

HARVEST DAY TALK, OCT 15, 2017

Prince George's Chapel is certainly one of the quaintest, interesting old houses of worship in Delaware.

It began as a chapel of ease, an outpost, if you will, of Worcester Parish Maryland, Church of England when large sections of Sussex County were claimed and administered by the Colony of Maryland. It wasn't until the eve of the Revolution that the century old boundary dispute between the Calverts of Maryland and the Penns who owned the 3 Lower Counties on the Delaware that this chapel became part of the Delaware scene.

I will quote from an old Wilmington News article of Jul 20, 1929 a description of the chapel, which at the time had recently undergone its last of many restorations and rededication by Bishop Cook.

"Perhaps the structure itself represents the earliest attempts at church building by so small a community in this section, and the old edifice is also a testimonial of the devoutness of our ancestors and settlers.. There are church buildings that antedate the erection of this ancient chapel, but it is doubtful if any of these reflects the determination of the colonists to have a worthy place to which they could conveniently repair for worship and to supplement the restricted means for social intercourse that was so lacking in rural districts a century and three quarters ago." (written in 1929).

I paraphrase now.

The original building, only 40 by 40 feet in dimensions was set in the shade of a grove of oaks of which but two or three remained in 1929. I quote "One can imagine the women riding behind their husbands or brothers who piloted the ount with skill and landed the feminine passenger on the stepping stone. Or later they ay have come in chairs, one of the early forms of travel (like a small buggy), or still after in oxcarts and then by chaises or carriages, then finally motor cars."

The architecture is plain "as a packing box" on the exterior, but the interior is impressive, creatively fashioned out of heart pine. The ceiling is vaulted, just a half circle and extends the length of the building. By this time, the original transepts had been removed and the chapel was once again the nave section where you sit.

The next most interesting architectural feature are the two remaining box pews in the nave section, which may have been salvaged for the more aristocratic part of the congregation. (Most of the were of the upper class per my research) They have seats on 3 sides, each accommodating 3 people comfortably?? Excepting that one side must sit back to the pulpit or look over their shoulders.

The pews may be closed if desired....they give one possible hit of the "exclusiveness" of the early men and women of "quality".

The gallery is reached by two staircases on either side of the door. It extends from the rear of the building along the sides, possibly offering room to sit 40 people. The ceiling is very low, perhaps owing to the average stature of the people in those days.

The building of the church was paid for in tobacco, one pound plugs tightly wrapped, were the currency of the day as tobacco was the most valuable commodity in the area. This amount is said to have represent a value of 105 lbs. sterling, British money. 45,000 pounds of tobacco.

The original dedication was June 30, 1757. The vestry had assigned the pews to the communicants and they were responsible themselves for paying for the construction costs of the pews.

The 1929 restoration showed evidence that everything was retained as far as possible of the original construction (and is this modern 1967-74 restoration). Much of the work was done by hands not deeply skilled in craftsmanship, perhaps by members of the congregation. The original heart pine wood is still employed in the interior, roughly worked, nailed and pegged together. There has never been any plaster as was the custom in more populated areas of the country. The arched roof, the barrel vault, however, speaks of the expertise of the well-trained shipbuilder carpenters that crafted it.

People appreciated the opportunity to assemble in worship and within a few years an addition was built to the chapel to include small transepts and a chancel sanctuary.

The original communion vessels were given by the British crown in the names of Prince George (later King George III) for whom the chapel was named and were still in use in 1929. Today, I believe that they are stored in a vault in Berlin, MD.

The news article relates that the chapel did not initially have a stove, but congregation made themselves comfortable by bringing heated wrapped bricks or stones from home for they were of hardier stock, sterner stuff than we are.

Prince George's Chapel resumed its services in 1929, but every Sunday services soon were discontinued and the chapel was opened only in October of each year for Harvest Services until the Diocese of Delaware abandoned it in 1964.

Be it ever so humble, this chapel no doubt brought consolation to hundreds seeking spiritual guidance. Quote "it is a testimonial of the piety of our forebears, who set themselves the task of building a house of worship, for in