

A STATE OF GRACE

ALBEMARLE COUNTY'S OLDEST CHURCH CELEBRATES ITS 275TH ANNIVERSARY

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Albemarle County has many old churches, but only one is as old as the county itself: Grace Episcopal Church, located on Route 231 in Keswick, VA. Albemarle County was established by the colonial legislature in September of 1744, with its existence to begin officially on January 1, 1745. The vestry of Fredericksville Parish commissioned the construction of Grace Church in April 1745, making it one of the earliest churches on what was then the Virginia frontier. Its founders and first parishioners included many prominent Virginians of the colonial and Revolutionary periods, including Thomas Walker, the explorer of Kentucky and the founder of Charlottesville, John Walker, an aide to Washington and US senator, Thomas Jefferson, author of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom and vestryman 1767–1770, and William Cabell Rives, US congressman and senator and minister to France. The church is listed both on the National Register of Historic Places and on the Virginia Register of Historic Places. The early history of the county and the church are closely intertwined. “Grace Church has a history which exceeds in interest that of any of the churches of the country,” the *Daily Progress* reported in February 1895.

Grace Church was initially known as Middle Church, for it was one of three churches intended for the Fredericksville parish. Subsequently, it was known as Belvoir Church, later as Walker’s Church, and finally, in 1855, as Grace Church.

Middle Church was built on the site of an older church, known as “the old Mountain Chapple,” built perhaps as early as 1727. Nicholas Meriwether secured the first land grant in this area. He was able to enlarge an initial grant of almost 18,000 acres to more than twice that many by 1730. When Meriwether’s eldest daughter Jane was married to Robert Lewis, himself a large landowner in the North Garden and Ivy areas, the couple made their residence in Keswick on 1600 acres of Meriwether’s parcel and called it Belvoir. It may have been the Lewises who built the old Mountain Chapple. The new Middle Church built on the site came to be called Belvoir Church after their estate.

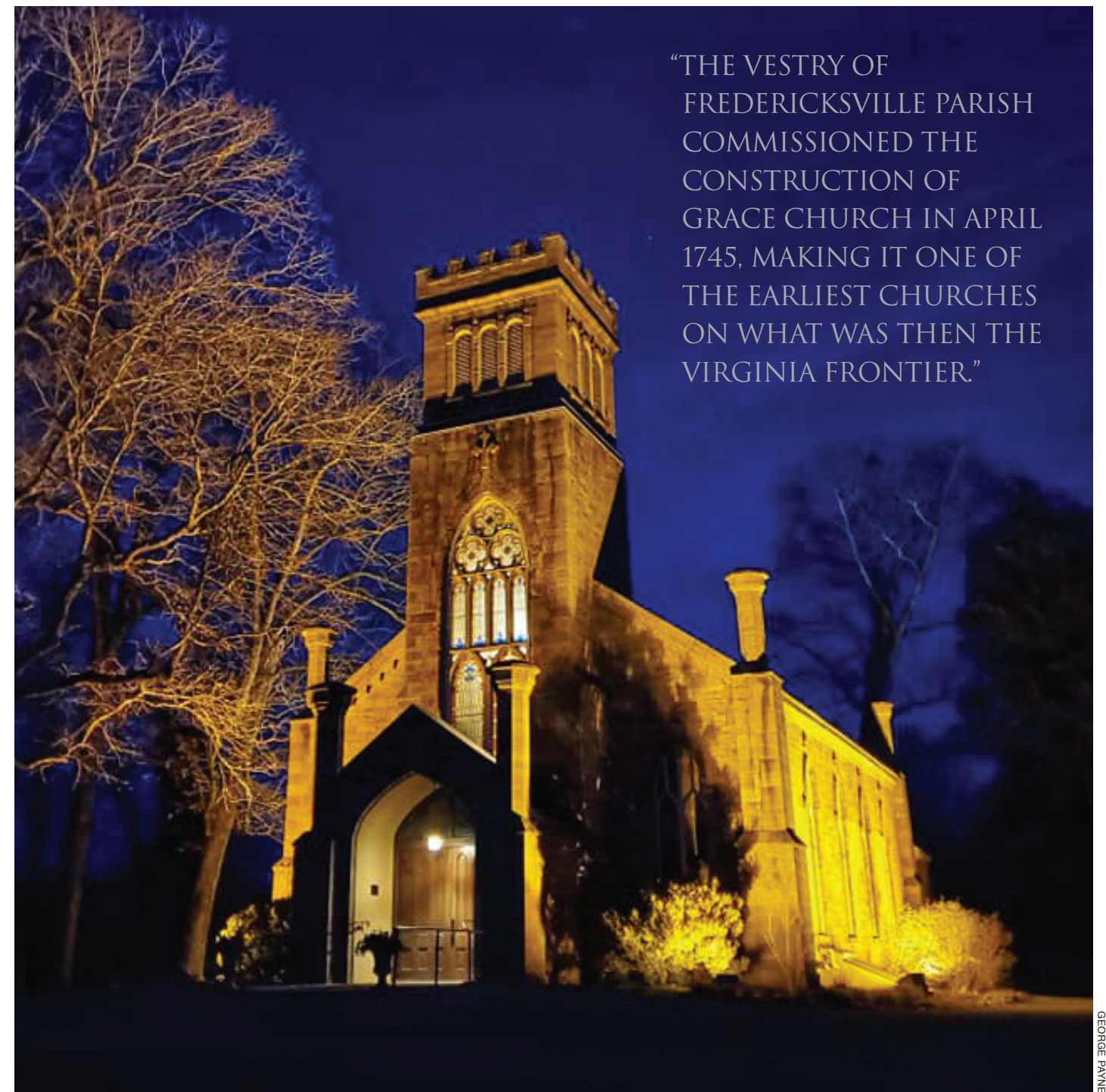
The vestry of Fredericksville Parish that commissioned the building of Middle Church in 1745 also elected Dr. Thomas Walker (1715–1794) as a member of their body. Thomas Walker was the most prominent and influential man in Albemarle County. By his marriage in 1741 to Mildred Thornton Meriwether, widow of the son of the first land grant owner Nicholas Meriwether, Walker came to occupy the large estate known (then and now) as Castle Hill. In 1750 Walker led a four-month exploratory expedition to Kentucky and was the first to map that area. In 1762 the General Assembly purchased a thousand acres for the creation of the town of Charlottesville and named Thomas Walker as the trustee. He was empowered to sell parcels to prospective residents, and he laid out the grid upon which the town

would be built. It was in tribute to Thomas Walker that Belvoir Church came to be known as Walker’s Church.

During this time, this part of Virginia was on the western frontier. The Tidewater area was well-populated but, apart from a few settlers who had trickled down into the Shenandoah Valley from Pennsylvania, the land across the Blue Ridge and beyond the Alleghenies was still peopled almost entirely by native Americans. In the pristine area of the Piedmont, among the foothills of the Blue Ridge, a few small settlements had come into being in the decade before the creation of Albemarle County. Thomas Jefferson said of his father, Peter Jefferson, that “he was the third or fourth settler, about the year 1737, of the part of the county in which I live.” Although the county was at first much more extensive than at present, and incorporated parts of what is now Buckingham, Amherst, and Nelson counties it was sparsely settled. As late as 1745, the number of “tithables” or landowners in the county was only 1394.

In the middle of the 18th century, Virginia was still a colony of England, and the established, state-supported church was the Church of England. Colonists were required to support it with their tithes, and parish vestries functioned in civic as well as religious capacities: certifying boundaries, supervising public morals, and making provisions for the poor. But in the Piedmont area, there were few Anglican churches, and even fewer priests because they had to either come from England or go to England to be ordained by the Bishop of London. Thus, most priests served more than one parish church, and since those churches might be at considerable distances from each other, many churches could not manage to have a service every Sunday. Grace Church was fortunate to have several well-educated and historically significant men as rectors in its pre-Revolutionary period.

With the Revolution, the established church fell on increasingly hard times. The passage in 1784 of Jefferson’s Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom deprived the Anglican church of its privileged and tax-supported position, and it suddenly had to compete with dissenting groups—Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, and Quakers. Reconstituting itself in 1789 as the Protestant Episcopal Church, it became one among many other denominations, and not the most popular. Already weakened by disestablishment, the Episcopal church was nearly destroyed with the passage in 1802 of the Glebe Act, by which the Commonwealth confiscated almost all the property of Episcopal churches—glebe lands and



GEORGE PAYNE

church buildings alike. In succeeding decades, all Episcopal churches in Virginia struggled to survive. It was symptomatic that Frederick Hatch, the rector of the parish 1820–1830, reported in 1823 that “at Walker’s Church, the congregation is, as usual, very small, the spirit of religion languishing, and the neighborhood generally presents but a gloomy aspect.” Happily, a few years later, he was able to report at Walker’s church some growth and also “a reviving spirit of piety.” This revival was subsequently helped by the very long tenure of Rev. Ebenezer Boyden, who was rector of Grace Church from 1839–1880.

The rebound became even more evi-

dent when it was determined in 1845 to construct a new church building. The original frame colonial church building, whose foundation stones are still visible, had become dilapidated after a century’s use. The vestry appointed a committee to consider a design and raise funds for the new structure. This effort was inspired and led by a devoted female parishioner, Judith Page Rives, granddaughter of Thomas Walker and wife of William Cabell Rives (1793–1868), US congressman, senator, and minister to France. Judith Rives was a close friend of many prominent people, including Queen Marie-Amélie of France, Dolly Madison, and other influential fig-

ures on both sides of the Atlantic. Judith Page Rives, who wanted “a reform in the style of our rural church architecture,” wished for a gothic design, a medieval-style of church architecture that was then in revival in both Europe and America. Thinking that “the house of God” should be “the best and most costly edifice in the parish,” she enlisted the famous architect, William Strickland (1788–1854), a student of Benjamin Latrobe, to provide a design. Strickland had designed several notable buildings in his native Philadelphia, and at the time of his correspondence with Mrs. Rives, he was designing the Tennessee State Capitol. The work began in 1846,

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using local stone quarried from a nearby estate.

The new church was completed in 1855. Factors slowed the building progress, including a shortage of funds, a sojourn of the Riveses in France, and the deaths of members of the building committee. William Meade, Bishop of Virginia, consecrated the new edifice on May 9, 1855, and gave it a new name: Grace Church. The name, although relatively common as the name of a church, was also intended to honor the woman whom William C. Rives, Jr. (1825–1889) had married in 1849, Grace Winthrop Sears (1828–1919). Her father, David Sears, was one of the wealthiest citizens of Boston. He presented to the church its bell, which honors Judith Rives and is inscribed “To Madam Rives of Castle Hill from David Sears of Boston, 1854.” That bell still tolls today across Keswick each Sunday morning.

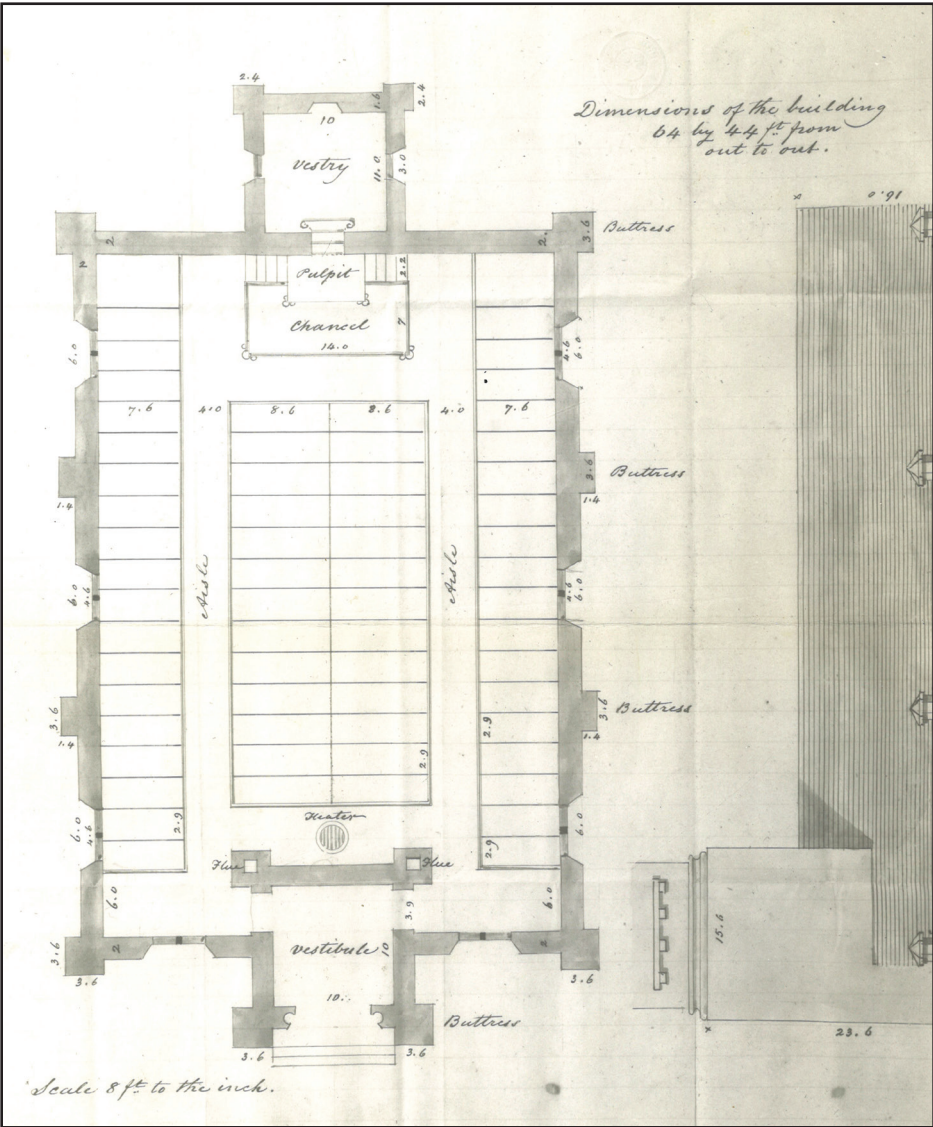
Although the parish, like most of the south, was impoverished and generally debilitated by the Civil War, Grace Church continued to serve its community. It even acquired a new organ in 1869.

Over several decades, the church replaced one furnace after another in an effort to keep the worshippers warm. It was probably the last of those inadequate furnaces that caused a devastating fire in February of 1895. The fire gutted the interior of the church; only the granite walls and tower remained. The bell had fallen to the ground and was half-buried there.

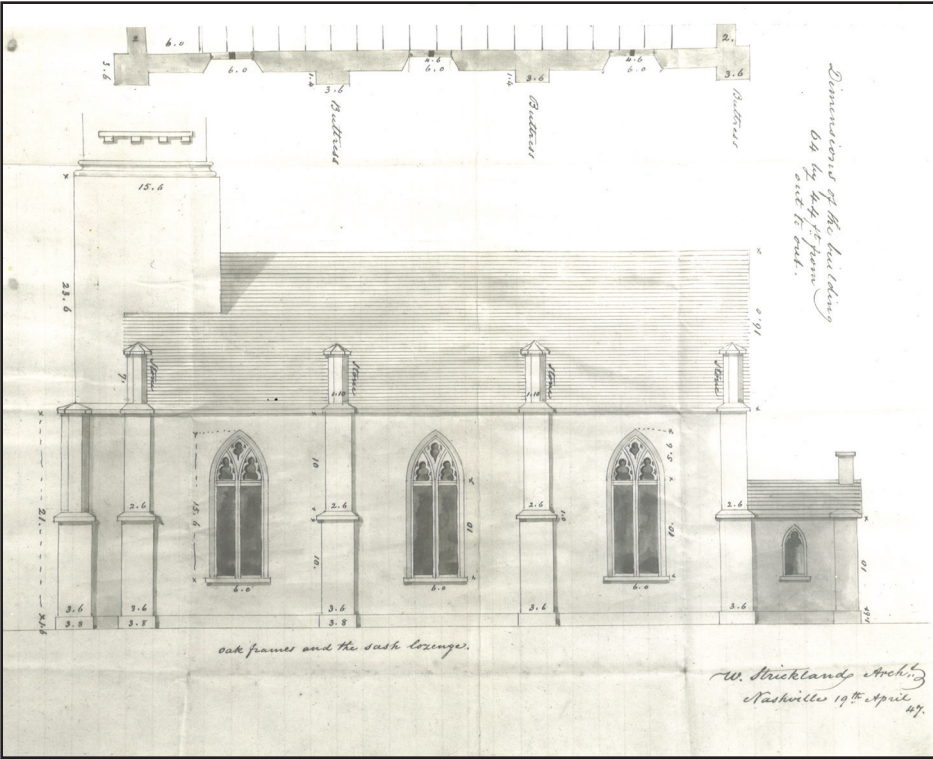
The discovery that a prominent member of the church, John Armstrong Chanler (later changed to Chaloner), had personally taken out a \$12,000 insurance policy on the church partially assuaged the grief occasioned by the fire. The insurance sufficed to repair most of the damage, although some of the building’s old treasures were irreplaceable. John Chanler (1862–1935) had come to the Keswick area and Grace Church in 1888 by dint of his marriage to Amélie Rives, granddaughter of Judith Page Rives. They divorced in 1895, but he remained in Keswick and became an esteemed, if eccentric, figure in the district. Born in New York, Chanler was a great-great-grandson of John Jacob Astor and enjoyed a share of the Astor fortune, from which he liberally gave to neighborhood causes and the poor and needy, both black and white.

The restoration of the church was completed in 1896. An added chancel, new furnishings, and new stained-glass windows made Strickland’s design more spacious and more beautiful as Grace Church entered the twentieth century.

From 1910 to 1942 the parish



Grace Church was designed in the Gothic Revival style by the architect William Strickland in 1847.



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flourished under the kindly leadership of a single rector, Frank L. Robinson, who became a beloved figure in the broader Keswick community. During his priesthood at Grace, the church began in 1926, a mission church, All Saints’ Chapel in Stony Point. It was also during his tenure that Grace Church inaugurated, in 1929, the colorful ceremony of the Blessing of the Hounds, held every Thanksgiving morning since and always heavily attended. In 1933, a parish hall was built. At his retirement in 1942, Rev. Robinson was honored by the church as “our faithful Pastor and loving friend for 32 years, ministering to all in every walk of life and all denominations.” He was named rector emeritus, in which capacity he continued to serve the church and community until his death in 1960.

The restoration of the church after the 1895 fire included the purchase of a new but not very good pump organ. It served feebly until a new organ was installed in 1959. That organ was heavily damaged in 2015 by rainwater from a massive storm and a blocked drain. The church contracted for a new pipe organ with the internationally known organ builders, Taylor and Boody, and at the same time undertook some historic restoration of the building itself. A celebration of the completion of these projects took place Christmas of 2019.

Grace Church enters upon its 275th anniversary year with a renewed spirit, a beautified edifice, and a magnificent organ. The congregation is celebrating the occasion with a series of varied events, includng a Twelfth Night Festival marking the end of the twelve days of Christmas. During March, April and May, there will be a series of lectures on the history of the Anglican Church in the colonial period, on the Episcopal Church in Virginia during the 19th and 20th centuries, and on Grace Church as an example of Gothic Revival architecture. The church will also recall its history by using several different liturgies deriving from the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. An official birthday party will be held in April, and the refurbished church and new organ will be formally consecrated in a special service on Sunday, May 3, followed in the afternoon by an organ recital and a choral evensong service. The celebration will culminate in early June with Grace Church’s annual Historic Farm Tour, which opens many of the beautiful old Keswick estates to the public visit includes a country fair on the church grounds. Even as it honors its past, the congregation of Grace Church looks toward a vibrant future of service to the Keswick and Charlottesville community.

EARLY RECTORS OF GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Rev. Jonathan Arnold • 1747–1751

The first rector was Rev. Jonathan Arnold,. Born in Haddam, Connecticut, in 1700, Arnold graduated from Yale College in 1723. He was then ordained as a minister of the Congregational Church and served the congregational church in West Haven, CT, from 1725–1734. He changed his allegiance, however; conforming to the Anglican Church, he traveled to England, where he was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1735 and received an honorary MA from Oxford University. Returning to Connecticut, he was the priest at Trinity Church in New Haven. On a visit to Philadelphia in 1739, he accidentally met up with the famous British evangelist, George Whitefield, who stimulated the Great Awakening during his preaching tour of the colonies 1738–1740. The two men took an immediate and deep dislike to each other and frequently disparaged each other in the press and personal communications. Whitefield said of Arnold that he “is unworthy of the name of a minister of Jesus Christ” and that “I have been in his company several times and was obliged to reprove him openly for his misconduct...Wherever he has been, a very ill report is spread abroad concerning him.” Such comments, rooted in their religious differences, need to be taken with a grain of salt. Arnold was by all other accounts a devout and upstanding man. Arnold sought to build an Episcopal church on the village green of New Haven. Still, violent opposition from Puritans (Congregationalists) caused him to relocate to Staten Island, NY, where he was the priest to St. Andrew’s parish from 1740–1745. Only then did he come to Virginia, where he served Fredericksville Parish at Belvoir (Grace) Church in Albemarle County.

Rev. James Maury • 1751–1769

The second rector of Grace Church, then known as Walker’s Church, was James Maury. The most notable of the rectors of this church, Maury was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1719, and emigrated with his parents to America while he was still an infant. He attended the College of William and Mary,

then traveled to England and ordained as a priest of the Anglican Church in 1742. After serving as a priest in King William County, Maury moved to the Fredericksville parish and served Walker’s Church as well as two other churches of the parish. Like many clergymen of his time, Maury also opened a school, the Maury School for Boys, where he taught classics, literature, mathematics, geography, and deportment. Among his pupils were three local boys, each of whom would become president of the United States: Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe. Jefferson came under Maury’s care when Peter Jefferson died, and was Maury’s student for two years, from 1758 to 1759. The classical learning that Maury imparted to him inspired Jefferson. Maury was a prominent plaintiff in the famous “Parson’s Cause,” a protest of low pay for Anglican clergymen that had been caused by a failed tobacco crop in 1758. It was in connection with this controversy that Patrick Henry came to public notice as an orator and critic of English interference in colonial affairs. James Maury married Mary Walker, a cousin of Thomas Walker, and with her produced thirteen children, some of whom became politically prominent. One of them, his son Matthew, succeeded his father as rector of Grace Church, where he served for thirty-eight years (1770–1808). Both James and Matthew Maury are buried at Grace Church.

Rev. Ebenezer Boyden • 1839–1880

The longest-serving rector of Grace Church was Rev. Ebenezer Boyden, 1803-1891, who served Grace Church for forty-one years. Born in Vermont, he graduated from Yale in 1825, proceeded to Virginia Theological Seminary, and ordained in 1829. On coming to Grace Church from a pastorate in Staunton, Rev. Boyden opened a school, and he proved to be both an apt teacher and a forceful preacher. Although he was a Northerner, when sectional strife was brewing before the Civil War, Rev. Boyden strongly endorsed the southern slave system and wrote a tract opposing abolition and claiming both biblical and rational support for slavery. His views on this subject were reasonably common in the area and within his congregation. Yet he was regarded as a man of tender kindness, genial nature, and held in deep affection by the congregation until his death.

Special Events as Grace Episcopal Church Celebrates 275 Years

Anniversary Celebration April 16
Raise a glass and see the historic exhibition
Faces of Grace

Lecture Series April 28
Dr. Robert W. Prichard:
The Episcopal Church in the Twentieth Century & Beyond

Lecture Series May 5
Richard Guy Wilson: *Grace Church & Gothic Revival Architecture*

Bishop’s Dedication
Sunday, May 31
Bishop Susan Goff will be dedicating the church after the extensive construction and installation of the new organ. A new piece of music has been commissioned for this important milestone.

Grace Church Historic Farm Tour June 13

Grace Church welcomes guests to a special day in the country to see what lies “beyond the gates,” those rock walls and those tree lined paths leading to some of Virginia’s most respected historical farms. Farm gates will open, and the Church grounds will transform, featuring local artisans, food vendors, and foot tapping music, pony rides, an English Country Fair children’s area and 4-H livestock presentations and show. An assortment of demonstrations awaits visitors at the featured farms.

Blessing of the Hounds
November 26
First held on November 28, 1929, Grace Episcopal Church was one of the first churches in the country to have a “Blessing of the Hounds” service—a tradition that has continued each Thanksgiving Day since.

Grace Episcopal Church
5607 Gordonsville Road Keswick, Virginia
www.gracekeswick.org

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