

NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM (CD, EMAIL, FLASH DRIVE)
ELECTRONIC FILES MUST BE WORD OR WORD COMPATIBLE

1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE *(must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)*

Street address: **701 West Johnson Street**

Postal code: **19144**

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: **Blue Bell Mission**

Current Name: **Mt. Airy United Fellowship Church (2013-2025)**

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Building

Structure

Site

Object

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: excellent good fair poor ruins

Occupancy: occupied vacant under construction unknown

Current use: Unknown

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and site/plot plan of the resource's boundaries.

6. DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and photographs of the resource's physical appearance, site, setting, and surroundings.

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach a narrative Statement of Significance citing the Criteria for Designation the resource satisfies.

Period of Significance (from year to year): **1879 to 2013**

Date(s) of construction: **Built: 1879 – Moved/Enlarged: 1922**

Architects: **Savery and Scheetz, Architects (1922)**

Builders: **Unknown**

Original owners: **Haines Street Methodist Episcopal Church**

Significant person: **Rev. Charles S. Albany, "The Park Guard Preacher"**

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Please attach a bibliography.

9. NOMINATOR

Name: **Philly Office Retail**

Author: **Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian**

Date: **2 February 2026**

Address: **701 West Johnson Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19144**

EMAIL: **KEEPER@KEEPINGPHILADELPHIA.ORG**

Nominator is is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: February 4, 2026

Correct-Complete Incorrect-Incomplete Date: February 11, 2026

Date of Notice Issuance: February 12, 2026

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Real Estate Appreciation, LLC

Address: 4701 Germantown Avenue, 3rd Floor

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19144

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: _____

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

Designated Rejected

NOMINATION

FOR THE

PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES



Figure 1. The primary (northwest) and side (southwest) elevations. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2025.

BLUE BELL MISSION
A MISSION CHAPEL OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
ERECTED 1879
MOVED 1922

—

701 WEST JOHNSON STREET
BLUE BELL HILL
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA



The subject designation is confined to the parcel delineated above in blue. Source: City of Philadelphia, Atlas, 2025.

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundary for the subject designation is as follows:

BEGINNING at a point formed by the intersection of the Southerly side of Johnson Street (forty feet wide) and the Northeasterly side of Walnut Lane (eighty feet wide); thence extending North sixty-five degrees, fifty-nine minutes and thirteen seconds East along the Southerly side of said Johnson Street, one hundred and twenty-five feet to a point and angle; thence South twenty four degrees, forty-seven seconds East, fifty-seven feet, eleven and three-quarters inches at right angles to Johnson Street to a point and angle; thence South twenty-six degrees, fifty-three minutes, thirty-seven seconds West seventy-five feet, two and seven-eighths inches to the Northeasterly side of Walnut Lane aforesaid; thence along the said side of Walnut Lane with a radius of five hundred and twenty-five feet, nine inches and the central angle of thirteen degrees, thirty-seven minutes, twenty seconds, one hundred and twenty-five feet, bearing Northwardly to Johnson Street and the place of beginning.

Tax Parcel No.: 775210000

Deed Registry No.: 136N060075



Figure 2. The side (northeast) and primary (northwest) elevations. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2025.

6. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Blue Bell Mission at 701 West Johnson Street in the Blue Bell Hill neighborhood of Northwest Philadelphia is a quaint old chapel that stands on a large, triangular lot near the Walnut Lane Bridge. The subject building is a small, one story structure of frame construction and set on a raised foundation constructed of course schist. The original volume is rectangular in plan with three small additions at the rear. The building is oriented with its primary facade facing northwest onto West Johnson Street. The main volume is capped by a steeply pitched front-gabled roof that is clad in modern asphalt shingles. The exterior walls are finished in a rough textured stucco treatment, which is no doubt applied over the original wooden structure. The schist foundation remains exposed above grade and visually anchors the structure, providing a clear material contrast between the masonry base and the lighter stuccoed walls above.

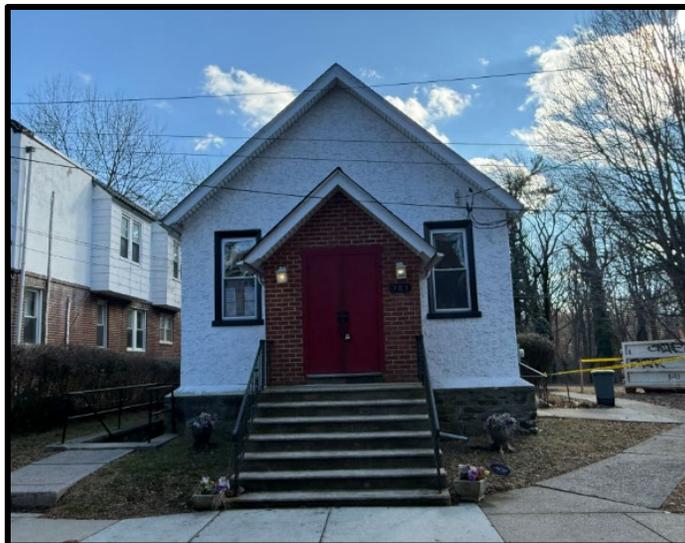


Figure 3. The primary (northwest) elevation. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2025.

The primary (northwest) elevation is symmetrically composed and organized around a centrally placed entrance porch, which appears to be a reconstruction of the original wooden structure after 1960. This entrance consists of a projecting gable-front vestibule faced in red brick, distinguishing it from the stuccoed body of the church. The vestibule is accessed by a broad flight of concrete steps with metal railings and features paired doors set beneath the gable. On either side of the vestibule, the main facade contains single window openings with simple trim, maintaining a restrained and utilitarian ecclesiastical character. The roof eaves are finished with plain fascia and soffits, which replace the original restrained ornamentation.



Figure 4. The primary (northwest) and side (southwest) elevations. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2025.

The side elevations are punctuated by regularly spaced rectangular window openings set within simple surrounds, providing natural light to the interior worship space. A secondary entrance and ramp for accessibility is located along the side (southwest) elevation integrated into the overall form without altering the building's modest scale. The side (northeast) elevation includes a

basement entrance that extends southeast from the north corner of the building. The basement entrance exposes more of the schist foundation, featuring concrete steps and tubular metal railings.



Figure 5. The rear (southeast) elevation, including the three additions. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2025.

The rear (southeast) elevation of the main volume is largely concealed by three additions, all of which fronts on an alley that serves the houses in the 600 block of West Johnson Street. A small, shed addition appends the central part of the rear (southeast) elevation, featuring a hipped roof and a two-part mullion window. The schist foundation was originally built to serve the two larger additions. A slightly larger addition, irregular in form, extends from the east corner of the main volume and connects to the rear (southeast) elevation, consuming much of its façade. This addition appears to contain a staircase and a small room, featuring a door that is accessed by a basement stair at the center of the larger elevation. The largest addition, square in form, appends the south corner of the main volume and connects to the rear (southeast) elevation, consuming much of that façade. Extending from the rear to the southeast and southwest, this addition is visible from West Johnson Street, featuring a slow-slung gable-front roof and a door that serves the previously mentioned ramp (as well as concrete steps) that extends along the side (southwest) elevation. The southwest elevation of the square addition features two windows, as well as one central basement window. The southeast elevation features two windows on the main level with basement windows symmetrically placed below. The stucco exterior continues uninterrupted along all elevations of the main volume and the three additions, as does the exposed schist foundation walls.



Figure 6. Top: The north corner, including the rear (southeast) and side (northeast) elevations. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2025. Figure 7. Middle: The south corner, including the side (southwest) elevations of the main volume and the square addition. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2025. Figure 8. Bottom: Looking northeast at the site of the Blue Bell Mission at 701 West Johnson Street. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2025.



Figure 9. The Blue Bell Mission at 701 West Johnson Street in 1960. Source: Phillyhistory.org.

7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Blue Bell Mission at 701 West Johnson Street in the Blue Bell Hill neighborhood of Philadelphia is a significant historic resource that merits designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The subject building satisfies the following Criterion for Designation, as enumerated in Section 14-1004 of the Philadelphia Code:

- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

The period of significance dates to the time of design and construction in 1879 through the occupancy of the Blue Bell Mission and its successive Methodist congregations, which concluded in 2013.

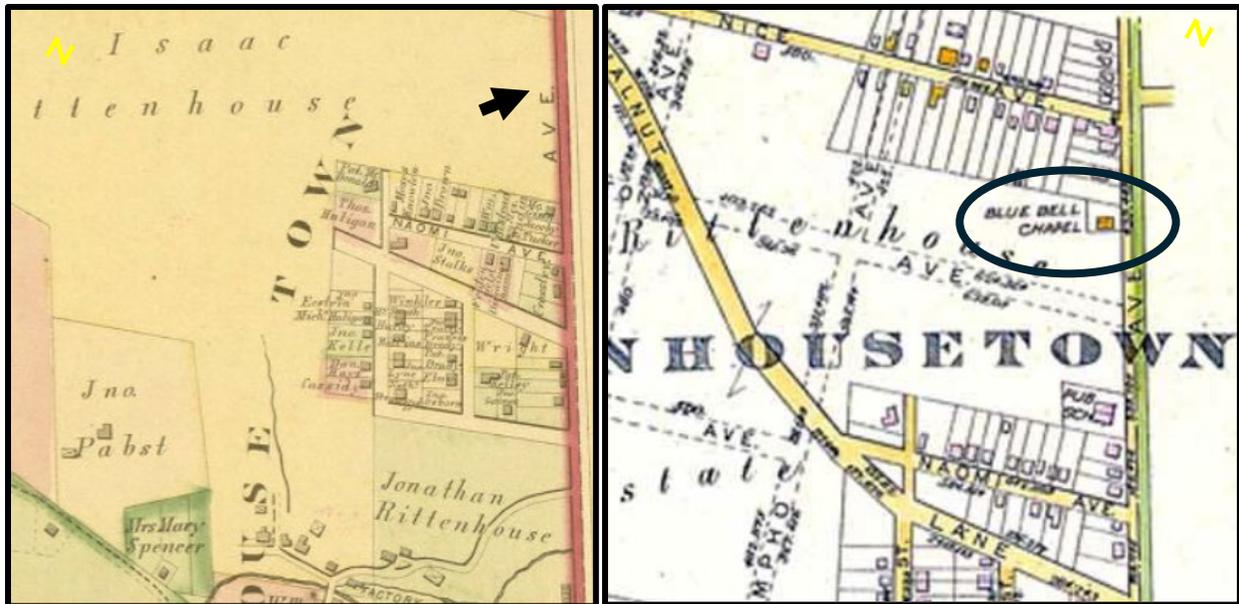


Figure 10. Left: The future site of the subject property is shown on this 1875 Philadelphia Atlas. Source: City Atlas of Philadelphia, vol. 2, 1875, Plate J, Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network. Figure 11. Right: The Blue Bell Mission at its original site at 6244 Wissahickon Avenue on the 1885 Philadelphia Atlas. Source: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network. Please note that the “N” that is titled within the maps above indicate the northern cardinal direction.

CRITERION J (FIRST ARGUMENT)

The Blue Bell Mission, also known as the Blue Bell Chapel, the Blue Bell Methodist Episcopal Church, the Blue Bell Hill Mission, &tc., represents the foundational period and continued heritage of the Blue Bell Hill community and neighborhood, from the time of its construction in 1879 until it ceased in use as a Methodist church in 2013. While a modest frame structure with historic alterations, the building stands as one of the community’s few institutional edifices and is a touchstone to the primary period of Blue Bell Hill’s residential development by the Rittenhouse family in the years after the Civil War.

Built in 1879 to serve as one of several Sunday school or mission congregations of the Haines Street Methodist Episcopal Church, now known as the First United Methodist Church of Germantown (FUMCOG), the subject building is a modest frame structure that retains a building form, scale, fenestration, and material composition that is true to its origins as a mission chapel.



Figure 12. The Blue Bell Mission, ca.1900. Source: Taken from a Powerpoint Presentation on the history of RittenhouseTown and Blue Bell Hill by David Young, Ph.D.David Young, Ph.D. Blue Bell Hill History Night [Presentation Slides]. 11 March 2024.

On a Saturday evening, June 30, 1877, “Brother John T. Walker, a class-leader of the Haines Street Church, had his class meet at the house of Brother Leadbeater, in the village of Blue Bell Hill, just west of the Township Line, near Walnut Lane.” Bro. Leadbeater’s class proved successful, growing in popularity to the point that on June 13, 1879, a committee was formed “for the purpose of securing a lot and erecting a chapel thereon.” The committee included Brothers Daniel L. Keyser, R.W.P. Goff, William Benner, William Sheldmerdine, and William McArthur.¹ This led to the official formation of the Blue Bell Mission, as well as the procurement of a lot, then located at what is now 6244 Wissahickon Avenue. The small frame, board-and-batten chapel was erected on the site, featuring an entrance porch and a small bellcote. At a cost of approximately \$4,000, the project was completed with dedication services taking place on Sunday, October 19, 1879.² The services were conducted by Presiding Elder Rev. William Swindels.³

In 1888, Rev. J. Brandreth was appointed as “acting” pastor.⁴ On Sunday, October 20, 1889, the “Blue Bell Methodist Mission of Germantown” celebrated its tenth anniversary, which included sermons and speeches by numerous prominent Methodist ministers.⁵ The twelfth anniversary was

¹ Robert Thomas. *A Century of Methodism in Germantown*. (Philadelphia: *Germantown Independent*, 1895), 34.

² *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 21 October 1879, 2.

³ Robert Thomas. *A Century of Methodism in Germantown*. (Philadelphia: *Germantown Independent*, 1895), 34.

⁴ *The Philadelphia Times*, 22 March 1891, 7.

⁵ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 21 October 1889, 5.

also noted in *The Philadelphia Times*, the celebration of which took place on October 25, 1891.⁶ In March of 1892, Rev. R.N. Rawlings was appointed pastor of the church.⁷

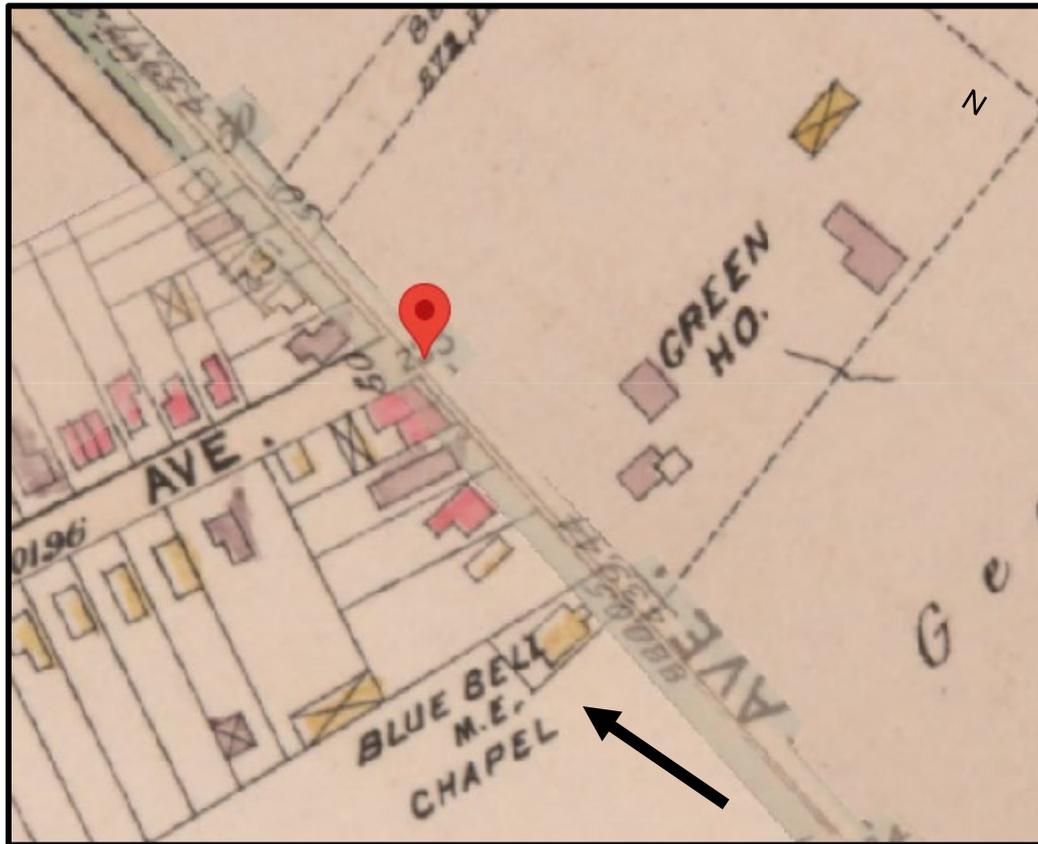


Figure 13. The Blue Bell Mission, labeled the “Blue Bell M.E. Chapel,” at 6244 Wissahickon Avenue in 1895. Source: Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network. Please note that the “N” that is titled within the map above represents the northern cardinal direction.

Beyond its link to the foundational period of Blue Bell Hill, the subject building is significant for its longtime association with the neighborhood, and its locality, in general, as one of the few churches and/or institutions in Blue Bell Hill and immediately adjacent to this part of Fairmount Park. This significance was strengthened by the longtime pastorate of Rev. Charles S. Albany (1843-1923), who was appointed as pastor of the congregation in 1895. Rev. Albany was unusual in the fact that he doubled as a methodist minister and a park guard at Wissahickon.⁸ After serving in the Civil War, he eventually entered the service of Fairmount Park as a park guard, a tenure that reportedly began on May 1, 1870. He held this position until at least the fall of 1917, when his golden wedding anniversary and 75th birthday events were held in September and November respectively, being described in detail by local papers.⁹ In 1890, he “was ordained a minster...by the Methodist Episcopal Conference at Bethlehem,” first serving temporarily as pastor of the

⁶ *The Philadelphia Times*, 26 October 1891, 2.

⁷ “Religious Notes,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 28 March 1892, 2.

⁸ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 18 November 1897, 3.

⁹ *Evening Public Ledger*, 14 September 1917, 13.; and *Evening Public Ledger*, 23 November 1917, 15.

Ebenezer Methodist Church of Manayunk from 1890 to 1895, and, afterwards, as the pastor of the Blue Bell Mission.¹⁰ At some point after 1917, it appears that Rev. Albany lost his vision, retiring from his career as a park guard, but continuing on as the “blind pastor” of the Blue Bell Mission until the time of his death in 1923.¹¹ In his old age, he was also an active member of the Washington Camp, Patriotic Order, Sons of America, and the Fairmount Park Guards’ Association.¹²

As pastor for nearly three decades, he championed the Blue Bell Mission, elevating its renown, as a park guard, who was no doubt a familiar character and public servant to many residents of Northwest Philadelphia, serving in that capacity on the old township line between Roxborough and Germantown, a demarcation also shared by his mission congregation and their chapel. Rev. Albany engaged the young people of Blue Bell Hill with events like “Children’s day” in 1895, which certainly included the subject building.¹³ He presided over funerals for members of the community, including congregants like Albert B. Constable, who died tragically in 1896.¹⁴ The longtime Blue Bell Mission pastor also solemnized many marriages in the community, including the nuptials of John A. Wright and Cecelia E. Rittenhouse in June 1902.¹⁵ It is interesting that the Rittenhouses were still linked to the Blue Bell Mission and its community even decades after RittenhouseTown became part of Fairmount Park. Like most pastors of small churches, Rev. Albany’s work also included raising funds for the upkeep of the subject building, which included painting the exterior and interior in June 1902.¹⁶ By 1908, Rev. Albany’s positions as park guard and pastor had coalesced to earn him the moniker: “the park guard preacher.” *The Christian Advocate* reported on his work, describing him as “one of our most acceptable and able local ministers.” His duties at that time also included managing a Sunday school, “Sunday evening preaching, and a Wednesday night prayer meeting.”¹⁷ This description of the pastor’s career and labors demonstrates the cultural and social role of this small congregation in its community. For a small village like Blue Bell Hill, the subject building and its pastor were integral to local moral edification and identity. One can almost imagine Rev. Albany leaving the guard house at Lincoln Drive and Wissahickon Avenue to stroll up Blue Bell Hill for his Wednesday night prayer meeting at the Blue Bell Mission.

The subject building’s unique importance to the community continued into the 1920s, when it was relocated from Wissahickon Avenue to the subject property. It appears that the Blue Bell Mission became an independent Methodist Episcopal congregation in the early 1920s. Soon after, in 1922, the congregation acquired a new site at 701 West Johnson Street, in the triangular lot created by the juncture of Walnut Lane. Why exactly the congregation decided to move the subject building

¹⁰ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 18 September 1893, 2.; and “Celebrate Golden Wedding,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 17 September 1917, 24.

¹¹ “Mrs. Anna M. Albany,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 26 December 1922, 23.

¹² “Rev. Chas. S. Albany,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 29 July 1923, 17.

¹³ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 17 June 1895, 3.

¹⁴ *The Philadelphia Times*, 14 October 1896, 9.

¹⁵ “Married,” *The Philadelphia Times*, 25 June 1902, 13.

¹⁶ *Germantown Telegraph*, 20 June 1902, 1.

¹⁷ “Brief and Miscellaneous,” *The Christian Advocate*, 14 May 1908, 819.

is not known. Architects Savery and Scheetz were commissioned to draw up plans for a “New Foundation & Location,” which are dated August 12, 1922.¹⁸ By Sunday, October 8, 1922, the building was “mounted on jacks” just in time for the last service to be held in the chapel at the old location on Wissahickon Avenue.¹⁹ A contractor, specializing in the physical relocation of buildings, was engaged to move the Blue Bell Mission “a distance of about three squares” to the present location near the Walnut Lane Bridge.²⁰ The structure was lifted onto logs and rolled down Walnut Lane. Savery and Scheetz appears to have designed minor alterations and a new stucco treatment, along with the new foundation and location.²¹ The oeuvre of Savery and Scheetz is one that is replete with buildings clad in roughcast and/or stucco treatments. The firm completed several buildings at the Germantown Friends School, all of which were clad in stucco. Many of their suburban houses, despite being of masonry construction, featured an exterior stucco treatment. In the late 1920s, the firm was designing Mermaid Lane Cottage for Miss Sarah “Sallie” R. Watson, which included a roughcast treatment in the design; however, their client soon nixed the idea for the natural stone.²² Nevertheless, it appears that Savery and Scheetz gave the building a uniform look when they added the stucco treatment once the building was set upon its new schist foundation.

Rev. Albany oversaw this project at approximately 80 years of age. He died the following year with the chapel safely relocated to the new site, yet still in the bounds of Blue Bell Hill. The subject property appears to have been purchased for the congregation by Edward T. Alexander and Helen S. Alexander, his wife; H. Warren Alexander; Ely J. Smith and Margaret J. Smith, his wife; and Edwin C. Emhardt and Carrie C. Emhardt, his wife, as these parties conveyed the parcel to the Philadelphia Missionary and Church Extension Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in February 1923, roughly six months after the building was moved to the site.²³ Even with the removal of the church to a new, nearby site, and the loss of their longtime pastor, the congregation continued to be an active community organization, as well as a place for religious worship. By 1925, Rev. W. H. Behney took over as pastor.²⁴ In the 1930s, the congregation formed a basketball team, who played similar teams like the Leverington Press Reserves.²⁵ In 1939, the ownership of the subject property shifted due to changes in the Methodist denomination, as it was deeded from the Philadelphia Missionary and Church Extension Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church to

¹⁸ Savery & Scheetz, Architects. *Blue Bell Chapel, New Foundation & Location, West Johnson St., 21st Ward, Phila.* 12 August 1922. Hutton-Savery, Scheetz & Savery Collection, Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pa.

¹⁹ “M.E. Church To Move, Jacked Up Blue Bell Mission Will Go to 695 Johnson Street,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 8 October 1922, 15.

²⁰ [Unknown Publication], 12 October 1922. Source: Church Clippings, Germantown Historical Society.

²¹ Savery & Scheetz, Architects. *Blue Bell Chapel, New Foundation & Location, West Johnson St., 21st Ward, Phila.* 12 August 1922. Hutton-Savery, Scheetz & Savery Collection, Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pa.

²² H.D. Eberlein. “Mermaid Lane Cottage, Savery, Scheetz, & Savery, Architects,” *The Architectural Record*, 1911, vol. 30.

²³ Deed: Edward T. Alexander, et. al. to the Philadelphia Missionary and Church Extension Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 13 February 1923, Philadelphia Deed Book (PDB) J.M.H., No. 1540, p.7.

²⁴ “New Pastors for Two Methodist Churches,” [unknown newspaper publication], 1925. Source: Church Clippings, Germantown Historical Society.

²⁵ “Mt. Airy Keystones Trip Leverington,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 February 1932, 15.

the Memorial Methodist Church of Philadelphia.²⁶ During the Second World War, it appears that the condition of the Walnut Lane Bridge had significantly deteriorated, as some reports of its potential demolition and abandonment were reaching members of the Blue Bell Hill community. It was in the old chapel that these concerned citizens met and ultimately agreed to “call on Mayor Samuel and City Council to replace or repair the old Walnut Lane Bridge,” this being yet another indicator of the central place that the Blue Bell Mission held in the community.²⁷

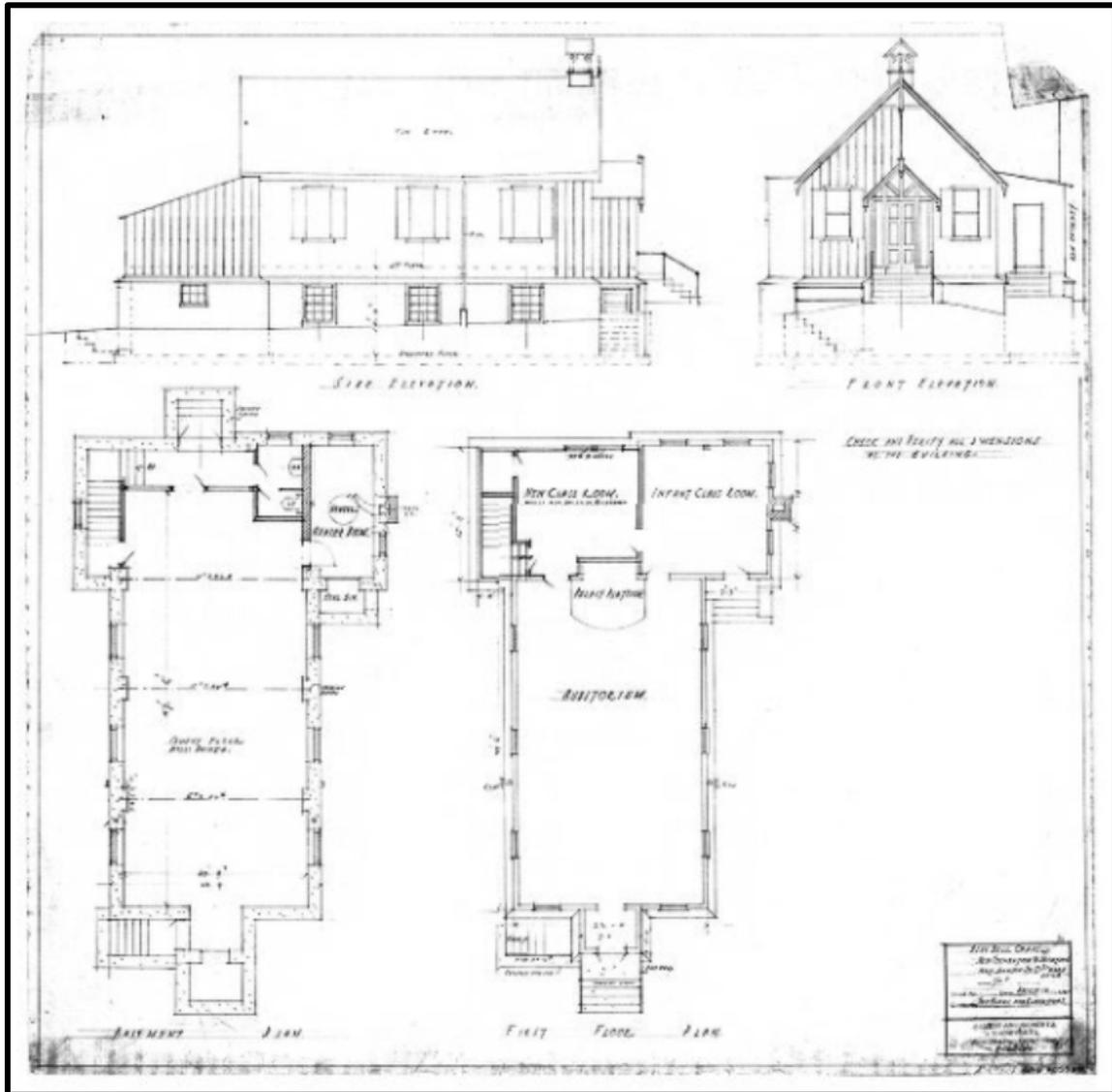


Figure 14. Plans for the relocation of the subject building, referred to in the document as the “Blue Bell Chapel,” by Savery and Sheetz, Architects, dated 1922. Source: Savery and Sheetz, Architects. Blue Bell Chapel, New Foundation & Location, West Johnson St., 21st Ward, Phila. 12 August 1922. Hutton-Savery, Scheetz & Savery Collection, Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pa.

²⁶ Deed: Philadelphia Missionary and Church Extension Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church to the Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia, 24 March 1939, PDB D.W.H., No. 681, p.453.

²⁷ “Drive to Save Walnut La. Span Begun,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 3 November 1942, 23.



Figure 15. Looking northeast toward West Johnson Street with the Blue Bell Mission on right in 1960. Source: Phillyhistory.org.

In the years afterwards, the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church merged, and, as a result, the congregation fell under the Germantown Memorial United Methodist Church. Even with the organizational changes in Methodism, the congregation and its congregants still referred to the subject church as the “Memorial Methodist Church of Blue Bell Hill” and the “Blue Bell Methodist Church” in various publications in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and the early 2000s.²⁸ Community meetings continued to be held in the chapel throughout the years. In 2003, the congregation voted to discontinue with “The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church,” a position that was ultimately accepted and approved by the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church. This led to yet another name change; the congregation appears to have morphed to become the True Worship Memorial United Methodist Church in 2004. The congregation would eventually merge with Trinity Baynton United Methodist Church to become the Trinity United Methodist Church, also known as the Journey of Faith. The congregation continued worshipping at the Blue Bell Mission until it was sold to the Mt. Airy United Fellowship Church on February 8, 2013.²⁹

Even though the subject building is no longer in use as the Blue Bell Mission or as a Methodist church, it endured and served the community for over 130 years, becoming an integral feature of Blue Bell Hill, representing the historical, cultural, and social heritage of the neighborhood, satisfying Criterion J.

²⁸ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 28 September 1967, 36.; *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 19 February 1987, 51.; *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 30 May 1998, 16.; and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 12 July 2001, 23.

²⁹ Deed: Trinity United Methodist Church to Mt. Airy United Fellowship Church, 8 February 2013.



Figure 16. “Bluebell Hill” (1932) by Benton Spruance. Source: Philadelphia Museum of Art.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLUE BELL HILL

Blue Bell Hill is a small, but distinct historic village in Northwest Philadelphia, situated where the city meets Fairmount Park along the Wissahickon Creek. It is recognized as part of the city’s patchwork of neighborhoods and is associated with historic sites including the RittenhouseTown Historic District, Blue Bell Park, and the Thomas Mansion. The area’s name dates to the third quarter of the 19th century, when the locals are said to have referred to the Grape Hyacinths as “Blue Bells,” which then dotted the village hillsides in springtime, a memorable sight for residents and travelers on nearby roads.

The history of Blue Bell Hill is tightly interwoven with that of RittenhouseTown, one of the earliest industrial villages in what became the United States. Beginning in the late 17th century, William Rittenhouse, a German Mennonite immigrant, and his son Nicholas established the first paper mill in British North America along Paper Mill Run, a tributary of the Wissahickon Creek. This mill anchored a small, but thriving industrial community that, in the 19th century, included multiple mill buildings, workers’ homes, and supporting structures. While RittenhouseTown is located downhill from Blue Bell Hill, the Rittenhouse family’s historic landholdings extended to the blocks that now comprise the neighborhood. By the third quarter of the 19th century, the fortunes of RittenhouseTown and the Rittenhouse family began to change. The mechanization of industry and the rise of steam power made the water-powered mills less competitive, and the City of Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park Commission began acquiring much of the land along the Wissahickon Creek to protect the larger watershed from industrial development. Most of the industrial buildings were demolished by the city, and the remaining Rittenhouse structures were preserved largely through family and later preservationist efforts.

As their age-old family manufacturing business deteriorated, the Rittenhouses found a new source of income in suburbanization. Nearby, in Germantown and Roxborough, the advent of commuter

trains and trolley lines led to aggressive suburbanization. In the years after the Civil War, the Rittenhouses cashed in on the portion of their land that now comprises Blue Bell Hill. This included the planning and opening of streets and the creation of building lots, which were subsequently improved with modest, but attractive cottages of masonry and frame construction that were snugly erected on the newly created streets.

A book, *Remembering Germantown*, details the early history of the neighborhood:

The earliest record of sale for any lot on Blue Bell Hill, according to Jacoby, was in 1867 [1866]. He identified early householders as Hutelmyers, Foster, Jacoby, Aucott, Henshaw, Evans, Gentner, Rhoades, Green, Bussger, and Mollenkopf.³⁰



Figure 17. The Crease School in 1913. *Source: Franklin Davenport Edmunds. The Public School Buildings of the City of Philadelphia From 1868 to 1874. (Philadelphia: 1925).*

As RittenhouseTown became part of Fairmount Park, Blue Bell Hill persisted as a residential neighborhood that was closely associated with Germantown in the 22nd Ward, despite actually being located in Roxborough in the 21st Ward. With the development of residential streets, the community became home to longtime landmarks and institutions in the late 1860s and throughout the 1870s, including the Thomas Mansion, built by that prominent family in 1869; the Alfred Crease School in 1874-75; and the Blue Bell Mission, the subject building, in 1879. Eventually, the Thomas Mansion became part of Fairmont Park, surviving as a Gothic Revival landmark even after the city demolished many Victorian-era structures. The Alfred Crease Public School, also known simply as the Crease School, was erected along Wissahickon Avenue between 1874 and 1875. It replaced the Rittenhouse Academy, which was in RittenhouseTown at the intersection of the Monoshone and Wissahickon Creeks. This educational building had served the community from the time of its erection in 1848 until the Crease School was completed in 1875. A trust fund that supported the Rittenhouse Academy was transferred to serve the Crease School. Given the

³⁰ Judith Callard and Irvin Miller, eds. *Remembering Germantown: Sixty Years of the Germantown Crier*. (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013).

timing, the Crease School was built in Blue Bell Hill, steps from the new houses that lined the adjacent streets.³¹



Figure 18. Fort Blue Bell, the Spanish American War Memorial, built at the corner of Wissahickon Avenue and Walnut Lane. Source: Shoemaker Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

The sense of pride of Blue Bell Hill was always present. In 1898, during the Spanish American War, the “boys of Blue Bell Hill” erected Fort Blue Bell, which was a diminutive masonry fortification with faux cannons that stood at the northwest corner of Walnut Lane and Wissahickon Avenue. Painted on the locally-crafted monument was the following epitaph:

Fort Blue Bell

We Remember the Maine³²

This was one of many such memorials built in and around the city during the Spanish American War, which was captured in the 1898 photograph taken by Thomas Shoemaker.

In the twentieth century, there was additional residential development. For example, when the Blue Bell Mission was moved from Wissahickon Avenue to West Johnson Street in 1922, a two-and-one-half-story stone twin was built on the site. In fact, the core group of houses built in the

³¹ The Crease School in 1913. Source: Franklin Davenport Edmunds. *The Public School Buildings of the City of Philadelphia From 1868 to 1874*. (Philadelphia: 1925).

³² The Shoemaker Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

nineteenth century became a basis for additional residential development that occurred throughout the twentieth century.

According to David Young, Ph.D., Executive Director of the Montgomery County Historical Society and a local Historian and Author, Blue Bell Hill was considered by the locals and at-large, one of the neighborhoods of Germantown, despite being located, like RittenhouseTown, just over the township line in what was historically Roxborough.³³ Edward Hocker, a prominent historian and author, wrote a book on Germantown, in which he refers to Blue Bell Hill as one of its distinctive communities:

Once there were in this territory numerous villages and communities having their own names and individualities, such as Rittenhousetown, along Rittenhouse street, west of Wissahickon avenue; Blue Bell Hill, round about Johnson street and Wissahickon avenue; Little Britain, at Wayne avenue and Price street; Pulaskitown, near Queen lane and Pulaski avenue; Smearsburg, in lower Germantown, south of Penn street; Brick Yard, Sawdust Village and Potterton Heights, on the east side in lower Germantown; O’Kane’s Point, in the triangle bounded by the Reading Railroad “Y” and Cheltenham Avenue; McNabbtown, Walnut lane and Chew street; Irishtown and Fenian Hill, in the neighborhood of Wister street, south from Cheltenham avenue; New Jerusalem, near Haines and Crittenden streets; Pittville, Haines street and Limekiln pike, north of Washington lane; Beggarstown, Franklinville and Dogtown, in upper Germantown, and Mount Pleasant, at Germantown and Mount Pleasant avenues.³⁴

Blue Bell Hill persisted as a residential neighborhood with deep roots in the region’s history, retaining a sense of pride and place to this day.

³³ Interview of David Young, Ph.D. by Oscar Beisert, 25 January 2026.

³⁴ Edward W. Hocker. *Germantown, 1862-1933*. (Germantown, Philadelphia: Published by the Author, 1933), 309.

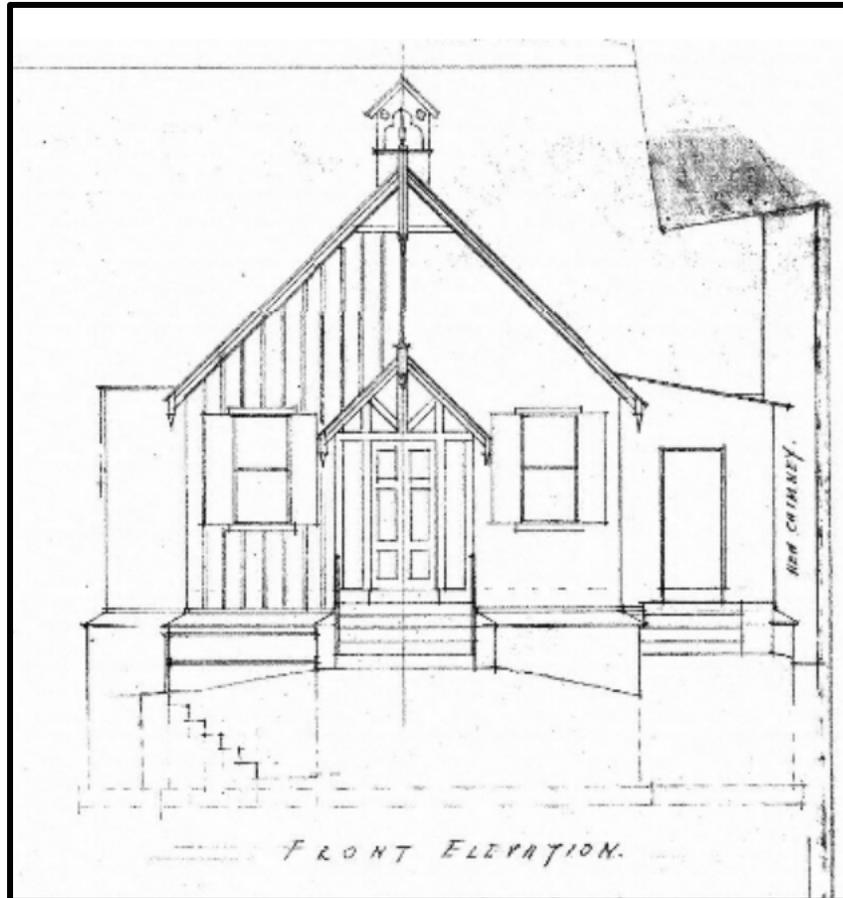


Figure 19. A drawing of the primary (northwest) elevation of the Blue Bell Mission as it was intended to look at 701 West Johnson Street. This drawing was done in 1922 by Savery and Sheetz, Architects. Source:

CRITERION J (SECOND ARGUMENT)

The Blue Bell Mission is an important example of a small wood frame, mission chapel structure, representing a common building form and type often built and employed by a nascent religious body. In most cases, mission chapels did not survive, as they were quickly outgrown and outmoded. In this case, the Blue Bell Mission was founded by FUMCOG as a mission congregation. The congregation built this chapel, which ultimately proved to be just the right size for the small Methodist community in and near Blue Bell Hill. As a result, the congregation used the building, as did the community, from the time of its construction in 1879 until 2013. As a result, this building form and type represents the history of this congregation, which was significant in Blue Bell Hill. However, because this is a mission chapel that was never replaced by a larger church building, the subject building represents a building form and type that was commonly employed by mission congregations in nearby Germantown, throughout Philadelphia, and beyond. This informs on an important aspect of history wherein religious congregations constructed temporary and wood frame mission chapels to meet their needs immediately after their establishment. As a result, the subject building represents the cultural, economic, and social history of the neighborhood and city. The forthcoming examples, discussed in this section, demonstrate that the subject building represents a mission chapel building form and type.



Figure 20. Left: The frame chapel of the Mount Pleasant Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church at Mount Pleasant Avenue and Bryan Street. Figure 21. Right: The frame chapel of the Chelten Avenue Mission, East Side, Germantown. Source: *Edward W. Hocker. Germantown, 1862-1933. (Germantown, Philadelphia: Published by the Author, 1933).*

In the local Methodist community, specifically around Germantown, FUMCOG spearheaded the founding and management of numerous mission congregations, including the “Chestnut Hill, Mt. Airy, Blue Bell Hill and Chelten Avenue” churches.³⁵ Mission congregations often began in temporary or frame buildings, even in Philadelphia, and the subject building is a wonderful example of such a structure surviving the lifespan of its congregation for more than 130 years. One of FUMCOG’s proteges, the Chelten Avenue Mission (Demolished), East Side, Germantown, formerly known as the Haines Street Mission, stood near Chelten and Stenton Avenues. It was built in a similar manner to the subject building, originally consisting of a small one-story, frame chapel with later additions. As the neighborhood around the church grew, the wooden structure was replaced by a larger stone building.³⁶ Another child of FUMCOG, the West Side Methodist Episcopal Chapel (Demolished), built in 1895, was a slightly larger, yet similar frame house of worship, which relates to the subject building in form, scale, and material composition. This building too was ultimately replaced by a masonry structure.³⁷ The Mount Pleasant Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church, which started as a Sunday School congregation, secured a site at Mt. Pleasant Avenue and Bryan Street, where they first built a frame chapel, which was eventually replaced with a masonry structure.³⁸

³⁵ “Uncle Peter’s Chat,” undated clipping. Source: Germantown Historical Society.

³⁶ Robert Thomas. *A Century of Methodism in Germantown*. (Philadelphia: Germantown Independent, 1895).

³⁷ *The Epworth Courier*, March 1895.

³⁸ Robert Thomas. *A Century of Methodism in Germantown*. (Philadelphia: *Germantown Independent*, 1895), 61.



Figure 22. The original frame chapel of the Methodist Episcopal Church of the Advocate. Source: Drawn by Owen S. Young in 1906, Germantown Historical Society.

Founded in 1895, the Methodist Episcopal Church of the Advocate at 5250 Wayne Avenue in Germantown is remembered for its impressive stone church at Wayne Avenue and Queen Lane, which has since been converted to apartments. However, the congregation began in a small frame chapel, as described in this church history:

The old church is a low frame structure, which first began serving the congregation in 1890 at 10th and Morris Streets. It was moved from there on rollers to Wayne Ave. and Queen lane., five years ago and rapid growth necessitated the new church [building on the same site]...³⁹

In Roxborough, the Emmanuel Methodist Episcopal Church, a stone structure at Silverwood and Gates Streets, was first housed on the site in a small frame chapel, which was ultimately demolished for their larger masonry church building.⁴⁰ These examples show how commonplace it was for a Methodist congregation to start life in a small frame chapel.

³⁹ "Build New Church Around Old One," unknown publication. (Philadelphia: 1910). Found as a clipping in the file on the "Methodist Episcopal Church of the Advocate" in the pamphlets collection of the Germantown Historical Society. Courtesy the Germantown Historical Society.

⁴⁰ Oscar Beisert. *Philadelphia Register of Historic Places Nomination: Gates Street Historic District*. (Philadelphia: Ridge Park Civic Association, 2022).



Figure 23. The frame chapel of Emmanuel Methodist Episcopal Church in 1894. Source: *Oscar Beisert*. Philadelphia Register of Historic Places Nomination: Gates Street Historic District. (*Philadelphia: Ridge Park Civic Association, 2022*).

Most denominations of Christianity had what were called mission congregations. Presbyterianism was an important religious denomination in Germantown and Philadelphia at-large. In East Germantown, the Somerville Presbyterian Church began as a small one-story edifice, 30 by 55 feet, near the corner of Penn Street and Chew Avenue, later to be replaced by a larger building.⁴¹ The Westside Presbyterian Church, organized as the Pulaskiville Mission in 1892 (in Pulaskitown), first built a small wooden chapel (Demolished) near the corner of Pulaski Avenue and Winona Street, where their later stone edifice would be erected.⁴² These are just a few of many examples of mission churches that occupied similar frame chapel buildings that have largely been lost to time.



Figure 24. Left: The Somerville Mission's original building. Source: Germantown Historical Society. Figure 25. Right: The Pulaskiville Mission's original frame building in Pulaskitown at Germantown. Source: Germantown Historical Society.

These local examples demonstrate the role of the small frame mission chapel as a building form and type that was integral to the history of many congregations, serving Methodism and other denominations of Christianity. The Blue Bell Mission stands as an important specimen, retaining its original form, scale, fenestration, and material composition, speaking to the foundational history of Blue Bell Hill, as well as many congregations that began in similar frame buildings.

⁴¹ "Somerville Presbyterian Chapel," *Germantown Telegraph*, 31 October 1902.

⁴² *Germantown Telegraph*, 28 December 1902.

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This nomination was authored by Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian, for the Keeping Society of Philadelphia. The nomination was commissioned by Philly Office Retail for the purpose of designating their newly acquired building as a historic property listed in the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. A word of gratitude to David Young, Ph.D., for his past efforts to research and recognize the history of Blue Bell Hill. Additional recognition to Nancy McBreen, retired Philadelphia school teacher, and Washington Irving, IV for reviewing the nomination.

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