

## **ST. STEPHEN'S NORTH SASSAFRAS**

By Miss Lilly Ferguson (1982)

By the Act 1692, the Province of Maryland was divided into thirty parishes, one of which was North Sassafras. The organization of St. Stephen's Church and Parish was commenced November 22, 1692 and completed January 10, 1693. The County commissioners of Cecil County, in pursuance of an Act of Assembly, laid out and divided the county into two districts or parishes, one for Worton and South Sassafras Hundred, and the other for North Sassafras, Bohemia, and Elk Hundred. These parishes were called South Sassafras and North Sassafras.

The original boundaries of Cecil County, created in 1674 by proclamation of Governor Charles Calvert are: *“From the south of the Susquehanna River, down the eastern side of the Bay to Swan Point, the up the Chester River to the head thereof.”*

The first Vestry meeting of North Sassafras Parish was held on January 10, 1693 at the county's first Court House erected on the north side of the Sassafras River, a short distance east of Ordinary Point, now known as Cassidy's Wharf. The Rev. Lawrence Vanderbush was then officiating. At the time of his death in 1696, he was also in charge of South Sassafras.

The currency at this time was tobacco. According to the Act of Assembly, a tax of forty pounds of tobacco was laid on each taxable person in each parish to be

collected by the sheriff of each county and paid to the parish vestry, which was required “after the building of the Church or Chapel” to apply “to the use and benefit of the Minister” of the parish. The number of persons then assessed was 321.

At the February 10, 1695 vestry meeting the record states that the Vestry found it absolutely necessary to purchase some land and to build a church, because the present meeting house of worship, location unknown, was in ill repair, not conveniently situated, and too small. Thereupon, it purchased from Mr. William Ward, one hundred acres of land for 5,000 pounds of tobacco. Col. Casparus Augustine Herman, vestryman, agreed to build a church of brick or stone, 35 feet in length, 25 feet in breadth with walls 12 feet high to be completed by December 25, 1695 for 18,000 pounds of tobacco. Later he asked for an extension of time. He died before building the church, and in 1697 his widow petitioned the Vestry to release her husband’s bond, which the Vestry did.

On July 8, 1697, the Rev. Mr. Richard Sewell was sent by the Bishop of London and appointed by Governor Nicholson to both parishes, thus becoming the first regularly appointed rector of St. Stephen’s. On September 24, 1697, the Vestry received books for parish use from the Bishop of London. Among them were one great Church Bible and one large Common Prayer Book. Both are still in the possession of the Parish.

On January 4, 1699, Matthias Hendrickson arranged with the Vestry to build a church about the same dimensions as the one agreed upon with Col. Herman. The said church to be bult on a piece of land, 200 acres, called North Level,

bought from Mr. William Ward on March 25, 1697. It stood near the old vestry house and the parsonage.

On March 30, 1703, occurred the first election of vestrymen held at the church, but the inside work was not completed. However, on March 25, 1706, the record states: "The parish church is this day dedicated to the honor of St. Stephen, by the Rector, Rev. Richard Sewell, and from hence forward to be called St. Stephen's North Sassafras."

Thus, after thirteen years of hopes, trials, disappointments, and accomplishments, there was a parish church with a glebe of 300 acres.

On August 5, 1707, the Vestry arranged with Robert Pennington to "pail in" a church yard 130 feet square, with convenient gates thereto, and to build a Vestry Room 20 feet by 15 feet, all for 8,000 pounds of tobacco. In 1717, Mr. Henry Hendrickson replaced the old fence with one of locust posts and chestnut rails and pales.

In November 1723, Mr. Sewell resigned after having served the parish more than 26 years. During the next eight years, the parish was vacant for much of the time. In a letter dated September 25, 1731, the Rev. Hugh Jones was recommended as Rector by Governor Leonard Calvert.

Because of the need of a new and larger parish church (the then present one had been in use nearly thirty years) the Vestry agreed on November 10, 1733 with John Babenheim and James Jayard for the building of a new one “at or near the place where the old one now stands” for 75,000 pounds of tobacco and for a new chapel on Bohemia Manor, St. Augustine, at or near where the old one now stands, “for 55,000 pounds of tobacco.” In 1735, the Vestry petitioned Governor Ogle for an Act authorizing them to levy additional amounts of tobacco to complete the church.

In 1735, the Rev. Mr. Jones was asked to have the church Bible and the Prayer Book rebound.

On September 7, 1736, a new Communion plate, replacing the old pewter vessels, arrived from England. It consisted of a silver flagon, chalice and paten. The cost was 19 pounds, 25 shillings, 5 pence.

On September 20, 1737, the Vestry agreed to pay 150 pounds currency to complete the new church and chapel. To “clarify the pewing of the new church,” the list of forty pews with three subscribers each was listed in the records of 1746.

In 1756 by an Act of Assembly, a special tax was levied, for church purposes, upon bachelors over 25 years of age.

During the year 1760 small-pox prevailed in the vicinity of the church—no Easter Monday election of vestry—the Rev. Mr. Jones dies during the year.

In 1779 the Vestry petitioned the General Assembly for aid in collecting support for the rector. The Vestry agreed to pay the rector in wheat and corn, and to give hi full use of the glebe. A second petition was made in the Assembly that it pass a law for the support of public worship.

In 1790 on May 17 the Vestry elected Henry Ward Pearce as the first lay delegate to the convention at Easton on May 27. Further references to the problems of expenses continued, for on September 13, 1790, the Vestry agreed on a lottery to raise money for repairs to church property—the outcome of which is unknown.

In 1807, a school, among the first here, was opened in the “Vestry House”, an old brick building ear the parsonage gate. It was torn down July 9. 1834 and the school ceased. In 1822 the graveyard was enlarged so as to include the portion on which the present church stands.

On June 12, 1823, the old church being unsafe for “assembling in”, the Vestry resolved to take it down and to rebuild it. This church was near the old “Vestry House” and the entrance to the parsonage. It was decided to remove the church to its present location, as its site then was deemed hazardous, and to lay out and finish a new one 30 x 40 feet, and 20 feet high with a chancel in the rear. Its cost was

\$2,428.49 and the old building. It was consecrated July 21, 1824 by Bishop Kemp and stood until 1873.

1834 St. Stephen's was the scene of the first ordination of a Negro to take place south of the Mason-Dixon Line. The Rev. William Douglas, the fifth Negro ever to receive Anglican Orders in America, was made a deacon AT St. Stephen's on June 22, receiving ordination at the hands of the Right Reverend William Murray Stone, third Bishop of Maryland.

In 1850 a "handsome melodian" was purchased.

In 1860 plans were made for the building of the parsonage. The lovely old housed was sold in 1976 and replaced by a modern one in 1980.

During the War Between the States, the church was searched for arms by the Provost-Marshal from Elkton; none were found.

In 1867 a marble baptismal font was given in memory of Eliza Ward by her family.

In November 1869, a subscription was started for the support of the Bishop of Easton, and although this church opposed the division of the diocese, its subscription was one of the most generous on the Shore.

On June 20, 1870, the Vestry decided to build a new church, retaining the walls, belfry, and sacred old bell. The additions made at both ends and the newly installed windows denoted a change in architecture from Colonial Brick to Victorian Gothic. This building, consecrated on May 8, 1874, is the one in use today. Its cost, exclusive of sand, hauling, and the old walls was \$6,598.23.

On October 25, 1873, the Rev. Lewis Walke, great grandfather of Lucy Morgan Beckwith, Mary Morgan Haggerty, and Elbert Ireland Morgan, was called as Rector. The renting of pews was abolished in 1873.

About this time, Dr. W. H. Cruikshank proposed a Sunday School in Cecilton. It was first held in a room over Mr. J. M. Beaston's store and then moved to a "good board tent in the woods opposite." Its early organizers and teachers were Miss M. E. Ferguson, Miss Gertrude Hoover, and Mrs. George Padley. The needs of the Sunday School and winter transportation led to plans for a chapel. Land was given by Col. A. C. Nowland of New Castle, Delaware. Contributions and gifts were promised. In 1879, when the building was completed at a cost of \$4,250, not counting sand and hauling, the treasurer, Mr. George Biddle, was ready to settle. He had collected every dollar, save four, that had been subscribed. Col Nowland gave \$1,800 in cash. The beautiful and cherished chapel served the church and the community well until in 1978 discovery of the ravages of termites and powder post beetles doomed it to demolition.

In 1964 a lot for parking, 7,500 square feet, back of the George Schmidt property and adjoining the church grounds, was bought from Mr. Robert Cooling and given to the Vestry in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Ferguson by their children, Alverda, Lilly, and Robert.

A special service to commemorate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Parish was held on May 25, 1893. A copy of the program with complete text of the service is among the possessions of the parish. Since then, memorial services have been held yearly in May.

During the early 1900's, the church property was deteriorating and the church yard became completely overgrown with honeysuckle and various weeds and brambles. The cemetery committee, with Robert Ferguson and Harry Duhamel as chairmen, became very active in its endeavor to make mowing possible. The honeysuckle was cut with hedge knives and rolled as a snow ball. Then the yard was kept under cultivation for over a year. A group of young and older enthusiasts, armed with sycles, rakes, handmowers, etc., under the able guidance of two ladies from Rick Neck Farm, would work from late afternoon until early evening. Then all enjoyed Rick Neck's supper of hot dogs, hamburgers, etc. cooked right on St. Stephen's brick path to the church, with the eye of the chancel window "eyeing" all.

Lawn fetes were held to help make the needed money. Governor Albert C. Richie was the speaker for one of the fetes and Senator Millard E. Tydings was one for



another. It was during this period that a member of the committee working in the cemetery found the beautifully crafted and engraved brass sundial by Hoare, made and engraved October 10, 1718. It had fallen from its decayed wooden post holder, and had been found by the son of the Rector, the Rev. William A. Coale. It was then placed in the crotch of a tree where it stayed until the tree, too, fell down. Mrs. Harry Clark Boden, IV, had it embedded on a marble pedestal and placed inside the church.

In later years the grounds have been enhanced by many hours of laboring love and landscape planting. In the early 1920's, while living in the rectory, Mrs. A. B. Darby gave much of her time working and planting flowers and shrubbery around the southern side of the church. The smoke tree was especially lovely in mid-summer.

In the mid-thirties, Miss Margaret England and Miss Ruby Pannal of Rich Neck Farm gave, and had planted along the church fence and the brick walk to the church, twenty oak trees.

Under the rectorship of the Rev. Tracy F. Walsh, the old Parish Building in Cecilton was torn down and replaced by the present one in 1964. It is greatly used today for Parish and civic activities.

Also at this time, the interior of the Rectory was completely renovated at a cost of over \$27,000.

It was in 1963 with the church and grounds in much disrepair that Mrs. Harry Clark Boden, IV, began an extensive restoration in memory of her early St. Stephen's ancestors, the Louttit and the George families. All tombstones were cleaned and re-aligned; tree surgery was followed by post and rail fencing. Additional graveled roads were made with new brick gate posts, and the church was painted.

In the interior of the church, the entire open-beamed ceiling and all woodwork, pews, and floors were scraped and stained, then waxed. The plaster walls were painted. Three gothic, handwrought, iron cartwheel chandeliers and two five-foot matching candelabra, and iron wall brackets were added. Heating and air conditioning were installed. Chimes were placed in the tall steeple.

Nineteen stained-glass windows from Wippell's in London were installed. The reredos of Victorian carving, covering the lower third of the altar window, was split and moved to each side of the window, thus making the figure of St. Stephen visible. The work was done as a gift by Mr. John Lippart, a former vestryman, now living in Florida.

Also included in the restoration were wall-to-wall carpet, tufted seat pads and kneelers, a bronze plaque of dedication placed in the church, and floodlights outlining the tower and steeple at night.

Then, too, Mrs. Boden had planted and Cecilton Fire Company kept watered the row of lovely Cedrus Deodaras trees given by Mr. Carroll. C. Short.

Interested in the church and in its restoration, Mr. and Mrs. George Kennedy gave, in December 1965, a Baldwin organ in memory of her brother, Mr. Lindsey Price.

In 1975 the Chapel was rewired and appropriate lights installed in memory of Margaret Cochran Cook by her husband, daughter, and son-in-law,

In 1980 a new rectory on the old site replaced the one sold in 1978—just in time for the coming of St. Stephen's new rector, the Rev. John B. Birdsall and his wife, Nina.

Thus, situated in the southern portion of its own glebe land, among its century-old cedars, box, a stately larch, and its dead, with interesting and lovely old tombstones scattered here and there in the well-kept yard, St. Stephen's has existed in continuous life and usefulness. Its old belfry spire is pointing heaven-ward "To speak to mankind of a fountain of undying truth, a strong link between time and eternity where the living and the dead will meet again and one communion make."