

Telling Our Stories: James Battle Avirett and Grace Church

The Rev. James Battle Avirett, Grace Church's third rector, presided over the church from 1872-1884—a period of great growth. Under Avirett, the parish increased the size of its congregation, got a new name, started a school, became a “free seat” church, and added three mission churches. But Avirett embodied racist beliefs, strongly supported the Confederacy, and wrote *The Old Plantation: How We Lived in Great House and Cabin Before the War* as a vehicle to promote poisonous Lost Cause arguments about Southern life and white supremacy.

Before Grace

James Battle Avirett was born in 1835 at Rich Lands, his family's turpentine plantation in Eastern, North Carolina. His father, John Averett, enslaved 125 people, far more than nearly all other landowners in the area.¹ The younger Avirett studied law at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (and changed the spelling of his name), then was ordained as an Episcopal deacon in 1861. He was then commissioned as the first chaplain in the Confederate States Army and served in Virginia under Turner Ashby² (whose overflattering memoir he later penned). After the war, Avirett directed a women's Episcopal seminary in Virginia for several years.³

Avirett in Montgomery County

By 1872, Avirett was officiating at two parishes in Montgomery County: Labyrinth (Grace Church's original parish name) and Prince George's (Christ Church, Rockville). Grace's congregation size increased, in part because Avirett preached “cottage” services at people's homes during the week. At Grace, Avirett discontinued the requirement that congregants rent their pews, establishing the parish as a “free seat” church.⁴ (There is no indication that these free seats were available to Black congregants, who likely would have still been relegated to the balcony.) The parish also added a school with 20 paying students. At the same time, records of baptisms of “colored” children and adults disappeared from Grace's annual report to the Diocese of Maryland.

In his efforts to grow the Episcopal church in Maryland, Avirett was truly a priest of “untiring energy and singular zeal.”⁵ In 1872, Avirett arranged to open two “mission stations,” or additional church congregations:⁶ “one across Sligo Creek, the other across Rock Creek from the rectory.” These became St. Mary Magdalene in Wheaton and St. John's, Norwood in Bethesda, respectively. Only with the help of [faithful lay readers such as Montgomery Blair](#) was Avirett able to support two parishes with four congregations. In 1874, he added a third mission: St. Mark's (Fairland), on what is now route 29.⁷ That same year, he resigned from his position at Christ Church, Rockville. And In 1875, Avirett successfully petitioned the Diocese of Maryland to change the parish's name from Labyrinth to Silver Spring.⁸

These efforts garnered praise from Bishop William Pinkney, then assistant to Bishop William Whittingham of Maryland. Bishop Pinkney was a Southern sympathizer⁹ who enslaved seven people¹⁰ and was reprimanded by Whittingham for declining to offer prayers for President Lincoln.¹¹ On a visit to Grace in 1874, Pinkney wrote, “The hospitality displayed carried us back to the golden era of Maryland refinement,”¹²—a reference to pre-Civil War Southern sentiment.

Confederate Soldier Interment

While Avirett was expanding the reach of Silver Spring parish, he was also facilitating a plan to inter Confederate dead on Grace's property—a decision that would have long-felt consequences. Mildred Newbold Getty's rosy 1965 history of Grace Church reported that, after the Battle of Fort Stephens,

fallen Confederate soldiers were buried in the southwest corner of the Grace cemetery in 1864.¹³ In fact, members of the Confederate forces who died at Fort Stephens were buried on a farm near the fort.¹⁴ Ten years later, in 1874, Avirett arranged to have these 17 bodies removed and reinterred on Grace's property. As reported in the Washington, D.C. *Evening Star*, "friend of the 'lost cause' headed by Rev. J.B. Avirett, pastor of Grace (P.E.) Church...resolved to gather up the remains and remove them to the above named church yard for interment."¹⁵

After the reburial, Alexander Yelverton Peyton Garnett—a former Confederate surgeon and personal assistant to Jefferson Davis—gave a speech in which, as reported in the *Evening Star*, he "alluded to the south as 'our people' and Jeff Davis as 'our President.'" Following this speech, Bishop Pinkney read a poem, "full of tender allusions to the dead, which was well received."¹⁶

The Old Plantation and the Lost Cause

Avirett went on to work at other parishes in Maryland, New York, and North Carolina before retiring in 1899. In his retirement, he published *The Old Plantation: How We Lived in Great House and Cabins Before the War*, as a (delayed) response to the portrait of enslaved people's lives presented in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Avirett's racist and apologist memoir romanticized the relationships between the landowners and the people they enslaved and presented an idyllic (fictional!) account of plantation life. In the epigraph to the book, he dedicated it to "the memory of the old planter and his wife—the only real slaves on the old plantation of many overgrown children, servants on the estate, from 1817 to 1865—the father and mother of the author." *The Old Plantation* advanced numerous tenets of the "Lost Cause" of the Confederacy school of thought: that slavery was benevolent, that the Civil War was about states' rights, not slavery, and that the Old South was a Christian land of grace and gentility.¹⁷

As recent historians have shown, *The Old Plantation* did not simply fictionalize aspects of plantation life. Its central thesis—that the Civil War destroyed Avirett's family's plantation and way of life—was a lie. Three years before the Civil War began, the Avirett plantation lay in ruins, a byproduct of the destruction of the pine forests on which turpentine production relied. As historian David Cecelski put it, "James Avirett, it turned out, had deceived his memoir's readers just as surely as if he had chiseled another man's name onto his own gravestone."¹⁸

At the time of his death in 1912, Avirett was recognized as the last Confederate chaplain. He was buried in his Confederate uniform, clutching a Bible in one hand and a Confederate army flag in the other.¹⁹ By recognizing his role both in Grace's growth and as a proponent of white supremacy, we can tell a truer, fuller picture of our church's history—a first step toward becoming the beloved community.

¹ Cecelski, David. "Oldest Living Confederate Chaplain Tells All? Or, James B. Avirett and the Rise and Fall of the Rich Lands." *Southern Cultures*, vol. 3, no.4 (Winter 1997): 5-24; 6

² <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/avirett-james-battle>

³ <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/avirett-james-battle>

⁴ Journal of the 88th Annual Convention, Diocese of Maryland, v. 88-90, (1871-1873): 156
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433070793306&seq=532&q1=labyrinth>

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- ⁵ Journal of the 91st Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, Diocese of Maryland. v. 91-93 (1874-76): 95, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433070793298&seq=355&q1=zeal>
- ⁶ Journal of the 91st Annual Convention, p 165
- ⁷ Journal of the 91st Annual Convention, p 76
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433070793298&seq=558&q1=silver+spring>
- ⁸ Journal of the 91st Annual Convention, p 52
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433070793298&seq=312&q1=labyrinth>
- ⁹ Church of the Ascension and Saint Agnes, "Our History." <https://www.asa-dc.org/our-history.html>
- ¹⁰ Ancestry.com. 1850 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules [database online]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com
- ¹¹ William Pinkney (Bishop) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Pinkney_\(bishop\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Pinkney_(bishop))
- ¹² Journal of the 91st Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, Diocese of Maryland. v. 91-93 (1874-76): 73
- ¹³ Getty, Mildred Newbold. *To Light the Way: A History of Grace Episcopal Church, Silver Spring, Maryland*. (Grace Episcopal Church, Silver Spring, MD, 1965) 9
- ¹⁴ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C) "Confederate Dead Removal of Remains To-Day." Dec. 11, 1874; <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1874-12-11/ed-1/seq-4/>
- ¹⁵ *Evening Star*, Dec. 11, 1874
- ¹⁶ *Evening Star*, Dec. 11, 1874
- ¹⁷ Janney, Caroline. "The Lost Cause." *Encyclopedia Virginia*. Virginia Humanities, (Dec. 7, 2020). <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/lost-cause-the/>
- ¹⁸ Cecelski, David. "Oldest Living Confederate Chaplain Tells All? Or, James B. Avirett and the Rise and Fall of the Rich Lands." *Southern Cultures*, vol. 3, no.4 (Winter 1997): 5-24; 18
- ¹⁹ *Washington (D.C.) Sunday Star* "Rev. Dr. Avirett Buried." Feb. 25, 1912, p 21