The Scranton Area’s Forgotten Methodist Churches

I. Scranton’s Three “Avenue” Churches

Various references exist to three enduring Methodist Episcopal “Avenue” congregations in the city of Scranton for which there is little or no documentation in the journals of the former Wyoming Conference: the Adams Avenue ME Church (1855-1938), the Prospect Avenue ME Church (1884-1940), the Cedar Avenue ME Church (1884-1902). As it so happens, portions of the three congregations continue today in a single United Methodist congregation. This paper discusses the histories of these three congregations, explains why there is little or no mention of them in the official records of the former Wyoming Conference, and names the present Susquehanna Conference church that is the successor to all three of them.

A. Adams Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church
Adams Avenue & Vine Street

This is not the Adams Avenue Church pictured on page 907 of Chaffee’s 1904 *History of the Wyoming Conference* in connection with the history of Elm Park Church. The first church building of that congregation was a wooden chapel erected in 1842 at what is now the corner of Adams and Lackawanna Avenues. In 1856 they erected a brick sanctuary in the 100 block of Adams Avenue, which they occupied until selling it in 1891. This is the building Chaffee identifies as the Adams Avenue Church – although the appointment was officially named Scranton until 1876, and First after that date. After selling that Adams Avenue structure, the congregation worshiped in a temporary wooden tabernacle at the corner of Adams Avenue and Mulberry Street until the Elm Park sanctuary at Madison Avenue and Linden Street was completed in 1893.

But the Adams Avenue ME Church at Adams Avenue and Vine Street was not the Elm Park congregation’s former structure in the 100 block of Adams Avenue that Chaffee and others refer to as the “Adams Avenue Church.” In fact, the Adams Avenue ME Church at Adams Avenue and Vine Street was never in the Wyoming Conference! That was a German-speaking congregation founded by a missionary sent by the New York Conference in 1855. Originally known as the First German ME Church of Scranton, the congregation remained a part of the New York Conference until the East German Conference was formed in 1866, and it remained a part of the East German Conference until the congregation’s demise in 1938 – even though after World War I the English language was
introduced into the services, eventually to the point where only part of the Sunday morning service was still in German and the Sunday evening service and the Sunday School and all organizations of the church operated in English.

In 1856 the congregation purchased the wooden chapel abandoned by the English-speaking congregation that eventually became Elm Park. They dismantled the structure and re-erected it at the corner of Adams Avenue and Vine Street. In 1872 a brick sanctuary was erected at the site. The congregation continued as a station appointment until 1930, at which time it was paired with Prospect Avenue, its stronger daughter congregation, as a two-point charge in the East German Conference. By 1938 there were not enough German-speaking members to continue two congregations, and Adams Avenue was merged into Prospect Avenue.

The Adams Avenue ME Church of the East German Conference – from the 1929 “A complete History of the Providence Methodist Episcopal Church, together with Short Histories of other ME Churches of Lackawanna County,” page 61.

B. Prospect Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church
   Prospect Avenue & Birch Street

   Methodist work among the German-speaking residents in South Scranton started in 1874 – the meetings being held on Cedar Avenue, between Beech and Birch Streets. In 1884, the preacher at Adams Avenue began holding regular services. The following year the East German Conference assigned a second
pastor, who more formally organized the work and led the people in the erection of a church building at the corner of Prospect Avenue and Birch Street. In 1887 Prospect Avenue was separated from Adams Avenue and became a station appointment.

In the twentieth century, daughter Prospect Avenue became more prosperous than mother Adams Avenue. By the late 1920’s all the programs of the church except the Sunday morning worship were being conducted in English. In 1939, the German language was dropped completely, and the congregation decided to approach the congregation of St. Paul’s Methodist Church, at Pittston Avenue and Pear Street, to propose a merger. On December 20, 1940, a joint plan of merger was adopted by both congregations. The 1941 Wyoming Conference Journal, page 63, reported the events as follows:

AN ECCLESIASTICAL WEDDING

The East German Conference transferred Prospect Avenue Church to our Wyoming Conference. This gave us two churches on the South Side. Under the wise leadership of Pastor L.A. Meeker, Saint Paul’s and Prospect Avenue united under the name Saint Paul’s and is now located in the old Prospect Avenue edifice. Extensive improvements have been made, and the united congregation has taken on life and vigor.

The Prospect Avenue ME Church of the East German Conference before the 1923 remodeling that added a usable basement and moved the entrance from Prospect Avenue to Birch Street.
C. Cedar Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church  
Cedar Avenue & Cherry Street

This congregation began as home meetings conducted in South Scranton in the early 1880’s by the pastor of First (later Elm Park) ME Church, then located in the 100 block of Adams Avenue. In the spring of 1887 a structure, named the John Rogers Memorial Chapel, was dedicated at the corner of Cedar Avenue and Cherry Street. In 1891 the chapel became an independent charge and was chartered as the Cedar Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church.

In 1902 the property was sold to the Scranton Button Company, and the congregation erected a new structure at the corner of Pittston Avenue and Pearl Street – at that time changing its name to St. Paul’s Methodist Episcopal Church. This was the congregation which merged with Prospect Avenue in 1940, and which continues today in the Susquehanna Conference at the Prospect Avenue location as St. Paul’s United Methodist Church, “successor” of the three forgotten “Avenue” congregations.

II. More Little-Documented Scranton Area Methodist Churches

A. Petersburg Methodist Episcopal Chapel  
Taylor Avenue, Scranton

The former town of Petersburg is now a section of Scranton. This area once included enough German immigrants to support a both a German Presbyterian church and German Methodist work. The Adams Avenue German Methodist congregation started a German Sunday School in Petersburg in 1856, immediately after beginning their own ministry in Scranton. Unfortunately the
work, which was conducted in a building known as the brick church, did not endure and was abandoned after several years.

In 1876 the Adams Avenue congregation began another Sunday School in Petersburg. The work started with 35 pupils and quickly grew to over 100. Meetings were held in the old Petersburg school, until it burned, and then in the Dunmore school. After a brief and less than successful stay in Dunmore, the ministry returned to Petersburg and met in various locations – but it was obvious that the work needed a permanent home if it was to succeed.

In 1885 the Adams Avenue Women’s Association purchased a lot on Taylor Avenue for $450, and a new chapel was constructed for $2245. Dedication day was June 7, 1885. In the 1890’s a second pastor was assigned to Adams Avenue so that more work could be done at the Petersburg Chapel. The work there was always considered a mission – a Sunday School, mainly for children, but with classes for all ages – and there were never any serious efforts to create a separate daughter congregation as had been done at Prospect Avenue. The work continued for many years, maintaining a roll of about 100 students, with several who had been spiritually nourished there as children returning as adults to continue the cycle.
B. First Methodist Protestant Church  
Southampton Street, Scranton

This congregation was chartered June 7, 1870. The third article of their charter, regulating how their property shall be held, states in part

*that whenever any property, real or personal, shall be hereafter bequeathed, devised, or conveyed...for religious worship or sepulture, or the maintenance of either, the same shall not be otherwise taken...than subject to the control and disposition of the lay-members of said church...or such constituted officers or representatives thereof.*

Such language reflects the spirit of the Methodist Protestant Church, which was formed partly as a reaction against the perceived unchecked power at both the conference and the local level given by the Methodist Episcopal Church to bishops, church hierarchy, and clergy in general.

But the Methodist Protestant denomination and her Conferences were not without their Discipline and rules of procedure. In particular, the Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church was incorporated by an Act of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania approved April 11, 1859. Under this charter the Annual Conference had general supervision over the appointment of ministers and to make such rules and regulations as were necessary to defray the expenses of the itinerant ministers. The charter also provided that the property of a church which had become extinct by death of its members, by removals, or otherwise, shall vest in the Annual Conference. And it was further specified that a church shall be regarded as extinct when the membership shall become so reduced that it has not sufficient members to fill its offices, and had ceased to hold regular meetings, and to keep its relation with a charge having regular connection with the Annual Conference.

All that legal language would eventually prove to be important and necessary to settle a dispute between the congregation and the Conference. In 1871, Frank Geswinder and his wife conveyed to the First Methodist Protestant Church of Scranton a lot on Southampton Street, on which a chapel was erected. In 1880 the members of the congregation, with the exception of a Mr. Bartley Meyers and his wife, voted to go independent of the Pennsylvania Annual Conference and refused to recognize its authority. In 1882 a Mr. John R. Hall filed suit to regain $735.91 owed him by the congregation. The congregation also owed $120.75 to the Conference, which body then joined the suit.

To settle the debts, the property was ordered to be sold at a sheriff’s sale. Mr. Hall purchased the property for $1325.00. The court paid Mr. Hall his $735.91, and paid the Conference its $120.75. The Pennsylvania Annual Conference then claimed the remainder of the money on the basis that by severing its connection with the Annual Conference the congregation had become extinct. At this point, the court appointed an auditor to determine how to distribute the
remainder of the money. After due consideration, the auditor awarded the remainder money to the Conference.

The “congregation” (i.e., the members who had voted to become independent) filed an appeal and asked to be awarded the remaining money. Among their arguments were the following.

1. The auditor exceeded his authority by attempting to interpret ecclesiastical law.
2. The auditor exceeded his authority by determining who had proper title to the property without holding legal hearings to settle the question.
3. The Pennsylvania Annual Conference could not be both lien holder and owner of the same property.
4. The charter specifically states that the property should be under the control and disposition of the lay members of the congregation.
5. The congregation should receive all the remaining funds and the Pennsylvania Annual Conference should pay the costs for the auditor.

The appeal went all the way to the Supreme Court of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, which heard the arguments by the attorneys for both sides in January and February of 1885 and published their final decision in July of that year in the Weekly Notes of Cases, Vol. XVI, No. 16. The Supreme Court affirmed the original decision, on the basis of “the well-settled rule that the title to church property adheres to that party which is in harmony with its own laws, and the ecclesiastical laws, usages, customs, and principles which were accepted before the dispute arose.” The case is also referred to in the 1916 book The Civil Law and the Church, page 370, which summarizes the decision as follows: “It was held that the two members who did not join the independent movement constituted the church, and being too few to fill the offices, the property of the church was forfeited and became vested in the Conference.”

While the First Methodist Protestant Church of Scranton existed for only ten years, from 1870 to 1880, its demise created a case that appears in legal texts to this day.

Editor’s Postscript: While “Southampton Street” is what appears in the 1882 court records, the location is now referred to as “Hampton Street” – and there is a whole other level to this story. Other sources (e.g. Hitchcock’s 1914 History of Scranton) indicate that Embury Methodist Episcopal Church was organized June 22, 1882, with some members of the Methodist Protestant Church and some from Simpson Methodist Episcopal Church. It was incorporated on the above date with John R. Hall as one of the trustees. The Methodist Protestant Church had built a chapel “on the corner of Hampton and Ninth Streets” and occupied it for about 10 years. In the spring of 1882 the property was sold by the sheriff and purchased by this new society – which worshiped in it for 20 years as the Hampton Street Methodist Episcopal Church, until their present Embury building on South Main Street was dedicated May 4, 1902.
Reuben Nelson (1818-1879)

Reuben Nelson, an ordained member of the Wyoming Conference and the founding principal of Wyoming Seminary, figures indirectly in the 1859 trial of Elisha Butler that is presented on pages 31-56. The following account of his life is taken from the 1974 *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, page 1715.

Reuben Nelson (1818-1879), American minister, educator and publisher, was born in Andes NY on December 16, 1818. One of twelve children of Abraham and Huldah Nelson, he became a Christian at fifteen and a local preacher at eighteen. In his youth, he lost his lower right arm in a woolen mill accident. He joined the Oneida Conference at twenty-one, becoming a fully ordained member in due course. He served as principal of the Otsego Academy in Cooperstown NY and as the third preacher on the Otsego and Westford circuits. In 1842 he married Jane Scott Eddy, daughter of Col. And Mrs. Asa Eddy of Milford NY. Because of a throat infection, he temporarily stepped aside from employment in 1843.

In 1844 the Oneida Conference established Wyoming Seminary in Kingston PA, naming Reuben Nelson its first president – a position he held for twenty-eight years, excepting two years (1862-64) when he was presiding elder of the Wyoming District. In 1868-69 he filled both responsibilities.

Nelson became a charter member of the Wyoming Conference in 1852 and beginning in 1860 was elected to five General Conferences. In 1876 he was the chairman of the Committee on Episcopacy. In 1872 and 1876 the General Conference elected him senior agent of the Methodist Book Concern, with offices in New York City. His second election was by acclamation in recognition of his successful administration at a time when many business enterprises were being ruined. He was also made treasurer of the denomination’s Missionary Society.

Reuben Nelson was an able preacher, educator and business man. He held honorary degrees from Union College and Dickinson College. He died in New York City on February 20, 1879, and was buried in Forty Fort PA.