

Centennial Moments in History 1851–1866

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The History of St. George's Protestant Episcopal Church (1845–1928) Financial Strains and Stress

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.

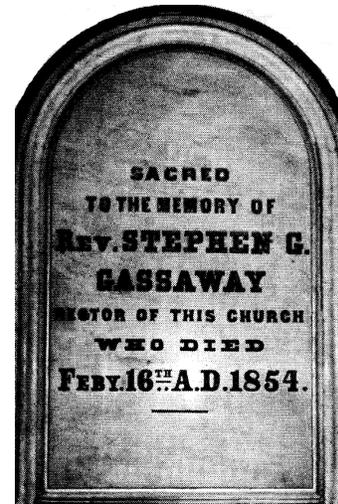
— Hebrews 12:1–2a

The Rev. Stephen Griffith Gassaway, the 30-year-old associate rector of St. George's Protestant Episcopal Church, presided at the Annual Parish Meeting on 21 April 1851 in which the resignation of the Rev. Dr. Eleazar Carter Hutchinson, the church's first rector, was officially accepted. That evening after the meeting adjourned, the newly-elected vestry met and elected Mr. Gassaway to serve as the new rector.

The church's financial picture improved during the first year of Mr. Gassaway's rectorate, and the church was able to focus on dealing with its building indebtedness of just over \$12,000 (multiply all dollar figures in this e-letter by 26 to get an approximate present value, based on the CPI). Creative fund raising techniques along with generous financial arrangements by several parishioners enabled Mr. Gassaway to announce in May 1853 that the building indebtedness had been eliminated, although the church still owed \$6,900 to Mr. John H. Lucas for the land. Unpaid bills and unforeseen building repairs continued to plague the church's operating budget, and in November 1853, it was predicted that there would be a \$2,100 shortfall at the end of the fiscal year in May 1854.

The vestry convened a meeting on the evening of 16 February 1854, but not to deal with the financial concerns. The steamboat *Kate Kearney* had exploded that morning at her moorings on the levee with Mr. Gassaway aboard, and the rector had died from his injuries that afternoon. He left a wife and five small children. The rector's funeral was held on Sunday morning, 19 February 1854, and was reported in the newspaper as "the largest and most imposing funeral pageant ever witnessed in the city, and was an evidence of the high estimation in which he was held."

The church found it difficult to deal with its current situation absent a rector. Six months elapsed, and calls to two men to serve as rector had been declined. Then two men who had been nominated to serve on the vestry at the most recent Annual Parish Meeting sent a letter along with "others" to the vestry seeking canonical consent of the wardens and vestry to organize a new congregation within the limits of St. George's parish. (Among the petitioners was Mr. Thomas Skinker, father of the Mr. Thomas



This memorial tablet was hung in all three St. George's Church edifices and now is displayed in the Church of St. Michael & St. George.

Keith Skinker who would be so instrumental in the founding in 1912 of the St. Michael and All Angels Mission.) The vestry reacted with shock, chagrin, and then dismay. The vestry responded with a long, directly-worded letter declining to give their consent.

The Rev. William Colvin Brown accepted a call to be the rector of St. George's Church on 25 September 1854, noting that "I look upon the position as a most arduous one." He arrived in deacon orders and was ordained a priest at St. George's Church in December. He quickly turned his attention to the petitioner's request to form a new church within the limits of St. George's parish. The petitioners had proceeded with requests to the bishop who said he would give his consent only if the organizers agreed to locate in "some destitute part of our large city where rights of other parishes are uninvaded." Thus, in February 1855, Trinity Church was organized by a group made up mainly of members of St. George's Church who were supporters and followers of the still controversial Dr. Hutchinson. A close review of extant records shows that two factions in the church were vying for seats on the vestry at the Annual Parish Meeting on 17 April 1854, and that the supporters of Dr. Hutchinson had lost. The vestry vote no doubt was affected in some way by two provisions adopted in the meeting before the vote was taken for the vestry: A provision not to allow voting by proxy narrowly passed by two votes, and a ground-breaking provision to allow women over the age of 21 to vote was adopted after some parliamentary wrangling. The resulting split in the congregation reduced the number of communicants to only 68, less than half the number reported a year earlier. After only four months as rector, Mr. Brown tendered his resignation. His task indeed had been "a most arduous one."

Within a few months, the church was able to secure the Rev. Theodore A. Hopkins of Rochester, NY as rector. He set out to free the church of its debt and to rebuild the congregation. He was amazingly successful, for by February 1856, the church was debt-free and able to pay the diocesan assessment that had gone unpaid the previous five years.

Mr. Hopkins also managed to build the membership to 166 communicants with 146 scholars in the Sunday school. He reported to the diocese in May 1856 that he had baptized 27 people and presented 47 persons for confirmation the previous year, a remarkable record when one considers the conditions he inherited upon his arrival as rector just eight months earlier! St. George's was now the largest Protestant Episcopal church in the city, and it carried no debt.

The operating budget continued to be a challenge, and the vestry determined that the rector's salary could not be increased in spite of Mr. Hopkins's remarkable achievements. He tendered his resignation to be effective no later than 1 September 1857.

One month later, the Rev. Edward F. Berkley, a priest with impressive accomplishments on the parish and diocesan levels in Kentucky, accepted a call to be the fifth rector in 12 years. He would stay for 14 years, giving leadership stability that would prove especially valuable through the coming Civil War years. His starting salary was far more than twice Mr. Hopkins's final salary. Given the financial state of the church, one wonders how such a generous offer could be made, or if Mr. Hopkins would have stayed if his salary had been increased by only a reasonable amount. Perhaps the vestry felt it had to make such an offer to Mr. Berkley to get the leadership required to rectify the "low state of the church in your great city, and the sad condition of your parish," as Mr. Berkley described it in his letter of acceptance. Attendance jumped with his arrival. In his first six months, he baptized 46 people and presented 52 persons for confirmation. But he reported that the membership records were in disarray, making it difficult to determine the correct number. He wrote a note in the parish register saying that "the people are floating — they ask for no letter dismissory, and of course, they take none, bring none, and it is impossible for a

rector to keep pace with their movements". (As it was in the beginning, and is now, so shall it ever be!)

In an attempt to address the continuing financial difficulties, Mr. Berkley "abolished an expensive choir" and reported that he was "endeavoring to introduce congregational singing as being the most compatible worship of God," something Mr. Hopkins had attempted a year earlier but was unable to sustain when the vestry deemed the experiment a total failure (no doubt after hearing from the congregation). Expensive building repairs became necessary, and "the agonizing decision was made to borrow \$10,000" which meant putting a lien on the property. The congregation also ordered a new organ at a cost of \$4,000.

In 1860, St. Louis was growing rapidly. It had a population of 160,733, making it the largest city west of the Mississippi and the eighth largest city in the country. St. George's Church had grown to 256 communicants with 190 scholars in the Sunday school and had recently started a mission Sunday school which had an additional 100 scholars. But there was trouble unlike any before on the horizon.

The nation had become increasingly divided on the issue of slavery in the previous two decades. Most of us are familiar with the landmark Dred Scott Decision of 1846 in St. Louis. We may not know that the plaintiff's lawyer, Mr. Montgomery Blair, had been a junior warden of St. George's Church before moving to Washington, D.C. The opposing attorney was Missouri Senator Henry S. Geyer, one of the founders of St. George's Church a year earlier and a vestryman at the time of the trial.

The Civil War came to St. Louis on 10 May 1861 when Union troops captured Missouri Militia forces who were attempting to take the St. Louis Arsenal, the largest military storehouse in the Confederate States. The Militia surrendered without bloodshed. Among those taken prisoner by Union troops was the son of the Rev. Dr. Hutchinson, the first rector of St. George's Church. St. Louis remained in Union hands throughout the war even though the outlying areas of the state sympathized with the South and the Confederate flag flew over the governor's mansion.

References to the Civil War are conspicuously absent in the vestry's minutes, although there are entries describing the severe economic conditions of those years and the resulting salary reductions. Bishop Hawks addressed the Diocesan Convention each year throughout the war, but never once did he address the issue of slavery or even use the word. As would be expected, there was no unanimity on the issue in the National Church. High churchmen remained aloof, or along with Southern Evangelicals supported slavery. Northern Evangelicals took a stand in favor of abolition. In 1861, the southern dioceses followed the secession of the Southern States, meeting in convention and adopting a constitution and canons. They did not meet with the National Convention during the war years, and the National Convention never introduced a resolution condemning slavery. After the war, the southern dioceses again attended the National Convention. The Episcopal Church was the only major Protestant denomination that did not formally split into Northern and Southern jurisdictions.

The parish actually grew in membership during the war years and had a communicant membership of 375 in 1866 with 300 scholars and 36 teachers in the Sunday school. But the economic difficulties of the war years presented financial challenges even with a growing membership. The church was again \$1,600 in debt in 1863. By the end of 1865, the rector's program had eliminated the debt, an amazing feat in the war years, and the vestry restored the rector's salary to its ante-bellum amount.

 *BACK TO THE FUTURE* 

Financial concerns are a staple of church life. Sometimes they occur because of strife in a congregation of the kind that caused a group in St. George's Church to leave and form a new parish. It is hard to say if those who left were at fault or if those who stayed created an untenable situation for those who left. Like most difficulties in personal relationships, all parties usually bear some degree of the blame. Have you seen a parish develop factions that created strains in personal relationships, perhaps even at some point in the life of our parish? What caused the strain? Was it addressed, and if so, how? What was the result? What are ways a parish can maintain harmony when parishioners are not of one mind on one or more issues?

Sometimes financial concerns arise when calamities beyond the parish occur. The Civil War certainly put financial and other forms of stress on St. George's Church as it did on all churches. Sometimes a rector or vestry makes poor decisions by ignoring matters that must be acknowledged and addressed. Sometimes parishioners have failed to practice faithful stewardship. What is the role of the following three groups in maintaining a strong, financial position for a parish?

- The rector
- The vestry (there are 18 members at our parish)
- The "parishioners in the pew" (there are about 600 resident households on our parish roll)

Someone has said that each time history repeats itself, the price goes up.

*Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways!
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence praise.*

*Drop thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strains and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.*

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