

Grace Church, Robbinston

History By:

Miss Isabelle Streenstra

(1922)- A very interesting service in commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the founding of Grace Church, Robbinston, was held at that place on Saturday afternoon, August 12. It was thoroughly enjoyed by their congregation and the many friends from the different parishes on the St. Croix.

The sermon was preached by the Rt. Rev. Bishop Brewster of Maine, and services conducted by the Rev. Henry P Ross of Chamcook, the Rev. Walter C. Roberts of New York and Rev. Frank Walker of Eastport.

The Rev. F. N. Steenstra read the following history of Grace Church which was written by his sister, Miss Isabel Steenstra. At the conclusion of the ceremony a reception was held by Professor and Mrs. Simkhovitch on the beautiful grounds of the Mansion House to which all present was most cordially invited.

It was in the year 1786, a few years after the close of the Revolutionary War, that the Hon. Edward H. Robbins of Milton, Mass., afterwards lieutenant-governor of Massachusetts, purchased the land on the St. Croix River known as township No 4, and founded the settlement later incorporated as a town and named Robbinston in honor of its founder.

The early records tell of activity in trading and ship-building. It is said that at one time fourteen ships were in the docks. At first, before the land was cleared, the shore formed the highway of communication. People travelled either by boat or on horseback along the beach. There are picturesque details of those pioneer days, of Indians hospitably sheltered over night in front of the big kitchen fireplaces, of people sailing to meeting held in the big log school house near Liberty Point, of Militia drilling during the war of 1812 in the field opposite the Mansion House.

There is an entry to the effect that on the proclamation of a fast day by President Washington, they went over to St. Andrews and invited the Episcopal minister to hold service in the house of Gen. John Brewer,

who later built the Mansion House, presumably the first service conducted in Robbinston conducted by a minister of our own church.

The Congregational Church was early established. It has filled a place in the town representative of the strength that denomination has always had in this State. We all remember the earlier building, visible far down the bay, and its spire hailed with delight by every home-comer. Its mahogany pulpit and its clock bearing the date of the settlement, a gift of Governor Robbins. The older ones among us can easily close our eyes and people the pews again. Mr. Thos. Vose the kindly postmaster to whom on week days we children would listen with eager interest while he called the mail and we stood round ready to claim the family letters. There was Deacon Balkam, Mr. Albert Buck, Mr. John Brooks and many others, men of strong character, descendants of the pioneer inhabitants.

In one of the side pews sat a lady whom I would especially mention, since under God's guidance it is largely the result of her Christian character and loyal devotion to the church of her Virginia girlhood that we are gathered here today. Gentle, refined, amid the stern surroundings of a New England town, Mrs. Hunt was still the gracious Southern Lady, loving above every other the Episcopal Church, yet joining in the worship of the community in which she lived.

It is now over fifty years since my father first came to Robbinston. Like everybody else, after the first visit he continued to come. He early made an attempt to hold a regular Sunday service, giving as his motive that he was not willing to spend the whole season in Robbinston without doing something for the town. In particular he wished to bring to Mrs Hunt, so long deprived of them, the services of her own church. This first attempt took the form of a Sunday afternoon held at Red Beach, there being, I think, no public worship in that town. Selections were made from the Prayer Book which Mrs Hunt had printed in pamphlet form at her own expense. This attempt, however, did not meet with success, and was soon abandoned. Then came a summer when the Congregational Church was without a minister, and for one season my father preached in that church, using the familiar form from the Prayer Book as a continuous prayer.

Just how the next effort came about I am not sure. It was about the time that the cottage opposite the Congregational Church, now occupied by Mr. Holmes, was bought by Mr. John Lambert, a Philadelphia Churchman, who with his family came to Robbinston,

summer after summer for a number of years. There was probably a spontaneous desire on the part of the few Episcopalians to have their own service. Arrangements were made to hold it in the school house, which was done during four summers morning and evening.

In appearance these services must have borne some slight resemblance to Quaker meeting. For, as I remember it, the men and women, doubtless acting under the impulse of early school habits, would enter and seat themselves, the former by the "boys' door" on the south, the latter by the north or "girls' door." The school boasted no musical instrument, but this need was met by the loan of a small organ from the hotel of Mr. O'Brien, a Roman Catholic resident.. And a regular Sunday evening sight, after the lights had been fanned out at the end of the service was this instrument borne homeward on the shoulders of Mrs. Hunt's two sons.

The department of music was entirely in the hands of Mrs. Hunt's family. Her daughter was organist and chorister in one, and with such spirit and enthusiasm did she do her part that it might truly be said of her _as I have heard it said of a certain wonderful singer in Trinity Church_ that "while the minister preached at one end of the church, she preached at the other. Besides playing and singing herself Miss Hunt pressed into service all the available talent of the neighborhood. The strains of "The Gracious Firmament on High" sung in the little school house still ring in my ears.

These services were well attended, not alone by our few Church people: but in the evening especially, others formed the majority of the congregation. My father wore no surplice; everything was plain and simple. One lady recalls the passage through the Red Sea Illustrated on the blackboard. On several occasions his place was filled by theological students. The Rev. Paul Stirling and the Rev. Charles Maurice Addison stand out in my memory of those services.

It was there in Sept. 1881 that we held a memorial service for President Garfield after we had shared with the rest of the country the daily newspaper reports of that long anxious summer.

I think that it was that same summer, the summer of 1881, that an attempt was made in the direction of forming a parish. I remember two enthusiastic meetings held in the living room of our house, when perhaps a dozen men were gathered together. Mr. Lambert and Mr. Hunt were appointed wardens of the new parish. Our neighbors Joshua and Abel Brooks, were both present and to the end of their lives were faithful attendants upon the services of this church. This parish

formation, however, apparently lacking the canonical connection with the diocese, naturally became ineffective, especially as the church was open only during the summer.

The need was felt of a more suitable building. The Lambert family had guests from Philadelphia. Mrs. Hunt had friends visiting her from Norfolk, Va.

All were interested. Money was raised amounting to over \$500. Of this \$15.00 was a gift of George C. Shattuck of Boston, contributed through Mrs. Elizabeth Shattuck of Red Beach.

Beginning work however, was not dependent upon the funds in hand, for Mr. J.D. Sargeant, of Philadelphia, brother-in-law of Mr. Lambert. He advanced whatever was needed, taking a mortgage on the church for the amount beyond what the subscription covered. Before his death Mr. Sargeant liquidated this mortgage, so that the building is entirely free of debt. The deeds were held in trust by Mr. George H. Hunt and Rev. Mr. Steenstra.

The church was built during the summer of 1882. Land was purchased at a cost of \$75.00. The building plan was, I think, procured through Mr. Nehemiah Marks, a member of Trinity Church, St. Stephen. I do not know whether he drew it himself or employed an architect. Mr. Gordon of St. Stephen and Mr. Joshua Brooks of Robbinston were the carpenters. The furnishing was mostly in the hands of Mr. Lambert. this was of the simplest, a plain communion table of oak, the table rendered more churchly in appearance by the green-altar cloth_it being always the Trinity season when services were in progress. This summer Mrs. Simchovitch has presented the church with an altar cross in memory of her father, Col.Kingsbury, and of Dr. Nash. The lamps were a gift of Mrs. Hunt and of her brother, Mr. Stephen Bonsal of Baltimore. Mrs. Lambert gave the Communion service. There was great enthusiasm. Everyone took hold and helped. The beautiful embroidery upon the altar cloth was a work of Miss Hunt. Mr. John Lambert, Jr., an artist by profession, stenciled an ecclesiastical design upon the windows in soft brown, effective and charming. I am sorry to say that his work did not withstand indefinitely the severe Maine winter.

One interesting gift were the two lamps on the organ, presented by an old gentleman, Mr. Hinton, who as a youth had fought against

Napoleon in the battle of Waterloo. The surplice was made by hand in the Lambert home. I remember being summoned to sew on the buttons in order as father explained, that I might have a share in the work.

Mr. Lambert's Philadelphia rector, the Rev. Thos. F. Davies, afterwards Bishop of Michigan, with his family, spent part of that summer in Robbinston, and was present for the opening service on the first Sunday in Oct. 1882. For the first time in our services the Lords Supper was celebrated and the new building was consecrated by the Sacrement of Baptism_Dr. Davies baptising the rectors two younger children , one of whom has since accepted the ministry of Grace Church as an inheritance.

A few years after this Dr. Nash came to the shores of the Passamaquoddy, making his summer home in the adjoining town of North Perry. For years the services of Grace Church were carried on regularly morning and evening. Dr. Nash always present in the church with my father at the morning service, speaking to us on alternate Sundays, words of cheer and inspiration. The evening service was attended by many besides our own church people, and the church was often filled to capacity, interest reaching a climax toward the end of the season.

Until her marriage a few years later Miss Hunt continued to be responsible for the music, after which Miss Mary Steenstra took up the duty, followed in the course of time by our present organist. For a good many years a small Sunday School was held in connection with the services.

As long as he came to Robbinston Mr. Lambert performed the duties of sexton, going to the church every Saturday accompanied by his big deer-hound, trimming and filling lamps, putting up numbers on the hymn boards, finding and marking the lessons for the following day. At times he served as lay-preacher. On Sunday mornings he rang the bell, passed the offering plate__ occasionally receiving the offering on an open Prayer Book when by oversight the plates had been forgotten. Never once did he forget the length of the sermon. Of late years the duties of opening the church and ringing the bell have devolved upon Mr. Hitchcock, who has performed them with fidelity.

During the summer of 1884 and again in 1885, Bishop Neely visited this church and administered the rite of Confirmation, in all, nine persons

being confirmed. After one of these visits a reception took place at Mrs. Hunts house, giving us all an opportunity to meet the bishop. It is cause for rejoicing to us that today after these many years we are again enjoying the privilege of a visit from the Bishop of the Diocese .

From time to time we have had the refreshment of a sermon from some visiting clergyman. Probably the most frequent contributions in this direction have been made by two ministers who are present today, the Rev. Walter C. Roberts and the Rev. Henry P. Ross. To Mr. Roberts the congregation is deeply indebted for what he has given us this summer of his own faith and spiritual insight.

On one occasion we had a sermon from Dean Hodges of the Cambridge Theological School. Also Professor Drown preached here a sermon that on the following day called forth one listener a note to the effect that " he lived in the hopes of hearing him preach again".

One summer after the church had been closed for the season, the Rev. Mr. Hand, at that time rector of St. Anne's Church, Calais, anxious to minister to all within reach of his automobile, opened the church for a Sunday afternoon service. Last summer a special afternoon service was held and sermon preached at the request of the United Order of Red Men, who attended in a body.

In the memory of most of us who are gathered here today, the little church is still filled with the forms of those who have worshipped here in the past. Who knows how short the time may be before the revealing light of science shows that in very truth they are dearer to us than we know!

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