

Cathedral Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem

The History of Our Community

[From the Parish Profile 2005 of the Cathedral Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem.]

One of our best loved Christmas hymns sings, "Come to Bethlehem and see..." and come they have. Originally they came to live and preach the message of that "newborn king". Later they followed other dreams. All have added to our city. Two groups, however, have forever marked the area, giving it the framework for what it is today.

The first group arrived in 1740 and were called Moravians. Inspired by John Hus, a Roman Catholic priest whose attempt to reform the Catholic Church earned him a "heretic's bonfire," they formed a church which initially prospered, then was nearly wiped out in later persecutions. It was a young, wealthy Count von Zinzendorf who allowed them to settle on his estate and regain their momentum. Missionary work was a must for them. Among the missionaries that were sent out was a group that arrived in this area, settling first in Nazareth and later on the Monocacy Creek/Lehigh River Junction where they built their first cabin. It was here that the community celebrated their first Christmas Eve. Because Count von Zinzendorf and his daughter were visiting at the time, they were given the honor of picking a hymn for the communion. That hymn contained the verse, "Not Jerusalem-lowly Bethlehem," which somehow seemed to fit. Thus our town of Bethlehem was named.

For the next hundred years Bethlehem stayed a closed community. Though they treated the natives as brothers, educating them and accepting them, only Moravians could own land or businesses and the church leaders were also the town's leaders. However, being a convenient stopping place on the way to New York or Philadelphia, it was impossible to stay completely isolated. Growth and change inevitably caught up.

This brings us to the second group of people who significantly changed Bethlehem, the Nativity's founding fathers. With the discovery that anthracite coal could be used as a fuel, canals and railways were needed to move it from the mountains to the more urban areas. The Lehigh Valley was an ideal route. Asa Packer owned a railway north of Bethlehem. Being an impressively creative man, he had plans and workings in many directions. Bethlehem was one. He sent several assistants to the area to facilitate the building of the railway. These men, along with Mr. Packer, had begun the Episcopal Church in Jim Thorpe, and once they were joined in Bethlehem by their families, a decision was made to have occasional local church services with visiting Episcopal ministers.

One thing led to another. The railway prospered, an iron foundry was established and Robert Sayre built his mansion on the south side, followed by many others. Eight men and women met and a decision was made to actively work on forming a parish. They were quick to tackle the task and one week later, a Sunday School began in the railway station.

With the formation of a temporary Vestry in November of 1862, an appeal went out for building funds. The decision that no construction would begin until there was enough money to complete it gave urgency to the task. Donations were made by many, starting with Robert Sayre, but the Ladies Group got together and raised enough money to finish the building. The cornerstone of Nativity was laid August 6, 1863, three months after Nativity had been added to the Philadelphia Diocese. Interestingly enough, the first church service was held Christmas Day 1864...123 years almost to the day from that first Moravian service that named the city.

As the nation stretched, adapted and grew, so did Bethlehem and Nativity. The city had two very distinct centers, one north of the river and one to the south. Bethlehem South was now a larger community than North Bethlehem and Nativity was just on the edge of the business district. In fact wherever one looked, Nativity was involved in the growth...with good reason.

That reason was our founders. For over 20 years these people gave of their energy, vision, time and pledges, often digging deeply into their personal wealth. They believed not only in the excitement of the industrial rise for themselves, their city and country--BUT, that it was paramount for society to rise alongside. They also believed that acquired wealth and status carried with it the responsibility to give back to the community around them. Because Nativity was the home for so many of these remarkable people, it became central to the beginnings of a variety of community-building efforts:

Lehigh University, founded by Asa Packer as a free engineering school, was guided from the start by both the Bishop and Nativity's rector.

Bishopthorpe School for Girls was established and renovations on their building paid for by a parishioner. St. Luke's Hospital was begun as a cottage hospital by parish members because there were no hospitals north of Philadelphia.

The parish was instrumental in starting a free reading room; the Lehigh Valley National Bank; a boys' school; and several mission churches which they also maintained.

By 1871 The Episcopal Church had created the Diocese of Bethlehem and approximately 30 years later Nativity became the Pro-Cathedral. The generation of founders came to an end with the deaths of Anna Sayre in 1907 and W.H. Sayre, Jr. in 1909. Nativity was on its own.

We have been blessed through the years that we have been a strong parish as well as a Cathedral. Parishioners did not run to the suburbs when Southside Bethlehem faltered. The 60's and 70's saw "the Steel", as it's been called, institute environmental policies that began to clean up Bethlehem's "dingy-city" image.

The 80's and 90's saw the decline and end of Bethlehem Steel. Gone forever were the jobs and community help with which the Steel had upheld the area. Still parishioners have continued to come to Nativity, supporting various community programs, church music, youth programs and more. Nativity has prevailed as a symbol of the past, joined to the present, with a continued focus on the future.

Without a doubt, the Cathedral Church of the Nativity will be here in the thick of it. We hope its steadfast qualities, reflected in the very buildings built by our founders, will continue to attract people with the same devotion, energy, dreams, and generosity that were present at our start. The City of Bethlehem's marketing phrase is "Follow the Star", and we at Nativity hope there will always be those who will "Come to Bethlehem and see" that star on the mountain above us and will stay, to move forward with us...in prayer, worship, and the community we have committed ourselves to be as a parish.