



AN EARLY PICTURE OF CHRIST CHURCH  
From the Original, in the Possession of J. Bennett Nolan, Esq.

PART III

*Pioneer Missionary Work in Reading  
and Berks County*

*The Labors of the First English Missionary*

The Rev. Alexander Murray,  
Missionary of the Society for the Propagation  
of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.  
By Louis Richards, Esq., late Member of  
the Berks County Bar, and for many years  
a member of Christ Church, Reading.

THE ESTABLISHMENT of the Anglican mission in Berks county is due, in a large part, to the efforts of the Rev. Dr. William Smith, first Provost of the College of Philadelphia, now the University of Pennsylvania, himself an ordained minister of the church. It is a matter of record that on April 17, 1761, at a meeting of the Propagation Society held in London, a petition dated July 13, 1760, subscribed by twenty-two of the inhabitants of the county of Berks in Pennsylvania, in behalf of themselves and others, was presented, setting forth: "That the said county was a very large and prosperous one, situated on the frontiers of the province, and had never had any English minister of any denomination

settled in it, nor had it the happiness of being often visited by any of the clergy of the interior provinces; that in this distress they had invited the Rev. Dr. Smith to come amongst them, and having received encouragement from him they had presumed to lay their case before the Venerable Society and pray that a missionary might be sent to reside at Reading, and to officiate also at Morlatton, fifteen miles from Reading, where a church had been built many years before by a society of Swedes, who joined with them in the application. That they had obligated themselves by subscription to pay yearly to such missionary the sum of £60 Pennsylvania money (about £38 sterling) over and above what the Society might be pleased to allow him. That for want of encouragement many people sincerely disposed to the Church of England are drawn after various sectaries, and others were inclined to popery, a popish priest being on the point of settling in the town of Reading."

This application was indorsed by a letter from the Rev. Dr. Smith, who said that the petitioners were personally known to him and competent to fulfill their engagements, and that Mr. William Bird, who headed the subscription list, was a prosperous ironmaster. Dr. Smith further stated that Reading, the chief town of the county, was settled mostly by

Germans, and had not as yet had an English resident minister; that the Romish priests were busy among the people on the one hand, and the sectaries dependent upon the Quakers on the other, and that it was the opinion of the whole body of the Episcopal clergy of the province that there was no place where a mission was more needed than in that town. The petition was further commended by a letter from the Rev. Thomas Barton, the Society's missionary at Lancaster, Pa., stating that he had preached at Reading, and promising to co-operate with the new undertaking.

The appeal was granted by the Society, which decided to send the Rev. Alexander Murray as its representative in the new field. His salary was fixed at £30 sterling per annum, which the petitioners engaged to supplement with £60 Pennsylvania currency. Mr. Murray was a native of Scotland, was educated at King's College, Aberdeen, and appears originally to have been a minister or licentiate of the Scottish church. The evidence of his ministerial connection is the statement upon the records of the Society that he came well recommended by the Presbytery of Aberdour and a great number of his hearers in that Presbytery, and that his appointment was to be contingent upon the Lord Bishop of London finding him, upon examination, worthy of holy orders.

He set out in August, 1762, and landed in Philadelphia in the following December, reaching Reading on the eighteenth of that month.

Mr. Murray was a man of learning and zeal, and his selection proved most fortunate. Of his labors in this field much has been written which it would be superfluous to recapitulate in this connection. His letters to the Society from time to time embrace reports as to the details and progress of his work. It thence appears that when he took charge of the mission he was much discouraged by the paucity of the element out of which he expected to build up a church, and the preoccupation of the field by the German sectarians who represented the masses of the inhabitants and had already provided themselves with houses of worship in Reading and its vicinity. At Reading he found at the outset but seven families, comprising forty-eight souls, belonging to the Anglican communion. At Morlatton the outlook was more favorable, for here were thirty-six families, embracing two hundred and thirty-two souls, nearly all of whom had been baptized. The old church built here by the Swedes he reported as in a ruinous condition; at Reading his little flock met for worship in a private dwelling, and he despaired of seeing a new edifice erected in either place.

Such was the humble beginning of the Protestant Episcopal organization in our own county. Mr. Murray officiated on two successive Sundays at Reading and on the third at Morlatton, journeying thither on horseback. Whilst his congregation at Morlatton began to decrease somewhat by deaths and removals, that in the growing town of Reading continued to increase, and services were presently held in the county court house in Penn square, then recently erected. The Proprietaries having granted a lot for the purpose, a project was set on foot to build a church, and subscriptions to the amount of £200 were secured toward its cost. The parish took the name of St. Mary's, and was at a later period represented occasionally in the Conventions of the Diocese of Pennsylvania.

Mr. Murray must have become possessed of considerable private means; otherwise the slender stipend allowed him by the Propagation Society and the somewhat precarious contributions of his congregations would have been inadequate to his proper support. It is known that he married in this country. He built in 1770 a substantial residence upon a tract of one hundred and seventy-five acres of land a short distance east of Reading, which he acquired in 1768, and also came into possession of several pieces of real estate in other counties.

There is little doubt that the project of erecting an Episcopal church in Reading would have been accomplished had it not been for the enkindling, shortly afterwards, of the fires of the Revolution, which utterly paralyzed for the time being the work of the Anglican churches in the colonies, and wholly extinguished many established parishes. The English clergy were obligated by their ordination vows to pray stately according to the liturgy for the welfare of the King and Parliament, and it is readily understood how incongruous was such a petition with the designs of the patriots who had confederated to declare their independence of both, and were working it out by an appeal to the sword. Nor could the missionaries take the oath of allegiance to the cause of the colonies, required by law, without forfeiting their appointments and severing their relations with the Home Society, as well as with the country of their birth.

In this crisis of political affairs Mr. Murray was compelled to suspend his public ministrations, and in May, 1778, he petitioned the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania for leave to sell his real estate and retire to England during the war. It appears from the Colonial records that he was made prisoner by the British forces in August of that year, and paroled. I greatly doubt the statement which has been made that he was subjected to some per-

sonal indignities for political reasons at the hands of his fellow citizens of the town of Reading. Such violent measures towards the Episcopal clergy were resorted to in some other communities of the State, but Mr. Murray was a man of great prudence and dignity of character, and was held in high esteem by all who knew him and were acquainted with his work. Several prominent local leaders in the Revolutionary cause, moreover, were members of his church. His application to the Executive authorities of Pennsylvania having been promptly granted, he disposed of his real estate, and embarked for England in the fall of 1778, in company with his fellow itinerant in the missionary service, the Rev. Mr. Barton of Lancaster. His record of pastoral acts in his two parishes extends down to the time when he left the country.

Cut off from the parent church of England, the Episcopal churches were left, after the Revolution, without any external bond of unity and strength. They had for many years previous to the disruption repeatedly petitioned to obtain the Episcopate from the mother country, but these applications had always been refused, and non-juring ministers had been promptly recalled. After the ratification of peace, steps were taken to organize the church in the several states. A General Convention was called in Philadelphia in 1785; in 1787 Bishops White and

Prevost obtained consecration at the hands of the Bishop of London—Bishop Seabury having received the same rite from the Scottish church a short time previously—and in 1789 another General Convention of the American churches revised the Prayer Book. With these events the independent life of what is known as the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States began, and thenceforward it pursued its course in freedom.

During the Revolution and for several years afterwards it is presumable that the church at Morlatton had no stated public ministrations from any source. The Rev. Mr. Murray, whose heart seems to have been with his people in his remote missionary field, returned to Pennsylvania about 1790, and resumed in part his pastoral duties both at Reading and Morlatton. He died in Philadelphia September 14, 1793, of the prevailing epidemic of yellow fever, aged sixty-six, and his remains, together with those of his wife, Mrs. Ann Murray, who survived him until March 31, 1811, rest in the burial ground adjoining Christ Church in that city. Mrs. Murray's friendly interest in the parish of St. Gabriel's is evidenced by her presentation to it in the month of June, 1801, of a large folio Bible, printed in London, which for many years afterwards continued to be used in the church services.

## PART IV

*The Clergy of Christ Church*

"Moreover it is required in Stewards, that a man be faithful."—1 Cor. 4, 2.  
 "Touch not My anointed, and do My prophets no harm."—Psalm 105, 15



THE STORY of the early Christian Church, as it has been preserved to us, is, to a great extent, the record of the lives of the Apostles, and the Bishops who followed them. The History of a Parish has to do chiefly, though not entirely, with the record of its ministers and rectors. It is their labor and efforts that have been preserved and it is our privilege to gather together what data is available, and to make the record permanent for future generations.

The missionary activities of the Rev. Thomas Barton brought to the attention of the church authorities the fact that Reading, in Berks County, was an established and growing city with great possibilities, and the need of the Church's effort to advance the cause of Christ was evident. This recommendation was handed on by the report of Dr. Bearcraft to those interested and responsible across