



Saint James' Episcopal Church
Mill Creek Hundred
2106 St. James Church Road
Wilmington, DE 19808

Tercentennial Celebration

1714 - 2014

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Foreword

What follows is an account of the life of St. James' Church in the heart of New Castle County, Delaware. Over its history, the parish has been identified as "St. James' White Clay Creek," "St. James', Stanton," "Old St. James'," and "St. James' Mill Creek Hundred."

That's a lot of places and names for a congregation that for 300 years has always gathered at the same location. While there is a special place in the heart for the historic building in which we still gather, what is truly the soul of St. James' is that for three centuries it has welcomed and nourished those who have regularly met here to worship, to learn, and to serve the surrounding community.

To step inside this church is to step not into the past; rather it is to enter into an enduring journey and story that are handed down from one generation to another. It is to participate in the best of our traditions preserved not as some remembrance of an earlier age, but as witness to the ever-flowing stream of our faith in the goodness of Almighty God.

We invite you to not just visit this sacred place. We invite you to sit for awhile in reflection, prayer, and gratitude for the people who have come through its doors and found themselves touched by the presence of God. Seek for yourself this "peace which passes all understanding," and when you leave, our hope is that you will carry with you an appreciation for the life that our Creator has bestowed upon us all.

*Saint James' Vestry
St. James' Mill Creek Hundred
Wilmington, Delaware*

St. James' Mill Creek Hundred and How It Came to Be a Colonial Church

The Rev. Mark Harris*

St. James' Mill Creek Hundred is a congregation with a long history. It begins in the colonial period and extends into the present. In these notes I try to indicate how this congregation came to understand itself as both a colonial church and an enduring congregation. The information is grouped into three historical periods: The "poor sister" years from 1678 to 1815; the years of "full sisterhood" from 1816 to 1945; and the years of "full matriarchy," which extend from 1946 to the present.

Much of what follows grows from the research of two histories, *The Anglican Church in Delaware* by Nelson W. Rightmyer and *The Episcopal Church in Delaware* by Charles A. Silliman. Additional background material came from a lecture I delivered at the Episcopal Divinity School titled "The Colonial Anglican Church and Its Theological Environment, 1714 to 1815," as well as from the archival work done by Marietta Baylis, for many years historian at St. James'.

The Poor Sister

In 1677, the Rev. John Yeo came from Maryland and presented his credentials to the court in New Castle. He was in the area for only a brief time, being removed in 1681 for seditious language against William Penn. He was acquitted and returned to Calvert County Maryland. There is a tradition, but no proof, that Mr. Yeo preached near or at the present location of St. James' Mill Creek Hundred in 1678. The one thing to be said in favor of this tradition is that the pathway or road from New Castle back into Maryland no doubt followed through the wetlands up the creek and over the border near Newark. Therefore, Yeo might well have stopped and preached to the farming community in this slightly raised area near White Clay Creek. It is entirely conceivable that adherents to the Church of England in the area used the occasion of Yeo's visit to begin conversations about the building of a church.

*Father Harris served St. James' as Interim Rector from 1979-1980 and Rector from 1994-2000. This piece was written in 1999.

An inscription on the bell of the church states that the parish was organized in 1698. If so, it was organized while there were no Anglican clergy in the area. It may be that Mr. James Robinson, a local farmer who later gave the land for the church, gathered his own family and farming household for services on this property, invited others to join him, and that from those gatherings a parish congregation was organized.

The Rev. Mr. George Keith made a survey of the colonies for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in 1702 and visited New Castle. He may well have visited the White Clay Creek area. In about 1703, a log building on the Robinson land was said to have been put to use for church services. There are some stories that the building and/or land was also used for gatherings of Native Americans in the area. But it was not until the Rev. Mr. George Ross (father-in-law of Betsy Ross) was sent as missionary to New Castle in 1703, arriving in 1705, that there are any records of Church attention to the community of White Clay Creek (later included in the land area called Mill Creek Hundred).

Mr. James Robinson, who lived in the area, gave a ten-acre parcel of land on which to build a church, and in 1714 the land was dedicated for that purpose. Plans were made to build a frame church at White Clay Creek, to be called St. James'. Rightmyer records that the frame was raised on December 4, 1716, and the church dedicated on July 4, 1717. The three-year discrepancy between 1714 (the date normally used by St. James' itself) and the dedication may well represent the time from decision to completion. The fact is, there was a community in place that made the decision to build the church. It was a lay community, without consistent encouragement or any support from outside its own bounds.

The church as built was 32 feet long and 22 feet wide, and described by Mr. Ross as "as fair and complete an oratory, as any not made of brick within the government." Church members at White Clay Creek had previously been considered part of the New Castle church, and Mr. Ross continued to view them as such. He considered St. James' a "chapel-of-ease," that is, as a place of

convenience rather than the location of a separate congregation. The members of St. James', however, felt they were indeed a church, deserving of their own minister. They petitioned the SPG for their own clergy. One person, the Rev. Mr. Alexander Campbell, ministered regularly to them from 1728-1729. Otherwise they relied primarily on clergy from New Castle and Holy Trinity (Old Swedes) as well as clergy with multiple stations for almost the entire colonial period.

We can see in the beginnings of St. James' parish a number of the issues that typified Anglican Church life in the eighteenth century. In more successful colonial environments, the 1720's saw the building of brick or stone churches. In Delaware, with few exceptions, the buildings in the colonial period were wooden. New Castle, although a bit rough and in the backwash of East Coast civilization, was an exception. There a brick church was built in 1705. Mr. Ross' perception that St. James' was a chapel-of-ease says more about social class and order than about mission. St. James' people were farmers, not villagers.

For the whole of the colonial period St. James' would suffer second-rate status, seldom having consistent clergy leadership (on Sundays in particular) and often lacking in lay leadership. The church fell into disrepair several times during this period. In 1767, there was an attempt to make St. James' a village church by moving its location to Newport some four miles away nearer the Delaware River. Meanwhile St. James' continued in use on what must have been an irregular basis.

During the colonial period, from 1714 to 1815, St. James' was a poor sister indeed. Sometimes viewed as a chapel-of-ease, sometimes having regular clergy attention, sometimes in disrepair, and sometimes in the process of relocating, St. James' was without doubt led and sustained by the laity.

The names of lay leaders are difficult to find. At the beginning of this period we have mention of Mr. Robinson, and near the end of the period we know of two lay delegates to the first conventions of the diocese. The only other records from these early days are in the graveyard. The earliest stone records the death of Mr. John Armstrong in 1726. Many of the farming families of the area are

buried there, and their names continue in the community as names of developments built on their lands or as names of local businesses. Records tell us that 33 Revolutionary War soldiers are buried in the graveyard although the locations of many of the graves are unknown.

Full Sisterhood

In about 1815, the decision was made to build a new church on the site of the old one. In 1820, work was begun on the current building. The old building was probably burned down to make place for the new, but there is no record that that was actually done. In 1822, the building seems to have been finished enough for a stone to be placed over the rear transept with that date. It was consecrated by Bishop William White of Pennsylvania on August 14, 1823. There is a record of a lottery to pay off the remaining debt in 1825.

The new church, (the one we now have) is only 10 feet longer than the old (42 feet) and only 10 feet wider (32 feet). It has an interior balcony on three sides. Originally, it had large, clear-glass windows all around on both floors, with a large, clear-glass window behind the altar. The existing box pews are original to the structure.

At this point there begins to be the record of a sustained clergy presence. It is interesting to note that the parish records a lay reader as part of its succession of clergy, a Mr. Jacob Whiteman, from 1843-44. It was becoming important for the church to maintain continuity of ministry as St. James' was now established clearly on its own. It had continuous lay representation at diocesan conventions, continuous services in place, and continuous ministry.

The current church building was constructed of stone. The first backward glance at "colonial" styles is evident in its architectural features as well as its orientation. If church architecture of the colonial period was meant to convey solidity and light, then stone or brick was preferable to wood, and large windows were favored over small. St. James' had both. Moreover, the building has an interesting orientation. Most churches followed the tradition of locating the altar at the east end, and most graveyards had their graves aligned east and west. The graves at St. James' follow the

tradition, and there is some indication that the old frame church followed that tradition as well. But the new St. James' was built north and south so that both the morning and afternoon light come in through all the side windows. Orientation was changed from the norm so that the architectural style would conform to what was understood as colonial.

Rhys Isaac, in *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790*, remarks that rural colonial churches were most often built as places of meeting rather than of adoration. St. James' was such a church. It is small – almost as small as its wooden predecessor – but it can hold more than 200 people. It does so by use of the balcony and main floor as well as by having a very small chancel/altar area. No one is more than 40 feet from the preacher, and the rounded ceiling carries the voice up and out remarkably well. It is indeed a meeting place.

Thus we see that this “new” church was built with colonial objectives in mind. At the same time, the church was built with some of the niceties of Anglican theological perception and with some hints of what would come to be called “high church” concerns. On the interior, the church is a rectangle, with the altar at the north end. But built into the north end is an apse. Further, if you include the entryway and the sacristy, the total exterior ground plan is in the shape of a cross. The apse and the cruciform pattern give the church a less congregational and more catholic style.

Over the years, St. James' has made modifications to its church building to suit the liturgical and social times and to reflect the community in which it is located. There was for many years wood paneling on which were inscribed The Ten Commandments, The Lord's Prayer and the Creed. The paneling probably dated from the construction of the new church, although of this we are uncertain. It covered the lower part of the apse so that the altar was in front of the curved area behind the panel. There were doors leading to a space behind the altar where clergy may have robed or goods may have been stored. The doors and paneling were taken down at some point, but we do not know just when.

There have been several conjectures about the use of the balcony. It is a large balcony, extending around three sides of the

church. Who were the people envisioned as the primary users of this balcony? It may well have been that slaves sat there, but there is no record of that fact. It is not clear just how many slaves there were in the farming area in and around St. James', or how many of them had owners related to the parish.

Some stories suggest that St. James' graveyard was one of the few open to slaves, although their graves had no markers. Such stories, if true, would support the possibility that the balcony was a segregated section for slaves. On the other hand, one commentator bluntly states that the balcony was built because of anticipated crowds and not for slaves. It could well have been used both ways, but there is no conclusive record of the matter. Native American and African American records that could contribute to a basic history were not kept.

As originally constructed, the existing church had no belfry; there was no reason for one. St. James' was indeed a farm and county church, not a village church. It was in 1894 that the belfry was built and a large bell installed. Today the bell is still rung 15 minutes before, and at the hour of, each Sunday service. It can be heard in a wide area around the church. Installing that bell signaled that St. James' was now a church in a more urbanized area and its solidity established.

The Romantic Ideal of the Colonial Church and Full Matriarchy

Real population growth in the area awaited the end of World War II. In the period immediately following the war, large farms were sold and the land divided into subdivisions or developments. The population grew fairly rapidly from that point on. With new people, a growing community, and with a longing for symbols of stability, St. James' entered its third phase, that of "full matriarchy." It did so by claiming itself to be one of the first of the colonial churches in Delaware, on a par with its elder sister churches in New Castle, Middletown and Lewes. As a congregation, it was indeed among the first, but it had not been established in the same sense as these churches. Now it firmly asserted its claim.

With all that, it must be admitted that Mr. Ross was right when he dubbed St. James' a chapel-of-ease. St. James' was not like Immanuel New Castle – it was not a village church. It did not really conform to either the New England model of a colonial church in the village, or the Virginia model of a plantation church at the crossroads. It did not have a consistent record of clergy or lay leadership during the colonial period.

What it did have is something very few of the elder sister churches had. It had a church building deliberately built to incorporate the ideals of colonial architecture as they were understood at the close of the period. Furthermore, as the post WWII period progressed, it modified its appearance to conform to what was considered the best of that style. That is, it romanticized a colonial style that more truly reflected the best of the colonial period as now perceived. In 1962, the church was restored to return it to what was believed to be its original style. In reality, it was restored to something like what we now would hope a colonial church would look like. At long last, here was a church whose stability in appearance and whose continuing congregational life would warrant the claim that it was indeed a colonial church.

The romantic ideal, “the colonial church,” holds some real value for many Episcopalians because in the midst of great change it suggests a stability of purpose and witness. St. James' fosters this very sense of stability and witness in an area that has yet to really have a sense of village or town existence. Around it have sprung up developments rather than farms, and interstate highways rather than river roads. But no village or town surrounds St. James'. It continues to exist “in the country” or now “in the *county*,” rather than the city.

The point to be made here is this: we think of colonial churches and we think of places like St. James'. But in fact, colonial churches varied widely in architectural style. It is in retrospect, and for our own reasons, that we think of St. James' as colonial.

Discovering the Colonial St. James'

After all this time, what we know about St. James' during the colonial period can be summed up in the following:

It was like many of the colonial Anglican churches in that it was primarily the product of lay initiation, either without clergy or with clergy shared with other stations.

It suffered from lack of status. The Anglican propensity for settlement was not met in its rural location: it was not a parish in an established church context nor was it a regular recipient of SPG attention.

It provided final burial grounds for its members, a place of gathering for its people, and a sense of continuity. Its sole remaining artifacts of that period are its gravestones and the land itself. This is an important fact that is often missed in discussions of colonial churches. If the church was more a place of meeting than of adoration, communal graveyards were reminders of both the love of the land and those who labored there, and thus a place of adoration. The wilderness, a subject of adoration in the American psyche, is echoed in the lands around the church in which the ancestors are buried.

The current building reflects what at the end of the colonial period was thought to be the best of the colonial era. It is a place of light, acoustically fine for preaching and worship. It is communally intimate; it is a place of meeting. It is a place of stability in the midst of change. It is aligned to take best advantage of the morning and evening sun. It is a church proclaiming its people as an established community of faith, as a congregation that endures.

From a theological perspective, St. James' is a constant affirmation of the ministry of the people, for to the extent that it is a colonial church it is so because all its members made it so. It stands as a witness to those who found the Prayer Book and its rituals and life worth saving.

From a historical/theological perspective, it is an example of the tenuous state of Anglican witness throughout most of the colonial period.

Finally, because it and almost all colonial churches still in active use are now reflective of a romanticized understanding of colonial church life, it is – like many of its counterpart parishes in England

and now in the United States – constantly in danger of becoming more interesting as history than as an active community.

That, of course, would be to violate the experience of the St. James' present in colonial times, which was resilient in the face of adversity, and the St. James' present today, lively and energetic.

REFERENCES

Isaac, Rhys. *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982.

Rightmyer, Nelson Waite. *The Anglican Church in Delaware*. Philadelphia: The Church Historical Society, 1947.

Silliman, Charles A. *The Episcopal Church in Delaware, 1785-1954*. Wilmington, DE: the Diocese of Delaware, 1982.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The following references may also be of interest:

Scharf, J.T. *History of Delaware*. 2 Volumes. Philadelphia, 1899. Reprinted Lewes, DE: Delmarva Roots, 2001

Zebley, F.R. *The Churches of Delaware*. Wilmington, DE, 1947.

A Chronological History
St. James' Episcopal Church
Mill Creek Hundred,
Wilmington, Delaware

- 1714 Land endowed by James Robinson for church and school.
- 1716 Frame church built on present site. Cost: \$1,900.
- 1717 First service conducted July 4 by the Rev. George Ross, Rector of Immanuel Church, New Castle, and father-in-law of Betsy Ross.
- 1726 John Armstrong buried in churchyard.
(Oldest known gravestone in cemetery.)
- 1807 School building construction begun. Cost: \$577.99 ½.
Building used as community educational center for many years until school districts established by state.
- 1819 Frame church either razed or destroyed by fire sometime between 1818 and 1820.
- 1823 Present church consecrated by the Rt. Rev. William White, Bishop of Pennsylvania. Bishop White served as chaplain of the Continental Congress from 1777 to 1789. He was chief architect of the Constitution of the American Episcopal Church following the Revolutionary War.
- 1824 Act passed by legislature authorizing lottery to raise \$1,200 to pay off indebtedness of church.
- 1857 Melodeon purchased for \$60.
- 1859 Additional land purchased for cemetery.
Stone wall built around churchyard.

- 1873 Ladies Aid Society (later called Parish Aid Society) founded. Initiation fee: 25 cents. Monthly dues: 10 cents. Society sponsored various festivals, socials, suppers, etc., to raise funds for the parish.
- 1890 Sanctuary remodeled and oak altar installed. Clear-glass Palladian window removed from above altar and replaced by memorial stained-glass window. (Clear-glass window later installed in belfry.)
- 1894 Belfry added to church. Bell cast by McShane Bell Foundry, Baltimore, Maryland. Inscription reads, "Established In 1698. First church built 1714. Praise Ye the Lord."
- 1916 School building dismantled. Stones from building used to build sexton's house. One room of house used for Sunday School until 1928, then house converted for use as a Sunday School building.
- 1923 Electricity installed in church. Project funded by Parish Aid Society.
- 1924 Construction of rectory begun. Total cost: \$9,402.04.
- 1930 First vested choir.
- 1934 Addition made to sexton's house, then converted for use as parish house.
- 1942 Major renovation to church. Original pews painted white with mahogany trim, walls painted ivory with white trim, venetian blinds installed, belfry rebuilt, exterior woodwork painted white.
- 1951 Configuration of sanctuary changed from semi-circle to rectangle.
- 1951 Women eligible for membership on vestry.

- 1958 Addition made to parish house (present-day middle section).
- 1960 Parking lot completed.
- 1963 Gothic and Elizabethan features of church interior removed. Church refurbished to reflect colonial era. Also, altar rail replaced, new altar rail kneelers added, chandelier refinished, venetian blinds replaced, new lighting installed.
- 1964 250th anniversary celebration of St. James' Episcopal Church.
- 1971 Classroom additions made to parish house (present-day east end).
- 1973 St. James' Church placed on *National Register of Historic Places*.
- 1974 Majority of parish house destroyed by fire on Halloween Eve.
- 1976 Rebuilt parish house dedicated May 16, by the Rt. Rev. William Clark, Bishop of Delaware.
- 1977 Existing sacristy enlarged. Project also included the addition of a room above the sacristy. Dedicated November 6.
- 1986 New organ dedicated April 27.
- 1988 Church interior repainted and recarpeted.
- 1989 275th anniversary celebration of St. James' Episcopal Church.
- 1992 Altar rail needlepoint kneelers, stitched by parishioners and friends of St. James', dedicated April 5.
- 1994 Central air-conditioning installed in church.

- 1996 Stone altar constructed in memorial garden by members of property committee. Replaced earlier outdoor altar built from a 200-year old Linden tree that was eventually destroyed by termites and carpenter ants.
- 2005 Memorial stained-glass window in balcony dedicated May 15.
- 2007 Memorial Alhborn Galanti organ dedicated September 16.
- 2010 Rectory converted to day center for use by Family Promise of Delaware.
- 2013-2014 300th anniversary celebration of St. James' Episcopal Church Mill Creek Hundred.

Succession of Clergy at St. James' Mill Creek

Dates

1717
1761
1765
1787-1792
1797
1799-1821
1809
1821
1824-1832
1833-1834
1835-1838
1839-1843
1844-1845
1845-1847
1847
1847-1850
1849
1850-1854
1854-1857
1857-1872
1873-1874
1875-1885
1885-1887
1887-1891
1891-1900
1900-1901
1902-1905
1906-1907
1907-1908
1908-1911
1912-1922
1922-1931

Rector

George Ross
Thomas Barton
Jacob Duche
Robert Clay
Joseph Clarkson
Robert Clay
William Price
Richard Hall
Stephen W. Prestman
Isaac Pardee
Hiram Adams
Correy Chambers
George W. Freeman*
Walter E. Franklin
William H. Trapnell
Zebidiah H. Mansfield
Samuel C. Brinkle
Bried Batcheller
George Sheets
William Marshall
Charles E. Fessenden
William Dent Hanson
William A. Aldrich
Edward H. Eckel
Enoch K. Miller
Wyllis Ride
Alexander M. Rich
Herman Schaffer
Robert G. Osborn
Herbert A. Grantham
John E. Parks
Ernest A. Rich

1931-1940	Milward W. Riker
1941-1945	E. Kenneth Albaugh
1945-1961	Alvin B. Potter
1958-1960	A. Hugh Dickinson – Curate
1961-1964	William R. Merrill
1964-1966	Stewart Labat
1966-1979	Everet F. Ellis
1970-1972	Robert Toulson – Deacon
1979-1980	Mark Harris - Interim
1980-1994	Arthur W. Archer
1994-2000	Mark Harris
2002-2019	James M. Bimbi

*Elected Bishop of Arkansas

