

**A New and Concise Architectural, Cultural, Social, and Spiritual History of
St. John's Episcopal Church, upon its Reopening on John's Island, South
Carolina, Anno Domini 2022**



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I. How to View Our History

Like our ancient neighbor, the Angel Oak Tree, St. John's Episcopal Church has very deep roots on John's Island. Also like Angel Oak, St. John's has weathered centuries of both natural and human storms. To understand where God is leading us as a community, we must tell the full story of our church's past—acknowledging our triumphs and errors alike as we make our pilgrim journey like our forebears.¹

II. The First Church, the Colonial Era, and Revolutionary Tumult, c. 1730s-1780s

¹ While much has happened in our parish in recent years, particularly regarding the schism in the Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina in the early 21st-century, this historical survey—based on both primary sources and historical scholarship— will only cover the history of the church from its early 18th-century founding to the construction of the present sanctuary in 1955.



Map of the Province of Carolina, c. 1773, James Cook.

For thousands of years, Indigenous peoples such as the Kiawah, Stono and Bohicket farmed, hunted, fished, and lived on the sea islands of the South Carolina Lowcountry and the land upon which St. John's now stands. After the founding of Charles Town in 1670, relations between English colonists and Indigenous peoples in the area were initially peaceful but quickly soured as the infant colony expanded.² Despite these conflicts, the slow trickle of Anglo-American settlers on John's and Wadmalaw Islands in the closing decades of the seventeenth century presaged a tidal wave of new settlers in the first decades of the eighteenth century. This was largely a result of the adoption of 'Carolina Gold Rice' as a cash crop for the colony. Plantation owners quickly established themselves on John's Island and its neighbors—using the labor of enslaved Africans to acquire extraordinary sums of wealth.³

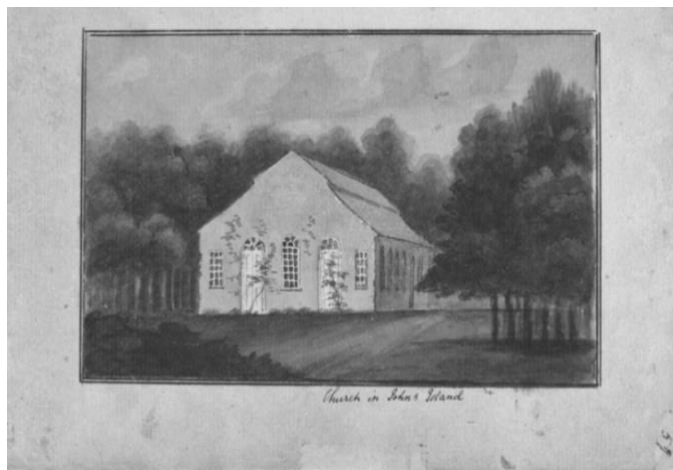
While slavery was the defining feature of the South Carolina economy and social landscape, the colony's founding document—the Fundamental Constitutions of 1669—established the freedom of worship for Protestants and Jews who would settle in the colony. Catholics were generally excluded from such protections in much of the British empire. Despite the religious diversity (and tensions) within the colony, the South Carolina legislature established a parish system that made the Church of England the official state religion. In each parish, landowning white men of any religious background were allowed to vote for wardens and vestrymen to govern the parish church. Aside from governing parish churches, these parish officials also helped provide for local roads, education, and even appointed members of the legislature. In

²"Lower Coast American Indians." Dataw Historic Foundation. <https://www.datawhistory.org/52-sams-in-52-weeks/lower-coast-indians/> and Dr. Nic Butler, "The First People of the South Carolina Lowcountry," Charleston Time Machine. <https://www.ccpl.org/charleston-time-machine/first-people-south-carolina-lowcountry>

³ Laylon Wayne Jordan and Elizabeth H. Stringellow, *A Place Called St. John's: The Story of John's, Edisto, Wadmalaw, Kiawah, and Seabrook Islands of South Carolina* (Spartanburg: the Reprint Company, 2000), pp. 52-53.

1734, the South Carolina government created St. John's Parish, and placed John's, Seabrook, Kiawah, Wadmalaw, and Edisto Islands under its purview.⁴

Johns Islanders met in the summer of 1734 and voted to build the first church on land belonging to Abraham Waight. This parcel was next to the Angel Oak Tree, which may have already been a couple of hundred years old by this early date! By 1738, local Anglicans asked for guidance and financial assistance from the Church of England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts—an Anglican outreach organization tasked with expanding the Church of England in the New World.⁵



Early 19th-century view of the first 18th-century church. Source: Public Domain. Fraser, Charles, 1782-1860. "Church in John's Island" Lowcountry Digital Library, Gibbes Museum of Art.

St. John's, which was constructed between 1734 and 1744, had three interior aisles. Two of the aisles came from doors on the church's western side, and the third aisle went from the north to the south. The church was packed with 27 pews in orderly rows. As elsewhere in the Church of England, the pews were then sold to various families to help finance the church construction. The largest donors would sit closer to the front of the church and had spaces for their whole families. At the very back of the church were "public" pews for non-paying visitors or the

⁴ Jordan and Stringfellow, *A Place*, pp. 52-53.

⁵ Frederick Dalcho, *An Historical Account of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South-Carolina...* (Charleston: E. Thayer, 1820), pp. 360-362 and John K. Nelson, "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts," *Encyclopedia of North Carolina*. <https://www.ncpedia.org/society-propagation-gospel-foreign->

impoverished. It is possible that enslaved people also sat in rear pews, or may not have had a pew granted to them at all as was common in period Anglican parish churches.⁶ It is known that enslaved and free Africans were involved in the congregation to some extent because of records of Rector Isaac Amory's attempts to minister to them in the 1760s. Nevertheless, the parish church of the 18th-century was primarily a house of worship for the richest and most elite white members of society.⁷

This image of 18th-century St. John's is certainly complex and difficult to discuss and study for the modern scholar, clergyperson, parishioner, or visitor. What emerges in our study of the earliest congregation is a complicated picture—a congregation that did charitable acts such as constructing a "Home for Widows and Poor," but also one that took part in the enslavement of God's children.

Aside from social divisions within the church, the actual style of worship at St. John's in the 18th-century would have looked a bit different than it does today. The congregation would have used the Church of England's 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*—an ancestor to the current 1979 edition still used in St. John's. Music at St. John's could have varied from the Parish clerk leading the congregation in responsive chants of Psalms to more musically complex tunes. While some larger parishes like St. Michael's had organs to accompany the singing, it does not seem that St. John's had an organ in the colonial era.⁸ One can almost imagine dozens of congregants singing psalms to the tune 'Old 100th.'

In addition to prayers and worship music, the clergyman's sermon was a major—and frequently lengthy—part of the service. Throughout the colonial period, the rural parish struggled to keep clergy due to sickness, death, disputes over pay, and administrative issues. One of the more well-known clergymen was Reverend Samuel Quincy. Quincy, a former missionary in the colony of Georgia and later rector at St. Philip's in downtown Charles Town, published many of his sermons in a compendium called *Twenty Sermons, & c., preached in the Parish of St. Philip's*. Even though these sermons came from a later era in his service at a different church, one can get a real sense of what a colonial sermon at St. John's may have sounded like by reading them. One such sermon, "Christianity: A Rational Religion," is more than 17 pages in length and

⁶ Louis P. Nelson *The Beauty of Holiness : Anglicanism and Architecture in Colonial South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), pp. 310-317. ProQuest eBook Accessed 27 October 2022 via College of Charleston Website.

⁷ Richard J. Hooker, ed. *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953), p. 62, n. 52.

⁸ Nelson, *The Beauty*, pp. 228-231.

expounds upon the Enlightenment-era belief that Christianity was at its best when treated as a faith for “Men of Reason and Understanding.”⁹

During this era when Enlightenment ideals of reason, rationality, and self examination permeated Anglican sermons, they also inspired non-Anglican Dissenters to hold a continent-wide revival known as the “Great Awakening.” During this period of vigorous (and often outdoor) worship services, renowned ministers such as George Whitefield came to John’s Island and challenged the Anglican-establishment with rousing and controversial sermons. It is doubtful many of the congregants of St. John’s, with its focus on Anglican orderliness and hierarchy, were fond of this interference!¹⁰



A depiction of an congregation that original

like. Source:

Character Sketches of Romance, Fiction, and the Drama... (1892). Wikimedia Commons.

18th-century church mirrors what St. John's parishioners likely looked

Ebenezer Cobham Brewer,

The Enlightenment may have inspired some of the ministers and spiritual revivals of this era, but it played a major role in fomenting the Revolutionary Crisis that would separate the American colonists from the British Empire. As anger grew throughout the colonies at British taxation without representation, many of the wealthy planters who attended St. John's joined the Patriot cause despite years of praying for the King and Royal Family in the church.¹¹ While it is possible that church activities were less frequent during the Revolutionary War, vestry

⁹ Edgar Legare Pendleton, “The Rev. Samuel Quincy, S.P.G. Missionary,” in *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 11 (1927), pp. 164-165, “Letters from the Clergy of the Anglican Church, c. 1696-1775,” ed. George W. Williams. College of Charleston Special Collections [Accessed 4 January 2023]. <https://speccoll.cofc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Letters-from-the-Clergy-of-the-Anglican-Church-in-SC.pdf> and Samuel Quincy, “Christianity: a Rational Religion” in *ibid*.

¹⁰ Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield* (Charles Tappan, 1845), pp. 78-80.

¹¹ Dalcho, *An Historical Account*, pp. 364-365.

minutes indicate that the parish officers were as invested in keeping the parish running as much as they were in creating a new country. For instance, in August of 1776—only weeks after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia—vestry officers from various prominent families including the Whaleys, Seabrooks, and LaRoches were elected to positions in the vestry.¹²

When the Crown decided to capture Charles Town and its surrounding areas in 1780, Johns Island became an important launching pad for the invasion. Several skirmishes occurred between Crown and Patriot forces on other parts of John's Island, but the church seems to have been spared actual battle damage. Nevertheless, the war certainly created social and spiritual dissension within the fabric of the parish itself. For instance, while many of the parishioners were supporters of the Patriot cause, Edward Fenwick, Jr. was imprisoned by Patriot authorities for Loyalist sympathies and eventually fled South Carolina.¹³ By the end of the war, looters had clearly wreaked havoc on the ill-attended house of worship. Vestry members reported that the church was in a "most deplorable situation indeed, not a door, window shutter, or pew to be seen; a large part of the floor, missing, the pavement of the Aisles in many places distroy'd [sic]." Despite the damage to the sanctuary, women from the Stanyarne family thankfully saved the silver communion service.¹⁴ So began the work of rebuilding St. John's.

III. The Second Church and the Expansion of the Parish, c. 1790-1860

Like much of the South Carolina Lowcountry, Johns Island and its parish church had much rebuilding to do. With the creation of the new United States, American Anglicans rebranded themselves as Episcopalians. It took the planters of John's Island some time to recover from the effects of the Revolutionary War, but by the end of the century, census records indicated that St. John's Parish had 600 white people, 40 free black people, and 4,660 slaves. Enslaved laborers continued to harvest rice on John's Island plantations, but also the new and lucrative crop of Sea Island Cotton.¹⁵

To accommodate this postwar growth, Episcopalians on Johns Island decided to replace the decrepit old parish church. Early on, parishioners turned to the rising architectural star Robert Mills—a Charleston native and future designer of the nation's Washington Monument—to draft

¹² Records of the Parish of St. John's, Colleton, 1734-1917. South Carolina Historical Society, Manuscript 0328.0

¹³ Jordan and Stringfellow, *A Place*, p. 89.

¹⁴ Records of the Parish of St. John's, Colleton, 1734-1917. South Carolina Historical Society, Manuscript 0328.0 and Jordan and Stringfellow, *A Place*, p. 98.

¹⁵ Jordan and Stringfellow, *A Place*, pp. 97-99.

plans for a new church. The enterprising architect based his plan on recent trends in Neoclassical architecture that were sweeping the nation (n.b. This style had Greco-Roman and symmetrical attributes seen in other buildings like the original White House).¹⁶ Mills planned a small church, with dimensions of 46x26 feet. There was to be a portico with massive columns on both sides of the sanctuary, large bay windows, a dome sheathed in copper with a skylight, an elaborate pulpit requiring large stairs, and a second floor gallery where enslaved and free congregants of color were expected to sit. The congregation rejected Mill's elaborate designs, but clearly kept his idea of a towering cupola and portico.¹⁷ One 1820s source reported that St. John's new church was:

"...a new building of wood was finished in 1817, by the liberality of the late Francis Simmons, Esq. It is a neat and commodious building with a handsome Portico...The interior is 45 feet long, by 32 feet wide; the extreme length 54...The Communion Plate consists of a Chalice, Paten, and Alms Plate. St. John's, Colleton, is a flourishing and respectable Cure. It has a Glebe and Parsonate, and its funds are large and increasing. The inhabitants generally remove from the Parish during the summer, and the service of the Church is suspended from June to November."¹⁸

The note that the church was only operable from November to May is interesting. In the 18th- and-19th-centuries, wealthy Lowcountry planters frequently moved out of the area during the summer when Yellow Fever and Malaria (literally Latin for 'bad air') were rife. Antebellum planters mistakenly attributed these diseases to the heat/ 'miasmas' that spread disease rather than to the actual culprits: mosquitoes. While some planters fled the state in general, others created 'summer villages' such as Rockville, which still resides on the rural sea island of Wadmalaw. By the 1830s, local planters constructed Grace Episcopal Chapel—a beautiful Gothic style house of worship which is still part of our parish today. Interestingly, the chapel served as a headquarters for Union veteran nurse Clara Barton when she orchestrated disaster relief for Wadmalaw residents after a major hurricane in 1893.¹⁹

¹⁶ John M. Bryan, *Robert Mills, Architect* (Washington, D.C.: American Institute of Architects Press, 1989), p. 20.

¹⁷ Nelson, *The Beauty*, pp. 344-346.

¹⁸ Dalcho, *An Historical Account*, p. 365.

¹⁹ South Carolina Picture Project, <https://www.scpictureproject.org/charleston-county/grace-episcopal-chapel.html> [Accessed 15 February 2023].



Image of
Commons

Grace Chapel by Galen Parks Smith, Wikimedia

Antebellum St. John's was a busy place indeed. For instance, an 1826 diocesan report by the rector, the Reverend Thomas House Taylor, reported the following:

*"Baptisms, Adults, 4 White, and 6 Coloured; White Children, 16: Total 26. Marriage, 1. Burials., 4. Communicants, 19. White, 14 Coloured: Total 33, Non-Communicants, 56. Children under 14 years of age, 71. Families, 35. Confirmed by the Bishop, 6. Public Worship is performed on 30 Sundays, and on 2 other days. Whole number of times, 32."*²⁰

A modern reader will certainly be taken aback by the racial language used in the preceding entry. In the mid-19th-century, the Episcopal Church, the Diocese of South Carolina, and St. Johns all continued to have a complicated relationship with the institution of African slavery. In the century leading up to the Civil War, the national Episcopal Church avoided discussing slavery to prevent regional schisms that were occurring in other denominations. Even though enslaved Africans were included in total church numbers throughout the parish, there is sadly no indication that they were treated as equals in any sense. One can get a sense of this from an 1850s diocesan note that "The members of the Parish, residing at Legareville [note: a now defunct village], are about to erect a Chapel for their convenience in summer...Other individuals are planning a Chapel for the convenience of the negro population..." By 1858, the parish constructed Zion Chapel for African American worshippers on Wadmalaw. While there is evidence that white parishioners occasionally attended services at this chapel, services were not necessarily integrated in the modern sense of the word. Enslaved Africans in most island parishes were required by custom to sit in separate galleries from white parishioners.

²⁰ *Journals of the Proceedings of the 35th Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocess [Sic] of South Carolina; Held in St. Michael's Church, Charleston...1823* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1823), p. 12.

In sum, by midcentury, the Episcopalian population of Johns Island was large enough to demand at least three houses of worship. Additionally the parish constructed a permanent rectory at Rockville to allow for a more permanent tenure for ministers, created a church library, and organized a Sunday school.²¹ Unfortunately, the latter half of the nineteenth century would bring disaster and tribulation to the parish community and beyond.

IV. The Third Church and the Age of Disaster, c. 1860-1900

The state of South Carolina seceded from the Union in December of 1860, largely concerned over issues of slavery. By April of 1861, the Civil War broke out in Charleston Harbor with the bombardment of Fort Sumter. Like so many men from around the South, planters' sons, brothers, uncles, and fathers of St. John's Parish flocked to the ranks of the Confederacy. By early 1862, Federal victories in nearby Port Royal Sound encouraged many white plantation owners to flee inland. A number of parishioners stayed behind and served with the Stono Scouts mounted militia unit. Their main goal was to scout for Union landing parties and to secure vital waterways around Johns and Wadmalaw Islands. Parishioners served in other units, too. For instance, the white Reverend Paul Gervais Jenkins—former minister at the parish's largely black Zion Church—served as an infantryman and clergyman for various South Carolina units.²²

If white parishioners fought for the Confederacy, Johns Island's black residents took a different route. When given the chance to pursue freedom, countless certainly took it. In an interview in the 1960s, Betsy Pickney—a daughter of a former enslaved Johns Island man—recalled that her father, Cyrus Jenkins, fled in the early years of the war when he had been ordered to begin the spring planting on the Jenkins plantation. She stated “My daddy just up and ran off with the Yankees...My grandma didn't see him for four years...” When he finally returned after the conflict he had “only one raggedy [Union?] soldier coat and nothing else but that.”²³ It's possible that he served with the 1st SC Regiment of U.S. Colored Troops—a Federal unit filled with many former slaves and freemen from Charleston.

Even though the island would see scattered combat during the Revolutionary War, it would be during the latter years of the Civil War when the horrors of war truly came to the parish. For instance, the multi-day, July 1864 Battle of Burden's Causeway (AKA 'Bloody Bridge') took place at a junction near modern day Plowground Road. If one were standing at the threshold of St. John's in 1864, they could hear loud bursts of Parrot guns and volleys of thousands of

²¹ Ron James Caldwell, *A History of the Episcopal Church Schism in South Carolina* (Wipf & Stock, 2017), pp. 11-13, *Journal of the Diocesan Convention of South Carolina, 1851* (Charleston, A.E. Miller, 1851), p. 41, and Albert Sidney Thomas, *A Historical Account of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina, 1820-1957...* (Columbia: R.L. Bryan Company, 1957), pp. 337-339.

²² Johns Island Conservancy Website. [Accessed 15 February 2023]. <https://jicsc.org/> and Thomas, *A Historical Account*, pp. 337-339.

²³ Guy and Candie Carawan, *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life?: the People of Johns Island South Carolina—Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 4.

muskets—even 3.5 miles away. The Confederates successfully repelled Union forces in this engagement but lost over 100 men—doubtlessly including members of the congregation— in the process.²⁴

As battles raged across the island throughout the spring and summer of 1864, a fire of unknown origins swept throughout the parish and destroyed the second St. John’s church building. Around the same time, the Episcopal chapel at Legareville—already damaged in the frequent combat on the island—was also burnt. The final years of the Civil War brought the church’s financial holdings down from \$30,000 to \$3,000. Nevertheless, parishioners still found ways to worship as they always had. In the final months of the war and after, soldiers and civilians alike held small services at Zion Chapel, at the parsonage, at the nearby Presbyterian church, and even on the grounds of the ruins of St. John’s. There in 1868, Reverend E.E. Bellinger led a moving service and administered the Holy Sacrament to parishioners gathered underneath oak trees on the south side of the current property.



1865 Photograph of Civil War Damage in Downtown Charleston, notably including the Circular Church. The 1864 Fire on John’s Island Likely Created a Similar Appearance Throughout our Parish

V. A Century of Reconstruction and the Final Two Churches, c. 1865-1955

Reconstruction changed the landscape of Johns Island, Charleston, South Carolina, and the nation as a whole. While many white southerners bemoaned the Confederate defeat, African American men had the opportunity to vote for the first time and could even run for office. Unfortunately, South Carolina’s Reconstruction years were also filled with violence, continued regional and racial tensions, and economic depression.

More specifically for St. John’s Parish, church members were tasked with postwar reconstruction for a second time. The postwar congregation would be much smaller than its antebellum predecessor. Many African Americans—largely upset over the paternalistic and

²⁴ "JOHN'S ISLAND, S.C. JULY 4TH - 10TH, 1864", Rootsweb, [Accessed 15 February 2023]. https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~merry/genealogy/New_Folder/military_history/battles/johnsisland.htm

racist attitudes they experienced before the Civil War—left Southern Episcopal churches en masse, and joined other denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Reformed Episcopal Church. Those African Americans that remained in the Diocese of South Carolina—including the congregants of the newly formed St. Mark’s Church in downtown Charleston—often faced skepticism and racial bigotry from their white coreligionists.²⁵

In the Spring of 1873, the Diocese of South Carolina and various parishioners worked together to build a third church on the same site as the 1734 and 1817 congregations. Throughout the final decades of the 19th-century and into the 20th-century, St. John’s started to adopt the aesthetic shape that so many Episcopalians would be familiar with today. By the 1880s, Parishioners ensured that the new church had an organ, a new communion silver set, and enlarged worship space. Congregants also paid constant attention to the care of this church and its sister parish chapels. For instance, in the late 1890s—after a decade of earthquake and hurricane damage—the rector personally led a crew of young men of the parish to make significant physical repairs to Grace Chapel at Rockville. The restored Grace Chapel had a new porch, memorial windows, a new altar, etc.

While the third St. John’s served as a formidable house of worship for nearly a century, a rapidly expanding congregation in the years following the Second World War opted to tear it down and to replace it with the more spacious, modern—and current—house of worship. For once, congregants chose to rebuild St. John’s on their own terms rather than because of the ravages of war.²⁶

V. The Story Goes On

This short survey of the history of the Parish of St. John’s is necessarily incomplete. The story of our fourth—and current—church building, and its congregation, is ever changing and evolving. The same could be said for the story of God’s people in general. We have a complicated story, but we can only better ourselves by drawing inspiration from moments of triumph (such as the ability to rebuild after tragedy) and by learning from moments of failure (such as our church’s historic connections to slavery). Drawing on the author of Hebrew 12, we can prayerfully say “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.”

²⁵ Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), pp. 8-9.

²⁶ Thomas, *A Historical Account*, pp. 340-342.

