

## Clement Smith (1776–1839)

Clement Smith was one of the most influential founders of Christ Church, Georgetown. He was born in Georgetown in 1776, well-born, well-connected, and with multiple religious influences. Smith was the son of Revolutionary War surgeon Dr. Walter Smith, who was Georgetown's first doctor. His paternal roots reached deep into Calvert County. He was a direct descendant of Richard Smith of "Hall's Croft" near St. Leonard's, MD, a Cavalier who emigrated from England in 1649 and later served as the first Attorney General of Maryland. Richard Smith's son Col. Walter Smith of the Calvert County militia was pro-Stuart and supported King James's cause, resulting in his detention for over a year following the Glorious Revolution (his wife had to journey to England to plead for his release). Both men were active in civic and church affairs and served as Vestrymen of All Saints Church, Calvert County. His family was also affiliated with Christ Church in Calvert County. Both churches were founded in the 17th century. Clement Smith's paternal grandmother Barbara Sim Smith was an aunt of Maryland Governor Thomas Sim Lee, from the Catholic branch of the Lee family. He also had Quaker ancestry. Among his many Maryland familial connections, he was a grandson on his mother's side of Col. Joseph Belt who patented "Chevy Chase" plantation in 1725. Clement Smith's sister was the wife of Georgetown's longest serving mayor (1823–1845) Colonel John Cox.

By the first decade of the 19th century Smith was associated with his brother Walter in the mercantile and shipping business. They were active financiers and shareholders in the C&O Canal. The two brothers also engaged together in many real estate ventures and investments in Georgetown, typically holding title jointly to properties. By 1813 they were involved in building projects which gave Georgetown some of its

finest homes, including Smith's Row in the 3200 block of N Street, the Bodisco House (3322 P Street, currently the home of Secretary of State John Kerry), the David K. E. Bruce House (1405 34th Street, more recently the home of Christ Church, Georgetown, parishioner and founder of The Bank of Georgetown the late Curt Winsor). Walter later went on to controversy as the Brigadier General in command of the two routed regiments of Georgetown and City of Washington militia in the 1814 Battle of Bladensburg, a/k/a the "Bladensburg Races" (another Christ Church founder, Francis Scott Key, was his aide at the battle). Clement Smith at one point commanded the Independent Grays, a Georgetown militia company.

At its founding in 1817, Clement Smith became Cashier of the Farmers & Mechanics Bank (the predecessor by merger to Riggs Bank NA and, more recently, PNC Bank NA). He became President of the bank in 1821, a position he held until his death in 1839. In addition, between 1808 and 1833 Clement Smith was a part owner, often with his brother Walter, of numerous ocean-going vessels home ported in Georgetown (his ships included the *Maria*, *Presage*, *Shenandoah*, *Katherine Jackson*, *Francis Depau*, *Caledonian*, and *Atalanta*, and they accounted for significant tonnage). At his death, he left an estate of \$50,000, which was a large sum at the time.

Clement Smith was married to Margaret Clare Brice of Annapolis, a descendant of the Carroll family. Her grandmother was a sister of Charles Carroll, known as "the Barrister," of Mount Clare, Baltimore, who had converted from Catholicism to Anglicanism in order to hold civic office. Together, Clement and Margaret Smith had eight children. Thus, although Clement Smith was a Protestant, he had various family connections to (at least originally) Catholic and Quaker



Marylanders and himself descended from a pro-Stuart line. One might reasonably speculate that this heterogeneous background might have resulted in a somewhat more ecumenical outlook than was typical of the time.

With his brother Walter he was a member of St. John's Church Georgetown, the first Episcopal church established west of Rock Creek in the District of Columbia. He was a member of the Vestry there in 1811 and 1817. However, in 1817 he joined a group of parishioners which met at the home of Thomas Corcoran on November 10 "for the purpose of organizing a new congregation, and devising a plan for building an additional Protestant Episcopal Church." His name heading the list of founders, Clement Smith subscribed to more shares than anyone else, 40 shares valued at \$1000, to underwrite the project. He also was a member of the initial Committee of Eight constituted to act until a Vestry could be elected. His name subsequently appears on the list of 26 committed pew owners, and he in fact later owned a pew. In many respects, Clement Smith was the "money man" behind the project. The Lancaster School, still standing at 3126 O Street, was selected as an appropriate place to hold services until a new church could be built. (Lancaster schools were founded by Quakers in England, were coeducational and free to all who could not afford to pay). The Vestry of St. John's posed no objection to the split. A Vestry was selected, of which Clement Smith was one (he was an active member of the early Vestries but resigned in 1821 "compel[led]" by his "engagements," only to rejoin in 1826). The Reverend Dr. Reuel Keith accepted the Vestry's call to become the first Rector of Christ Church. The congregation met for the first time on December 21, 1817 in the Lancaster School.

Construction on the site of the current church was promptly started on May 8, 1818 and proceeded quickly. It is plausible that Clement Smith, who was an active builder of homes in Georgetown at the time, acted as what was effectively first finan-

cial and chief executive of the undertaking (he was not, however, the general contractor; that role was fulfilled by John Myers, whom the Vestry minutes describe as "superintending the building of the church;" Myers was an active Mason and contemporary records show the church's cornerstone being laid according to Masonic rites). The first gathering of the congregation within its walls was held at sunrise on Christmas Day 1818 and consisted of a prayer to the "Throne of Grace," a reference to Hebrews 4:14-16. That scripture, with its image of Christ as high priest, mediator and pathway to grace in time of need, reads as follows:

<sup>14</sup> Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.

<sup>15</sup> For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.

<sup>16</sup> Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

At 11:00 that same morning the Reverend Keith conducted the first divine service in the church. The Right Reverend James Kemp, Bishop of Maryland, consecrated the church on December 30, 1818.

During construction, subscriptions to finance the building fell short. Clement Smith, among several others, dug into their pockets to advance funds to meet the shortfall, and the church was completed at a total cost of \$15,952. According to the Vestry minutes, their (and principally his) repayment was a recurrent challenge within the church as it struggled to make ends meet. Various schemes were tried, including auctioning off unsold pews and pledging unsold pews to Smith as collateral. The church's debt to Smith was finally settled only in 1836.

Along with his fellow parishioners Francis Scott Key and Dr. Thomas Henderson, Smith served



on a Committee of Three to construct the church steeple in 1819.

Dr. Keith's successor, The Rev. Charles P. McIlvaine, acted as tutor to at least one of Clement Smith's children in the early 1820s, among other duties.

On April 18, 1822 a funeral was held at Christ Church for Sarah Hoffman Smith, Clement and Clare Smith's infant daughter. Also in 1822 Clement Smith bought "Parrott's Woods" mansion on R Street and renamed it "Elderslie" (after the birthplace in Scotland of Sir William Wallace). He lived there until 1837. The subsequent owner named it "Montrose." The mansion is no longer standing. It is today the site of the Rittenhouse rose garden in Montrose Park across from the Jackson School.

It appears that in his last two years of life Clement Smith lived in one of the houses on Smith's Row, perhaps what is now 3255 N Street, as his wife's 1862 will refers to the house where she lived as being on First (now N) Street. Smith also had a country retreat called "Dunblane," which still stands in Tenleytown.

Clement Smith died in 1839, and his funeral almost certainly would have been at Christ Church, but there are no records for the years 1838-40 to prove it. He was originally buried in the Old Presbyterian burial ground on the west side of Georgetown and was later reinterred at Oak Hill Cemetery in Georgetown with his wife Margaret Clare Brice Smith.

The first recorded reference to the new church in Georgetown as "Christ's Church" [sic] was in the Vestry minutes on April 19, 1819, after the church building had been completed and consecrated. The church records are silent as to why that name was chosen. It may have been because of the Evangelical leanings of some of the founders or because of its first service on Christmas Day. Another clue on the dedication might be in the formal call to Dr. Reuel Keith: "The most prom-

inent, important, and interesting duty devolving on us is the selection of a minister in whose devotion to the religion of Christ, and the doctrines and forms of the Episcopal Church, the utmost confidence can be reposed." The centrality of this charge was reflected in Keith's resignation letter in 1820:

"The church...will not be deserted by the Lord....No. It is, we humbly trust, built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone. It is cemented with the tears and prayers of some of His most faithful and devoted people. He will never leave it, nor forsake it."

In addition, at the time of Christ Church's founding there already were Christ Churches in Washington City and Alexandria, as well as Baltimore. But it cannot be excluded that Clement Smith, who was instrumental to both its conception and completion, might have additionally helped settle on the name as a tribute to the older Christ Church in Charles County. Perhaps it was a combination of all these factors that gave our church its name.

