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A CHURCH FIRE AND RECONSTRUCTION:
ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

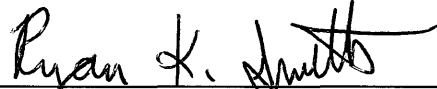
Ryan K. Smith

1998

APPROVAL SHEET


This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts



Ryan K. Smith

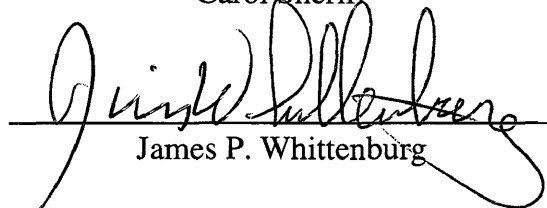
Approved, April 1998



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ABSTRACT

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church was founded in Petersburg, Virginia in the months following the end of the Civil War. This thesis, drawing from letters, newspapers, Episcopal reports and publications, and early histories, outlines the congregation's first few years. The African-American congregation grew around a school for freed slaves that had been established by the Freedman's Commission of the Protestant Episcopal Church and the Freedmen's Bureau. In April 1867, the chapel used for the church and school burned down in an apparent arson. One year later, a new church was built with the continuing support of the Freedmen's Bureau and the Freedman's Commission.

Part of a wave of arsons and violent acts committed against African Americans in Petersburg after the Civil War, the fire at St. Stephen's illustrates local resistance to black organization and education. However, the fire consequently encouraged greater cooperation among freed slaves, Northern and Southern Episcopalians, education advocates, Republicans, Southern moderates, and the Freedmen's Bureau, all of whom assisted in the rebuilding effort. Occurring as Congress began to change President Johnson's terms of Reconstruction, the response to St. Stephen's fire demonstrated a shift in conflict away from strictly sectional divisions, instead involving civil rights and race relations. By the end of Reconstruction, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church remained segregated within its community and its denomination, but it had gained a steady foundation.

Beyond its political significance, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church was a unique congregation. The vast majority of postbellum blacks joined or helped create other Christian denominations. For most, the Episcopal Church's soft stance on slavery, enduring discrimination, and rigid worship routine far outweighed the educational and material advantages offered by Episcopal organizations. Yet St. Stephen's continually committed itself to the Episcopal Church, mostly as a result of the congregation's determined leadership, local Episcopal support, and strong personal beliefs.

**A CHURCH FIRE AND RECONSTRUCTION:
ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA**

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 and 1996, an epidemic of church fires swept across the South. During these two years, at least 90 black churches and 72 white churches burned. The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms determined that most fires were caused by arson. Though there was no evidence linking the arsons to a broad conspiracy, localized outbursts of racial hostility proved to be a major factor.¹

These tragic fires brought renewed national attention to the difficulties faced by many African American communities. As congregations began to rebuild, several organizations, including the National Council of Churches, the U.S. Catholic Conference, and the Christian Coalition, offered donations totaling over \$9.5 million.² President Clinton declared the fight against church fires to be a “struggle against racism and religious bigotry,” and upon pressure from black leaders, he designated \$6 million for further church protection.³ Newspaper, magazine, and television reports focused on the churches, clergy, and communities targeted by arsonists. So while the arson epidemic illustrated persistent and widespread racial hostility and further outraged African Americans’ sense of justice, it also forged new alliances between black and white churches and reaffirmed the roles of the burned churches in their respective communities.

When a similar cycle of widespread racial hostility and complex national response took place in the first years after the Civil War, the stakes of the racial conflict’s

¹ Lori Sharn, “Christian Coalition Gives Money To Black Churches,” *USA Today*, October 18, 1996; Gordon Witkin, “Black Church Fire,” *U.S. News Online*, June 24, 1996.

² Sharn, “Christian Coalition Gives Money To Black Churches.”

resolution were particularly high. Without concrete plans for granting freed slaves citizenship or for reunifying the states, the nation faced a grave conflict over the terms of Reconstruction. Ex-Confederates took advantage of the nation's indecisive policy and moved quickly to reestablish control over blacks and Southern politics, employing tactics that included violence and intimidation.⁴ The nature of the response to their violent acts and to their overall bid for power would have profound effects on the development of the country.

This thesis traces the events surrounding an April 1867 fire at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Petersburg, Virginia. The chapel of this growing congregation of African Americans, which doubled as its schoolhouse, burned down as a probable target of racial violence. Instead of remaining "very much scattered" as Virginia's annual diocesan journal initially reported, the members of St. Stephen's soon rebuilt their church with aid from Northern Episcopalians and the Freedmen's Bureau.⁵ Once rebuilt, the church continued its programs of worship and education and grew to be a stable presence in Petersburg.

These early experiences of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church offer insight into the impact of postbellum racial violence. Initially, the young congregation was caught in the regional tug-of-war between Southern conservatives and Northern radicals and benevolents. As an educated black church receiving a great deal of Northern support, St. Stephen's disrupted Petersburg's threatened social order. A portion of the white

³ Sonya Ross, "Clinton Releases Funds to Battle Church Fires," *U.S. News Online*, July 2, 1996.

⁴ Stetson Kennedy, *After Appomattox: How the South Won the War* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995).

⁵ *Journal of the Seventy-Second Annual Council of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Virginia* (Richmond: Medical Journal Printers, 1867): 58.

community, fearful and angry over the terms of Reconstruction, apparently lashed out in violence. No suspects were ever named, and despite some efforts by the Freedmen's Bureau and federal troops, the level of racial violence in Petersburg hardly decreased.

The church and its fire encouraged an alliance within the larger regional conflict. The congregation brought together the goals of freed slaves, Northern and Southern Episcopalians, education advocates, Republicans, Southern moderates, and the Freedmen's Bureau, all of whom assisted in the rebuilding effort. At this community level, the major conflict took shape over the proper place of freed slaves within society -- from the ballot box to church worship. Violence forced the issue, and segments of Petersburg's community and outside interests divided on each side. While not all of St. Stephen's allies agreed on black suffrage, they did consider spiritual and educational development to be important rights, regardless of race or social status, and they bolstered the core of moderate politics. This small prize was among the few that survived the rolling partisan battles and conservative outcome of Reconstruction. Thus, the congregation's broadening regional support, new church building, and personal dedication enabled it to provide spiritual and social relief with political significance.

The early experiences of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church invite investigation for reasons beyond the church fire and rebuilding process. Formed in 1865 when most freed slaves across the South were distancing themselves from the Episcopal Church, this congregation assumed strict Episcopal standards for worship and education. The congregation remained Episcopal even after it was repeatedly denied equal representation within its diocese and denomination. Also, although the Episcopal Church was informally identified with the upper social classes, St. Stephen's faced rejection from

freeborn blacks in Petersburg, who typically associated with other area churches. A study of this unique church reveals key aspects of the development of the Episcopal Church and the conditions of Southern blacks' postwar lives.

Therefore, the early experiences of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church lie at the crossroads of several strands of historiography -- Reconstruction, Church, African-American, and local. The history of Reconstruction provides an indispensable framework for analysis. The nature of Reconstruction in Virginia and the rest of the South is a matter of great debate. An early and enduring interpretation was espoused in the first years of the twentieth century by John W. Burgess, William Dunning, and other scholars at Columbia University. According to the "Dunning school," Reconstruction was a sad, disgraceful period in which vindictive Radical Republicans tormented the defeated South. Infamous Northern "carpetbaggers" and Southern "scalawags" manipulated ignorant freed slaves for selfish ends, and the spectacle was finally halted after the restoration of "home rule" in 1877. Northern interest in black organizations like St. Stephen's was deemed meddling at best.

Although the Dunning school's interpretation took deep root in popular imagination, important dissenting interpretations included Alrutheus Ambush Taylor's *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia* (1926) and W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). Taking exception with the Dunning school's omission or vilification of freedpeople, these two historians presented the African American "as a participant in an upheaval rather than as a disturbing factor in a foreign

atmosphere.”⁶ They described Reconstruction as an idealistic effort to construct a democratic, interracial political order beyond slavery. DuBois focused on social class issues, and Taylor described the organizational activities of postwar blacks in Virginia. Taylor demonstrated the breadth of racial violence and found African-American clergymen to be important leaders in the developing cities.

Mainstream historical revisionism took place after the social upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s. In books like James M. McPherson’s *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (1964) and Kenneth M. Stampp’s *The Era of Reconstruction 1865-1877* (1965), historians reversed much of the Dunning school’s story. Revisionists defined the postbellum period as one of noble goals and earnest effort on behalf of the freedpeople and the Radical Republicans. These historians found that despite ex-Confederates’ violent attempts to disrupt the nation’s course, blacks made extraordinary social and political progress and Congress made bold, progressive plans for the nation’s future. The new social history of the 1960s fueled the revisionists’ investigation of Reconstruction-era minority groups.

Postrevisionists soon countered that the Reconstruction glass was half empty. They suggested that early gains in Congressional Reconstruction toward black political participation and reformed Southern state constitutions were undercut by a failure to protect those gains from persistent racism. Considering the essentially conservative outcome of Reconstruction, postrevisionists found the nation’s efforts to reconstruct to be superficial. These historians also outlined conflicts among African Americans, including

⁶ Carter G. Woodson, “Forward,” in Alrutheus Ambush Taylor, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia* (Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1926; reprint, New York: Russell & Russell, 1969).

the friction between the old, free mulatto class and the freedpeople. Major postrevisionist works include Leon F. Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (1979) and William Gillette's *Retreat from Reconstruction 1869-1879* (1979).

Recently, works of synthesis have forged a rough compromise between postrevisionist and revisionist scholarship. In *Reconstruction, America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1988), Eric Foner placed the African-American experience at the center of Reconstruction's meaning and events while integrating social, political, and economic aspects of the period. Finding Reconstruction to be radical and "unfinished," Foner's interpretation followed the lead of DuBois in its attention to African Americans and its sensitivity to Marxist issues. On a smaller scale, Richard Lowe offered a synthesis for Virginia's Reconstruction in *Republicans and Reconstruction in Virginia, 1856-70* (1991). Focusing on the activities of both black and white Republicans, Lowe traced the growth of the party, the implementation of national policies within Virginia, and the conservative response. Both Lowe and Foner leaned toward revisionist versions of Reconstruction, characterizing white Republicans as earnest and blacks as resolute.

Despite the breadth of new synthesis works, they do not fully address the era's religious activities. Unique examples of Southern congregations such as St. Stephen's Episcopal Church simply fall through the cracks in most Reconstruction histories. Although both Foner and Lowe note the importance of the church as a social institution within African American communities and the challenge it presented to the conservative order, one must look to religious historiography for a thorough treatment of postbellum church development.

Church historians have long characterized America's religious course as one dominated by colonial Puritanism and Anglicanism, followed by revivalism and evangelicalism, and then modernization, with a corresponding slackening of vigor.⁷ Recent studies of American Christianity have increasingly focused on non-traditional topics, such as the spiritual expressions of minorities, and have outlined trends other than declension. In two works, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (1990) by Jon Butler and *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (1993) by William E. Montgomery, the authors detailed the creation of independent African American congregations, the characteristics of their worship, and their nineteenth century growth. Particularly relevant to this thesis, Montgomery documented the post-emancipation flight of blacks from white churches and the increasing leadership roles assumed by black churches.

Episcopal historians have investigated the stories of blacks who remained within the mostly white denomination. Black Episcopal history received an early push from George F. Bragg, Jr.. Historian, Episcopal clergyman, and childhood member of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Bragg wrote several accounts of black participation in the Episcopal Church, including *History of the Afro-American Group of the Episcopal Church* (1922) and *The Story of Old Saint Stephen's, Petersburg, Virginia.* (1906). Conscious of the public skepticism under which the few black Episcopalians worshipped, Bragg stressed the earnestness of minority Episcopalians and identified early black Anglican leaders. Bragg was very open about those whites who had been allies to black Episcopalians and congregations, but he was more reserved when alluding to racist forces

⁷ Historians who have outlined this course include Kenneth Lockridge, Edmund S. Morgan, Rhys

affecting the church. His short exposition of the early works and membership of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church reveals a great deal about the congregation's commitment and solidarity, while leaving questions regarding the church's place in the larger community open. A wave of "revisionist" Episcopal historians sustained Bragg's tradition of Episcopal inclusion after a mid-century lull in minority research.⁸

Related to both Church and Reconstruction history, African-American historiography must inform an investigation of St. Stephen's. Of the varied themes developed within African-American historiography, two of particular significance for this thesis include African cultural survivals in America and the postbellum rise of racial segregation. The question of whether West African customs or an African cultural heritage survived the transatlantic crossing and the hardships of slavery has been the subject of debate. On one side, scholars such as Robert E. Park and E. Franklin Frazier maintained that African Americans adapted Euro-American culture for their own uses, but that a truly African culture did not survive in North America. However, W.E.B. DuBois, Eugene D. Genovese, Lawrence W. Levine, and other scholars have found that African Americans were successful in blending both African and European traditions and that "Africanisms" contributed to American culture. Jon Butler has forged something of a compromise as this debate relates to African-American religion; he describes an African "spiritual holocaust" in America followed by a rising African identity within the Christianity of American blacks in the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁹

Isaac, and Paul E. Johnson.

⁸ "Revisionist" Episcopal Church historians include Robert A. Bennett and David L. Holmes.

⁹ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith, Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990): 129.

The origins of racial segregation in the South were defined in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1957) by C. Vann Woodward. Reflecting an overlap with Reconstruction history, Woodward suggested that white southerners initiated racial segregation as a gradual response to emancipation. Eric Foner and William E. Montgomery have modified this view as it pertains to black churches and organizations established shortly after the war. These two historians found that in general, ex-slaves took advantage of new freedoms by voluntarily establishing congregations of their own. Therefore, scholars have defined several motives behind southern racial segregation. St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, as a congregation formed by ex-slaves within a racially discriminatory denomination, embodied these different motives.

Beyond the fascination of Civil War historians with Petersburg's siege, its Battle of the Crater, and the dramatic final days of war, local history in Petersburg has not received the attention enjoyed by other Southern cities. The innumerable works on nearby Richmond offer a flavor of nineteenth-century Petersburg, but there are few studies of Petersburg alone. This is surprising given the city's early status as an agricultural and industrial center with excellent rail and river transportation. Notable works on the city include William D. Henderson's *The Unredeemed City: Reconstruction in Petersburg, Virginia: 1865-1874* (1977) and Suzanne Lebsack's *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (1984). From these and other available works, it is possible to gain a sense of Petersburg's political atmosphere and social characteristics. Like other Southern cities during Reconstruction, it had a contested Republican base and a strong conservative element. Many theaters and saloons contributed to its wild reputation, but there were also an extraordinary number of active

churches and benevolent societies. In 1870, the city's population was about half white and half black, with one-third of the blacks free-born. Henderson, Lebsack and other historians have considered the significance of race relations in the city.

Despite the relevance of such historiography, an investigation driven by historical debate risks losing sight of the congregation's own professed reasons for gathering together -- spiritual faith and practical education. Not merely a mirror or microcosm of social distress, St. Stephen's Church evidently heightened spirituality and genuine personal comfort among its members. Due to this personal aspect of membership, I do not wish to explain the congregation's activities solely in terms of their historical context. Instead, this thesis narrates an early history of St. Stephen's while attempting to balance the delicate mixture of personal choices and political statements.

The lack of available records complicates this task. The church built in 1868 after the fire no longer stands, for in the early twentieth century, St. Stephen's moved to a new brick building a few blocks away. The current congregation holds a few furnishings and an interior photo from the old church, but little else. Information on the church's early development comes mainly from the Diocese of Virginia's annual council journals, Petersburg newspapers, letters published in the Episcopal monthly *The Spirit of Missions*, and Bragg's *The Story of Old St. Stephen's*. These sources create a picture of the early church in which stubborn cohesion, denominational assistance and discrimination, and consistent educational priorities combined to establish a meaningful black organization in a difficult time.

CHAPTER I

A NEW CONGREGATION

On a Wednesday night in January or February 1867, about thirty African Americans in Petersburg met to formally organize their Episcopal church. The congregation had been worshipping together for about a year, associated with a school for freed slaves established by Northern Episcopalians. The organizational meeting took place after a weekly evening worship service at the congregation's chapel, which doubled as the Episcopal schoolhouse. A letter written by founding member D. W. Cain to Amanda Aiken, the Northern teacher in charge of the school, detailed this "Business Meeting." Cain stated that to begin the meeting, "brother John Cain was called to the Chair and D. W. Cain was appointed Secretary; brother Peter W. Bragg was made Treasurer." Next, "a temporary Standing or Business Committee" was appointed, composed of seven men, with the power to tax members of the congregation according to income. "We thought it good, also," Cain wrote, "to raise a choir, seeing it is much needed." Cain listed the names of eighteen choir members, and he confirmed commitments from a local Episcopal minister and a local layman "to preach for us" at the new church's upcoming services. The meeting ended with a collection, which raised two dollars. Reflecting on the night's events, Cain told Aiken,

Respecting the Church, I thank my God that He hath been pleased, through you and your friends, to lift the dark cloud that so obscured the prospect of our ever having a Church to ourselves. Now the long-desired light appears

not far distant, I trust, shining brighter and brighter, seeming to promise, by God's assistance and our perseverance, sure success.¹⁰

Cain's letter illustrates the new church's joy and ambivalence. Their long-desired light, a church of their own, indeed grew closer with organized leadership and a plan for fiscal independence. Still, the congregation depended on outside support, contracting with local white Episcopalians to preach for them in the absence of a regular minister and maintaining close ties with the Episcopal school directed by Amanda Aiken and funded by Northern benevolent groups. Cain declared that "in our opinion, the prospect is very bright for success," and while ultimately the congregation did flourish, success may not have come in the form this hopeful congregation envisioned.¹¹

The new church, soon to be known as St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, ostensibly grew out of two distinct institutions -- local Sunday Schools associated with Petersburg's Episcopal churches and "day or mission schools" established by Northern or national organizations for the freed slaves.¹² Contemporary Virginia diocesan records and church historian G. Maclaren Brydon emphasized the role of Sunday schools in St. Stephen's origins, while church historian George F. Bragg, Jr. claimed that freedpeople's schools principally encouraged the congregation's formation. The two institutions were not mutually exclusive, for although leadership differed greatly between the two, their functions and membership overlapped. Both consistently mixed secular education with Christian worship, and these were the two impulses around which the congregation formed.

¹⁰ D. W. Cain in "Correspondence," *The Spirit of Missions* 32 (March 1867): 244-245.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² George F. Bragg, Jr., *The Story of Old St. Stephen's* (Baltimore, 1906).

At Grace and St. Paul's, Petersburg's two Episcopal churches operating in 1865, black Sunday schools continued antebellum traditions. Before the war, many blacks were segregated members of these congregations. With few exceptions, Southern blacks sat in slave galleries during conventional Episcopal services or attended separate services at special hours.¹³ After emancipation, Episcopalians attempted to call back the freed blacks who left the Church for African-American denominations or quit formal Christian worship. At the same time, many Episcopalians on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line sided with the Freedmen's Bureau on the need to educate newly freed blacks for their citizenship. Sunday schools could address both the educational and spiritual needs of interested blacks while promoting the Church and retaining some of its prior influence. Thus, black Sunday Schools "with large membership" were organized at both St. Paul's and Grace Churches immediately after the war.¹⁴

These parish activities were encouraged by traditional church leaders. Episcopal leadership began with the bishop of the diocese, and Bishop John Johns supported mission work among the freedpeople. Although he made no effort to integrate black and white worshippers, the evangelistic Johns acknowledged African-American concerns throughout his episcopate. In 1866, he urged his diocese to act upon its "duty" to freed slaves "not occasionally and irregularly, but continuously and systematically, and in every part of this extensive diocese." Johns declared that the diocese

should take formal and decided action on this subject, and, not resting with the general resolution of our last Council, approving of the policy of promoting

¹³ Robert A. Bennett, "Black Episcopalians: A History from the Colonial Period to the Present," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 43 (1974): 238; George F. Bragg, *History of the Afro-American Group of the Episcopal Church* (Baltimore: Church Advocate Press, 1922): 136-138.

¹⁴ G. Maclaren Brydon, *The Episcopal Church Among the Negroes of Virginia* (Richmond: Richmond Press, Inc., 1937): 9.

their education, address ourselves in earnest to the work itself, and appeal to our people to cooperate, by their means and their personal influence, in a mission more obligatory on us than any foreign operation.¹⁵

Bishop Johns maintained the Church's prickly approach to African Americans, comparing mission work among freed slaves to a "foreign operation" even as he pressed the diocese to address their needs. Visiting Petersburg several times after the war, Johns confirmed black members of St. Paul's and Grace churches and met with St. Stephen's fledgling congregation.

Local white clergy and laymen promoted the diocese among African Americans on a more routine basis. Typically, these men had been loyal Confederates, and in some cases, they had served in the Army of Northern Virginia. Two such men, Alexander W. Weddell and Robert A. Gibson, organized the black Sunday School of Grace Church in 1865. Giles B. Cooke returned from service as a major in General Lee's personal staff to direct several freedpeople's schools in Petersburg. Eventually, Cooke became ordained as an Episcopal minister and served as rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church from 1873 to 1885. With noted local support and the efforts of cooperative clergy such as Churchill J. Gibson of Grace Church, the black Sunday Schools associated with Grace and St. Paul's churches numbered about 300 total students a year after the war's end.¹⁶ Emphasizing the Church's traditional authorities, Episcopal historian G. Maclaren Brydon summarized simply that "in 1866, under Mr. Weddell's leadership, the colored

¹⁵ "Bishop's Address," *Journal of the Seventy-First Annual Council of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Virginia* (Richmond: Gary and Clemmitt, 1866): 22.

¹⁶ *Journal of the Seventy-Second Annual Council*, 58.

people connected with the two Sunday Schools organized a congregation called St. Stephen's."¹⁷

Sunday schools maintained formal relations between the Episcopal diocese and the black community, but freedpeople's schools generated fresh enthusiasm in those relations. Historian and childhood member George F. Bragg, Jr. attributed a large part of St. Stephen's origins to the efforts of female schoolteachers. In 1906, he wrote that "the formation of St. Stephen's Church...was under the guidance and direction of the ladies of" the local Episcopal Freedman's Commission school.¹⁸ These mostly Northern women had been active in Petersburg since the summer of 1865, as part of the deluge of schools established, funded, and staffed by Northern or national societies. By 1866, there were at least 15 freedpeople's schools and 20 Northern teachers in Petersburg, representing at least 8 societies and offering thousands of blacks academic, religious, and social instruction.¹⁹ The Episcopal Freedman's Commission, founded by the Protestant Episcopal Church after the Civil War to establish schools and missions for freed slaves, took the lead in the education of Petersburg's freed slaves with about six schools to its credit in the city. Petersburg was one of the few Southern cities in which Episcopal schools outnumbered the schools of competing denominations, and this attention was returned by local blacks.

Episcopal Freedman's Commission schools blended secular education and spiritual worship in a manner similar to parish Sunday schools, but the nature of the Commission's leadership kept its work distinct from that of local parishes. Northern women headed

¹⁷ Brydon, *The Episcopal Church Among the Negroes of Virginia*, 9.

¹⁸ Bragg, *History of the Afro-American Group of the Episcopal Church*, 132.

branches of the Freedman's Commission, raised money and supplies for the schools, and traveled South to staff the teaching positions. Petersburg's Episcopal schools received most of their funding specifically from the Pennsylvania Branch of the Episcopal Freedman's Commission, led by Isabella James. Three female teachers held the main teaching posts in Petersburg's schools, with Amanda Aiken from Brooklyn, New York supervising. Aided by local freedwoman Caroline W. Bragg, the teachers shared teaching duties and took an active interest in the community. George F. Bragg, Jr. reported that in addition to teaching, Aiken and other Northern teachers "entered the humble homes of many of the freedmen and greatly helped in the reconstruction of such homes, along the lines demanded by the new order of affairs."²⁰ Aiken detailed such work in a letter written in 1866, stating "one day I accompanied [another Northern teacher] to visit the sick in their cabins of utter destitution."²¹ The teachers' energies regularly expanded beyond formal classes to stress the importance of free-market work ethics, formal education, and Episcopal devotion.

Of course, the teachers' ideas of proper training, worship, and values did not always correspond with those of Petersburg's blacks. While most references to the teachers written by members of St. Stephen's express appreciation for their help, the members and students received morality lessons and judgments with their instruction and aid. Northern

¹⁹ William D. Henderson, *The Unredeemed City: Reconstruction in Petersburg, Virginia: 1865-1874* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1977): 52-53.

²⁰ Bragg, *History of the Afro-American Group of the Episcopal Church*, 133.

²¹ Amanda Aiken in "Correspondence," *The Spirit of Missions* 31 (March 1866): 161.

teachers and Petersburg blacks may have shared Republican political allegiances, but they did not always share customs or values.²²

There is evidence that the teachers' enthusiasm and extracurricular activities embittered conservative Petersburg whites. Northern teachers represented outside interests who, through instruction and political mobilization, helped blacks develop their place in the reconstructing city. Many whites were not necessarily opposed to black education, but, matching the approach of local Conservative Republicans, they wanted to direct such activities themselves. Friction even existed within the teachers' own denomination. The Freedmen's Inspector of Schools, Charles A. Raymond, after visiting a school taught by Amanda Aiken in 1866, observed that "Miss Aiken is not well received by the members of her church in the city."²³ During the same year, Churchill J. Gibson, minister of Grace Episcopal Church, contradicted Raymond by reporting that female teachers in freedmen's schools were "helping" with mission work "in entire harmony with the clergy."²⁴

The degree of friction among Northern and Southern Episcopalians in Petersburg during the first years of the freedpeople's schools is difficult to determine, but such friction soon became eclipsed by outbursts of reactionary hostility. Violence against self-improving blacks disturbed the moderate sensibilities of local clergy and laity and disrupted their own efforts to educate and minister freed slaves. At the same time, Northern and Southern Episcopalians increasingly recognized their shared goals and

²² William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: the African-American Church in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993): 45.

²³ Charles A. Raymond, quoted in Henderson, *The Unredeemed City*, 51.

²⁴ Robert A. Gibson, quoted in "Southern Diocesan Conventions," *The Spirit of Missions* 31 (July 1866): 404.

created interregional bonds of support. The extent of these bonds is demonstrated in a letter written by Giles B. Cooke as rector of St. Stephen's Church and Schools, published in a nationally-distributed Episcopal monthly in 1875. He sought donations and support for the congregation, writing

when it is remembered that the politico-religious agitators have done much to poison the minds of the colored people, and that they have to pass through the ordeal of social ostracism in becoming members of the Episcopal Church, it must be admitted that the good work of converting these benighted people is prospering in spite of persecution and other difficulties....The congregation, although the only established Episcopal one in Virginia, is too poor to be self-sustaining, and has to rely on the aid of Missionary societies.²⁵

Cooke's appeal concluded with a request for five thousand dollars to build a schoolhouse and maintain his work, and his request was endorsed by the statements and signatures of Bishop Johns and four other Petersburg clergymen. In itself, Cooke's letter to the national Church audience demonstrates cooperation, as Petersburg's Episcopal leaders worked on behalf of the school begun by the Freedman's Commission and Northern schoolteachers. Cooke's words indicate that Northern Episcopalians may have mellowed their political views while Southern Episcopalians may have committed themselves to black education, for the larger goal of missionary work among Petersburg's blacks. Eventually, Cooke received a good portion of the funds requested.

White clergymen and schoolteachers provided forums and encouragement for black Episcopal participation, creating new alliances in the process, but the decision to form a congregation in Petersburg came from the African-American community. As Cain's letter described, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church was a long-desired light, and its membership constituted a tight-knit group whose leadership centered in the Bragg family.

At the head of the group was elderly Caroline W. Bragg, who had become had become a devoted member of Grace Episcopal Church while a slave. The grandmother of George F. Bragg, Jr. and mother of D. W. Cain, Caroline Bragg had two sons with her first husband, a Cain, and two with her second husband, a Bragg. She remained an active Episcopalian after emancipation, joining the Freedman's Commission school as a teacher for the youngest classes. Apparently, her work strengthened ties between local whites and blacks. Her funeral at St. Stephen's was crowded with both races, and she was eulogized by her close personal friend, the Reverend Gibson of Grace Church.

The influence and participation of Caroline Bragg's extended family in St. Stephen's Episcopal Church is unmistakable. In D. W. Cain's letter on the organizational meeting, 10 of the 22 named participants were either Cains or Braggs. This participation was lasting; in a list of St. Stephen's communicants made by Giles B. Cooke in 1873, 11 of 55 names were Cains or Braggs.²⁶ Observers consistently attested to the effects of the elder Bragg's direct discussions and indirect examples in motivating her family and community.²⁷

Although it was not discussed by early observers, the congregation of St. Stephen's must have been mostly composed of freed slaves, not free-born Petersburg blacks. The congregation's close ties with the Freedmen's Bureau, the Freedman's Commission, remedial education, and the emancipated Bragg and Cain families indicate that most members had once been slaves. In Petersburg, as in the rest of the South, there was some

²⁵ Giles B. Cooke, "Appeal From the Rev. Giles B. Cooke," *The Spirit of Missions* 40 (August 1875): 491.

²⁶ Cain in "Correspondence," *The Spirit of Missions* 32 (March 1867): 244; Giles Buckner Cooke, *Personal Papers*.

²⁷ These observers include Reverend Churchill J. Gibson, George F. Bragg, Jr., and Amanda Aiken.

conflict between freed slaves and blacks who had been free before the war. In 1865, there were just under 10,000 whites and just over 10,000 blacks in Petersburg. About one-third of the local blacks had been free before the war; only Richmond had a larger population of free blacks in antebellum Virginia.²⁸ In April 1867, the *Petersburg Index* commented on local tensions between "the freemen and the freedmen," stating that the feeling between the two

is not of the most harmonious character. The latter, though the most numerous, seem to be looked upon by the former as a degree inferior to themselves, and as naturally subject to their control.²⁹

It appears that most free-born blacks would not wish to participate in a young church where leadership was centered in freedpeople's hands.

There were distinct material differences between Petersburg's freed slaves and free-born blacks, reinforcing each group's insularity. Petersburg's industry revolved around cotton mills, flour mills, tobacco-processing factories, iron foundries, and railroads. Blacks born as slaves worked in the most laborious positions before and after the war, often in the tobacco factories. After 1865, freed slaves from the countryside entered the city in large numbers seeking work, but the city's unemployment problem contributed to their general poverty, compelling them to seek aid from the Freedmen's Bureau and other organizations. In contrast, free-born blacks in Petersburg practiced over 51 different trades such as carpentry, masonry, and retail sales, providing them with a degree of wealth. In 1860, 29 of the wealthiest free blacks each owned over \$1,000 in property.³⁰

²⁸ Henderson, *The Unredeemed City*, 85.

²⁹ "The Freemen and the Freedmen," *The Petersburg Daily Index* 4 (April 15, 1867): 3.

³⁰ Henderson, *The Unredeemed City*, 85.

So while free-born blacks were not exempt from strict racial codes, they sought to maintain their distinct status and occupy leadership positions throughout the community.

Therefore, most free-born blacks took advantage of the many other options for black spirituality outside St. Stephen's Church and Petersburg's Episcopal community. Since about 1800, both free-born blacks and slaves had been more strongly associated with evangelical denominations such as the Baptists and Methodists. In Petersburg, one of the largest congregations of blacks was Gillfield Baptist Church, organized around 1803. Under the leadership of free-born blacks, this congregation built a new church structure in 1859 at the cost of \$7,000.³¹ Also, an "invisible" black church became "visible" after 1865, flourishing in the forms of several other denominations, including African Methodist Episcopal, A.M.E. Zion, and Colored Methodist Episcopal. Both African-American denominations as well as black congregations of Baptists and Methodists served as central social institutions in black communities, promoting political organization, developing leaders, offering social aid, as well as nurturing personal faith.³² Freed slaves found homes in all of these congregations.

Referring to the growth in black congregations, schoolteacher Amanda Aiken reported in 1866 that the "great 'revival' in the colored churches here...took a goodly number from our ranks" at the Episcopal mission.³³ Although concerned with the competition these churches presented, Aiken was more alarmed about the very nature of the "revival" activities. Many white observers, fearing freedpeople to be impressionable and undisciplined, characterized some black worship as emotional and potentially

³¹ James G. Scott and Edward A. Wyatt, *Petersburg's Story* (Petersburg: Titmus Optical Company, 1960): 286; Henderson, *The Unredeemed City*, 98.

³² Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990): 41.

threatening. Sharing this perspective, Aiken actually visited a black revival in 1866. In her letter detailing the experience, she stated "their mode of worship seemed to me peculiar." She observed that the church was very crowded, filled with "those seeking religion, who seemed as if they had thrown themselves down in an attitude of despair." She described how the crowd moaned and swayed to prayers and music until it was "beyond any control." She continued:

They reserve the most exhilarating of their hymns, all peculiar in words and melody, until the latter part of the evening....As I looked upon that vast sea of ignorance before me my heart melted with pity, and I was deeply impressed with the conviction that even 'the least' in our Church can do much in this great work which lies before her.³⁴

For Aiken and other Episcopalians, education and Anglican worship were an antidote for these excesses. The tightly organized *Book of Common Prayer* represented a solemn approach to religion that emphasized learning and restraint, two qualities that many uneasy whites, both Northern and Southern, found important for the newly freed African Americans.

Of course, while Aiken and revivalists attempted to sort out the proper format for Christian worship, some postwar blacks took advantage of their new freedom to disassociate themselves from Christianity altogether. Christianity served as the principal collective expression of supernatural ideals for blacks after the American Revolution, but it was not universally accepted.³⁵ A Mississippian at the Episcopal Board of Missions meeting in 1870 stated that "the colored people where I live...have revived the old

³³ Amanda Aiken, in "Correspondence," *The Spirit of Missions* 31 (May 1866): 286-288.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 248.

religions of Africa."³⁶ Another commentator reported alternative African-American spirituality in the South in an 1874 *Spirit of Missions* article, warning readers about the "danger of heathenism" among "vast masses, who, with their...secret rites, and strange, weird religious superstitions, may hardly be considered greatly in advance of the Hottentot."³⁷ Discovering deeper evidence of African religious survivals or other significant alternatives in Petersburg is problematic, but the full range and the private expressions of African-American spirituality in the nineteenth century remains unclear.³⁸

The members of St. Stephen's congregation appeared unmoved by these distractions. Their enthusiasm for the Episcopal Church was both spiritual and practical. Through Sunday and Freedmen's Schools, blacks of all ages could receive free schooling. The value of education was fully understood by freedpeople, who thronged the schools and consistently evoked positive comments from Petersburg's teachers. Also, poor church members received shipments of clothing, supplies, and gifts donated by interested Episcopalians across the country. Aside from these worldly attractions, there seems to have been deep support for Episcopal worship among the original members, fueled by effective leadership. The letters of George F. Bragg, Jr. and D. W. Cain consistently maintained the sincerity of their faith, and the congregation's persistence through local and diocesan obstacles reinforced this message. The result was a compromise between the "long-desired light" and the support offered through Episcopal authorities. Through

³⁶ "Dr. Crane" quoted in "Report of the Proceedings of the Board of Missions," *The Spirit of Missions* 35 (December 1870): 639.

³⁷ "Danger of Heathenism," *The Spirit of Missions* 39 (April 1874): 253.

³⁸ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 248; Bennett, "Black Episcopalians;" Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*.

this compromise, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church emerged as a shelter that generated physical, practical, and spiritual relief for Petersburg's blacks.

CHAPTER II

THE CHURCH FIRE

In 1866, the young congregation occupied a chapel that had been constructed and used by Union soldiers during the war. Known locally as the Stringfellow Chapel, the building was purchased and supported by the Episcopal Freedman's Commission with the help of the U. S. Freedmen's Bureau. The chapel doubled as a classroom and a house of worship, where "a good congregation assembled every Sunday and Wednesday" for worship, and classes met regularly for Amanda Aiken's day and evening schools.³⁹ This building was significant for the freed blacks -- although it reinforced the community's racial segregation, it offered degrees of independence and ownership that they probably would not have had if they shared the space with whites. The African-American-controlled chapel must have been a recruitment aid for new members and students.

The Stringfellow Chapel was located at Poplar Lawn Park, on the corner of Sycamore and Filmore Streets, about a mile south of Petersburg's commercial district. Throughout Reconstruction, this park was the scene of many public gatherings of Petersburg's blacks, including Republican associational meetings. While Episcopalians were not known for radical political activities, the proximity of the chapel to the meeting grounds surely associated the two in the minds of many local whites. Also, the chapel's associations with Union forces offered sources of tension, for its construction was supervised by the Reverend Horace Stringfellow, Jr. of Indiana, and it was used by U.S.

³⁹ *Journal of the Seventy-Second Annual Council*, 58.

soldiers during the war. The chapel's location, history, and black ownership branded it as an unwelcome target for reactionary citizens.

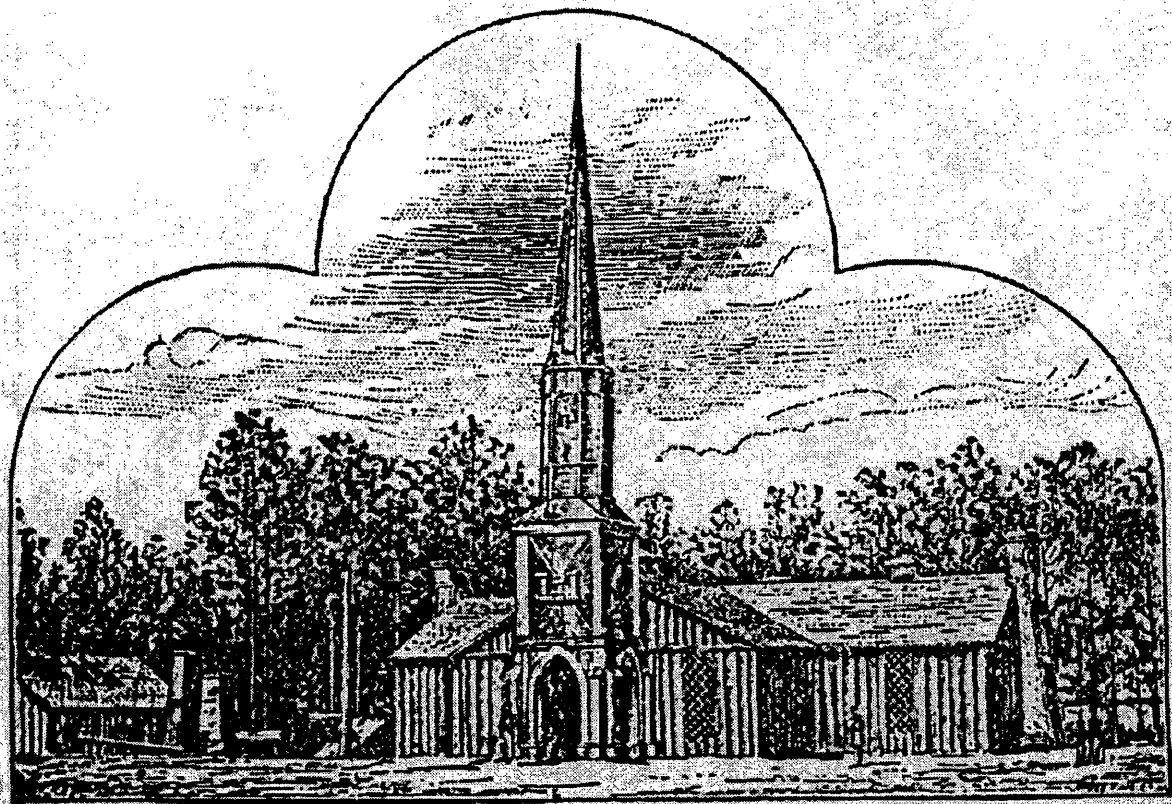
In its most detailed surviving description, the Stringfellow Chapel was reported as "a large board building unceiled within."⁴⁰ Although the exposed rafters may have been intentional, corresponding to popular wooden chapel designs of the period, the building survived the war in a poor condition. In April 1867, the *Petersburg Index* reported that "the Colored Episcopal Church" was in the process of repairing the chapel. The congregation was making subscriptions, and "about \$200 had been expended in fitting up the pulpit and making other improvements in the interior."⁴¹ Members of the congregation performed some of the improvements themselves, as one of Caroline Bragg's sons made the "table, benches, &c."⁴² A report from Isabella James of the Pennsylvania Branch of the Episcopal Freedman's Commission, written in March 1867, indicates that not all repairs were simple structural improvements. She observed that "a chancel was being erected and some repairs made to give the building a more churchly appearance."⁴³ Episcopal church designs during this period made special accommodations

⁴⁰ Isabella James, "Narrative of a Visit to the Schools of the P. E. Freedman's Commission in Norfolk and Petersburg," *The Spirit of Missions* 32 (July 1867): 555. James also called this chapel the "Poplar Lawn Church," suggesting a possible link with an image of a "church built by federal soldiers at Poplar Grove, 1864-1865" printed in Edward Pollock's *Historical and Industrial Guide to Petersburg, VA* (Petersburg: Zimmer and Co., 1884): 59. Although probably not the same church, the construction dates and circumstances are remarkably similar to those of the Stringfellow Chapel and therefore may provide an idea of the Stringfellow Chapel's appearance.

⁴¹ "Fire," *The Petersburg Daily Index* 4 (April 10, 1867): 3.

⁴² Amanda Aiken, in "Correspondence," *The Spirit of Missions* 31 (May 1866): 288.

⁴³ Isabella James, "Narrative of a Visit to the Schools of the P. E. Freedman's Commission in Norfolk and Petersburg," *The Spirit of Missions* 32 (July 1867): 555. Amanda Aiken also remarked that St. Stephen's interior was being made more "churchlike," with the congregation apparently adding an "altar of their own," in "Correspondence," *The Spirit of Missions* 32 (June 1867): 486.



CHURCH BUILT BY FEDERAL SOLDIERS AT POPLAR GROVE. 1864-5

Figure 1. Church built by federal soldiers at Poplar Grove, 1864-5, resembling the Stringfellow Chapel. From Edward Pollock, *Historical and Industrial Guide to Petersburg, VA* (Petersburg: Zimmer & Co., 1884): 59.

for increasingly ritualistic worship services.⁴⁴ Amanda Aiken attributed layman Alexander Weddell with directing the alterations to St. Stephen's chapel, and she and James seemed satisfied with the changes. Nevertheless, the serendipitous acquisition of the Stringfellow Chapel and its personal attention from members of the congregation probably gave it a distinctive character that revealed its users' values.

Despite the congregation's new facilities, effective organization, and increasing strength, St. Stephen's was not always recognized by traditional white society. For example, the conservative *Petersburg Index*, edited by William E. Cameron, offered a

⁴⁴ David L. Holmes, *A Brief History of the Episcopal Church* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993): 80; Ryan Smith, "Carpenter Gothic: The Voices of Episcopal Churches on the St. Johns River," *El Escribano* 32 (1995): 72-74.

weekly list of "our churches" throughout 1867. The list included Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic, and Baptist churches, along with a Jewish synagogue, but did not mention St. Stephen's or other African-American congregations.⁴⁵ Likewise, Edward Pollock's 1884 overview of the city, *Historical and Industrial Guide to Petersburg, VA*, overlooked all African-American congregations.⁴⁶ This active exclusion occurred even as new black organizations deeply affected Petersburg -- in white churches' loss of communicants, in Reconstruction politics, in labor arrangements, and elsewhere. White Episcopalians acknowledged St. Stephen's congregation through informal ties and in official records, but the exclusion by other whites seems to have been related to social control. By ignoring black organizations, white writers could suggest that black organizations were irrelevant and that Petersburg's white community had maintained its power over blacks after emancipation.

Such exclusion must have been unpleasant for St. Stephen's, but the congregation soon faced worse. On the night of April 9, 1867, the Stringfellow Chapel burned down. Apparently an act of arson, the fire destroyed the church only weeks before the congregation was to receive Bishop Johns for the first time in its own building. Racially-motivated violence was a direct method for social control in Petersburg. This probable arson reflects reactionary whites' frustration over new black organizations and educational programs, as well as dissatisfaction with the course of Reconstruction. April 9 marked the second anniversary of Lee's surrender to Grant, a coincidence that strengthened the ties between the violence and the social message of the apparent arsonists.

⁴⁵ For example, see *The Petersburg Daily Index* 4 (April 27, 1867).

⁴⁶ Edward Pollock, *Historical and Industrial Guide to Petersburg, VA*.

The *Petersburg Index* reported the event and indirectly linked the fire with Lee's surrender. In the April 10 edition, the news on St. Stephen's fire appeared directly underneath a story discussing the anniversary of Lee's surrender. In the first story titled "Anniversary," the anonymous writer commented that due to the post-surrender actions of the people of the victorious section,

the feelings and affections of the Southern people are at this day more hopelessly alienated from the Federal Government and the citizens of the North than at any day during or before the war.⁴⁷

Beneath this notice of Southern frustration and belligerence, the story titled "Fire" began:

Last night...the building...formerly used as an Episcopal Chapel, was discovered to be on fire. The flames were first seen in the rear, but speedily spread until they enveloped the whole house. A policeman, who passed there at 7 1/2 o'clock, reports that the front door was open, and that he heard persons moving about the benches, but as this was frequently the case, he supposed they were cleaning out the house....The opinion seems to be very generally entertained that it was set on fire...and all the decent and respectable portion of the community view it with feelings of abhorrence.⁴⁸

The *Index* followed the investigation and the congregation's plight for the next few days. It reported that the mayor and the police had unsuccessfully searched for the "miscreants who fired the chapel," and once proposed that the fire "may have been accidentally caused by" curious boys.⁴⁹ No suspects were ever named.

Despite the initial link with Lee's surrender, the wording of the *Index's* articles suggests that mainstream Petersburg society viewed such an act of arson as crude and unacceptable; however, there are several peculiarities in the stories. For example, it is especially odd that the policeman who passed by on the night of the fire did not pay closer attention to the "persons moving about the benches" in the chapel after dark. Was this a

⁴⁷ "Anniversary," *The Petersburg Daily Index* 4 (April 10, 1867): 3.

⁴⁸ "Fire," *The Petersburg Daily Index* 4 (April 10, 1867): 3.

deliberate acknowledgement of the arsonists' activities or an innocent mistake? Also, the *Index* later downplayed the political significance of the fire. Reporters wonderingly speculated as to what motive would exist for such an act, eventually suggesting that it was a mistake made by local boys. If the authorities' investigations of the fire were as superficial as this reporting, then we should not wonder that the cause of the fire was never "discovered."

Other commentators had fewer reservations about attributing the fire to racial violence. Amanda Aiken wrote

the building was destroyed by fire. It was thought, at the time, to have been the work of some evilly disposed person, of the dominant race, pained with the avidity with which the Negroes responded to the educational call.⁵⁰

George F. Bragg, Jr., in *The Story of Old St. Stephen's*, did not directly comment on who burned the chapel, but he included a letter from Pennsylvania Episcopalian Isabella James, who had visited the congregation a few days before the fire. James wrote that the church had been burned by "an incendiary." She continued,

we had fondly hoped that the day of burning Negro school houses had passed away, and that the new political relations between the two races would protect them in a measure from this expression of antagonism still so rife in Virginia.⁵¹

James then compared the black congregation to English martyrs. As participants in the Episcopal Freedman's Commission, both Aiken and James viewed the incident as sad but unsurprising and promised to help the congregation move forward.

The fire at St. Stephen's also frustrated the bishop's impending visit. St. Stephen's congregation was looking forward to receiving the bishop under its own roof. Bishop

⁴⁹ "The Fire," *The Petersburg Daily Index* 4 (April 11, 1867): 3.

⁵⁰ Amanda Aiken, quoted in Bragg, *The Story of Old St. Stephen's*, 5.

⁵¹ Isabella James, quoted in Bragg, *The Story of Old St. Stephen's*, 17.

Johns had planned to attend all three of Petersburg's Episcopal churches on April 28 to confirm new members and review the congregations. The bishop was upset by the fire but did not comment on its cause. He visited Petersburg on schedule, and attended Grace Church in the morning and St. Paul's in the evening. In the afternoon, he conducted services with the "colored congregation" in the lecture-room of St. Paul's. The bishop confirmed several members of St. Stephen's later that evening in the presence of St. Paul's congregation. These arrangements stress how important it was for St. Stephen's to have its own chapel, as the congregation apparently could not borrow St. Paul's church space for its services, using the lecture-room instead. In his annual report to the diocese, Bishop Johns remarked that he hoped the congregation would soon gain a suitable building.⁵²

The timing of the fire also corresponded to a major shift in the terms of Reconstruction.. About four weeks before the fire, Congress passed its first Reconstruction Act, officially reversing President Andrew Johnson's conservative policy towards Southern state governments. Virginians learned that their state was to be placed under martial law and that General John M. Schofield was to serve as the state's military governor. Additionally, blacks gained the right to vote and hold office, and thousands of ex-Confederates were disenfranchised and barred from public office. Congress also required a new state constitution for Virginia incorporating these reforms and the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. Virginia would not be readmitted into the union until these conditions were met.

⁵² John Johns, "Bishop's Address," *Journal of the Seventy-Second Annual Council*, 33-34.

The Reconstruction Act mobilized Republicans across the South and inspired a bitter reaction from conservatives. While blacks assembled to establish voting organizations such as Union Leagues or Loyal Leagues, “hopelessly alienated” conservative whites undercut federal policy through local violence and intimidation. Only three days after the fire at St. Stephen's, the *Index* reported a nighttime meeting of Petersburg blacks to form a Union Republican Association at Poplar Lawn Park. Just before the meeting, a “rumor had been circulated that a keg of powder had been put under the house to blow the meeting up.”⁵³ The meeting took place at the infamous park in the face of the threatening rumor, with “sentinels” positioned outside for protection.

The violent backlash against the terms of the first Reconstruction Act was part of a broad campaign of arsons and violence committed against blacks and white Radical Republicans across the South after the war. Despite the presence of federal occupying troops and Freedmen’s Bureau authorities, reactionary whites maintained a steady wave of terrorism against expressions of black citizenship and independence. The violence was not confined to urban or rural areas, and it was committed by individual marauders and a range of organizations, including vigilante groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, uniformed ex-Confederate militias, and legitimate civic agencies such as the police.⁵⁴ The general postwar poverty of the South fueled this hostile atmosphere. Especially targeting black organizations, schools, and churches, violent whites attempted to reestablish control of the black labor force, restore racial subordination, and weaken the Republican party.⁵⁵

⁵³ “Colored Meeting Last Night,” *The Petersburg Daily Index* 4 (April 12, 1867): 3.

⁵⁴ Kennedy, *After Appomattox*.

⁵⁵ Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, 184.

As suggested by the fire at St. Stephen's and the gunpowder threats at the Union Republican Association's meeting, racial violence was present in Petersburg throughout Reconstruction. Federal soldiers themselves set an uneasy tone for the city's peace in July 1865 when Virginia's military commander, General Hartsuff, advised Petersburg's city commander, Lieutenant Colonel Baker, to "adopt at once the most stringent measures to prevent the abuse of Negroes by soldiers. Many complaints are made of their lawlessness and tyranny over Negroes."⁵⁶ Four months later, the *Petersburg Daily Index* blamed the city's racial clashes on the whites' habit of control and the blacks' "misapprehension" of their duties, thus making "numberless differences between the two races inevitable."⁵⁷ In 1866, black churches on Union Street and Harrison Street, both very close to Poplar Lawn Park, were deliberately set on fire and the arsonists were never found.⁵⁸ In 1868, the local Freedmen's Bureau agent, Major Stone, reported that the "existing feeling between blacks and whites is not amicable" due to political differences.⁵⁹

Possibly the largest incident took place in November 1870, after the Radical Republicans held a rally in response to a Conservative rally in Petersburg that had drawn a crowd of six thousand, including more than one thousand members of Richmond's "[James L.] Kemper Kampaign Klub." The Republican rally formed a parade in which Radical candidates were preceded by a brass band and fifty club-carrying blacks. While marching through the commercial district, some black youths apparently threw stones at

⁵⁶ Hartsuff, quoted in Henderson, *The Unredeemed City*, 20.

⁵⁷ *The Petersburg Daily Index* 2 (November 10, 1865), quoted in Henderson, *The Unredeemed City*, 65.

⁵⁸ *The Richmond Enquirer* (May 2, 1866), quoted in Henderson, *The Unredeemed City*, 67.

⁵⁹ Stone, quoted in Henderson, *The Unredeemed City*, 94.

windows and spectators. Angry whites rushed to the armory of a militia company, where local leaders urged them to go home. Instead, the group telegraphed the governor for ammunition, and the governor responded by dispatching a munitions train to Petersburg. Remarkably, the disturbance settled without outright conflict.⁶⁰

Violence across Virginia reflected a similar tone. A black demonstration in Norfolk in April 1866, gathered to show approval of the Civil Rights Bill's passage, erupted into violence that ended with at least two whites and two blacks dead. In settling the riot, the U. S. Army commander declared that local police were "worse than useless."⁶¹ In Richmond that same year, the Second African Church was burned by "incendiarists" in protest against a proposed Emancipation Day celebration.⁶² The Episcopal monthly *The Spirit of Missions* related the story of a Virginia clergyman who rebuilt a school "in the face of an angry mob which tore down a freedman's school-house he built with his own hands."⁶³ Newspapers from all areas of the state reported instances where black individuals were beaten or murdered following trivial disputes.⁶⁴

Without adequate federal or police protection, African Americans responded to this violence in a number of ways. In some communities, uniformed black militias made public displays of organization and strength. Petersburg's two black militias, the Petersburg Guards and the Silver Key Club, drilled in city parks and accompanied parades and demonstrations. In addition, individual blacks fought back in self-defense at times, using fists, knives and newly available (since emancipation) guns. These actions

⁶⁰ Henderson, *The Unredeemed City*, 249-250.

⁶¹ Major F. W. Stanhope, quoted in John Hammond Moore, "The Norfolk Riot, 16 April 1866," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 90 (April 1982): 161.

⁶² Taylor, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia*, 79.

⁶³ "Selections," *The Spirit of Missions* 31 (December 1866): 713.

alarmed white citizens and federal troops, and the “perpetrators” of such “Negro Riots” often landed in jail.⁶⁵ Most blacks offered little violent resistance, avoiding open racial confrontation. Instead, many blacks made appeals to the Freedmen’s Bureau and employed its court system until the Bureau was essentially abolished in 1872. After the first Reconstruction Act, blacks elected to local and state offices were able to adopt modest measures of protection. Blacks also testified to Congress their violent and unjust treatment. Local black organizations, such as Loyal Leagues and the Independent Order of Good Samaritans, and churches offered mutual support and community leadership. Despite these different strategies, racial violence often succeeded in limiting black voting and rights of assembly.

Clearly, not all white Southerners nor white Petersburg residents supported racial violence. In Petersburg, the majority of whites after the war became Conservative Republicans. Represented by mayor Charles F. Collier and churchmen Giles Cooke and Churchill Gibson, these pragmatic moderates accepted most of the terms of Reconstruction, but wanted local control of government and schools. In a rally in April 1867, white conservatives, seeking to accommodate political trends, adopted resolutions agreeing to Congressional Reconstruction, accepting black citizenship, and stating the need for a new state constitution. Their disapproval of violent tactics was exemplified in the conservative Petersburg *Index*’s response to 1866 church arsons. The editor expressed the community’s “regret and indignation that there could have been found within the limits of Petersburg one heart so profligate and abandoned as to inflict this

⁶⁴ Taylor, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia*, 83.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

outrage on our colored people.”⁶⁶ So while only a small number of Petersburg’s white residents actively worked on behalf of blacks, the mass viewed racial violence with feelings of abhorrence.

This was not enough to stop reactionary violence, but it did provide important common ground. Perhaps Northern teachers wanted to transfer their own values to freed slaves and shape the new Petersburg, and perhaps local clergy and laity wanted to regain control over freed slaves and encourage traditional forms of worship. Yet both groups recognized an ally in the other opposing base violence and African-American “revivals,” and both groups agreed on the piety of Anglican worship. The members of St. Stephen’s congregation were willing to accept these allies, as they were “more determined than ever, to work until they have another church edifice of their own.”⁶⁷ So the congregation began the rebuilding process with interregional and governmental support and with greater public awareness of its plight, but without assurance of its place within the city and diocese.

⁶⁶ *The Petersburg Daily Index*, quoted in Taylor, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia*, 79.

⁶⁷ Amanda Aiken, “Correspondence,” *The Spirit of Missions* 32 (June 1867): 487.

CHAPTER III

THE NEW BUILDING

The fire at the Stringfellow Chapel failed to discourage the congregation. St. Stephen's "Sunday School" met at the basement of St. Paul's Church during the new search for another building.⁶⁸ Classes and church services continued with the participation of Freedman's Commission teachers and local clergy and laity. Numbers stayed relatively constant, as the diocese's 1867 journal reported forty communicants for St. Stephen's after the fire.⁶⁹

Approximately one year after the fire, a new church was built for St. Stephen's, primarily with money from the Freedmen's Bureau and Episcopal Freedman's Commission chapters in Philadelphia and New York. Presumably, both black and white leaders were involved in the fundraising and rebuilding process, but reports for this activity are scarce. George F. Bragg, Jr. briefly stated that layman Alexander Weddell "was the determined leader" of the process.⁷⁰ The Freedmen's Bureau, which had helped the Episcopalians obtain the Stringfellow Chapel, offered the first \$2,650 "through the courtesy of Major J. R. Stone," the Bureau's main agent in Petersburg.⁷¹ The procurement of school buildings for benevolent organizations constituted an important part of the Bureau's activities in Virginia, and the "courtesies" Major Stone and the

⁶⁸ "Colored Sunday School," *The Petersburg Daily Index* 4 (April 15, 1867): 3.

⁶⁹ *Journal of the Seventy-Second Annual Council*, 59.

⁷⁰ Bragg, *The Story of Old St. Stephen's*, 30; Brydon, *The Episcopal Church Among the Negroes of Virginia*, 9.

⁷¹ Bragg, *The Story of Old St. Stephen's*, 15.

Bureau extended to St. Stephen's probably related to the size of Episcopal educational efforts in Petersburg and the mutual support between St. Stephen's church and school. The final construction cost of the new church was \$5,214.

Bishop Whittle, recently appointed to assist Bishop Johns, consecrated the new church on May 18, 1868. It was located on Perry Street in a residential district, about three blocks northwest of Poplar Lawn Park. The new location brought the congregation closer to the main commercial district and other established churches such as St. Paul's Episcopal Church and Second Presbyterian Church. Bragg named the contractor as "Mr. Gibson whose work shop was on the street leading to Grace Church."⁷² The building no longer stands, and like the Stringfellow Chapel before it, the building's appearance is difficult to judge from the remaining records. Bragg's history of St. Stephen's has a faint illustration of the church built in 1868 that shows a rectangular main body with a square tower at the entrance.⁷³ After inspecting the new church, Charles Gillette, the General Agent of the Freedman's Commission, posted a brief description:

The building itself, occupied for the double purpose of church and school, is a neat, tasty, wooden edifice, quite churchly in its appearance, well finished in the interior, except seating, and lighted with gas. Two rooms are taken off at each end for school purposes, and the centre of the building is occupied as a church.

Gillette noted that the new building could accommodate about four hundred people.⁷⁴

It is unfortunate that a clearer picture or description of the church is unavailable, for the various interests associated with St. Stephen's church and school could have been

⁷² Ibid., 30.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Charles Gillette, "Report of the Secretary and General Agent, To the Executive Committee of Home Missions to Colored People, of His Late Visit to Some of Our Schools," *The Spirit of Missions* 34 (April 1869): 238.

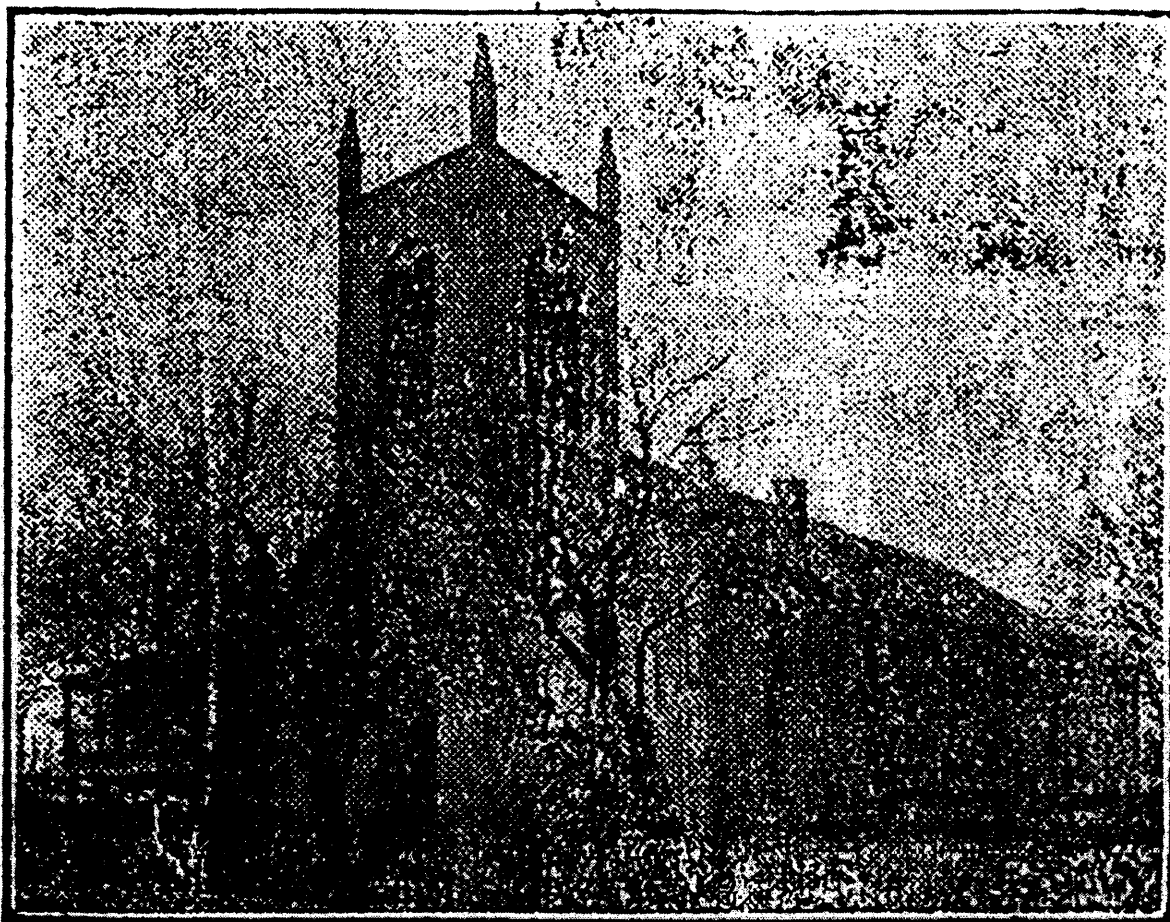


Figure 2. Exterior of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Petersburg, Virginia, circa 1870. From George F. Bragg, Jr., *The Story of Old St. Stephen's* (Baltimore: 1906).

physically expressed in the building's design. As seen in attempts to give the Stringfellow Chapel a more "churchly appearance," great attention was paid to church buildings during this period in Petersburg. Other congregations that moved into newly constructed buildings between 1855 and 1870 included St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Grace Episcopal Church, and Gillfield Baptist Church. Petersburg's church architecture included examples of the Classical Revival, the Gothic Revival, and regional colonial styles, but St. Stephen's mildly Gothic rectangular plan and square tower held the closest affinity with Grace Episcopal Church. So St. Stephen's design pleased Northern Episcopalians

like General Agent Charles Gillette and flattered local Episcopalians, all of whom found it recognizably “churchly.” Neither members of the congregation nor George F. Bragg, Jr. commented publicly on the new building’s design or appearance.

Whatever the effect of its particular design, the large new building for St. Stephen’s must have provoked Petersburg’s reactionaries. The new church boasted the cooperation of North and South, black and white, federal and local. The building was much bigger than the previous chapel, with greater capacity, promising growth rather than retreat. It was also nearer to the city’s center, in proximity with other established organizations. Three communicants held the title to the building as trustees of St. Stephen’s Church, underscoring the black congregation’s relative independence.

The year of the church’s reconstruction also marked the beginning of Radical Republicans’ power in Petersburg. In April 1868, Radical Republican Rush Burgess was appointed to replace conservative mayor Charles F. Collier, ushering in six years of Radical rule as Congressional Reconstruction Acts took effect. These six years were especially meaningful for blacks, as black Republicans, mostly free-born, held seats on the city council as well as other municipal positions and represented the city in Virginia’s legislature. During this time, Petersburg’s Radical government established free public schools, minimizing freed slaves’ reliance on benevolent organizations. Thus, the interests of freed slaves associated with St. Stephen’s won political prominence over even the Conservative Republicanism represented by their Southern allies, despite local conservatives’ strengthening interregional relationships. This situation ended with the restoration of white “home rule” in 1874, when reactionaries and Conservative

Republicans celebrated victories over Radicals in local elections, four years after Virginia had regained statehood.

Despite the relationship between the church building activities at St. Stephen's and local politics, the Episcopal Church as a whole tended to downplay its involvement in secular affairs. Throughout its history, the Episcopal Church attempted to diminish the effect of national politics on the Church's course. Before the Civil War, the Church took no official stand on the divisive issue of slavery, and it reunited promptly after the war's end. Hoping to maintain this "neutral" position, the Episcopal Freedman's Commission often refuted claims that it was a Northern society. One member stated that the Commission "knows no North, no South, no East, no West. It is a Christian Commission, and therefore regards only Christian motives and ends."⁷⁵ Of course, neither the Freedman's Commission nor the larger Church nor Petersburg's Episcopal congregations perfectly pursued these goals. However, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church did demonstrate an ability to transcend fierce political disputes. St. Stephen's transcendence resulted from its strict focus on educational and spiritual missions, its broad interregional, interpolitical support network, and its steady course of slow growth through a variety of obstacles and blessings.

Black church leaders helped the congregation reconcile its spiritual and secular duties. Beyond early leaders such as Caroline Bragg and her family members, St. Stephen's Church soon enjoyed the competent leadership of J. S. Atwell, the Diocese of Virginia's first official black clergyman. St. Stephen's offered a successful record of white and black cooperation, but Atwell's presence was meaningful for the developing

⁷⁵ "The Protestant Episcopal Freedman's Commission," *The Spirit of Missions* 32 (July 1867): 551.

congregation. A white Episcopal minister in Brook Hill, Virginia reported after the war that "the colored people were unwilling to have anyone preach to them except one of their own race," an observation that identified a stumbling block for black Episcopal conversions and illustrated the growth of black leadership outside the Episcopal Church during Reconstruction.⁷⁶ The Episcopal Church required its ministers to be proficient in classical languages and hold seminary degrees, and without access or resources to meet these requirements and with greater prospects in other denominations, only a handful of blacks became Episcopal clergymen. Atwell provided a satisfactory compromise for blacks who sought new control over their lives through black institutions and leadership, yet wished to remain within the established Episcopal Church. Additionally, Atwell's successful administration of St. Stephen's indirectly convinced local blacks and whites of the ability of blacks to become independently pious Episcopalians, as George F. Bragg, Jr. described, "giving ocular [sic] evidence to the *capacity* of Negro Priests and Negro people."⁷⁷

Atwell had been "brought up in the English Church" as a child in Barbados.⁷⁸ He later served as a missionary in Kentucky, where he was working when hired by St. Stephen's in 1868. Bishop Johns and Bishop Whittle ordained Atwell in Virginia on May 7, 1869, making him one of only six black Episcopal clergymen in the country. As the first official rector of St. Stephen's, Atwell maintained the focus on education, and his wife served in the Freedman's Commission school. Also, he took an interest in the

⁷⁶ Brydon, *The Episcopal Church Among the Negroes of Virginia*, 8.

⁷⁷ Bragg, *The Story of Old St. Stephen's*, 39.

⁷⁸ J.S. Atwell, quoted in "Report of the Proceedings of the Board of Missions," *The Spirit of Missions* 35 (December 1870): 643.

church's facilities, directing the construction of a rectory, which was built by a local black contractor, and making improvements to the new church building.⁷⁹

With new church facilities and a competent black rector, St. Stephen's developed a stable presence in Petersburg. There is no evidence that attendance at worship services ever filled the church's four hundred-person capacity, but on General Agent Charles Gillette's visit in 1869, two hundred people attended a Sunday night service, filling all available seats. Amanda Aiken ran the school at St. Stephen's with three other teachers until 1869, when she returned home to Brooklyn. Atwell's wife Cordelia took charge of the school, and like most other freedpeople's schools in Petersburg, classes became increasingly centered on young pupils. In 1870, the Reverend Atwell reported that the school had an annual appropriation of \$425 for its three teachers and eighty students.⁸⁰ Church membership climbed to more than 70 regular communicants, and the school's enrollment was 137 pupils in 1872.⁸¹ St. Stephen's was not yet self-sufficient, and Atwell continued to seek other local, diocesan, and national sources for school and church funds.

During this relative harmony, the Republican party controlled affairs in Congress and Petersburg. The city was still volatile, as represented in the 1870 riot, but St. Stephen's offered no reports of violence or crime. With the establishment of public schools, opposition to black education became less conspicuous in the city, and the immediate attractions of other African-American spiritual outlets faded, enabling St. Stephen's Church to address the problems presented by its own diocese.

⁷⁹ C.A. Atwell, "Petersburg, VA.," *The Spirit of Missions* 36 (June 1871): 303. Regarding improvements to the new church building, Atwell's wife Cordelia only wrote that "Mr. Atwell has commenced repairs on his church, and needs much pecuniary aid.

⁸⁰ J. S. Atwell, quoted in "Report of the Proceedings of the Board of Missions," *The Spirit of Missions* 35 (December 1870): 643.

Even as St. Stephen's prospered locally, it struggled within the body of well-established, primarily white congregations that comprised the diocese. Atwell left his ministry at St. Stephen's in 1873 to accept a call from a Georgia congregation, partially as a result of St. Stephen's frustrated relations with the Diocese of Virginia. In his very first year at St. Stephen's, Atwell testified that "denominational prejudice" was the greatest difficulty he encountered.⁸² The growth of St. Stephen's Church and the development of other black Episcopal congregations in Richmond and Norfolk pressed the issue of black congregational status on the diocese, which had made preliminary arrangements for black congregations during its annual council in 1866. At this council, the diocese voted to appoint a standing "Executive Committee on Colored Congregations" that would provide indirect representation for black congregations. Under this arrangement, "new and separate congregations" would be welcomed into the diocese, but they would not receive independent parish status.⁸³

Hoping to defeat these discriminatory arrangements, St. Stephen's vestry submitted a formal application for parish status and lay representation within the diocese in 1869. Beyond its own durable organization, St. Stephen's congregation had several reasons to be optimistic. White clergy in Petersburg had been consistently supportive of St. Stephen's activities, and the church attracted donations and good will from Episcopalians across the country. The Reverend Atwell had been properly ordained, and his performances at St. Stephen's and in diocesan and missionary meetings drew many compliments.

⁸¹ Cordelia Atwell, "St. Stephen's Parish School, Petersburg, Va.," *The Spirit of Missions* 37 (January 1872): 68.

⁸² J.S. Atwell, "St. Stephen's Church, Petersburg," *Journal of the Seventy-Fourth Annual Council of the Diocese of Virginia* (1869): 126.

⁸³ *Journal of the Seventy-First Annual Council*, 40.

Furthermore, the diocesan committee on new parishes was chaired by the Reverend Gibson, St. Stephen's longtime ally from Grace Church.

At the 1869 diocesan council, Gibson's committee unanimously recommended granting St. Stephen's petition. Nevertheless, the council declined this recommendation and voted to deny the petition, continuing St. Stephen's place under the care of the Committee on Colored Congregations. Ironically, the same council also voted to induct the recently ordained Atwell as a full-fledged member. Atwell, Gibson, and the congregation were profoundly disappointed with the council's denial, and within three years Atwell left for other prospects in Georgia.

Regional concerns contributed to the decisions of the 1869 council. By subordinating black congregations, the Diocese of Virginia joined many other Southern organizations that systematically denied equal status to emancipated slaves after the Civil War. Like the Freedman's Commission, the diocesan council did not detach itself from worldly, political concerns as well as it hoped. The national church did not form a policy on the issue of black congregations' diocesan status, leaving the separate dioceses to follow their own courses. While dioceses in several states outside the South admitted new black congregations as equal parishes, the dioceses of Virginia, South Carolina, and most other southern states restricted their few black churches. This Southern expression of racial segregation culminated in 1883, when a conference of Southern bishops assembled at Sewanee, Tennessee voted to establish separate diocesan organizations for black members. Their plan failed in the General Convention, but the bishops clearly demonstrated a regional stand.

The Diocese of Virginia was not hostile to the existence of St. Stephen's Church. White clergymen and laity throughout the diocese consistently voiced their desire to educate the freedpeople and regain African-American membership losses. Yet, the diocese had no real plan for racial integration, and its relations with new black congregations developed haphazardly. While encouraging and supporting new schools and missions for blacks, the diocese denied those missions direct representation and procrastinated on key racial issues. This undeveloped policy discouraged black conversions and frustrated successful congregations like St. Stephen's Church. Perhaps the Southern restriction of black congregations was a response to black suffrage and citizenship mandated by Congress. White bishops, clergy, and laity may have created within the diocese a racial arrangement that they thought proper for society as a whole.

Compounding this problem, support from the Episcopal Freedman's Commission soon faded. The Commission's most prosperous years were its first, from 1865 to 1868, when it received a total of \$75,033 in parish and private donations. In 1866, the Commission's first full year, Southern parishes contributed almost nothing, and only 27 percent of all parishes in the remaining states and territories contributed. At the end of its first three years, the Commission employed 65 teachers in charge of about 5,500 students.⁸⁴ Church leaders pleaded for more donations and interest. Hoping to raise more support, the 1868 Episcopal General Convention changed the name of the Commission to the Home Missionary Commission for Colored People, thereby dropping the politically-charged term of "Freedman" in the Commission's title. This strategy did not work; from

⁸⁴ J. Brinton Smith, "Appeal," *The Spirit of Missions* 32 (May 1867): 392 and Appendix III-1, "Report of the Board of Missions, With Accompanying Documents," *Journal of the Proceedings of the*

1869 to 1871, the Commission's receipts dropped to \$59,721, and receipts never rose afterwards to match its first three years.⁸⁵ The Commission's efforts declined until it was eventually terminated in 1906.⁸⁶ The combined disappointments associated with the declining Commission, the failure of diocesan representation, the departure of the Reverend Atwell, and the return of a harsher Conservative rule hindered significant Episcopal growth among blacks in Petersburg and beyond.

Still, St. Stephen's faith remained. After Atwell's departure in 1873, the congregation chose Giles B. Cooke, local white minister and schoolteacher, to fill its head position. This selection demonstrated the lack of available black Episcopal ministers and the long commitment of Cooke to Petersburg's black schools and organizations. Born in Portsmouth, Virginia, Cooke served in the Confederate Army and then settled in Petersburg to teach in a private school for whites. At the same time, he was active in black Episcopal Sunday schools, and his interests in the Episcopal Church and black education soon led him in a different direction. By 1868, he headed a school for freed slaves in Petersburg sponsored by the American Missionary Society. When the Radical city government established free schools that same year, he was hired as principal of the black high school. In the next three years, his attention to ministry increased, and he preached at St. Stephen's during Atwell's absences. In ¹⁸⁷⁴1872, he was ordained as an Episcopal minister, and he continued his educational activities by enlarging a school associated with St. Stephen's into a Normal (industrial) School. His diary indicates that

Bishops, Clergy, and Laity... Assembled in a General Convention...1868 (Hartford: Church Press Company, 1869): 368-369.

⁸⁵ Appendix III-1, "Report of the Board of Missions, With Accompanying Documents," *Journal of the Proceedings of the Bishops, Clergy, and Laity... Assembled in a General Convention...1871*, (Hartford: Church Press Company, 1872): 512.

he maintained personal friendships with many members of St. Stephen's congregation, and his call to minister at St. Stephen's was based on mutual affection. On Saturday, May 10, 1873, he wrote a letter to the vestry of St. Stephen's, stating

In responding to the resolution adopted by the vestry calling me to the pastoral charge of St. Stephen's Church, Petersburg, Va., I take the earliest opportunity to express my acceptance of the "call" thus extended. also [sic] to thank the vestry for the kind terms in which the invitation is tendered. In taking charge of the Church, I shall endeavor to do my duty to God and to the flock that He has entrusted to my care."⁸⁷

Cooke's words express a sense of humility and devotion, and his commitment to practical education and Episcopal worship made for a happy match with the congregation.

However, during Cooke's successful twelve-year tenure at St. Stephen's, both he and the congregation worked to prepare future black ministers. In the late 1860s, the congregation sent several of its own sons, including a Cain and a Morgan, to Northern seminaries to study for the priesthood. In 1878, the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria and the Reverend Cooke helped establish a "Branch Theological School" at St. Stephen's in connection with the Normal School. The theological school's enrollment averaged about 15 students, and it was chartered in 1884 by the state legislature as the Bishop Payne Divinity School. With few other options in America for black Episcopal study, it was the primary Episcopal theological school for African Americans for over 50 years.⁸⁸

Other notable achievements for the congregation during Cooke's ministry include the creation of a health and burial insurance program, a sewing society, a small

⁸⁶ Bennett, "Black Episcopalians," 240.

⁸⁷ Giles B. Cooke, quoted in Bragg, *The Story of Old St. Stephens*, 37; Giles B. Cooke, Personal Papers.

⁸⁸ Brydon, *The Episcopal Church Among the Negroes of Virginia*, 11.

orphanage, and a used clothing distribution center for the poor, all of which encouraged the church's steady growth.⁸⁹ When Cooke retired from St. Stephen's in 1885, he was succeeded by white clergyman Rev. R.A. Goodwyn of Botetourt County. Reasons for Goodwyn's selection are undocumented.

The close of Reconstruction saw a decrease in the nation's attention and response to Southern racial hostility, outwardly expressed in the removal of the last federal occupying troops. Other issues, including unemployment and low farm profits, railroad and industrial developments, and westward expansion and conflicts, replaced federal and popular interest in Southern struggles. By 1876, many philanthropic societies for freed slaves had disbanded or, like the Episcopal Freedman's Commission, had shifted control to the local level, where Southern conservatives were regaining command. Racial violence continued, as white Southern conservatives employed a violent "Shotgun Plan" to consolidate power and intimidate black voters in 1876. The federal government belatedly appointed a corps of marshals and polling supervisors to monitor election day activities, but, strictly limited in their scope, these appointees did little to halt the general atmosphere of violence. The compromise surrounding the presidential inauguration of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1877 ended the enforcement of constitutional amendments guaranteeing black political participation. In Petersburg, St. Stephen's still received individual contributions from Northern and Southern supporters, but the civil rights of the city's blacks were seriously diminished.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ William D. Henderson, *Gilded Age City: Politics, Life and Labor in Petersburg, Virginia, 1874-1889* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980): 320.

⁹⁰ In the late 1870s, St. Stephen's received donations from a variety of sources, examples of which were outlined by Giles B. Cooke's in "Acknowledgments," *The Spirit of Missions* (February 1875): 120.

Despite the congregation's ambivalence and hardships, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church did have a lasting impact. Foremost, the church helped mitigate the community's racial violence. Although it presented a target that was burned, the coalition between local blacks, local white moderates, and Northern benefactors that formed after the fire not only replaced the building that was lost, but established long-term validation for the freed slaves' educational and spiritual endeavors. The church apparently was not targeted after the fire, and it expanded its membership, educational scope, and community service. More broadly, it advanced the debate over black representation and leadership within the Episcopal diocese, mirroring and reinforcing that debate's presence within federal and state governments.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of St. Stephen's presence throughout Reconstruction is the church's duality. Although it joined a long list of black organizations established after the war, it was associated with the aristocratic, discriminatory, and educationally demanding Church so unpopular with most blacks. Also, St. Stephen's ex-slave leadership may suggest an increased division between free blacks who, despite their typically higher social standings, worshipped at other parishes and freed slaves who joined the new congregation. Furthermore, the church created an alliance between Northern and Southern Episcopalians, education advocates, and federal agencies like the Freedmen's Bureau while it inspired divisions in Petersburg's ex-Confederate community between benefactors and hostile opponents. The clearer lines between Union and Confederate or white and black blurred around St. Stephen's Church.

So why did the congregation remain Episcopal? The congregation was motivated by a blend of educational advantages, Episcopal traditions, and faith. Episcopal schools

for freed slaves in Petersburg indicated a commitment to blacks' needs and offered reliable classes and resources. The close-knit, familial congregation had valued roots in the Episcopal Church and leaders committed to continuing those traditions. Yet, the indispensable ingredient was the church members' original faith. St. Stephen's Church, at its most basic level, was formed to help individuals develop a particular relationship with God. Apparently, the church successfully created a meaningful worship experience for the communicants. The church's cohesion throughout difficulties testifies not only to the tangible social benefits of its arrangement but to the basic beliefs of its members.

In 1869, as the congregation occupied its new building under its new minister, Bishop Johns summarized his feelings on St. Stephen's Church: "I must express my gratitude for the favorable circumstances under which this congregation commences its course....I trust that...it will prove a safe and edifying example and pattern to be successfully followed by many others."⁹¹ St. Stephen's did not become an example and pattern, but remained a unique congregation of Southern blacks. Nevertheless, its uniqueness reveals the changes in conflict and allegiances during Reconstruction, the duality of which Petersburg's institutions were capable, and the possibilities of individual faith under trying circumstances.

⁹¹ John Johns, quoted in Bragg, *History of the Afro-American Group of the Episcopal Church*, 140.

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