



Oldest Congregation Dates Back To 1747

By *Russ Bellavance*, President of Wissahickon Valley Historical Society

Religion was central to the lives of the people who settled in Whitpain in the early 18th century, and one of the crucial features of religious life in Pennsylvania (unlike the rest of the colonies) was the great diversity of religions. During the 18th century, many Christian denominations established churches here. So which is the oldest continuously operating congregation in the area?

Well, a good guess would be a Lutheran Church and Saint John's Lutheran Church on Skippack Pike in Center Square does date back to 1769. But the earliest is Boehm's Reformed Church at Plymouth Road and Penllyn-Blue Bell Pike.

John Philip Boehm immigrated to Philadelphia from the German Palatinate around 1720. By that time, Whitpain had already had been settled by families (especially the Conards and Yosts) coming out from Germantown. Boehm moved here around 1730, purchasing a 200-acre farm in 1734. Boehm was a fierce adherent of the German Reformed tradition, and an equally outspoken and fierce opponent of the "heretical" Lutheran and Anabaptist sects (such as the Mennonites and Moravians).

Oddly, Rev. Boehm founded several German Reformed churches outside of Whitpain before eventually founding the church that bears his name. He rode circuit among these churches, but

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in the late 1740s he began to build a congregation closer to home. He did this partly because of demands from his neighbors, and partly because of the rigors of riding circuit began to wear on him. This new congregation built a small stone church in 1747, at the same site where Boehm's Church stands today.

So what would a service have been like back then? Well, it would have been longer than most of us are used to, and it would have been much, much heavier on sin and denunciation. And most of us may have had a small difficulty understanding it, because it was (of course) in German. It was not until 1814 that regular services began to be conducted in English, and the last exclusively German service was 1820.

The current building consists of a core building from 1811, and extensive additions, renovations and modernizations in 1853, 1870, and 1903. Electricity was added in 1913. The church is unusual in having done an excellent job of documenting and

preserving its past, including having its own museum. Two of the treasures of the museum are the original church registry and the original pulpit Bible, printed in Basel in 1747, based on Martin Luther's German language translation. It has a very active history committee, which sponsors events at the church.

The graveyard also receives many visitors, both from extended family members coming to the area and from researchers. Anyone who drives in this area will be familiar with some of the family names in the graveyard: Yost, Morris, Shaeff, Wentz, Walton, Dager and Bustard.



The fascinating museum at the church is not regularly open to the public, but you can call the church secretary at **215-646-6132** to schedule a visit. The graveyard is open at all times. Please see the website of Boehm's Church at boehmschurch.webs.com for more information.

This is the third in a series of articles about local history brought to you by the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society. If there is a topic you would like to propose for a future article, please contact me at rcbellavance67@gmail.com. If you enjoy these articles, you may want to consider membership in the Society. To learn more, please visit WValleyHS.org

The German Reformed Churches in the United States merged with the Congregational Churches and the Evangelical Churches to form the United Church of Christ, which is the current affiliation for Boehms. There are many other UCC churches in this general area competing for a smaller number of people of German Reformed/UCC heritage. Like many other churches in this area, Boehm's Church has adjusted to the changing needs of current day Blue Bell by sharing its space with both a Korean congregation and a Christian Science meeting.

