

# CHRIST CHURCH+WASHINGTON PARISH

## A Brief History

Nan Robertson, April 1994©



**C**hrist Episcopal Church is almost as old as the city of Washington, nearly as old as the nation itself.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, this charming, tidy building, later remodeled to look like an English country church in Gothic Revival style, has crowned a little knoll on Capitol Hill, the bell tower soaring above the neighborhood's Federal and Victorian row houses. In 1993, the Society of Architectural Historians, in its book *Buildings of the District of Columbia*, cited the 1807 church unequivocally as "the earliest structure in the city built to serve an ecclesiastical purpose."

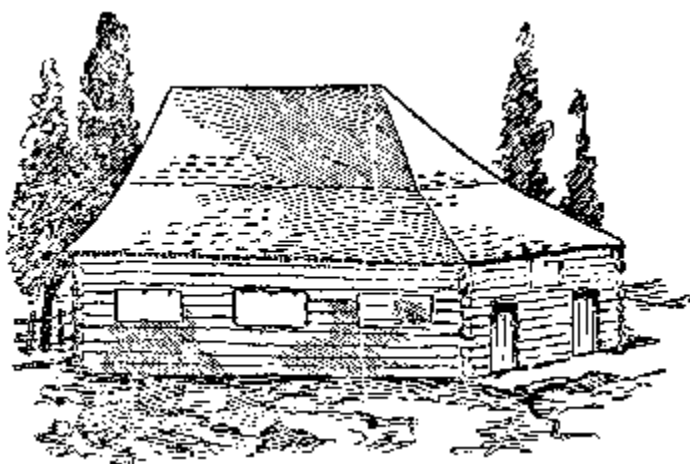
The founding of the church parish dates back even earlier, to 1794. It was created by an act of the Maryland legislature. In 1994, Christ Church, Washington Parish, celebrated its bicentennial as the "mother parish" of all Episcopal parishes in the original Federal city. The Interior Department put the building on its National Register of Historic Places in 1969.

Thomas John Claggett, the first Episcopal bishop to be ordained on American soil, consecrated Christ Church in 1809, two years after its completion. Of it he wrote: "It is not large, but sufficiently elegant,

and is the first building that hath been erected by the Protestant Episcopalians, for public worship, at the seat of government."

Famous men attended services at Christ Church and events that shook a nation took place nearby. But in all eras across the centuries, ordinary citizens carried on its mission of worship and witness on Capitol Hill. And always, the little church, its history, its parishioners and even its appearance have reflected changes in the greater society.

*Christ Church, 1795*



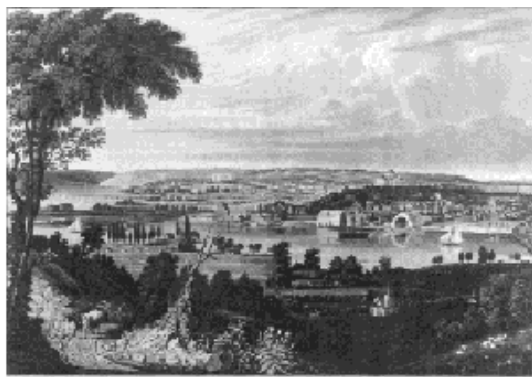
Thomas Jefferson came to the log tobacco barn that was Christ Church's first house of prayer; it was located on New Jersey Avenue near D Street Southeast, not far from what is now the Capitol South metro station. For several years, Jefferson contributed \$50 annually to the church coffers.

In 1806, when the cornerstone was laid for the church's second and only formal structure at 620 G Street Southeast, and the next year, when it was finished, the surrounding lands were meadows, woods and fields of hops and corn dotted with farmhouses. The Capitol building

was slowly rising a mile to the northwest. The population of the city was only 14,000.

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*City of Washington from Beyond the Navy Yard.*  
*William James Bennett. Colored aquatint. 1834*



For many years, the celebrated architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe was believed to have been the designer of Christ Church. In fact, the still-standing original central section was designed by Robert Alexander, a vestry member, a builder, Latrobe's friend and chief contractor for the Washington Navy Yard.

In 1814, Christ Church's members saw invading British troops occupying the U.S. Marine commandant's superb brick mansion less than two blocks east at Eighth and G Streets. More troops were bivouacked at its adjoining

barracks.

The British set fire to both the Capitol and the White House. Meanwhile the Navy Yard to the south of Christ Church was going up in flames, put to the torch by its fleeing commandant, Thomas Tingey, so that it would not fall into enemy hands. Captain Tingey was a devoted and dynamic church vestryman for decades. The British spared Christ Church, the only other prominent public structure in the immediate vicinity.



John Quincy Adams was a Unitarian, not an Episcopalian, but decided while Secretary of State to go to Christ Church anyway. The reason, he wrote in his diary in 1819, was that its rector, Andrew McCormick, was the only preacher in town worth hearing. "I have at last given the preference to Mr. McCormick, of the Episcopal Church," Adams noted in the entry for October 24, "and spoke to him last week for a pew." McCormick had served earlier as Chaplain of the U.S. Senate and had officiated at the wedding of Lydia, Benjamin Latrobe's daughter.

John Philip Sousa, America's "March King" composer and great Marine bandmaster, was born in 1854 three doors east of the church on G Street. He became a member following his mother, a faithful parishioner for 50 years. Sousa and many family members are buried in Congressional Cemetery, the church's graveyard.

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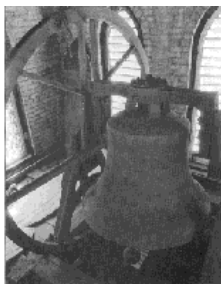
Christ Church's tower was a lookout post for Union soldiers during the Civil War. From it they watched Confederate armies maneuvering across the Potomac River. At various times during the conflict, the threat to Washington of yet another invasion seemed imminent.

Joshua Morsell, rector during all but the final months of the war, preached fiery anti-slavery sermons; his parishioners were heavily pro-Union in a city that had its share of Confederate sympathizers. Mark Olds, Morsell's successor, eschewed all politics, North and South. His letter of acceptance as Christ Church's rector was read at a vestry meeting on April 13, 1865.

The following night, in the midst of rejoicing over the end of the war, John Wilkes Booth shot and fatally wounded Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theater. Joy turned to grief. By order of the vestry, Christ Church was draped in swags of black "for the space of Thirty days in Commemoration of President Lincoln the magistrate of the nation." On April 20, 1865, the parishioners could hear the guns fired at the Navy Yard every half hour from sunrise until the funeral service for Lincoln was over.

One of those parishioners was David Herold, whom some thought to be a slow-witted boy. He was accused of helping the assassin Booth to make his escape on horseback from Washington into the countryside. Another member of Christ Church's congregation, Dr. Samuel McKim, testified in Herold's defense at the trial that he might not have understood fully what he had done. But all the plotters were found guilty. David Herold, aged 23, was the youngest.

*Original bell believed to have hung in Christ Church belfry since 1849 (By Andrea Harles)*



On July 7, 1865, the Reverend Olds stood on the scaffold with Herold as he and three other conspirators were hanged. The execution took place at 1:30 PM.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Olds comforted Herold's mother at home on Capitol Hill. The Oldses' daughter-in-law recounted later in her memoirs that the rector's wife had stopped all the clocks in the house so that the mother would not know the moment of her son's death. David Herold is buried, along with the other Lincoln conspirators except Mary Surratt and John Wilkes Booth, in

Congressional Cemetery. Christ Church has owned the cemetery, also listed in the National Register of Historic Places, since 1812. It is located at 18th and E streets Southeast.

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Congressional Cemetery is a microcosm of Washington history. It was once the semiofficial burial ground for Congress and was called the "American Westminster Abbey." The gloomiest monuments in an otherwise attractive and historically fascinating graveyard are a clutch of dark sandstone cenotaphs designed by Latrobe. Being interred beneath them, a 19th century Senator from Massachusetts said, "would add a new terror to death."

*Tombstone of Myra Summers (1893-1910),  
Congressional Cemetery, Washington, D.C.,  
owned by Christ Church since 1812  
(By Abby Johnson)*



Congressional has the remains of 19 U.S. Senators and 68 members of the House of Representatives, war heroes, Cabinet officers, a Vice President of the United States, a Supreme Court justice, three mayors of Washington, the great Civil War photographer Matthew Brady, virtually every Native American who came to negotiate treaties in the capital in the 19th century and a little girl with sausage curls who was the first automobile victim in the District of Columbia in the 20th. More than half of the 70,000 people buried there are children. The reason is the appallingly high infant mortality rate of the 19th century.

Side by side are Confederate and Union soldiers, as well as those who died in the Knickerbocker Theater disaster and the women killed by an explosion at the Navy Yard. J. Edgar Hoover, the dreaded chief of the Federal Bureau of

Investigation, was buried in 1972. Hoover's longtime companion, Clyde Tolson, died three years later and lies a dozen graves away.

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Christ Church's vestry minutes and other contemporary documents, faithfully kept throughout most of two centuries, evoke lesser known persons and events as well as architectural details. Through the archives, we know that the original building at 620 G Street Southeast was a plain box structure made of brick. It was two stories tall, measured 45 by 36 feet and was entered through two doors at the front leading to two aisles. It had clear windows at the sides and a peaked roof. The interior went from the back wall of today's sanctuary to about the third row of pews from the front. A thrust platform at the front contained a pulpit and "holy table" from which the minister read the service and gave Communion.

A wood-burning stove in back heated the structure. Above this were balconies around the rear and sides, occupied in later years by the choir, slaves and Marines- who were regularly marched to church on Sundays from their barracks only a block and a half away. The central cove ceiling, with its wide, shallow vault, was plastered and "plainly ornamented" by William Thacker, Latrobe's favorite plasterer at the Capitol.

Vestry minutes from 1824 show that the rector, Ethan Allen, was given leave to build a dwelling on the site of the present rectory. It cost \$1,500; the vestry reimbursed him. His salary was raised to \$750 per annum. Five years later Allen resigned: the rector and his family could not live on his pittance.

*Boys Choir of Christ Church circa 1900*



was \$456.84.

In 1842 all boys were banned from the balcony unless their parents took responsibility for their conduct, which had become fractious. The same problem cropped up in later years.

The vestry minutes also record scrupulously the various building expansions and remodelings that have changed the appearance of Christ Church. In 1848, Rector William Hodges suggested "the expediency of having a bell to assemble the congregation". The cost

*The Rev. Charles Denison Andrews,  
Rector, 1873-1887*



This decision led to the most important alteration ever of the church's exterior. It was the erection in 1848-49 of a square, four-story bell tower with four mini-steeples on top at each corner, tipped with fleurs-de-lis. Crenellated roof edges and pointed-arch, stained-glass windows around the front and sides gave Christ Church's facade the cozy "rustic Gothic" look it has kept to this day. The Society of Architectural Historians says it *ca. 1900* is the oldest still standing and "probably the first" Gothic Revival structure in Washington.

The parish hall at the back and to the right was built in 1874. Three years later the interior of the church began to be utterly transmogrified into florid Victorian. The pristine simplicity of the original was obscured by "discreet ornamentation." This included gilt stars on a pale blue ceiling that drifted loose during humid weather.

*Believed to be 1891 photograph of*



*workmen who erected the fifth and final  
story of bell tower and projecting  
vestibule in front of Christ Church*

In later years the interior was painted in somber browns, tans and violets, and there were frescoes and friezes of the Lamb of God, vines and grapes on the walls and ceilings, the whole highlighted with gold. The side balconies were removed. The brick facade in front was covered with gray, pebble-dash stucco.

In 1891 a fifth and last story was added to the bell tower and a projecting front vestibule was built. The church's facade on G Street now appears exactly as it did a century ago.

The interior was again redone in 1921. The frescoes were stripped away, the walls painted to resemble big blocks of stone. The chancel was deepened so that the choir could sing within; it was framed by a yawning Gothic arch that made the altar space look for all the world like a darkened grotto.

The glowing stained-glass window above the high altar, in which Mary gazes at Christ on the cross, was made in England and installed in 1927. It is in honor of the mothers of the parish.

*Christ Church and its congregation circa 1918*

Finally, the restoration of 1954 was an attempt to bring the interior back to its clean, uncluttered beginnings. The architect, Horace Peeslea, who took part in the restoration of Williamsburg, Va., removed the last vestiges of Victorian and Gothic pretention. The walls, ceilings and columns were painted white.

Peaslee's memory is kept green by his parting gift: two magnificent magnolia grandiflora trees rising high on either side of the raised front lawn. The inside of the church has changed hardly at all since that time.

In 1957, three sparkling jewel-like windows by Rowan LeCompte, the preeminent stained-glass artist at the Washington National Cathedral, and his wife Irene were added to the front wall of Christ Church.



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In the period between the two world wars, Christ Church reached its peak in well attended services, ministering to Capitol Hill's white, middle-class community. Rector Edward Gabler presided for 18 years over a thriving parish.

Despite the Great Depression and World War II, the recollections of the vestry and the congregation during the 1930's and 1940's give an impression of a happy, stable church. The parish was big enough to support three services on Sunday, with an overall attendance of 400. There was a senior choir for 11 o'clock services and a junior choir for the family service at 9:30. Gabler, a jovial, gregarious bachelor, loved to roller skate, dance and bowl with the children. He occasionally played the organ—"loudly," it was said. Every year the Sunday school went by boat to a picnic and church dinners were held two or three times a year, as well as an annual, all-day excursion by train to Chesapeake Beach.

A streetcar line ran down the center of G Street, which otherwise looked like part of a sleepy Southern (and segregated) town. In the early 1940's, public housing projects occupied mainly by poor white families replaced the slum to the south known as Navy Yard Alley, where crime and prostitution were said to flourish. The church literally cleaned up its own back yard to the north in 1954. The sordid, tumbledown shacks without plumbing where the poorest of all dwelt, beginning right at the rear of the rectory, were torn down. A parking lot and a playground for the neighborhood children were built on the site.

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*Shanties, without plumbing, in alleyway just back of rectory and parish hall Photo from 1952. Shanties were razed in 1954. Playground and parking lot built later in their place.*



The 1950's ushered in a period of turbulence and change on Capitol Hill. As usual, Christ Church mirrored the larger society. The parish began to shrink as blacks moved in and more and more white families left for the suburbs. The Supreme Court decision of 1954 desegregating public schools accelerated the "White flight" out of the city. Older people dominated the congregation, often driving to the Hill from Maryland and Virginia only on Sunday mornings. The vestry granted the request of the pastor, James Greene, for a rectory

in the suburbs at Camp Springs. The family service and Sunday school were dropped.

In the 1960's, social turmoil did not leave the church untouched. The civil rights revolution, the rebellion of the young against tradition, the Vietnam War, the rise of black separatism, all had their impact. In 1968, parts of Washington were again put to the torch, 154 years after the British invasion. This time the black community rioted in grief and rage following the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. From the church and nearby houses, flames could be seen leaping above looted stores along 8th Street Southeast. The supermarket on 7th Street was trashed. Armed National Guardsmen on many corners enforced the curfew, brandishing their rifles and yelling at the occasional stroller, "Get back! Get back! Go home!" In the days that followed, many blacks and whites passing on the sidewalks of Capitol Hill said to each other: "I'm so sorry."

Donald Seaton was the rector. He had been called to Christ Church in 1964. A passionate preacher and activist, he championed and attracted the young, particularly the "flower children" of that era, and alienated many of the older traditionalists. Separated from his wife, he lived in the rectory next to the church-which fast became known as the "hippie church." The bitter antagonisms split the congregation and are powerfully recalled in archival documents from that time.

Seaton's informal family at the rectory openly smoked dope and sometimes wandered barefoot and stoned into church during services. A parishioner polishing the brass altar rail was said to have discovered a stash of marijuana inside the hollow table. Seaton was asked to resign.

But during his tenure, he had also gained admirers for his sermons and counseling and had made one of the most useful contributions to the community by helping to start the Capitol Hill Day School.

His successor, David Dunning, was a healer and an organizer of great warmth and enthusiasm. His charge from the diocese was either to put Christ Church back on its financial feet or to be its last rector. Meantime, Capitol Hill was reviving as an attractive, historic and neighborly place to live, drawing many families with young children. Dunning and his wife, Donna, helped to put the battered parish back together so that it could function both as a unified congregation and part of the larger community. It became once again a true neighborhood church, with about 95 percent of its congregation living on the Hill.

*May 25, 1969. 175th anniversary of the founding of Christ Church. Rev. David Dunning, Rector, with certificate putting Christ Church on the National Register of Historic Places. Signed by Ernest Allen Connolly, Chief, Federal Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation.*



In 1969, the Dunnings presided over the church's 175th anniversary celebration. It was a fresh, sparkling May day, the world-famous U.S. Marine Band played on the front lawn, G Street was closed to traffic, an Interior Department official added Christ Church to the National Register of Historic Places, Dunning greeted visitors in a wig, women parishioners strolled in Federal-era costumes and the whole neighborhood took on the air of a joyous party.

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*May 25, 1969, following U.S. Marine Band conceit and festivities on front lawn of Christ Church, General William Westmoreland leaves Christ Church to be confronted by anti-Vietnam protester on G Street. Westmoreland was a commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam.*

It being 1969, there were pickets, of course. They stood just outside the church fence with their signs held high, protesting the presence of General William Westmoreland, a commander of American forces in Vietnam. One sign was a paraphrase of: "In order to save the village, we had to destroy it," a remark of an American officer in Vietnam quoted in the New Yorker magazine. It had become the most famous—and infamous—quote of the war.



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Once again in 1994, its bicentennial year, Christ Church is celebrating its past and looking toward its future. Under the leadership of an energetic and imaginative young rector, Robert Tate, the congregation began in the mid-1980's to plan the restoration, repair and expansion of the church and parish hall, the first major renovation project in 40 years. For decades, its members had grown weary of patching ancient heating systems, sweltering in Washington's brutal summers, painting over crumbling plaster, and squeezing growing parish and community programs into every available space. The fund-raising effort, appropriately, has been named the "Third Century Campaign."

*Christ Church Bicentennial Celebration (by Bruce Robey)*



On April 23, 1994, marvelous weather ushered in the opening bicentennial ceremonies. Temperatures were in the low 70's, the air was crystalline, the sky the keenest blue. The mood, one neighbor said, was magical. It was Capitol Hill epitomized: black and white, old and young, every community group represented, from the Restoration Society to Washington's most venerable settlement house. Toddlers danced in the street as the Marine Band in scarlet tunics and gold braid thumped through an all-Sousa concert. Balloons bobbed everywhere.

There were arts and crafts booths, characters in 19th century costumes, hamburgers sizzling on the grill. An historian from the Library of Congress gave a lecture on Sousa. The Bishop of Washington blessed the church. The commanding officer of the Marine Barracks recalled the Corps's historic relationship with its ecclesiastical neighbor. The throng applauded tumblers, a baton twirler, the choirs of Christ

Church and its Capitol Hill partner, St. Monica's. The residents of G Street smiled and clapped from their front stoops.

It was a perfect day.



Christ Church on its 200th birthday is the sum total of generations of witnesses. They admired babies at baptisms, smiled at weddings, wept at funerals, sang joyfully, listened to preachers rousing and boring, asked God for help and forgiveness, reached out to neighbors and supported one another in crisis and thanksgiving. Some day the people who celebrate this bicentennial will become part of Christ Church's history themselves.

*Christ Church interior, 1994  
(By Bruce Robey)*