

The Rambler Writes of Old Maryland Churches

An Early Presbyterian Church on Cabin John—A Mention of Potomac Church and the People Who Worshipped There—Newspaper Articles That Disagree—Some Facts About Roads.



OLD "CABIN" ON THE ROAD.

IN the third narrative of the series having for their text or theme the country through which Persimmon Tree lane runs the Rambler wrote a few paragraphs about Potomac Church. It is a Methodist church and the small structure, in its plain and simple architecture, no doubt reflects the plain and simple religious faith of the good men and the better women who gather there on Sunday and on other days to send up their prayers and songs to the throne of grace. As the Rambler so far understands the history of this place, the little church has been standing there since 1850, and perhaps nobody need be reminded that seventy years is quite a long stretch of time as we measure years in America.

A single year brings so many changes that in computing the change that has taken place since the plain little church was dedicated to the service of God and man it might be fairer to multiply its years not by seventy, but by the square of seventy. And for thirty years before 1850 a plain little frame church stood where this little church stands now. It also was a Methodist house of worship. That carries us back to 1820. And for many years before 1820, but the exact number the Rambler is not able to determine, another little church stood there. That was a Presbyterian church. The date of its foundation was perhaps some time about 1723, and that church was identified with early Presbyterians in the region of Washington.

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The Presbyterian church was burned down in 1820, or the year before, and it does not seem probable that it could have been the first church on this site, because a frame church is not apt to endure within about three years of a century, and a congregation founded in 1723 or thereabouts probably outgrew or became otherwise dissatisfied with its church home before the passage of ninety-seven years. So it is likely that more than three churches have stood at this place.

The burying ground has been in use since the first church was built and it is very easy for the reader to think how richly this God's acre is impregnated with the ashes of men who called this part of the country their home. The Rambler has no means of knowing how many men, women and children who looked upon and loved the same hills, valleys, brooks and rivers that we do have been gathered at last into the small oak-grown space about this little church. It must give even to the rudest man who strays that way a feeling of reverence to reflect on the countless good, friendly and pious thoughts or emotions that have been felt and expressed where this plain little frame church stands. It is curious to speculate on how much influence for good this plain little church and the other plain little churches that previously occupied this place have exercised on man. Descendants of people who have knelt and bowed their heads in prayer in this place are scattered all over the world and must be especially numerous in the District of Columbia and the nearby sections of Maryland and Virginia.

This church stands back from that main road, called the Falls road, which leads from Rockville to Great Falls. That it is one of the old roads of the Washington neighborhood is proved by the date of the building of the first church, and it is very likely that it was a much used road when that church was built. Our ancestors in picking out a site for a church naturally chose a central one. They set up this church near the center of population or near the center of the Presbyterian population, which is very much the same thing, for that part of Montgomery county in the early eighteenth century was strongly Presbyterian. It is fair to assume that the road leading through this part of the country was among the early roads in this vicinity. No doubt the Rambler could take a day off from his regular work and by digging into acts of the Maryland assembly year after year could find the exact date on which the construction of this road was authorized, and if there is any vehement demand from his readers for that particular piece of information he will look it up.

This road, because it passes through a section of country now thickly settled with prosperous people, has been highly improved, or it may be that the section is thickly settled by prosperous people because the road has been highly improved. At any rate, because it is a good road and because of the scenic and historic interest of the country through which it passes, it is now one of the important automobile roads in the Washington region. Automobiles rush along it at great speed and frequent intervals.

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The Rambler does not mention this with the idea that he is paying any compliment to the road. Perhaps

quite the reverse. For as a rule an automobile road is less interesting and less useful for purposes of rambling than an ox-cart road, a saddle-horse road or a buggy road. Automobiles are very disturbing to humble pedestrians, and it is only now and then that one is kind enough to stop and give a man a lift. But the Rambler is not making any complaint, because in walking along this road he has been pretty lucky in getting lifts. Never yet has the Rambler been so unappreciative or affected as to say, when asked to take a ride: "No, thank you; I am walking for health and profit." The main disappointment toward an automobile road is that so many machines go by without stopping. But, and however, though walking is hard work, it is said to be quite healthy.

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A number of years ago, in writing of the Soldiers' Home grounds and the tombs of Rev. Dr. Brackenridge and his wife, Eleanor, daughter of James White, whose farm is now the southern part of the home grounds, the Rambler said:

Rev. Dr. Brackenridge was the first Presbyterian minister to hold service in Washington city. That was in 1796. The tombs of Dr. Brackenridge and his wife are in the Soldiers' Home grounds not far from the little cottage which was called *Harewood* and which was the summer home of W. W. Corcoran. That land passed to Mr. Corcoran in 1852 from the Brackenridge family. Dr. Brackenridge died in 1844, at the age of seventy-five years. His wife died in 1817, at the age of fifty-two. Little of the early history of Dr. Brackenridge is known, though because of the name and sundry other facts he was probably a native of Virginia and was no doubt familiar with this section long before it became the seat of government. This was quite a Presbyterian neighborhood long before the American revolution. Presbyterian churches having been established on the Eastern branch near Bladensburg and in the Cabin John neighborhood. The Bladensburg congregation was established in 1719, and the pastor there until 1752 was the Rev. Hugh Conn.

In that "ramble" in which mention was first made of Potomac Church the Rambler pointed out that it stands on a knoll in a grove of old oak trees and that around it are many old tombs carved with the names of early settlers in that part of Montgomery county. On the west edge of the cemetery is a tall and broad slab inscribed: "Presbyterian Church 1716—Grammar School 1760—Placed by Janet Montgomery Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution 1916." Among the tombstones is one inscribed: "In memory of the Rev. James Hunt, who departed this life the 2d of June, 1793, aged sixty-one years. He was set apart to the work of the ministry early in life, in which he continued till death, laboring for the good of souls and for the glory of his Heavenly Master."

Beside this tomb is one inscribed: "In memory of Mrs. Ruth Hunt, wife to the Rev. James Hunt, deceased, who departed this life the 15th of May, 1795, in the sixty-seventh year of her age. She early in life devoted herself to the service of religion and continued through a long life a bright example of Christian piety. She was a woman of sorrows and acquainted with grief, being the greater part of

her days the subject of affliction which refined her as fire for dwelling in the mansions of the Holy and the Blessed."

It will be observed that the memorial marker in the churchyard is inscribed "Presbyterian Church 1716." There is a discrepancy in dates which the Rambler cannot now harmonize. In the Rockville newspaper in October, 1916, was published the following little article, written and signed by the chairman of the historic committee of Janet Montgomery Chapter, D. A. R.:

On Sunday, October 5, at 2:30 p. m., the Janet Montgomery Chapter, D. A. R., expects to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Presbyterianism by unveiling a marker on the site of the first Presbyterian Church in Montgomery county, located at Potomac.

The old church was formerly known as "the Captain John's Church" and also as "the Presbyterian Meeting House," and was organized in 1716 by the Rev. Hugh Conn of Ireland, a member of the Donegal Presbytery, who also preached at Bladensburg or Patuxent Church, organized in 1704.

The first grammar school in the county was nearby. Here William Wirt, Attorney General of the United States, and many other distinguished men were educated by Rev. James Hunt, who conducted the school and filled the pulpits of Patuxent and Captain John's churches, and whose body lies by that of his wife in the old churchyard at Potomac. The tombstones are in good condition, bearing quaint inscriptions.

The chapter has a good program of distinguished speakers and fine music. One interesting feature of the program will be the school children of Potomac standing by the Hunt graves, forming a living United States flag and singing "America," led by the band.

The chapter historian will read the history of the church collected for the chapter, and the marker will be unveiled by descendants of Rev. John Orme and Rev. James Hunt, pastors of the church and descendants of Ninian Beall, first elder.

Rockville, Darnestown, Bethesda, Nealsville and Hermon, together with Methodist churches which are the outgrowth of this mother church, are requested by the chapter to be present and join in singing "Coronation" and "Doxology," led by the band, and hopes are entertained that this union service will give new impetus to Christian patriotism and education in our country.

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The date of the building of a Presbyterian church near Upper Marlboro, the county seat of Prince Georges county, was 1704. The deed to the land, given by Ninian Beall, is on record. Whether that was the first Presbyterian church in that locality is not known, but it probably was not, because Presbyterians were settled in that part of Maryland in the latter years of the seventeenth century, and where Presbyterians lived there was Presbyterian worship, and it is quite likely that as soon as a congregation was formed, a church was built. In the deed of 1704 there are named sixteen trustees of the church, and the pastor's name is given as Rev. Nathaniel Taylor. Rev. J. William McIlvain, whose work on "Early Presbyterianism in Maryland" was published as one of the Johns Hopkins studies in history and political science, says that it is not known whether Nathaniel Taylor was an Englishman or a Scotchman, "but that he was an educated man is shown by his library of 700 volumes of fine literature." He died in 1710.

Mr. McIlvain gives a good deal of space to the Patuxent or Marlboro

church of 1704, and then passes to the Eastern Branch or Bladensburg church, concerning which he seems to have been able to collect very few facts. But he does give the date of the establishment of the Bladensburg church as the year 1719. Then, opposite that statement and on the margin of the page some person has written in pencil and in a careful hand: "Wrong, 1744." The Presbyterian population, like the Episcopalian and Catholic populations, expanded northward in Maryland, and if the Patuxent church was built in 1704, and the Eastern Branch church in 1719, it would seem a little strange that the Cabin John church was built in 1716. It is a perplexing matter. The erection of a church building and the formation of a congregation are often confused.

There was usually a congregation before there was a church and it is quite likely that Presbyterians in the Cabin John country met in private homes for worship before they built a church. The Rambler is going to try to work this out at some other time.

In the matter of the marker on the site of the early Presbyterian church on Cabin John the Rambler turns to the following, which was published in The Star in October, 1916:

A memorial stone marking the site of Old Cabin John Presbyterian Church on Cabin John creek about three miles west of Bethesda is to be dedicated tomorrow by Janet Montgomery Chapter, D. A. R., of Montgomery county, Md. Nothing now remains of the ancient church, the site having been bought nearly a century ago by the Methodist denomination and a Methodist Church now stands near where the original Presbyterian edifice stood. The graves of Rev. James Hunt, the first pastor of the church, and his wife are the sole remaining indications of the former ownership.

Cabin John Presbyterian Church, called in the original records Captain John Church, was founded about 1723, when Rev. John Orme, pastor of the Patuxent Presbyterian Church at Upper Marlborough, was sent to preach in what is now the Bethesda section of Maryland. The first congregation was composed mainly of Scotch settlers of whom the Magruder and other families of Scotch names are descendants.

The first regular pastor of the new church of whom definite records exist was Rev. Mr. Hunt, whose grave, marked by a headstone, is in the old burying ground with that of his wife. Rev. Mr. Hunt was a native of Hanover county, Va., and in 1762 was a member of the Hanover Presbytery. He was a companion in youth of Patrick Henry, both being under the ministerial charge of Rev. Samuel Davies, founder of the Presbyterian church in that part of Virginia and later president of Princeton College, now the University of Princeton. It was Rev. Mr. Davies who, in speaking before King George III of England in the interest of the colonists, and being interrupted by the king, who expressed amazement at the eloquence of the speaker, rebuked the monarch with these words:

"When the King of Kings speaks let the kings of the earth keep silence."

Rev. Mr. Hunt died June 2, 1797, according to the inscription on the headstone at his grave. His successor was Rev. Adam Freeman, who died in 1800. Rev. Dr. Conrad Speece of Virginia succeeded Mr. Freeman, remaining until 1805, when he returned to Virginia. He was succeeded by Rev. Samuel Martin, who in turn was succeeded by Rev. J. T. Russell.

The old church burned in 1820 and the site was sold to the Methodist congregation, the Presbyterians reserving only the burying ground. The Cabin John—or, as it still appeared in the records, the Captain John—Presbyterian congregation built a church within a hundred yards of the site of the present

church on the Rockville pike. A few years later this church was also burned and in 1860 the present church was built. At that time Rev. John Mines, who had come to the church as pastor in 1822, and Rev. Randolph Smith, co-pastor, served the church and the Presbyterian church at Montgomery County Court House, now Rockville, which was also a mission of the original Cabin John Church. Rev. Mr. Smith was followed in 1859 by Rev. E. H. Compton, who served until 1875, when he was succeeded by the present pastor, Rev. Parke P. Flournoy, who has served continuously since that year.

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The Rambler is perplexed by the number of discrepancies in the two stories which he has secured, one from the Rockville paper and the other from The Star. That in the Rockville paper was written by the historian of Janet Montgomery Chapter and that in The Star was written by a reporter who evidently got some of his facts from a member of the congregation of Bethesda Presbyterian Church on the Rockville pike. The first account says that the Cabin John Church was organized in 1716 by the Rev. Hugh Conn, who also preached at Bladensburg or Patuxent Church, organized in 1704. The Patuxent Church was at Marlboro and the Bladensburg Church was on the Eastern Branch. There is a deed for land for a site for the Patuxent Church dated 1704, but nothing to indicate that that was the first church. Mr. McIlvain says that the Eastern branch church was established in 1719 and some man who read that statement in Mr. McIlvain's book marked it "Wrong, 1744." Mr. McIlvain makes no mention of the Cabin John Church, the inference being that he had found no record of its origin. The neighborhood of Bladensburg was well settled before grants to wild land in Montgomery county were issued by the proprietary of Maryland. The earliest land patent covering land in the immediate vicinity of the Presbyterian Church was issued in 1729, which would indicate that not many Presbyterian settlers were there in 1716. There were earlier patents west of Rock Creek, and the Rambler finds three of earlier date covering land west of where the Presbyterian Church stood. One was a patent to Archibald Edmonston in 1717, called Cool Spring Level, and one was a tract adjoining it patented in 1717 to James Moore, called Archibald's Lot. Some of the grants for land through which the Rockville pike runs were made as early as 1688, among them being Leeke Forest, patented to Henry Dulany, and in 1689 a grant was made to William Joseph of a tract which he named "Hermitage." So it impresses the Rambler as reasonable that the Presbyterians in the Bladensburg neighborhood built a church before those in the Cabin John neighborhood. But, of course, he may be wrong.

Now for the account in The Star. It says in one place that James Hunt was the first pastor, and in another that it was founded by John Orme, pastor of the Patuxent Church. It says that Mr. Hunt "died June 2, 1797, according to the inscription on the headstone at his grave." The date of a man's death on his headstone is generally right, and it is usual for a man's headstone to stand at his grave. But this particular headstone is inscribed "June 2, 1793." The tombstone says he died at the age of sixty-one years. Then he was born in 1732 or thereabouts, and if he came to Cabin John Church as pastor at the age of twenty-one, which is highly improbable, that would fix the beginning of his pastorate there as 1753. The information given to the reporter was that "a memorial stone marking the site of old Cabin John Church on Cabin John creek, about three miles west of Bethesda, is to be dedicated," etc. The marker stands seven miles west of Bethesda, where Wisconsin avenue passes through it, and instead of being "on" Cabin John creek it is somewhat more than two miles west of the creek.

Sometimes the Rambler is going out to see the Rev. Parke P. Flournoy of old Bethesda Presbyterian Church about this matter. Bethesda Church is on the west side of the Rockville pike north of the Hamilton farm, south of the Corby farm and about a mile west by a trifle north of the electric station at Alta Vista. The Rambler hopes to get at the facts about "the 1716 church of Cabin John." There must be some good old Presbyterians in Montgomery county or Prince Georges who know the story of this interesting church.

Artistic Wives.

GERALDINE FARRAR said at a tea:

"Girls who have gone in for the arts, failed and then married as a last resort make poor wives.

"I know a girl who married after failing in music. It is reported that her husband said one night in his cups:

"My wife used to play the guitar. Now she—hic—picks on me."