

The following is taken from the 1998 50th Anniversary Booklet. Written by Karla Tyson

The first record of any attempt to establish a church on this site was October, 19 1809, when a meeting was held at the home of Adijah Dewey. A building fund was drawn up at that meeting; and “as soon as fifteen or more shall have subscribed to this instrument (meaning a Building Fund document) we will meet to reform a church....”

Reverend Samuel Fuller was the first minister that preached regularly for this church group in Durham, and he helped to organize the church. Reverend Fuller served in Durham from 1811 to 1818 and during his ministry the parish was formally organized. On June 15, 1812, a Certificate of Incorporation, incorporating the church as St. Paul’s Protestant Episcopal Church, was drawn up. On December 4, 1812 it was recorded in the County Clerk’s office.

In 1819, Reverend James Thompson became the pastor and during his ministry the church was built. The church building was consecrated on November 21, 1834.

Reverend Thompson continued to serve the church until April 13, 1841. He died on August 19, 1844 and is buried in the Church Cemetery at Oak Hill.

In 1883 the church underwent repairs and enlargement.

On April 18, 1918, St. Paul’s Church was declared closed by the Diocesan Convention and by order of February 11, 1919 the Supreme Court declared the lands could be sold.

On November 26, 1948 a group of people interested in founding a Lutheran Church in the Durham, Oak Hill area held a meeting. The meeting was held in the home of Mr. & Mrs. B.M. Dratz of Oak Hill and was directed by the Reverend Berthold von Schenk of Our Savior Lutheran Church in the Bronx. At this meeting, Pastor von Schenk suggested the following objectives: 1. Find a church building for use, 2. Advertise, 3. Organize a choir in preparation for opening.

A suggestion was made that the St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Oak Hill might be available for use and this church, if available, was the unanimous choice of the group.

The following were present at the meeting:

Mr. & Mrs. B.M. Dratz
Mr. John Wiechmann
Miss Dorryce Wiechmann
Mrs. George Luhrs
Mr. & Mrs. Hans Haberman and daughter Helen
Mr. & Mrs. Ernst Henneman
Mr. & Mrs. Robert Rotzol
Mrs. John Mahne
Mr. & Mrs. Robert von Schenk

Through the kindness of the Right Reverend Frederick Barry, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Albany, St. Paul’s Church was made available for use. On February 6, 1949, Pastor Berthold von Schenk conducted the first Lutheran worship service at St. Paul’s.

For several years Pastor von Schenk, along with the assistant pastors from Our Savior Lutheran Church in the Bronx, traveled to Oak Hill on weekends and conducted services at St. Paul’s. During this time Our Saviour Lutheran Church financially supported St. Paul’s and the church was completely restored with a new organ and heating system.

The church was incorporated in 1954, adopted the name of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church and called Edwin Gietz as a full time pastor.

On January 8, 1962 the church was purchased from the Episcopal Diocese with the assistance of the Atlantic District-Missouri Synod.

As the church grew, a building fund was begun in 1970 to raise money for a Parish Hall. On April 29, 1973 the Parish Hall with its new facilities was dedicated.

A sad note around this time was the discovery of rotting beams in the bell tower which necessitated the removal of the tower and bell. The church roof was reshingled and a new five foot high stainless steel cross was mounted on the peak.

On September 1, 1977 St. Paul's Lutheran Church joined the East Coast Synod of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches and the new Lutheran Book of Worship was introduced in 1978.

The festivities for St. Paul's 35th anniversary began on February 5, 1984. Pastor James von Schenk, son of the church founder, Reverend Berthold von Schenk, served as guest preacher. On October 7, 1984 the congregation celebrated with a special anniversary dinner, Douglas Thomson, local Oak Hill historian, was the guest speaker.

The bell, removed from the church tower in the 1970's was restored, mounted on the front lawn, and dedicated on Sunday, November 9, 1986. The historic bell was built by the Aspinwall Company of Albany in the 1830's. It was probably rung first atop the steeple of St. Paul's when the church building was dedicated on November 11, 1834. It was rung for a full half hour by the Reverend Howard Bates on April 10, 1865 when the Civil War ended. Now it is rung by the children of St. Paul's to call people to worship on Sunday mornings. The bell was dedicated "To the glory of God and in loving memory of all members of St. Paul's who are now at rest."

Early in 1982 the American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches began negotiations to create a new Lutheran Church. On April 30, 1987, the three Lutheran Churches joined to form a new Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, with headquarters in Chicago and combined total of 5.3 million members.

In 1998 St. Paul's entered a Parish Covenant Agreement with two other ELCA congregations: St. John's in Hudson and St. Thomas in Churchtown. The purpose of this "yoking" arrangement was to allow the congregations the fullest extent of cooperation in the ministry of the Gospel, while enabling each to maintain its respective identity and heritage.

The yoking arrangement included the calling of a full-time and half-time pastor. Pastor Jack Wilder, Jr. was called as the full-time and Pastor Leslie Wilder as the half-time pastor. Both pastors preach and lead worship every Sunday rotating between the churches on a monthly basis.

Maintaining our historic building is a demanding task. Late in 1998 the sanctuary was renovated, installing sheet rock on walls and ceiling and applying a fresh coat of paint. In early 1999 the Church Hall was refurbished with a new ceiling and coat of paint. Now that Spring is here attention will be focused on the exterior of the church, which is in great need of painting, and the maintenance of the grounds and historic wrought iron fence. Did you know that the wrought iron fence dates back to around 1840 and was manufactured locally? Oak Hill produced the first malleable iron in the country and at one time five foundries operated here.

Now as we are celebrating the past we are also looking to the future. We know we are called to do a mission

even though we are small and our human and financial resources are limited. We know we are called to do a mission even though our pastors serve in part time ministries. We are striving to seek new approaches to old problems, recognizing that society and the role of the pastor have changed greatly in the past 50 years. By considering the God given gifts and talents of the congregation and pastors we will be able to focus more intently on our mission.