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## St. David's Episcopal Church in Radnor marks its 300th anniversary

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RADNOR >> Visitors to St. David's Episcopal Church in Radnor will feel a sense of peace as they enter the small, white-walled sanctuary in the old stone building surrounded by the tombstones of a centuries old graveyard the church, which is said to have served as a stable for British horses during the Revolutionary War, is marking its 300th anniversary this year.

In 1880 the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a verse about the church, "Old St. David's at Radnor" and his words ring true today: What an image of peace and rest/Is this little church among its graves!

A larger chapel, finished in 2006 to serve the needs of the 3,300 present-day parishioners, is also clad in Pennsylvania stone and its white sanctuary harkens to the interior of the older church across the street, albeit with a soaring ceiling and polished copper chandeliers, along with a grand pipe organ.

Services are still held in the older church, along with weddings and funerals, said the Rev. Frank Allen, pastor at St. David's.

Perhaps, the church's most famous member was Gen. Anthony Wayne, however, many Main Line families have belonged over the years, he said, and well-known local names can be found on the old headstones. Another member, Richard Williams, survived the Titanic and went on to play in the U.S. Open in 1926. Another legend is that colonists who died in the Paoli Massacre were buried in the church yard, he said. But parishioners who died in all the country's wars are buried at St. David's.

On Sept. 2, 1700 a group of Welsh Christians, about 12 or 15 families, gathered somewhere in Berwyn. And they had an Anglican priest here who spoke Welsh, Allen said. The Bishop of London sent missionaries to what was designated the Radnor Parish, he said.

By 1715, the Rev. John Clubb arrived and the families began to erect a building.

"So the little stone church across the street, they had their first service of worship on Christmas Eve 1715," he said. "Over the next 140 years Christians worshiped in that space," he said, except for a break during the Revolutionary War, when there was an issue with the prayer book that had a prayer for the English King.

"The view of the community was, most of them were for the Revolution," he said. "Various people Quakers and Methodists came in on Sundays."

A traditional story is that the colonists took lead from the original leaded glass windows in the church to make musket balls,

he said.

Eventually, in 1792 the American Episcopal Church was founded (breaking from the Church of England) and St. David's continued as an Episcopal Church. It's the largest Episcopal congregation in Pennsylvania and the 18th largest in the U.S.

St. Peter's in Great Valley and St. James in Perkiomen are also now part of the Radnor Parish, he said.

Over the next two hundred years, the dirt floor was covered and an addition built but "they pretty much kept it as it was," he said. By the 1950s, with people moving to the suburbs, the church expanded and a "chapel" that holds 390 people was built across the street. The first chapel became the fellowship hall and the new chapel holds 650 people, he said.

"We're in the process of renovating some buildings built in the 1920s and 1950s," he said. So work continues, he said.

"Most churches are declining but we've got a couple good things going on," he said. "We have a very active group of people who want to learn more about God and make a difference in the world."

St. David's offers many ways to help others including "outreach" programs to help people in Guatemala, Uganda and Haiti, where church members help with schools and nutrition.

"Christianity is not a spectator sport," he said.

They also help people closer to home, Allen said, with programs to help needy people in Norristown and Philadelphia. St. David's employs five full-time clergy members and two semi-retired clergy, with a total staff of 28, he said.

Indeed, the celebration of the laying the church's first cornerstone on the weekend of May 9 kicked off with congregants preparing 30,000 meals for Stop Hunger Now. There was also a concert and a Sunday service followed by a picnic lunch for 600 people that Sunday, he said. Some 300 letters were put into a time capsule to be opened in 100 years, he said.

Other small programs will continue throughout the church's anniversary year.

Also, the first Saturday in October the church holds a large fair to sell items with the proceeds to be used for charity, he said.

When Allen, who hails from Texas, came to St. David's 18 years ago, he was unsure what to expect. He was surprised at how friendly and welcoming the congregants were.

"They had a Christmas pageant with live animals," he said. There kids, adults, sheep and goats. "I was so impressed. Ushers are not usually willing to clean up sheep poop."

"St. David's Church is one of the Main Line's greatest landmarks," said Greg Prichard, a local historian. "The church, along with its remarkable landscape and churchyard, was once the area's foremost sightseeing destination. It has inspired everything from a Longfellow poem to the name of a town previously known as 'East Wayne.' The fact that it has endured and thrived for so long is a testament to the dedicated community that supports it."

The church is listed on the National Historic Register.

Prichard noted, "I should mention that three local historical societies (Tredyffrin-Easttown, King of Prussia, and Radnor) are collaborating for a 'field trip' at the church on June 13, to celebrate its tri-centennial."

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