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UNITED STATES
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Historic Site Survey
St. George's (Methodist) Church
Philadelphia, Pa.

Prepared by:
Dennis C. Kurjack
Chief Park Historian

Independence National Historical Park
National Park Service

July 2, 1956

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Historic Site Survey

ST. GEORGE"S (METHODIST) CHURCH

Description, Identification:

St. George's Church was begun in 1763 for the German Reformed congregation of Philadelphia, and the shell completed in that year. It remained unfinished and unoccupied, however, until 1769 when the Methodist Society purchased it at public auction. The church is located at the southeast corner of Fourth and New Streets, 14 feet north of the Benjamin Franklin bridge and four blocks north of area "A" of the Independence National Historical Park, in a blighted section of downtown Philadelphia occupied by industrial and commercial buildings. Adjoining and belonging to the Church are two three-story buildings on New Street, #324 and #326, the former erected in 1814 as a parsonage, the latter erected in 1812 as an interdenominational day school. The two have been combined and since 1945 have served as the historical center of the Philadelphia and New Jersey Conference Historical Society, housing over 5000 books as well as many manuscripts, costumes, relics and other objects pertaining to the early Methodist Church in America.

Architecturally, St. George's is a brick structure with

a double-pitch roof measuring 55 feet by 85 feet[1] and comprising a basement story (now above street level), main story, gallery, and attic. The shell of the Church appears substantially as built except for the basement row of windows which gives it the external appearance of a three-story structure instead of the original two. These windows were added in 1837 following excavation of the basement to its present dimensions and lowering of the entrance to the church several feet to permit direct access to the basement.[2] The original doorway was replaced by a window. A more recent change affecting the external appearance of the Church was the lowering of Fourth Street in the 1920's in connection with the construction of the Benjamin Franklin bridge under which the street now passes. The basement as a result is now well above street level and is reached by a flight of steps.

The interior was not completed until 1800. In 1769, when the Methodists held their first services in the church, it was still an unfinished shell with a dirt floor.[3] It remained in that

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1 Francis H. Tees, The Beginnings of Methodism in England and America (Phila., 1940), 92. Another authority gives the dimensions as 53 feet by 82 feet; see The Reverend Bishop Fred Pierce Corson, "St. George's Church: The Cradle of American Methodism," in Historic Philadelphia From the Founding until the Early Nineteenth Century (issued as Vol. 43, Part 1, of the Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Phila., 1953), 231.

2 Tees, 98

3 Ibid., 95-96; Corson, 232.

condition until after the Revolution when a temporary "rough floor" was laid at the east end. This was replaced in 1799 by a more permanent floor. The walls were plastered in 1786, the galleries added in 1792, and the floors raised to the present level in 1800.

Interior appointments have changed considerably from about 1838 on; some of these changes may be traced from the views appended to this report. The present pulpit, referred to by some as the "Asbury pulpit,"[4] is a modern replica, not the original.[5] Some of the original details, appointments, and objects from the early church, however, still remain, according to historians of the church. Among these are the gallery with its original rough boards, a portion of the flooring in the lower chancel, the three chandeliers and sconces, collection boxes, and the chair once belonging to Francis Asbury dating from about 1773.[6]

History of St. George's Church:

St. George's has an almost unbroken history as a Methodist Church from 1769 to the present. The single break in its continuity goes back to the time of the British occupation of Philadelphia, from the fall of 1777 to the spring of 1778, when the British cavalry

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4 Ibid.

5 Tees, 97. John F. Watson, Annals of Philadelphia (Hazard edition, 3 vols., Phila., 1909), III, 386, describes the original pulpit.

6 Tees, 97; Corson, 833

used the church as a riding school.[7]

While St. George's is not the first building set aside by the Methodists in America as a permanent meeting house---that distinction belonging to Wesley Chapel in New York (1768-1818) which antedated St. George's by one year---it is the oldest Methodist Church still standing.[8] Associated with it are a number of events and people significant in the establishment of the Methodist Church in America. In this Church Francis Asbury preached his first sermon in America in 1771; the first three "conferences" of American Methodism were held, in 1773, 1774 and 1775; and the first negro Methodist was ordained in America in 1799.[9]

The writer has had little opportunity to do original research on St. George's and its place in the history of American Methodism. He has perforce obtained most of his information from the writings of local church historians for the history of St. George's and recognized scholars for evaluation of its relative importance.

Methodism in America did not begin in any organizational sense, according to W. W. Sweet, until 1766. By then two Methodist "classes" or groups had been formed in the colonies, one under the

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7 Watson, I, 436; Joseph Jackson, Encyclopedia of Philadelphia (4 vols., Harrisburg, 1933), IV, 1004.

8 Tees, 87; Wayland F. Dunaway, A History of Pennsylvania (N.Y.,1948), 284.

9 Tees, 126, 137, 142, 144, and 206; Corson, 233-234.

leadership of Robert Strawbridge in Maryland, the other by Philip Embury in New York.[10] Both these movements antedate the first stirrings in Pennsylvania by two years. The history of Methodism in Pennsylvania begins with Captain Thomas Webb, a British officer who had been converted by the preaching of John Wesley. In 1768 he visited Philadelphia where he held services in a sail loft on Dock Street.[11]

In 1769 John Wesley sent out two missionaries, Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor (Pilmore), to help establish societies. Both arrived in Philadelphia where Pilmoor remained to serve a congregation of about 100 members which Webb had gathered.[12] It was under Pilmoor's direction that St. George's was acquired and dedicated that year. Two years later Wesley sent out two other missionaries, one of them, Francis Asbury.

Asbury's arrival in Philadelphia marked a turning point in the history of American Methodism. His organizing ability and his tireless circuit riding, a system which he promoted and which proved

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10 W. W. Sweet, "The Methodists," in James Truslow Adams, ed., Dictionary of American History (N.Y., 1946), 380.

11 Dunaway, 283

12 Joseph Cullen Ayres, "Joseph Pilmore," in Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., Dictionary of American Biography (22 vols., N. Y., 1928-1944), XIV, 609.

so eminently suited to frontier conditions, gave powerful impetus to the growth of the denomination. W. W. Sweet, in Methodism in American[13] says:

> "The importance of Asbury's influence in setting an example of tireless itinerancy at the very beginning of his American ministry can hardly be overestimated. If Methodism had lost its itinerancy feature at this early period, the whole movement could not have succeeded as it did in America."

He was the only prominent Methodist to become an American citizen following the War, and at the Baltimore Conference in 1784 he organized the Methodist Episcopal Church of America with himself as first bishop and premier circuit rider.[14] Asbury's primacy in the annals of the church is so well established that he is referred to by Methodists today as the "Father of the Church" and its "Patron Saint."[15] Indeed, his importance in the religious history of the United States transcends that of the purely denominational, for his circuit riding and powerful preaching had a major effect in stimulating the religious revival of the 1790's.

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[13] N. Y., 1933, p. 67

[14] Allen Johnson, "Francis Asbury," in Ibid., I, 330-332.

[15] Corson, 233; W. W. Sweet, Methodism in American History (N. Y., 1933), 174.

Asbury's contacts with St. George's were many. He preached there frequently between 1771 and 1774 during which, according to one authority, he served as its pastor.[16] In 1775 while presiding over the third conference which began at St. George's on May 17, the Second Continental Congress hardby at the State House was wrestling with temporal problems, and Asbury noted with apprehension that the minds of men were "full of sin and politics."[17]

Among the relics of Bishop Asbury still preserved at St. George's are his pulpit Bible, the chair he used at St. George's, the desk at which he sat while presiding over the first conference in the Church, his glasses, and razor.[18]

In the larger story of Independence and the establishment of the United States under the Constitution, the role played by St. George's is substantially that played by other 18th-century churches in Philadelphia, the participation of some of its congregation as soldiers in the War. However, through at least two men St. George's has another association with that story. John Adams, in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress, attended evening

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16 Ibid.

17 Dict. Amer. Biog. I, 381

18 Corson, 233-234

service on Sunday, October 23, 1774 and recorded in his Diary the following interesting account:

> ..... In the evening, I went to the Methodist meeting, and heard Mr. Webb, the old soldier, who first came to America in the character of quarter-master under General Braddock. He is one of the most fluent, eloquent men I ever heard; he reaches the imagination with great propriety. The singing here is very sweet and soft indeed; the first music I have heard in any society, except the Moravians, and once at church with the organ.[19]

Richard Bassett of Delaware, delegate to the Federal Constitutional Convention, and from 1789 to 1793 a member of the U. S. Senate, was a regular attendant at St. George's during his Philadelphia sojourn. He spoke there frequently, and his singing was described as "sweet."[20]

William Pierce, a member of the Federal Convention, in his character sketches about his fellow members described Bassett as "a religious enthusiast, lately turned Methodist [who] serves his Country because it is the will of the people that he do so... He is a Gentlemanly man, and is in high estimation among the

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19 Charles Francis Adams, The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States (10 vols., Boston, 1850), II, 401.

20 John C. Munroe, "The Philadelawerians: A Study in the Relations Between Philadelphia and Delaware in the Late Eighteenth Century," in Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, V. 69 (1945), 143, citing Robert C. Pattison, "Life and Character of Richard Bassett," in Papers of the Historical Society of Delaware, XXIX (1900), 13.

the Methodists."[21]

Two items from Bassett's later career, if not strictly relevant at least historically interesting, may be mentioned here. First, he was one of the famous "midnight judges" appointed by President Adams at the expiration of his term, an episode which excited Jefferson's wrath.[22] Second, Bassett's daughter, his only child, married James A. Bayard of Philadelphia, and through this connection has arisen the longest senatorial dynasty in American history, every generation of this family having produced at least one United States Senator since Bassett himself was elected to that office in 1789.[23]

St. George's flourished through the years and at one time in the 19th century its congregation numbered 3716. In the surge of a growing city, however, with the population shifting to newer sections, the neighborhood of St. George's eventually changed from that of homes to an industrial and commercial area. And so, by 1965 the congregation had dwindled to 111, or 11 more than the original membership in 1769. The church appeared headed for extinction. Indeed in that year the Commissioners for the proposed

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21
Max Farrand, ed., The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787 (Rev. ed., 4 vols., New Haven, 1937), III, 93.

22
Edmund Kimball Alden, "Richard Bassett," in Dictionary of American Biography, II, 39-40.

23.
Munroe, loc. cit.

Benjamin Franklin Bridge over the Delaware sought a right of way over the ground on which the Church stands. Fortunately, the timely intervention of Bishop Thomas B. Neely and others saved the venerable church, and the bridge was finally constructed 14 feet south of the church.[24]

Status, Condition:

Ownership of St. George's is vested in the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, Philadelphia. It is administered by a Board of Trustees of which Mr. James T. Buckley is currently president. Church properties include the Church, two small strips of ground adjoining to the north and east, and the old parsonage and school buildings, #324 and #326 New Street, which now serve as the Historical Center.

St. George's today is a very active church and historical center. Since 1944, the buildings have been completely renovated, and according to officials of the Conference and the Church, restored to their original colonial design." Annually, the Church is the scene of the ordination of candidates for the ministry, and the Asbury bible is used in the services. For a number of years an annual series of broadcasts have originated at the vesper services sponsored by the Bishop of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Methodist area. Several hundred young people preparing for church membership come to St. George's annually for a part of their instruction---and

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[24] Church Records

the library in the Historical Center renders valuable service in making available old records of churches which have gone out of existence. Energetically promoting these activities and planning new ones is the present pastor, the Reverend Albert W. Cliffe.

As far as can be established, the Reverend Cliffe initiated the plan to achieve national historic site status for St. George's. The plan undoubtedly has the approval of the Board of Trustees, though this writer has had no direct contact with the president of the Board or its other members. Sponsoring the plan is the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and certain representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The plan does not envisage Federal acquisition of church properties; the question of the appraisal value of the church and related properties, thus, is not pertinent to this report.

St. George's lies four blocks north of Area "A" of the Independence National Historical Park. It is accessible from points in the city and from the Park.

A. Suggested Boundaries, Development:

In the event the Church is designated for Federal recognition and provision is authorized for Federal acquisition and development of property related to it, it is recommended that such acquisition and development be limited to the three properties identified as 318, 320 and 322 New Street, as shown on attached Map NHP-NHD-2396. The Church property is bounded on the north and west by streets, on the south by the approach structure of Benjamin Franklin Bridge with ground level street construction, and on the east by a vacant lot, 322 New Street.

Suggested Development:

Contingent upon Federal authority provided for acquisition and development of 318, 320, and 322 New Street, it is recommended such development consist of demolition of buildings and properties 318 and 320 New Street, and landscape treatment of the acquired site. The estimated cost of such acquisition and development is as follows:

Land Acquisition	$25,000
Demolition (2 buildings)	3,000
Landscaping (Walks, Paths, Plantings)	31,000
Exterior Walks	2,000
TOTAL	$61,000

B. Management & Protection:

In the event Federal acquisition and development of the site is authorized, it is recommended that provisions be made and

required in the Cooperative Agreement between the government and Board of Trustees of St. George's Church that the Church will assume responsibility for future management, maintenance and protection of the site. [Above sections A and B prepared by Superintendent M. O. Anderson.]

C. Evaluation of Historical Significance of Site:

1. The present St. George's is substantially the structure as built in 1763. In terms of chronology, therefore, it has physical association with the events of the eighteenth century.

2. It was built earlier than any other structure, past or present, used by Methodists in America as a permanent meeting house. Its use as a Methodist Church, however, is antedated by Wesley Chapel (1768) in New York. That Chapel no longer exists, leaving St. George's the oldest Methodist Church still standing.

3. St. George's was the scene of events significant in the establishment of the American Methodist Church, including Asbury's first sermon in America in 1771 and the first three "conferences" of American Methodism in 1773, 1774, and 1775. It had close association, moreover, over a period of several years beginning in 1771 with Francis Asbury, Father of the American Methodist Church.

To relate the story of American Methodism in terms of a single structure would be historically unwarranted. However, in

view of the conclusions enumerated above, St. George's undeniably enjoys a primacy among Methodist churches. Bishop Fred Pierce Corson, Vice-President of the Association of Methodist Historical Societies, may have overstated the case, but he reflects the feelings of many Methodists, when he says:

> St. George's Church is inseparably associated with the beginnings of a great Protestant denomination which came to America as a mission and has grown to be not only the largest Protestant church body in the United States, but a world church with work in fifty-six countries. Read the history of St. George's and you will have a comprehensive picture of early Methodism.*

In sum, St. George's possesses uniqueness and certain historical qualities in terms of the American Methodist Church which justify its preservation as a monument to that denomination.

On a national scale, however, it does not appear that this uniqueness and these historical qualities are of such outstanding significance as to entitle St. George's, by itself, to a position of first rank among historic sites.

Nor does the direct relationship of St. George's and the story of American Independence, as represented in the Independence National Historical Park, appear to be more than a tenuous one. It consists of the participation in the Revolution of an undetermined

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* Corson, 234

number of its congregation, of a single visit to the church of John Adams, and of the longer association of Richard Bassett, a member of the Constitutional Convention. This relationship, in general, is that of a number of other eighteenth-century Philadelphia churches.

On the other hand, taking St. George's not by itself, but as one of the several other (10 at the very most) eighteenth-century Philadelphia churches still standing (and possibly the site of three others, at the most), within the urban limits of the City of that period, all representing the religious theme, serious consideration could be given to it and these other churches for possible recognition in relation to Independence National Historical Park. For the story of Independence as represented through the buildings and sites encompassed in the Independence National Historical Park covers a broad sweep of the American scene from 1774 to 1800. It is more than the merely political; it is also the military, economic, diplomatic, learned, and religious, each of which supports and enriches the grand theme of Independence and the establishment of the Nation under the Constitution. All these themes, including the religious, are in fact already recognized and represented in the park. But the religious theme, represented by two churches of the same denomination, is at present out of balance. The addition of a limited number of church structures and possibly sites would round out the repre-

sentation and bring it into balance. Individually, the churches tend to suggest the denominational approach; collectively, they are physical expressions of an important facet of the Independence National Historical Park story.

It is recommended, therefore, that St. George's be considered in these terms for recognition in relation to Independence National Historical Park; not as an individual church, but as one of a group of churches listed and shown on Base Map, "Historic Church Sites---Old Philadelphia---Adjacent to Park Area---Independence," Drawing NHP-IND-2397, 5/21/56.

APPENDIX

PHOTOGRAPHS

Fig. 1. St. George's Church, date unknown, showing facade as it probably appeared prior to 1837. Courtesy St. George's Church.



In 1800 a portico, with platform, steps and columns, was built. The peak of the roof of the portico extended a little above the top of what are now the second story side windows. The bottom of the door was several feet below the window sills. A step led to the platform, then another down. Two steps more at the street line led to the pavement. "Work done by John Wilson at the Methodist Meeting," reads the account, "to a moulded platform, steps, door cills and spout stones, £72 3s. 3d. Also, "To wall coping including 2 pieces on the piers —plain door cill and plenths (bases) under the columns at the doors, £43 13s. 1½d." F.H.T.

Presented To Trustees Of The St George's Methodist Episcopal Church, Decm 29th 1895.

By Rev. Charles Pitman Whitecar. D.D.

Copyright 3[illegible] All right[illegible]

Infringement will be prosecuted.

Fig. 2. Interior view of St. George's Church, 1865, after fire on August 12. Courtesy St. George's Church.



Phot. by A. Hendrickson, No. 522 N. Second St., Philada.

Interior Ruins of St. George's M. E. Church. Destroyed by Fire Aug. 12th, 1865.

Fig. 3. Exterior view of St. George's Church with plaster over brick work, prior to 1926. Courtesy St. George's Church.

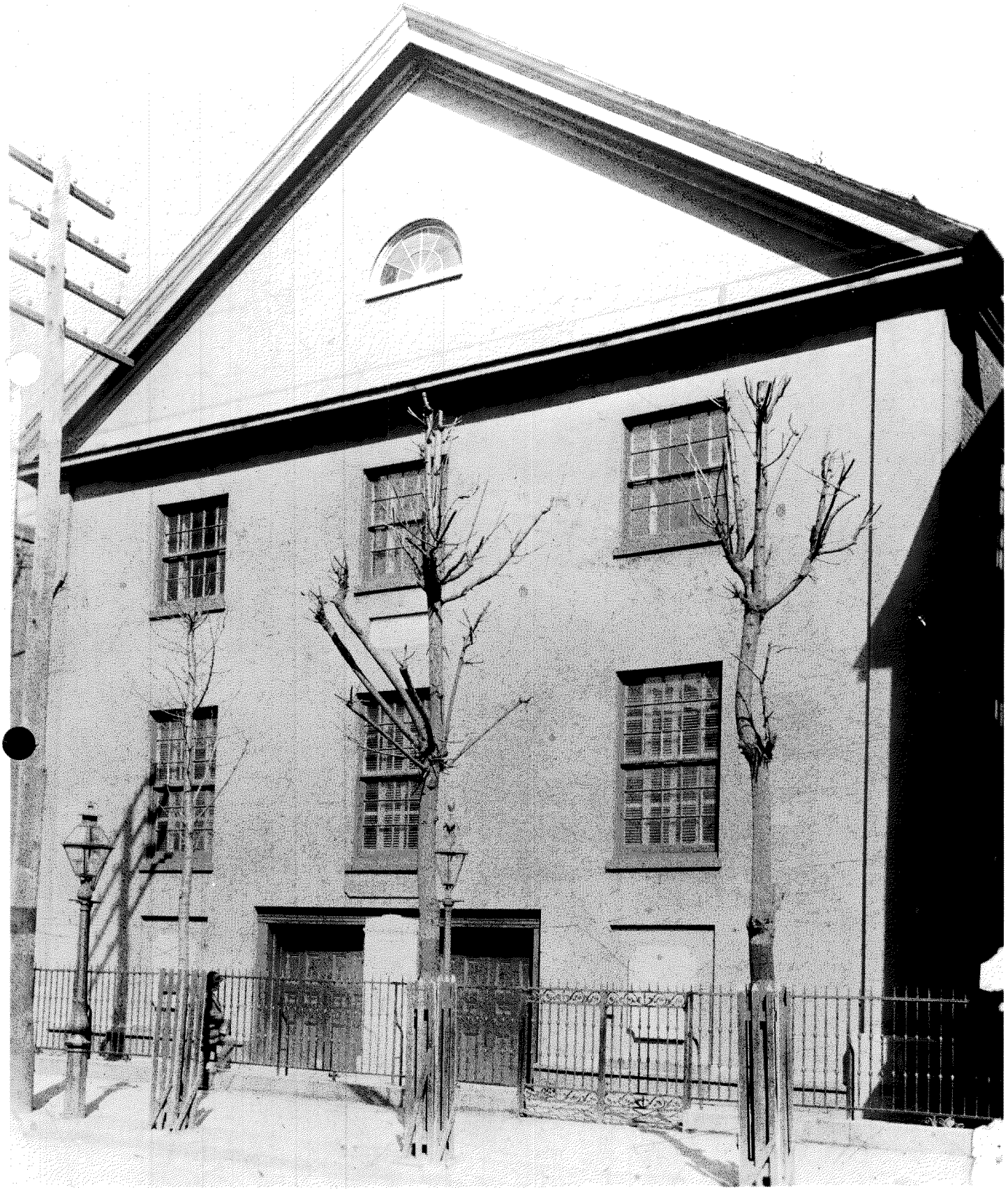


Fig. 4. Interior view of St. George's prior to 1934.
Courtesy St. George's Church

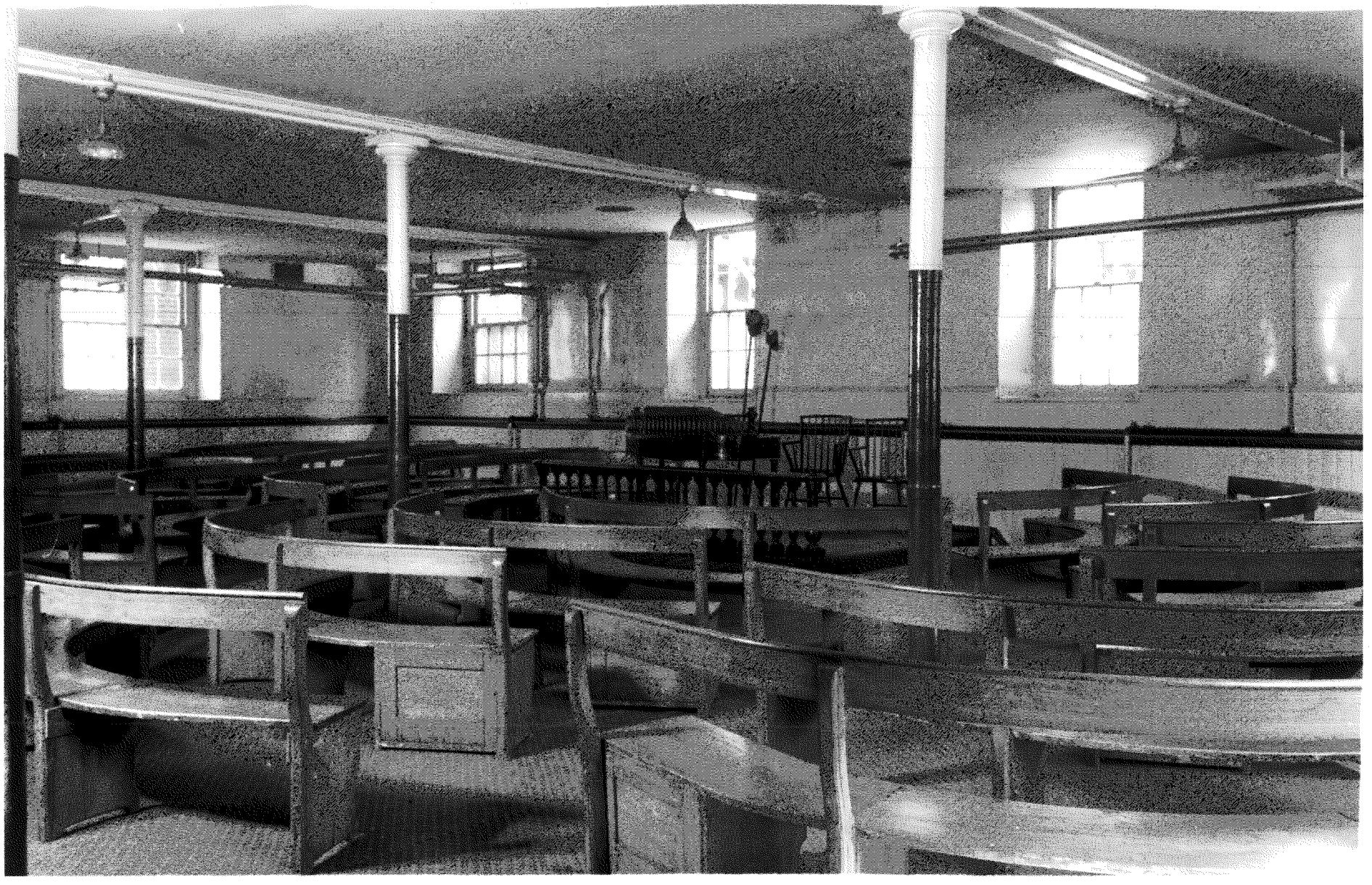


Fig. 5. Interior view of St. George's Church, 1940.
Photo by K. F. Lutz, Philadelphia.



Photgr. By K. F. Lutz, 537 S. 49th St., Philadelphia 43.

Fig. 6. Sunday School Room, in basement, St. George's Church, 1940. Photo by K. F. Lutz, Philadelphia.



Photgr. By K. F. Lutz, 537 S. 49th St., Philadelphia 43.

Fig. 7. Philadelphia approach to Benjamin Franklin Bridge with St. George's Church in left middleground, 1950. Photo by K. F. Lutz, Philadelphia.


LIONEL TRAINS
LANDAU SIGNS SELL
Schmidt's

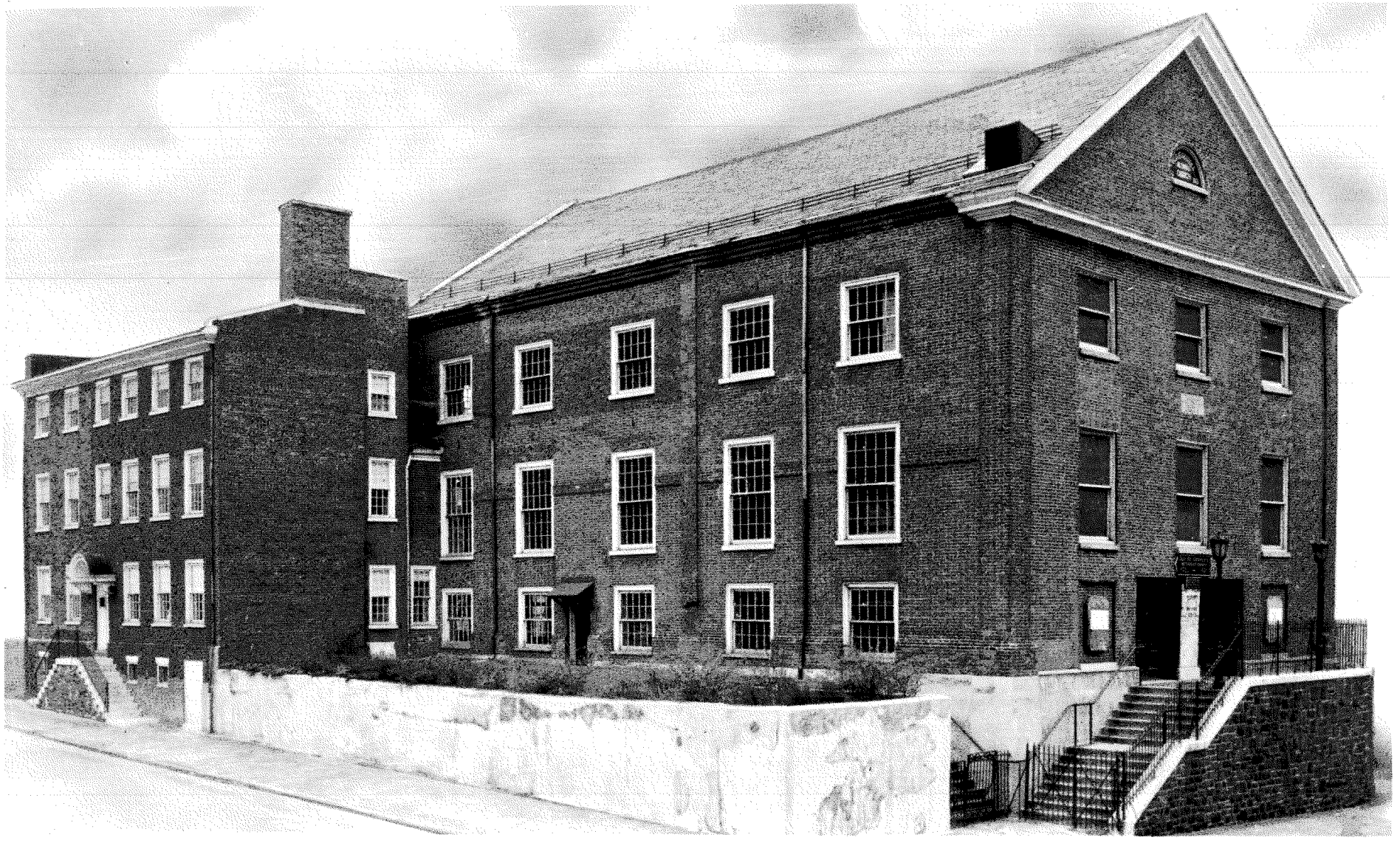
Photgr. By K. F. Lutz, 537 S. 49th St., Philadelphia 43

Fig. 8. Chancel and replica of Asbury pulpit, St. George's Church, 1951. Photo by K. F. Lutz, Philadelphia.


OUR PASTORS
1760
1808
OUR PASTORS
1903
1909

Photgr. By K. F. Lutz, 537 S. 49th St., Philadelphia 43.

Fig. 9. St. George's Church and Historical Center, 1951. Photo by K. F. Lutz, Philadelphia.



KARL F. LUTZ
537 SOUTH 49th STREET
PHILADELPHIA 43, PA.