

Beyond <sup>The</sup> Red Door



### **A Historical Treasure at St. Stephen's**

By E. Ray Walker

This much we know about the early history of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church: It was built in 1821 on land donated by Revolutionary War hero Brig. Gen. Edward Stevens.

Before and after that, things get, well, complicated.

Now, thanks to the dedicated work of St. Stephen's parishioners Mary Ann Coward and Julie Weatherby and Little Fork historian Don Stockton, light is beginning to shine once again on some of that complicated history. For better or for worse.

The St. Stephen's historical documents dating to the 1700s, as well as recent church business records, have been stored in the Vault, a closet in the basement of the parish hall. It was brought to the attention of the Vestry that the Vault was severely overcrowded, and more space was crucial for financial and personnel records. Mary Ann was asked by Vestry senior warden Kim Helsel to take on the job of making space in the parish hall basement library so the historical documents could be moved out of the Vault into a dedicated Archives space.

"God was smiling on me when Julie agreed to help," Mary Ann says. "It was a labor of love." That "labor of love" involved weeks of cleaning out books and organizing the shelves. Mary Ann enlisted additional help from Jim Matz and Gerard Weatherby during the clearing-out phase.

Mary Ann says, “We’re working on layers of paperwork and boxes of photos, old Bibles and construction. We felt that the Vestry Minutes were top priority, and we’ve begun to get them labeled by years and in binders. The job is half done.”



*(The Vestry minutes and packets labeled and in binders)*

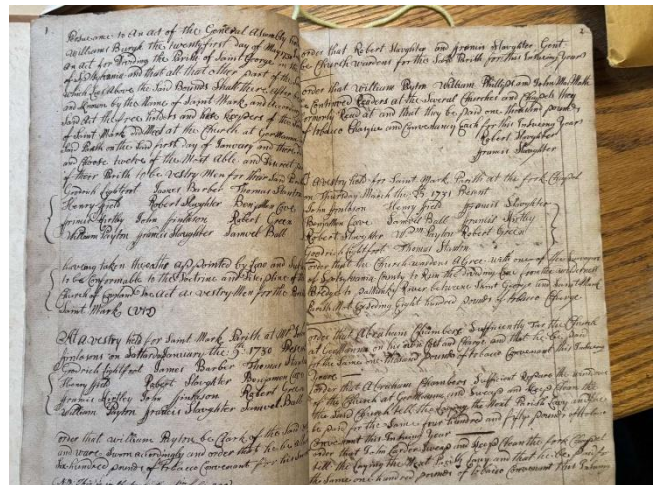
Julie adds, “The main goals of making space in the Vault and of having a dedicated historical Archives space are mostly accomplished. Still to do are moving a few more items from the Vault to the Archives, organizing both the Vault and the Archives a bit better, perhaps finding places on walls for some paintings and plaques, and gradually scanning more historical documents into digital format.”

There is no deadline for completing the work.

In the beginning, to borrow a phrase, there was sizable number of Episcopalians in Culpeper before the downtown church was built. In fact, according to Journey Through Hallowed Ground, in 1814 the Diocese of Virginia’s Convention could list only 10 towns and five counties in which the Episcopal Church showed signs of life; Culpeper County was one.

There are several references in pre-1821 documents about Episcopalians meeting at the Culpeper Court-house.

In Stevens’ will dated August 24, 1820, he stated: “Then I promised to give unto the Trustees of the protestant Episcopal church one acre of Land to build a church thereon.” The exact date of construction was not known until 1916, when the cornerstone in the northwest wall of St. Stephen’s nave was removed and a tablet found. The partial inscription read, “James Monroe, Pres. U.S.A. 46th Year of American Independence.” This inscription established the date of the church’s construction as 1821.



*(A page from a Vestry Book dated January 9, 1730 - March 13, 1871)*

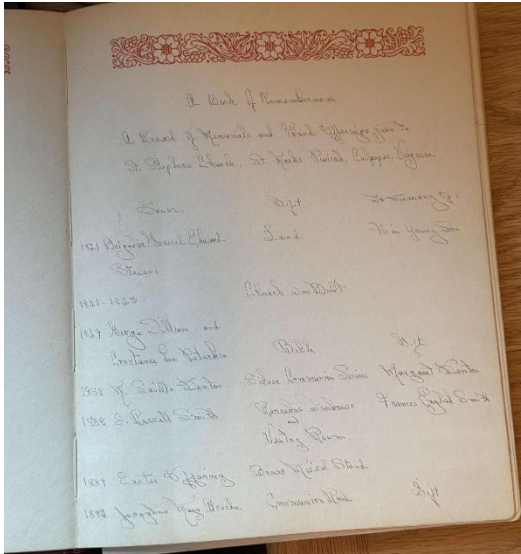
The church building, an architecturally insignificant rectangular brick box, was erected on an acre of land as a memorial to Stevens’ deceased young son. Stephen’s / Stevens, get it?

Yet, there is a problem here. Which son does the church memorialize? The prominent Culpeper landowner had two sons, John (1765-1820) and Edward Jr. (1773-1795). Both died before their father.

But wait, there’s more. At a Diocesan meeting in 1815, six years before the church was built, the Culpeper congregation at the meeting used the name “St. Stephen’s.” While that might be thought to argue for Edward over John, it seems equally plausible that the name St. Stephen’s predated the idea

of the church building being a memorial to Stevens' son. So it could just as well be John, as his death was contemporary with the church's construction.

Confusion reigns.



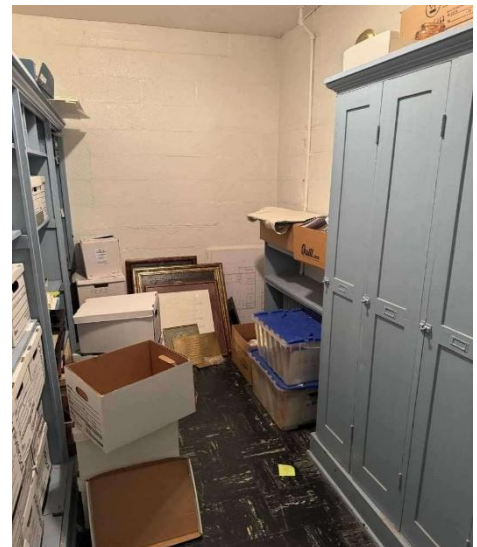
An aside: According to Culpeper historian Zann Miner Nelson, Stevens Sr. also willed the Presbyterians one acre of land to build in town. "However, the Presbyterians thought better of establishing their church so close to the Episcopalians — St. Stevens on north East Street — that they purchased a half-acre lot on the north end of what was then Coleman, now Main Street." The book "Early Churches of Culpeper County" states the Presbyterians thought it "inadvisable to be adjacent to the Episcopal Church." Take that, you Catholic lites!

There was nothing about the new building in 1821 to suggest it would become a jewel of historic Culpeper two centuries later. Expansion, renovations and rebuilding did wonders.

Stevens died on Aug. 17, 1820. He is buried in Culpeper Masonic Cemetery on land he donated. (Stevens Street in Culpeper is named in his honor.)  
Back to the Vault.

The Vault/Library project comprises three rooms. All three are on the lower level of Peterkin Memorial Hall, the parish hall. If you walk from the parish hall past the kitchen and proceed downstairs toward the acolyte room and the restrooms, the Vault is on the right near the bottom of the stairs. Keep walking past the acolyte room and the restrooms, and you will come to the Library.

—The Vault: This is a small, locked room near the bottom of the stairs for financial and personnel records. Cowherd says it's more like a closet than a room. When the Cowherd/Weatherby/Stockton project is completed, the Vault will contain boxes of personnel and financial records and records of building projects such as construction drawing.



—The Library: A small meeting room with shelves of books for the congregation's use. Many books from the library were given away; some were outdated or of more general than religious interest. Parishioners are welcome to visit the Library whenever the parish hall is open. They may borrow a book. Important: Please remember to return borrowed books.

—The Archives: This room, next to the Library, contains historical church documents from the 1700s to the present. Also in the Archives are artworks and plaques. The room houses Vestry meeting minutes, annual reports, parish profiles, parish registers, church bulletins, directories, photographs and other historical miscellany.



The church is keeping everything deemed of historical interest. Don Stockton, the archivist from Little Fork Episcopal Church, has started scanning the documents into digital format.

The first parish register we have for Culpeper dates from 1794. It was transcribed into typewritten form and indexed by Donna Stevens Boyd in 2001 to 2002. Many of the oldest documents were rebound in new covers by Angus Green.

Notable in the documents are accounts of payments in guineas, shillings, pounds sterling (pre-Revolutionary War) and levies for assorted services to be paid in tobacco.

Vault project co-leader Julie was amazed by this currency discovery. “Most interesting to me was all the entries in the 1700s for payments to be made in pounds of tobacco. The church, and perhaps the community in general, apparently used Pounds of Tobacco as the prevailing unit of currency in the 1700s.”

Dig deeply into the Vault and one uncovers some Culpeper Episcopal “firsts”:

### **FIRSTS, ETC.**

The first recorded Culpeper Episcopal baptisms were on October 4, 1794:

- Jinny Pierce, daughter of Mr. William Pierce
- William Catlett, son of Mr. Kemp Catlett

The first recorded Culpeper Episcopal marriage was May 4, 1794. Mr. Michael Bannen and Miss Frances Brown were married by John Woodville.  
Some funerals are recorded but not until a later date.



The first Episcopal rector in Culpeper was the Rev. John William Hawley, 1814-1817. An image of Hawley is on St. Stephen’s wall of rectors in the parish hall. The St. Stephen’s church building was constructed during the ministry of the Rev. Herbert Marshall, 1820-1822.

St. Stephen’s vast history is buried in those documents. The oldest item found is the vestry book from the 1700s. Some pages are faded and unreadable. The handwriting in places is difficult to read. Other pages are fine. This trove of information is fascinating, with marriages, baptisms and funerals listed. And some are cringeworthy. For example, among the baptisms are:

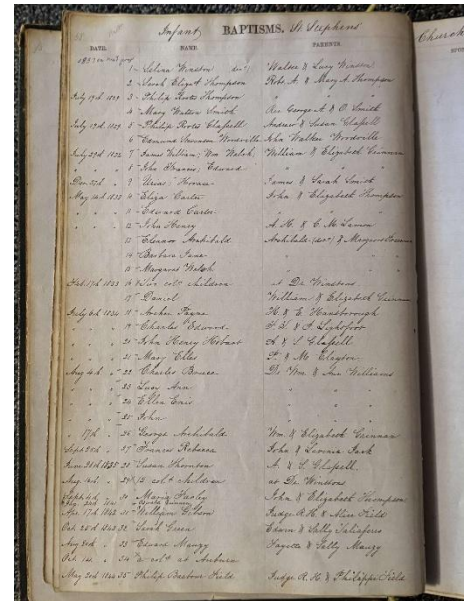
- A negro girl belonging to Archibald Tutt.
- A negro girl child belonging to ... Slaughter.
- Boy named Abraham belonging to Mr. Hume.
- Juno, a negro girl of Mr. Marshal's.
- Negro boy of Mr. Marshal's.

You get the idea.

*(Our Father, forgive us our sins. Amen.)*

## THE CIVIL WAR

Culpeper — town and county — was devastated by the Civil War. Mary Jo Browning's chapters in the book "Early Churches of Culpeper County, Virginia," provides a glimpse of St. Stephen's during that time.



Mary Jo quotes the Rev. John Cole, in his 1865-1866 report:

"Since my last report of 1861, cruel war has raged. Pen cannot write or words utter the trials of mind and heart, and the privations endured. All the Episcopal churches in this county, and every other place of worship within the lines of the Federal army (except the Baptist and Episcopal churches at the Court-house), were utterly destroyed by it during the winter of 1863-1864. The whole country is a widespread desolation. The people, peeled and poor, are struggling for a living. During the occupation by the Federal army, we were not permitted to use our church. We worshipped God, like primitive Christians, in private houses, and never did the services of the church seem sweeter or more comforting. I visited the sick and wounded, and buried the dead of both armies alike — the number of funerals being 490."

When Cole says "at the Court-house," he means the courthouse and its surrounds, that is the town of Culpeper. They were not meeting inside the courthouse in the 1860s.

Sadly, there are no Vestry books from the 1800s.

## SOLVE A ST. STEPHEN'S MYSTERY

Attention St. Stephen's history class: Your homework assignment is to answer a question you have been thinking about forever. On the brick path from the church to the parish hall — and near the parish hall door — is a collection of bricks, one with the number "1723" etched on it. Other bricks seem to have had etchings at some time, but they are indecipherable now.

Your assignment is to solve the mystery of these bricks. Send your answers to [rayreklaw@aol.com](mailto:rayreklaw@aol.com).

