

HISTORY OF ST. MATTHEW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

By: Ann E. Miller

Picture what it must have been like here in the early 19th C. It is agricultural, sparsely populated, with very few roads to connect the farms to each other or to the city of Louisville five miles to the west. There are several Episcopal families who find it difficult to get to Christ Church in the city, so they gather to form a congregation close to their homes and work.

Helen Bullitt Massie Martin and her husband John were among those families, and on May 8, 1839 they deeded one acre for the purpose of building a church. The Vestry, previously appointed by Bishop Benjamin Bosworth Smith, receiving this deed at the office of the Jefferson County Clerk, consisted of Robert M. Smith, Davis S. Chambers, William L. Thompson, James Brown, and John Brengman. The land (located at Westport Road at St Matthews Avenue, eleven years before the railroad was built) did have a caveat included. The deed specifically stated that the property was to be used exclusively for the benefit of the Protestant Episcopal Church as a place of Christian worship; to be used for no other purpose and that it always be devoted to the "pious purpose of providing a place of worship for Episcopalians". Not to be sold if it ceased to be used as a church for five or more years, the property would be reverted to the Martins or their heirs. This location was what was known as Gilman's Point, presumably named for the Gilman Tavern, a way station between Louisville and Frankfort. It appears that the congregation and Vestry were in place before the deed had actually been signed by the Martins.

In June 13, 1839, at the 11th Convention of the Diocese which was held at Calvary Church, Smithland, a tiny community on the Ohio River about 200 miles southwest of Louisville, Bishop Smith reported that "St Matthew's parish, located five miles east of the city of Louisville had erected ' a neat little church edifice' which was consecrated May 11, 1839. The Vestry called the Rev. Charles H. Page of Virginia as its Rector. Father Page reported a "neat and commodious church has been erected and consecrated to the worship of God and the prospect of rearing a good congregation is flattering." (At that time, St. Matthew's was a parish, not a mission.)

By 1841, St. Matthew's Church had ten communicants with a thirty member Sunday School. Ten Baptisms and two marriages took place. In 1843, The Rev. Page reported to the Diocesan Convention that "a commodious vestry room had been erected and furnished with a handsome gown through the liberality of two ladies of the communion." (The gown referenced was probably a set of vestments.)

In 1846, Mr. Page moved to Indiana and the Rev. R. M. Chapman of Massachusetts came to officiate at St. Matthew's. He reported that in 1849 the Sunday School was not doing well due to the irregular attendance of—not the children, but the teachers! By the following year, the Diocesan Journal shows the Rev. Chapman to be "residing in Louisville," but lists no report for the St. Matthew's Church. The years 1852-53 show the church to be vacant.

Meanwhile, the United States Post Office Department established a Post Office six miles east of the city of Louisville, naming it St Matthews. While there is no official document stating that it was named for the church, it seems safe to make that assumption.

In February 1854, the Rev. George Beckett came to St. Matthew's Church from Grace Church, Hopkinsville, KY. He reported to the convention that spring that the Sunday School had grown to fifty children. While at Grace Church, the Rev. Mr. Beckett operated a school for young ladies. He initiated another one in Louisville, and again when he moved to Tennessee. He was thirty-three years old when he and his wife, Ann, arrived at St. Matthew's. He guided the church through a prosperous period when in 1855 there were six teachers, thirty-six scholars, and thirty colored scholars. In 1859, the Protestant Episcopal Orphan Asylum (eventually to become part of the Home for the Innocents) reported to the convention that "St Matthew's parish is the only congregation in the Diocese that ever aided our work."

The original church was burned to the ground around 1858, but was soon rebuilt. Many members contributed money, materials, and labor—much as the present day commitment of time, treasure, and talent in stewardship. The same Helen Bullitt Massie Martin, and then Key, who had donated the original acre for the first building, gave an additional two acres, as well as \$4000. Theodore Brown gave \$300. and other contributors included Joshua Bullitt, Dr. Henry Chenoweth, Richard Ten Broeck, Mrs. L. L. Dorsey, Miss Mary Anderson (who was later to marry Meriwether Lewis Clark, grandson of the explorer, in the new St. Matthew's Church), Mrs. Floyd, and Thomas W.

Bullitt, who incidentally rode with John Hunt Morgan's 2nd Kentucky Cavalry during the Civil War.) Many of these communicants' descendants' have been leaders in the growth of Jefferson County for generations and their names mark geographic points throughout the county.

The new building is believed to have been a Gothic board and batten structure, designed by the architect W. H. Redin who was paid \$598.00 by Mrs. Key. The Rev. William Perkins conducted the first service on October 2, 1870. Services continued until the Rev. Meade Nelson of Virginia arrived in June, 1871. On June 25, 1871, the Rt. Rev. George David Cummins, Asst. Bishop of Kentucky, consecrated St. Matthew's new church, assisted by the Rev. Dr. Perkins, the Rev. Messrs. Page and Halliken of the Kentucky Diocese, plus the Rev. Mr. Matlack of Pennsylvania, and the Rev. Mr. Thome of Connecticut. A most impressive array of clergy to launch this "country church."

The Rev. Mr. Perkins reported that "for this new and tasteful church, the community is chiefly indebted to the late Mrs. Key of Louisville who, also before her decease, added to this good work the gift of the Rectory for the parish and ten acres attached, for the home of the rector." This location is so noted on an 1879 plat of St. Matthews. The Young Ladies Institute continued until about 1874 when Carter Page left the Diocese.

In 1873 the St. Matthew's church property was valued at \$12,000.00 with 12 communicants. It seems the church, despite the new building with space for 250 members, had only a few good years under Father Nelson. By 1876 there was a vacancy in the pulpit with the Diocese reporting only four families and "whole number of souls, 29." By 1877, the Diocesan Journal reported "the church and rectory are sadly out of repair. The rectory is now vacant, with no probability of renting it. She (the church) is struggling for existence. The Rev. Mr. Flowers has been officiating for us most of the winter and spring, also the Rev. Mr. Leacock has very kindly volunteered his services."

The little church continued to struggle, to no apparent avail. It had become a mission and by the turn of the 20th Century, a Rev. C. L. Pindar, who was trying to keep her functioning, appeared to be losing out to the newly established St. Mark's Church in Crescent Hill. In 1906, the Rev. Mr. Pindar conducted twelve services up to May 1. He died in November of that year, but his widow and daughter continued occupying the rectory for several years afterward. (Eventually, the rectory was used by the YMCA until

it was used for a practice fire supervised by the St. Matthews' Fire Department in the late 1940's.)

In 1912, a lawsuit was brought to return the property of the now St. Matthew's mission to the heirs of Mrs. Helen Key. Sadly, the Rev. Robert L. McCready of St. Mark's, with eighteen others, tried valiantly to keep St. Matthew's alive, holding four services and two business meetings there despite its dilapidated condition. However, based on the stipulations of the original deed, the Circuit Court Commissioner, Eustace L. Williams, sold the property at the courthouse door to Ida Staebler for \$2340.00 in February, 1913.

NEW BEGINNINGS

Following World War II, Louisville began to expand. New young families needed housing not readily available in the city, so new schools and churches began to mushroom. On March 16, 1948, the Department of Missions of the Diocese of Kentucky advised Bishop Charles Clingman to proceed with the establishment of a mission at St. Matthews. At an April 2, 1948, meeting at the Bishop's home, fifteen of the twenty-seven persons in attendance (plus three by mail) signed a petition. Numerous meetings were held in homes in April and May making plans as well as reviewing resumes of potential clergy. On June 1, 1948, the Rev. Wilfred B. Myll, assistant rector at St. Mark's Church in San Antonio, Texas, was called to be minister-in-charge at St. Matthew's. He accepted the call, to become effective September 1, 1948.

The dedicated souls willing to take a risk to grow a new mission were largely members of St. Mark's Church and Christ Church Cathedral. Among these optimists were Catherine and Henry Scheirich, Liz and Joe Hitz, Dolly and Al Entwhistle (he managed and owned the local Howard Johnson's), Matt Diggs, Mildred and Rip Geylense (parents of Rosemary Drybrough), Helen and John Laird (he owned Dolfingers, THE wedding store of the city), Mabel Bowen, V. C. Glass, Mr. And Mrs. Tom Nantz, Lansing Hendricks, John Hottell, the Dorseys, Madeline and Bill Williams, Mildred and

Kenny Smith, Ellsworth Elliott, Mildred and Bill Bryant, and Frankie and Mack Mathews. These faithful Christian soldiers held their first service at the St. Matthews' Woman's Club Building on Shelbyville Road. Conducted by Bishop Clingman, there were 43 attending the 8:00am Eucharist and 197 at the 11:00am service—most remarkable!

The Diocese reported that the annual income of those signing the petition to start the mission was \$2600., yet before the first service a Hammond organ, 250 kneeling pads, a lectern, and three sets of altar linens were donated by enthusiastic future communicants. While meeting at the Woman's Club, the nursery group met in the kitchen; the older children, sixty in all, met in two rooms with four tables in the center.

In addition to the \$5000.00 contributed by the Department of Missions, \$60,000.00 was pledged by members of the now established church toward building their own place of worship. The elder C. Robert Peter (father of Frankie Mathews) gave the funds to purchase the eight acres property at the corner of N. Hubbards Lane (which reportedly cost \$17,000.00). Prior to the groundbreaking, services continued to be held at the Woman's Club except for Easter Sunrise services, the first of which was a freezing morning with a good sized choir and Evelyn Dorsey playing a pump organ donated by the Scheirichs—what dedication!

The architectural firm of Hartstern, Louis and Henry was hired to develop plans for the church, and ground was broken in April, 1952, for the first unit. The design caused much comment and controversy as it was the first contemporary structure in the Diocese and one of the first of its type, for an Episcopal church, in the nation.

The cornerstone of the church was laid on June 21, 1952, and the first service was held on February 8, 1953. The familiar wooden screen in Clingman Hall, the original sanctuary, ran horizontally behind the altar. Representing various biblical stories, it was designed by Carl Bach, whose wife Sue has helped create many of the church's admired banners, and was carved with a jigsaw by Lew Wright, husband of Neeley, a Bellringer and former choir member (both men are deceased). The linoleum floor was laid by the men of the parish under the supervision of V. C. Glass, one of the founders.

The St. Matthew's congregation grew to 539 by 1955. On June 27, 1965, Bishop C. Gresham Marmion dedicated the present structure, the second unit of the current plant. This newer part of the church caused even more comment in the neighborhood. The tent-

like roof, fashioned after gathering places of early Christians, alarmed many—too avant garde, too stark. Some referred to it as St. Pryor's after a restaurant at the SW corner of Hubbards Lane and Shelbyville Road, or "the ski lodge church." For traditionalists, it was a huge adjustment, but the idea of worshiping in a circle was appealing to many, especially as the priest's back was not toward the congregation and members could easily see one another. The church was designed to bring the outside in—to bring God's world into our hearts and attention.

Fred Louis, the designer, was adamant about maintaining the integrity of the church's style and meaning. After the Rev. Mr. Myll retired in 1972, the Rev. Richard H. Humke, assistant at St. Francis-in-the Fields at Harrods Creek, was called to St. Matthews. He agreed strongly with Mr. Louis and thus he formed an Aesthetics Committee to protect the spirit of the building and its worship space. So many new churches bring portions of their former selves to the new which are not in harmony with the design; often well meaning, parishioners wish to make gifts, often inappropriate to the design, thus in establishing this committee, it was hoped that could be avoided by reviewing all suggestions and offerings. The same is true for the landscaping which was done in consultation with the Olmsted Firm of Boston in 1952.

In 1986, a wing was added to provide offices and more classrooms. By the time the Rev. Richard Humke retired in 1996, it was evident that St. Matthew's growth to 900 was exceeding its space. However, with an interim priest, the Rev. David Gable, and a search for a new priest, the notion to expand was put aside.

In October, 1997, the Rev. Canon Lucinda R. Laird was called from St. Mark's Church (a congregation of 125) in Teaneck, N.J., to be the priest in charge at St. Matthew's. The following September, the church celebrated its fiftieth anniversary and was featured in a Speed Museum program, "Art and Soul." This highlighted the architectural and artistic aspects of St. Matthew's, including its highly regarded collection of over twenty banners created by members of the church.

Also, in 1998, the Vestry decided to explore increasing its services to three to alleviate the crowding in the sanctuary, changing the schedule to 8:00, 9:00, and 11:15am. This arrangement put too much pressure, not only on the clergy, but also the Altar Guild, choirs, and ushers, so by 2000, that was changed. The church returned to the

8:00 and 10:00am times, adding a 5:00pm service which attracted much new interest. By 2004, the average attendance was 387 with 1048 members on the rolls.

In late 2002, St. Matthew's was notified that it was the recipient of a \$2,000,000. bequest from Eleanor Augustus. Eleanor and her husband, Ed, had been faithful, longtime members of the church, as well as Eleanor having been a much beloved Sunday School Teacher. This bequest was a huge surprise and the Vestry decided to step back and consider how best to put the generous gift to use, reflecting the Parish Mission Statement: "Our mission is to be a caring, inclusive community, centered in the Eucharist and grounded in the Gospel so that we can reach out as Christ's hands to the world."

After much soul searching, a significant gift was made to All Saints' Conference Center, with the balance of the Augustus bequest placed in reserve for further prayerful consideration by the Vestry and the congregation. The latter met in small groups over a period of several weeks to consider the necessity for, and feasibility of, a Capital Campaign to refurbish and enlarge the present building. After several months, with the assistance of an outside consultant meeting with clergy, staff, and communicants, it was decided to go ahead with a campaign, using \$1,000,000. of the Augustus gift as seed money. A Candlelight Dinner for the congregation was held at Christ Church Cathedral as the opening of the "Building the Spirit" Capital Campaign, with \$2,700,000. as the goal. The successful campaign ended in June, 2005.

On September 25, 2005, in celebration of St Matthew's Day when the church's annual picnic is held, a greatly anticipated groundbreaking took place with the new construction to begin in October. Many things about St Matthew's have made it unique and outstanding. For instance, behind the present choir area (west side), a Memorial Garden is in place. It was the first such garden in the Kentucky Diocese, having been established in the early years of the Rev. Humke's tenure.

St. Matthew's outreach programs have been legendary in the Louisville community. The Rev. Mr. Humke was a founding member of Hospice, Philip Ardery, a fifty year member of the church, spearheaded the establishment of Wellspring (housing for the bipolar and schizophrenic), while Jonnie Vatter Hoge organized the support group, Survivors of Suicide which meets twice monthly at the church. Members of the parish have long been involved in volunteer work at the Norton Hospital, Home of the Innocents, Episcopal Church Home, Wayside Christian Mission, Habitat for Humanity,

St. John's Day Shelter, the Cornerstone (for young single mothers), House of Ruth (support house for HIV/AIDS patients and their families), the prison ministry, Prodigal Ministries, and the Renewal of Christ Church Cathedral.

The St. Matthew's Youth have participated in mission work in Washington, D.C., Appalachia, an Indian Reservation, Kenya, and one year, helped build a Gullah church in South Carolina. The congregation has sponsored Sudanese, Bosnian, and Somalian refugees, as well as providing Christmas for local families, clothing and food for several agencies, such as Dare to Care. The week following Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast, St. Matthew's accumulated enough tools, money and cleaning supplies to fill six vans and trucks which were then driven to Mississippi by church members to a Lutheran-Episcopal rescue center. In addition, at the ground breaking on September 25, 2005, it was announced that the congregation had contributed \$35,000 for relief to the Gulf Coast hurricane region.

St. Matthew' has weekly Alcoholics Anonymous and Alanon meetings, frequent Red Cross Bloodmobile Collections, art classes, Diocesan meetings, voting polls, and even in 1974, was an emergency help center following the devastating tornado.

This church has an interesting history. As you look and ride around the community, you can see much to remind you of the founders: Bullitt County, Oxmoor (the original Bullitt family farm), Floyd's Fork, Massie Avenue, Brown's Lane, and Dorsey Way. Through future growth at St. Matthew's, let us hope that the present and future congregations can leave a worthwhile legacy for the community.

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RESOURCES

Robert Trimble's 1984 History of St Matthew's

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The Rev. Richard H. Humke, 2004

Rosemary G. Drybrough, 2004