

A History of Bloomsburg through Methodist Parsonages

Robert Dunkelberger

The story of the physical growth of Bloomsburg in the 1800s can be told in many ways. This article will do it through the four houses that have served as the parsonage for Wesley United Methodist Church since 1863. But first a little background on the congregation. It was founded in Bloomsburg in 1831 and initially met in a school house at Iron and Second streets and later a wagon shop on Market Street. That was until 1837, when the first church building, a small frame structure located on West Third Street at Murray Avenue, was completed. The denomination grew and in 20 years needed a new building. It was built on the same site, a more substantial brick church dedicated in 1858.

During this time Bloomsburg's Methodist congregation, along with others in the area, was part of a circuit and a minister was assigned who rode in turn to each charge. Only the more established congregations had a resident pastor. Once the new building was completed the situation changed and in 1862 Bloomsburg was made a station with a permanent minister. At this point the decision was made that for the first time the church would have a parsonage of its own.

In December 1863 a home located at 143 West First Street was purchased for \$1,500 from a member, Frances (Fanny) K. Weaver. This began a trend, with the owner of all four parsonages being connected to the Methodist congregation. The house was located at the northwest corner of West First Street and Murray Avenue, just two blocks uphill of the church, and described in the deed record as a brick tenement on a 42' by 170' lot.



The Hurley & Cathcart addition from the 1876 county atlas. The two parsonages and AME church were built between Murray and Jefferson alleys.

The house was actually quite new. The land it sat on was part of a large parcel on the north side of West First between Murray and Oyer, which were then called alleys. It was purchased in 1839 by two prominent Bloomsburg residents: William G. Hurley, a longtime lawyer, and clock and watch maker Robert Cathcart. The plot became known as the Hurley & Cathcart addition, but they were in no hurry to sell off the lots. Finally, in July 1859 the lot on the northwest corner with Murray

was sold for \$200 to John Ludwig. By the following May a house had been built, which was bought by Frances Weaver for \$1,300.

The addition became known for its religious connections, with a house constructed at the same time on the lot directly to the west, which became the parsonage for the Episcopal church. Then a decade later, the next lot to the west running along Jefferson Street became the site of Bloomsburg's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church building.

The Methodist parsonage served the congregation for 20 years, until the search began for a larger one. This took the church leaders to Market Street and the intersection with West Fifth. On November 1, 1883, the home at the northeast corner of that intersection, 455 Market Street, was purchased from Isaiah W. McKelvy—a local businessman and loyal Methodist—for \$5,000. This was actually an exchange of properties, because on the same day he bought the old parsonage for \$2,000. McKelvy was deeply involved in the business of Bloomsburg and the surrounding area. Among his interests were the McKelvy and Neal furnace, the Red Mill flour mill, and operating cargo boats on the Pennsylvania Canal.



The second parsonage, seen here c.1900, was owned by the church for 54 years and is currently undergoing extensive remodeling.

The Episcopal congregation also soon gave up its First Street house and for nearly a century both former parsonages were rental properties. That ended when almost every lot in the Hurley & Cathcart addition was sold off between 1979 and 1981 as part of the William Street Urban Renewal Plan. Purchased by the Redevelopment Authority of the County of Columbia, the homes and former AME church were torn down, preparing the way for development of the Hawthorne Heights townhouses.

The new parsonage on Market Street was also new, having been built for local tailor William Morris in 1877, three years after his wife Barbara purchased the lot. They lived there for a brief time at most, having run into financial difficulties, with Morris being sued by the Bloomsburg

Lumber Company for nonpayment of more than \$450 in building supplies. The couple sold the house for \$4,000 in October 1878 to Isaiah McKelvy and ended up moving to Sunbury.

Even though new, the church found the house not large enough, so contractor John S. Sterner—one of the builders of the 1857 church—was immediately engaged to put on an addition. Not only was the house enlarged, the church completed it with new furnishings. They were courtesy of the Methodist Ladies' Aid Society, which was given charge of the parsonage. As the years went on, the house was constantly updated as new ministers and their families moved in, with the improvements paid for by public entertainments held by the Society.

In 1892 alone, when Reverend W. G. Ferguson began his pastorate, the parlor received a new carpet, wallpaper, and suite of furniture. And this wasn't all. After only 15 years the slate roof was replaced, heating installed by the nearby Bloomsburg Steam Company, located on Sixth Street, and a new sidewalk placed along both streets. The total cost of \$1,400 (\$41,000 in 2020 dollars) was paid off by the end of the year.

The new parsonage soon evolved into a center of church activity. In the 1890s and into the new century, it was a popular place where many couples were married, avoiding an expensive church ceremony. Unfortunately, other less desirable activity occurred around the house. In 1895, the corner somehow became a favorite spot for drunken rowdies to congregate and exhibit very poor manners by using obscene language. There was other excitement as well, when two years later a fire broke out on an enclosed porch. Prompt action by the men of the Winona Fire Company saved the parsonage, but the fire and water resulted in \$350 in damage.

The house served the church well for more than 50 years, but the 1930s brought an opportunity for a different location. It involved a prominent local doctor, J. J. (John Jordan) Brown, and the eventual fate of his home. The house was 311 Market Street, located right across from the church. Brown was born in Mifflinville, graduated in 1870 from Philadelphia's Jefferson Medical College, and then returned home to open a practice. After additional study to become an ophthalmologist and eye specialist, he moved to Bloomsburg in 1887.



The Dr. J. J. Brown home, c.1920. In more recent years it served as the Yellow Gables Bed & Breakfast.

Brown eventually wanted his own home with an office and in August 1892 purchased a lot near the intersection of Market and West Third. Although the price was a very steep \$10,000, there was as yet no house, so this must have included building costs. Construction began that October and concluded the following spring.

The doctor was active in the community, worked at the Bloomsburg Hospital after it opened, and served as a director of the Bloomsburg Water Company, vice-president of the Farmers National Bank, and a trustee at the Bloomsburg State Normal School. Brown was also very involved as a trustee of the Methodist Church. He played a leading role in the construction of the current stone building, dedicated in 1897, and was treasurer of the fund to build its education wing, completed 30 years later.

Brown was devoted to the church and allowed the use of his home to visiting Methodist clergy when they came to Bloomsburg. This gave him the idea that his house would be well suited to replace the old parsonage when the time came. Two years after his wife died in 1907, he stipulated in his will that the house would be donated to the church for possible use as a parsonage.

It was to take effect following his death, except that he had two unmarried sisters who outlived him. Brown passed away in 1932, sister Martha two years later, and lastly sister Dorothy on December 21, 1936. The following year the church took possession, the old parsonage sold on August 9 for \$10,000, and the congregation had its third home for the pastor.

Although convenient in its location right across Market Street, the Brown house served the Methodist church a far shorter period of time than either the preceding or following parsonage. Since one doctor in town decided their home would make an ideal residence for the minister, it made sense that a second would as well. That practitioner of medicine was Dr. John W. Bruner and his home was at 346 Market Street.



The current Wesley UMC parsonage, seen here possibly decorated for the 1902 Bloomsburg centennial celebration.

A house had been on the site since the mid-1800s, owned for many years by the Weaver family. The head of the household, Joseph Weaver, died in 1881 and he willed it to his sisters, the executor of the estate being a familiar name by now, Isaiah McKelvy. It remained in the Weaver family until 1898, when it was sold to Bruner for \$3,500. He wanted a prime location to serve as both a residence and medical office and this was it. The house was torn down, a new one built, and Bruner, wife Etta, and son Arthur moved into their new home in March 1899.

This leads to yet another story in the growth and development of Bloomsburg in the late 1800s. The contractors Bruner hired to build his new house and future Methodist parsonage were the firm of E. J. (Edward Joseph) Stetler and Howard W. Watts. Stetler was the older of the two, born in 1856, with Watts nine years his junior. By the fall of 1897 they had begun working together and soon received a number of commissions for building new homes in Bloomsburg.

Even before the two got together however, in the spring of 1897 Watts was hired by a bookkeeper at the local American Car & Foundry plant, R. B. Angell. He had purchased land at the far end of East Fourth Street where there had been very little development. What Watts built was a nice frame house up on the hill at what is now 635 East Fourth. It was generally to be a trademark of Stetler and Watts (S & W), nice but somewhat modest wooden homes, not the elaborate brick houses that were prevalent during this time, especially along Market and Fifth Streets.

To be different however, in April 1898 S & W was hired by Emanuel Hummel, a watchman at the Carpet Mill and later farmer, to build a house at 115 North Iron Street. Completed in July, it was a brick home, not frame. The same year the contractors again took to East Fourth Street, that fall building a house for Stetler and his family, what eventually became 349 East Fourth at the intersection with Penn Street. The third house they built on Fourth was completed in 1897 for W. E. (William Edward) Searles, an employee of Paul Wirt, the fountain pen manufacturer. His was also a comfortable frame structure, located at 423 East Fourth.

The crown jewel of the S & W homes, though, was the Bruner residence on Market Street, begun in October 1898. One tribute to the quality of their homes was that of the five known residences for which they were responsible, in four cases the original owner lived there until he died, including Stetler. The one holdout was Searles, but only because he changed occupations. At some point after 1904 he went to work for the postal service and moved to West Street to be closer to his job.

Stetler & Watts were together only a brief time, less than two years before dissolving their partnership in April 1899. While both continued in the building trade for a few years, Watts kept at it while Stetler became town assessor. Their work together demonstrated how even brief relationships have had a role in the development of Bloomsburg.

Getting back to the original owner of the current Wesley parsonage, John Bruner was a Columbia County native, born in 1865 in Pine Township, and graduated from the Jefferson Medical College in 1890. His first stop as a practicing physician was in Lycoming County, before he came to Bloomsburg in January 1895 and opened an office.

Additional courses taken by Dr. Bruner in Philadelphia gave him the background to devote all of his time to surgery. He was a primary supporter of the Bloomsburg Hospital from the time of its 1906 founding, becoming the first president of the hospital staff and serving as chief surgeon. In the community he was both vice-president and president of the Town Council, a director of the Bloomsburg Bank-Columbia Trust Company, and as with all others associated with the parsonages, active in the local Methodist church.

Bruner passed away on February 10, 1943, at the age of 77. He was survived by his third wife, Elsa, with Etta having died in 1910 and second wife Margaret in 1917, after only five years of marriage. It was Elsa, in a will dated March 1957, who decided to leave the house to the church to serve as a parsonage. She died on December 7, 1961, also aged 77. The 311 Market Street house was sold for \$15,600 and on June 25, 1962, the church was assigned the deed to 346 Market and it became the fourth parsonage owned by Bloomsburg's Methodist church. It has served as the minister's home to the present day, with the current pastor, Mark Reisinger, the ninth to live there.

One of the nicest things I have found about Bloomsburg is that so many of the homes that defined the community, built in the decades leading up to the First World War, are still here and appreciated. I plan on doing more research and am glad to share this piece, told through the lens of the homes Methodist pastors have lived in for nearly 160 years.