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Colonial Origins of Tappahannock Churches Essex County, Virginia

By David W. Gaddy

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The last remnant of the established Church of England from the Colonial era in Essex County is historic Vauter's (now Episcopal) Church (1731 or earlier), on Route 17 in the upper part of Essex County (St. Anne's Parish). What became of the two churches of South Farnham Parish, the area south of Mount Landing Creek, the parish name recalling the 17th Century unity of what is now Richmond and Essex counties? Episcopal Bishop William Meade, writing in the 1850s, mourned the loss of "one of the oldest Colonial churches," in Essex County—"Piscataway," although he never uses that name in lamenting the senseless destruction, confiscation, and vandalism that took place in the early 1800s. "The feeling of hostility to the Church," he wrote, "engendered by the establishment under the Colonial Government, and transmitted from generation to generation, was greatly increased in this vicinity by the imprisonment of some of the Dissenting ministers," referring to three itinerant Baptist preachers jailed in Tappahannock in 1774, in "a proceeding which was unjustly identified with the Episcopal Church."

It is obvious from these words that there was a time in which the Colonial era churches in Essex were not viewed through eyes of nostalgia or romance, but as symbols of a despotic regime overthrown in years of struggle. That struggle – our Revolutionary War – had seen the emergence of the yeoman farmer through the ranks of the triumphant army, freed also from the sway of the wealthy planter class and the Scottish merchants of Tappahannock—some of whom were still suspected of weak support of independence from England, if not latent loyalty to the Crown, and most of whom had lost wealth and power in the revolt. All of this and more was represented by the church buildings. It was

also identified with those faithful worshippers who sought to retain the familiar form of worship with an American version of the English *Book of Common Prayer*, and who had adopted the name, Protestant Episcopal Church. Locally, they organized themselves at the Essex County Court House on 27 December 1819—the same court house where those Baptist preachers had been brought before a judge 45 years earlier. In the back country of Essex County, Baptists and Methodists had proliferated in that time, offering a "fire-and-brimstone," emotionally-charged challenge to what had been viewed as a cold, aloof religious service that tolerated social practices condemned by the evangelicals. They made no distinction between the former English Church and the Episcopalians.

After the Revolution, as successor to the Anglican Church, the Episcopalians had planned to resume familiar services in an independent Virginia. But in 1803 the State reversed an earlier decision to allow the Episcopal Church to take over the old church buildings. "They were built and supported by taxing all of us," the other denominations argued. "They should not become the property of one denomination." The legislators agreed. So they became the property of everyone...and of no one. Antagonism toward the symbols combined with a looter's mentality and led to what Bishop Meade described as "the wholesale plunder of the churches and church-property."

The destruction in this parish has been complete, he wrote, having visited in 1827. Nothing is to be found but the durable material of which the buildings were made. The bricks may be recognized where seen; but they are nowhere found except in other buildings. The flagstones, too, from the aisles, may be

seen in walks and in hearths; but not a whole brick, much less one upon another, not a piece of timber, is to be seen where the temples of the living God stood. The monuments of the dead were not even spared in the general depredation. These were dragged from their resting-places and made into grindstones, and may still be identified by parts of the original inscriptions.

...[N]o vestry-book is to be found belonging to the parish, no Bible, Prayer Book, font, nor Communion-table; and the strange fact can only be accounted for by supposing that they shared one common ruin with the churches.

(Vestry books and some Colonial era records dating to 1733 were held for safe-keeping by Warner Lewis of “Lewis Level” and later restored to South Farnham Parish, where they are now in the custody of St. John’s, Tappahannock.)

The first church building in what is now South Farnham Parish was probably erected in 1660 or during the prior decade, and was probably a wooden structure. This was during a time in which the two sides of the Rappahannock River were part of the same county, “Old” Rappahannock. Farnham Parish, also spanning the river, was divided into North and South in 1684, and the county was divided into Richmond and Essex in 1692. (Since 1721, and the transfer of St. Mary’s to Caroline County, two parishes, St. Anne’s in the northern part, and South Farnham in the south, have constituted the Episcopal divisions of Essex.) This first church, referred to in deeds of 1673 and later, lay on the south side of the lower main branch of Hoskins’ Creek, on “Church Road” and “Church Swamp” adjoining, generally to the west southwest of Tappahannock town. The earliest named reference found (1675) calls it by the Indian name, Piscataway. Records indicate that it was located on the north (upper side) of the creek of that name and that a replacement was being planned. The newer church was constructed at the head of Church Swamp on an elevation that came to be known as Church Hill, although the name no longer appears on maps.

A church for the lower part of the parish was probably erected about the same time as the formation of the parish (1684), and became known simply as Lower Piscataway, by distinction from Upper Piscataway, the original church and its successors. Lower Piscataway was located just west of present-day Ozeana on the 17th Century Bowler property called Marigold (Mary Gold). It was evidently of brick, for bricks from the Lower Piscataway Church are said to have been used in the construction of a house at Marigold. A granite marker on the property was placed by the vestry of South Farnham in the mid-1900s. (In his *History of Old Rappahannock County, Virginia, 1656-1692*, published by his *daughter, Pauline Pearce Warner in 1965, long-time Essex County surveyor, antiquarian and historian Thomas Hoskins Warner described the crumbled ruins of Lower Piscataway apparently from direct observation. Likening it to Vauter’s in “the same general design,” he stated that the brick building was 60’x33’ with a wing 40’x20’ and overall

dimensions of 53’x60’ with a 90’x120’ brick wall built around it.)

A successor to the Upper Church—the third and last structure, perhaps also akin to Vauter’s—was built of brick at another location between Hoskins’ and Piscataway creeks prior to 1728, when it was referred to as “the new brick church.” It probably was close to the Church Hill location. A granite marker placed by the vestry of South Farnham locates the site near the entrance to St. Johns [Baptist Church] Road (formerly referred to as “Church Road”) off DeSha Road—State secondary road 659 northeast of Kino – the name, DeSha, once an area called “Texas,” also having disappeared from the map.

Regrettably, no distinction is made between the two churches in Bishop Meade’s account, nor have historians been able to separate them, so as to determine which met its fate last.

One of these buildings, he wrote, was preserved from destruction by a worthy old gentleman [Newman Brockenbrough, the last Colonial warden of Lower Piscataway] – who is said to have watched, with his servants, night after night, to protect the house of God. When he died [1816], the work of destruction went on, nor ceased till nothing was left to tempt the cupidity of the plunderers. The other was spared, to meet, if possible, a worse fate. The bricks and nails were the most tempting materials in this house; and, as the readiest way to obtain these was to fire the building, this was done accordingly. But the first attempt to burn it was unsuccessful; the fire, after burning for a time, went out of itself. No one of sensibility could see this house of God as it then stood—charred and blackened by fire, hacked by axes, and otherwise injured by Vandal hands—and not have his feelings deeply moved. But this condition did not suffice the spirit that was bent on its destruction. It stood a short time longer, was again fired, and burned to the ground.

In her 1936 biographical sketch of The Rev. Mr. Lewis Latané, Colonial minister to the parish for thirty years, Lucy Temple Latané wrote,

The sites are known, and some years ago [in 1913] the vestry of St. John’s Church, Tappahannock placed substantial granite blocks bearing dates and a few facts to mark the place of each. In the grove where the upper church stood near Tappahannock there is now a colored church, but the other site is in the deep woods, to be found only by one who is familiar with the place. I was glad to be taken there in the summer of 1929, and see for myself where the old church had stood.

Reference to “a grove” led Dr. George Carrington Mason, historian of the Southern Diocese of Virginia, writing in the mid-1940s, to conclude that the Lower Church was the last to be razed, because it—and not the Upper Church—lay in a grove of oaks. On the contrary, (Upper

Piscataway was the older and principal church in the parish—and it did also lie in a grove of oaks. Not to distinguish which of the two, but to refer by the single name, certainly implies the upper church, plus the following facts: The vestry for the successor Episcopal South Farnham Parish was organized 10 January 1820. On 24 July its vestry directed that a formal inquiry be made to inquire into the burning of Piscataway Church, suggesting a recent date for that event, which would have been “just outside town,” and must have represented the final destruction of property of concern to the Episcopalians.

The vestry book also states that the site of the upper church was “deeded to the Baptists.” This, in turn, raises the interesting prospect that the members of Mt. Zion (earlier named Piscataway) Baptist Church may, prior to a move to the vicinity of their present location at Dunbrooke, have occupied the Upper Piscataway colonial church after it was barred to the Episcopalians. Virginia state highway marker, O-41, “Piscataway Church” (placed on Route 360 west, near Miller’s Tavern) states: “Five miles north [at Dunbrooke, in Essex County] is Mt. Zion [Baptist] Church, organized in 1774, the mother Baptist Church of the vicinity.



*Mt. Zion Baptist church was erected in 1854 at its current location at Dunbrooke. Although this photo is undated, it is believed to have been taken at the Dedication of the new church.
Photo courtesy of Mt. Zion Baptist Church.*

In 1813 the congregation occupied a colonial Episcopal [sic] church, which was not far from the present Mt. Zion Church.” This last is in obvious reference to Upper Piscataway a few miles east of Dunbrooke.

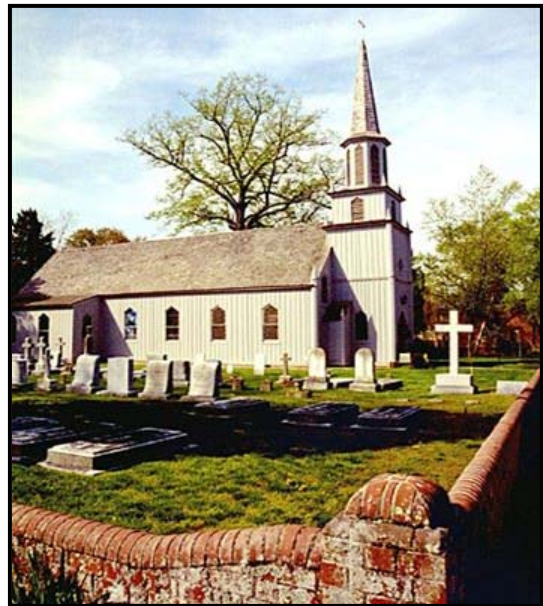
Tappahannock Chapel (1826)

With the Episcopalians deprived of the colonial church buildings, in 1817, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Henley, members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) deeded a town lot to build an inter-denominational church—a “Free Chapel”—in Tappahannock, the county seat. (With its river-oriented commerce, and several “grog shops” and taverns, this seems to have been the first church to be erected in the little 18th Century town.) It was placed under the

Episcopalians, but to serve town Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians (“if any”) on a rotating basis.

The actual building was slow to take form, over the next nine years. (Perhaps it incorporated bricks from Upper Piscataway.) Not until a year after the arrival in 1825 of a young Episcopal minister, The Rev. Mr. John Peyton McGuire, in Essex County did the chapel finally open for service. Referred to, variously, as the Tappahannock Chapel, the Town Chapel, Tappahannock Free Church, and “the old church,” the inter-denominational building evidently served for the worship of both white and black, free and slave, worshippers. It would continue to serve the Episcopalians for 24 years.

By 1838, McGuire had led the parish to construct a brick church near Miller’s Tavern—St. Paul’s—to serve the people of the western part of the county at what had been a customary gathering place for worship. In late 1849,



*St. John's Episcopal Church, Tappahannock, 1850.
Photo available on church web site:
<http://www.stjohnstappahannock.org/history.htm>*

Tappahannock Episcopalians sought a separate church building of their own, and moved just down Duke Street the following year to erect a “board and batten” wooden structure that Bishop Meade recalled as “a very handsome frame building” when it opened in 1850 (although, in his book, he mistakenly placed it in St. Anne’s parish, rather than South Farnham).

That frame building, preserved, expanded, and renovated still stands as St. John’s Episcopal Church, Tappahannock, an historical treasure with its “carpenter’s Gothic” design and unique center-located, elevated pulpit – a “trademark” of Mr. McGuire, who was dedicated to the preaching of the Gospel, as opposed to form and ritual, and shared with St. Paul’s, Miller’s Tavern. The Episcopalians, therefore, were first to depart from the “Town Chapel” building.

After the war of the 1860s, Baptists established Centennial—later Beale Memorial—in the 1870s and, in 1875, took over the former court house in Tappahannock where, in a choice bit of irony, the unlicensed itinerant Baptist preachers had once been brought before the bar of justice.



Centennial Baptist Church (c1875) was housed in the 1728 Court House. The name was changed to Beale Memorial Baptist Church in 1908. Settle Postal Card Collection, ECMHS.

Evidently Baptist membership at the Town Chapel had embraced both white and black; with emancipation, some of the latter remained with their white brethren, while others withdrew to establish their own churches. The only hint of Presbyterian services at the Chapel is contained in *The Children of Bladensfield*, which refers to a Confederate army scout re-entering the town in 1862 to seek information, and hiding “behind the chimney of the old Presbyterian church.”



Mouzon Memorial - now Tappahannock Memorial Methodist Church, 1939. Photo courtesy of ECMHS.

That left Methodist use unaccounted for, until, in January 2009, as part of renovation to its 1939 building, Tappahannock Memorial United Methodist Church (originally organized as Mouzon Memorial, named for a distinguished Methodist Bishop) opened a sealed box in a cornerstone to discover an account of the last two Methodist services, morning and evening, being held on 6 May 1884,

“representing the last use of the Town Chapel for religious services” by any group. It had served well for 58 years. From that point on, it was to be used as a dwelling, a “town hall for the White People of Tappahannock,” a motion picture theater, and a warehouse.

(On 20 December 1920, under orders from Judge Joseph Chinn to sell the “abandoned building,” the Episcopalians of South Farnham had voted to sell their interest in the Tappahannock Chapel, and to donate it to the Tappahannock Town Hall Association.)

The old building they all once shared may have been built slowly but it was solid, for it still stands 183 years later, now housing a modern dry-cleaning establishment at the west end of Duke Street, and its brickwork—but not the glazed headers—can still be seen through layers of paint. (Might they also include bricks from the colonial churches?)



Tappahannock Chapel (c1819-1920s) was converted in 1953 to Modern Cleaners. Photo courtesy of Suzanne P. Derieux, Tappahannock, VA.

Sentiment, and “tight money” due to the Great Depression, kept St. John’s from being torn down in the 1930s, to be replaced by a brick building to match its parish hall. Little changed externally, with the exception of a mid-1970s expansion and it celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2000. Beale has recently moved outside of town limits; the Methodists are preparing to celebrate their 70th anniversary in a renovated structure. Presbyterians now occupy their own “Tappahannock Chapel,” and other denominations, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-Day Adventists, and others now serve the faithful in the little town. Generally unknown to their modern members, they share a Colonial heritage worshipping together at Upper Piscataway and a mid-19th Century period in which they again shared a common structure for their services. Perhaps a reminder of their shared past can enrich their Lenten and Thanksgiving programs, the shared Christmas carols on the court house green, and their cooperative ministries to meet the needs of the county.

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Author Biography

David Gaddy retired from Federal service in 1994 and currently makes his home in Tappahannock. He was a co-author, with William A. Tidwell and James O. Hall, of the 1988 prize-winning "Come Retribution: the Confederate Secret Service and the Assassination of Lincoln", and served as a Board member and Bulletin editor for the National Cryptologic Museum Foundation in Maryland. He is a Life Member of both the Essex County Historical Society and the Museum, having served the former as vice-president, president, archivist, and occasional Bulletin editor, and the latter as founding board member and the first executive director. He is at work on a history of the Confederate Army's signal service.

Historic Camden House Tour



*7314 Camden Road
Port Royal, VA 22535
Sunday, May 17, 2009*

Guided Tours at 2, 3, and 4 pm, \$10 per tour ticket (limit of 20 tickets per tour)

Essex County Museum and Historical Society will sponsor its annual historic home tour at *Camden*, one of the most complete and best-preserved Italianate country houses in America. Built between 1857 and 1859 for William Carter Pratt, *Camden* appears today much as it did in its original architectural drawings. Mr. and Mrs. John R. Pratt, descendents and current residents, will personally conduct each tour.

Tickets can be purchased at the museum, 218 Water Lane, in Tappahannock, through the post, or e-mail. Specify your choice of tour time. Tickets requested through post or e-mail will be mailed upon receipt of payment. Contact Amy Griffin at 443-3893 for more information on this event or visit us at www.essexmuseum.org. Directions to the tour site will be included on the ticket. Make checks payable to **ECMHS** and mail to ECMHS, POB 404, Tappahannock, VA 22560. Credit cards are acceptable. The deadline for ticket purchase is April 30, 2009.

Upcoming Events

- April 1** **Second Annual Fund Drive begins**
This effort, which continues through Dec 31, 2009, supports our operating budget. All donations received during these months are incorporated for immediate availability to ensure the daily operation of the museum. Look for more information in March.
- May 8** **Annual Spring Gala and Members Meeting**
Essex Inn
Members Meeting at 5:30 p.m.
Gala 6 - 9 p.m.
- May 30** **Memorial Day Yard Sale 8 a.m. - 1 p.m.**
Donated items needed. Call Becky Snyder, 804-443-2979, for more information or pick-up. Check your local newspaper for location.
- May 17** **Historic Camden House Tour**
See page 5 for details.

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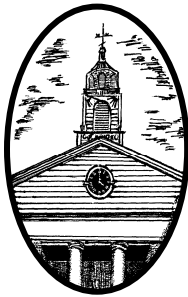
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Essex County Museum hours are:
10 am-3 pm on M, T, Th, F, S and 1-3 pm on Sun
Admission is always free

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