

A Brief History of Bruton Parish Church

After Middle Plantation, between the York and James Rivers, was "laid out and paled in" in 1633, a parish with the same name was established. Colonists soon built a wooden church, but no one knows when or where.

In 1644, Harrop Parish in James City County became active, and it united with Middle Plantation Parish in 1658 to form Middletown Parish. Still more consolidation followed in 1674 when Marston Parish (1654) in York County merged with Middletown Parish to form Bruton Parish. The name honored the prominent Ludwell family and Governor Sir William Berkeley, whose ancestral homes were at Bruton in County Somerset, England.

Bruton's earliest vestry records of April 18, 1674, named the Reverend Roland Jones as the first rector and authorized buying glebe lands. Three years later, the vestry agreed to build a new brick church to serve the consolidated parish. In 1678, Colonel John Page, a wealthy colonist, donated a plot of land about 144 feet by 180 feet and £20 sterling for building a brick church and for the surrounding churchyard. Other subscribers pledged additional funds.

The brick church, about 60 feet by 24 feet, rose to the north and west of the present church building. Completed in 1683 and dedicated the next year at the Epiphany, Bruton Parish Church was of Gothic design with supporting buttresses. Soon the vestry authorized a steeple and a ring of bells. Royal approval of the structure came in 1694 when the governor, Sir Edmund Andros, gave the parish a large silver server (paten) which the church still has. Roland Jones died in 1688, and a succession of ministers followed.

A series of events in the 1690s quickly made the church inadequate. James Blair, commissary of the Bishop of London in Virginia, founded the College of William and Mary in 1693 and remained president of it for 50 years. In 1699, the General Assembly moved the colonial capital from Jamestown to Middle Plantation and renamed it Williamsburg. The influx of students, the governor and his entourage, and the legislature, as well as townspeople overwhelmed the small church. It was, after all, now the "court" church of colonial Virginia and soon took on appropriate trappings such as an altar cloth and cushion.

In 1706 the vestry considered building a larger church, and four years later the General Assembly agreed to fund pews for the governor, council, and burgesses. Governor Alexander Spotswood drafted plans for the structure: a cruciform-shaped church (the first in Virginia) 75 feet long, 28 feet wide, with 14½-foot long transepts (wings.) Construction began under the watchful eye of James Blair, rector from 1710 to 1743 and also president of William and Mary, and was finished in 1715. The church soon had all the required furnishings: Bible, prayer books, altar, font, cushions, surplice, bell, and reredos tablets.

As the 18th century unfolded, Bruton increased in prominence and grandeur. It was the center of activity for both government officials and townspeople. In fact, tombstones and monuments in the church and the churchyard are tributes to royal governors, members of the council, and local leaders who are buried there. Later additions--an enlarged chancel, galleries, the churchyard wall, the Jamestown baptismal font, the Tarpley bell (Virginia's Liberty Bell), and a new steeple enhanced the building. A highly prized organ, installed in 1756, became a centerpiece, and professionally trained musician, Peter Pelham, served as organist for the next 46 years.

During this time, Bruton acquired such treasures as the Book of Common Prayer (1751) and the Holy Bible (1753) and three sets of communion silver. The 17th-century Jamestown Church communion service came to Bruton circa 1750s, and the King George III set a decade later. The Jamestown service is on display at the Jamestown Settlement; the George III service is at the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Gallery. A third communion service, the Queen Anne set, was a gift of Lady Gooch to the College in 1775 and consisted of a two-handled cup with a cover, both washed in gilt, and a paten. Bruton later acquired the set but returned it to the College in 1985.

When they were members of the Virginia House of Burgesses, men who would lead the fight for independence and for creating a new government worshiped at Bruton. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry attended when the legislature was in session. As emotions and rhetoric heated during the years before the American Revolution, special services took place at Bruton. After the Stamp Act passed in 1765, burgesses expressed their distress in a service at Bruton. The closing of the port of Boston in 1774 touched off another protest when the burgesses marched in solemn procession to the church for a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer.

The Reverend John Bracken, rector from 1773 to 1818 and president of William and Mary from 1812 to 1814, guided Bruton through these tumultuous times. It was probably Bracken who crossed out the prayer for the king in the lectern-size prayer book of 1751 and substituted a prayer for the president of the United States. Recently conserved, this rare Book of Common Prayer is kept in the Special Collections Research Center at the College of William and Mary's Swem Library and is occasionally displayed.

Before the end of the Revolution, fortunes of Bruton Parish had begun to decline. In 1776 the Virginia House of Burgesses disestablished the Anglican Church by ending tax support. Four years later the capital moved to Richmond, depriving Bruton of the bulk of its membership. Still another blow fell in 1804 when the court ordered the sale of the glebe lands owned by Bruton, which finally happened in 1813.

Poverty stricken, the church declined in communicants and the building fell into disrepair. After 1828, "modernization" got underway at great cost to the colonial beauty of the church. The old high-backed pews were cut down and painted; the organ was given to the organist, sold, and the profits used for remodeling; all "unnecessary" furnishings such as the high corner pulpit and the flagstone flooring were sold. A partition shortened the nave, and the altar stood at the west end. The space behind the altar became a Sunday School room, and the tower served as a coal bin. By 1840 the completely transformed interior bore no resemblance to the old church. Impoverished Bruton even rented out pews to generate operating funds.

After the Battle of Williamsburg in May 1862, Bruton served as a hospital for wounded Confederate soldiers. The Reverend Thomas M. Ambler, rector from 1860 to 1872, tried to substitute a prayer for the governor instead of one for the president, but occupying Union forces forbade the change. Ambler then conducted Sunday services at his own home until he joined the Confederate army as a chaplain.

Bruton and all of Williamsburg struggled to recover from the Civil War, and by the mid-1880s the church was able to make some repairs to the interior. The Catherine Memorial Society, made up of children and a forerunner of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, raised funds for furnishings and also began repairing old tombstones and monuments in the churchyard. In 1896 the Reverend William T. Roberts, rector from 1894 to 1902, initiated the move to repair exterior walls and restore the "sadly mutilated and defaced interior," but it was not until the Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin, rector from 1903 to 1909, arrived that real restoration efforts began.

Between 1905 and 1907, the church partially regained its original form. The partition was removed, and the altar was returned to the east end. A high pulpit with a sounding board, a silk canopy over the governor's pew, and a new organ adorned the building. In 1907, commemorating the 300th anniversary of the settlement at Jamestown, Great Britain's King Edward VII presented Bruton with a large Holy Bible and President Theodore Roosevelt donated a bronze lectern.

Returning as rector from 1926 to 1938, Goodwin was instrumental in convincing John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to restore Williamsburg to its colonial appearance. Bruton was part of that restoration, and in 1938-1939 a complete renovation and authentic replica of the old church gave us today's magnificent building. At the same time, a new parish house and a new rectory increased Bruton's properties. Over the years, the parish house has grown larger and includes a chapel. The rectory is now used for parish functions and as housing for scholars and clergy as needed.

After 1940, Bruton flourished, first under the rectorship of the Reverend Francis H. Craighill (1938-1956), then the Reverend Cotesworth Pinckney Lewis (1956-1985). Membership expanded; programs multiplied; and services to parishioners, visitors, and the wider community grew. Festivals such as Christmas and Easter have been televised nationally, and Bruton hosted well-known theologians during a "Great Preacher" series.

More recently, under the leadership of the Reverend Herman Hollerith IV, rector from 1999 until 2008 and now bishop of the Diocese of Southern Virginia, and the Reverend Ronald Jaynes, current interim rector, Bruton strives to answer the call to serve our Lord in a multitude of ways. Services on Sundays, holidays, and weekdays attract hundreds, and religious education for adults and children is thriving. Especially important is the extraordinary music program, led by organists and choir directors JanEl B. Will and Rebecca E. Davy, which culminates with the Rockefeller Concert each spring. Bruton continues to reach out to about 1,500 members, as well as students, visitors, and the wider community, and indeed the world with its timeless message of praise to the risen Lord.