

The Sugarland Church

By Barbara Glakas

The Rector at the Saint Timothy's Episcopal Church on Van Buren Street in Herndon asked the Herndon Historical Society why there were references to another 18th century St. Timothy's church in our area, since it predates the founding of his church, which came about in the late 19th century. His inquiry was the genesis of research that led to this article.

The town of Herndon's original St. Timothy's Episcopal Church was built at the corner of Elden and Grace Streets and was consecrated in 1881. They built their new church on Van Buren Street in 1968 where it remains today. Their original church on Elden Street is now used as Herndon's Masonic Lodge.

A confusing find was that the popular grave website, Find-a-Grave, listed Herndon's Saint Timothy's Episcopal Church on Van Buren Street as having cemetery burials at their church dating back to 1749, over 130 years before that church even existed. However, Saint Timothy's Church does not have a cemetery.

Obviously, something was wrong here. What is this other church that is also referred to as St. Timothy's?

That led us to discover that there was once a Colonial-era Episcopal chapel located in greater Herndon (about three quarters of a mile north of the Town of Herndon corporate limits). It was located along the boundary line between Fairfax and Loudoun Counties. In today's geographical terms, it formerly sat between Powell's Tavern Place (Fairfax Co.) and East Beech Road (Loudoun Co.). The chapel had its own cemetery. Find-a-Grave shows eleven known burials there, which range between 1749 and 1811, but it is also believed that there are many more unidentified burials there. The chapel is no longer there.

Delving back into history, we learned that since the founding of the Virginia Colony in 1607, the Church of England was the official and only legal religion in Virginia. Its followers are called Anglicans. The Truro Parish (the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Anglican church in Colonial Virginia) was formed in 1732, which covered everywhere north of the Occoquan and Bull Run. This area became Fairfax County in 1742.

According to Margaret L. Hopkins, who wrote "*Cameron Parish in Colonial Virginia*," and "*Dranesville Methodism*," laws of that day required that all adults who were 21-years-old or older had to attend Anglican Church services at least one sabbath day per month. This required them to spend an entire day travelling to a faraway church by foot, horseback, or wagon. They petitioned the Virginia General Assembly to build churches that were closer to their homes. As a result, in 1748, the Cameron Parish was created which covered the western part of Fairfax County. This parish was named after Thomas, 6th Lord Fairfax, Baron of Cameron. Then in 1757, Loudoun County was separated from Fairfax County, formed by a boundary line based on Difficult Run. The land that now makes up the town of Herndon (which did not exist yet in the 1750s) was then in Loudoun County. Cameron Parish also covered the newly formed Loudoun County. In 1798, the boundary line between Loudoun and Fairfax was realigned again, mostly

based on Sugarland Run, the stream that runs through the east side of Herndon. Eventually, Herndon became part of Fairfax County.

According to Find-a-Grave, the identified surnames listed in this old chapel cemetery are Bridges, Broadwater, Jenkins, Lewis, Owsley, and Self. It was discovered on Ancestry.com that several of those people were born in places like England, or in Prince William, Westmoreland or Northumberland, Virginia, but then died in either Fairfax County or Loudoun County. One of the men buried in the cemetery is Ezekiel Jenkins (1699-1750). A write-up under his name on Find-a-Grave says:

“Interment unverified (markers at cemetery destroyed), but he died in what was then Loudoun County near his daughter Elizabeth Self who lived very near this site and near the Sugarland Chapel/St. Timothy's at the time of her father's death, and is thought to be buried here herself. The Sugarland Chapel was in existence in 1749, somewhere near this site, though apparently the church did not move to this exact site until 1773.

“Sugarland Chapel was built to serve the people of the Anglican Cameron Parish, formed from Truro Parish of Fairfax County in 1749, according to "Dranesville Methodism" by Margaret Lail Hopkins. Cameron Parish became a part of Loudoun County when that county was formed from Fairfax in 1757.

“On 10 September 1773, Joshua Evans and his wife, Martha, deeded three acres of their land to John Carter, trustee for Cameron vestry, "for the use of the said parish and for the purpose of Erecting a church thereon" (Loudoun County Deed Book I, pages 426-427).

“Hopkins quotes the following advertisement which appeared in the 4 January 1773 issue of the *Virginia Gazette*:

“TO LET, to the lowest bidder, on the second Monday in March, if fair, if not, the next fair day, on the land of Joshua Evans, in Cameron Parish, Loudoun County.

“The building of a brick church 53 x 40, two feet in the clear, and the walls to be 28 feet high from the surface. One hundred and fifty pounds will be paid the undertaker the day the work is let, he giving bond and approved security. Three hundred and fifty pounds more will be paid in June next, and the other payments to be agreed on the day the work is let. Any person inclined to engage in the said building is desired to attend at the time and place appointed.”

Joshua Evans's house can be seen marked on a 1790 survey map, located just south of the Sugarland Run Church.

A Loudoun County Court order dated 1773, mentions the beginnings of a pathway to the new church:

“Upon the petition of the Vestry for Cameron Parish, it is ordered that Francis Peyton, William Smith, Simon Hancock and Thomas Lewis, or any three of them... do view the

most convenient way for Turning the road (leading from Broad Run Church to Sugarland Run) by the New Church now Building near Sugarland Run, and make report thereof to the Court of the Conveniences and inconveniences that may attend the same.”

Hopkins stated, “The above order seems to refer to either a change in the old Church Road or an extension of it. In any case, it was designed for the purpose of giving access to the new church in Sugarland Run.” It can be seen on maps that the historic Broad Run Church and its associated cemetery is in Loudoun County off Waxpool Road, established in c. 1750. The east end of Waxpool Road connects with Church Road. And Church Road in Sterling is located approximately 800 yards north of the Sugarland Church site.

The write up on Find-a-Grave under Ezekiel Jenkins’s name has an unexplained reference to “Sugarland Chapel/St. Timothy’s.” That was one of the references that prompted the inquiry by the Rector of Herndon’s St. Timothy’s Church. When the Loudoun County archeologist was contacted, he said he was not aware of the St. Timothy’s reference but he confirmed being aware of, “... the Sugarland Chapel and cemetery. Originally all in Loudoun but now mostly in Fairfax, following 1798 boundary line move from Difficult Run. A portion of the cemetery is still in Loudoun.”

With all the various boundary changes over the years, this old Sugarland Chapel lot became divided between Fairfax and Loudoun Counties. About 2.5 acres of this approximate 3-acre lot lies in Fairfax County and the remaining 1/3-acre sits in Loudoun County.

At one point in the 1970s, this area was getting ready to be redeveloped into a residential neighborhood. According to a specialist at the Virginia Room of the Fairfax Regional Library, that was the time that “the ruins of the church were discovered and there was a dispute between the Episcopalian Church and the developer who owned the land.” He continued, “The Church was disestablished during the Revolutionary War and fell into disuse and then ruin. Eventually the bricks were used to rebuild a Methodist Church down the road.”

A 1979 *Washington Post* article further explained,

“Loudoun County was acting to restore the remains of a 200-year-old Anglican cemetery, while Fairfax, where most of the church yard lies, has yet to act on its ownership or preservation.”

After weeks of debate and negotiations, the Loudoun developer agreed to proffer two acres, with the understanding that the land would go to whomever proves to own the church yard. Someone was able to document a string of deeds of sale dating back to 1773. It was deemed that since the parcel was originally purchased for the Anglican Parish of Cameron, that it still belonged to the heir of the Anglican tradition, the current Episcopal Diocese of Virginia. In the meantime, another developer on the Fairfax side, incorporated the cemetery into its plan as open space. Today, the approximate 3-acre lot, which is now thickly wooded, belongs to the Diocese of the Episcopal Protestant Church, according to Fairfax County tax records.

Another question about this story is how some sources refer to the “Sugarland *Church*” that was built on that site in 1773, as opposed to “Sugarland *Chapel*,” that was supposedly built in 1749. Confusingly, some of the burials at the Sugarland Church site date well before the construction

of the church in 1773. Could it be that the original building on the site was a small wooden chapel which was later replaced by a bigger brick church?

Looking online to define the difference between a chapel and a church, one website said, "Unlike a church, a chapel is a place of worship that has no pastor or priest and no permanent congregation; it's all about the physical space." Another said, "Churches rely on congregants and a pastor or priest to give sermons. On the other hand, chapels can operate without a group of people." Could it be that a small wooden chapel was initially built to be co-located with the cemetery?

Hopkins discovered a document entitled, "Parish Proportion 1764." It was a Cameron Parish levy document. Four churches were named in that document, but none of them were the Sugarland Church. That supports the theory that the 1749 building was simply a small chapel building, collocated with the cemetery, without a priest or defined congregation.

A partial explanation about the chapel building came about in a 1997 College of William & Mary dissertation by Kimberly Joyce Wells entitled, "Reflections of Social Change: Burial Patterns in Colonial Fairfax County, Virginia." Referring to a nearby Goose Creek Chapel in Cameron Parish, it said in part:

"For example, vestry minutes show that Goose Creek Chapel was part of Truro until 1749 when it was included in Cameron Parish...it later became the first church in Loudoun County upon its separation from Fairfax in 1757. (Harrison 1964:78) Scholars speculate that both Upper Church and Alexandria's house of worship were probably chapels-of-ease and therefore small, wooden structures built to allow for services led by either lay readers or ministers traveling periodically to the frontier. (Harrison, 1964:80) ...These early churches were all small structures made of wood."

Further confirmation that the original Sugarland Chapel was likely made of wood was found in a book entitled, "Dunbarton, Dranesville, Virginia," by Charles Preston Poland Jr.

"The first decade of significant settlement in the Sugarland area was in the 1740s. Settlers, including the Colemans, Garners, and Jenkins, established the first agrarian community in the Sugarland Run watershed. Indicative of the emergence of a simple and unpretentious community was the construction of a small log church on Sugarland Run to the south of Coleman's ordinary. There is plausible evidence that Sugarland Chapel was in existence by 1749."

Poland continued:

"The history of the Methodist of Dranesville goes back into the mid-1700s to the log church of Sugarland Run. This church was a colonial Anglican Church called Sugarland Chapel. It is believed that at about the turn of the century, the log cabin was relocated on one of the highest elevations on the Coleman property, subsequently called 'Church Hill.'"

A document entitled, "Virginia Family Cemeteries, Preliminary Survey," referred to a Cameron Parish Cemetery that was located between the Fairfax and Loudoun County lines. It said the

date was not determined, "... but the historic church area was formed in 1748. This church was the largest of the five churches of the Cameron Parish."

Nancy Palmer Harvey wrote a 1995 article entitled, "*The Sugarland Church (1774-18??): Lost & Found A Colonial Anglican Church, on the Fairfax/Loudoun Border.*" Below are some excerpts:

"The Revolutionary War soon broke out and efforts to remove the Anglican church as the established church gained strength. As the revolution began, Virginia repealed all laws that forced dissenters to contribute to the support of the established church... In 1784 the Church of Virginia was fully disestablished by allowing marriages to be performed by any minister of the Gospel, the appointment of overseers to care for the poor in place of the Anglican vestrymen, and the incorporation of the Episcopal Church as a self-governing body... Deprived of maintenance funds, churches such as the Sugarland church fell into disuse and eventual ruin. By 1829 a deed for the sale of land that surrounded the church property noted, "boundaries ... embrace a portion of the land which has been heretofore deeded for the benefit of the Protestant Episcopal Church to erect a Church thereon which has gone to decay. When Benjamin Bridges, Newton Keene, Washington Hummer, Hardidge Bridges, Joseph Orison and John Keene petitioned the court in 1847 to be appointed trustees they described the Sugarland Church in the Parish of Cameron and County of Fairfax as, "in a very dilapidated condition the enclosures to the burying ground entirely destroyed, and that it has been abandoned by all denominations of Christians... According to tradition, the church was dismantled in the 1850's and the bricks taken 2 miles down Church Road to the site of the Liberty Meeting House (now the Dranesville United Methodist Church). There the bricks were used to rebuild that structure that had been destroyed by fire."

A Fairfax County cemetery website says:

"The church, originally called Liberty Meeting House, was allegedly built using bricks that came from the old Sugarland Chapel (St Timothy's Episcopal Church, FX168)."

Margaret L. Hopkins wrote that it was the American Revolution and the disestablishment of the Church of England in Virginia, as well as in other colonies, that led to the demise of the Sugarland Church. Many Anglican priests returned to England at the beginning of the Revolution and some of the ones who remained continued to be loyal to the British Crown.

Hopkins continued:

"After the Revolution, the congregation of Sugarland Chapel [or church] dwindled away and the church building fell into disrepair and eventual decay. Oral tradition maintains that some years after this happened, the old bricks were hauled across Sugarland Run at Coleman's Ford and along the Old Leesburg Road (now called Sugarland Road) to the site of the Liberty Meeting House, where they were reused to build the brick church which stands today on Church Hill in Dranesville and houses the congregation of the Dranesville United Methodist Church."

Hopkins was not exactly sure when this occurred, but dated it anywhere between 1833 and 1852.

This Liberty Meeting House or Church that was on the Church Hill site where the old wooden Sugarland Chapel had supposedly been previously moved, and can be seen on an 1861 Battle of Dranesville map. It is labelled as “Brick Church.”

The inquiry from the Rector at Herndon’s St. Timothy’s Episcopal Church, was not the first time that someone has made inquiries to the Herndon Historical Society about the old Anglican church, the Sugarland Church. But since it was located on land outside the town of Herndon, and it existed before the town was established, major research was never previously done. This time, however, in 2024, three Herndon Historical Society members decided to walk around the wooded chapel lot, to see what could be seen, if anything.

After an hour of trampling through the thick woods with boots and gloves, the Society members spotted it -- a row of gravesites, marked by simple old-style head and foot grave marker rocks. There are no tombstones, but grave depressions could be seen. Periwinkle ground cover could also be seen on the ground. Periwinkle, a durable, maintenance-free flowering ground cover, was typically used in 18th and 19th century burial sites as an alternative to grass. Also, strewn throughout the area were some random old bricks. Sources say the church (that had apparently replaced the wooden chapel) was made of brick which were later re-used to build another nearby church, the Liberty Church or Meeting House. The Society members were glad to see what others had been inquiring about, and that the cemetery had not been destroyed by the surrounding housing development.

All this discovery, however, did not answer one of the original questions as to why this colonial-era Sugarland Chapel was sometimes referred to in records as “St. Timothy’s.” The Virginia Room specialist was not sure either. He said:

“It's all pretty straightforward except for why it's filed as "St. Timothy's." It appears to be filed here that way because that's what it's called in the County report (and on the 2002-2003 published map of "Cemeteries of Fairfax County"), but it's not recorded *why* they called it that. My guess would be that it's because St. Timothy's [on Van Buren Street] is the closest Episcopalian Church to the site in Fairfax County?”

When the Loudoun County archeologist was asked the same question, as to why the Sugarland Church may have been referred to as St. Timothy’s, he said that he did not know and just assumed that the present-day St. Timothy’s was a successor church to the original Anglican Sugarland Chapel, adding, “The property with cemetery and chapel remains is owned by the Episcopal Church Diocese.”

That is a reasonable theory, worth more investigation. Supposedly, the old Sugarland Church was dismantled in circa 1850s. The original St. Timothy’s Episcopal Church building on Elden Street in Herndon was consecrated in 1881, although a fledgling congregation/mission existed prior to that; how many years prior is not exactly known. However, the mission building can be seen on Herndon’s earliest map, dated 1878, drawn by cartographer G.M. Hopkins. There was a mission school related to Herndon’s St. Timothy’s congregation that existed at least in 1874, if not earlier. Their Sunday school started in 1871. And the earliest record found of the first service conducted at the St. Timothy’s mission is dated 1868. Therefore, it could theoretically be possible that when the Sugarland Church was taken down in circa 1850s, it could have soon after

led to the formation of the St. Timothy's mission in Herndon in the 1860s, since after the American Revolution the Anglican Church became an independent organization in the United States and called itself the Protestant Episcopal Church. More research is needed on that hypothesis.

However, it can also not be discounted that the old Anglican church may have been referred to as "St. Timothy's" in modern records simply due to a clerical error, misfiled in a "St. Timothy's" folder, for lack of a better place to file the information. It is a mystery that may be left unsolved. Regardless, the re-discovery of remnants of this old Cameron Parish Church and cemetery site is an interesting part of the Herndon area's earliest religious history.

About this column: "Remembering Herndon's History" is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon's past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of "Remembering Herndon's History" columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society's website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.