

Part III - Abandonment

In a brief history that is included in many Hungars Church publications, a single sentence summarizes a period in history that might have been devastating to this building and its congregation:

“After the Revolutionary War, the church was unused for nearly forty years, and stripped of its Colonial furnishings.”

Consider that this building - which had been built with such pride - was only 30 years old at the time of the War. Supported by the income from the Glebe property as well as by tithes, the church had been financially secure. Until the war, virtually every colonist within parish boundaries was assumed to be a member of the church. This church had been vested with the responsibility to oversee the social welfare of the entire community. Nevertheless, in 1781, the doors of Hungars church were closed and the congregation seemed to disappear.

Neglected, the lovely building began to deteriorate. Vandals began their stealthy work: the famed crimson velvet church hangings disappeared, only to reappear in smaller pieces throughout the neighborhood; leaden parts of the pipe organ were said to have been melted down and re-purposed as lead sinkers by fishermen. (Somehow the silver communion vessels survived, to be used again in the next century.) One wonders how former church members could pass by this magnificent building for forty years and watch its gradual decline. What were their sentiments about this building? What were their thoughts about the institution it represented?

These passers-by were doubtless swept up in the anti-British sentiment of the Revolution – and the “Church of England” had been a most visible, local representation of that now dislodged power. But there had always been dissenters among the colonists and these were now pleased to be free of a church that had operated like a glove on the heavy hand of a remote government. For many colonists, resentment of a powerful state-supported church had been simmering for a long time.

In addition, seven Anglican churches on the Eastern Shore in 1776 could not possibly address the spiritual needs of the 20,000 residents in a meaningful way. Most people were simply unchurched, and their indifference to the state of this fine brick building in their midst would not be unexpected.

Consider also the ministers who were sent from England to serve the parishes. They may have been well educated in universities in England and properly ordained and orthodox, but they were not known for their piety, diligence, or competence. There are exceptions, of course, but stories abound of those ministers notorious for drinking, fighting, gambling, or neglecting their duty. The Glebe income guaranteed a fairly comfortable living that was unrelated to job performance. Oversight of the colonial ministers was provided by the Bishop of London – 3700 miles away. Before the War there had been talk of seating a Bishop in the colonies to support better discipline, but the colonists were reluctant to be saddled with another authority whose allegiance would be to the crown and whose powers would rival that of the governor. And on the other side, the “mother church” declined to consecrate a bishop for the colonies, whose loyalty could not be guaranteed. Without a bishop, there could be no discipline, no confirmations, no ordinations, and in reality, no local initiative.

So, the Anglican Church in 1776 was feeble, marked by laxity, apathy, and general irrelevance to most people. At the time of the War, many Anglican ministers simply returned to England or moved to Canada, and the Anglican Church was officially disestablished in 1784. Doubtless, the church represented an institution whose dominance had rightly ended.

The Congress of the fledgling United States arranged for the transfer of Church of England buildings and possessions to a new American episcopal church, but it would be decades before such a church could be properly organized and for its influence to be felt on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

Meanwhile, as the Church of England was disappearing, two new denominations swept in to fill the void it left.

On Easter Day of 1776, the last Anglican minister in Hungars Parish, the Rev. Samuel McCroskey, failed to appear at the Old Magothy Bay church where his congregation had assembled for worship. Among those gathered was a visitor from across the bay named Elijah Baker. When the crowd finally realized there would be no service that day and began to leave, Elijah Baker politely asked if he could say a few words. His words were powerful Baptist preaching, and although not everyone was persuaded that day, a few people were moved – enough to give the Baptist movement a foothold on the Eastern Shore. This was the beginning of the Lower Northampton Baptist Church, which is still a strong church to this day.

On Pentecost Sunday of that same year, the Rev. McCroskey preached a sermon directly addressing the threat of the Baptist incursion but he was helpless in the face of Elijah Baker's zeal and the spirit of the times. The Baptist movement spread rapidly and by 1783, Baker had established "Hungars Baptist Church" right in Bridgetown. This is the church we know today as Red Bank Baptist Church, now located in Marionville. Baker went on to establish 13 more Baptist congregations on the Delmarva peninsula, including Hollies Baptist Church in Keller. It is easy to imagine that many former parishioners of Hungars would have been attracted to this engaging Christian force.

At the same time another mighty movement was sweeping down the shore. Decades before, Anglican minister John Wesley had been visiting the colonies as a missionary and had been greatly influenced by "The Great Awakening." He founded the reforming movement in the Anglican church known as Methodism, which became as powerful and contagious a spiritual force as Baker's Baptist religion, and its reach extended to the Eastern Shore. A visit from the Methodist missionary Francis Asbury inspired Johannes Johnson, down the road from Hungars Church, to build a chapel "for the use of the Methodist preachers and friendly Clergy of the Church of England (so called)" in 1790. Doubtless, many disaffected Anglicans would have found a home at Johnson's Church, where worship would have resembled what they were accustomed to.

So, following the Revolution, religious life on the Eastern Shore was marked by the demise of one denomination and the flourishing of two new ones. The Rev. Samuel McCroskey - unable to compete with the appeal of the Baptists - nevertheless was a patriot. He remained in the county, living in the Glebe, baptizing, burying and otherwise serving his diminishing flock until 1803 when he died.

Whenever there is change, there are always the hold outs who remain loyal to what is passing. Hungars Church and its sister church Magothy Bay were closed and the Anglican Church existed no longer. Still, a remnant remained. In 1782, Hungars Vestry records cease, but a Mrs. Annie Parker wrote the following:

The episcopal church in Northampton has been small and feeble, the grief of all the friends of Zion. I became a communicant on Christmas Day 1813. At that time there were 7 communicants...[seven more ladies] soon joined the little band....Hungars and Maggothy Bay Churches were deserted and worship was conducted at the Court House at Eastville.... In 1821 the communicants increased to "the twenty-two."

The forty years of Hungars' closure seem like a period of exile and diaspora. But while this church was quiet, something new was emerging from the ashes of the colonial Anglican Church. The American ministers who remained in the new country – Samuel McCroskey among them – helped bring to life the new Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America. This church which sought to remain in the apostolic tradition, chose Samuel Seabury to be sent to England for consecration as a bishop, which would allow the fledgling church to confirm, ordain, consecrate – and grow. When England presented obstacles (requiring allegiance to the king), Seabury traveled to Scotland, was properly consecrated as a bishop, and returned to the United States. In each state a new bishop was seated, and these bishops were zealous to revive, restore, and rebuild. The revival of the Anglican tradition in a new American church led to an astonishing period of evangelism and church planting that – in its own way – rivaled the Baptist and Methodist movements.

Virginia's Bishop R. C. Moore re-opened the churches that had been closed for so long. Old Magothy Bay Church was found to be beyond repair and to replace it, Christ Church in Eastville was built in 1828. Christ Church soon became the largest Episcopal congregation on the Eastern Shore and it remained so for more than 150 years

What about Hungars Church? It still stood, and its doors re-opened in 1819, and Bishop Moore re-consecrated the building in 1821. The Hungars congregation seems to have remained quite small; its communicants numbered fewer than thirty for much of the 19th century. Hungars may have been hindered by two difficulties which consumed the small congregation's attention and resources: continuous repairs and a lengthy legal battle to retain ownership of the Hungars Glebe property.

The small congregation, with the help of its glebe income, managed to pay to repair the church for its reopening in 1819. In 1828 there were more substantial repairs, followed by a new roof in 1837 and in 1840 a complete remodeling which eliminated most of the colonial features of the interior. In spite of all this work, in 1850 the roof was discovered to be in imminent danger of collapsing, and the congregation immediately vacated. Vestry minutes reveal the stunning decision:

"that the Old Hungars Church be taken down and a new one be erected on the same site using the materials in the old building, as far as might be considered sound and suitable."

Bids were sought for the building's demolition, and providentially, Thomas Stevenson of Snow Hill responded with a proposal that would save the church. The changes he made removed any remaining boast of being the longest and second largest colonial church. Nevertheless, Stevenson's careful work has enabled the building to survive in sound condition to this day.

In 1802 Virginia's General Assembly had passed an act requiring the sale of all church glebe properties in order to fund the work of the Overseers of the Poor. While the Rev. Samuel McCroskey still occupied the Glebe, Northampton County did not pursue the matter then --- or for many years after. Eventually, in 1834, the Overseers of the Poor took notice of the considerable asset. Hungars tried to

retain its glebe, claiming that this land had been a private gift and was not therefore subject to seizure. Many years of litigation followed. Norfolk lawyer Tazewell Taylor wrote "Within the last forty years the question presented by the well-known case of the Hungars Glebe has been considered by every lawyer of reputation in Virginia...." William Meade, Bishop of Virginia, wrote in 1851:

"Years have already passed in painful controversy. Great have been the expenses to the Church, and much the loss in various ways which has been sustained. The peace of the county has been much impaired by it. Political questions, and election to civil offices, have been mixed up with it and Christians of different denominations estranged from and embittered toward each other."

In 1879, Hungars Church at last relinquished its claim to the Glebe property. The Vestry had inadvertently allowed 7 months to lapse between rectors, thus failing to meet one of the conditions of Stephen Charlton's will.

How did the small congregation cope with the loss of this important source of income? And how did Hungars continue through the years of Civil War and Union occupation? Did this building ever witness the spiritual revival that had caused neighboring churches to grow and thrive? These questions await further exploration.

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