As many of you know, the Synod of the Trinity is embarking on its 300th birthday. There are probably only a couple of you who remember when the first synod in the United States was formed, so for the rest of you I’ll give you a quick history lesson.

There is some debate over which Presbyterian congregation is the oldest in the United States. (slide) It’s between Southold and Southampton on Long Island, N.Y., both of which lay claim to settling in 1640. In fact, the first eight Presbyterian churches to be established in the U.S. were all on Long Island.

Presbyterians eventually made their way into Pennsylvania, and by the late 1600s there were many Presbyterian congregations in this state. (slide) The oldest Presbyterian congregation in Pennsylvania is First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, which was organized in 1698. Ben Franklin was a regular attender of First Presbyterian Church in the mid-1700s, but when they saw him coming with his kite, they quickly shut the doors.

In 1706, the first presbytery was formed in Philadelphia. It was simply called “The Presbytery” and not known as the “Presbytery of Philadelphia” until 1716, which is when we as a Synod step into the picture.

(slide) In the fall of 1716 “The Synod” was formed and it included the presbyteries of Philadelphia, Long Island, New Castle and Snow Hill. However, the Presbytery of Snow Hill was never formed and its congregations were absorbed by New Castle. It’s not until 1717 that the first meeting of “The Synod” is held in First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia. There were 19 ministers from Virginia to Long Island who were part of “The Synod,” with six of them coming from Philadelphia.

(slide) Not too long after, some disagreements arose from congregations in Philadelphia and New York, and in 1741 our great Synod had to be split into two bodies. (slide) It’s at this point that the Old Side Synod of Philadelphia and the New Side Synod of New York were formed. The breakup lasted only 17 years, at which time they reunited and became known as the Synod of New York and Philadelphia.

(slide) By the late 1700s and early 1800s, a strategic policy was enacted by the Presbyterian General Assembly that directed missionaries to go west and set up new congregations, making it the first denomination to send missionaries that direction. While several Presbyterian congregations had already been established in West Virginia and Ohio by this time, it marked a distinct presence of the denomination in those areas.

(slide) Over the next 100 years the Synod consisted of all of Delaware and Maryland and most of Pennsylvania. In 1881, the Synod territory also included a portion of west Africa, but it really put a crimp in our mileage reimbursements for these assembly meetings in State College. (slide) The next year the Synod’s name was changed to the Synod of Pennsylvania and it stayed that way until 1973 when we merged with the Synod of West Virginia and became known as the Synod of Pennsylvania-West Virginia. (slide) In 1983, we added eastern Ohio to our area and again changed our name to what it currently is, the Synod of the Trinity, to avoid a geographic title.

So that’s a brief history of how the Synod formed and the several different names and geographical shapes it has had during the last 300 years. But honestly, the Synod of the Trinity’s history is much more than that. Our churches’ histories are the Synod’s history.

Because Pennsylvania, and especially Philadelphia, was at the center of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, there is plenty of early history surrounding those wars and the Presbyterian Church. (slide) First Presbyterian Church, which had moved to Buttonwood Hall, was virtually destroyed by the British who were living in the building and using it as a stable, burning the pews for firewood. (slide) At nearby Abington Presbyterian Church, the American Army was stationed in the church in order to keep the British contained in Philadelphia and prevent them from raiding the countryside. On at least one occasion, the British soldiers were marching out of town when the Americans pushed them back from behind the Abington Cemetery wall.

(slide) Old Pine Street Church in Philadelphia was known as the “Church of the Patriots” because many of the worshipers like John Adams were fighting alongside George Washington. It is the only remaining building in Philadelphia from before the Revolutionary War.

(slide) During the Civil War, Great Conewago Presbyterian Church and Gettysburg Presbyterian Church, like many other public buildings in the area, were turned into temporary hospitals for the soldiers. Just hours after he gave his famed “Gettysburg Address,” Abraham Lincoln attended a meeting at the Gettysburg church. (slide) Lincoln’s seat is marked with a bronze plaque and all of the pews except that one have been replaced in the building. Another president also set foot inside Gettysburg Presbyterian Church. Dwight Eisenhower and his wife actually became members of the church in 1963, and the pew they sat in is also marked with a plaque. There is also an Eisenhower Lounge in the church filled with paintings and memorabilia of the late president.

(slide) Also during that time, Montrose Presbyterian Church in the Presbytery of Lackawanna was a main station in the Underground Railroad. It was one of the main stops because it was on the way to Canada where African-Americans could gain freedom from slave owners. It also ended up being a permanent home for many escapees because of the vast farming and lumber industries in Montrose.

(slide) In 1807, the First African Presbyterian Church was established in Philadelphia in 1807. This was not only the first African-American church in Philadelphia but was also the first in the United States. The church was founded by John Gloucester, a slave and famous preacher from Tennessee. While waiting for his freedom in Philadelphia, he gathered a congregation and began preaching in a house before quickly growing too large and having to construct his own building in 1811.

In the 1830s, the Presbyterian Church was divided over slavery, resulting in Northern and Southern branches. Both of those branches were present in Ohio and caused a split in the denomination there. The Civil War and the end to slavery helped reunite the Presbyterians in Ohio.

(slide) The 20th century was also a pivotal time in American history. The Great Depression of the late 1920s caused plenty of anxiousness and worry for many. That’s when a preacher at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh wanted to try something new. Dr. Hugh Thomas Kerr decided to do something uplifting despite all of the economic and political issues of the time. He led his congregation in a communion service on the first Sunday in October and urged all other congregations regardless of their denomination to have a communion service on the same day in a show of togetherness and solidarity. Eighty years later, this practice has evolved into World Communion Sunday.

(slide) Reaching out to the world is something very near and dear to our congregations. Our churches and presbyteries have relationships and partnerships with many other parts of the world. They range from Honduras to Peru to Malawi to Zambia to Ghana to the Dominican Republic to Tanzania to Haiti. And we’re doing great work here, too, helping our own recover from devastation in places like New Jersey, West Virginia and New Orleans.

Not only have our presbyteries and churches become well known for the different roles they play here and abroad, but there have been many personalities who have made a difference as well. (slide) Probably the most famous is Rev. Fred Rogers, better known as Mister Rogers. As many of you know, Mister Rogers was a children’s television host in the 1970s and ‘80s and also a Presbyterian minister, having graduated from Pittsburgh Seminary, but he never did lead a church.

(slide) So, as you can tell, the Synod of the Trinity has had a long, historic past that we’re planning to start celebrating in a little over a year. At the March Synod Assembly meeting, there were many great suggestions given by you on how we can celebrate our tercentennial, from commissioning a hymn to bulletin inserts to Synod school to creating a 300th Anniversary Fund to be used for mission work to having a PBS documentary created on our history. Those ideas are still very much in our discussions and a meeting is in the works to continue those talks next month.

Because the history of our churches is what makes up the history of the Synod, we’re looking for people who have a passion for history to help us gather information and help us celebrate. I have been in touch with all of our presbyteries looking for volunteers to assist us in this project and I have received a few names. If you or someone you know would be interested in helping out, let me know. And please spread the word that we are looking for volunteers. After all, it’s the people in the pews who helped shape what the Synod of the Trinity is today.