

Telling Our Stories: Grace Church During the Civil War

Telling stories is an essential part of what makes us human. In every type of community, storytelling is fundamental to how people create a shared culture, pass down history through generations, and emphasize values important to the group.

As Christians, the scriptures we hear weekly strengthen our connection with God and our community and provide a scaffold for how we face the world, how we treat each other, and how we grow in love and understanding.

But what if the stories we tell ourselves and each other fail to serve these noble purposes? What if, instead, our stories inadvertently reinforce ideas and norms that don't serve our community and our God?

That's why it's critical to examine the stories we tell ourselves with open hearts and minds.

The Grace Church Parish History team has been unpacking well-worn stories about our church community's history and founding. Using archival documents, team members are teasing the truths from the untruths in these old stories, bringing light to inaccuracies and misrepresentations.

Myths About Our Founding

What We Say: *Grace Church was founded in 1855 after the first congregants petitioned the bishop directly.*

In her 1965 history of Grace Church, *To Light the Way*,¹ Mildred Newbold Getty described how early congregants, finding no church between Rock Creek and Rockville, directly petitioned Bishop of Maryland, the Right Rev. William Rollinson Whittingham, in 1855. They asked for a church halfway between the existing parishes, and the bishop "gladly gave his consent," for a new parish, which was named Labyrinth after the original colonial land grant.

The Truth: *Grace Church was first established as a mission, and the parish was created through a petition to the Diocesan Convention in 1863.*

Even in the mid-1800s, establishing a new church involved a certain level of bureaucracy, and could not be done through a simple conversation with the bishop.

The first official reference to Grace Church appears in *The Journal of the Eighty-First Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Maryland*, published in 1864.² Grace was listed as a mission church in Prince George's Parish, the same parish as Christ Church in Rockville. That same journal also reports that the Reverend George Mackenheimer and others petitioned the convention to create Labyrinth Parish on July 1, 1863. Rev. Doctor Kerfoot, of the Committee on New Parishes and

Congregations, expressed support for the petition to the convention, and the group resolved that permission be granted for a new church. Rev. Mackenheimer was appointed to officiate the new church, which was “not yet completely organized.”

Myths About One of Our Founders

What We Say: *Dr. Josiah Harding, a kindly local physician, was among the first congregants.*

In *To Light the Way*, Ms. Getty describes Dr. Josiah Harding as being a member of the original group that petitioned the bishop.³ He also served on the first vestry and is named among the first congregants. He was, she reports, “the country doctor for the area around his home. He served rich and poor alike... Many bills weren’t collected by Dr. Harding, because he didn’t want to press those in trouble.”⁴

The Truth: *Dr. Josiah Harding was an early congregant. He was a doctor. And U.S. Census slave schedules from 1860 indicate he was also an enslaver of at least five individuals.*⁵

We know the names of two of these people: David Diggs, who ran away in 1858, and Eliza Coguire, who was freed in 1862.

In July 1858, Harding placed an ad in the *Evening Star* with a physical description of “my servant man” and the offer of a reward of \$100 for anyone who could return Diggs.⁶ In William Still’s *Underground Rail Road Records*, published in 1886, Still compiled personal histories of enslaved people who escaped their enslavers. Still wrote how Diggs’ enslaver, Dr. Harding, had at one time offered him the opportunity to buy his freedom by paying in installments. When Diggs, with the aid of friends and after many years, had nearly collected the agreed-upon sum, “the Doctor got very angry one day about some trifling matter (all pretension) and in his pretended rage he said there were too many “free n-----” going about, and he thought that Dave would do better as a slave.”⁷

Eliza Coguire, a woman in her mid-30s, is recorded as being emancipated on May 28, 1862.⁸ That same day, Harding filed a slave owner petition to be reimbursed for the loss of Coguire, whom he still considered his personal property.⁹

Myths About Our Building

What We Say: *Money for the original church roof was donated by a Confederate general, who was later memorialized in a stained-glass window.*

In *To Light the Way*, Ms. Getty reports, “There is a story told by all the members of the community whose grandparents were alive during the Civil War that in July of 1864, when Jubal Early marched down the turnpike on his way to attack Washington, he saw the church standing without a roof. He asked someone why this was so, and was told that there was no money to finish the building. Upon his return to the South, he sent Dr. Harding a check for \$100.00 to put on the roof.”¹⁰

A 1969 Grace Church document, the *Messenger*, described the creation and installation of the “Te Deum—All Saints” window in the balcony, which included representations of Saints Peter and Paul, John the Baptist, and John the Divine, as well as Confederate General Jubal Early and Dr. Harding.¹¹

The Truth: *A few founding families of the congregation paid for the roof before General Early even marched through Maryland.*

The original Grace Church building (including the roof!) was completed and paid off by at least May 25, 1864, when the Diocese published Reverend Mackenheimer's first report for Diocesan Convention, which stated that, "by the commendable and indefatigable exertions of the comparatively few families composing this growing and interesting congregation, a beautiful Gothic church has been erected...and the whole cost of the building is paid."¹²

There is no indication in historic records that Jubal Early had any connection to Grace Church or its roof; the longevity and veneration of this myth, to the point of its embodiment in stained glass, raises questions about Grace Church's collective conscience. Jubal Early was a leading proponent of the Lost Cause movement, which argues that Southern secession was not based on a fervent desire to maintain slavery, but was instead about maintaining a set of (much-romanticized) Southern cultural ideals based in white supremacy.

We as a church community are working to come to terms with the legacy of racism that is a part of our story. In our next installment, we'll learn more about one of our more famous early parishioners, Montgomery Blair.

¹ Getty, Mildred Newbold. *To Light the Way: A History of Grace Episcopal Church, Silver Spring, Maryland*. (Grace Episcopal Church, Silver Spring, MD, 1965).

² *The Journal of the Eighty-First Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Maryland*. (The Convention, United States, 1864).

³ Getty, 1965, 5.

⁴ Getty, 1965, 81.

⁵ Ancestry.com. *1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database online]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010.

⁶ *Evening Star*, July 13, 1858, Washington, D.C. <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn83045462/1858-07-13/ed-1/>

⁷ Still, William. *Still's Underground Rail Road Records*. Revised Ed. (Philadelphia: William Still, 1886), 468.

⁸ Ancestry.com. *Washington, D.C., U.S., Slave Emancipation Records, 1851-1863* [database online]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

⁹ Ancestry.com. *Washington, D.C., U.S., Slave Owner Petitions, 1862-1863* [database online]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

¹⁰ Getty, 1965, 9.

¹¹ Shirey, Orville C., and Bettie Loux Donley. *To Grow in Grace: A Continued Account of God's Work in Grace Episcopal Church, 1957-1982*. (Vestry, Grace Episcopal Church, Silver Spring, MD, 1985), 54.

¹² *List of the Clergy of the Diocese of Maryland*, May 25, 1864, 40-41.