Serving the Lord with gladness…

Pioneer Churches of Franklin Park

Originally created as a travelling display (2012) by Debby Rabold.
Color posters by Glenn Lewis.


Serving the Lord with Gladness...
Franklin Park's Pioneer Churches

Franklin Park's pioneer churches grew from America's Second Great Awakening, the evangelical Protestant movement that dominated our nation during the first half of the 19th century. It was a time when itinerant preachers travelled the frontier in search of souls to save.



The first Methodist minister to preach in the Sewickley Valley was Rev. Thomas McClelland (1763-1820), who in 1811 bought a farm next to Big Sewickley Creek in what later became Franklin Township. Neighbors gathered for services in the pastor's log house and later organized the Hopkins Chapel (1844), which was built on a bluff overlooking Big Sewickley Creek.

Rev. Robert Hopkins (1798-1891) was the chapel's namesake. Before settling in Sewickley, most of the beloved minister's career was that of an itinerant. *Some of his fields of labor embraced vast stretches of territory requiring hundreds of miles of travel, mostly on horseback, the climbing of mountains, threading of forests, swimming of swollen streams, and lodging in rude cabins. That was the heroic age of Methodism west of the Allegheny Mountains…* [from Agnes Ellis' Lights and Shadows of Sewickley Life (1893)]

Another group of Methodists built a log meeting house next to the old Kuskusky Indian path. The *Little Log Church at Pine Creek* (1837) grew into the Ingomar United Methodist Church on West Ingomar Road.

Itinerant preachers converted large numbers of frontier families into the Protestant faiths, especially the Methodist and Baptist churches, by preaching in homes, barns and the open air. Camp meetings and revivals became popular venues. Every year, hundreds and sometimes thousands would gather for a week or two of hymn singing, confessing and prayer along with two or three daily sermons.

James Wakefield, the brother and nephew of prominent Methodist ministers, was a founding member of the Pine Creek church. Perhaps with encouragement from his uncle who was a well-known revivalist, Wakefield opened his Franklin Township farm to a camp meeting. The late Rev. Hodge Eagelson (1937) continues the story:

> *The next summer after the purchase of their farm, they* [James and Susan Wakefield] *started a camp meeting. To this meeting people came by scores and hundreds. The campground was located near the present residence of Carl Van Der Voort* [Wilvan Lane]. *Out of this venture grew the Mt. Sewickley Camp Meeting* [Leet Township] *and* [Ingomar United Methodist Church].
>
> *For the benefit of those who think that the people of those days had all the religion and folks now very little, it should be related that Mr. Wakefield had to withdraw the use of his property as a camp meeting ground because the worshippers and alleged worshippers tore down the barn for firewood. This was the end of the Wakefield camp meeting. One of the young vandals who did this tried a similar feat at the old Franklin log church, but the preacher caught him in the act and lit into him with his fists and administered a sound thrashing.*

An offshoot of America's early Methodist movement was the United Brethren in Christ, popular in Pennsylvania's German speaking communities. Sometime before 1800, Christian Newcomer, who later became the denomination's first bishop, travelled through Allegheny County and is credited with establishing what became known successively as Creese's Church of the United Brethren, Mount Union Church of the United Brethren and Little Hill United Methodist. While the property deed to the Magee Road church was not recorded until 1844, the earliest cemetery markers date from the 1820s, clearly indicating an early, but unrecorded organization.

Formally organized in the Fall of 1822 from the earlier Duff Mill Congregation, Fairmount Associate Reformed Presbyterian is Franklin Park's first documented congregation and oldest cemetery. Located on Fairmount Church Road, the hilltop location overlooks the Rippling Run branch of Big Sewickley Creek.

> *The services were often held under a large sugar tree that stood in the valley about a half mile below the present location. At first there was frequent preaching in Duff's Mill and the congregation was for a long time known as the Duff's Mill Congregation.*
>
> Rev. Levi Risher (1876)

Replacing an earlier log structure, Fairmount Church was built on its current site in 1838 with bricks made by David Duff, one of the founding elders. The building was destroyed by fire circa 1900 and was replaced by the current frame structure in 1903.

Many of Franklin Park's early Catholic families were clustered in the Wexford area where they attended mass at St. Alphonsus Church in neighboring Pine Township. Living amongst the Catholics was a group of about twelve Lutheran families who in 1845 organized Allegheny County's fourth Lutheran church, the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity of Franklin Township, known today as Trinity Evangelical Lutheran. The 1847 log church stood next to the old Kuskusky Path and is remembered for its all white interior. Until Dr. William Passavant bought him a horse, Rev. Michael Schweigart walked from McKeesport, PA to conduct Sunday services at Trinity. The historic 1868 red brick church replaced the log sanctuary and occupies a prominent hilltop location overlooking Brandt School Road.

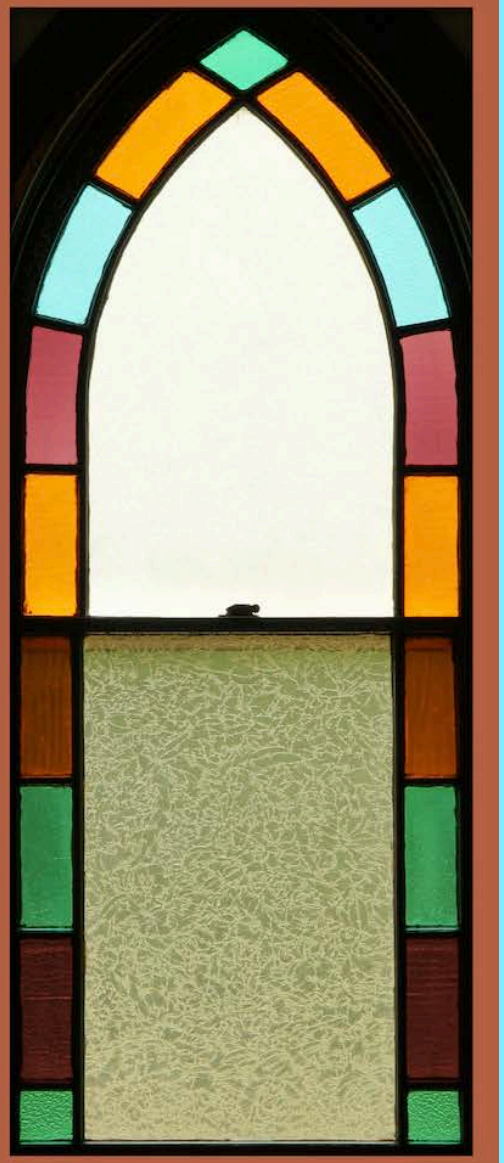
The last of Franklin Park's pioneer churches was the Regular Baptist Church of Franklin Township, which dates from 1852 and is today the Franklin Park Baptist Church, located on Nicholson Road. Its eleven original members met in homes until the first sanctuary was built in 1873 on land donated by William Neely. An interesting feature of the early church was the two doors used to enter the sanctuary; one being for women, the other for men. In later years, members of the congregation donated the labor needed to brick the original frame church and expand the facilities. Many of the current members are descendents of the church's founders.



1940 view of the Big Sewickley Creek Valley facing west above the intersection of Rochester, Big Sewickley Creek, Fairmount Church and Camp Meeting roads.









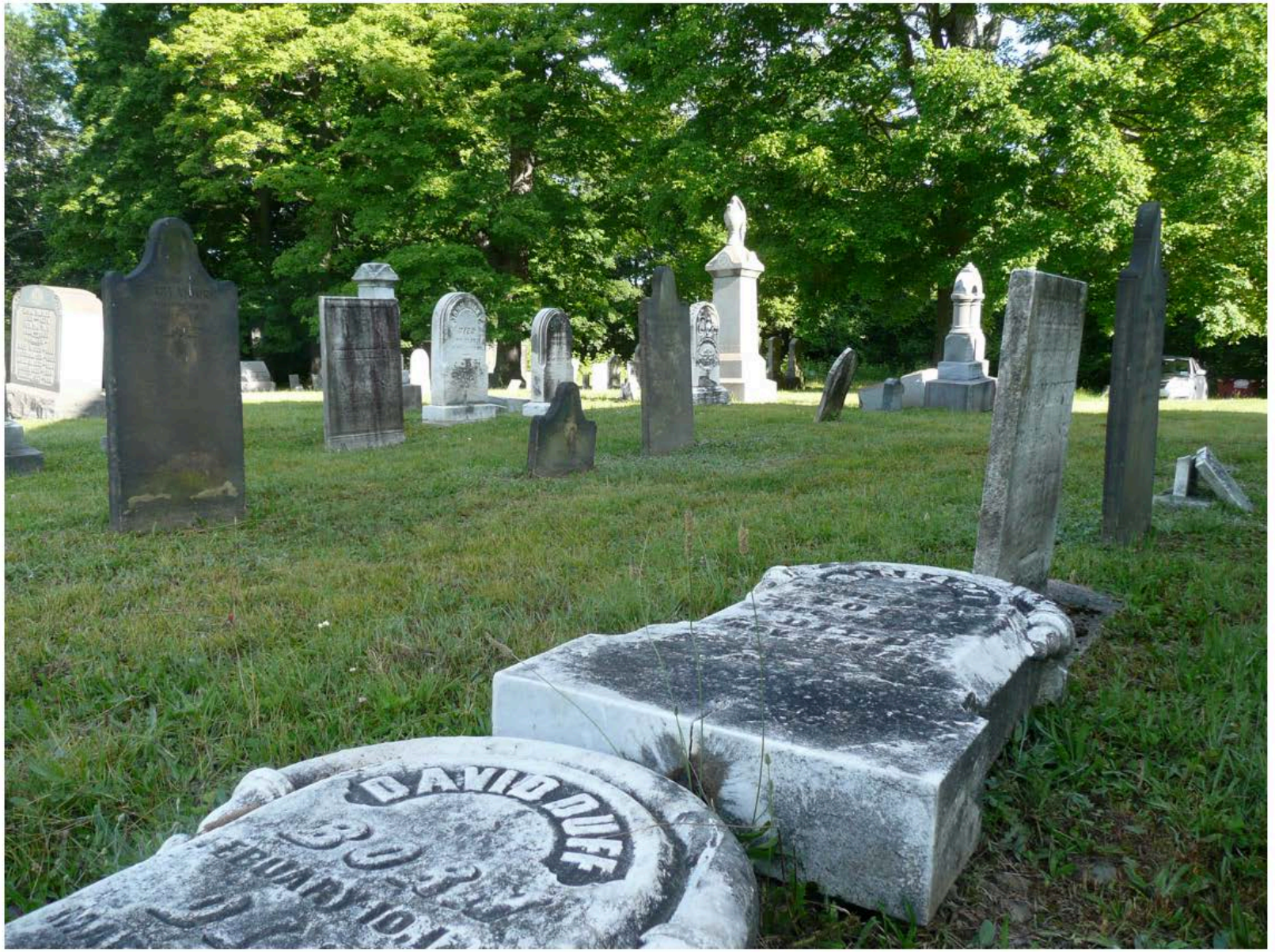
Fairmount Presbyterian Church in Franklin Park Borough



Men and women entered Fairmount's brick sanctuary through separate doors. Rev. Walter Wilson served the congregation from 1898-1909. In 1913, the Sessions approved a ban on the sale of bottled drinks and tobacco at church gatherings.



After fire destroyed Fairmount's 1838 brick building, a new frame structure was built in 1902-03. During construction, Fairmount services were held in the neighboring Little Hill U. B. Church. A modern education wing was added in 1972.



Nearly 200 years of burials are found in the Fairmount A. R. Presbyterian church cemetery.



One of Franklin Park's earliest grave markers is found in the Fairmount Cemetery.

Hardships of Itinerant Preachers

While serving as pastor to Perrysville's Hilands Presbyterian Church (1807-1833), Rev. Robert Patterson was also a noted man of letters and successful Pittsburgh bookseller. Prior to Fairmount Church's formal organization in 1822, Rev. Patterson often travelled to the banks of the Big Sewickley Creek where he preached to families that later formed Fairmount's first congregation under Rev. John Andrews.

The son of a minister, Rev. Patterson was described by a contemporary as *"rather short and heavy, very lively and good natured."* The following excerpts are from Patterson's November 1803 journal in which he recorded his experiences as an itinerant preacher near Erie, PA.

Set off from the place of my residence…rode thirty miles… [Sunday, next morning] *Met this morning, at different places on the road, one man carrying a hoe, shovel, and basket, going into his potato field; another carrying a log chain; and a third a cutting knife. Besides these met several others on their return from a Saturday night's lodging in a tavern, after having attended the office of a justice, whose custom it is to transact law business on Saturdays, and so late that those who are obliged to appear before him are under the necessity, some with and a few against their will, of staying all night in a place where drunkenness, profanity, and obscenity too frequently introduce the Sabbath.*

Preached…to eighteen hearers, some not very attentive and no appearance of solemnity. Rode in the evening three miles…

Preached to eleven persons, attentive and serious. Rode three or four miles…

Rode eight or nine miles…preached to seven persons.

Rode eleven miles…preached to twenty persons. Received $1.37.

Rode twenty miles home.

…the road solitary, swampy and in some places covered with deep snow…two or three hours after night, came to a watercourse, seen by snow light, which was too broad and miry to cross. Prepared to pass the night as well as I could. All in a perspiration, my feet wet with walking and wading, for the place did not admit of riding, hungry and fatigued, I lay down on the slush snow, somewhat afraid of wild beasts, but more of perishing with the chilling cold, though it did not freeze. About midnight the cold in my feet became excessive. Rose and walked for about an hour on a path which I made in the snow for the purpose. My feet were somewhat relieved from the cold. Lay down again and passed the night sometimes awake but mostly asleep.

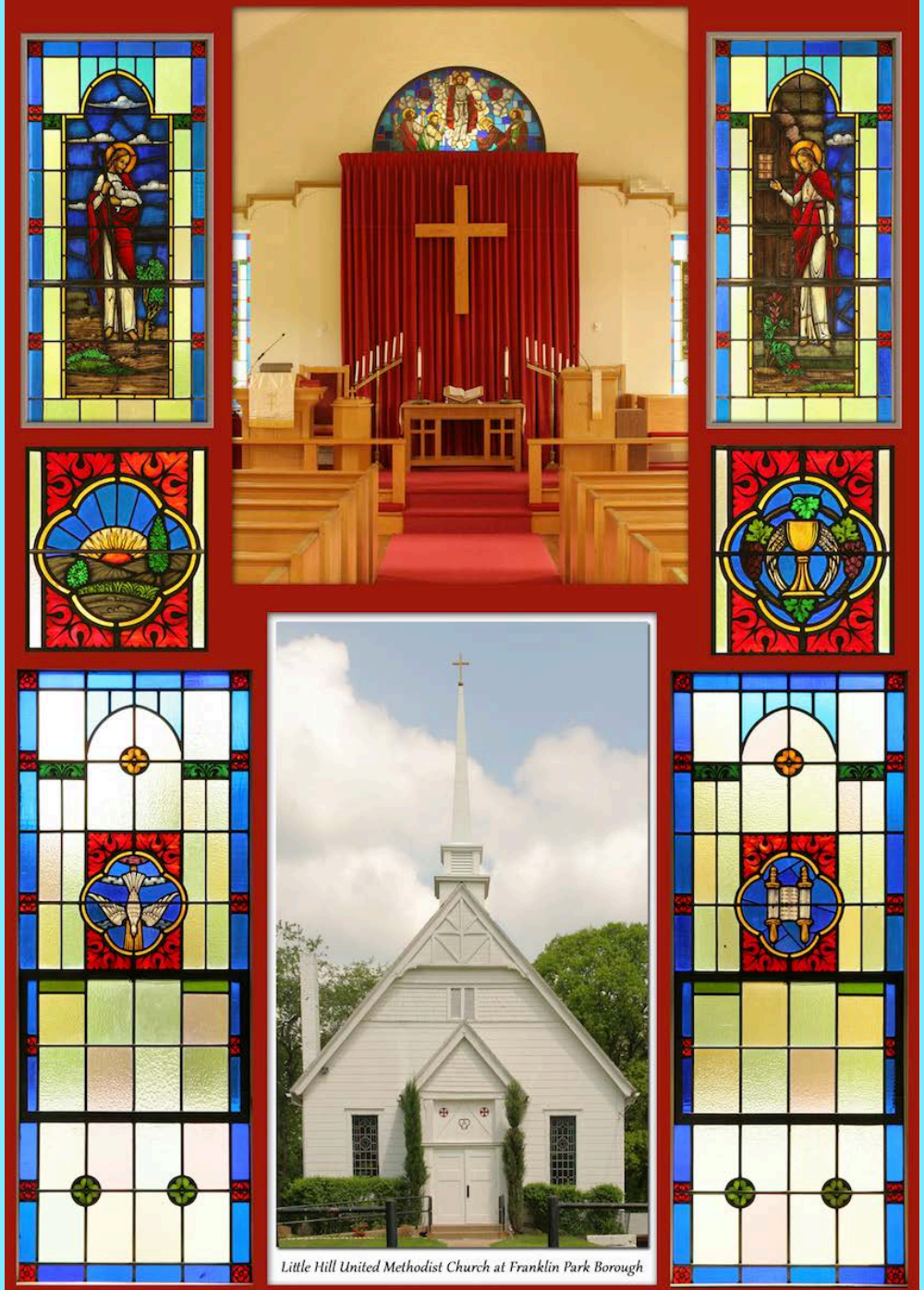
In the morning, after having spent eleven or twelve hours in this dreary place, and after having suffered severer hardships than I ever before endured in traveling, and feeling some sense of my obligation to God for His preserving mercy, took my track backward, and between nine and ten o'clock reached the house of John Bundle…preached ten persons.

Rode eighteen miles home.

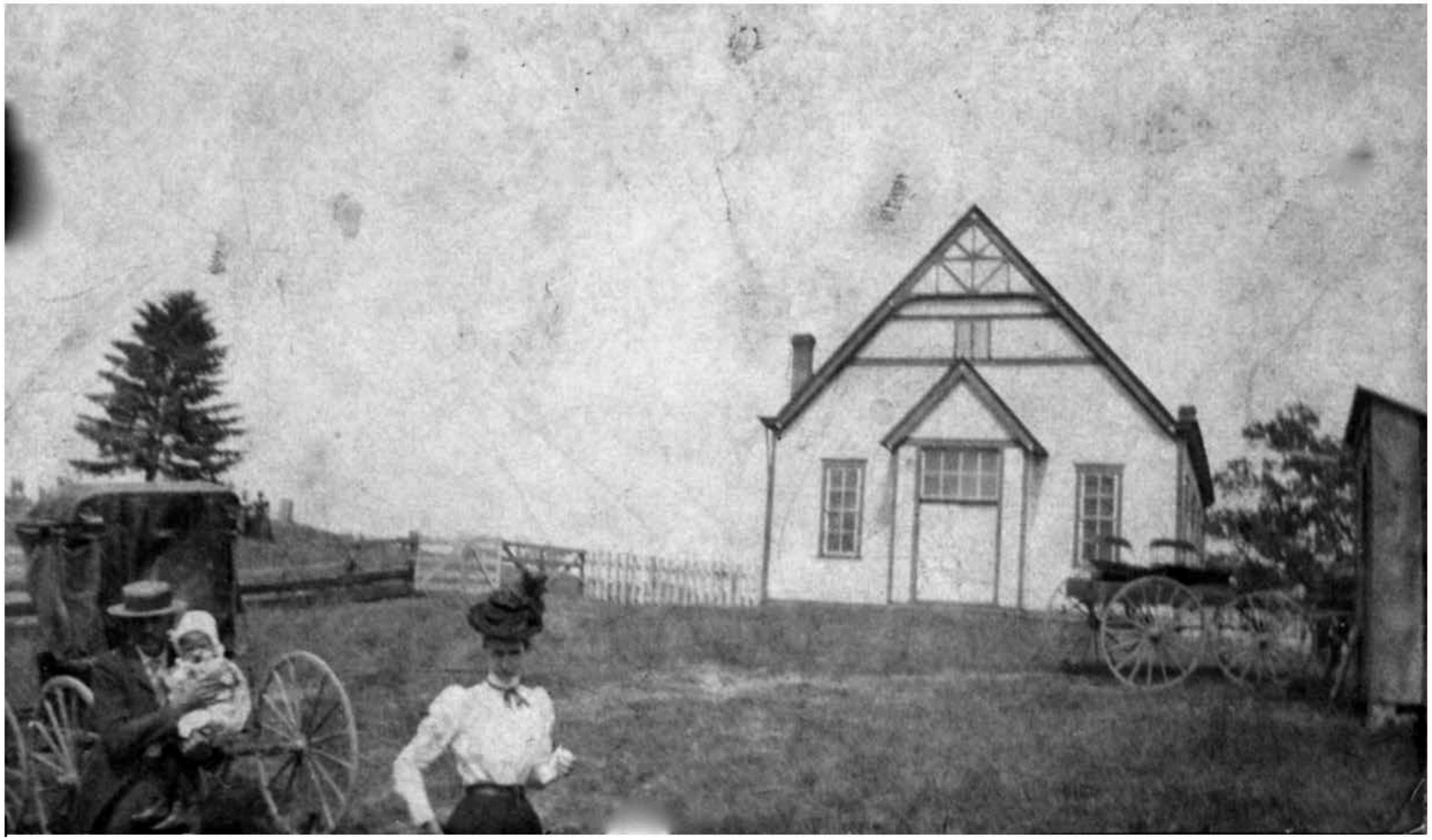
Set out a sunrise, having appointed to preach at the house of P. Cooke, distant eleven or twelve miles. The road, however, was so extremely bad with mud, frost and snow and the day wet, that at twelve o'clock I found that I could not reach the place until two or three hours after the time appointed and not being well since the night I lay in the snow, rode home…

Rev. Patterson often told the story of a conversation he had with a traveler one Sunday morning as he road from his home to Hilands Church in Perrysville.

The church was soon reached and I said, "Suppose you come and hear preaching, it will rest both you and your horse." "Who is your preacher?" "One Patterson." "Did he preach in Erie once?" "Yes." "Then I won't stop. He is the driest old stick I ever heard."



Little Hill United Methodist Church at Franklin Park Borough



This 1898 photo of the Robert Creese family shows the 1894 church before it was moved over a newly built basement in 1924. Philip Creese and his uncle walked to Red Bank [Clarion County] where they purchased pine and floated it down the river, the church subsequently being built from the timber. While helping to build the 1894 church, John Schuring insisted that frosted glass instead of clear glass be used in the windows. He thought that if a young man rode up on horseback for Sunday service, he would have to attend the service to see if his favorite girl was there.



Little Hill United Methodist Church and Cemetery



Little Hill United Methodist church cemetery contains burials dating from the 1820s, including that of John Creese, once held in the Civil War's infamous Andersonville Prison.

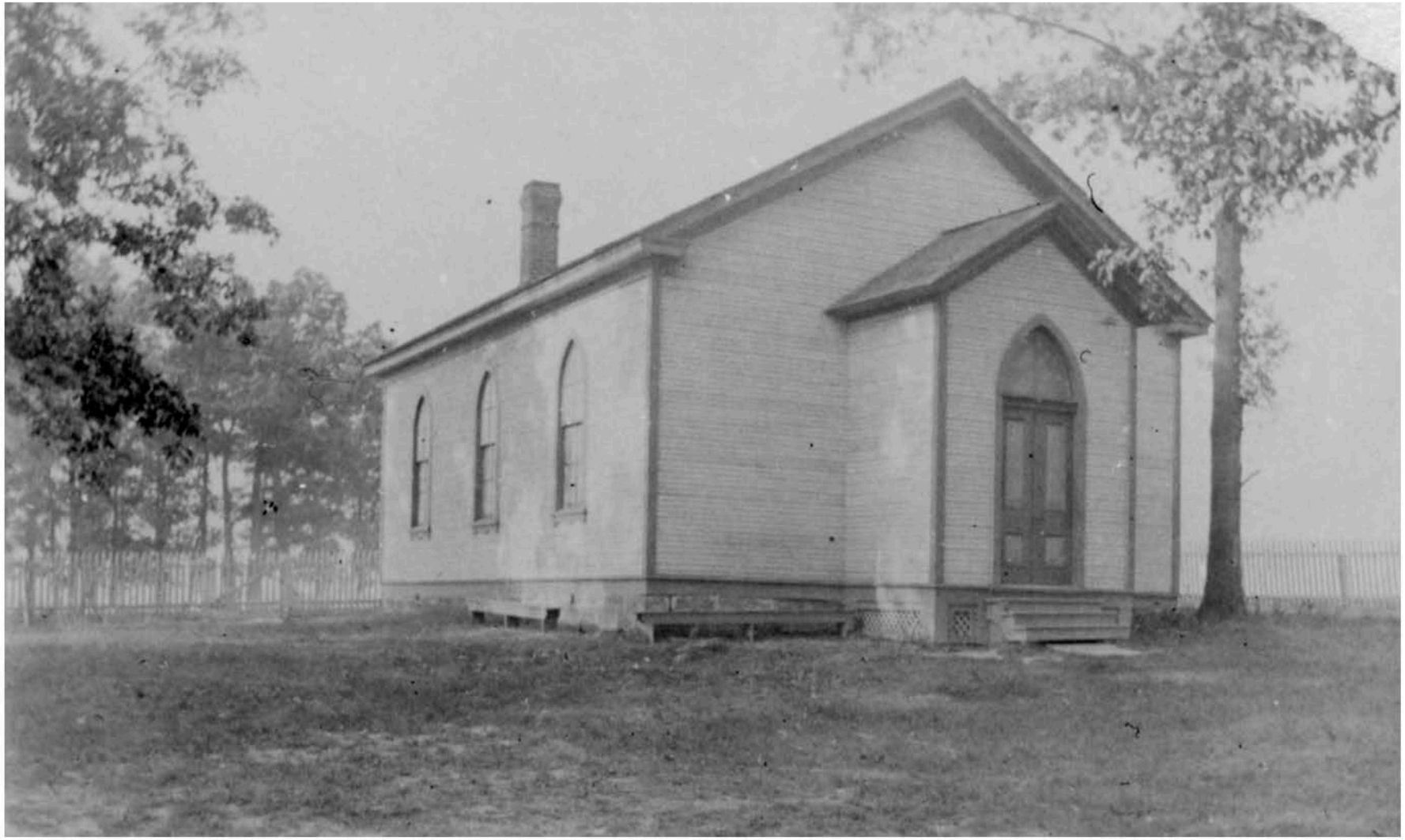
How the Preacher Lost His Ham

Told by Reverend Hodge Eagleson (1937)

In the days when the old Franklin Methodist Church was organized, the country north of the Ohio [River] *was filled with bears. These animals were for the most part welcome sources of meat, but at times their presence was not altogether welcomed. One of the seven men who founded the church was James Pinkerton. He had long been a friend of the circuit riders who treaded the wilderness of 'The Old Shenango Circuit'. When he built a log barn in the wilderness, care was taken to add a stall for the circuit rider's horse. Many times, the saddle bags of the weary pioneer minister were unstrapped at his dwelling. Usually, also when the frontier minister stopped there, he carried away with him ample provisions, in the form of bacon or poultry.*

On one unusual occasion, notice had been given ahead of time that the minister would arrive on a given date. After consulting with his good wife, it was decided that a present of unusual value should be given to the minister at this time. It was to be nothing less than a ham, which had been taken to the village of Perrysville to be cured in a large smoke house where several of the pioneers carried their pork to be smoked. On the evening of the appointed day, Pinkerton walked across the hills to the village of Perrysville to secure the preacher's ham. He selected a large one, and one that was properly cured. To lighten the task of carrying it home his foresight had provided a grain sack.

However, Pinkerton had not reckoned with the fact that bears were yet to be found in the forest and that they had a great fondness for ham. In the valley near the site of the old Willoughby mill [Sloop and Highland roads], *Pinkerton heard the sound of cracking twigs behind him, turned and found a good-sized bear trotting down the trail after him. Pinkerton decided to run. The same idea had already occurred to the bear. Closer and closer came the hungry bear. The path led uphill* [Highland Road towards Ingomar] *and Pinkerton soon was out of breath. He was spurred on by conflicting emotions, fear of the bear, regard for the preacher and the desire to save him the ham. The bear won. Pinkerton dropped the ham and a few hundred feet further on he paused and watched the bear tear the sack to shreds and devour the ham he had meant for the preacher's breakfast. He hurried on home and secured his trusty rifle hoping to make the bear pay for his theft with his life. However, the bear had finished his meal leaving only the torn pieces of the sack. The circuit rider had lost his ham.*



Built to replace an earlier Civil War era structure, this 1886 frame sanctuary of the Franklin Methodist Church was itself replaced with a larger brick building in 1913/15. The 1908 opening of the Harmony Line trolley system brought many new residents to the Ingomar area, resulting in the need for a larger church facility.



1918 view of the Franklin Methodist Episcopal Church. Notice the adjacent oil derrick. The brick sanctuary was built in 1915 to replace an earlier frame structure.



Ingomar Methodist's fifth church building was constructed in 1953, combined with a remodel of the 1915 building. An education wing was added in 1955.



Ingomar Methodist's current 600 seat sanctuary was completed in 1991, serving as anchor to the earlier built Child Enrichment Center. In 2005, the 1915/1953 church building was converted into an activity center and meeting rooms.



Out by the headwaters of the Big Sewickley Creek is a quaint old brick chapel or church known as Hopkins Chapel that is well worth a Sunday afternoon visit, both because it is a beautiful ride with plenty of different routes for the return trip, and because it is a place with a history…where the service is attended by people coming from the farming country for several miles around, where the worship is conducted in the simplest way…there is a great charm about the simplicity and earnestness of this worship in the little brick chapel with its old-fashioned pine pews and the rustling of the forest trees and the freshness of the hill breezes coming through the broad open door… **[excerpt from the Sewickley Herald August 5, 1916]**

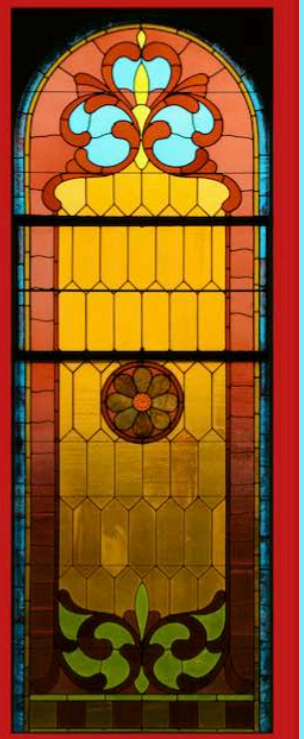
Rev. A. B. Leonard served the Allegheny Circuit and Hopkins Chapel during the early years of the Civil War. In remembering that time, he later wrote, *"At the close of a Sabbath afternoon service at Hopkins Chapel the news was received of the defeat of the Union forces and their retreat toward Washington City."* [1st Battle of Bull Run] While still serving at Hopkins, Rev. Leonard visited Washington D. C. soon after the battle at Antietam, and wrote *"One morning I visited the White House grounds and had my first and only sight of President Lincoln, who spent the summer nights at the Soldiers' Home, some three or four miles distant. I happened to be near the front entrance when a carriage was driven up, guarded by a squad of cavalry, from which the President emerged and quickly passed into the door. There remains with me a vivid memory of his appearance – tall gaunt, and bent, with the saddest face I have ever seen."*

Andrew Rosensteel (standing far right) was a Franklin Township road supervisor, Justice of the Peace and school director. He missed only two Sundays in nine years as the chapel's Sunday school supervisor.

The chapel closed circa 1920. The empty building was subsequently vandalized before being torn down. Graves were also vandalized. Only a few scattered markers remain for the 125 recorded burials.

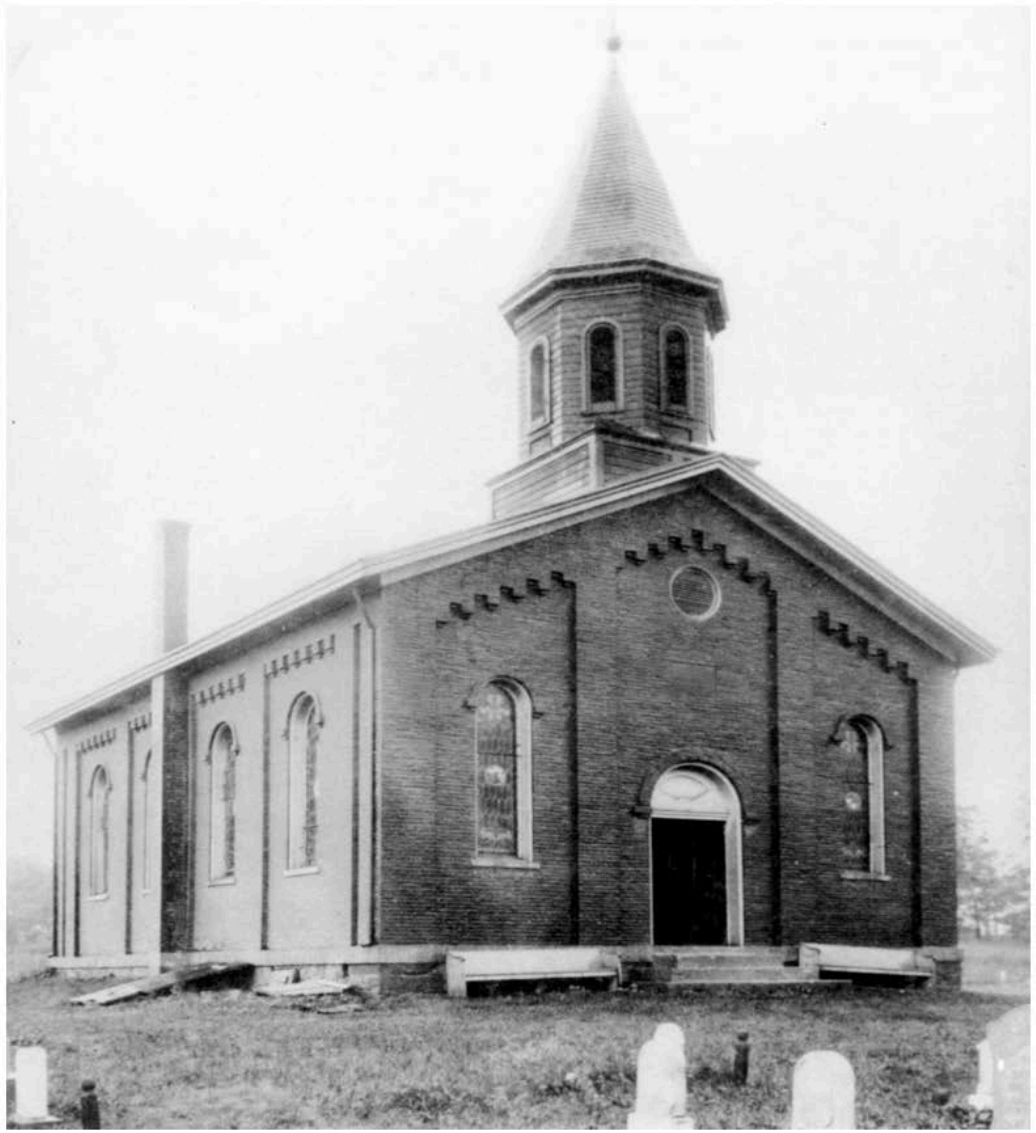








Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Franklin Park Borough



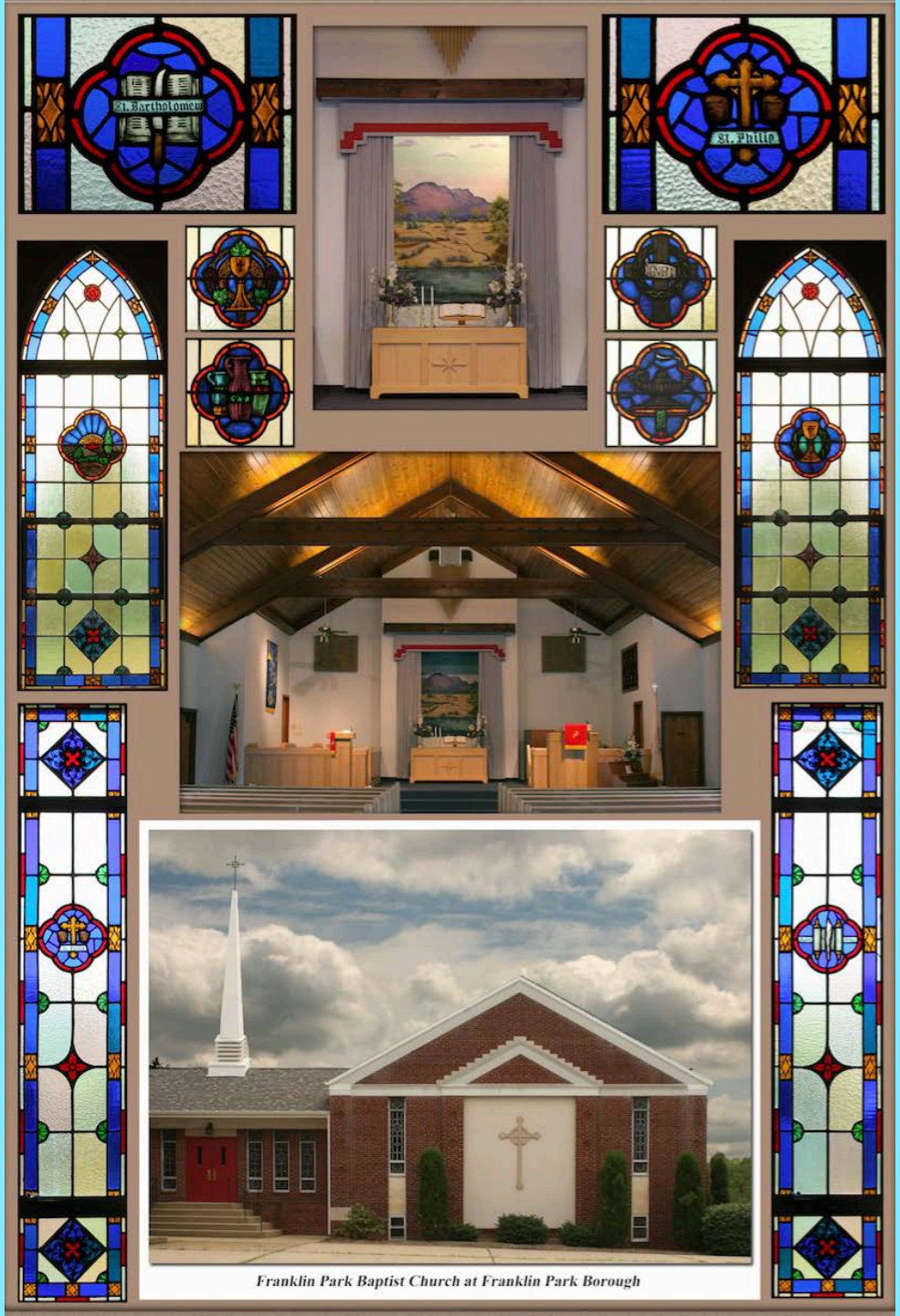
The 1868 red brick sanctuary replaced an 1847 log church. Once known as Brandt's Church, sermons were delivered in German until 1907.



Albert Brandt (holding folded hymnal in center of photo) joined the Klondike gold rush in 1897 only to die in the arctic four years later. His remains were returned to Trinity Evangelical Lutheran for burial. Before leaving for Alaska, young Brandt was a member of the church choir.



1917 Post Card



Franklin Park Baptist Church at Franklin Park Borough



Franklin Park Baptist's first sanctuary was built in 1873 with separate entrances for men and women. The vestibule and stained glass windows shown above were added in 1911.



Franklin Park Baptist's longest serving pastor was Reverend Robert F. Cunningham who wrote a new sermon every week of his thirty-three year tenure, which lasted from 1952 to 1985. In 1999, the church bestowed the title of "Pastor Emeritus" on Reverend Cunningham in honor of his ministry.



Saint Alphonsus Church and cemetery in neighboring Pine Township has served Franklin Park families since 1840 when Fr. John Neumann ministered to local German and Irish families. In 1977, he was canonized as Saint John Neumann, namesake of Franklin Park's first Roman Catholic church.

Weep not for me my children dear…

Old Cemeteries Filled with Art and Verse

Older cemeteries are interesting places to explore. Weathered markers not only yield information eagerly sought by family historians, but also reflect how taste and tradition have changed with time.

New England's early colonial markers feature images associated with death. Skulls, skeletons and angels of death were meant to frighten the living into leading more godly lives. Over time, grave art was used to portray grief or make a statement about the person buried beneath.

Six 19th century church cemeteries are scattered throughout Franklin Park. Five are in active use and the sixth, Hopkins Methodist Chapel Cemetery, is an abandoned site that has suffered extensive neglect and vandalism. The newer Tree of Life Memorial Park opened in 1948.

Founded in 1822, Fairmount Presbyterian is Franklin Park's oldest church and cemetery. Its earliest markers are typical of early 19th century design; a vertical stone featuring a sculpted top and unpolished face that is placed directly into the ground. Cut from slate, sandstone or whatever stone was readily available, these markers featured simple inscriptions; usually a name, date and age. Burials dating from the 1820s can be found in both the Fairmount Presbyterian and Little Hill Methodist cemeteries.

By the mid-1800s, when transportation improved and quarried stone from further distances was available, white marble became a popular choice for markers. While easy to carve, marble weathers quickly. Many once beautiful markers are now worn and covered with lichen. By the end of the 1800s, polished granite gained in popularity and is still used today.

It was during the Victorian era of the mid to late 1800s that grave ornamentation became fashionable. No longer content with a simple record of names, dates and ages; the living chose to memorialize the dead with poetic epitaphs and carved images on more elaborate markers.

Crowns represented victory over death; a lamp meant faithfulness; a rose, beauty; wheat a fruitful life. Weeping willows or ivy promised immortality. A broken column or cut tree signified a life too short. Fingers pointing heavenward, clasped and praying hands, doves, books and flowers were all commonly used motifs. Lambs representing innocence were often used to decorate the graves of young children. Emblems of fraternal organizations were often inscribed as well as acknowledgments for military veterans. Often appearing on the base was the name of the skilled craftsman who carved and inscribed the marker.



(Photo by Glenn Lewis) Zinc column featuring death mask of Philip Brandt in Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church Cemetery where many markers are inscribed in German.

A walk through any one of Franklin Park's pioneer cemeteries is a trip through history where generations of local families have been memorialized for nearly two hundred years with everything from simple stones to elaborately styled obelisks and with all manner of verse.

Weep not for me my children dear,
I am not dead, but sleeping here.
My end you know, may age you see,
Therefore prepare to follow me.

James Montgomery 1882

"A little flower of love that blossomed, but to die, transplanted now above in bloom with god on high."

Ida C. Sickles 1862-1867 (Baptist)

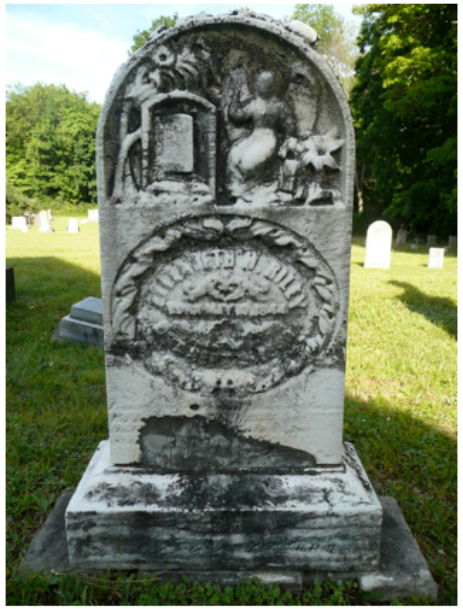
"Why do we mourn for dying friends or shout at death's alarms, tis but the voice that Jesus sends to all them in his arms."

John Creese 1860-1918 (Little Hill)

"Home is not home Mother is not there, Dark is her room empty her chair, Angels have taken her out from our care, Lifted her over life's stair."

Martha Wilson 1829-1882 (Ingomar)





"In labor and in love allied, in death they here sleep side by side, Resting in peace the aged twain, Till Christ shall raise them up again."

Caroline Schulz Pfeiffer 1854-1879 (Trinity)

"Through many nights and dangers, Amidst our country's gloom, This soldier of a loyal band, Was marching to the tomb."

Alexander Creese 1864 (Little Hill)
Battle of the Wilderness

"A light is from our household gone, A voice we loved is stilled, a vacant place around our hearth, which never can be filled."

Adolph Beuermann 1819-1896 (Trinity)

"Sleep dearest Father take thy rest, God calls thee home He thought it best, It was hard to part with thee, but God's strong arm supported me."

Matthias Fisher 1814-1881 (Ingomar)

"This lady was a good woman."

Walburga Soergel 1824-1899 (Trinity)

"She sleeps in the valley so sweet, But her spirit has taken its flight, Lo, her form is but dust neath our feet, While she is an angel of light."

Edna Blanch Rosensteel 1879-1894 (Fairmount)

