ST. JOHN'S CHURCH

As the Bi-Centennial Celebration begins in our nation, we all have become more interested in our history. A part of this heritage occurred at a small parish church located in King William County. St. John's Church was built in 1734 and was the result of a need that the people of the upper area of the Parish had been trying to fill since 1700.

Thomas West deeded in 1703 land that ran from the “Churchfield” branch to the mouth of the Branch in Bull Swamp. On this land an inadequate church was constructed. It appears to have been little more than a chappel. John Fontaine mentions in his diary that he and Governor Spotswood stopped at the upper church of St. John's Parish for Sunday services.

It was in 1729 that the Vestry decided that both churches had fallen into ruins from lack of care and that the decay was so bad that it was useless to spend any money on repairs. Instead of repairing the churches they decided to close them up and leave as soon as they had built two new churches of “equal dimensions and goodness” in the parish.

The decision to build two new churches in the parish at the same time met with opposition because of the expense. The opposition reasoned that one centrally located church would serve the Parish just as well. The two churches were to be paid for by a levy of 19,050 pounds of tobacco. Today 100 pounds of tobacco sells for about $110.00, so at today’s prices the vestry would have paid $2,955.00 for both churches. The price they set for their tobacco was ten shillings of current cash after all charges for the sale.

Perhaps inflation was present even in the 1720’s for later the vestry voted to build only one church that would be centrally located. They gave as a reason that one church would be more “suitable, easy, and convenient to the inhabitants.” They also stated that the difference in the expense of building two churches in the parish influenced their decision.

The church finally built was St. John’s Church. The Church at the time of its construction differed from the present structure in two major ways. On the north a wing had been added and the floor height of the Nave and the windows seem to have been raised by about twelve inches. Other than these changes, St. John’s Church is the same today as it was in 1734 in its structural body.

St. John’s was served by Daniel Taylor, Junior as its minister from 1729 to 1742, when he died. When Taylor died, St. John’s was left without clergy until 1752 when John Robertson assumed the role of Minister of the Parish. When Robertson ended his tenure we find the Church without benefit of Clergy until just prior to the Revolution.

During these years preceding the Revolution, we find sentiment in King William split between the Rebels and the Tories. As early as 1771, Col. John West, a descendent of Sir Thomas West, the third Lord Delware, moved away because of his rebel neighbors.

The political climate during this time carried over into the church itself. Carter Braxton, a member of the Vestry of St. John’s and also a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and Thomas Claiborne, another member of the Vestry, became bitter political rivals in both the county and the church. As one would imagine a split developed in the vestry and in February of 1772 a petition was presented to the House of Burgesses that called for dissolving the vestry because of the division among the members.

The Rebels had obtained a majority on the vestry and they were represented before the House of Burgesses by Carter Braxton. Braxton stated the vestry was not split and it had worked in harmony during the last year. One example he gave was the efforts of the vestry to retain the Rev. Henry Skyren by increasing the Parish Glebe in 1771.

Others from the Tory side who testified before the House of Burgesses indicated that the only matter on which the vestry had ever been in complete agreement was that of retaining the Rev. Henry Skyren.

While Braxton’s view was upheld before a committee of the House looking into the problem, when the full house reviewed it they voted to divide the vestry.

Many a Church was forced to close its doors during the Revolution as Rebels and Tories found themselves on different sides of a war that lasted for years. St. John’s instead found itself in the brightest era of its history. As mentioned earlier the only thing the vestry could agree on was the Rev. Henry Skyren, one of the outstanding clergymen of his day.

H. L. Lewis, in a series of articles on King William County, said of Rev. Skyren, “crowds attended services held in this church to listen to the eloquent sermons from the above celebrated divine, Parson Skyren. Many families brought with them to the church chairs that they might be seated in the aisles, so great were the crowds attending the same.” To emphasize what Lewis said about Skyren, remember the travel conditions of the times and the fact that people traveled from great distances to hear Rev. Skyren.

Except for Rev. Skyren we might have seen St. John’s Church being dissolved during the Revolution. Instead we find Rev. Skyren holding two factions together and keeping the situation in the church and therefore the community from breaking down into chaos.

Little is known of how the years of the Revolution directly affected the church. We do know that in 1785 Carter Braxton and the Reverend Skyren were listed as delegates from St. John’s Parish to the first Episcopal Convention. In 1786 they also served as delegates and in 1787 we find the Reverend Skyren as a delegate with William Claiborne taking Carter Braxton’s place as the other delegate.

The year 1787 also marks a turningpoint in history of the church. This was the year the Reverend Henry Skyren ended his service at St. John’s. For all practical purposes we can use this as the date St. John’s Church began its downfall. No man could be found by the Church with the Reverend Skyren’s ability.

After Rev. Skyren we find a James Price becoming minister for the years 1792 to 1796. He was succeeded by John Dunn in 1797. For Dunn we have no definite dates for his ministry but we know he left St. John’s by 1799, because in that year he was rector of Manchester Parish in Chesterfield County.

John Dunn was the last full time minister of St. John’s although Bishop Meade does state that a Reverend John McGuire often served at St. John’s while he was pastor in Essex County.
It was during this period that St. John's began to follow the established path of the Anglican Church in the South. William Monross said "the revolution acted as a catalytic agent," in hastening the forces already working against the Anglican Church in the Southern States. By 1802 St. John's along with other churches had lost its glebe right. This loss of its means of support and the ill will created when most of the Anglican clergyman sided with England during the Revolution, played a large part in St. John’s closing its doors.18 St. John’s became a free church during the Nineteenth Century. Baptist and Methodist held regular services in the Church after the Civil War. A few attempts were made to reorganize the church but these failed.19 It was at this point that St. John’s was almost disconnected from its historical sources. The Methodists who had been using the church started proceedings to obtain legal claim to the church. It was only because of the efforts of two friends of the old church, Captain Robert E. Lee, Junior and Mr. B. Richards, who filed a Treasury Warrent on the church and two acres around it on July 28, 1876 in lieu of payments owed them by the State of Virginia.20 By 1882 the Episcopal Church had reorganized the parish and built a simple wooden church in West Point.21 Forgotten was old St. John’s Church. The Church existed and fell into ruins. On December 12, 1913, Captain R. E. Lee and his wife Juliet Carter Lee, deeded the church property around St. John’s Church to the Trustee’s of new St. John’s Church.22 Today the St. John’s Restoration Association is working to preserve and restore St. John’s to its colonial grandeur. St. John’s recently was declared a Historic Landmark because of the efforts of the Association.

Charles W. Wyatt, III

Bibliography

1. King William County Records, Volume for the years 1702-7, p. 128.
4. Ibid., pp. 216-17.
5. Ibid., p. 217.
10. Ibid., pp. 228-32.
11. Ibid., p. 380.
12. Ibid., p. 380.
15. Ibid., p. 381.
17. Meade, op. cit. p. 381.
19. Statement by Captain J. Churchill Cooke of “Airwell”, Beaver Dam, Virginia on March 4, 1930 which was in the possession of G. MacKenry Brydon.

20. Ibid. and King William Deed Book number seven, p. 223.
22. King William Deed Book number thirty, p. 500.
This tax list was a gift to the King William County Historical Society on July 12, 1974 by Mr. Hallowell McGeorge of Richmond, Virginia.

The King William County Historical Society met October 5, 1975 at 3:30 P.M. in the Fellowship Hall of the United Methodist Church in West Point.

Mrs. D. S. Robinson, President, presided. The invocation was given by the Rev. Anthony Layman. Mrs. Robinson welcomed members and guests and expressed her appreciation for the use of the Fellowship Hall.

The minutes were read by the Secretary and approved as read. Thomas T. H. Hill read the treasurer's report in the absence of Mrs. J. B. Sweet, Treasurer. There is a balance on hand in the treasury of $332.88.

Mrs. W. E. Garber, Membership Chairman, presented thirteen names for membership in the Society.

Mrs. Annie Page Russ, Graveyard Chairman, reported that a booklet of all the old graveyards in King William County was being prepared. Therefore, it is quite important for each member with knowledge of an old graveyard to please copy the information from the tombstones and send to Mrs. Russ.

Mr. Ned Smith reported on the Old Post Offices in King William County. Mr. Smith has done extensive research in this area in Washington, D.C., going back as far as 1666.

Mrs. Lloyd Stevens reported that she had contacted all the churches in the County requesting that they send her a history of their church. She has received six histories to date.

The following two recommendations from the Executive Committee were read by the secretary, and after discussion of each, were passed:

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE RECOMMENDS that the Society have a historical house tour in King William County around the later part of April with the proceeds going towards a bicentennial project.

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE RECOMMENDS that for the Bicentennial project, the Society purchase a visual aid with sound track to be placed at King William Court House.

Mrs. L. E. Wendemburg introduced the speaker, Miss Julia Henley, who gave a most delightful and informative talk on "Architecture in King William County". She also showed slides taken of the old homes in the County.

Refreshments were served by the Society members from West Point. There being no further business to come before the meeting it was adjourned.

Mrs. George H. Guy, Jr. Recoding Secretary

The next meeting of the Historical Society will be held Sunday, April 4, 1976. The annual dues are $2.00 and are due on or before the July meeting. Members whose dues are in arrears will not receive the Bulletin.

The King William County Historical Society was founded April 6, 1974. The purpose of this society shall be the collection and preservation of everything relating to the history, antiquities, and literature of the County of King William, and Virginia in general.

In order to achieve the above objectives each member is being challenged to do his part. Many valuable historical materials may be found in desks, trunks, attics, and other areas in homes in the county. Family papers contain information of interest about our history. Won’t you begin to document your family records and share them with the King William County Historical Society?

KING WILLIAM COUNTY MEDAL

The face of this medal is a reproduction of the original seal of the Circuit Court of King William County, Virginia. In 1863 one Daniel Hershey of Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, a soldier in the Union Army, while on a raiding detachment at King William, saw and pocketed the seal. In 1927 the seal was located and graciously returned to King William County by Mr. Hershey, who had retained it in his possession.