

Centennial Moments in History
1886–1928
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The History of St. George's Protestant Episcopal Church (1845–1928)
A Bumpy Ride from Parish to Chapel to Parish

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

— Hebrews 12:1–2a

The Rev. Dr. Robert Afton Holland was called back to St. George's Church after an absence of seven years and began his second rectorate on 1 September 1886. At the following Annual Parish Meeting, the parish was experiencing a "state of prosperity" that was attributed to Dr. Holland's leadership and ministry.

For many years the church's music had been provided by a salaried quartet. Dr. Holland asked to change to a vested boys' choir. Soon the choir had 40 boys who sang in cassock and cotta for the Sunday morning and evening worship services using *Best's Psalter*. The choir was so popular that the chancel had to be enlarged and new choir stalls added.

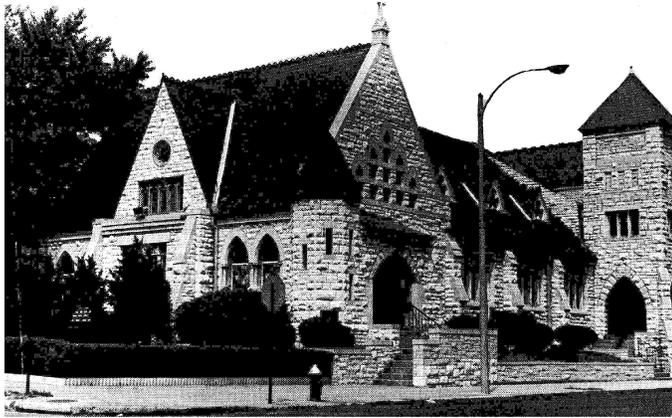
The church now had 633 communicants, a fine physical plant, and a rector respected throughout the city. A parish house was completed in 1888 at a cost of \$10,000 (multiply all dollar figures in this e-letter by 26 to get an approximate present value, based on the CPI). The church was thriving, and the finances were in good order.

Shortly after 9:00 p.m. on 20 March 1891, flames were seen in the western sky, and word went out that St. George's Church was on fire. The fire totally destroyed the church that *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported to have been "one of the largest as well as one of the handsomest and most richly furnished houses of worship in St. Louis." Dr. Holland was interviewed at the scene by a reporter of *The Republican*. When asked if the church would rebuild, he said, "No, that would be absurd. I shall raise \$50,000, and with it and the insurance money will build out west. It would be foolish to put \$50,000 into that corner now. The negroes have taken up this locality with a church. We will go west and build a fine church. We have been thinking over this matter for some time and have been undecided what to do, and now the fire has settled the difficulty." A move further west had been under consideration after only 15 years at the church's second location.

The records show that the congregation had been divided on the subject of moving west. A majority of the parishioners voted with the rector to move, but a large and influential part of the congregation declined, and they formed the Church of the Redeemer on Pine Street between 30th and 31st Streets. (This church later moved to Washington and Euclid where it dissolved in 1935. The building was turned over to the diocese and sold to Trinity Church that worships there today.)

The Building Committee chose a lot at the corner of Pendleton and Olive, about eight blocks west of Grand Boulevard. Many meetings were held to discuss financing and the details of design and construction. The first building to be constructed was the chapel, and the cornerstone was laid on

25 October 1891. The chapel with a seating capacity of 400 was built from the blackened flame-swept stones salvaged from the walls of the Beaumont Street edifice as proposed by Capt. Dennis Paul Slattery who paid for their salvaging and transportation to the building site. The chapel is a memorial to his wife, Lizzie Leigh Slattery, who had died 21 months earlier. The first worship service was conducted in the new chapel on 3 April 1892, 13 months after the disastrous fire. A three-story parish hall was added later. The church, that would have the same seating capacity as the previous church, was to be built in the future.



St. George's Chapel and Parish House in the background.

Once again, debt began to build, and in 1904, the year of the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition, it was suggested that the church sell some of its vacant church lots to the west. Dr. Holland objected, saying that those lots were necessary as an incentive for further expansion and for the building someday of a larger church. Dr. Holland began to suffer health problems, and he was helped by a succession of assistants. By November 1904, he made his residence in the second floor of the parish house in order to conserve energy and finances. The necessary alterations cost \$250, and Dr. Holland had \$5 per month deducted from his salary until the \$250 had been repaid.

By 1906 St. George's Church was unable to sustain herself. The beloved Dr. Holland's health had further eroded, but the parish would not let him resign. However, they could not provide for him financially and at the same time provide a salary for a new rector. So after much discussion with the cathedral, all property in the name of St. George's Church was transferred to the cathedral. In turn, Dr. Holland was made Rector Emeritus and unconditionally given an annual salary of \$2,000 for the rest of his life (he would die within three years). The cathedral also assumed all of St. George's obligations. After a parochial life of 62 years, St. George's Church became St. George's Chapel of Christ Church Cathedral. The cathedral chapter chose to make the St. George's congregation practically autonomous and elected a committee to be in charge of the chapel.

The Rev. Benjamin T. Kemerer assumed duties as Vicar-in-Charge on 19 February 1907. Mr. Kemerer maintained a vigorous program of worship, education, and activities. In 1909, the chapel had 173 families. By 1915, there was formal and informal talk of the chapel again becoming an independent parish. On 17 January 1919, the chapel committee, now called St. George's Governing Board, met to discuss the matter in earnest. There was still a \$17,500 mortgage on



This memorial plaque to the Rev. Holland now hangs on the west wall of the nave of the Church of St. Michael & St. George.

the property, and the operating deficit had accumulated to \$9,127. The Cathedral Chapter agreed to reduce the operating deficit by \$3,127, deed back to St. George's all the property, and assist the congregation in securing an extension of its mortgage for a period of at least two years. On 28 March 1919, St. George's Chapel was reorganized as a separate parish with Mr. Kemerer as the rector. A vestry of nine people was elected, including Miss Ada Winston and Mrs. W. H. Buttitt who became the only women in the diocese at the time to serve on a vestry.

On Easter Sunday 1920, the treasury was \$1,000 ahead of running expenses and 376 persons made Easter communions, the largest attendance in 13 years with one exception. In July 1920 Mr. Kemerer was called to serve in a position with the National Church.

The Rev. Robert Hall Atchinson became rector of the 76-year-old parish on 1 January 1921. He canvassed a 37-block area and added about 35 scholars to the Sunday school. Mr. Atchinson found the parish to be located in what had become a transient neighborhood "where the average tenure of boarding house habitués is from six to eight months." He suggested that the parish should move as he did not hold great prospects for the future of the church at its present location. Nevertheless, he worked creatively and tirelessly to establish the church as a vital neighborhood organization. To his further credit, he again freed the church from debt. There had been no payments on the \$17,500 unpaid balance of the mortgage since the church had returned to independent parish status in 1919. By 1924, the balance was paid off with money received primarily from the sale of the church rectory located at 4265 Washington Boulevard near Pendleton Avenue and eighty feet of the property on the west side of the church. Mr. Atchinson resigned on 1 October 1925 to become rector at St. Paul's Church in Alton, IL. During the interim, the parish was determined to carry on at all costs.

The Rev. Raymond E. Brock became rector of St. George's Church on 8 March 1926, coming from Clovis, NM where he had been involved in missionary work. He was fully aware of the difficult circumstances he and the parish faced. The pull of home may have been at play in his decision, for he had once sung in the choir of Christ Church Cathedral, and when St. George's had become a chapel of the cathedral, he had sung in St. George's choir until he left to go to Columbia College.

Mr. Brock gave permission to add female voices to the choir, noting at the Annual Parish Meeting in 1928 that "the addition of women to the choir had made a decided improvement in the manner and quality of the rendition of the music."

In 1928, it had become apparent that St. George's again could no longer sustain herself as an independent parish. This time there were only two options: merge with another parish or close the church and turn the property over to the diocese. The parish voted with no voiced opposition to merge with another parish. Different arrangements were pursued with the Church of the Redeemer, located at Euclid and Washington, and the Church of St. Philip the Apostle, located at Union and Maple, but nothing resulted from the discussions. On 1 October 1928 a vote was taken on three other invitations to merge. This vote was taken to get the "sense of the house" rather than to make a binding decision. What happened? We'll find out in next week's Centennial Moments in History e-letter.



Church consultants note that churches, like other organizations, recognize the need to change too slowly, and then when a decision is made for change, the church opts for incremental change that soon proves insufficient. Consultants encourage churches not to take the next obvious step, but to

“leap-frog” that step and take what looks at the time like a terribly bold step into the future. How would you assess the changes St. George’s Church made throughout its life? In hindsight, something we are privileged to have, do the changes look more like incremental steps or more like “leap-frog” steps? This question applies to all changes in the life of a church, not just to its physical location.

St. George’s Church was plagued throughout most of its life with debt. Churches have no control over some things that will affect their financial situation, like the devastation of the Civil War in St. George’s case. Churches do have control over other factors. What decisions did St. George’s Church make during its history that may have contributed to the church’s financial difficulties? What might we learn from those decisions and their results?

*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD,
plans for your welfare and not for harm,
to give you a future with hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)*

— John R. Tyler
Historical information from *Trilogy* by Harriet Davidson