

Sir Philadelphia 15 Dec^r 1762

I send this by your worthy Missionary Mr Murray, who will want all the assistance you can give him as he is a stranger and will have to struggle with many difficulties in the opening of a new Mission. He is learned and well disposed to promote real Religion amongst you. Advise, assist & countenance him for the sake of the Church — the Country — your own selves. Please to procure him lodging in some decent quiet and respectable Family.

You are greatly obliged to Dr. Smith as he has said much in your favor. I hope you will act accordingly.

I am Sir
Your most humble Servant,
Richard Peters

Philadelphia, 15th Dec. 1762

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RICHARD PETERS

Addressed James Read, Esq., Reading. By the Rev. Mr. Murray.

Mr. Murray remained in charge of the Episcopal Mission in Reading from 1762 to 1778, and from 1791 to 1794. He died that year in Philadelphia from yellow fever, and is buried in Christ Church Cemetery at Fifth and Arch Sts., near where the body of Benjamin Franklin lies.

PART II

The Early History of the English Church
in Berks County

"A vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying: 'Come over in to Macedonia and help us.' And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavored to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them."—Acts XVI, 9.

Address Delivered by

WELLINGTON BERTOLET, ESQ.,

of the Berks County Bar and Vestryman of Christ Church, Reading, at the
Centenary of Christ Church

STRANGELY enough, John Penn, a Quaker, writing in his Journal in 1788, remarked that while the town of Carlisle had an English Church, Reading had none. It is probable that there was no Episcopal Church building in Reading until 1826, although there was an Episcopal congregation from 1763 to that date, which met in the Court House, in churches of other denominations, and in private houses. During that period it was the constant object of a small group of English Church folk

to build a church, but lack of numbers, lack of funds, and finally, the Revolution and the prejudice it brought against everything connected with England, postponed the erection of a church for about 66 years, apparently almost as long as it will take our city fathers to build a new City Hall.

One hundred years ago to this very day Christ Church was consecrated after a struggle for existence over a period of more than half a century.

The history of that struggle is to be found *first*, in the work of Rev. Alex. Murray who came to Reading as a missionary of the English Church in 1763 and remained until 1778, and *second*, in the devoted and persistent labors of a group of distinguished gentlemen who, against tremendous religious odds, and in spite of local prejudice against the English Church, (as the present Episcopal Church of this country was then called), kept the ancient faith alive in a community then ill adapted to its existence. These gentlemen were: Edward Biddle, James Diemer, James Read, John Patton, Jonas Seely, James Whitehead, John Price, Mark Bird, Peter Witherington, George Hinton, Jasper Scull, James Scull and John Scull, who constituted the vestry, sidesmen and questmen for a long period of years beginning in 1763. Sidesmen were deputy vestrymen, while questmen were collectors of parish rents and investigators of abuses in the Church.

Alexander Murray, then a youth of 25, came to Reading in about 1762, four years after the town had been founded, probably representing the English "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts," hereinafter referred to as the "S. P. G." He was evidently of Scotch descent, and a graduate of the University of Aberdeen. In the interest of the established Church of England, he came and went in Berks County, visiting Maiden creek, the Tulpehocken Valley, the home of the Palatine and the Indian, on what was then the extreme edge of western civilization. His efforts to establish an Episcopal Church in Reading are recorded in a series of reports or letters which he wrote to the S. P. G. from 1763 on, which are found in "papers relating to the history of the church in Pennsylvania, A. D. 1680-1778," edited by William Stevens Perry, later Bishop of Iowa.

In 1760 there were in Reading six or seven families amounting to 48 souls brought up in the English Church, while at Molatton, now Douglassville, there were 36 families of our Church, consisting of 232 souls, most of whom, however, were of Swedish extract. At Molatton, Murray found a "ruinous kind of church, built of logs," and it was his purpose to build a new church in Reading where there was no English Church at all.

In 1760, the Episcopalians of Reading and Mollatton joined in a petition to the S. P. G., asking that a missionary be sent over permanently to reside in Reading. The petition set forth that Berks County was a growing community on the frontiers of the province, "and hath never yet had any English minister of any denomination settled in it."

It stated that the petitioners, their children and families, were living entirely destitute of those instructions which they in their young days had the happiness to be blessed with in their native places, and to strengthen their plea they agreed to pay such missionary 60 pounds a year in Pennsylvania money. In the same year, the Rev. William Smith of Philadelphia, reported to the S. P. G. that the whole body of the clergy in convention recommended Reading as a fit place to open a mission, and stated that in his honest and most candid judgment he knew of no place where a mission was more wanted.

In 1763, the Rev. Alexander Murray appears to have taken up the reins as missionary in Reading, and his letters to London gave a clear picture of his problem. In that year, he records, there were 210 families of about 1300 persons, and that in Reading three-fourths of these families were German Lutherans and German Calvinists, and the rest chiefly

Quakers, and a few Baptists. Only six or seven families were at all interested in the old English Church.

The Germans outnumbered all other peoples in Reading twelve to one. Rev. Mr. Murray wrote that the Germans were so blindly attached to their native tongue that no English minister could be of great service to them. Their children went to German schools which "they had everywhere in great plenty." Murray found a small but very active group of Presbyterians, and was of the opinion that had a missionary been appointed promptly on the petition of 1760, they would have united with our churchmen. In 1762, however, these Presbyterians employed a preacher of their own persuasion and built a "neat meeting house," and, says Murray, "being none of the most bigoted sort, raised a large sum to purchase an organ for it." Thus the Reading Presbyterians seem to have gotten away from us because the S. P. G. was slow to act. Thus the First Presbyterian Church just missed being part of the Episcopal flock.

By 1764, Rev. Dr. Murray's congregation had increased to 18 families, some Baptists, some Quakers and some Presbyterians. In that year he won as a member and took great pride in it, the principal attorney-at-law of the town, probably Edward Biddle, who was to become the outstanding churchman

of Reading of his day. From the beginning, Murray's constant goal was to build a church to care for his Reading congregation, but he could not get his people to engage heartily in any such scheme.

In 1765, Missionary Murray baptized 39 children and 3 adults, and won another lawyer who became one of the fastest and ablest friends of the Church, James Whitehead. He held services in the Court House, and retired to a private room for communions. In that year Mr. Murray and the church wardens applied to the Lieutenant-Governor for a lot in the town of Reading for building an Episcopal Church upon, although the records of the land office show that in 1763 Lot No. 394, located on the southwest corner of Sixth and Walnut Streets, now Raser's Drug Store, had been granted to the Church of England by Francis Morgan and Evan Price. With the land but without money to build a Church, Dr. Murray petitioned the General Assembly of Pennsylvania to pass a bill granting a lottery for the benefit of St. Mary's Church of Reading, and such bill was actually passed on February 15, 1765, "for raising by way of lottery the sum of 3,003 pounds, 15 shillings, to be applied to the payment of arrears of debt due for the finishing of St. Peter's and St. Paul's Church in Philadelphia, and towards finishing the Episcopal Church at Carlisle and the build-

ing of an Episcopal Church in each of the towns of York and Reading, and repairing the church at Mollatton."

St. Mary's share of this lottery was 315 pounds. This lottery business woke up the whole parish and created continuous excitement therein for over a year. As late as August, 1766, the wardens of St. Mary's were authorized by resolution to purchase 200 additional lottery tickets.

Assuming that the lottery was a success, there is no evidence that any attempt was made to build a church other than the gathering of building material on the lot on which this church stands.

While the minutes of the vestry meetings during Mr. Murray's period have disappeared as indeed have the minutes of this parish prior to 1875, they seem to have been in existence as late as 1880, for in that year Mr. Henry May Keim, a prominent member of our parish wrote an article on the Episcopal Church in Reading, which was published in the fourth volume of the Pennsylvania magazine, in which he speaks of having seen the Vestry minutes of Mr. Murray's time.

From reading these minutes, Mr. Keim got the impression that there was a good deal of discord among the Vestry and parishioners during the decade ending in 1772. He noted that there was a continual

change of officers of the parish. Almost each vestryman at some time or other became a warden, and a sidesman became a vestryman, and then back again to the ranks. But Mr. Keim notes from the record that Mr. Murray took great pains to search the Scriptures in behalf of his suffering congregation by preaching from the following texts: "Let brotherly love continue." "Be kindly affectioned, one to another, with brotherly love." "Being knit together in love." "Be at peace among yourselves." "That ye love one another." "By this, all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another." "Be ye all of one mind." "Live peaceably."

Whatever feelings of discord existed in the parish in the early days, appear to have been entirely cured by the efforts of the good missionary, for in 1772, he wrote to the S. P. G.:

"I have hardly anything new to communicate concerning my parishioners. They continue orderly and quiet amidst the clamor and noise, contention and foul speaking of the German colonists who are the chief body of the people of this frontier country."

But still not without hope, he added:

"I expect we shall be in condition next summer to build a church here, which is much wanted."

But the approaching dark days of the Revolution set back the building of Christ Church for an-

other 50 years. The Rev. Mr. Murray was a loyalist in a flock of, as we shall see, ardent American patriots. Being suspected of favoring the British, his house was mobbed, the furniture carried out and smashed to pieces and burned with his books and papers. Dr. Murray himself was seized by a mob and carried before the Vigilance Committee, and preparations were made to tar and feather him, but through what was regarded as a special act of kindness, the reverend gentleman was permitted to escape and later embarked for England. After the War he visited Reading, and in kindness and cordiality and Christian spirit met and forgave those who drove him from his parish.

Dr. Murray died of yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1793, aged 66. He is buried in Christ Church yard in Philadelphia, and his tombstone bears the following inscription:

"A truly honest man.
Reader, who'er thou art,
Strive to attain his character.
A Wit's a feather, and a Chief's a rod,
An honest man is the noblest work of God."

Mrs. Murray survived him eleven years.

STAUNCH LAYMEN

Now let us for a moment see who were the men who went through the early struggle with Dr. Murray and after the Revolution held together the Churchmen of Reading until 1826 when Christ Church was consecrated. They were without exception leaders in the community in peace and in war. Perhaps the most illustrious gentleman was Edward Biddle who first appeared in our church annals as a warden in 1765. He was an ensign in the Provincial Army in 1758. He studied law in Philadelphia and located in Reading. The Court House records indicate that his practice was as large as that of all other members of the Bar combined. He presided at a public meeting of Reading citizens held on July 2, 1774 to take initiatory steps on the Revolution, and is said to have drawn the stirring resolution adopted on that occasion. He was a member of the first Continental Congress, and with it all, he was the leading and active Churchman, either as a warden or vestryman until his death. His powerful influence was, I rather suspect, responsible for Dr. Murray's easy departure after the action of the Vigilance Committee.

In the first Vestry was James Read, Esq., another lawyer with a propensity for politics. From 1752 to 1774 he was Prothonotary, Register of Wills, Recorder of Deeds, Clerk of the Court of Quarter

Sessions, and Clerk of the Orphans' Court. For a time he was a member of the State Assembly, and later a judge. He, with Edward Biddle, acted as a member of committee of Reading citizens protesting against the Boston Port Bill.

James Diemer was one of the first burgesses of the borough of Reading and later President Judge of our Court.

John Patton was a Justice, State Assemblyman, member of the Committee on Observation in 1774, and a colonel in the Continental Army.

Jonas Seely was the first treasurer of Berks County, and also a Justice.

James Whitehead was a lawyer, coroner of the county, and Clerk of the Court of Quarter Sessions.

Mark Bird was a distinguished ironmaster, whose father laid out Birdsboro in 1762 and gave it its name, a justice, delegate to the Provincial Congress in Carpenter's Hall, and brother-in-law of Edward Biddle.

Peter Witherington was a captain of the 12th Regiment of the Continental Army.

These men of standing, courage and strength of purpose, held St. Mary's together under Dr. Murray, and clung to the church after the Revolution when there was no one to officiate. There are no records of the Church following the Revolution until

1815, excepting that James Read represented St. Mary's at a meeting of the clergy and laity held at Christ Church, Philadelphia, in 1784, from which the Diocese of Pennsylvania was formed the following year.

The next documentary record is a deed for the property on which this Church now stands from James Diemer, a vestryman, to James May, Marks John Biddle and George Douglass, to be by them "held in trust for the erection of an Episcopal Church whenever it should be found convenient, and as a burial place for the Episcopalians within the town of Reading, and for such other persons, not Episcopalians, as the Trustees shall permit to be buried thereon, and for no other purpose whatever." The consideration for this lot was 180 pounds and 5 shillings, and the real grantor was John Price, also a vestryman.

The conditions of this trust fixes this property for an Episcopal Church or burial ground for all time to come. It can be sold for no other use no matter how valuable the site may become. This restriction emphasizes the necessity of insuring the continued existence of Christ Church for all time by adequate endowment.

With the acquisition of this lot, the old name of St. Mary's was dropped, and the parish was named

"Christ Church" after the venerable church in Philadelphia where Washington had worshipped. A Building Committee was formed in 1822, consisting of George DeBenneville Keim, Nathaniel P. Hobart and Benneville Keim to which William Pendleton Orrick was afterwards added, and on the 10th day of May, 1826, one hundred years ago to the day, in the presence of the Diocesan Convention, this Church was consecrated by the Right Reverend Bishop White.

In Memoriam

Isaac Hiester, Esq.

At a special meeting of the vestry of Christ Church, Reading, held on Wednesday, March 16, 1921, the following Minute was unanimously adopted:

The unexpected summons of Isaac Hiester, Esq., a member of this vestry and Junior Warden of the Parish, seems to our worldly sense like a public calamity, because of his uses and worthy example here; but, bowing to that Divine wisdom "which passeth all understanding" we accept, with submission this final decree and transfer of allegiance "to Him whose service is perfect freedom."

Mr. Hiester's family for a hundred years have been faithful worshippers in the congregation of Christ Church, Reading, and have at all times contributed generously with heart and hand to its welfare and progress. Three Church edifices, in whole or in part, have been erected by this congregation, in course of time, and all of these bear in their cornerstones the names of Mr. Hiester's ancestors or of himself, as subscribers to promote the worship of Almighty God, through the forms of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States.

In his profession as a lawyer, he rose to the first rank, and in business he was in equal demand for a number of substantial enterprises, to which he devoted his attention with able and methodical care, always enjoying the unlimited confidence of his associate and of the general public.

Socially he impressed himself rather by example than by precept. He was impressive but prudent in speech, unobtrusive and almost reluctant in presenting his views, but his keen sense of humor and intelligent knowledge of affairs made him a charming and instructive companion.

His walk in life was almost exemplary, and his profession of religion was without reserve. He was elected a member of the vestry in 1879 and was Junior Warden in 1902. For a number of years he took active part in the work of the Sunday School, having been Superintendent from 1880 to 1889. His last public act was to attend Divine Services in his Parish Church of which throughout his life he was a loyal and devoted member.

From the minutes.

Attest: H. B. Hagy, Clerk.
