

THE HISTORY OF ST. JOHN'S CATHEDRAL



It was a sweltering hot day in July of the year 1565. Commodore John Hawkins, commander of a small fleet of English sailing ships was anchored in the St. Johns River. As was his custom, he ordered services to be read on deck from the Book of Common Prayer. In this seemingly routine worship service was planted the seeds of the Anglican Communion in America. This was the first Anglican worship service within the continental United States.

Two hundred years later Florida was still uncharted territory, viewed as a fertile field for mission by the Church of England. By 1822, "Cowford", in U.S. Territory of Florida, became "Jacksonville". Seven years later The Rev. R.A. Henderson, a missionary from St. Augustine, came to hold the first Episcopal services in the small town of almost 100 people. An entry from his diary, April 15, 1829:

I arrived at 3 o'clock at the ferry opposite (the town) but owing to the violence of the wind, was detained until the next day, when I crossed the river and performed service and preached morning and afternoon. These were the first Episcopal services ever witnessed in that part of the country. They were well received, and I make no doubt that if our Church be established here, a small church will soon be erected... where I could ... celebrate divine service and be instrumental in gathering a ... congregation. The expense and inconvenience of traveling in this region are truly great.'

Some of these services were no doubt held outdoors under the spreading oak trees along the banks of the river. In 1834, the Parish was organized as one of the first in Florida. Church meetings were held in members' homes later in the county courthouse. The first church building began on Billy Goat Hill, the highest point of land in the city. Slowed by a lack of funds, this first church took nine years to complete, with funding provided by ladies who gave teas, baked foods for sale and did sewing of all kinds. Their dream was finally realized after years of effort with the dedication of the church in 1851. Tragically, only a scant twelve years later, occupying Federal troops burned the church to the ground in 1863. The only remnant of this first church was the altar prayer book; Dr. Alfred Walton, a Federal medical officer, ran into the burning church and "took from the altar a large gilt-bound prayer book with the inscription on the cover St. John's Episcopal Church, Jacksonville." Three years later, Dr. Walton returned the prayer book to the parish. At the end of the Civil War, nothing remained of the church building but ashes on the ground. The small congregation persevered. Services were held in a wooden building, lovingly known as "The Shack."

In 1870, the vestry approved plans for a new church to seat 800 persons. This church was wisely built of brick and granite. The first services were held on Easter Sunday, 1877. St. Johns continuing as a vibrant worshipping community, enduring two yellow fever epidemics, during the last of which, The Rev, Reginald Heber Weller was always at his post of duty, "a power in those days, when strong men were needed." Despite the epidemics, the church bells rang and the faithful responded.

In 1901, the church, parish house and rectory were totally destroyed by fire of unbelievable proportions. The Great Fire destroyed almost all of downtown Jacksonville. A story in the newspaper the

next day contained this reference: "At four-thirty o'clock St. John's Episcopal Church neighborhood was the center of the conflagration. It lived but a few minutes."

The St. John's community again rebuilt- first a small wooden chapel and then the present day cathedral, built on the foundations of the old. Built of Indiana limestone in a style known as Gothic Revival, the church recalls the great medieval churches of Europe. St. John's was designed for the spoken word as Morning Prayer was typical for this time.

In 1951, The Rt. Rev. Frank Alexander Juhan designated St. John's as the first cathedral of the Diocese of Florida. In its fifty years as a cathedral, St. John's has chosen to remain downtown, still perched atop Billy Goat Hill and serving as a beacon of light. These rays of light include the Cathedral Foundation whose high-rise residencies and Meal-on-Wheels program continue to provide quality care for the city's elderly. Rather than moving to the banks of the St. John's River, the cathedral chose to start Episcopal High School- a premier center of learning in the Southeast. The Cathedral Arts Project brings art, dance and music into the lives of impoverished children. St. Johns is actively creating new houses for deserving people, meals for the homeless and inspiring music. St. Johns is responding in myriad ways to the needs of the city.

The history and the future of St. Johns is best expressed in the great hymn:

*Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the head and cornerstone,
chosen of the Lord, and precious...*

Hymn 518, The Hymnal 1982
Church Publishing Incorporated