

Holding On to a Historic Landmark

Prince George's Chapel, Dagsboro

This October, the Friends of Prince George's Chapel commemorate their 25th year of dedicated service to the operation and maintenance of Dagsboro's historic treasure. A Harvest Celebration, featuring Joy Slavin's Harp Ensemble, will be held at the chapel on Sunday, October 15, 2017 at 3:00 p.m. The program is free and open to the public

Prince George's Chapel, on Vines' Creek Road, has survived over 260 years despite ravages of time, weather, and neglect. It has likely undergone more restorations than any other small, 18th century church in Delaware. The chapel began in 1755 as an Anglican (Church of England) chapel-of-ease, serving the outlying areas of Worcester Parish, Maryland. The mother church of Worcester Parish was St. Martin's Church, located on Rte. 113, near Showell, Maryland.

As much of Sussex County territory was once claimed and administered by the Colony of Maryland, Maryland residents were taxed to support the Church of England. In 1755, the vestry of Worcester Parish petitioned the legislature for funds to build a small chapel in Blackfoot Town (Dagsboro's original name) near Pepper's Creek. The assembly appropriated 45,000 pounds of tobacco for the parish to purchase 2 acres of land and build the chapel. The land was purchased from Walter Evans in July 1755. The vestry commissioned James Johnson to oversee the construction of the chapel. In April of 1757, the vestry met at the new chapel and laid out the pews. Families drew lots and were obliged to build their own pews. On June 20, 1757, the completed chapel was received by the vestry, dedicated, and named "Prince George's Chappell" for England's prince, who later became King George III.

In 1763, the vestry acquired additional land and an addition, consisting of transepts and small chancel, was built of the east end. It is believed that General John Dagworthy, for whom the town was later named, financed the addition. Local legend claims that Dagworthy was buried under the cancel upon his death in 1784.

Once the boundary dispute between the Penn (Delaware) and Calvert (Maryland) proprietaries was settled, lines were redrawn and Prince George's Chapel became a part of the Delaware scene and lost its tax support from Maryland. After the Revolution, all Anglican churches became part of the Episcopal Church, established in 1785 in America.

By 1804, Prince George's had fallen into disrepair. No longer tax supported, services were discontinued for a time, and members began to move away to nearby churches. After repairs, the church continued until the 1860s when major renovations were needed. In 1865, upon the insistence of Rachel Wells Waples, the granddaughter of John Dagworthy, monies were raised to refurbish the chapel. The exterior siding was replaced with cedar shake shingles. The box pews were removed and replaced with handmade benches. By 1876, the east end addition suffered rot decay and was removed.

During the latter part of the 18th century into the early 20th century, this chapel experienced several periods of neglect and disrepair, being renovated and rededicated several times, with services held intermittently. The congregation dwindled significantly. In 1929, after yet another restoration, the little church was opened, using the same communion vessels that had been given by the royal family of England in the 18th century. These chalices still exist, owned by Maryland. From 1929 to 1964, the chapel held Harvest Services once a year each October, until the building was declared unfit for use.

The Episcopal Diocese of Delaware had no funds for antiquities, so the Dagsboro Century Club formed a Preservation Committee and initiated a movement to have the state acquire the chapel and restore it. The extensive restoration and reconstruction began with funds from the state and the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

Between 1969 and 1974, master carpenter, Olin Givens and his small crew lovingly restored the chapel to its 18th century appearance with the transepts and chancel rebuilt, the foundation rebricked, the interior ceiling and gallery railings replaced. The nave section remains as the original portion constructed in 1755-57, containing much of the original heart pine. The deteriorating cedar shingles were replaced with the appropriate beaded clapboard cypress siding to resemble the original. The box pews were reproduced in exact detail and arranged in the original configuration. The large Palladian style window was reconstructed to resemble the original 18th century east window. For the pulpit restoration, the state relied on a letter and recollections written on November 7, 1893 by the Rev. John L. McKim to Bishop Leighton Coleman. In the letter, Rev. McKim describes the chapel's appearance during his term of service there in 1836-1838. He describes the chancel area, locating the usual triple structure of pulpit, lectern, and clerk's desk just outside the communion railing. The pulpit with reader's desk was reconstructed and placed on a conjectural basis on the north side just outside the rail. It is interesting to note that Bishop Coleman reopened the chapel, officiating at a service just a few days after the date of this letter.

The nave section of the chapel remains as the original portion, constructed in 1755-57, containing much of the earliest heart pine interior. The original

footings for the transept end were located, providing the footprint for the reconstruction of this section. The most striking feature of the chapel is the barrel-vaulted ceiling, constructed of wide pine planks spanning the nave, forming a cross with the transepts. The two rear staircases to the gallery are original, as is much of the gallery railing and walls. Two original pews remain in the gallery, the section reserved for visitors. Wood was the only available material for building in this rural area. The structure was built of cedar and cypress with the interior entirely of heart pine. This natural, unadorned pine makes a unique, eloquent architectural statement.

Prince George's Chapel was placed on the National Register of Historic Buildings on Marcy 24, 1971 and was dedicated as a museum on June 15, 1974 by Governor Sherman Tribbitt. Currently the chapel is leased from the State of Delaware by the Town of Dagsboro and operated by the Friends of Prince George's Chapel.

The Friends' efforts to preserve this historic landmark include sponsoring various fundraisers, special hymn sings, services, and tours, plus rental of the building for weddings. The Friends are seeking new members with time and talent to give to this mission.

Marking a quarter-century of dedication to the chapel, the Harvest Celebration at old Prince George's is the Friends effort once again to invite the surrounding communities to visit their heritage in this revered, historic church. Mark your calendars to attend the one-hour harp concert on Sunday, October 15 at 3:00 p.m. For more information, call Sandie Gerken at 302-732-6835.

SOURCES:

Prince George's Chapel Docentry Booklet, compiled by Sandie Gerken, 1982

Worcester Parish Register, Records of St. Martin's Church, MD, Delaware Archives, Dover, Delaware

Letter to Bishop Leighton Coleman from Rev. John L. McKim, November 7, 1893, Delaware Archives

"State's Quaintest House of Worship", Wilmington News Journal, July 20, 1929