



ST PETER'S PARISH CHURCH

in the Diocese of Virginia (Episcopal)

NEW KENT COUNTY, VIRGINIA

President and Mrs Washington were married in this parish on January the sixth in 1759. To-day, as it has for three centuries, St Peter's Parish Church joyously welcomes all those who come to seek God's blessing, to hear and receive His holy Word and Sacraments, and to participate in the ministry of our Risen Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

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The First Church of the First First-Lady

Virginia's General Court confirmed the establishment of St. Peter's Parish on April 29, 1679. In the summer of 1700 the vestry ordered that a second Lower Church replace an earlier, structurally weak building known as the *Broken Back'd Church*. The new church, begun in 1701, was in use by July 1703. Today it is the oldest parish church in the Diocese of Virginia and the fourth oldest in the Commonwealth.

Martha Dandridge, St. Peter's most famous parishioner, was born at Chestnut Grove on June 2, 1731. She married Col. Daniel Parke Custis, a member of the vestry and former churchwarden, in June 1749. Her father, Major John Dandridge, had also served as churchwarden and vestryman, and her great-grandfather had been the first rector of nearby Bruton Parish Church. After eight years of marriage she was widowed with two surviving children.

On the sixth of January, 1759, the Rector of St. Peter's Parish, the Rev'd Mr. David Mossom, solemnized the marriage of Col. George Washington and the widow, Martha Dandridge Custis. It has always been assumed that another future First-Lady, Letitia

Christian, later the wife of President John Tyler, was baptized in the parish church in 1790.

The parish was represented by Col. William H. Macon at the first Convention of the Diocese of Virginia in 1785. From 1843 when the vestry reorganized and called the Rev'd Edwin A. Dalrymple as rector, Episcopalians and Presbyterians worshipped somewhat as one congregation until 1856 by alternating the Worship Service from Sunday to Sunday.

During the Civil War the church was desecrated by Federal (Union) troops. **General Robert E. Lee**, whose wife was Mary Ann Randolph Custis – Martha Washington's great-granddaughter – wrote on October 23, 1869 that,

“St. Peter's is the church where General Washington was married and attended in early life. It would be a shame to America if allowed to go to destruction.”

General Robert E. Lee's son, General William Henry Fitzhugh Lee, superintended the work of restoring the old church, contributed needed lumber, and furnished teams and hands for the hauling.

Funds for the renovation was raised by the Rev'd Henry S. Kepler, Evangelist of the Diocese, who had become rector when the war broke out. The church was reopened for Divine Service on Sunday, November 10, 1872 and the Rev'd Mr. Dalrymple, who gave a stone font that the parish still possesses, preached the sermon.

St. Peter's Church Restoration Association was organized on July 20, 1922 and the Virginia General Assembly designated St. Peter's Parish Church as *The First Church of the First First-Lady* on March 11, 1960. With the assistance of architectural and ecclesiological experts on both sides of the Atlantic, the interior of the building was elegantly restored to a colonial appearance in 1964.

The marble monument on the north wall of the chancel honors Parson Mossom (1690-1767), rector for forty years, who probably lies buried beneath the chancel. The marble wall-monument on the south side of the chancel, sculptured in 1737 by Michael Sidnell of Bristol, England, is one of the oldest of the few such monuments in America, and a rare signed example. It honors vestryman William Chamberlayne, **whose son Richard introduced Col. George Washington to Mrs. Martha Custis**. The three-decker pulpit, the Holy Communion Table, the octagonal font and cover, the psalm-board, the Royal Arms, and many other furnishings in late 17th century style, as well as service-books of the period are all reminders of the more than three centuries of witness that this parish and church have borne to the honor and glory of Christ the Lord.

God preserve thy going out and thy coming in.

Source: St. Peter's Church official brochure.
