

Georgetown at the Founding of Christ Church, Georgetown

Georgetown was not a quaint neighborhood of Washington, DC in 1817. Georgetown was its own incorporated town, having been established in 1752, first in Frederick County, MD and then in Montgomery County, MD from 1778 to 1791 and thereafter in the District of Columbia. Its governance was known as the "Corporation" and consisted of a Mayor, Recorder, Board of Aldermen, and Common Council. In the 1820 census its population stood at 7360, making it the 19th largest town or city in the United States. It stood apart from the City of Washington, separated by a virtual no-man's land of undeveloped forests and swamps.

During the period between the Revolution and the War of 1812 Georgetown was the principal exporting center for the tobacco grown on the great plantations of southern Maryland. Merchants not long removed from Scotland and gentlemen farmers whose descendants had lived in St. Mary's, Charles, and Calvert counties for several generations engaged in a lively export trade, the profits of which not only enriched them but an entire community later to be described as a town "where as much wealth, intellect, and refinement are collected together as at any place of the same population in the United States." As late as the 1820's the exchange of Maryland tobacco for the dry goods of New York, the luxury products of Europe, and the sugar, spices, and cigars of the West Indies provided the major source of wealth for the merchants of Georgetown and the planters of Maryland's Cavalier country. After 1815 there was a gradual decline of the once brisk tobacco trade. The exhaustion of the soil in the tobacco growing counties, the destruction wrought by the British during the War of 1812, the erection of a causeway between Annapolis Island and Virginia, and the expansion of port facilities in the nearby capitol city were all to have an injurious effect on the commercial interests

of Georgetown. The business survived, however, until the early 1830's when the city slumped into a depression.¹

Although many of its early houses still stand, Georgetown at the time of the founding of Christ Church had a somewhat more rural feeling about it. According to early 19th century property records, almost every household kept a cow and many kept chickens; horses and chaises were maintained only by the wealthiest residents. At appointed times of the year drovers from western Virginia would drive thousands of cattle and sheep through the streets to Drovers Rest, just west of the town. Some days thousands filled what is now P Street, just a block from the church. Similarly, large flocks of turkeys from southern Maryland were driven through the streets to pens on the outskirts of town. Always closely tied to their Maryland origins, Georgetowners were not happy to be incorporated into the District of Columbia, and in the early 19th century they repeatedly petitioned Congress for retrocession back to Maryland. They did not succeed.

What was going on in Georgetown, the City of Washington and nationally in late 1817 at the time of the church's founding? A local newspaper, the *National Intelligencer*, provides a few glimpses:

◆ "Mrd: at Phil, on October 28, by Rev Mr. Carr, at the residence of Stephen Girard, Gen. Henry Lallemand, to Miss Harriet Girard, niece of Stephen Girard. There were present, Messrs. Cte de Survilliers, Mrshl de Grouchy & Son, Genrls Vandamme & Chas Lallemand, sen, & family & friends." (Nov. 8)²

◆ "Eliz. Oliver, sen'r, is opening her store in Gtown: hair caps, frizzets, kill beaux, etc." (Nov. 12)

◆ "Tally ho! Tally ho! An extraordinary Bag Fox will be let loose at Upper Marlboro on Dec. 4. Every comfort will be provided & a nice pre-



mium given for the brush, by B. Bowling, owner.” (Nov. 18)

◆ “Married at Rosedale, nr. Wash City, on Nov. 13, by Rev. Mr. Hawley, Lt. John Tayloe, USN, to Miss Maria Forrest, y/d/o the late Gen. Forrest.” (Nov. 19)

◆ “\$100 reward for runaway negro woman, Barbara, belonging to Mrs. Ann Key, of DC. She is about 44 yrs old & one of the best female cooks in the country.—Thos Plater, Gtown” (Nov. 28)

◆ “Died: on Mon night, of a burn rec’d the night before, by his night dress of cotton taking fire from a candle, Jas L. McKenney, 2d s/o Mr. Wm McKenney, of Gtown, aged 4 yrs.” (Nov. 29)

The founding of Christ Church did not appear to merit mention.

Who Were the Founders of Christ Church, Georgetown?

There is no single list of founders but, rather, several overlapping lists from which the founders may be adduced.

The first, and most fundamental, list consists of 35 people who subscribed, that is agreed to pay money, for shares to build “a new Episcopal church.” Most, if not all, of these people probably attended the initial organizational meeting at the home of Thomas Corcoran on what is now M Street on November 10, 1817. However, there does not appear to be an extant list of the attendees at that meeting as such. Most of these people were probably parishioners at St. John’s Church Georgetown from which they sought to separate. The amount of their subscriptions varied from a low of one to a high of 40 shares, ranging in value from \$25 to \$1000 (\$1 in 1817 is worth approximately \$17.08 today). One person, Clement Smith, subscribed to 40 shares, five persons subscribed to 20 shares, six persons subscribed to 10 shares and on down.

At the November 10, 1817 organizational meeting the founders selected from this list of subscri-

ers a so-called “Committee of Eight” to exercise the powers of a Vestry until such time as a formal Vestry could be elected. The Committee of Eight was not coterminous with the largest subscribers. Although some of the largest subscribers were represented on the Committee, it also included others who committed more modest amounts. Its members were therefore apparently not selected solely on the basis of their financial contributions but also on the basis of their standing in the community, piety, and skills.

At that meeting and subsequent ones various other committees with lesser, more specific missions were impaneled, e.g., a Committee of Seven to “look for and recommend a suitable site and to propose a plan for building the church,” a Committee of Three to find temporary quarters for church meetings, etc. It is evident from the early Vestry minutes that these committees were adjusted and their membership changed as tasks shifted and grew more specific.

With the completion of the church building at Christmas 1818, some 26 parishioners committed themselves to purchase pews (what might be termed the “26 committed pew purchasers”). That list contained only 11 names from the list of 35 subscribers, but it added some 10 new names to that earlier list, including some who were to play important foundational roles. Importantly, some 24 persons on the original list of 35 subscribers did not commit to purchase of a pew at this time. By the time of the first census of sold and rented pews on February 8, 1819, it is evident that some 15 of the original 35 subscribers had not purchased or rented a pew and thus may have either dropped out or attended Christ Church only irregularly as visitors (to be sure, some people attended regularly and were active in the leadership of the church even though they only rented pews). The whole question of financing the church through pew sales and rentals proved problematic for many years, as the sales fell well short of meeting the costs of construc-



tion, and the failure of renters to pay was a perennial problem, with the Vestry threatening law suits against defaulters by 1834. It appears that there was a certain fluidity to these lists in the early years, as the population of the parish had yet to stabilize.

On February 8, 1819 the first Vestry was elected. It was effectively the same as the Committee of Eight, except with Ward and Mansell off and Plater and Williams on. Also at that meeting the first census of 70 pew holders (both owned and rented) was approved, showing names and assigning specific pews. In many cases the owners paid slightly more than their earlier subscription price, evidently on a voluntary basis to help defray construction costs. Missing from this list were two (Ward and Morsell) from the 26 who had committed to purchase pews (the likely reasons are discussed in their individual profiles).

What Methodology Did We Use?

Given this complex and constantly shifting picture, in preparing profiles of “The Founders” we have started with the list of 35 initial subscribers to the extent we have been able to develop information on these persons. Of these, the 20 who not only subscribed to the construction of the church but went on to own or rent pews (Smith, Corcoran, Henderson, Pickrell, Clagett Wm., Burnett, Williams, Linthicum, Haw, King, Jewell, Barnes, Compton, Key F.S., Abbot, Plater, Hyde T., Morton, Burgess, and Hayman) might be viewed as the core stable group, and we have tried to focus in particular on these persons. However, we have also included a few others, such as Ward, Morsell, and Riggs, who did not fit these criteria but who nonetheless played important roles in the founding of the church.

Results

So who were these people?

The answer is a diverse lot professionally, politi-

cally and economically. One (Key) was arguably of national prominence even then, many more were of local stature, and a few were largely unknown. They tended to be of English or Scots descent, and many had roots in Southern Maryland. A number of them—but by no means all—were related to one another or to other prominent citizens either by blood or marriage.

Most were born in the early days of the American republic, but a significant minority were born when America was still a British colony. The youngest was about 17 and the oldest 87. Setting aside the outlier aged 87, they tended to be a relatively young crowd who just happened to come together at a particular place and time, Georgetown in 1817, and stayed associated with the church and one another for a few years or decades. Based on the 23 of the 26 founders whose birth years we know, and again setting aside the one 87 year old founder, their average age was 38.

They included:

- Lawyers/Political Figures (Key, Morsell, Plater)
- Bankers (Riggs, Corcoran)
- Merchants (the three Clagetts, Williams, Haw, Pickrell)
- Builders and Land Speculators (Smith, the three Clagetts)
- Doctor (Henderson)
- Brewer (Hayman)
- Government Clerk (Morton, but also many others part-time)
- Skilled Craftsmen (Ward, Burnett, Hyde)
- Schoolmaster (Abbott)
- Democrat-Republicans or Democrats (Key, Morsell, Barnes)
- Federalist (Plater)
- Foreign born (Barnes, Corcoran, probably Pickrell)
- Northerners (Hayman)



A number held what appeared to be secondary sinecures with the federal government, which was a common practice at the time and apparently was not viewed as raising conflicts of interest.

Also consistent with the times and with Southern Maryland and the District of Columbia being slave-holding jurisdictions, almost all of them had at least a few servants who were enslaved persons.

They also included a surprising number who left Georgetown and Christ Church: Key, Ward, Riggs, Henderson, Plater. Washington even then was a transient city. People came and went.

Less clear is what motivated them to found the church. Some, like Key, may have been self-described low churchmen or “evangelicals,” but others do not necessarily appear to have fit that mold. Most left no discernible records of their inclinations in the faith. It is possible that St. John’s Church Georgetown had simply grown too large and was unable to devise a plan to accommodate more people, thus forcing the issue of establishment of a new church.

All in all, and excepting the historical anomaly of holding slaves, it was a group of parishioners that our current membership might plausibly recognize and feel comfortable with. According to the church records, many had their children baptized at Christ Church and all too many had their children, often infants, buried from there. As today, each parishioner was on his or her own spiritual journey but sharing that journey, for a few short years, with fellow parishioners. If, as today, most were reticent to write of their religious convictions, the defining characteristic of the congregation does not seem to have been low church or high church but, rather, piety and Christ-centeredness in a personal and private way.

Their individual stories are summarized in the profiles that follow. In reading these prayerfully

one is inevitably brought to the famous passage at Ecclesiasticus 44 1-14:

*Let us now sing the praises of famous men,
our ancestors in their generations.
The Lord apportioned to them great glory,
his majesty from the beginning.
There were those who ruled in their kingdoms,
and made a name for themselves by their valor;
those who gave counsel because they were intelligent;
those who spoke in prophetic oracles;
those who led the people by their counsels
and by their knowledge of the people’s lore;
they were wise in their words of instruction;
those who composed musical tunes, or put verses in writing;
rich men endowed with resources, living peacefully in their homes—all these were honored in their generations, and were the pride of their times.
Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise.
But of others there is no memory;
they have perished as though they had never existed;
they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them.
But these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten;
their wealth will remain with their descendants, and their inheritance with their children’s children.
Their descendants stand by the covenants;
their children also, for their sake.
Their offspring will continue forever,
and their glory will never be blotted out.
Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name lives on generation after generation.
The assembly declares their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise.*



¹ Harold W. Hurst, *“Business and Businessmen in Pre-Civil War Georgetown, 1840-1860,”* 50 Records of the Columbia Historical Society 161-171 (1980).

² Deciphered, this item reports on a most unusual gathering of exiled Napoleonic top brass for the marriage of the niece of the Philadelphia merchant Stephen Girard (reputed to be the wealthiest person in the United States) to the French Napoleonic General Henri Lallemand, who was a divisional commander in Napoleon’s Imperial Guard at Waterloo. Present were (i) the Count of Survilliers, who was Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon’s older brother and former King of Spain, (ii) Marshal of France Emmanuel de Grouchy, the pivotal cavalry commander who arguably lost Napoleon the Battle of Waterloo by his single-minded pursuit of part of the Prussian army, and (iii) General Dominique Vandamme, a French corps commander who also fought for Napoleon for years and at Waterloo. General Charles Lallemand, brother of Henri Lallemand, was also a divisional commander in the Imperial Guard at Waterloo; he escaped arrest by the British on Malta, fled to the United States incognito in April 1817 and was on his way to establishing a short-lived colony for French military exiles in Texas. The presence at the time of this concentration of Napoleonic exiles in Philadelphia is a little-known fact of American history.

