

## The Reverend Reuel Keith

*First Rector of Christ Church, Georgetown*

Reuel Keith was born in Pittsford, Vermont, on June 26, 1792, the son of Reuel Keith and Abigail Allen. From a very early age he was a notably avid reader.

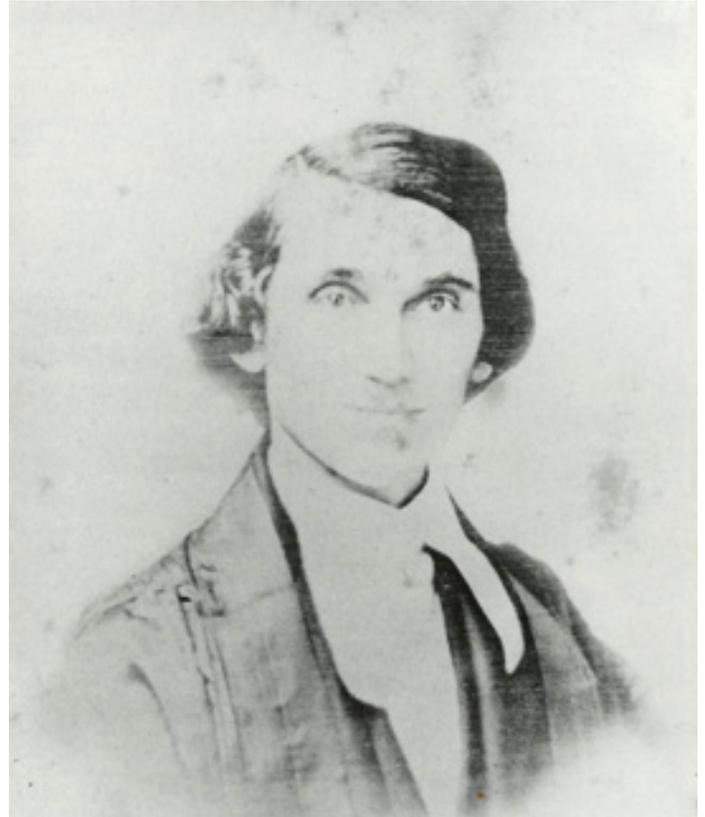
In 1806 Keith was apprenticed to a merchant in Troy, New York. It was there that he was attracted to the Episcopal Church, drawn by its liturgy and apostolic traditions. The apprenticeship did not suit Keith, and in 1808 he returned to Vermont to prepare for college. He entered Middlebury College in 1811, graduating with honors in 1814.

Soon after graduation Keith relocated to Alexandria, Virginia, as a tutor. It seems likely that it was during this time he became known to parishioners of Saint John's in Georgetown since there was considerable interaction between people living on both sides of the Potomac River.

Keith returned north to study theology, eventually attending lectures at Andover Seminary. He was ordained a deacon by Bishop Alexander Griswold early in 1817. Griswold was Bishop of the Eastern Diocese which covered much of New England.

Keith then returned to Virginia for ordination as a priest on May 10, 1817, by Bishop Richard Channing Moore. It was during this time that parishioners at Saint John's in Georgetown were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the leadership of their Rector, the Reverend Walter Dulaney Addison. One outcome of this was the employment of Keith in May of 1817 to assist at Saint John's where Addison was frequently absent.

At that time the portion of the District of Columbia north of the Potomac River was part of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland. Keith's arrival as a clergyman there was hailed as a major strength-



ening of the so called "Washington Group" of Evangelical clergy greatly distrusted by Bishop James Kemp of Maryland.

The dissatisfaction with Addison at Saint John's continued. Keith seemed to embody the qualities Addison was felt by many to lack. A group of Saint John's parishioners began the work of organizing a new Episcopal congregation in Georgetown, compiling an impressive subscription list during the summer and early fall of 1817. The first recorded meeting of representatives of the new congregation took place on November 10 at the Bridge Street home of Thomas Corcoran, Sr. On November 19 Keith was invited to become Rector of the new congregation, and he accepted the call.



Keith again went north to be married to Marietta Cleveland on December 3, 1817. The leaders of the new congregation, which was temporarily meeting in the Lancaster School, were busy preparing a permanent place of worship. A lot was purchased at the corner of Congress and Beall Streets, now known as 31st and O, where the present church still stands. Construction began in May of 1818. The first services were held on Christmas day in 1818. The church was consecrated by Bishop Kemp on December 30 with a dedication to Christ. That led to its first identification as Christ Church, Georgetown.

Keith involved his new congregation in two formative endeavors which helped to shape identity. One was the Education Society which eventually led to the creation of the Virginia Theological Seminary in 1823. The other was an influential publication, the Washington Theological Repository, which promoted Evangelical points of view.

Keith left Christ Church in 1820 to devote all of his efforts to bringing a local seminary into existence, despite objections from many Episcopal bishops including the Bishop of Maryland. The General Convention had established the General Seminary in 1817, and these bishops feared local seminaries would erode doctrine and discipline within the church. Despite his fairly short time as Rector, Keith clearly had an enormous role in forming an ethos that, arguably, has remained a recognizable part of Christ Church, Georgetown, ever since.

After leaving Christ Church, Keith went to Williamsburg where the Education Society saw an opening for a seminary at William and Mary. Keith taught there, and also served as Rector of Bruton Parish, but the seminary did not work out. Finally the Virginia Theological Seminary emerged in 1823 and Keith returned to Alexandria as its first professor.

Keith's first wife, by whom he had four children, died in 1830. He married a second time in 1831 to Elizabeth Sewell Higginson, who died in 1840.

Toward the end of his life Keith's mind reportedly became "unhinged" on questions of predestination and his own salvation. He returned to Vermont and died at Sheldon on September 3, 1842.

People who knew Keith have left various descriptions. A fellow scholar, William Sparrow, wrote, "Dr. Keith was in person tall and slender, but not erect—he stooped much. His visage was thin; his nose aquiline; his complexion fair, and eyes dark...." Sparrow also noted that "Dr. Keith stood very high as a preacher.... His topic was always Christ, and in exhibiting Him there was an unction about him which subdued the stoutest hearts, and melted the hardest."

Edward Hooker recorded that "In his temperament he was calm and agreeable, cheerful without levity or gaiety, and sober, sedate and dignified without moroseness. His disposition was faultless.... In his scholarship he was accurate and thorough."

R. Bethell Claxton, one of Keith's students, wrote "He was a very moderate 'Calvinist'... receiving in their obvious sense 'the Articles of Religion' as they had been handed down by the illustrious Reformers of the English Church." Claxton also observed of Keith that "His excellence as a reader, whether of Scripture or of the Prayers and other Offices of the Liturgy, was of the very highest order. He threw his whole soul into what was read. No one could hear him, and then say that prayers could not be prayed, when read from a printed form.... No chanting by the most skillful choir has ever seemed to me so elevating to the soul as the thrilling warmth of his devotion...."

It is arguable that Christ Church emerged largely because of Keith and he clearly had a major formative influence on the new congregation. The letter calling Keith to be Rector expressed "utmost confidence" in his "devotion to the religion of Christ." Keith's scholarly specialty was, in fact, Christology, and he clearly left that mark on Christ Church, Georgetown.

