



BRIEF NOTES ON THE HISTORY
OF
ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Southampton, New York

1913-2013

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I

For the first five years of its existence, beginning on July 12, 1908, the parish of St. John's (then called the "Mission") held services at the Parrish Art Museum on Job's Lane in Southampton Village. Under the leadership of Rev. Samuel C. Fish, the founding Rector, sufficient funds were gathered to construct a church



*St. John's Episcopal Church
by Walter Longstreet Deane*

building on South Main Street. The land upon which the church is located was first purchased from the Shinnecock Indians by Thomas Topping in 1650. After successive owners over the following generations, in 1911 owner Albert Foster sold this land for \$8,000 to the Mission of St. John's Church. Groundbreaking for a new church took place in August 1912, and construction began that October. The building was dedicated on Sunday, June 29, 1913, the feast day of Saints Peter and Paul.

At the time, Woodrow Wilson had been in the White House for fewer than four months. The day before the presidential inauguration in early March, Alice Paul organized a "procession" in Washington to demonstrate for women's suffrage. In New York City, Grand Central Terminal was completely rebuilt. An income tax was authorized by the Sixteenth Constitutional Amendment. The Armory Show rocked the New York art world. The Woolworth Building soared to an unprecedented height. The Garden Club of America was founded in Philadelphia, PA. And two future presidents—Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford—were born in 1913.

The *Southampton Press* ran the story of St. John's dedication on the front page of its issue for July 3. Over four hundred people attended the service. The Right Reverend Frederick Burgess, the Second Bishop of Long Island, presided at the ceremony and preached the sermon. The hymns included several familiar favorites: "Onward Christian Soldiers" and "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken."

The *Press* duly lauded the contributions of the architects (Franklin B. and Arthur Ware of New York City), as well as of the builders (Donnelly and Corrigan of Southampton) and those responsible for the masonry, the plumbing and heating, and the electrical work (A. Guldi & Son).

On Dedication Day, much still remained to be done, including installation of the pews, the chancel furniture, and the organ, as well as completion of the basement. We can tell from the church archives, though, that the indefatigable Sam Fish was on top of it all. The glasswork, the gable ornaments, the corbels and trusses, the gutters, the wood varnish: inside and outside, nothing seems to have escaped the Rector's notice and supervision. Just two weeks before the dedication, an estimate arrived from the Estey Company of New York for a "T-60" organ with pipe top and motor. Total cost? \$683.

Samuel C. Fish (1876-1941), in fact, was a missionary of formidable energy and talent (prophetically, his middle initial "C." stood for "Centennial"—possibly due to the year of his birth). Buried in Southampton Cemetery, he is commemorated on a plaque at St. John's commending his "vision and unfaltering faith." He started out as the Assistant Rector of St. Luke's in East Hampton. Encouraged by Bishop Burgess, Fish is credited not only with the founding of St. John's, but with establishing three other nearby



Rev. Samuel C. Fish

congregations: St. Ann's in Bridgehampton, St. Mary's in Hampton Bays, and St. Mark's in Westhampton Beach.

In early July of 1913, the *Southampton Press* summed up its coverage by singling out the "hard work" and "devotion" of the congregation. With forgivable local pride, the article noted that "...the congregation and friends of the church have maintained the work without any grant for this purpose from the diocese."

St. Andrew's Dune Church, founded in 1879, provided major gifts for the building of St. John's, as well as for the Roman Catholic Church of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, completed in 1907 on Hill Street. This project was as practical as it was ecumenical. In the later 1800s, New York City Episcopalians had begun to summer in the Hamptons, but their domestic help, many of Irish descent, resisted coming to Southampton because there was no Roman Catholic Church in the area. Hence the helping hand of St. Andrew's Dune Church, on behalf of Canterbury and Rome alike.

II

On September 21, 1938, a massive hurricane struck the coast of eastern Long Island. The consequences were especially severe for St. Andrew's Dune Church. Yet the church's congregation and friends resolutely rose to the challenge. Rallied by the president of the Board of Trustees, Harry Pelham Robbins, they rebuilt, and despite extensive damage St. Andrew's re-opened for the summer season right on schedule in June 1939. The reconstruction cost more than \$10,000, a massive sum by today's standards.

A few years after the hurricane, the issue of the relationship between St. John's and the Dune Church came to the fore. The St. Andrew's Trustees, under the leadership of Robbins, were eager to explore a merger of some kind. In the spring and summer of 1941, they corresponded about the matter with the Rt. Rev. Ernest M. Stires, the Bishop of Long Island, and with the Suffragan Bishop, the Rt. Rev. J. S. Blair Larned. Perhaps the issue took on some urgency because Samuel Fish, the founding Rector of St. John's, had died earlier that year.

The issue of the amalgamation of the two congregations had been broached as early as 1914 by Bishop Frederick Burgess—he who had presided over the dedication of St. John’s the year before. This issue, however, was deceptively complex. On the one hand, the Diocese of Long Island was committed to St. John’s as the institution charged with caring for Episcopalians year-round in Southampton, and Burgess emphatically declared his confidence in Samuel Fish. In a letter that may have perplexed some of the St. Andrew’s trustees, the Bishop also went so far as to “approve” the Dune Church’s roster of preachers for the summer season of 1914.

On the other hand, St. Andrew’s was not a Diocesan Church. It had been founded in 1879 as an independent corporation under civil legislation known as the “Free Church Act.” It was predictable that neither the vestry of St. John’s nor the trustees of St. Andrew’s would be eager to surrender their autonomy.

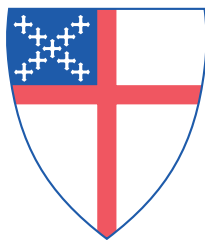


St. Andrew’s Dune Church in Winter
by Enid Hatton

Harry Robbins, though, was keen on a merger. But even he, writing to Bishop Stires in 1941, diplomatically stated that he could not envision the St. John's vestry wishing "to be told where they head in by the City people." Robbins expressed the wish that whoever was chosen by St. John's as its new Rector would be acceptable to both St. John's and St. Andrew's. Robbins wrote that he knew very little about the favored candidate, Rev. Marland Zimmerman, who was serving a church "somewhere in New Jersey." But he felt that the choice of "an extreme Anglo-Catholic" might be a deal-breaker for the contemplated merger. In the event, Rev. Zimmerman, once he had been installed as Rector of St. John's, was invited to kick off the Dune Church seasons of 1942 and 1943 by preaching the sermon on the opening Sunday each year.

There was to be no merger, however, despite the considerable overlap in the congregations of both churches. In true mediational, Episcopalian style, a compromise emerged from the new Bishop of Long Island, the Rt. Rev. James DeWolfe, in the summer of 1943.

In a letter to Robbins, DeWolfe suggested that the St. Andrew's trustees make themselves available for a meeting with the Rev. Alexander Hawke, the leading candidate to replace Zimmerman at St. John's. The Bishop also put forward a cooperative plan that more or less reflects the relationship of the two churches today. The Rector of St. John's would preach at the Dune Church at least once a summer and would regularly assist in the Sunday services there. Alec Hawke carried out the plan, inaugurating the summer season with a sermon on June 24, 1945. DeWolfe's tact and common sense had succeeded in preserving the best of both worlds for the two congregations and their governing bodies.



III

Since its founding, St. John's Church has had just six rectors. (For comparison, in the same period there have been nineteen presidents, ten popes, ten Chief Justices of the Supreme Court, twenty-two Speakers of the House of Representatives, and seven presidents of Harvard.) The founder, Rev. Samuel C. Fish, has served the longest to date, followed by the current rector, Rev. Peter M. Larsen. The list, with the dates of tenure, is as follows:

Rev. Samuel C. Fish	1908-1941
Rev. Marland Zimmerman	1941-1943
Rev. Alexander E. Hawke	1943-1957
Rev. Hobart J. Gary	1957-1966
Rev. Malcolm L. Foster	1966-1989
Rev. Peter M. Larsen	1989-

This longevity of service has enhanced leadership continuity in the parish, as well as fostered a sense of community spirit. In fact, fully three-quarters of the history of St. John's in the past century has unfolded under the pastoral leadership of three men: Rectors Fish, Foster, and Larsen.

What are some of the programs and activities that have allowed St. John's to become a parish that makes a difference? Over the years, outreach has emerged as one of the church's foremost missions. Every year the Outreach Committee of the Vestry approves grants to local, national, and international ministries ranging from day care to human resources to disaster relief. Last year 42 efforts were supported for a grant total of approximately \$30,000. All proceeds from the Annual Fair and the Art Show—two major events sponsored by St. John's each summer—are designated for outreach.

In addition to outreach, St. John's Church maintains a scholarship program for young people in the parish who are attending college or graduate school. The Scholarship Fund has grown steadily over the years and now amounts to \$500,000. In the summer of 2013, nineteen students received grants.

For one hundred years, St. John's has been a valuable presence in Southampton and the surrounding area. St. John's remains one of the few parishes in the Diocese of Long Island that offers three services each and every Sunday. The Church is open for rest and prayer twenty-four hours each day of the year—the doors are never locked. The Parish House is also open to the public free of charge. Meetings and programs held here include several Alcoholics Anonymous programs, music instruction, fundraising dinners, and community events.



Annual Blessing of the Animals
by Henry Koehler

A strong ecumenical spirit exists among the churches of our Village, and parishioners of all faiths work together to serve the needy in our area. Ecumenical worship services on Thanksgiving, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday are held annually and led by the Village clergy. Beginning in 1995, St. John's added a service with unique popular appeal: the annual Blessing of the Animals, held around the time of the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi in early October.

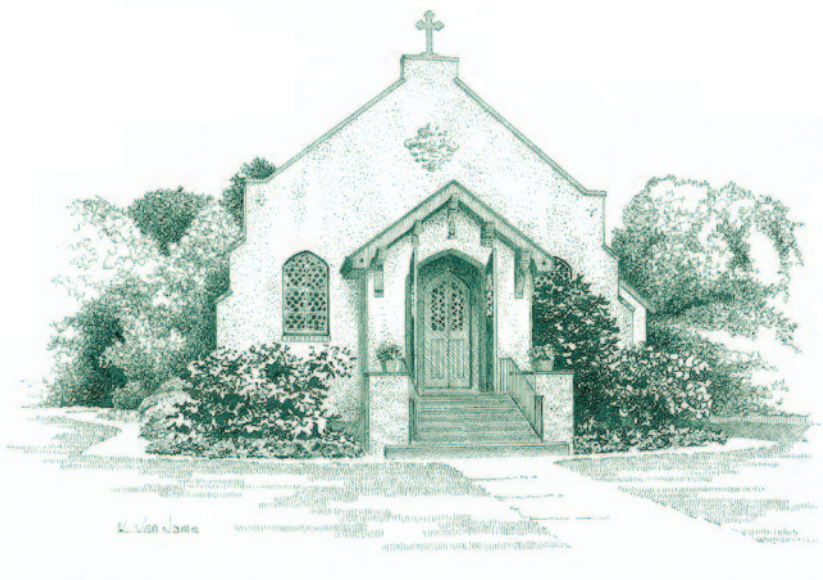


*Stained glass windows behind the altar given in memory of
Charles E. Merrill by his children*

“Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” So read the words from the Gospel of St. Matthew that are inscribed above the chancel screen at St. John’s. Throughout the years, the parishioners of St. John’s have been encouraged to respond to the Gospel message in their daily lives by works of charity and mercy. As we celebrate the first hundred years, may we all say with long-time parishioner Grace White, “It is like a home for me there now.”

*Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for their assistance:
Rev. Peter Larsen, Elizabeth Deneny, Margaret Harbo, Larry Horton,
Barbara Lord, Alan McFarland, Grace White, and Cindy Willis.*

— Carroll Moulton



*Go out into the world in peace
Be of good courage
Hold fast to that which is true
Render to no man evil for evil
Raise up the faint-hearted
Honor all men and women
And remember the poor
And may the blessing of God Almighty
Be upon us this coming week and forever more.*

Amen