

Early Prince Georges Church

By John Claggett Proctor

OLD ST. JOHN'S CHURCH, commonly called Broad Creek Church, is one of Maryland's oldest houses of worship. It was organized on January 30, 1693, at the home of John Addison, early known as Oxon Hall or Oxon Hill, and on July 29, 1696, the Rev. George Tubman became the first minister of the parish. He continued as such until his death in 1701, being succeeded the following year by the Rev. Robert Owen. By June 23, 1810, the Rev. John Frazier became rector of the parish and was instrumental in the founding of Addison Chapel in Maryland and our own St. John's Church.

The work which was started in connection with the latter was climaxed September 18, 1719, when Col. John Bradford wrote on the subscription paper:

"John Bradford, one hundred acres of land called 'Generosity,' whereon is timber for building said chapel and necessary houses for a glebe for the use of the present and future ministers for which interest the said hundred acres of land is given forever." And soon a frame chapel was built.

Addison Chapel and Rock Creek Chapel were not the only missions springing from the mother church at Broad Creek, for in 1728, or about that time, the mission of Akkoek had come into being. The Rev. Mr. Frazier, rector of Broad Creek Church, died in 1742 after a pastorate of 32 years. His bones are said to rest beneath the chancel of old Broad Creek. As rector of this church he was succeeded by Henry Addison, son of Thomas Addison, and grandson of John Addison, founder of the Addison family in America. The old church was rebuilt between 1763 and 1768, and took the form it bears today.

Other Addisons followed as rectors of Broad Creek Church, and in 1793, Walter Dulaney Addison was ordained a minister of the Anglican Church, and he was the first minister ordained by Bishop Thomas John Claggett. He was also founder of St. John's Episcopal Church in Georgetown, and was active in educational work. In 1800 he came to Broad Creek Church as assistant rector, and became rector in 1805.

Addison Came in 1667

The story of Broad Creek Church is so interwoven with that of Oxon Manor that both might well be treated together. Thus it is known that John Addison came to Maryland in 1667. He was the son of the Rev. Launcelot Addison and a brother of Launcelot Addison, dean of Litchfield, and of the Rev. Anthony Addison, rector of Abingdon and chaplain to the Duke of Marlborough. He was uncle to Joseph Addison of Spectator fame. John Addison had received in England a royal patent for lands in Maryland extending from Piscataway Creek on the south to the Eastern Branch of the Potomac on the north and from the Potomac on the west to a line about 4 miles west, comprising land estimated at 30 square miles, or about 20,000 acres. Arriving in Maryland he took up his residence at or near Piscataway. But the site of his dwelling here is unknown. He was a devoted Oxford man, and the name survives in Oxon Run, a pretty stream that pours into the Potomac opposite Alexandria.

John Addison removed from Piscataway and built the mansion across from Alexandria, and gave it the name Oxon Hall. From its elevation it was pleasant to view Mount Vernon when the weather was clear. Oxon Hall was completely destroyed by fire on February 6, 1895. Prior to this, however, about 1830, the estate passed into the possession of the Berry family, and in the hillside, overlooking the river, may be seen relics of the burial vault of this family.

Thomas Law's 'Retreat'

In the Alexandria Gazette of February 7, 1895, at the time of the fire, the following account is printed:

"When first discovered, a small spot in the roof only was burning, but it quickly spread, and in 15 or 20 minutes the whole eastern heavens were illuminated by the conflagration—the fire raging furiously, the flames leaping high, while a huge volume of smoke settled over the



Old St. John's Episcopal Church, Broad Creek, Prince Georges County.



The Retreat, country estate of Thomas Law in nearby Prince Georges County, erected in 1817 and destroyed many years ago.

adjoining hills. Numbers of people in this city went to the streets facing the river to look at the fire, which continued to rage for several hours. The origin of the fire is unknown, from the fact that ice in the river rendered it impossible to communicate with the opposite shore. Nothing now remains of the former building but the walls and the four chimneys.

Washington's First Rich Man

Later the walls and chimneys fell, and trees and shrubbery are now growing from the heaps of debris that mark where the old house stood.

It has been said over and over again, and may still be repeated, that nearly every man in his lifetime has a desire to go farming, and so we find Thomas Law, Washington's first rich man, buying a farm of 243 acres in nearby Prince Georges County as early as November, 1816, where he built a manor house in 1817, and in April of that year he advertised for men to make 100,000 bricks. Of this early mansion, George Alfred Townsend has left us this description:

"The Retreat was a farm and forest upon the Maryland table land 2 miles across the Branch of the Potomac. The road to be climbed is a piney, gravelly hill and descended into the cove of a little stream called for the English Oxon at Oxford. A second hill was crowned with Mr. Law's wooden villa or 'seat,' a high, cone-roofed house with two dormers on each side of the roof-comb and four heavy brick chimneys which supplied fireplaces both to the central mansion of two stories and to one-story extensions. The full length of the ground floor was more than 70 feet by nearly half that width.

"Its front toward Washington City, whose blue cavity could be seen, but not the city itself, except from the two high great window peaks, was ignominiously entered through a small pitch-roofed porch with a border-lighted door and brass knockers. The other, or south front, had a veranda covering the central mansion with a belvedere on its top.

Had Big Banquet Hall

"The interior had eight rooms on the ground and four on the floor above, with garrets for domestics over the wings. The great room was made of the two front parlors, which, thrown into one by large dividing doors, gave a banquet hall of 40 by 16 feet, with fireplaces at the ends. Blind passages or small wardrobes further extended this room into the wings, one of which was a buffet or bar, the other a kitchen."

Mr. Law's seat crowned the future Anacostia Heights, Silver

Hill. Says William Wirt to his daughter Laura, May 23, 1820: "Such a splash as we had at Mr. Law's yesterday! Near a hundred gentlemen; all the farmers of Prince Georges County for many miles around, and all the gentry from Washington. And no more ceremony, and quite as much festivity and playfulness as among a flock of children just broke loose from school. Anthrobus, with his white horse rearing up perpendicularly half a dozen times, from impatience to start; and his English servant to be even with his master, dancing off, in short jumps, for about 40 yards, then giving whip and spur and dashing through Mr. Law's clover field like a thunderbolt, to get to the gate before his master, who was driving at the rate of 12 miles an hour! Then, such a rattling of carriages and clattering of horses' hoofs! But first, such a dinner! But before that such fine punch down at the spring beyond the pavilion, on the hill in the woods. Then such excellent songs after dinner! Graff had a Dutch parody on Jessie of Dumblane, which is admirable. The President laughed 'til he cried, and I believe would have danced if a fiddle had struck up. The good man sat at table beating time with his fork to the songs sung by Graff and others, with all the kindness and amiability of his nature."

Early Scandal mongers

Thomas Law married Elizabeth Parke Custis, March 21, 1796. But all was not rosy. In 1804 they agreed to live apart, he getting custody of their daughter Eliza. A complete divorce followed in January, 1811. And, of course, the scandal mongers were just as busy a century or more ago as they are today, and it was alleged that upon one occasion when her husband was abroad that his frail partner became quite familiar with the military, at the Marine Barracks in Washington, and that she had been seen dressed in military attire in company with the officers. But of this assertion or other seemingly indiscretions, Mr. Law disclaimed any belief and upon one occasion had this to say: "That, although a separation did unhappily ensue, originating in a disagreement in disposition, yet I have always paid tribute correctly due to Mrs. Law's purity of conduct, which I never did impeach."

Thomas Law died July 21, 1834, and was first buried in St. John's Cemetery, then between R and S and Twelfth and Thirteenth streets N.W. Later his remains were removed to Rock Creek Cemetery, but the spot is unknown. Mrs. Law died January 1, 1832.