Philadelphia's "Five Points"

Taverns, brothels, and (eventually) Protestant mission efforts were plentiful around South Street, but historical writing by Methodists about their mission in the neighborhood has been scarce. Historians of social welfare in Philadelphia have likewise not had much to say about the Bedford Street Mission. On the whole, they have tended to look more at municipal efforts at poverty alleviation than religious ones. Social welfare history in Philadelphia from the colonial and early republic period also appears more prevalent than antebellum studies.

The purpose of this article is to provide a sketch of the nineteenth-century history of the Bedford Street Mission and the urban and ecclesiastical context out of which it was born and flourished until the 1930s. The early years of the Bedford Street Mission will be given more focus than the later years, since the Mission became less of an explicitly Methodist effort by the 1880s. Much work remains to be done to more fully understand how Protestants—and especially Methodists—interacted with the wider political and social realities of the city of Philadelphia in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Bedford Street Mission offers one window into better understanding Methodists’ role in the city through an assessment of their involvement with impoverished Philadelphians.

The Philadelphia Social Welfare Context

Protestant involvement in social welfare efforts among the Philadelphia poor has a long history prior to the establishment of the Bedford Street Mission in 1853. In unsystematic and informal ways, most Philadelphia churches helped the poor in their midst. As needs arose, caring pastors and church members tried to meet them as best they could. Formal and systematic initiatives among Protestants to confront the problem of poverty in


3 The Mission had two locations within its first few years of existence—both on Bedford Street near Sixth Street. The building constructed for the Mission in 1856 still stands at 619 Kater Street. The streets surrounding the Mission were reported to be Bedford, Baker, and St. Mary’s. An Annual Report from the Bedford Street Mission in 1869 indicates that Bedford Street was renamed Alaska Street in the late 1860s. Today, St. Mary’s Street corresponds to Rodman Street located between Sixth and Eighth streets one block north of South Street.
Philadelphia began in 1713 when the Quakers opened the first almshouse in the city. Other churches followed suit in subsequent years, often in response to dramatic events which worsened the situation of the impoverished in Philadelphia.

The 1793 yellow fever epidemic was one of several events which prompted renewed attention to the plight of the poor. The heroic work of Richard Allen and other African Methodists in helping fever victims is well known by historians. Following the fever outbreak, in 1794, the First Baptist Church established a special fund for the support of orphans and the Quaker-led Female Society of Philadelphia for the Relief and Employment of the Poor began an industrial school to give women and children needed skills to support themselves. The War of 1812, and the economic depression that followed it, was another crisis which increased the number of impoverished people in Philadelphia and prompted renewed calls for action from Philadelphia Protestants. Historians have counted as many as eleven new charities established between 1815 and 1830 and another ten established in the 1830s. Several of these new charities were led primarily by Protestant women, and many were ecumenical in nature.

The first Methodist institution in Philadelphia to be formally established for the sake of poor relief was most likely the Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the City and County of Philadelphia. Founded in 1835 by young men from Union and St. George’s churches, the Home Missionary Society established five Sabbath-schools in six years throughout the city which they had very methodically subdivided into twelve missionary districts. Several of these Sabbath-schools eventually became local churches. The work of the society revolved around preaching in streets, markets, and wharves in addition to providing food and fuel for the poor, tract distribution, and Sabbath-schools. Missionary John Street in 1842 noted—perhaps in overworked exasperation—that “the poor from almost every part of the city seek my residence.” Prior to 1842, Street had been a

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3 The Female Hospital for the Relief and Employment of the Poor was begun in 1808 and was open to “females of every Christian denomination.” Presbyterian women likewise established, in 1812, homes for the assistance of widows and children (Pendleton: 161–165).


5 Rev. J. Woolson and Rev. John Hersey, served each for less than a year as missionaries prior to Rev. John Street. Although all appointed by the Methodist bishop, Woolson and Hersey apparently had a great deal of difficulty in raising their own support ($50 per month) for their missionary work and each did not remain for longer than a year. It appears that Street did not have this difficulty. His service as a foreign missionary in South America perhaps had helped him develop a firm base of financial support (Dwight, 13).

6 Dwight, 14.

7 Dwight, 19.

8 Dwight, 62. For information on the founding of the Ladies’ German Home Mission Society see Christian Advocate and Journal, September 16, 1852. A women’s auxiliary organization to the Bedford Street Mission was also very important throughout the history of the organization, in providing clothing for the poor.

9 One can gain a sense of the formally established benevolent institutions in Philadelphia at this time from published lists of such organizations. Isaac Collins and John S. Powell, A List of Some of the Benevolent Institutions of the City of Philadelphia and Their Legal Titles Together with a Form of Device and Bequest to Them (Philadelphia: Henry B. Ashmead, Book and Job Printer, 1859).
Episcopal Church on November 23, 1857.\(^7\)

Efforts in 1851 to begin a Philadelphia branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association may also have inspired Methodists to begin the Bedford Street Mission in May of 1853. After returning from a visit to the pioneer YMCA institution in London in 1851, Presbyterian businessman George Hay Stuart began to muster support for a Philadelphia branch of the organization. Although he did not succeed in doing so until 1854, one may speculate that the increasing energy around the project was influential for the twelve to fifteen young men from area Methodist Episcopal congregations who gathered in the basement of Salem Methodist Episcopal Church to begin the Bedford Street Mission. The choice of name for the Mission in its early years, the Young Men’s Central Home Mission, and the founders’ initial desire that it be an ecumenical endeavor are further clues which suggest a possible connection between the founding of the YMCA and the Mission.\(^8\)

The tumultuous changes posed by immigration and growing poverty in Philadelphia the decade prior to 1853 also served as a call to action for Methodists as they observed the crises unfolding in their city. The 1840s and 1850s were a time of substantial immigration to the United States from Europe.\(^9\) The history of the Bedford Street Mission’s work with immigrants follows the national trends as they moved from working primarily with Germans and Irish in the 1850s to working mostly with Italians by the early 1900s. The Roman Catholic Church in the Philadelphia diocese responded to the immigrant growth by establishing fifteen new churches between 1845 and 1855.\(^10\) The growing numbers of Roman Catholics, of course, was seen as a threat by many Protestants in the city of Philadelphia who responded with vigor to their ecclesiastical competitors in the anti-Catholic riots of 1844. The precise nature of Methodist involvement in these riots requires further research.\(^11\)

African Americans were also prevalent in the neighborhood at the time of the Bedford Street Mission’s founding in the 1850s and were frequent visitors to the Mission for evangelistic services and material assistance. In the 1840s there were approximately 20,000 blacks living in Philadelphia, nearly half of whom were recent migrants to the city. These newcomers had not been warmly welcomed by Philadelphia residents. Between 1829 and 1849, African Americans were victims of at least five major riots. The densest concentration of African Americans in Philadelphia in 1848 was between Fifth and Eighth Streets and South and Fitzwater Streets—an area which directly surrounded the Bedford Street Mission.\(^12\)

The publication of two books on Philadelphia poverty and the problem of drunkenness in America also suggest renewed concern over such problems in Philadelphia at the time of the Bedford Street Mission’s founding. \textit{The Mysteries and Miseries of Philadelphia}, published in 1854, vividly portrayed the dismal life of the poorest Philadelphians. Although not focused on the Philadelphia context, the famous temperance book by Philadelphia resident Timothy Shay Arthur entitled \textit{Ten Nights in a Barroom} was also published in 1854 and was widely read throughout the country for several decades.\(^13\) The scenes which he describes in a fictitious small town in America could have

\(^7\) Young Men’s Christian Association, \textit{Pentecost; or, the Work of God in Philadelphia, A.D. 1858} (Philadelphia: Perry and McMillan, 1859), 9. Historian Russell E. Francis has noted that by the early 1850s revivalism was “beginning to return to favor” in Philadelphia after a period when revivalism had been somewhat discredited by the Millerite eschatological exuberance and disappointment in the early 1840s. The ties between the Millerites and the Methodists were significant in New England. It is less clear how strong these ties were in Philadelphia. On the New England history of Methodist involvement with Millerites see Glen Alton Meser, “Restless for Zion: New England Methodism, Holiness, and the Abolitionist Struggle, Circa 1789-1845” (Th. D., Boston University, 2006), 248-253.


\(^9\) Irish immigration to Philadelphia due to the potato famine has been well documented by Mathew Gallman.

\(^10\) Gallman, 158.

\(^11\) It appears likely that Methodists were both supporters and critics of the anti-Catholic rioting that occurred in 1844. A Philadelphia nativist newspaper, in a number of articles published a month after the Kensington riots, refers to several Methodist churches which held mass meetings to support the victims of the “Kensington (Irish) riots.” The announcements made clear that Roman Catholics were not welcome at these events. The Wesley Church—Carpette Street (Southwark), the Brickmaker’s Methodist Protestant Church (Kensington), and Ebenezer MEC (Moyamensing) were all mentioned as sponsoring anti-Catholic meetings in 1844. It appears that the Brickmaker’s Methodist Protestant Church had not yet been constructed and the meeting was to be held in the open-air. The first Protestant fatality of the anti-Catholic riots was named John Weisley Rhineland, suggesting at least some Methodism ancestry. See The Native American, June 15, 1844; Michael Feldberg, \textit{The Philadelphia Riots of 1844: A Study of Ethnic Conflict} (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975). Puzzlingly, Feldberg claims that none of the rioters were found to be members of Philadelphia Methodist or Presbyterian churches.

\(^12\) A picture of a street scene on St. Mary’s Street in 1875 suggests a neighborhood that was at least 60 percent African American. See Edward Strahan, \textit{A Century After: Picturesque Glimpses of Philadelphia and Pennsylvanians} (Philadelphia: Allen, Lane and Scott, 1875), 185. See also Elizabeth M. Goffen, "Industrial Development and Social Crisis, 1841-1854," in \textit{Philadelphia: A 300 Year History}, ed. Russell E. Weigley (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 309, 355-355. It would be interesting to compare the ecclesiastical experience of Italian immigrants with African American migrants in Philadelphia in the nineteenth century since the period of intense migration (from the 1860s to 1920s) was similar for the two groups. See Robert Gregg, \textit{Sparks from the Anvil of Opposition: Philadelphia’s African Methodists and Southern Migrants, 1890-1940} (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993), 119-120. Gregg’s maps show the concentration of African Americans in all of Philadelphia’s wards from 1900. By the early 1890s a Union A.M.E. Church member, Annie M. Hall, had begun an Industrial Missionary Association which provided sewing instruction and other types of assistance to area blacks. It is not clear if similar A.M.E. organizations were in existence in Philadelphia’s “Five Points” prior to the Civil War of a similar nature to the Methodist Episcopal Bedford Street Mission. The Mother Bethel A.M.E. congregation was located just four blocks to the north of Bedford Street Mission.

\(^13\) Arthur lived in Philadelphia from 1841 to 1885 (Geffen, 335).
easily been observed in Philadelphia's "Five Points." In 1862 one Annual Report from Bedford Street Mission notes that within a two block radius of the Mission there were 130 grog shops or taverns.\(^{24}\)

The growth of disease epidemics at this time was yet another glaring example of the problem of poverty in Philadelphia a few years prior to the Bedford Street Mission's founding. After a period of decline, Philadelphians saw an increase in the death rate in their city beginning in 1850. The poor were especially hard-hit by these scourges as epidemics of cholera, smallpox, and yellow fever swept the city between 1849 and 1853. Other diseases were perhaps even worse:

In 1852, when smallpox killed 427 persons, 433 died of scarlet fever, 558 of dysentery, and 1204 of tuberculosis. Malarial fevers were prevalent in the area between Broad Street and the Schuylkill and in the low, flat lands to the south of the city between the rivers. It is estimated that more than ten times as many people died of malaria and tuberculosis as died of cholera, but they died gradually and quietly...\(^{15}\)

As early as 1847 the area where the Bedford Street Mission would be located was known as the "infected district" and was characterized by considerable overcrowding.\(^{26}\) One missionary of the Bedford Street mission, writing in 1859, noted that "in some houses there are from ten to sixteen families stowed away, whilst many others have eight and ten; and in some places I know of two and three men and their wives living, cooking, eating, and sleeping in the one room."\(^{27}\)

The Beginning of Bedford Street Mission

Descriptions of life at Bedford Street Mission in its earliest years come primarily from Sorrow's Circuit or Five Years' Experience in the Bedford Street Mission, Philadelphia, written by missionary Benjamin Sewell in 1859, published in 1860, which was not long after the start of the 1858 Businessman's Revival. One of the pastors who provided an "introductory letter" noted with the melodrama typical of the book that he hoped the fundraising for Bedford Street Mission would help the "Five Points" of Philadelphia, this moral plague-spot of our city, and this reproach to our land, be speedily renovated, and its desert wastes be made to "blossom as the rose."\(^{28}\) Indeed, if fundraising is any measure of an organization's "blossoming," the Bedford Street Mission was a clear success. It averaged two dollars per year in the first five years to over thirteen thousand dollars by 1874-1875.\(^{29}\)

\(^{25}\) Gelfen, 319.
\(^{26}\) Galtman, 90-120.
\(^{27}\) Sewell, 323.
\(^{28}\) Sewell, 39.
\(^{29}\) Sewell, 39.

\(^{15}\) This dollar amount is even more striking in light of the 1873 economic depression that still plagued the country (Strahan, 190). Annual income for the Bedford Street Mission in the first two decades was reported in the Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Bedford Street Mission (1875) (Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives). Methodists in the 1850s provided most of the Mission's financial support but even in these early years the Quakers provided about half.

Philadelphia's "Five Points"

Its humble beginnings in 1853 did not portend a ministry that would survive and thrive for nearly a century. Initially, the missionaries of the Young Men's Central Home Mission had no building from which to preach but simply spent their time at seven preaching stations—two on the wharves, four in the vicinity of Bedford and Baker Streets, and one on Gray's Ferry Road. At the latter preaching station the preacher often reported as many as five hundred people gathered to listen to him.\(^{30}\) Preachers were not always received this well in the rougher neighborhood around Bedford Street:

The first attempts at preaching in Bedford and Baker Street stirred up considerable excitement, and not a little opposition. Curses and foul epithets were freely bestowed on the preachers, and their Bible. Stones and mud were occasionally thrown at them; and so serious at length did matters become, that the Board of Managers were compelled to apply to the Mayor of the city for a Police-force to maintain the peace... As the winter approached in 1853, it was agreed that a house ought to be obtained for the sake of the mission, but they were not particularly fastidious about their choice of rental property. It was one of those old dilapidated frame hovels, the lines of which are neither perpendicular nor horizontal; the ceiling was just high enough to permit one to stand upright when the head was uncovered, and the floor so patchy, rotten, and creaky, that it made a very precarious footing indeed; added to which, it had been used as a receptacle or storehouse for old bones and filthy rags, and, of course, was rather unpleasant to the olfactory sense; in fact the place was literally in such bad odor, and so strongly suggestive of typhoid, etc., that the brethren who had rented it were not thanked for their pains.\(^{31}\)

In spite of its problems, the Board of Managers decided to keep the house and quickly saw it filled with residents of the neighborhood on Sunday evenings. "Many of the poor creatures, in their degradation, had sunk so far below the brutes, as to have lost all sense of personal cleanliness; their filthy rags serving them for a covering by night as well as by day, till they dropped piecemeal from their bodies."\(^{32}\)

Although primarily focused on the neighborhood near Bedford Street, the Mission was influential in the establishment of at least one church in a neighborhood nearly twenty blocks away. When a church building formerly occupied by the Baptists became available in 1854 near the vicinity of the Mission's successful Gray's Ferry Road preaching station, the managers of the Bedford Street Mission began a Sabbath School in the building and soon Pitman Chapel, a Methodist Episcopal Church, was founded at 23rd and Lombard. The Methodists claimed that in this neighborhood "[t]here was not a free seated church within six squares of this point. Churches for fashionable people with rustling silks and fine broad-cloths were plenty; but there was no place for a man with a check shirt, or a woman with a shilling a yard gown."\(^{33}\)

Two years after the establishment of Pitman Chapel, in 1856, the Bedford

\(^{30}\) Christian Advocate and Journal, May 11, 1854. Gray's Ferry Road (now Avenue) runs south of South Street near 22nd Street.
\(^{31}\) Sewell, 14-15.
\(^{32}\) Sewell, 17.
\(^{33}\) Sewell, 302; Koch, 48.
Street Mission celebrated a cornerstone laying ceremony for a new and much-improved three-story building of their own at 619 Bedford Street. Perhaps in part to appeal to potential donors, the building was said to have been “similar in design” to the Five Points Mission in New York. Reverends John Chambers, M. D. Kurtz, Andrew Manship, W. Kenney, and Dr. Hodgson were among the clergy who offered remarks at the ceremony. The house was completed in February of 1857 and contained rooms for the Dorcas Society to provide clothing needs for the poor, rooms for worship services and Sunday School, and a third floor reserved as a day school for neighborhood children who could not afford other schools. Apparently, a separate building (of unknown location) was utilized for the education of neighborhood black children. A member from the Methodist Wharton Street Church (near Third Street) was responsible for the construction of the new building for the Bedford Street Mission.

Early reports about the Bedford Street Mission mostly contain stories of how the missionary helped poor neighborhood residents, but one is also struck by the intensity of anti-Catholic rhetoric in the 1859 text, Sorrow’s Circuit. The willingness to go to blows with Catholics may have diminished somewhat from the 1844 riots, but anti-Catholic animosity remained strong. Stories are told of encounters with Catholic priests which seem to mostly have the purpose of raising the ire of the reader. In one case the missionary came to visit a dying woman where

Death’s work was already well nigh done. The Priest pettishly inquired why they had sent for him at so late a period; gave me a scowling look, as much as to say, “You meddling here, what are you here for?”—And then turned away, without even admiring a word of rebuke to the drunken woman that occupied the same wretched room or leaving a loaf of bread to satisfy the hunger of the starving children of the now dying mother. This kind of work was beneath his cloth, and could safely be left to the Missionary sent there by the bishops of the “Young Men’s Central Home Mission,” he caring but little who fed or clothed the people, so that they remained in allegiance with the Holy Catholic Church, and entrusted to him the care of their souls and their money.

Such vitriol was not reserved solely for Philadelphia’s Roman Catholic priests but was also utilized to condemn members of the Philadelphia business community in a bit of Methodist muckraking. The missionary told of an encounter with a young woman he sought to take away from a tavern and place in an asylum—most likely Philadelphia’s Magdalen Asylum. In doing so, he learned that the director of the asylum was also the owner of a Philadelphia brewery which supplied the beer for the tavern out of which he had taken the woman. He also criticized owners of distilleries and breweries who remained active members of prominent churches in Philadelphia. “For if it is true, as the Bible asserts, that ‘no drunkard shall inherit the kingdom of heaven,’ what will be the doom of that man, who, for the sake of gain, carries on a business, that results in the ruin of thousands and tens of thousands, both for time and eternity?” Even the Philadelphia police force did not escape condemnation from supporters of the Bedford Street Mission. Reverend Sewell tells the story of a woman lying on the street near the corner of Baker and Spafford streets while police simply leaned against a lamp post “looking on with indifference.”

**Bedford Street Mission after the Civil War**

The mission of the Bedford Street Mission continued during the Civil War years with little change, but after the war the Mission appears to have received a new infusion of activism from area Methodists. In May of 1866 the Philadelphia Inquirer published a lengthy article, “Two Hours’ Visit to Bedford Street,” seemingly re-introducing the mission to its readers. Evangelism remained important at the mission in the years following the Civil War, but increasingly one discerns a gradual move away from such work. For example, in 1866 an Annual Report dutifully recorded 4,850 pages of tracts distributed by the Mission. The number of conversions was listed as 28. One searches in vain for similar details ten years later. Instead, one observes a focus on improving the social welfare of neighborhood residents by providing baths, schooling, lodging, meals, fuel, healthcare, and other forms of charity. In the early 1870s the annual reports indicate that the Mission during some years provided a day school for over five hundred children, as many as ten to fifteen thousand baths, six thousand loaves of bread, and over 3,000 meals. In 1871 a separate building a few doors down from the Mission (at 613 Alaska [Bedford] Street) was rented to serve as a hospital for neighborhood residents and was named the Bedford Street Mission Hospital.

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34 Christian Advocate and Journal, May 11, 1854.
35 Sewell, 76.
36 Sewell, 76.
37 Sewell, 79.
and Dispensary. In 1873, the Mission relinquished control of the Bedford Street Mission Hospital and Dispensary to the Board of Health to be utilized as a temporary hospital for the increased number of fever victims in the city. In the early 1870s, the Bedford Street Mission Annual Reports identify standing committees for the day school, hospital, and baths. Its priorities in social services were clear.

In 1866 the Bedford Street Mission also welcomed a new famous (and infamous) missionary, John Dixon Long, who had been the subject of considerable debate in Methodist circles just a few years earlier. It is possible that Long’s notoriety alone may have helped the mission to expand its fundraising and social welfare missionary activity. In 1858, Long had been charged with slander of another clergy member at the Philadelphia Annual Conference because his book, *Pictures of Slavery*, had exposed the practice of slavery among Philadelphia Conference Methodist preachers. Long, together with his wife and family, served as missionary of the Bedford Street Mission from 1866 until 1882. He had bravely criticized the hypocrisy of Philadelphia Conference Methodist preachers holding slaves in the 1850s and the victory in the Civil War and the abolition of slavery had proven the justice of his cause. Like other social reformers of the post-Civil War era, Long likely viewed the dire poverty of industrial cities as the next great injustice to attack—albeit now with somewhat less youthful ambition.

In contrast to the controversy which Long prompted earlier in his ministerial career, his work with the Bedford Street Mission is mostly characterized by quiet and faithful service. In 1871, however, Long was physically assaulted by a member of the Board of Managers on a Philadelphia street after a brief dispute. The particular nature of the argument remains unknown, but the board member in a subsequent meeting was dismissed from the organization. One may speculate that Long still had the same penchant for speaking the truth plainly which had gotten him into so much trouble during the 1850s Philadelphia Annual Conference.

1875 was a watershed year for the Bedford Street Mission when a new constitution was approved by the Board of Managers. The new constitution

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43 Today this might be best described as an outpatient clinic. In a two-month period only eight people were said to have been received into the hospital while over 800 patients had been treated (Philadelphia Inquirer, June 24, 1871).

44 See Annual Reports from 1870 to 1875. *Twentieth Annual Report* (1873).


46 *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Bedford Street Mission, April 24, 1867* (Philadelphia: Bryson and Son, Printers, 1867); *Twentieth Annual Report of the Bedford Street Mission, 1882, Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives*. It appears Mrs. Long was responsible for inaugurating the free bath ministry at the Mission (Strahan, 191).

47 According to meeting minutes of the board of managers, J. D. Long had referred to a Mr. Barton as a "blackguard." Offended, Barton called Long a liar and punched him.


made it clear that the Philadelphia Conference bishop no longer had oversight of the organization. The number of Methodist churches which supported the work likewise declined after 1875, even though J. D. Long continued on as missionary for a number of years after this.49 In 1880 supporters of the Bedford Street Mission welcomed the founding of a new Charity Organization Society in Philadelphia which sought to systematize (and secularize) social welfare across Philadelphia as it had done in several other cities.50 This is also the first year that a single Methodist Episcopal Church is mentioned as a donor to the organization.51 By 1889 the missionary staff person was no longer called a “missionary” but rather a “superintendent.” The “culture” of the Bedford Street Mission had changed in other ways as well. For example, in its earliest years one finds considerable anti-Catholic sentiment expressed by the Mission’s supporters, but by 1871 one finds the name of the prominent Roman Catholic banker, Anthony Drexel, on the list of Bedford Street Mission’s Board of Managers. There was likely still considerable anti-Catholic feeling among Philadelphia Methodists at this time and they certainly desired to convert Roman Catholics to Methodism, but the Mission was changing enough that Drexel’s presence—and his money—were now less of a problem than they would have been in the 1850s.

By the early 1890s many other religious social welfare organizations found their way to the neighborhood which was “frontier” ground for Protestant missionary efforts forty years earlier.52 “Christian Socialist” Walter Vrooman and his Conference of Moral Workers and the University Settlement House had established themselves just a few doors down from the Bedford Street Mission and were involved in similar work as the Mission.53 By the late nineteenth century there were also other Methodist ministries among the growing Italian population in South Philadelphia.54 Those ministries would have likely pointed to the Bedford Street Mission and its legacy of activism and concern in the neighborhood in order to prove their commitment to the people with whom they worked.

Some new initiatives at the Bedford Street Mission were begun in the first decades of the twentieth century, though most of the Mission’s work...