



Pipe Dreams

Keswick's Grace Episcopal Church celebrates 275 years.

By SANDRA SHELLEY

DRIVING TO FREDERICKSBURG through the scenic countryside vistas of Keswick many years ago, Alison Walden went around a curve and saw for the first time an old stone church that she felt immediately drawn to. "Grace Episcopal is a beautiful church; it's like one that you would see driving down the road in England," says Walden. "If you're coming through for the first time on 231, you're really amazed. You don't expect to see it there."

Initially drawn to the beauty of the church, Walden soon came to know its caring, highly engaged parishioners. "It's a welcoming, happy place," she says. A member for 26 years, Walden served as the chair of Grace's colorful Blessing of the Hounds Thanksgiving service last year and volunteers with the church's annual historic farm tour, which has raised over \$450,000 in 10 years for local charities.

Grace Episcopal Church is one of six colonial houses of worship in Virginia that still has an active congregation. The original wooden church measured just 32 by 24 feet. Today, its foundation

stones are in Grace's front yard, in a rectangular area marked off by a black chain link fence. A parish house sits to the right of the church, and a large graveyard with headstones dating to before the Civil War is behind it.

"That's part of what we believe: that Grace will be here for centuries to come."

—Rev. Miles Smith

Nearby, an obelisk marks the burial site of the Rev. James Maury (1717-1769), who became the parish's second rector in 1751. Rev. Maury conducted a classical school at his home, where he taught three local boys who would become U.S. presidents: Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe. According to the Rev. Miles Smith, the rector of Grace and its additional site,

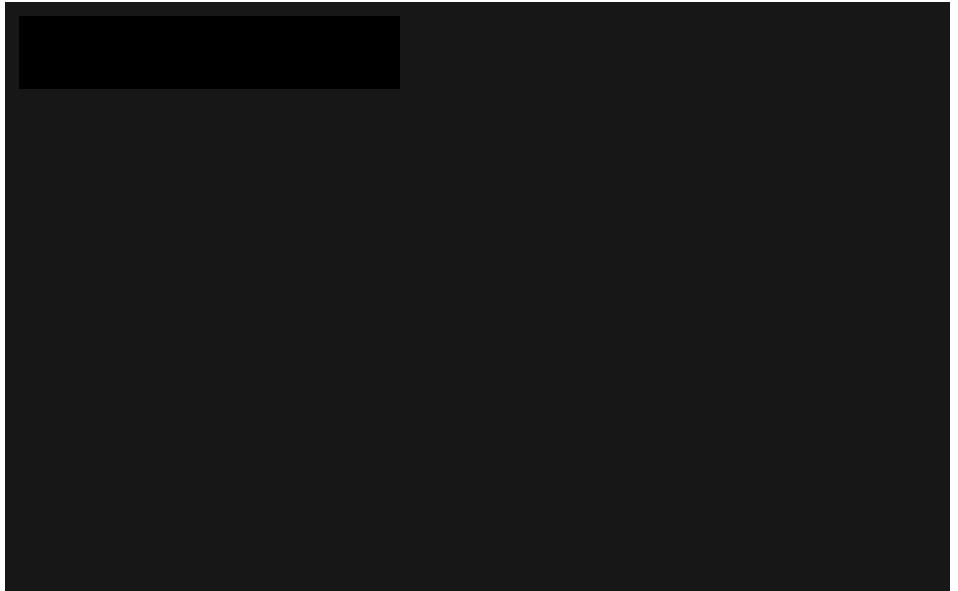
All Saints Chapel, "This was a Church of England parish before the separation of church and state. And when it became no longer a part of the colonial government, it was initially a real struggle" to sustain the church, because it no longer received public funding.

Regardless, the congregation managed to build a larger stone church to replace the small wooden one, using stone quarried from a nearby farm. Noted Philadelphia architect William Strickland designed the Gothic Revival structure with stained glass windows, pointed archways, and a turreted bell tower. Sadly, in 1895, just 40 years after its completion, Grace's second home caught fire and burned down, leaving just the four walls and the 1,575-pound bell, which is still used today.

According to Barclay Rives, a parishioner who wrote a history of the church, "Everyone thought there was no chance they could afford to rebuild the church. The area was economically depressed following the Civil War and still hadn't gotten back on its feet." Then, he says, along came John Armstrong "Archie" Chanler, an eccentric great-grandson of John Jacob Aster from New York. He married one of Rives' ancestors, Amelie Rives, a Virginian and a famous writer, and joined the congregation. "John Armstrong Chanler was one of the first of the wealthy Northerners to bring a little welcome capital down to the area. He had also secretly taken out an insurance policy on the church, which allowed the church to rebuild," Rives says. The present-day Grace was consecrated in 1896.

Five years ago, the church faced a new chal-

photos by bill remington; blessing of the hounds photo courtesy of grace church



challenge. In October, several weeks of rain caused significant damage, particularly to the pipe organ. A church task force studying replacement options learned that one of the world's great organ builders, Taylor and Boody, is in Staunton. The company built a new organ, Opus 1000, to perfectly fit the church, even matching the casework to the bell tower and melting down and incorporating pipes from the old organ.

World-class architect and acoustical expert Dana Kirkegaard designed the renovation, placing the pipe organ front and center in the chan-

cel, instead of tucked away at the back, which allowed a galley to be opened, revealing a previously hidden tower window. In addition, the chancel ceiling was raised, the carpet was removed, and rows of pews were removed to provide more space for baptismal and bridal parties. Ace Contracting of Charlottesville, with support from parishioner Ralph Dammann, led the renovation, which cost \$1.5 million, including \$1 million for the organ.

When Grace reopened last Christmas, the response was exhilaration. "We were out a whole

year, so there was a lot of hunger to be back," says Smith. He looks forward to the 100th anniversary activities later this year, including consecration by the bishop and the performance of a commissioned suite of musical pieces written by local composer Rafael Scarfullery.

One of the reasons why we chose this handmade, largely mechanical organ, it's called a tracker organ, is because they last for centuries. And that's part of what we believe: that Grace will be here for centuries to come. Smith says GraceKeswick.org, TaylorAndBoody.com