

THE OLD BELL RINGS AGAIN

AS IT HAS RUNG FOR OVER
A HUNDRED YEARS.

THE QUAINT CELEBRATION OF THE
CENTENNIAL OF EAST CHESTER'S ST.
PAUL'S CHURCH.

The old bell of St. Paul's Church, East Chester, N. Y., pealed out as clear and strong on the crisp December air yesterday morning as though it was brand-new, instead of having done service in and out the belfry for 130 years. There was a seeming gladness in its pure tone that told all the good people of the neighborhood of an unusual occasion, for yesterday was set apart by the congregation of St. Paul's to commemorate the centennial of the first service ever held in the present structure.

For weeks the gray-haired Rector and the good housewives of the parish had been preparing for this celebration. The former had brought out from their musty hiding places the treasure relics of the church, and the latter had united in preparing a collation that bore the semblance of a feast in its abundance. The news of the centennial had gone abroad throughout the surrounding country and people came from West Chester, Bartow, Mount Vernon, Pelham Manor, White Plains, New-Rochelle, William's Bridge, and New-York to take part in the service. The descendants of the Knickerbockers and the Huguenots met together and traced out pedigrees and the relationships resulting from intermarriage. Old men bent down with years and frosted with time clasped hands on the ancient green and talked of their great-great-grandfathers, while they recounted the legends of the place.

St. Paul's is one of the oldest public buildings now standing in the neighborhood of the metropolis. Only three others can equal it in point of age—the old Dutch Church at Sleepy Hollow, St. Paul's at Broadway and Vesey-street, and the ancient Hall of Records that stands on the City Hall green and does service as the Register's office. But, old as it is, the present place of worship had a predecessor. The town grant was made in 1664 and the first church was built in 1698. In 1702 the Congregationalists of the place conformed to the Protestant Episcopal Government. In 1764 the cornerstone of the present structure was laid and in 1788 the first service was held within its walls.

But meantime events portentous of the future were happening. The Declaration of Independence had been signed and the war of the Revolution was being waged. The British army had appeared on Pelham Heights, and, beating the colonial force under Col. Grover, had taken possession of St. Paul's and were using it for a hospital. The redcoats needed firewood, and so they tore down the old church and burned it piece by piece to keep them warm in the new one. Still the struggle went on and many skirmishes were had, until the fighting culminated in the battle of White Plains. St. Paul's gives evidence of her part in the strife by marks of cannon balls on her sturdy walls that are pointed out to this day with pride by the East Chester folk. Although the church was turned into a hospital for the enemy, the parishioners determined that their Bible, Prayer Book, and bell should not be desecrated, therefore they stole away these articles and buried them. When the war was over they resurrected them, and yesterday all three were used—the bell to call the worshippers together and the Bible and the Prayer Book in the service.

The bell bears this inscription: "The gift of the Rev. Thomas Standard, 1758." The Prayer Book was published in 1715 and the Bible in 1759. Both are in a remarkable state of preservation, and the former contains a special invocation for the King of England, the royal family, and the nobility. At the close of the Revolution this was so distasteful to the parishioners of St. Paul's that they carefully pasted over all allusions to monarchy and aristocracy and used the book in that form. The King of England and the royal family had no place in their prayers. The more comprehensive Christianity of the present day has removed as far as possible the patriotic "pastors." St. Paul's also has done service as a court of justice, and within its walls men have been sentenced to be hanged, especially one for horse stealing. In the vestry room there hangs to-day a framed record of a session of the Court of Oyer and Terminer held there nearly a century ago, at which Chief-Justice Morris presided.

Everything about St. Paul's savors of antiquity. On its vestry walls in modest frames are manuscript sermons preached from its pulpit in 1755 by the Rev. Samuel Johnson, S. T. D., President of King's College, (now Columbia,) and adorned with a picture of the preacher; by the Rev. John Bartow in 1722, and by the Rev. Elias Cooper in 1798. There are also the grim likenesses of Rectors and Bishops long since dead, and many relics of the time when St. Paul's was surrendered to the trial of infractors of the common law. Outside the sacred structure the reverential spirit is preserved in the legends of the people. The green that stretches before the church was long devoted to parades of the militia, and some of the graybeards of the neighborhood recount in glowing phrases the grandeur of these military exhibitions. On this green are several trees whose gnarled trunks still bear the hooks on which malefactors were long ago hanged by their thumbs in punishment of their misdeeds. Men were also hanged on them by the necks, and one tree bears the proud distinction in legendary lore of having been the gallows of three criminals. They are called "the gibbet trees" by the East Chester people, and are regarded with awe for the dread fruit they have borne.

St. Paul's has a capacious graveyard, too, and corpses have been buried there through the long stretch of two centuries. The oldest legible tombstone bears the date of 1704, but there are many others so moss-grown and worn down by the combined force of time and weather that their ages or the names of those that lie beneath them are problems wholly past solving. They are harsh, rough slabs rudely carved and forming a marked contrast with the white and polished shafts that rise in the more modern part of the burial ground. One corner of this cemetery is particularly interesting, for this was set apart for the interment of the slaves of the East Chester forefathers—a sort of poorhouse in the city of the dead. The epitaph literature of this God's acre is peculiar, as this sample will show:

"Life ending here is life begun,
For here a Christian lies,
Though not a modern one,
One whose life evinced to all good will,
Who died a victim to a want of skill."

The commemoration service yesterday was conducted by the Right Rev. Bishop Potter, assisted by the Rev. Mr. Bolton, the Rev. Mr. Holmes of Trinity Church, Mount Vernon, and the Rev. William Samuel Coffey, the faithful and beloved Rector of St. Paul's, East Chester. The Rev. Mr. Clendennin and Rev. Mr. Van Rensselaer were also present. There was a confirmation service, a communion service, and an address by Mr. Coffey on the history of the church. The music was furnished by Miss Jennings, who played the 50-year-old organ, and Miss Kitty Giles, soprano. After the service the entire congregation, headed by the Bishop and the Rector, adjourned to the newly-built horse shed, which had been converted into a temporary dining hall before being turned over to its equine occupants, and partook of the beautiful collation. They were waited on by the Misses Jennings, Van Gasbeck, Briggs, Nedham, Giles, Guard, Earle, and Saunders, and Mrs. Sherwood and Mrs. Coffey. These self-constituted waitresses were neatly attired in white aprons and were most vigilant as to the comfort of their guests.

The Bishop sat at the head of the long table with Mr. Coffey on his right and Miss Martha Wilson, who is now a very old lady and who has done much to keep St. Paul's in repair, occupying a seat of honor. After the company had fed to its utmost on oysters, patties, cold meats, pastry, ice cream, and coffee Bishop Potter made a speech, in which he said that the occasion was really phenomenal. He would illustrate his meaning by a story.

Once upon a time two oysters were floating in a great soup tureen. After a while they encountered each other.

"What! are you here?" asked the first in surprise.

"Yes," replied the other. "but can you tell me what sort of a place this is?"

"Oh! this is a church festival," was the answer.

"Bless me!" exclaimed the first; "if that is the case what can they want with us both?"

The Bishop had just had two plates of oyster soup and he had counted seven oysters in the first and nine in the second. He could scarcely believe his senses, but he attributed the phenomenon to the characteristic generosity of the East Chester people. Mr. Coffey followed the Bishop in an appropriate address and then the other reverend gentlemen and some of the laymen made speeches.

Mr. Coffey has been Rector of St. Paul's 37 successive years, and he feelingly alluded to that fact. His congregation has literally grown up around him and under his teaching. The services began at 11 o'clock, but the festival did not end until the afternoon was far spent. As the white-haired Rector stood on the old green and bade his parishioners an affectionate good-night, the December sun hung for a moment on the crests of the East Chester hills to bathe in a flood of gold the little group standing there beneath the "gibbet" trees and in the companionship of the solemn spire and silent tombstones of St. Paul's.

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