



# SELF-GUIDED *walking tour* OF THE CHURCHES OF AVALON



For a seaside town of approximately 5 square miles, the Borough of Avalon has always provided its permanent and seasonal populations with a well-established religious presence.

Whether in a series of non-denominational Tabernacle tents in Avalon's weather-beaten north end, or in the grand halls of the newly constructed Hotel Avalon, or even in the parlors of the rapidly growing private "cottages," the 1890s ushered in the growth of worship as a vital part of life in Avalon.

Today, Avalon continues with that tradition of providing an opportunity for all denominations to give thanks for our "Jewel at the Jersey Coast."



215 39<sup>th</sup> Street, Avalon

(609) 967-0090

[www.avalonhistorycenter.org](http://www.avalonhistorycenter.org)

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a map  
to guide  
you...

This self-guided walking tour is approximately three miles in length, starting on 9<sup>th</sup> Street and ending on 50<sup>th</sup> Street. Watch out for traffic, wear comfortable shoes, and drink plenty of water.

To learn more about the sites featured and view additional photographs, contact the Avalon History Center:  
(609) 967-0090  
[www.avalonhistorycenter.org](http://www.avalonhistorycenter.org)

**1. Wells Memorial Presbyterian Church**

**9<sup>th</sup> St. & First Ave.**

**2. Site of the Grace Union AME Church**

**17<sup>th</sup> St. & Dune Dr.**

**3. Maris Stella Chapel/Sacred Heart Church**

**Southeast corner of 25<sup>th</sup> St. & First Ave.**

**4. St. John's By-the-Sea Episcopal Church**

**25<sup>th</sup> St. & Avalon Ave.**

**5. Original Peermont Methodist Episcopal Church**

**(now a private home)  
3249 First Ave.**

**6. First United Methodist Church**

**33<sup>rd</sup> St. & Dune Drive.**

**7. Maris Stella Church**

**252 50<sup>th</sup> St. (between 49<sup>th</sup> & 50<sup>th</sup> Streets and Dune & Ocean Drives)**

**8. Tierney Hall**

**50<sup>th</sup> St. & Ocean Drive.**







**Wells Memorial Presbyterian Church**  
9<sup>th</sup> St. & First Ave.

Established as a non-denominational church in 1892, construction was completed by George Kates in 1893, supported and financed by Avalon's pioneer families of various faiths, among them the Wells family. As Avalon's second church, it took over from the religious congregations that regularly took place at the Avalon Hotel and later in the short-lived tented tabernacle. During this time, there were approximately 75 homes in Avalon, but even then, summer brought in large numbers of weekend visitors. The spiritual needs of residents and visitors were met all summer long along with sporadic winter services. Sunday School ran all year long and played a very important part in the "physical and spiritual development of the church," according to *Wells Memorial Presbyterian Church the First 100 Years*, a booklet by Thomas M. Gluyas.

The first service in the new church was held on July 30, 1893, even though it was not yet finished. Upon completion that fall, the NJ Synod agreed to take over the deed and it officially became a Presbyterian place of worship. The name Wells Memorial was not adopted until circa 1905 (most likely but unproven in honor of the late Joseph L. Wells).

Among its most notable features have been:

- Louisa Fifield Cooper Memorial Organ, donated in 1893.
- Bell Tower donated by early summer resident Adam Smith.
- Circular window inscribed: "Isabelle Annetta Dunham Dec 13, 1886-Oct 21, 1892" is said to be a donation from a church building fund contributor in his child's memory. She died during the Church's planning.

In more recent years, Hurricane Sandy displaced the cross on top of the church in 2012, prompting Avalon Fire Department to dispatch their new ladder truck to reposition it, with assistance from Dave Knoche's son-in-law.

**Site of the Grace Union AME Church**  
17<sup>th</sup> St. & Dune Dr.

Intended as a place of worship for the employees of summer visitors and homeowners in the early 1900s, construction was originally planned for 34<sup>th</sup> Street. However, according to Robert Penrose's *Avalon on the Seven Mile Beach*, opposition from residents on that street led to the Church being built on 17<sup>th</sup> Street, where it survives today as a private residence.

Lucy Morris, 40-year resident, appears to have been a church custodian. The Reverend Joel Cannon was the Pastor in the mid 1930s, as noted in the 1941 edition of "The Cape May Co. Directory of NJ Churches, Vol.5." It is also said that Joel Cannon was Avalon's trash collector and a fish market proprietor around the same time.

In 2008, the current owners generously donated a small building from their property that dated back to the Church's era to the Avalon Historical Society. Today, the renovated historic building can be seen next to the Avalon History Center on 39<sup>th</sup> Street.



**Maris Stella Chapel/Sacred Heart Church**  
Southeast corner of 25<sup>th</sup> St. & First Ave.

Before the Sacred Heart Church held its first Mass in July 1928, Avalon's Catholic population had to travel into Stone Harbor for services and since there was no paved road connecting the two towns, the trip was often arduous, if not dangerous. Swiss-born Frederick Michell, Jr., an Avalon summer resident and part owner of a successful Philadelphia seed company, worked with architect George J. Lovell to realize his vision of a Swiss style Roman Catholic Church, complete with sharply sloping roofs, designed to help heavy snowfall slide off! In 1928, Mr. Michell donated the Church to the then Diocese of Trenton.

Within a couple decades, the congregation outgrew the little church and in 1949, the Catholic Church purchased the entire block at 49<sup>th</sup> Street between Ocean and Dune Drives, and fundraising for a new church began.



**St. John's By-the-Sea Episcopal**  
25<sup>th</sup> St. & Avalon Ave.

St. John's by-the-Sea dates its origins to September 1907, when Mr. Cornelius Mahan of Avalon secured the Reverend Herbert J. Cook of Holy Trinity Church in Ocean City to offer an evening prayer service from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer at Peermont's Methodist Church.

The next April, a meeting was held in Philadelphia for those interested in starting regular services in Avalon during the summer season. Mr. and Mrs. John Canfield and the Rev. Cook submitted plans for a chapel. Mrs. Canfield suggested the name of St. John's, changing it some months later to St. John's by-the-Sea. During the summer of 1908, services were held at the Avalon Hotel as enthusiasm for the project grew, aided by the newly formed Women's Guild.

The next few years saw services at the Wells Memorial Chapel and again at the Peermont Methodist Church, while funds were raised for a church. Mr. Canfield offered two lots for the building and in 1913 a building committee was formed. Bids were accepted in January 1914 and the cornerstone was laid in May.

Avalon builder Mr. Levi Wentzel, promised to complete construction of the church in 60 days, which he did, for the cost of \$5,000. St. John's by-the Sea Church was finally dedicated on June 28, 1914. Among the many memorial gifts donated to the Church, even before its completion, was the Chancel window by Tiffany given by John M. Canfield in memory of his parents. The window is still in place today.







5

**Old Methodist Church**  
**3249 First Ave.**

August 7, 1892 saw the first public Sunday morning service at what was then called the Union Church, an interdenominational place of worship, Avalon's first church. By the next summer, it became Peermont Methodist Episcopal Church, known as the "little Church" with a "little flock" with services held whenever a Pastor could be secured. In 1909, a decision was made to keep the church open year-round, despite low attendance in previous years, even in the summer months. But the Sunday school was generally well attended and much to everyone's surprise, so were the newly available winter services.

The congregation grew and eventually it became apparent that a larger facility was required. In the winter of 1962 plans for an addition were put into place and a fund drive began. According to *History of First United Methodist Church, First 100 Years* by Anthony Wayne Robinson III, these plans were challenged when a property owner on 31<sup>st</sup> Street claimed such an addition would spoil his view and devalue his property. Instead, plans were made to build a new Church on Dune Drive and 33<sup>rd</sup> Street (see site #6).

The little Church was purchased by two Pittsburgh interior designers, who redesigned the interior, turning it into a five-bedroom home, the design of which won an award from the American Institute of Interior Designers in 1971. It was named "The Belfry House" by its next owners, Medford and Clarissa Brown. The current owners, have been restoring it to its former glory since they purchased it in 2002, keeping many original features. The Belfry House was featured in the Philadelphia Inquirer Home section in 2009 as a "Sanctuary at the Shore."



7

**Maris Stella Church on Dune Dr.**  
**252 50<sup>th</sup> St. (between 49<sup>th</sup> & 50<sup>th</sup> Streets and Dune & Ocean Drives)**

While the Chapel on 25<sup>th</sup> Street continued with services, the Diocese took advantage of Avalon's generous land sales and purchased an entire block on Dune Drive, between 49<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Streets in 1949. Ten years later, Sacred Heart Auditorium was completed and open for weekly mass. In 1961, Maris Stella Parish was established by Archbishop Damiano and the Sacred Heart Church on 25<sup>th</sup> Street was renamed the Maris Stella Chapel.

In 1983 Maris Stella Church, so named after its patroness Mary Star of the Sea, a large new church and steeple was built on the site, under the direction of then Pastor, Bishop James Schad.

Largely due to a decreasing number of priests, Saint Paul's Parish of Stone Harbor and Avalon's Maris Stella Parish were merged into Saint Brendan the Navigator Parish in 2010. The same year saw the Auditorium renamed Tierney Hall after Monsignor Patrick Tierney. In 2017, Maris Stella Chapel was renamed back to Sacred Heart Church.



6

**First United Methodist**  
**Dune Drive and 33<sup>rd</sup> St.**

Ground was broken on May 17, 1964 on the west side of Dune Drive between 33<sup>rd</sup> and 34<sup>th</sup> Streets, and the cornerstone for the First United Methodist Church of Avalon was laid in August of that year. By February 1965, the building was ready for its first service, minus pews for the Sanctuary. The "Little Flock" of the former "Little Church" decided not to wait any longer but gathered on February 7, 1965 to march from First Avenue to Dune Drive where Pastor Fillmore presided over the service in the Fellowship Hall adjoining the unfinished Sanctuary. A Consecration service was held on May 16, while a Dedication Service took place eight years later in September 1973. Building continued - 1969 saw ground being broken for the parsonage on the northwest corner of Third Avenue and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. Between 1983 and 1985 a handicapped access ramp, Sunday school wing, restrooms and nursery were completed. On the morning of October 9, 1985, a giant crane hoisted a tall, white steeple into place, watched by spectators lining Dune Drive.

Throughout the years, the Sunday School has been a permanent and active part of the church. Early on it was known as the Sabbath School and was responsible for the Methodist Youth League. Further, it sponsored the Cub Scouts and was responsible for Vacation Bible School.



8

**Tierney Hall**  
**50<sup>th</sup> St. & Ocean Drive**

Tierney Hall first opened its doors as Maris Stella Auditorium in 1959, initially to hold weekly Mass while funds were raised to build a church bigger than the Chapel on 25<sup>th</sup> Street, to accommodate the large summer congregation. Maris Stella Church was dedicated in 1983.

In 2010, the Auditorium was renamed Tierney Hall in honor of Monsignor Patrick Tierney, Pastor of Maris Stella Parish from 1992 to 2009.

The Auditorium is commonly used as a meeting space for several organizations and support groups, fundraising events, and religious education.