing American identity in cities across the country. It was their first and most successful venture into urban missions to date. However, with the foray into the unfamiliar context of the city, the church also exposed itself to the neighborhood change that would drastically change the identity of this section of Philadelphia, and leave the church without an easy path forward.

8. Bibliography

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Ruth, John L. *Maintaining the Right Fellowship*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004.

²³ Herr, "First Mennonite Church of Huntingdon Valley."

²⁴ "First Mennonite Church of Philadelphia's Facebook page." January 27, 2015

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