

HISTORY OF ST. JOHN'S CHURCH—WEST POINT, VIRGINIA, TO 1938

By Mrs. Herbert I. Lewis

The first Episcopal services held in West Point were held in a sitting room of the old Grove Hotel; later a room in the "Pythian Hall" was used. An aged minister came from Richmond every other Sunday afternoon, I can't now recall his name. The Methodist and Baptist churches were flourishing at that time, especially the Baptist church. They greatly outnumbered the Episcopalians and had so much more wealth represented in their members.

Our church lot was bought from Mr. Augustus Sizer in 1879. Our little band struggled on and succeeded in 1882 building a very simple church, Rev. Watson Wynn was called to take the Rectorship. He was a young, unmarried man, a very delightful gentleman. The only criticism I ever heard of him was that he would roll his trousers over his knees and sit on side of a boat while fishing in York River — many narrow minded citizens in those days.

Rev. Wynn was called away, and in 1863 Rev. Yates Dowman came to serve our little church. Our church flourished. He was much beloved by the older members and had the cooperation of all the young people in our church. He also had charge of St. David's at Aylett, Virginia, giving them a service each Sunday. Roads in King William County were terrible then and he had a long drive with horse and buggy. About this time, Miss Belle Lindsey trained what was called "Little Workers." They gave the Font in our church. Rev. Dowman had a large confirmation class, so many who had never attended an Episcopal church until he came to our town. Many were the regrets expressed when Mr. Dowman was called away. Our church building was still very bare looking, but the "Aid Society" worked hard, placed furniture in the Chancel and added many necessities. We had only one needy person in our congregation and we looked faithfully after her, supplying her with a good stove and groceries from time to time. I must mention that the choir at this time was located on the left side of the chancel. We had only a small organ, but some good voices in the choir. Miss Icy Starke was our organist.

Soon after Mr. Dowman left us Rev. Pendleton Brooke took charge of St. John's and St. David's,—he was a good man and faithful Pastor, but plain preacher—a delightful neighbor. Mrs. Brooke was gifted with a grand voice and was a great help to our choir. Mr. Brooke bought a lot on First Street and built our Rectory with the understanding that when he left us the vestry would return the money spent to him. This our vestry managed to do by borrowing money. Mr. Brooke left us to return West where he wished to educate his son and daughter.

In 1889 Rev. Yuger came to fill our pulpit. About this time our choir asked to have the organ put up in gallery of the church. Mr. H. I. Lewis called strong men from the wharf gang and the change was soon effected. The gallery ran across front of the church with steps in the vestibule. Mr. Yuger was a very scholarly man, sensitive and retiring, to know him well was to admire him. He was not a good mixer. Mr. Yuger left us to accept a country parish, he deemed it would be best for the health of his only child.

He was with us for eighteen months, until Mr. Ernest Stires arrived from the Seminary. Mr. Stires arrived in 1891. How can I find words to describe this wonderful man, his grand

personality, tact and policy,—old, young, married and single lost their hearts with him. Our church took on new life. On Easter Sunday there was not a vacant seat to be found in the church. The confirmation class formed two rows around the Chancel rail. He organized "The Brotherhood of St. Andrew." They met each week in the law office of Mr. H. I. Lewis; many men attended and the influence of this organization was felt in the town. The "Aid Society" held Bazaars and suppers, lunches, etc. One bazaar lasted three nights and \$350 was made clear of all expenses. Our Rectory was soon out of debt. A carpet to cover the entire floor of the church was then considered,—this brought on many discussions, as some thought a strip of carpet up the aisle and in the chancel was all that was necessary, but at last all agreed on the carpet and a dark red and black carpet web ordered. A group of young men with Mr. John Le Moine as Captain went after business hours and put down the carpet, they were all amateurs but did a good job. We were so proud of that carpet, nothing was too much to do for our beloved Rector. After Mr. Stires had been with us for sixteen months he was called to Augusta, Georgia. We plead and begged with tears in our eyes but to no avail. He left us just before Christmas. The Sunday before he left here, he preached a very touching sermon on the text, "Touch not thy anointed and do thy Prophets no harm."

Dr. Grammar then came down from Richmond on morning train on Sundays,—held services for us and left on afternoon train. A solid speaker and very intellectual man, he had no time to visit and few really knew him.

We needed a Rector, so called Rev. Thomas Baker, a hard student and good Pastor. He married Miss Mattie Starke who was our organist then but he soon left us to go to South Carolina.

In the early years of our church Capt. Robert E. Lee, Mr. P. H. Adams, Mr. Benjamin Robinson, Mr. Thomas Starke, and Dr. Charles Whiting were among our vestrymen.

Mr. Price followed Mr. Baker. Our church was his first charge in the ministry. He would get nervous at the sound of his own voice in the pulpit, lacked confidence in himself. A friend came to visit him and persuaded him to return with him to Tennessee. Mrs. Leo Trigg had been our organist for some years and again Mr. H. I. Lewis was called upon to have the organ put down in body of the church.

Now we called Rev. Hugh McDonald Martin of an old Scotch family in Fredericksburg, Virginia, he was just the opposite of Mr. Price, he had a dignified manner and winning voice in the pulpit. Our beautiful service never sounded more beautiful than when he read it. His voice added deeper tones and meanings to the words. Our choir added new members from other churches while he was with us. He also served St. David's. He left us for Crisfield, Maryland.

After this we felt discouraged and decided to have Lay Reading. Mr. H. I. Lewis read the service and a sermon to us for almost a year, then Bishop Gibson came and gave us a good talk, said we were too contented and we must stir ourselves and get a Rector.

So in 1901 Mr. Mitchell heeded our call,—a very sedate and retiring young man. During

his ministry our vested choir was started. The Aid Society" sent to St. Paul's church in Richrmond for patterns of cassocks and cottas. We all went to work, Mrs. William Green did all the cutting and each member of the "Aid" was responsible for one cotta and cassock. Such interest and excitement to have all ready by first Sunday in the month. A curtain was hung in the vestry room for the ladies to robe on one side and the Rector, Prof. Kenderson our organist, and Mr. Lewis on other side. This was best we could do. Some wanted to fix a robing room like they have at Ware Church in Gloucester but majority ruled. Little Marion Lewis led the vested choir. The anxiety for fear all would not go exactly right was depicted in all our faces that Sunday morning, but no cause for alarm and we were all just jubilant. Mr. Mitchell seemed sad these days, suffering from some personal grief. He wrote and asked the vestry to accept his resignation, which they did. He went to West Virginia where he has been very popular and most successful.

We had more Lay Reading. The vestry wrote to Mr. H. I. Lewis and asked him to conduct services for us, which he did for eleven months. Some were delighted with the short sermon he read.

Miss Matsie Catewood, a devoted member of our church, who always had our interest at heart, wrote and suggested we call Rev. Charles Holt. He had had charge of Trinity Church, Portsmouth, Virginia, some years before but was now in New York suffering from some throat trouble and was obliged to seek a milder climate. We sent an urgent call to him and he accepted in 1904. To know Mr. Holt was to love him. He was a commanding looking man, delightful in the pulpit; although his voice was often hoarse, his language was beautiful but sad and pathetic. I have seen him shed tears during the delivery of a sermon; he always seemed to plead unworthiness. He took much notice of the children in the church and all adored him. His confirmation class was composed of small girls and boys.

An artist friend from New York visited him and while here volunteered to draw plans to have our church remodeled—this he did. The gallery was taken down, new windows put in, the chancel enlarged, stained glass window put back of chancel, new choir stalls and solid oak pews, a tower added to the building, and an enlarged vestibule. The organ was put by the chancel on a raised platform, a robing room for ladies in the choir with hall connecting with the vestry room. We bought a second hand organ which had to be pumped; often there was no boy to pimp it and one of the vestrymen had to take a hand. Some awkward situations occurred. Once during a fashionable wedding the organ boy left the church before the ceremony was over, so bride and groom walked down the aisle in dead silence. Prof. Henderson had full charge of our choir at this time. We could count seventy members of our church at this time. I wrote to Bishop Ernest Stires and he sent us the handsome Bible we are now using. Dr. W. K. Gatewood gave the brace vases on our Altar in memory of his wife, Mary McCandlish, he also gave the cross on the Altar in memory of his little son, Thomas McCandlish Gatewood. Mrs. E. W. Wilkinson gave the silver collection plates and the Wilkinson family gave the Alms Basin in memory of Mr. E. W. Wilkinson. Mrs. Mariana W. Barham gave the cross used for vested choir. Mrs. Lizzie Wilkinson Westbury gave the veil for the font. The old carpet had to be discarded and sold and we bought a green and black three-ply carpet, a great improvement on the red carpet. Lieut. Kenneth McAlpine and Mr. Emmerson Smith offered to make our Pulpit. The work was done at the "Shipbuilding Plant" in Newport Hews, a very satisfactory piece of work which greatly adds to

our church.

Mr. Holt died very suddenly, — how we grieved to lose him and his charming family. Mr. E. T. Shoemaker gave the tablet in memory of Rev. Charles Holt, the background of this tablet is of old English oak. Had we ordered this tablet the cost would have been \$100.00. One vestryman said we could always look at this tablet and feel that his spirit was with us. —Lay reading again!

In 1907, Mr. Guy Christian came to serve our church, he had not been ordained Priest. For some good reason Bishop Gibson had postponed his ordination. He was a most pious and consecrated young man, very high churchman; no one, not even the janitress was allowed inside the Chancel rail, he attended to the dusting and cleaning. The church was kept open all the time, the vestry room was his study. He held services twice each day in Lent and had prayers whenever he visited any member of his congregation. About this time there was great interest and excitement in our town concerning Prohibition. Mr. Christian wrote letters to several of his vestrymen urging them to take special interest in this cause, his motive was good, but not well appreciated. He left here to enter the Missionary field in Alaska.

In 1909 Rev. Valentine Janes gave us part of his time. He lived in the Rectory in Urbanna, Va. and had charge also of Christ Church there. He was a gentleman of the old school. His health soon rendered him unable to serve the two churches and he resigned from St. John's.

In 1910 Rev. Hugh Sublett of Richmond came to us. To describe him would be to say, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God," He also had charge of the Chapel at King and Queen Court House and St. David's at Ayletts. Dr. Gravatt came from Richmond to attend our Convocation, he heard such lovely things said of Mr. Sublett that he at once asked him to come to "Holy Trinity" in Richmond and be his assistant. His loss was a blow to us and our church was closed for some time. We were discouraged.

But in 1914, Dr. W. E. Evans came, no one could have softened our resentment about the loss of Mr. Sublett better than Dr. Evans. He had had a breakdown and was not able to carry on the work in as large a church as Monumental, Richmond, so came to us. Our spirits revived and the "Ladies Aid" voted to give a generous sum each month to aid the vestry in payment of Dr. Evans' salary, which was more than we had ever paid our Rectors. Mr. and Mrs. Evans met the vestry and "Ladies Aid" in the Steere's home. We were so charmed with both of them that we would have promised anything to secure Dr. Evans for our Rector. Such wonderful personality. His sermons were like poems, indeed the English language was never more artistically portrayed. In his handsome vestments he looked like a portrait of some fine Artist. A picture long to be remembered.

Many were brought into our church during his ministry here, some whole families that have proved staunch members. His health began to fade and we suggested to him to take a vacation of a month. This he reluctantly agreed to do,—he died at this time at his home in Doswell, Virginia. Dr. Evans' most powerful sermon was from the text, "Render not unto the Lord that which costs you nothing." After Dr. Evans' death, Mrs. Evans presented to our church

the handsome white stole embroidered in gold thread, the stones in it are of no intrinsic value but just for ornamental purposes.

In 1915 when our hearts were sad and sore, Mr. Charles Shears came to us like a fresh breezy day in April. He was jolly and bright, popular with all classes. Only one summer with us and had charge only of St. John's,—all sorry when he left to return to Cherrydale. He had a most contagious laugh, always in good spirits, though very sympathetic.

Rev. John Scott who had no special charge came and held services for us each Sunday.

In 1916, Rev. McLaren Brydon came from Richmond to help us, he served us well and faithfully until Mr. Shacklett was called to be our Rector in 1917.

Mr. Shacklett tried hard to keep up with his studies at the Seminary and to attend to the duties of our Parish, He started the mission at "Euclid Heights," now "Port Richmond". Had services out there every Sunday afternoon in the school house, did fine work and was highly thought of. Mr. Shacklett left us for work in Norfolk. There was a tragedy that happened during Mr. Shacklett's ministry here, regretted by all and deeply regretted by Mr. Shacklett.

About this time the Rectory was sold for \$2,200.00. It was located on First Street next to Mr. Lewis' residence. About 1919 the vestry wrote to Judge Jones, our Circuit Judge, and asked if we could use \$600.00 of the Rectory fund to make some repairs in the church and get a new carpet. This was arranged and the "Ladies Aid" chose the carpet which was laid by Miller and Rhoads, purchased from them.

We conferred with Christ Church, Urbanna, and found we could make arrangements with Rev. Warren, he could give us a morning service every other Sunday and an evening service every other Sunday, We rented and furnished a room in Mrs. Nickol's home for him. But the plan did not seem to work out well and Mr. Warren decided that all his time was needed in "Christ Church School" and Church in Urbanna.

Dr. Nelson Dame then came to our rescue. He would come from Richmond on the Friday afternoon train, visit on Saturdays and remain here until Sunday afternoon. Mrs. Shacklett and her two children still lived here and we asked her to give Mr. Dame his Sunday dinner and also provide him with a room. He was very frequently entertained in other houses and was always an agreeable guest. Our church societies were then furnishing suppers to the Kiwanis Club, so we were able to assist in church expenses. The old stove was discarded and a new heating plant installed. Rev. Dame taught us like we were little children when expounding the doctrines of our Church.

In 1923 Mr. William St. John Blackshear of Texas was next to fill our pulpit,—a young man, the embodiment of culture and refinement. He was with us two summers, returning to the Seminary in the winters and trying to commute, but again this plan never worked out well. He took great interest in the "Boy Scouts", taking them camping and on trips and hikes, nothing was too much for him to do for his fellow men and the good of their souls. While he was here many

persons connected with St. John's church. The choir flourished for he gave them time and personal attention. He called to our attention all the needs in the church and he had a way of making us want to work and do our duty. He noticed the absence of any member from services and made it his business to inquire about them. He showed unusual talent in the pulpit. He owed a debt to the Bishop of California who helped him with his education and now that Bishop desired his services for a mission in California. While here he had permission from the Circuit Judge to perform his first marriage ceremony—this he did well. He could not administer the communion as he had not been ordained Priest at this time.

Rev. Nelson Dane then came again and had services for us, but after January first, 1924, did not come again.

Then we resorted to students from the Seminary. They came on Saturday nights and remained until Sunday afternoons. They were:

Mr. Beverly Boyd
Mr. Charles Sheerin
Mr. Watt
Mr. Charles Taylor

All very delightful in our pulpit and in our homes, we thoroughly enjoyed them.

September 1925, Mr. Charles Graves consented to hold services regularly for us. He was taking a course in medicine in Richmond preparatory to being a medical missionary. He never made his home here, but came every Sunday on early train from Richmond. We were not so impressed with him at first but we grew to know and like him. He expressed some very modern ideas and was firm in his convictions. He graduated from the "Medical College" in June and told us he would have to accept a position in a hospital in Washington. We were sorry to part with him and his congregation at Ayletts were deeply distressed. We all enjoyed an argument with him around our dinner tables. He was deep thinker and faith student. He had no time for visiting, consequently as in the case of several others our church could not increase its membership.

Rev. Cary Montague came then on Sundays. We hated to miss a single one of his sermons. Many said he had more religion than anyone in this world. He believed in being a happy and joyous Christian. We could always carry thoughts home with us from his sermons to help us in our everyday life. Many outsiders came to hear him, and we were sad when hearing his last sermon. But he told us Richmond was near and we could call on him at any time.

He spoke beautifully of his friend Rev. Arthur Gray who would be our next Rector. The Bishop had recommended him to our vestry and hoped we would call him to St. John's. This was done and in 1930 he came to this Parish, St. David's and King and Queen Chapel. Mr. Gray had had a severe illness, but his health improved until 1935 when he had a severe breakdown. He was a gentle, modest man. Had a very carrying voice and his sermons were much enjoyed, he was popular with each and all. If anyone was in trouble he was right there, no matter what their

religious belief was. Mrs. Gray was our organist and the three daughters sang in the Choir.

In the Spring of 1930, Mrs. Elis Olsson headed a band of faithful workers who painted the ceiling, walls and woodwork of the Vestry-room and robing room. Mrs. Olsson directed all the work and to her is the credit due. New linoleum was put on the floors and everything cleaned and put in order.

In 1931 Bishop St. George Tucker encouraged us to build a Rectory. A lot was bought on Tenth Street and a Dutch Colonial house was built for \$6,800.00. The Gray's were first occupants.

In 1937, Mrs. Tracy Miner started a fund to have the side walls of the church painted and woodwork cleaned. We were all so tired of the "Fleur De Lis" that Mr. Walter Kirby had put on the walls for us on an old rose background. But I must say those "Fleur De Lis" helped us often in a dull sermon, for we could entertain ourselves counting them. Mrs. Miner was most diligent in collecting money for this work. But after a struggle she made last payment and church was so improved with the light walls. Mrs. Olsson was asked to select the color for us which she did.

Here I want to mention that Mrs. A. J. Walcott supplied the wine for our communion for thirty years.

At the present time, 1938, Mr. Frank Perry is our Senior Warden and Mr. Tracy Miner is Junior Warden, Mr. W. L. Christian is Treasurer.

1938

Notes of Miss Elizabeth S. Gray carry the history of St. John's Church, West Point, forward from 1938, but they had not been transcribed at the time of the Time Capsule in September, 1970.

The list of rectors since 1938:

The Rev. Albert Muller
The Rev. Treadwell Davison
The Rev. E. Guthrie Brown
The Rev. Jack N. Eby
The Rev. William H. Jones
The Rev. H. Thompson Rodman
The Rev. Allen J. Green