

## Blandford Church and the Ladies Memorial Association

This article is one of a series of articles developed under the editorship of LTC (Ret.) John R. Kennedy, III as part of Preservation Petersburg's Peter Jones Trading Station Initiative in 2012-14. Many of the articles served as source materials for the "Petersburg Moments in Time" broadcast series produced by Professor Dan Roberts.

Blandford Church is the "oldest structure in Petersburg with a dearly documented history." It stands today as a memorial to Southern soldiers who died during the Civil War. It was built from 1735 to 1737 on the highest point in Petersburg, Well's Hill. Colonel Thomas Ravenscroft was the contractor. Originally it was a rectangular structure, 60' by 25', and cost 485 pounds. The church was part of Bristol Parish, formed in 1643 by an Act of Assembly from part of Martin's Brandon Parish. The parish encompassed the land from the convergence of the Appomattox and James Rivers to Peter's Point at the falls of the Appomattox, now Petersburg. In 1720, there were 848 people in Bristol Parish, which included a church and a chapel. In 1734, there were 2048 souls in Bristol Parish and five places of worship: mother church, Ferry Chapel, Namozine Chapel, Sappony Chapel (later Church, still standing in Dinwiddie County), and Flat Creeks Chapel. In 1735, two new parishes became active in Chesterfield County, and Bristol Parish shrunk to 1349 parishioners. Blandford Church was the third and last mother church of Bristol Parish. The church was known originally as Saint Paul's Church or the Brick Church on Well's Hill. The first time Blandford was used in its name was in 1762, when it was known as Old Blandford Church, named for the colonial town of Blandford. Later it was called Bristol Parish Church and Blandford Church of Bristol Parish.

Many historic events occurred in this church. The famous preacher George Whitfield preached at the church in 1737. In 1752 the construction of the new, northern wing on the church was authorized, but the fire at Bolling Point in 1755 possibly delayed that work. Colonel Richard Bland was responsible for completing the new north wing, and the capped brick wall that encloses the church and the oldest part of the cemetery. In 1769 Colonel Bland finally received his full payment of 400 pounds sterling. In 1799 a memorial service was held in the church for George Washington. By 1806 the church was

abandoned and the congregation began meeting in the new Episcopal Church in Petersburg on the site of the current Courthouse. Among the pastors who served in this church include George and Eleazar Robertson, Robert Ferguson, Thomas Wilkerson, William Harrison, John Cameron, and Andrew Syme. One of the original 1784 common councilmen, John Grammer, purchased the church in 1818. In the following year the church was deeded to the city for the cemetery. After Presidents Adams and Jefferson died on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1826, a memorial service was held in the church. In the early 1840s, a mysterious poem was found inscribed on the inside walls that began, "Thou art crumbling to the dust, old pile..." Some contend that Tyrone Power wrote the poem. He was an Irish actor who performed often in the Petersburg theater during the 1830s and was fascinated by the old church. However, by the middle of the 19th century, "Neglected by the city, the church became an ivy-clad picturesque shell." The church played a significant role in Civil War Petersburg. Beginning in May 1862 the church served as a major telegraph station. During the Siege of Petersburg from June 15, 1864 to April 2, 1865 Blandford Church was hit by three shells. Its major use during the siege was as a field hospital, most notably after the Battle of the Crater on July 30, 1864.

The City of Petersburg partially repaired the church in 1882. Between 1889 and 1905, the Ladies Memorial Association (LMA) paid for a speaker's stand and 34 pews inside the church. The LMA of Petersburg is perhaps the "oldest continuous non-church related women's organization in the United States." In 1901 the City of Petersburg gave the church to the LMA, who restored it as a memorial to the Confederate dead. The LMA requested funds from the 11 Confederate states, Maryland, and Missouri for the windows. From 1904-1912 these states funded memorial windows to their soldiers that were designed and built by Louis Comfort Tiffany. On September 9, 1904 the Virginia, Missouri, and Louisiana windows were the first to be dedicated. Georgia dedicated the 15th and last window on November 18, 1912. Each of these 13 states donated windows, as did the LMA and Tiffany himself. These magnificent windows have made Blandford Church a national art treasure. Others, such as Robert Sully, who sketched a watercolor and Currier and Ives, who published a print of the church, obviously appreciated its

aesthetic beauty.

Blandford Church is on the National Register of Historic Places. The annual Commemoration of the Battle of Old Men and Young Boys on June 9th 1864 is held here. Since 1976, the City of Petersburg has operated one of its three City museums at the church which is open to the public for tours.