

# **Saving Souls in Brandywine Park**

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The early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were a time of change for Wilmington. Between 1900 and 1910, the city's population rose by 14 percent, from 76,508 to 87,411. The war in Europe, on the front pages of local papers daily since August 1914, had brought a boom to local industries and with it an influx of new residents to fill jobs in the powder works and shipbuilding yards. Local ministers felt that Wilmington "in its present prosperous industrial condition needs a great religious revival." The instrument of that revival came to town in January 1916 when evangelist the Rev. Milford H. Lyon, D.D. arrived to begin a two-month campaign to save souls and drive the devil out of Wilmington. His "tabernacle" stood in Brandywine Park.

The Board of Park Commissioners had previously allowed certain church groups to use the parks for gatherings on Sunday evenings during the summer. Thus, when a committee representing several churches approached the Board in September 1915 about erecting a building for religious services in North Brandywine Park, their action was not without precedent. By the time the revival meetings began, thirty-seven congregations had joined the campaign.

Built on the site that the Todd Memorial now occupies, the "tabernacle," which resembled a low-slung barn, measured 200 by 158 feet and faced Baynard Boulevard. Six entrances gave access to a building that could hold 8,000 worshippers as well as the 1,000 singers who made up the choir. The land's slight slope created a shallow amphitheater facing the pulpit that stood on a substantial platform that also had space for twelve rows of seats. Above the platform red and white signs declared "Make Christ King" and "Wilmington for Christ." Volunteers from among the city's clergy built the plank structure under the supervision of one of Lyon's entourage. Roof dormers provided light and ventilation, gaslights illuminated the interior for evening services, and ten furnaces heated the building. All the seats were plank, the furnishings included 100 collection plates, and the floor was covered with sawdust, creating a "sawdust trail to salvation."

Even before Lyon's arrival, local pastors prepared their flocks for the campaign by organizing neighborhood prayer meetings. Hundreds of Wilmingtonians gathered in one another's homes each week in the two months before the first revival meeting. On New Year's Eve 1915, the Rev. Joseph F. Berry, a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal church, dedicated the tabernacle and, with the 4,000 worshippers who attended the dedication, launched the campaign that put Lyon's name on everyone's lips.

Banners stretched above Market Street and large signs were erected on church properties around the city, all announcing the services. On the first day of the campaign, Sunday, January 2, 1916, Lyon gave 6,000 worshippers "Reasons for a Revival" at the morning service, preached on "Witnessing for Christ" in the afternoon to 5,000 people, and concluded the day with an evening service at which 8,000 individuals learned "The Value of a Soul." The 1,000-person choir sang at the morning and evening services. In the first three days, attendance totaled 35,700.

Eight people, including two additional preachers, a choir director, a pianist, a soloist and a secretary, accompanied Lyon and his wife. The mayor and other city officials joined clergy representatives to welcome the evangelists when they arrived in Wilmington and the visitors soon made their presence felt throughout the community. A mayor's committee arranged luncheons that brought together Lyon and local businessmen. The preacher spoke to the Rotary Club of Wilmington and met with members of the Levy Court. He visited the county workhouse where he condemned the use of the whipping post and he orchestrated daytime shop meetings with the workers in many local industries and businesses.

At the end of the two-month campaign, Lyon's organization declared that attendance at the services totaled 425,000 and that 4,548 individuals had "hit the sawdust trail" and committed themselves to a Christian life. During the weeks of the revival, various groups organized themselves to march to the tabernacle.

Delegations from Wilmington High School, the YMCA, the Junior Order of United American Mechanics, and a group of 500 "business girls"—young women who worked at the YWCA, Woolworths, and Kresges or who were students at Beacom Business College—arrived en masse at the tabernacle doors, banners flying. When 300 Knights of the Golden Eagle, 500 members of the Epworth League, and 500 members of the Young

People's Society of Christian Endeavor all attended together, two brass bands headed the parade that brought the marchers to the meeting.

After the revival ended, the tabernacle was sold at auction and by early May, it was gone and the area where it had stood had been reseeded and was beginning to look like a park again.