

Charles Alexander Burnett (1769–1849)

Charles A. Burnett was one of the initial subscribers with eight shares valued at \$200 and was one of the 26 committed pew owners. In 1818 he was one of a Committee of Three to purchase a lot for the new church. He subsequently was a pew owner in fact. He also was a master silversmith who created the church's first communion service, as well as that of St. John's Church in Georgetown. The two original silver chalices and paten of the church's service bear his hallmarks.

Burnett was born in Spotsylvania County, VA and served his apprenticeship with silversmith James Brown of Fredericksburg starting in 1788. Burnett remained in Fredericksburg until 1793. Burnett worked in Alexandria from 1793 to 1796. Burnett was in partnership with Georgetown silversmith John E. Rigden from 1796 to 1806 and continued in his Georgetown location alone until 1840. His shop was located at what is now 3116-18 M Street. His hallmarks were his name, initials or a cartouche bearing the head of an eagle. Burnett employed apprentices and made and retailed silver, watches and jewelry at his Georgetown shop. There is speculation about how much Burnett silver was made in Georgetown and how much was made by others and sold by him. He had wholesale relationships with Samuel Williamson of Philadelphia and Epapras Hinsdale in Newark, NJ. Possible examples of his procuring silver for the church made by others are the "two center lamps" that the Vestry asked him to purchase in 1819 and the Baltimore-manufactured silver flagon which was added to the communion service in 1844.

Burnett is today regarded as the leading silversmith in Washington, DC during the federal era. His silver is highly prized by collectors. He sold to Presidents and other high ranking officials of the young republic. His work was also commissioned for official use as Indian trade silver by the

Office of Indian Trade and included gorgets, arm bands and ear rings. Some of these orders were quite large; in 1808 he made 2000 small brooches for that office. He made the skippet used by the United States Department of State to convey the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812 (a skippet is a round box that covers and protects the official wax seal of a nation attached to a treaty.)

He also executed commissions for George Washington (silver camp cups made in 1798 when Washington anticipated retaking the field as commander in the Quasi War with France), as well as Thomas Jefferson. His first dealings with Jefferson may have occurred when he was commissioned to craft a two-handled urn-shaped sugar bowl inscribed, "Presented to Camilla Franzoni by Thomas Jefferson, 1808." Camilla Franzoni was the wife of Italian sculptor Giuseppe Franzoni who had been commissioned to work on the United States Capitol.

From his Georgetown shop Burnett cultivated business with the new national government and many of the leading political and social figures who populated the emerging capital. In addition to Washington and Jefferson, his recorded clients included Presidents Madison, Monroe, John Quincy Adams and Jackson. Burnett silver is more widely distributed than that of most of his contemporaries since much of it was purchased by Congressmen and Senators who carried it home when their careers ended.

Examples of Burnett's work are held by numerous institutions including the Smithsonian, Yale University Art Gallery, the National Archives, Monticello, the Department of State, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the Mint Museum, Gunston Hall, Tudor Place and the Wadsworth Atheneum. The Lyceum in Alexandria VA has many fine



Burnett pieces on display donated by the father of a longtime Christ Church Georgetown parishioner.

In addition to his work as a silversmith, Burnett served as a Director and President of Union Bank and pursued a variety of successful investments.

His wife was Alethea Burnett (1778-1851), and they had at least one daughter. On March 5, 1822 a funeral was held at Christ Church for Mary their infant daughter.

Charles Alexander Burnett died in May 1849 and his funeral was at Christ Church. He and his wife are buried at Oak Hill Cemetery.

