

SAINT PETER'S PARISH CHURCH OF NEW KENT COUNTY, VIRGINIA

Saint Peter's Parish church was founded on April 29, 1679. In 1700 the vestry ordered that a second Lower Church replace the earlier, structurally weak building known as the "Swaybacked" Church. The new church was begun in 1701 and was completed in July of 1703. Today it is the oldest parish church in the Diocese of Virginia and the fourth oldest in the Commonwealth. The original portion of St Peter's church is one of the few Jacobean structures in America and its 1740 Stump tower is also rare. The body of the church is laid in English bond as are only three other Colonial Virginia Churches.

The Bacon and Lydall families from whom we are descended were members of the congregation of St. Peter's from 1684 until around 1809. There is a stone at the rear of the church bearing testimony to the service of the Lydall/Bacon and Bugg families. The inscription on the stone reads* "This stone witnesseth to the lives of good, upright people identified with St. Peter's Parish for more than 125 years from its foundation in 1684. Colonel George Lydal, Captain Edmund Bacon, John Bacon, Samuel Bugg and his wife Sarah Bacon and Sherwood Bugg, b. 1720."

There are few headstones so it is not known whether any of our Bacon kin are buried in the cemetery surrounding the church. Since Captain Edmund Bacon and Colonel George Lyddall lived just to the north of the church on Black Creek, it is plausible that they are buried there. I was told



*St. Peter's Parish Church,
front and side views*

* *Colonel George Lydall's daughter, Ann Lydall, was the wife of Captain Edmund Bacon. Their son was John Bacon who was married first to Sarah Langston and second to Rebecca Parke. Samuel Bugg was married to Sarah Bacon, daughter to Edmund Bacon. Our Nancy Bacon Thompson was a descendant of George Lydall, Edmund Bacon, John Bacon and his first wife, Sarah Langston.*

that the native stone in Virginia was too soft to be used for headstones in the early years. Only the very wealthiest of families had headstones because they could afford to have them made in England and shipped back to Virginia. So most headstones found in the cemetery are of a later period.

I visited the church in May of 1997 and found it to be one of the most beautiful spots in Virginia. It is way out in the country and surprisingly, there is nothing else around the area except for some isolated homes. It is approximately 45 to 50 miles east of Richmond and about 5 miles from the county seat, New Kent off Virginia State Highway 249. The church is still in use and has regular Sunday services, though they were cancelled the Sunday that I wanted to attend.

The church bears the name THE FIRST CHURCH OF THE FIRST FIRST-LADY! Martha Dandridge is perhaps St. Peter's most famous parishioner. She was born at Chestnut Grove in 1731 and married Colonel Daniel Parke Custis (the Bacons are related to the Parke's) in June of 1749. She was married to Col. Custis for eight years when he died and left her a widow with two small children. On January 6, 1759 Martha married George Washington in the church. Hence the title of the First First-Lady Church. Another notable parishioner was Letitia Christian who was baptized in the church in 1790. Letitia Christian later married (President) John Tyler whose Sherwood Plantation is about 12 miles south of the Church.

Between 1843 and 1856 the church gave shelter to two different groups, the Episcopalians and Presbyterians.

The church and records were burned by the British during the American Revolution and again during the War of 1812. Most church records were destroyed but there were some English duplicate records found in England. During the Civil War Federal troops occupied the church and it was desecrated and left almost in ruins. In 1869, Mary Ann Randolph Custis Lee, wife of General Robert E. Lee and great-granddaughter of Martha Washington, wrote a letter trying to save the church from demolition. Money was raised and renovations made and the church resumed services in 1872. Renovations were supervised by General William Henry Fitzhugh Lee, son of Robert E. Lee and Mary Ann Lee. He contributed much of the lumber and furnished teams and hands for the hauling. In 1964 the interior of the church was restored to look as it had during the colonial period.