

Centennial Moments in History
1845–1851
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The History of St. George’s Protestant Episcopal Church (1845–1928)
In the Beginning . . .

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

In the Centennial Moments in History e-letter of March 8, the Church of St. Michael and All Angels was busy planning for the enlargement of the church and parish house. During this effort in the fall of 1928, it became known that St. George’s Protestant Episcopal Church, the fourth oldest parish in the city, was in great financial difficulty and would soon be forced to dissolve or to merge with another parish. In this e-letter, we will go back to 1845 and begin a review of the history of St. George’s Church, for that history will one day become part of our past, our present, and our future.

On 26 March 1845, a group of 44 prominent and influential St. Louis Episcopalians and businessmen petitioned the Rt. Rev. Cicero Stephens Hawks, the first bishop of the Diocese of Missouri, for permission to organize a new parish, and if permission was granted, to seek to persuade the Rev. Dr. Eleazar Carter Hutchinson, president of the recently closed Kemper College in St. Louis, to remain in the city and become rector of the new parish. It was an unusual petition in that the petitioners were seeking to form a new parish to provide a post for a particular person, Dr. Hutchinson, a former professor at Virginia Theological Seminary and a man perceived to possess administrative talent and acumen. The bishop gave his approval, but not without expressing his misgivings due to the fragile state of the three existing parishes in the city. Dr. Hutchinson accepted the call as rector, and he officiated at the first worship service of St. George’s Church on 16 July 1845 in the basement of the Benton school on Sixth Street between Locust and St. Charles. (The first high school classes in St. Louis would be held at the school in 1853.)

St. George’s Church was named after the New York City parish of the same name whose late rector had been a distinguished leader in the church’s evangelical movement that was strongly supported by Dr. Hutchinson. Dr. Hutchinson’s first sermon, also published in printed form, outlined the direction in which he hoped to lead the parish. He endorsed “the moderate views, both of doctrine and practice which were so successfully taught by the burning and shining lights who first permanently planted the foundations of the Episcopal Church in this country.” He said that “we hold the sober and pious exercise of private judgment in religious matters to be not only a right but a duty incumbent upon every man who would become a sincere believer in truth. . . . We shall feel at perfect liberty, therefore, to examine for ourselves the opinions of the Fathers of all past ages; but we shall never feel under any positive obligation to subscribe implicitly to any of their views, unless they can be proved, as the Church requires, by most certain warrants of Holy Writ.” Dr. Hutchinson cited the authority of the Bible as the only source of any binding

authority for the Church in matters of doctrine and emphasized the doctrine of justification by faith. He showed an ecumenical open-mindedness, eschewing any “self-complacent arrogance . . . to denounce those who follow not with us. We dare not . . . insist that Episcopacy is in itself . . . so absolutely essential to the very existence of a Church, that its absence necessarily destroys all the validity of its sacraments and ordinances. . . . Remembering that God has set the broad seal of his Spirit upon the ministrations of many who received not their orders in the same line of succession with ourselves, we would strive to cultivate more fully that noble and expansive charity, which can recognize a Christian brother in every individual who bears the lineaments and produces the fruits of a spiritual life.”

The vestry voted on 1 September 1845 to purchase a lot on the northwest corner of Locust and 7th streets from Mr. James H. Lucas for the sum of \$7,300 (multiply all dollar figures in this e-letter by 29.7 to get an approximate present value, based on the CPI). The cornerstone was laid by Bishop Hawks on 16 April 1846. When the new church edifice was consecrated on 13 April 1848, the church had 120 communicants. Dr. Hutchinson reported 27 baptisms during the previous year as well as the presentation of 27 people for confirmation, the largest number from any church in the diocese. Things were off to a good start for the nascent parish. Then calamity struck.



St. George's Church, ca. 1867 (The tower had been recently removed due to unstable conditions.)

A cholera death was reported in St. Louis in December 1848, with eight more reported in January. Then an epidemic exploded in May. The death toll reached a peak in July, when 145 persons died in one day and 722 died in one week. The majority of the 4,547 victims who would die in the first seven months of 1849 were recent immigrants, a third of them children under five years of age. There is an absence of vestry meeting minutes during much of this period, one indication of how normal discourse was severely disrupted.

Then in the middle of the epidemic, fire broke out on 17 May on the steamer White Cloud which was docked two blocks north of Washington Avenue. The boat was cut loose and then drifted downstream bumping against boat after boat, setting fire to 22 steamers. Winds drove the fire to huge piles of freight on the levee and to the riverfront buildings. With inadequate water and equipment to fight the raging fire, buildings were blown up to create fire breaks. One building saved this way was the Old Cathedral (Roman Catholic) on the riverfront that stands today. The fire eventually burned 15 city blocks, and property loss was put at \$6.1 million. A state of normalcy did not return to the city until the final months of 1849.

When the vestry could again meet on 1 November 1849, they were faced with a financial crisis and the rector's letter of resignation. Dr. Hutchinson had been absent from the city during the worst months of the cholera epidemic, creating dissatisfaction among some in the parish who had witnessed the heroic pastoral care of the bishop during the epidemic. The vestry acknowledged the dissatisfaction, but persuaded the rector to continue. A fund-raising effort was sufficiently successful to address the current deficit.

Then in early 1850 Dr. Hutchinson told the vestry that he would not consider staying another year beyond the upcoming Easter unless an assistant was hired and the congregation “cheerfully” would allow him leave of absence during the summer months “under any and all circumstances.” He added, “. . . nothing but my convictions of duty and my sincere and grateful attachments to my friends could have availed to keep me, to the present, in such a path of thorns.” The vestry responded with a long letter dated 23 February 1850, stating that the decline in the church could be “traced, mainly, to the long absence of the rector this past season” and that a rector’s leadership is especially “needful while the organization is new, the discipline imperfect, and the individuals composing it unaccustomed to act together.” The vestry members further stated that they “regard the propositions you submit as involving a renewal of the disorganization of the past year, from which the church has not yet recovered.” As to the hiring of an assistant, the vestry said that was a financial impossibility and concluded their reply by saying that “if they have to part with you as pastor, they hope still to hold to you as an adviser and friend.”

The vestry then turned its attention to the financial crisis. After reviewing again the size of the operating budget shortfall, they reviewed the amount of debt owed on the property, an amount which inexplicably was heretofore unknown to the vestry. They concluded that unless something could be done quickly, the church would have to terminate operation at the end of the fiscal year. The congregation began another flurry of innovative fund raising measures to alleviate the situation lest they be required to “yield to the necessity of the times and forsake the altar so dear to them.”

With plans in place that looked like they might adequately address the financial crisis, Dr. Hutchinson decided to remain as rector and asked the Rev. Stephen Griffin Gassaway of Georgetown, Washington, D.C. to become his assistant. Mr. Gassaway arrived in January 1851. Then on 19 April 1851 Dr. Hutchinson again tendered his resignation, and this time the vestry accepted it. In their acceptance letter, they cited “the able support he has invariably and faithfully given to the cause of evangelical Christianity and the fraternal mission of the Protestant Episcopal Church.”



All churches undergo stressful situations, some of their own making, some not. History is replete with examples, and we can see how clergy and lay leadership — indeed entire parishes — responded, and the results produced by those responses. Here are some questions we might ponder:

- What calamities rocked St. George’s Church in its early years? Which ones were created by parish clergy and/or lay leadership? Which ones were beyond their control?
- With the limited information given above, how would you assess Dr. Hutchinson’s performance as rector? What did he do well? What might he have done better, and how might different approaches have benefited the parish?
- How would you assess the vestry’s performance? What did they do well? What might they have done better, and how might different approaches have benefited the parish?
- What lessons can we learn from these early years in the history of St. George’s Church that might help us live more faithfully into our future?

In next week's Centennial Moments in History e-letter, we will continue our look back at the history of St. George's Church.

*O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.*

*Under the shadow of thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is thine arm alone,
And our defense is sure.*

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