

## The First Church of the First First-Lady



We welcome all visitors to this historic parish. Virginia's General Court confirmed the establishment of St. Peter's Parish on April 29, 1679. In the summer of 1700 the vestry ordered that a second Lower Church replace an earlier, structurally weak building known as the Broken Back'd Church. The new church, begun in 1701, was in use by July 1703. Today it is the oldest parish church in the Diocese of Virginia and the fourth oldest in the Commonwealth.

Martha Dandridge, St. Peter's most famous parishioner, was born at Chestnut Grove on June 2, 1731. She married Col. Daniel Parke Custis, a member of the vestry and former churchwarden, in June 1749. Her father, Major John Dandridge, had also served as churchwarden and vestryman, and her great-grandfather had been the first rector of nearby Bruton Parish. After eight years of marriage she was widowed with two surviving children.

On the sixth of January 1759 the Rector of St. Peter's Parish, the Rev'd Mr. David Mossom, solemnized the marriage of Col. George Washington and the Widow Custis. It has always been assumed that another future First-Lady, Letitia Christian, later the wife of President John Tyler, was baptized in the parish church in 1790.

The original portion of St. Peter's Parish Church is one of the few Jacobean structures in America and its 1740 stump tower is also rare. The body of the church is laid in English bond as are only three other colonial Virginian churches. In the churchyard are a number of colonial tombs, and the parish still possesses its Vestry Book (1684-1758) and Register (1685-1786).

The parish was represented by Col. William H. Macon at the first Convention of the Diocese of Virginia in 1785. From 1843 when the vestry reorganized and called the Rev'd Edwin A. Dalrymple as rector, Episcopalians and Presbyterians worshipped somewhat as one congregation until 1856 by alternating the Liturgy from Sunday to Sunday.

During the War Between the States the church was desecrated by Federal troops. General Robert E. Lee, whose wife was Mary Ann Randolph Custis—Martha Washington's great-granddaughter—wrote on October 23, 1869 that *St. Peter's is the church where General Washington was married and attended in early life. It would be a shame to America if allowed to go to destruction.* His son, General William Henry Fitzhugh Lee, superintended the work of restoring the old church, contributed needed lumber, and furnished teams and hands for the hauling.

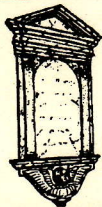
Money for the renovation was raised by the Rev'd Henry S. Kepler, Evangelist of the Diocese, who had become rector when the war broke out. The church was reopened for Divine Service on Sunday, November 10, 1872 and the Rev'd Mr. Dalrymple, who gave a stone font that the parish still possesses, preached the sermon.

St. Peter's Church Restoration Association was organized on July 20, 1922 and the Virginia General Assembly designated St. Peter's Parish Church as *The First Church of the First First-Lady* on March 11, 1960. With the assistance of architectural and ecclesiological experts on both sides of the Atlantic, the interior of the building was elegantly restored to a colonial appearance in 1964.

The marble monument on the north wall of the chancel honors Parson Mossom (1690-1767), rector for forty years, who probably lies buried beneath the chancel. The three-decker pulpit, the Holy Table, the octagonal font and cover, the psalm-board, the Royal Arms, and many other furnishings in late 17th-c. style as well as service-books of the period are all reminders of the more than three centuries of witness that this parish and church have borne to the honor and glory of Christ the Lord.

Today St. Peter's continues its tradition of witness as a parish of the Episcopal Church and is an active Christian presence in the community of New Kent County, Virginia.

May God preserve thy going out and thy coming in both now and forever more.



The marble wall-monument on the south side of the chancel, sculpted in 1737 by Michael Sidnell of Bristol, England, is one of the oldest of the few such monuments in America and a rare signed example. It honors vestryman William Chamberlayne whose son Richard introduced Col. Washington to Mrs. Custis.