

Witness to History: Old St. Peter's Church

House of worship dedicated in 1767 was often caught up in the events of the
Revolutionary War

This is the third in an occasional series of articles about local history that will be posted on this Web site.

By Jeff Canning

Old St. Peter's Church in Van Cortlandtville, dedicated August 9, 1767, is a living link to the tumultuous times more than two centuries ago when the newborn United States of America won its independence from the British. The one-room frame church is one of the oldest houses of worship in Westchester County.

The venerable structure has a new look after a rehabilitation project in spring 2013. With the help of \$7,500 from the Town of Cortlandt, the exterior was repainted brown, to match a previous color (and distinguish it from the nearby Little Red Schoolhouse), the interior was refurbished and a new cross was placed above the doorway. The next phase of the work will focus on the roof.

Missionaries of a London-based organization, the Venerable Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Foreign Parts, had brought the teachings and services of the Church of England to the Cortlandt/Peekskill area in 1744 when, according to the works of local historian Colin Naylor, the Rev. James Wetmore of Rye conducted services in private homes. "There are great numbers of people in the wilderness northward of Bedford and Westchester who have little knowledge or sense of religion," Wetmore wrote, as quoted by Naylor in the book *Historic Van Cortlandtville*, published in 1976 by the Van Cortlandtville Historical Society.

In 1752 three local men – Caleb Hall, Peletiah (or Pelatiah) Hawes and Joseph Travis – purchased about six acres on Locust Avenue from Andrew Johnston (or Johnson) of the Van Cortlandt family. The paperwork specified that the land was to be used only for religious or educational purposes. Construction of St. Peter's Church began in 1766 on the Hawes and Travis acreage; a Baptist church was built in 1772 on Hall's portion (now the site of the Little Red Schoolhouse).

Five trustees – Jeremiah Drake, Isaac Hatfield, Charles Moore, Beverly Robinson and Caleb Ward – were appointed in 1766 “for directing and carrying on a building and for securing it to the inhabitants as a place of public worship, according to the establishment of the Church of England,” Naylor wrote. Their efforts bore fruit the following year when the 28-foot-by-36-foot peaked structure was dedicated by the Rev. Dr. John Ogilvie of Trinity Church in Manhattan. The building had no ornamentation on its exterior and was plainly furnished inside. The church received its royal charter in 1770.

The Rev. John Doty was called as rector the following year after having gone to England to be ordained. That same year, Robinson, a wealthy landowner who was now one of the wardens of St. Peter’s, donated a 200-acre glebe (farm) in what is now Philipstown to the church. The first rectory of the parish was built on the glebe.

A few years later the church found itself caught up in the struggles of the Revolutionary War, beginning in 1775 when the rector, the Rev. Bernard Page, a Loyalist, fled the pulpit, leaving behind a divided congregation and a building that would seldom be used for services again until 1790.

Gen. George Washington, the American commander, reportedly read morning prayer in the church during his frequent visits to the Peekskill area, during which he often stayed at the nearby Upper Manor House of the Van Cortlandt family. French troops, who were in the area in 1781 and 1782 before and after helping the Americans defeat the British at Yorktown, Va., used St. Peter’s as a military hospital. “I caused my sick men, amounting to more than a hundred, to be ... placed in the Peekskill temple,” Claude Blanchard, the French commissary general, wrote in his journal. Seven French soldiers who died at St. Peter’s were buried in unmarked graves in the Old Cemetery at Van Cortlandtville, which was established in 1752 and surrounds the church; the body of an eighth, an officer believed to be related to the royal family, was returned to France for burial.

The vestry met in 1790 for the first time in 15 years, the same year services resumed. But financial problems plagued the war-ravaged congregation, and the glebe was sold in 1836 for \$5,000. Other changes were soon forthcoming. In 1838 the old church’s congregation joined with a group of fellow Episcopalians in a new edifice in what is now downtown Peekskill. In 1840 the congregation reincorporated as St. Peter’s Church, Cortlandt, in the Village of Peekskill while St. Philip’s Chapel in Garrison, which had served more

northerly residents, became an independent congregation. (The modern St. Peter's stands at 137 N. Division St.; St. Philip's Church in the Highlands is on Route 9D.)

Regular services in the Van Cortlandtville building were phased out over several years, although services are still held there on special occasions.

Old Saint Peter's, because of its hospital service to the French troops, is one of 15 sites in New York State scheduled for signage detailing the building's importance in the history of the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route (W3R for short). This new National Historic Trail will lead travelers through sites in nine states significant in the collaboration of the French (led by Count Rochambeau) and American (led by George Washington) allies as they marched from New York to Virginia to compel the surrender of British General Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown in October 1781. The trail will run from Rhode Island, where the French arrived in 1780, through New York, where they crossed the Hudson between Verplanck and Stony Point in 1781 and back in 1782, down to Virginia and eventually end at Boston, where they sailed away at the end of 1782.

In addition to Old Saint Peter's, the waterfront in Verplanck (site of the river crossings) and the Peekskill Museum (which stands on a portion of Camp 37, based on Drum Hill) are also scheduled to receive W3R signage. The National Park Service originally hoped to install the signs by the end of 2013 but, because of problems caused by Superstorm Sandy in the fall of 2012, the installation has been delayed until 2014.

Jeff Canning is a retired newspaper editor and past president of the Van Cortlandtville Historical Society.