

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church

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The earliest Episcopal Church in this area was Cattie Church, located in present-day Hopewell. It was formed in Bristol Parish by the General Assembly in 1642 (Old Calendar). Today, as the oldest congregation in the parish, Saint Paul's Church is known as the "mother" church of Bristol Parish. The congregation of Bristol Parish built a new church on Well's Hill in present-day Petersburg in 1735-- this structure is now known as Blandford Church. The congregation moved into a new church on Courthouse (or West) Hill in Petersburg about 1805. In 1837, the city purchased this church property for its courthouse. The congregation then moved to a new church building on the west side of the intersection of North Sycamore and Franklin Streets. This church was the first to be called "Saint Paul's."

In 1840, ladies in Saint Paul's Church recommended that the church place a full-time missionary to minister to the cotton workers in the city. These women were willing to pay the salary of the missionary, so in 1841 Reverend Churchill Jones Gibson assumed that position. Subsequently, Saint Paul's decided to begin a second Episcopal church in Petersburg, with Reverend Gibson as its pastor. The result was the consecration of Grace Episcopal Church in February 1843. The handsome, new church building was located on the northwest corner of High and Cross Streets. In the mid-1850s, Saint Paul's Church near North Sycamore and Franklin Streets burned. Rebuilt in the English Gothic style, the congregation moved into the new Saint Paul's on North Union Street in 1857. This church is on the National Register of Historic Places, and has a rich history of ministering to many of the senior Confederate officers during the Siege of Petersburg.

On September 15, 1863, Confederate Major General George Edward Pickett married LaSalle (Sally) Corbell in Saint Paul's Church. Miss Corbell was from Nansemond County, and the Union Army allowed her to pass through the lines to get married in Petersburg. In honor of

the wedding the church bells at Saint Paul's chimed and 12 guns fired on Dunn's Hill. Subsequent to the wedding, the chimes were dubbed "Pickett's Chimes."

After the Battle of Old Men and Young Boys on June 9, 1864, Saint Paul's rector, Reverend William H. Platt, was a very busy minister. The 125 men who fought at Batteries 27 and 28 against Union Brigadier General August V. Kautz's cavalry brigade of over 1,000 men delayed the Federals just long enough to enable Confederate forces to arrive on the scene and prevent the Union seizure of Petersburg. Fifteen of these militiamen were killed in the fight. The funerals of five of these heroes—John E. Friend, Wales Hurt, William C. Banister, Guy G. Johnson, and William H. Hardee-- were held at Saint Paul's Church, officiated by Reverend Platt, from June 11 to June 15. Lieutenant Wales Hurt, an 18-year old, volunteered to take a message to Brigadier General Henry Wise and was killed soon after his return to battlefield. William Banister was a 61-year old banker who was the father of four boys and two girls. Adjutant Guy Johnson died from his wounds, and his funeral was held the following day. Despite having his leg amputated, William Hardee died of his wounds. His daughter did not learn of her father's death until after the funeral service. Reverend Platt conducted each of these services before a completely filled sanctuary. Later that summer, Reverend Platt requested that the Union Army refrain from shelling the city during the hours of church services. The Commander of the Army of the Potomac, Major General George G. Meade, agreed to his plea. However, Saint Paul's was struck by Federal shells at other times during the siege.

Many of the Confederate generals worshipped in this church, including General Robert E. Lee. To commemorate Lee's attendance in church during the siege, a stained glass window was placed adjacent to the pew where he sat and his pew is marked with a small bronze plaque. He actually worshipped at both Saint Paul's and Grace Episcopal Churches during the siege, and the congregation increased at the church where he attended services. Like Lee, most of the Confederate officers who attended more than one service on Sundays went to the two Episcopal churches. Saint Paul's sanctuary was more striking, but most officers were of the opinion that Reverend Churchill J. Gibson of Grace Episcopal, the former missionary, was the better preacher. An officer who attended the Christmas service at Saint Paul's wrote that it was "one of the most impressive scenes I ever witnessed." Brigadier General William N. Pendleton, a former

Episcopal minister and Chief of Artillery in the Army of Northern Virginia, delivered several sermons at Saint Paul's Church during the siege.

When Brigadier General Walter H. Stevens was baptized at Saint Paul's on September 25, 1864, 20 generals' stars were present. These generals in attendance included General Robert E. Lee; Lieutenant Generals Ambrose P. Hill and James Longstreet; Major Generals Henry Heth, Robert F. Hoke, and Cadmus M. Wilcox; and Brigadier Generals Edward P. Alexander, Archibald Gracie, William W. Kirkland, and Stevens. General Gracie was killed two months later while reconnoitering the front lines; Reverend Platt conducted his funeral on December 4, 1864. General Gracie had received confirmation as an Episcopalian at Saint Paul's on October 2, 1864.

Over two years after the end of the Civil War, two former Confederate generals returned to Petersburg under more pleasant circumstances. General Lee's second eldest son, Major General William Henry Fitzhugh (Rooney) Lee, married Petersburg resident Mary Tabb Bolling in Saint Paul's on November 28, 1867. Miss Bolling was a member of the renowned Bolling family of Petersburg. Unfortunately, General Lee's wife could not attend due to poor health.

In the 1950s, Saint Paul's averaged from 400 to 500 people attending Sunday worship services. As new churches were added to the Parish, the congregation declined over the next several decades, with the nadir of attendance occurring in about 2001. Since then, attendance has grown at this very historic church located at 110 Union Street.

During Petersburg's Friday for the Arts (on the second Friday of each month), Saint Paul's almost always sponsors a concert in its sanctuary. These Friday night concerts each month and the Sunday morning worship services are the two best times to visit this venerable house of worship.