

CELEBRATING
125
YEARS

**St. Paul's is Celebrating its
125th Anniversary Celebration
in October, 2023**

*In preparation, Ron Fritze and Beth Hornish
are leading us through our history in
preparation for this grand celebration.
Anyone wishing to participate in its planning
may contact Beth or Ron!*

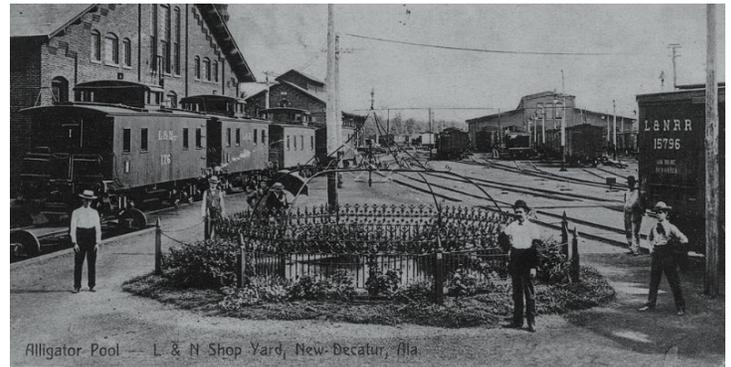
IN THE BEGINNING

St. Paul's Lutheran Church of Decatur, Alabama was born on the evening of 9 October 1898 in the house of one of the twenty-five pioneer members. It was the eighteenth Sunday of the Trinity season of the Church Calendar. Since the founders were all Germans, the original name of the congregation was Evangelisch Lutherischen St. Paulus Gemeinde Zu New Decatur. *Gemeinde* means congregation or parish. For many years thereafter, services were conducted in German. New Decatur or Albany was a community next to Decatur that would soon be incorporated into Decatur as were a number of other small communities over the years.

So what's up with all these Germans in Decatur.? First, Germans were one of the biggest ethnic groups in the American population. Thanks to the great migrations of German and Irish that began in the 1840s and continued to the early twentieth century, 25 percent of the American population were German and 25 percent were Irish. These two ethnic groups were essentially tied as the biggest ethnic groups in the United States and it remained that way until about 1980. The German and Irish immigrations were at their height during the 1840s and 1850s. The Southern states, however, got almost none of these immigrants in the years before the Civil War. The relative scarcity of Lutheran churches in the Southern states testifies to that reality.

Germans started to immigrate to Southern states toward the end of the nineteenth century. In those days, American businesses encouraged German immigration because many of Germans were skilled workers seeking economic advancement and their skills were in high demand. Decatur and Morgan county were growing economically and demographically. In 1870 Morgan County had a population of 12,187. The population increased dramatically over the next three decades. Morgan County had 16,428 people in 1880, 24,089 in 1890, and 28,820 in 1900. Decatur was also growing although some of that growth was a result of incorporating nearby smaller communities. Decatur's population in 1870 was a mere 671 people. It grew to 1,063 in 1880; 2,765 in 1890; and 3,114 in 1900. The people who formed the congregation of St. Paul's Lutheran were part of this growth.

Decatur got a big economic boost in 1889 when the Louisville and Nashville Railroad decided to combine all five divisions of its repair shops and locate them in one place—New Decatur, Alabama. The early St. Paul's members were employees of these repair shops. Prior to that time, the German Lutheran population of Morgan County was miniscule. By the 1890s, the growth in the German population made it viable to form a Lutheran congregation.



With the assistance of Pastor W. G. Hussmann, the New Decatur Germans began to hold church services. Hussmann was the pastor of Trinity Lutheran in Hanceville and that meant he had to travel from Hanceville to Decatur in a horse and buggy on bad roads to lead the worship. His journey would have taken hours and it would have been none too pleasant in the summer heat, on rainy days, or in the chill of winter. It appears that Hussmann conducted services in Hanceville on Sunday mornings and then travelled to Decatur where he conducted evening services. That is probably why St. Paul's official founding took place on the evening of 9 October.

Once the congregation was formed, they needed to call their own pastor. Their initial efforts did not go well. Calls were sent out to several pastors but all of them declined to come and serve St. Paul's. At that point, the congregation issued a call to Pastor Hussmann, and he accepted. He was installed on Septuagesima Sunday in 1899 which would have been 30 January. So, despite the turndowns, St. Paul's managed to get its first pastor within four months of its foundation. Hussmann would serve as St. Paul's pastor until 1904 and more will be said about him in later essays. Initially services were in German and were held in members' homes or rented halls. The congregation wanted a church and they would soon get one. That is the subject of the next essay.

Ron Fritze and Beth Hornish