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The Historical Significance of St. David's Church in Colonial America

Abstract

Located approximately twenty miles west of Philadelphia St. David's Episcopal Church in Wayne/Radnor, Pennsylvania is one of the oldest churches in southeastern Pennsylvania. This paper started out as an extra-credit assignment for a Colonial American History course offered last fall. However, through Dr. Sam Smith's passion for colonial church history, I became passionate about sharing the history of St. David's as it is located only two miles from my home. This paper discusses the foundations of this important church highlighting the history and growth of Episcopal churches throughout the colonial period in Pennsylvania. This paper also discusses how St. David's transformed from a small Welsh missionary community to a battleground of ideas during the Great Awakening. Overall, St. David's is an important area of colonial significance and dramatically impacted the foundations of its local community.

Keywords

Colonial America, Episcopalian Church, Colonial Pennsylvania, Radnor Tract, Chester County, Welsh Community

The Historical Significance of St. David's Church in Colonial America

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As one of the most important regions in the middle colonies, southeastern Pennsylvania became an area of growth and development for various people groups from the European world. Welsh Quakers, Baptists, and Episcopalians were one of the primary ethnic groups that immigrated to the Pennsylvania colony after its foundation in 1682.¹ These Welsh immigrants entered into a settlement agreement with Pennsylvania colony founder William Penn and were granted thousands of acres in various townships surrounding Philadelphia.² These lands, which encompassed various towns west of Philadelphia, became known as the “Welsh tract.”³ In 1700, Welsh Episcopalians settled in the Welsh Tract of Chester County, Pennsylvania, and sought to build an Episcopal community in Radnor Township.⁴ Fifteen years later, they would complete the construction of St. David’s Church.⁵ This church would become a cultural hearth in the local Welsh and Episcopal community and would go on to carry immense historical significance and missions work in the Colonial American era.

Founded by English Quakers in 1682, Pennsylvania was envisioned as a refuge for Protestant Christian religious minorities by its founder, William Penn.⁶ The religious freedom offered to Protestant groups caused Pennsylvania to be quickly settled by not only English Quakers, but also other Protestant sects such as German Lutherans and Moravians, Welsh Quakers and Episcopalians, and Dutch Calvinists.⁷ Philadelphia, the capital of Pennsylvania, became an important port of entry to those immigrants, and as Philadelphia began to grow,

¹ Nelson Burr, “The Welsh Episcopalians of Colonial Pennsylvania and Delaware.” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 8, no. 2 (1939): I.

² *Ibid.*, 103.

³ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶ Thomas Kidd, *American Colonial History: Clashing Cultures and Faiths* (New Haven: Yale Univ Press, 2016), 119.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

German, Dutch, English, and Welsh immigrants settled in land in the surrounding areas.⁸ While many German settlers opted to settle Northwest of Philadelphia in Germantown, the Welsh were not consolidated in one town but settled throughout three primary Welsh Tracts in Montgomery and Chester County, Pennsylvania, and Newcastle County, Delaware.⁹ The Welsh tract encompassed towns that were given Welsh names, such as Merion, North Wales, Gwynedd, Radnor, Haverford, New town, and Uwchland.¹⁰ This ethnic settlement caused both German and Welsh settlers in Pennsylvania to desire and create separate judicial and political powers.¹¹ However, as the colony developed, both the English Monarchy and the Pennsylvania Provisional Council required both the German and Welsh communities to assimilate under the jurisdiction of Pennsylvania fully; thus taking away the communities autonomous privileges.¹²

Many of the first Welsh settlers in Pennsylvania were Quakers and settled in the Gwynedd and North Wales Welsh tract in Montgomery County.¹³ These early Welsh Quakers settlers were given promises of land and encouraged by William Penn to settle in his new colony of Pennsylvania.¹⁴ Thus, nobility in Wales advertised and encouraged Welsh immigration to Pennsylvania, and many Welsh Quakers, Baptists, and Episcopalians sought a new life in the new world.¹⁵ William Penn's 1682 Frame of Government established religious freedom for those who desired to worship the Church of England, which attracted Welsh Episcopalians to settle in Philadelphia and establish Christ Church, Philadelphia in 1695.¹⁶ Within two years, Christ

⁸ Ibid., 234.

⁹ Nelson, "The Welsh Episcopalians," 103.

¹⁰ Ibid., 103.

¹¹ James Lemon, *Best Poor Man's Country* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1972), 110.

¹² Ibid., 111.

¹³ Nelson, "The Welsh Episcopalians," 106.

¹⁴ Ibid., 103.

¹⁵ Ibid., 105.

¹⁶ Ibid., 106.

Church had over five hundred members and attracted both English and Welsh settlers and even former Quakers.¹⁷ However, smaller land lots in Radnor and Haverford townships attracted poorer non-Quaker Welsh, and thus a significant group of Welsh Episcopalians from both Philadelphia and Wales itself began settling in the Chester County Welsh tract.¹⁸

In the mid-1680s, a group of sixteen Episcopal Welsh families immigrated from Radnorshire, Wales, and settled in Radnor township.¹⁹ In 1700, these early Welsh settlers began conducting church services in the Radnor home of a resident named William Davis.²⁰ Rev. Evan Evans, a Welsh Episcopal priest who was the rector of Christ Church in Philadelphia, would travel the approximately 20-mile trip to preach in Radnor every two weeks.²¹ When Rev. Evans could not make the trip, he was assisted in his missionary work with Rev. John Clubb, a Welsh Episcopal clergyman who established a school in Philadelphia.²² However, The fast-growing Welsh community petitioned the Episcopal church to send them a permanent missionary as Rev. Evans could only make the trip to Radnor during the week as he had responsibilities at his home parish in the city of Philadelphia.²³ In addition, the Welsh community in Radnor primarily spoke Welsh and wished to have a resident priest who could speak Welsh as Clubb and Evans could.²⁴ Thus, the local Welsh community in Radnor and another Welsh community twenty miles away

¹⁷ Ibid., 106.

¹⁸ Ibid., 106.

¹⁹ *Celebrating 300 Years of Mission and Ministry: St. David's (Radnor) Church* (Exton, PA: St. David's Episcopal Church, 2015), 2.

²⁰ Nelson, "The Welsh Episcopalians," 107.

²¹ Ibid., 107.

²² Henry Pleasents, *The History of Old St. David's Church: Radnor, Delaware (Chester) County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, The John C. Winston Company, 1907), 6.

²³ *Celebrating 300 Years*, 2.

²⁴ Ibid., 2.

in Oxford, Pennsylvania, requested that the Bishop of London and the Society for Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts send them a Welsh and English-speaking missionary.²⁵

Founded in 1701, The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) was a Church of England missionary organization active in North America during the 18th century.²⁶ Under the Bishop of London, the SPG was established to spread the Church of England throughout British North America.²⁷ In 1702, Anglican missionaries sponsored by the SPG traveled to South Carolina, where they hoped to foster the presence of the Church of England in the new world.²⁸ The SPG also saw Pennsylvania as a potential area for rapid growth because of the growing Episcopal population and freedom of religion offered by the Pennsylvania colony.²⁹ As early as 1707, Rev. Evan Evans reported to the SPG that there was a desire in the two Welsh communities of Radnor and Oxford for a minister who “might be capable by the blessing of God to bring in a plentiful harvest of Welsh Quakers that were originally bred in the Church of England but unhappily converted.”³⁰ Thus, in 1714, the SPG decided that Rev. John Clubb, who had already been visiting the area to preach, would be a suitable candidate to be the society’s first missionary and full-time priest in Radnor and to assist in Oxford.³¹ The Oxford community already had a church built in 1711, but when Clubb returned from his visit to the SPG in London in 1714, the parish in Radnor presented him with a large sum of money to build a stone church in the Welsh style.³² Construction began on the church in May

²⁵ Nelson, “The Welsh Episcopalians,” 107.

²⁶ Travis Glasson, “The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.” *Oxford Bibliographies*. (2015): n.p

²⁷ *Celebrating 300 Years*, 2.

²⁸ Kidd, *American Colonial History*, 147.

²⁹ Nelson, “The Welsh Episcopalians,” 107.

³⁰ Pleasents, *The History of Old St. David's*, 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

³² Nelson, “The Welsh Episcopalians,” 108.

of 1715 and was partially completed on Christmas of 1715.³³ Upon completion, the church was dedicated to St. David (Dewi), the patron Saint of Wales.³⁴ Although a proper church building was finally complete, the church building would not have the floor until 1765, a vestry house until 1767, and a gallery until 1772.³⁵

Although the parish community in Radnor finally had a permanent priest and church building, disaster soon struck their community when in 1715, just as the church building was completed, Rev. John Clubb passed away from repeated illness.³⁶ The Radnor community greatly grieved over Rev. Clubb but was now back to where they had started. Thus, they again wrote the SPG and requested that they would send them another missionary.³⁷ The SPG honored their request by sending Rev. Thomas Wayman to St. David's.³⁸ After Rev. Clubb's death St. David's was routinely visited by Rev. Evan Evans who preached there until Rev. Wayman arrived in 1719.³⁹ Although not Welsh, Rev. Wayman was instrumental in the growth of nearby parishes and traveled throughout southeastern Pennsylvania to remote Welsh settlements, in modern day Lancaster County, which later became growing missions.⁴⁰ These missions would later become flourishing Episcopal churches such as St. John's Episcopal Church of Pequea, the Bangor Church at Churchtown, and St. James of Lancaster.⁴¹ St. James of Lancaster would

³³ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁴ *Celebrating 300 Years*, 2.

³⁵ Nelson, "The Welsh Episcopalians," 108.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁹ St. David's Episcopal Church. 1715. Radnor, Pennsylvania

⁴⁰ HMJ Klein, "St. James' Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1744-1944." *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 13, no. 1 (1944): 26

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

develop its unique and rich history with a growing community.⁴² Growth also continued at St. David's, where in one year, Rev. Wayman baptized over seventy children.⁴³

Although instrumental to the growth at St. David's, Rev. Wayman felt that the congregation would be better suited to have a more experienced Welsh minister to be able to visit the homes of members of the congregation. Thus in 1730, he moved on to other endeavors and was replaced by a temporary missionary named Richard Backhouse until 1732.⁴⁴ In 1732, the SPG dispatched a Welsh priest named Griffith Hughes to Radnor and he was greatly received by the parishioners of St. David's.⁴⁵ Rev. Hughes quickly got to work in the parish community and took the advice of Rev. Wayman and visited all his parishioners in their homes.⁴⁶ In a letter to the SPG in 1733, Rev. Hughes highlighted his experience of visiting his parishioners and how he found many of his parishioners "ignorant of the very fundamentals of religion."⁴⁷ He also highlighted how some members of St. David's had "principles vitiated with false doctrines" and how he worked to rectify these mistakes and false beliefs.⁴⁸ Rev. Hughes also continued the missions work of Rev. Wayman and visited missions in modern-day Berks county.⁴⁹ As the Oxford church had grown and split from St. David's, Rev. Hughes was given charge of a new mission church called St. James of Perkiomen.⁵⁰ Although very successful, Rev. Hughes often wrote letters to the SPG where he mentioned that a lack of texts in the Welsh language hindered

⁴² Ibid., 26.

⁴³ Nelson, "The Welsh Episcopalians," 108.

⁴⁴ St. David's Episcopal Church, 1715.

⁴⁵ Griffith Hughes et al. "Letters of the Rev. Griffith Hughes, of St. David's Church, Radnor, Penna., 1733-1736." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 24, no. 2 (1900): 139

⁴⁶ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁹ Nelson, "The Welsh Episcopalians," 109.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 109.

the growth of the Episcopal church in the region.⁵¹ Due to declining health Rev. Hughes was eventually transferred to a church in Barbados in 1736.⁵²

1737 would be a year of dramatic change and growth for St. David's. Following the departure of Rev. Hughes, the SPG sent Scottish missionary Rev. William Currie to Radnor and Perkiomen.⁵³ Rev. Currie would be sent to Radnor during a pivotal time in Colonial American history: the Great Awakening. As a strict orthodox Anglican, Currie worked quickly to combat the wave of Calvinism that was preached by his fellow Episcopal preacher George Whitfield.⁵⁴ Traveling around British North America, Whitfield began preaching ideas regarding a "new birth" of salvation.⁵⁵ While many colonists were drawn to him, traditional Anglicans like Currie saw Whitfield as an antinomian.⁵⁶ In a letter dated July 1740, Currie would write to the SPG regarding Whitfield's influence in Radnor and Perkiomen.⁵⁷ In the letter, Currie described how Whitfield caused "pains and labor" among his congregation.⁵⁸ Currie also told how Whitfield "raised such confusion among the people of this province" and that "the generality of my hearers not only run after but adore him as an oracle from heaven."⁵⁹ Currie described Whitfield as a "deceiver" and fellow awakener Gilbert Tennant as a "kind of madman."⁶⁰ Currie's rhetoric regarding figures like Whitfield and Tennant shows that he remained a traditional orthodox Anglican throughout the awakening and worked to keep his congregation from diminishing. Regardless of the effects of Whitfield, Currie was able to keep St. David's and St. James of

⁵¹ Hughes, et al "Letters of the Rev. Griffith Hughes," 143

⁵² *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵³ Nelson, "The Welsh Episcopalians," 109.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁵ Kidd, *American Colonial History*, 210.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵⁷ Pleasents, *The History of Old St. David's*, 48.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

Perkiomen together, and in a letter to the SPG in 1741, Currie described how he “not only kept such to their profession but have brought over several others since his [Whitfield's] departure.”⁶¹

Currie even mentioned that “two persons who were dissenters before have received the sacrament from me.”⁶²

In 1742, while Rev. Currie was working to keep his parish community together, there was a significant theft at St. David's.⁶³ This theft was reported in a July 12, 1742 edition of *The American Weekly Mercury*, which was the first newspaper in America that was launched outside of Boston.⁶⁴ The Mercury was started by Andrew Bradford, the son of William Bradford, who had opened the first print shop in Philadelphia.⁶⁵ The stolen contents offer insight into liturgical life in St. David's. The newspaper describes the thieves stealing: “One large folio Bible..., one quarto Bible almost new, one black gown made of fine Spanish cloth, one Chalice, two plates, and one bason.”⁶⁶ The newspaper concludes its report by offering a reward of five pounds for the apprehension of the thieves.⁶⁷ Although the SPG replaced the stolen items, no record exists of the original stolen items ever being recovered.⁶⁸

Another critical aspect of this time is the growth of St. David's into an English-speaking parish.⁶⁹ Increased English immigration into the area and an increased British colonial presence would cause St. David's to develop into a more English model.⁷⁰ While many in the parish

⁶¹ Ibid., 50.

⁶² Ibid., 50.

⁶³ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁴ “The American Weekly Mercury,” *The News Media and the Making of America*, 1730-1865.

⁶⁵ Ibid., n.p.

⁶⁶ Pleasents, *The History of Old St. David's*, 50.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁸ St. David's Episcopal Church, 1715.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 46.

⁷⁰ *Celebrating 300 Years*, 3.

continued to speak Welsh, the liturgical language of the parish had switched to English.⁷¹ A key element that helped to unite the Welsh and English people was their dislike of the Spanish, French, and Indians. A sermon by Rev. Currie dated January 7th, 1747, described the “lawless crew of French and Spanish privateers; and which is a worse enemy than even the barbarous, cruel, and inhuman Indians.”⁷² This strong anti-French, Spanish, Indian, and overall Roman Catholic sentiment likely encouraged English integration among the Welsh peoples of St. David’s. In addition to unifying the parishes under the English tongue, in 1745, Currie helped establish another mission church nearby: St. Peter’s in the Great Valley.⁷³ The SPG was highly impressed with the church growth that Currie helped to foster. Thus, in 1746 the SPG would write to Currie and provide him with a “Folio Bible and Common Prayer Book for those in St. Peter’s in the Valley.”⁷⁴

The historical significance of St. David’s Church is essential in understanding the growth and development of Colonial southeastern Pennsylvania. From being one of the first Welsh Episcopal churches outside of Philadelphia to developing into a battleground of theological viewpoints during the Great Awakening, St. David’s is one of the most important churches in the region. In addition, one of the most important aspects of St. David’s is how it developed into a starting point for many different Episcopal mission churches throughout the Pennsylvania colony. Overall, this church demonstrates how a small community of Welsh immigrants came together to create a lasting impact in the region. Thus, St. David’s presents itself as cultural

⁷¹ *Celebrating 300 Years*, 3.

⁷² William Currie, “A Sermon Preached in Radnor Church, On Thursday, the 7th on January 1747,” (1747), 17.

⁷³ Nelson, “The Welsh Episcopalians,” 110.

⁷⁴ Pleasents, *The History of Old St. David’s*, 51.

hearth in the local Welsh and Episcopal community and went on to carry immense historical significance and mission work in the Colonial American era.

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