

St. John's, Tuckahoe, has existed on Colonial Heights, Yonkers, for two hundred years as a house of worship and a center of community activities. The church has not suffered from earthquake, wind, or fire, except that the flagpole in the churchyard was blown over by a gale in 1924, the parsonage burned down in 1861, the altar silver was stolen in 1984, and the *Handicapped Parking* sign disappeared in 1986. There have been no riots, tumults, or nailing of theses to the church door. The parish has moved quietly along, worshipping God and serving the community.

In 1789, the Rev. Elias Cooper, newly installed rector of St. John's, Getty Square, rode on horseback from Getty Square to conduct services for some farmers and their families on a distant hill. Thus the church was started. Like the founding of Rome by Romulus in 753 B.C., this event is not well documented. The service register for the years around 1789, in which the first services should have been entered, is missing from St. John's, Yonkers. Perhaps the date 1789 can be inferred from the fact that the 100th anniversary was celebrated in 1889. Written evidence consists of the date on the church sign and on the church stationery. The day, week, and month are unknown.

Colonial Heights was once part of the Indian community of Aquehung. That name has survived as the name of a mascot for Yonkers School 8. The land was obtained by a Dutchman, Van der Donck; eventually, by purchase, by violence, or by skulduggery, it passed into the possession of the Phillipse family, who once held all the lands between the Hudson River and the Bronx River. When the Revolution came, the Tory Phillipses were dispossessed of their property. Frederick Underhill, for whom Underhill St. was named, and John Bowne obtained tracts of farmland east of the Greenville Road (now Central Park Ave.). At some time the area became known as Turkey-ho Hills, Turkeyhoe, or Tuckahoe. When the railroad was built, the name *Tuckahoe* migrated across the Bronx River. Early in the XXth Century the Underhill farm was turned into a real estate development called Colonial Heights, with streets named *Mayflower*, *Pilgrim*, *Puritan*, *Alden*, *Standish*, and *Bradford*. The Bowne farm was also sold for housing lots, and the barn is now the Dunbar American Legion Post.

In 1795 John Bowne transferred to St. John's Chappel a piece of his property. The document exists to-day, signed by John Bowne, and by Mary his wife with an X. In 1798 a small church was completed. The bill for material and labor, with amounts in pounds, shillings, and pence, contains entries for boards, shingles, nails, and an item of 3 gallons of rum at 50 shillings (\$2.50) a gallon. The total cost was over 203 pounds, about a thousand dollars. That building remains as the middle part of the nave, which was later extended in both directions. Those old walls gave the electricians a hard time when wiring was being installed. There are still some original beams in the roof, hand-hewn and fitted with pegs.

The first service in the new church is said to have been held on Monday, December 24, 1798. That is the date on John Bowne's report on the cost of the building, which may very well have been read out at that service. It concludes, "We have paid all these monies and there is no debt left to plague us." This idea of freedom from debt has remained an objective ever since.

In view of the fact that St. John's, Tuckahoe, is very difficult to find (visiting speakers have often arrived at meetings an hour late because they got lost looking for the church), one might wonder why a church was ever erected in such an out of the way place. The explanation is that Underhill St. once formed part of the main route from Eastchester to Yonkers; Tuckahoe Road had not yet been hewn through the cliff beside the Bronx River.

In 1853 St. John's was liberated from its Mother Church and was incorporated as *The Rector Wardens and Vestrymen of St. John's Church in the Town of Yonkers in the County of Westchester*. This first certificate has been amended several times in order to allow women to vote at the annual meeting, to vote and hold office (none ever have), to permit the Vestry to set the date of the annual meeting, and to change the name to *St. John's Church, Tuckahoe*.

The first Rector was the Rev. Charles Jones, who was given a parsonage and the sum of \$400 a year. The first Warden was John Bowne, son of the donor of the property. His brother, Elias Cooper Bowne, named for the founding minister, was Vestryman and then Warden. Elias led the singing with a tuning fork, which has survived. For many years the Vestry met only once a year, after the Easter Sunday annual meeting. The same men were re-elected year after year, until they died. Only after a death does a new name appear.

The first excitement came when the Getty Square church refused to pay \$200 a year which had been promised at the time of separation as part of the Tuckahoe rector's salary. A law suit ensued, and the learned judges of the Supreme Court of the State of New York finally ruled that St. John's, Getty Square, must pay \$600 plus interest to St. John's, Tuckahoe. Since 1987, St. John's, Tuckahoe, has been donating \$500 annually to St. John's, Getty Square, to assist in their programs for caring for the hungry and homeless.

In 1859 a certain Augustus St. Clair was called to be minister. He declared that he would conduct two Sunday services, but would preach only one sermon. He also demanded that the parishioners send their children to his school. (In those days a clergyman was usually also a schoolmaster.) There was some funny business, too, about his credentials: he was probably a Deacon and not yet a Priest. He did not get along well with the congregation and served for only five months. Then in 1860 the parsonage burned to the ground, and he departed in disgrace and in debt. Although the Diocesan records show St. Clair as Rector, no Augustus St. Clair was ever ordained. His real name was William A. Doolittle (ordained Deacon in 1859). In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852, the chief plantation owner was named Augustine St. Clair.

During the Civil War the Church was closed. But not entirely, because the "Ladies Benevolent Society" was permitted by the vestry to use the building for their meetings. There can be little doubt that the WOMEN OF THE CHURCH took good care of the property at that time.

After the Civil War the church re-opened. The next few years were enlivened by several squabbles. When the parish became independent, nothing was settled about the churchyard, and it was still claimed by St. John's, Yonkers, which also held the deed to the parsonage lot. Furthermore, the Bowne family insisted that the Bowne-Dusenberry plot, which lies behind the Church, belonged to them and not to the parish. They also claimed as their own the ground at the southeast corner of the graveyard, on which the carriage shed had been built to shelter the animals and vehicles of this horse and butty age. After once rejecting the proposal, the Vestry agreed to pay ten cents a year as rent for the shed. In 1920 the shed was torn down, and the lumber used to build a garage for the rectory. After fierce correspondence the other matters were amicably settled.

In those days the surrounding area was growing. The marble quarries and factories in Tuckahoe were flourishing; there were mills along the Bronx River; and the railroad carried people to New York in the same time as it takes today. St. John's Too, began to prosper. During the next 50 years, the church was enlarged several times, with sacristy, choir rooms, bell tower, cellar, and gallery to hold the first organ. In 1910 new pews were installed with a single aisle in place of the earlier two aisles. There was much discussion as to whether or not to have cushions on the

seats. The decision was not to. There was also debate about what to do with the old pews. The final decision is not recorded.

At various times pew rents were established to raise money, then abolished. In 1853 rear pews cost eight dollars, and front ones twenty. If pews were rented nowadays, the ones in front would be very cheap and the rear ones expensive, in order to encourage the congregation to sit towards the front. In 1880 pew rents amounted to \$376, enough to pay the rector and to buy coal. Rental of pews was finally eliminated in 1906.

The Vestry decided to enlarge the building in 1927 by sawing it in two, crosswise, near the balcony and inserting a twenty-five foot section. It was noted recently that the pews in the back of the church are slightly different from those in front.

In 1948 the interior of the church was remodeled from dark Victorian to its present austere Early American style. The small, diamond-shaped panes of colored glass were replaced by square panes of bottle glass manufactured especially for this project. The tops of the pews were sawn off to their present height, and the walls were painted white. A stained glass window depicting St. John, one of the earliest examples of American stained glass, had been installed behind the altar in 1890 in memory of Elias Cooper Bowne; on the left are magnificent stained glass windows in memory of Wilbur S. Underhill and of his wife Jane, both benefactors of the church. When the church was remodeled, the experts directing the work agreed that these precious memorial windows, although not quite in keeping with the Federal style, nevertheless must remain.

In the beginning the members of St. John's, Tuckahoe, were farmers. In recent times the congregation has consisted of fairly well-educated people, mostly professional business men and women. Despite this conservative background, the church has been in the forefront of liturgical innovations. 40 years ago the altar was moved away from the wall so that the celebrant faced the congregation, while in most churches he stood with his back to them. This church was among the first to allow laypeople to administer the chalice. In 1962 for the first time a woman was elected to the Vestry. In the time of the Hippies, there were Folk Masses, and guitar services. The rector even had vestments of burlap adorned with psychedelic symbols. Thus those who objected to such anomalies had a chance to know what they were objecting to. In 1971 this congregation was among the first to become acquainted with, and grumble about, the new trial Prayer Book. Later, advance orders were placed for the new Prayer Book and the new Hymnal, so that no time was lost in using them. St. John's was also the first parish in Westchester to call a woman Rector.

This church has always had concern for the community surrounding it. In 1868 the Vestry considered building a chapel in Bronxville, but finally decided that the people were capable of building their own church. (They did so in 1901.) In 1906, services were held in Tuckahoe, and the idea of establishing a chapel there was proposed, but abandoned. In 1911 the Vestry considered hiring a team of horses to carry people from Crestwood up the hill for worship. The automobile put an end to that scheme. During the First World War parishioners sent books, clothing, and furniture to the soldiers stationed on the aqueduct on Bronxville Heights and in barracks across from the Church where the Parish House now stands.

When the Parish House was built in 1923, from a fund started in 1910 with four of the newly issued Lincoln pennies, it became a center for the community. Among its activities have been Boy Scouts, Alcoholics Anonymous, Weight Watchers, overflow classes from School 28, Family Service, the Turkeyhoe players, dance groups, political meetings, a polling place for the Board

of Elections, and the St. John's Nursery School. At times homeless congregations, such as the American Episcopalians and the Assembly of God, have held services in the Parish House.

Henry Ford once said, "History is bunk," a statement that shows the limitations of his mind. George Bush said in his Inaugural Address, "History is a book of many pages." Far better are the words of David Killefer, a former member of the Vestry, who wrote in his book, *The First 150 Years of St. John's Church*, "If, as Shakespeare has it, the past is but prologue, then we of St. John's can be grateful that our past has given us strength to meet whatever the future may hold for us as individuals and as a congregation."

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