

Thomas Corcoran (1754–1830)

“This is where Christ Church was founded.” So says a handwritten note in the “3119 M Street” manila folder in the Peabody Room of the Georgetown Public Library, accompanying a black and white photograph.

The address is for Thomas Corcoran’s “Bridge Street” house where a group of men met to “organize a new congregation to devise a plan for building an additional Protestant Episcopal Church.” The evidence of their success is Christ Church, Georgetown, founded in 1817.

A specialist in the history of Christ Church, Georgetown, has observed that, “If Clement Smith (a banker and builder) was the ‘money man’ in founding the parish, Thomas Corcoran was the ‘people person.’”

By the time of this gathering, Thomas Corcoran had been elected Mayor five times by the Corporation of Georgetown, its governing body; had been appointed a Justice of the Peace for Washington County by President Thomas Jefferson; had donated—along with others including the Architect of the White House James Hoban—to a fund to establish public education; and had served as Postmaster and a Member of the Levey Court.

Early History

Arriving from Limerick, Ireland, in Baltimore in 1783, Thomas Corcoran worked as a clerk for his uncle, William Wilson, in the import-export business. He was 29. Five years later, he married Hannah Lemmon and moved to Georgetown, where he established a shoe-making and leather goods store, patronized by faculty and students of Georgetown College.

Three years later, Corcoran built his three-story brick house. On November 17, 1791, he was invited to a meeting of the Corporation of



Thomas Corcoran by Charles Peale Polk, c. 1802/1810.
Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington

Georgetown, its governing body. The Corporation consisted of a Mayor, a Recorder, 5 Alderman, and 11 Common Council Members. Corcoran was elected a Common Council Member—whose duties included imposing and collecting property taxes, making laws to restrict all disorders and disturbances, regulating the inspection of flour and tobacco, and preventing the introduction of contagious diseases, such as yellow fever. Among the requirements for a Common Council Member were owning property valued at more than 100 Pounds Sterling and to having lived in the town for “one whole year.”

So began Corcoran’s career of public service.



The Link between the Presbyterian Church of Georgetown, St. John's Episcopal Church on "O" Street, and Christ Church, Georgetown

Christ Church, Georgetown, can trace its roots directly to St. John's Episcopal Church on "O" Street and, indirectly, to the Presbyterian Congregation in Georgetown—and, of course, to Dr. Stephen Bloomer Balch. Thomas Corcoran was a key figure in this progression.

As early as 1794, the need for an Episcopal Church in Georgetown was documented. In 1796, Colonel William Deakins, a Revolutionary War Officer, donated the lot on which St. John's was to be built. By 1802, in the absence of an Episcopal congregation, Thomas Corcoran joined the Presbyterian Church, where its renowned pastor, the Reverend Dr. Stephen Bloomer Balch—the only Protestant minister in the neighborhood—invited the clergy of other denominations to conduct worship services. An Episcopal minister, the Reverend Mr. Walter Addison of Broad Creek, Prince George's County, Maryland, accepted the invitation. So did Methodist ministers. Also in 1802, President Thomas Jefferson contributed \$75 to Dr. Balch's church with a note that it was "where non-Presbyterians were made welcome and officers of government sometimes attended services."

Dr. Balch encouraged Mr. Addison to establish an Episcopal congregation and helped make it a reality, contributing to the creation of St. John's, "as was but right, as the Episcopalians had contributed heretofore to the Presbyterian Church." His good will was further expressed—and also reciprocated—as religious leaders "courteously tended the use of their respective churches," offering them when the other buildings were under construction. As he had done in the case of the Presbyterian Church, President Jefferson donated \$75 for the Episcopal Church.

An interesting note is that, with funding uncertain to complete St. John's, the Reverend Mr. Elijah D. Rattoone, Assistant Rector of St. Paul's

Episcopal Church in Baltimore, wrote to Trinity Parish in New York to urge financial support for the nascent Georgetown parish to accomplish on a national scale what Trinity had done on a state level for a foundling parish in Albany. In particular, his thought was that St. John's could become a place where "the doctrines, discipline and worship of the Protestant Episcopal Church may be widely diffused throughout the United States." While we don't know whether the outreach to Trinity Parish on Wall Street was successful, St. John's was completed—opening its doors in 1804.

Given that Thomas Corcoran had lived in Baltimore for several years, could he have worshiped at St. Paul's—and could he have contacted Mr. Rattoone on behalf of a mission in which he was actively involved? One wonders.

St. John's Episcopal Church, Georgetown Parish

The first Episcopal Congregation in Georgetown was founded in 1796 by the Reverend Walter Dulany Addison. Other founders and benefactors include Thomas Hyde, Thomas Corcoran, Benjamin Stoddert, and Francis Scott Key. President Thomas Jefferson contributed to the building fund.

The Federal style building, based on a design by William Thornton, architect of the Capitol, was opened in 1804 and consecrated in 1809. The foundations, walls, roof, and bell tower are original.

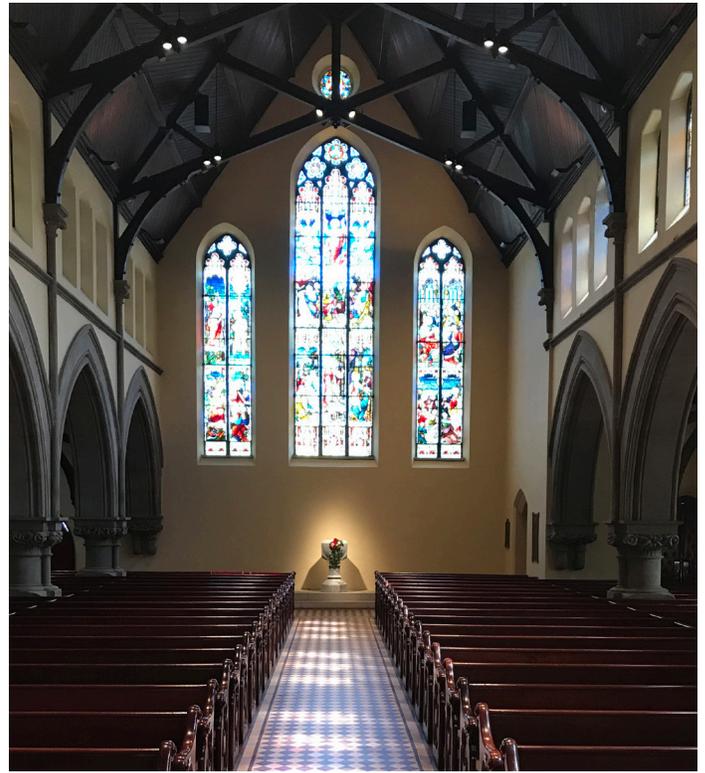
Founded as a Christian community for the worship of God, the dissemination of the Gospel, and the furnishing of spiritual and material help to those in need, St. John's remains dedicated to these purposes.



By 1811, the vestry at St. John's agreed that the church needed enlarging. A few years later, the parish was thronged to an overflow...the pews in the gallery were rented at high rates...and yet means could not be raised for the enlargement, and the enterprise was abandoned." That takes us to Thomas Corcoran's house in 1817, when the Vestry of St. John's was comprised of Francis Scott Key, Thomas Hyde, L. H. Johns, W. Bowie, Charles Worthington, Clement Smith, John Abbot—and Thomas Corcoran, J. Howe and T. G. Waters as Wardens. The unfulfilled mission of enlarging St. John's became a vision for a second Episcopal parish in Georgetown.

Thomas Corcoran was to be an active member of the Vestry of Christ Church, Georgetown, for years, involved in the spiritual and fundamental aspects of its life. He led the initiative to recruit the Reverend Mr. Charles McIlvaine as the new rector, substituted for Francis Scott Key as a lay delegate to the 1821 Convention of the Maryland Diocese, and served on the church's "Steeple, Bell, and Town-Clock Committee," the "Heating

and Lighting Committee," and the "Lay Committee to Extinguish the Church's Debt."



Thomas Corcoran and his wife, Hannah, were the parents of six children: James, Eliza, Thomas, Jr., Sarah, William Wilson, and Martha Ellen. James and Thomas, Jr. were both members of Christ Church, Georgetown, at least, briefly. William Wilson—businessman, banker, art patron, and philanthropist—created the Louise Home for impoverished elderly women, established the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and founded Oak Hill Cemetery in Georgetown. He belonged to the Church of the Ascension on Massachusetts Avenue and 12th Street, near his home on Lafayette Square.

Among William Wilson Corcoran's gifts to Christ Church, Georgetown, were two "very fine chancery chairs" and a stained glass window gracing the north end of the sanctuary—in memory of his parents, Thomas and Hannah.

Having experienced a major business reversal early in his career, William Wilson Corcoran settled with creditors for a fraction of his debts, but when his financial standing improved, he repaid the debts in full. A newspaper articles on his 85th birthday records William Wilson Corcoran's thought that, "Of all my money, that which I have given away is all that is truly mine."

