

Emmanuel Church, Chester Parish & Slavery

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(Originally published January 18, 2022 in "Common Sense: Straight Talk for the Eastern Shore"
<https://www.commonseasternshore.org/chester-parish-of-the-episcopal-church-and-slavery>)

The first Anglican Church in Chestertown must have been established soon after the Provincial Council of Maryland designated the town as the port of entry for Cecil, Kent and Queen Anne's Counties. In 1720, the original wooden structure was replaced by a brick chapel known as Chestertown Chapel, which was a chapel-of-ease for St. Paul's, Kent Parish. The next change came in 1766 when the Provincial Council created Chester Parish, using territory ceded by the County's two original parishes, St. Paul's Kent and Shrewsbury. Members of the new parish met at I.U. near Worton and elected a vestry that planned to build a new church on that site and to enlarge the chapel-of-ease in Chestertown. Within a year, however, they decided to erect a new building in Chestertown, for which they used the proceeds from the sale of 50,000 lbs. of tobacco collected as a tax on the members of the parish for the support of the church. There can be no room for doubt that the tobacco was produced by the hands of enslaved people. I have found no document to confirm that the enslaved were involved in the construction of the new church, but since owners often hired out those enslaved to work for others at a rental fee, church members may well have sent those whom they owned into town to work in the construction.

The new building, which was constructed between 1767 and 1772 measured 66" X 40", was two-stories high and included a gallery around three sides of the interior. The church was entered through a door facing High St. and had two tiers of clear, glass windows. The pulpit faced the entrance. Often the galleries in 18th and 19th century churches were used as an area in which those enslaved by members would worship. I have not found any documentation to prove that such was the case at Emmanuel, however. Nevertheless, some time ago, I was told by a member of the community that when the church was remodeled, lowering the roof and eliminating the gallery in 1880, one of the reasons was that it removed an association with slavery. Charles Tilden was appointed by the Vestry to build the church. Did he hire builders or did he use the labor of enslaved people? That is not contained in the records. Tilden was also responsible for construction of the pews and of a brick Vestry House. Enslaved people were often taught various trades such as carpentry and bricklaying during that period. For example, the father of well-known abolitionist, Henry Highland Garnet, who escaped from enslavement in Kent County in 1824, was trained as a shoemaker. Thus, it is not unreasonable to assume that those enslaved by church members would have been put to work in the construction of the new building.

From 1780 until 1789, Rev. William Smith, D.D. was rector of Emmanuel, while at the same time serving as Principal of the Kent School and, in 1782, founder of Washington College. Dr. Smith is known to have had as many as 3 enslaved persons, one of whom tried to escape twice. He arrived in Chestertown with one enslaved person, a teenaged or young woman named Dinah. She no doubt worked in the Smith home under the direction of Dr. Smith's wife, Rebecca. The second was a young man named Cyrus, who tried to run away twice, but was captured each time. He was put up for sale or hire in 1803 after Dr. Smith had left Chestertown. The sales advertisement described him as an able farm worker "immoderately given to drink."

This latter characteristic he apparently shared with Dr. Smith himself! In 1783, Dr. Smith purchased a boy named Primus, who was described as “a favorite negro body-servant of Dr. Smith.” Primus was part of the Smith household until he died in 1801.

Dr. Smith solicited funds to establish his college from major land holders across the Eastern Shore. Albin Kowaleski, a 2007 alumnus of Washington College, researched 1790 Census data and learned that only 14 of the 356 original donors did not own slaves. Those first subscribers included some of the State’s most prominent citizens. including members of the Lloyd family, William Paca, and several members of the Goldsborough family, as well as George Washington who gave his name to the institution, as well as the sum of 50 guineas. In addition to his ownership of human beings, Smith was apparently not a popular man, and was described by his critics as “haughty, slovenly . . . and often offensive in company.” Later college president Gilbert Mead described Smith as “high-tempered, irascible, and powerfully controversial, he was either friend or enemy of every man of importance in the colonies between the Carolinas and Massachusetts. Vocally, his critics outnumbered his friends.” Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia attended Dr. Smith during his final illness and wrote the following of Smith: “His temper was irritable. . . and when angry he swore in the most extravagant manner. He seldom paid a debt without being sued, or without a quarrel. On his death bed, he never spoke upon any subject connected with religion. . . nor was there a Bible or Prayer Book ever seen in his room. He descended to his grave. . . without being lamented by a (single) human creature.”

The Customs House in Chestertown was built in 1746 and was also the home of Thomas Ringgold. He was a wealthy Chestertown merchant and a member who exercised leadership at Emmanuel Church. He was also a leader in the local chapter of the Sons of Liberty, yet ironically was also a major dealer in enslaved people. Vestry records from 1769 record his purchase of one-fourth of a pew for fifteen shillings. Ringgold died in 1772 at the age of 82. Another member of Emmanuel during this period was Simon Wilmer. A painting on wood housed at the Starr Center in the Custom House, portrays his house and shows nearby Chestertown in the background. It also portrays enslaved people working in the field adjacent to the house. The 1790 Federal Census records Wilmer as the owner of 19 enslaved persons. Another prominent member of Emmanuel was William Ringgold (1723-1789), a brother of Thomas. There was a second William Ringgold, recorded in the church records with the title Dr. The first owned 11 enslaved people, while the Doctor owned two. Other Ringgolds in the congregation who owned human beings were Dr. John Ringgold, owner of 11; James Ringgold, owner of 10, Josiah Ringgold, owner of 20, and a second James Ringgold, owner of 31. That 1790 Federal Census is a valuable source showing how deeply the members of Emmanuel were involved in human bondage. In fact, a total of 63 of the members listed in church records in 1772 as owners of pews owned enslaved persons. This is out of a total of 72 pew owners recorded in that year. ¹

The involvement of the church leadership in slavery is further illustrated by looking at members of the Vestry and wardens who owned enslaved persons in various years:

¹ See appendix for the full list of 1772 members who owned enslaved people and the number they held in bondage.

1766 – Joseph Raisin, Jr. (10 enslaved persons)
1772 – Thomas Wilkins (2); Moses Alford (2)
1774 – John Angier (6)
1779 – Michael Corse (7); Simon Wickes (14)
1802 – Thomas Worrell (6); Simon Wilmer (19)

I have concentrated on the period from the construction of the present church building until 1802, because later records have not been available to me and earlier records pertain to St. Paul's Kent and I.U. I hope to continue my search to cover the period up to 1864, when enslaved persons in Maryland were emancipated by the new State Constitution. That Constitution was finally approved by Maryland voters by a small majority and that only thanks to the votes of Union veterans, many of them African Americans. It was not approved by the majority of Eastern Shore voters.

Sources:

- <https://www.emmanuelchesterparish.org/history>
- 1790 Federal Census, transcribed by Fred Heine www.us-census.org › states › maryland
- <https://www.washcoll.edu/campus-community/asterisk-initiative/william-smith.php>

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Appendix: Members of Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Chester Parish, who owned enslaved person. Based on the U.S. Federal Census of 1790

1. Thomas Jones – 3
2. John Hepbron – 6
3. James Wroth – 7
4. Hannah Bordsey – 18
5. Rasin Gale - 8
6. John Angier – 6
7. James Corse -4
8. Thomas Medford – 15
9. Mary Redding – 10
10. Marmaduke Medford – 10
11. Robert Meeks – 5
12. Edward Worrell – 7
13. John Beck – 20
14. Benjamin Terry – 12
15. Charles Groome -22
16. Richard W. Peacock – 3
17. John Kennard -13
18. Barsheba Gale – 4
19. Robert Buchanan – 19
20. Joseph Rasin Jr – 10
21. Peregrine Cooper -13
22. Richard Kennard - 4
23. Nathaniel Ricketts – 6
24. William B. Rasin – 4
25. Rasin Gale, Jr – 2
26. Henry Truelock o- 7
27. James Riinggold - 31
28. James Buchanan – 9
29. Jonathan Comegys – 5
30. James Beck – 7
31. John Tilden Kennard – 19
32. Nathaniel Kennard – 5
33. Aron Alford – 4
34. Marmaduke Tilden – 12
35. Nathaniel Redding – 7
36. Josiah Ringgold – 20
37. Thomas Worrell – 6
38. Dr. William Ringgold -2
39. Simon Wilmer - 19
40. James Ringgold – 10
41. John Eccleston – 27
42. Joseph Rasin – 5
43. John Frisbey – 28

44. Joseph Garnett – 11
45. Jesse Comegys – 4
46. Edward Comegys – 9
47. Wm. Frisbey – 13
48. Joseph Blackston – 4
49. James Phillips – 2
50. Samuel Beck – 9
51. Thomas Beck – 5
52. Dr. John Ringgold – 11
53. Simon Wickes, Sr. – 14
54. Wm. Ringgold (B.S.) -12
55. Daniel Groome – 10
56. Stephen Blackston – 9
57. Richard Ricaud – 20
58. Thomas B. Worrell – 10
59. Wm. Ringgold (Ect) - 21
60. Charles Tilden (Ect) 20
61. Edward Beck (B.L.) 10
62. John Beck (R.H.) – 2
63. Jacob Comegys – 5