



# ROCKBRIDGE EPILOGUES

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## A PRAYER AND A STRUGGLE

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IN 2015, AN IMPORTANT local institution, Grace Episcopal Church, for many years known as Robert E. Lee Memorial Church, celebrates the 175th anniversary of its founding, and the sesquicentennial of the arrival of its most famous parishioner. Tonight I will focus in particular on its first 50 years, a difficult, turbulent period during which the continued existence of the church was only slowly established.

The organization of an Episcopal parish in Rockbridge was a relatively late event, not occurring until 62 years after the creation of the county in 1778.

There were three main reasons for this. The first was geography. The barrier of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the poor transportation network restricted large-scale emigration from the east, where there were greater numbers of Anglicans. Most immigrants came down the Great Wagon Road from Philadelphia through the Shenandoah Valley, the principal route into the back-country wilderness.

A second reason had to do with the character and religious convictions of these immigrants. By the time Rockbridge County was formed from parts of southern Augusta and northern Botetourt counties, Ulster Scots from northern Ireland had been pouring into the area for forty years. The Ulster Scots formed tight-knit,

Above: Grace Episcopal Church, completed in 1884, rose on the site of the smaller 1844 building.

aloof Presbyterian communities that were highly suspicious of outsiders. Early on, they organized their own churches, such as Timber Ridge (1746), Old Monmouth (1746) and Falling Spring (before 1748).

Third, there was a religious problem peculiar to the Anglicans. Before the American Revolution, the Anglican Church of England had been the “established church” in British colonies. All the colonies were led by a single ecclesiastic, the Bishop of London. Independence cut the church–state tie, necessitating the organization of a new church, American Anglican, with its own bishops.

Although the new church held its first General Convention in 1785 and officially adopted the name of Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, it took time to expand its organization. Until 1829, a single bishop ministered to all Episcopalians in Virginia, which at that time also included what is now West Virginia.

This situation began to change in Rockbridge County in 1839, when the Virginia Military Institute replaced

the old Arsenal. The new superintendent, Francis Henney Smith, an 1833 West Point graduate, was a devout Episcopalian. Upon his arrival in Lexington, he was distressed to learn that although there were Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist churches, there was no organized Episcopal congregation. Smith saw a need to fill this gap, for beyond the fact that several Episcopalians resided in town, he also believed that it was important to provide succor for new cadets of the faith.



Francis H. Smith,  
1853

The initiatives that Smith undertook to achieve this objective created a strong bond between the institute and the local Episcopal congregation that he helped organize. One historian of the church has noted that “for many years most of the VMI senior professors served on the vestry, and the first nine VMI superintendents were Episcopalians.” Only with the arrival of Robert E. Lee in 1865 as president of Washington College would VMI’s dominant role in the life of what had become Grace Church slowly begin to change.

Yet despite Lee’s legacy, and although in 1903 the vestry voted to change the church’s name to honor his memory, it is Francis Henney Smith who should really be called the father of this church. Until his death in 1890 Smith was perennially a member of the vestry and of the building and finance committees, thereby accepting key responsibility for funding and growth. Above all others, it was he who provided the glue and continuity that held the church together during its most difficult times.

In fulfilling his duties as an educator, however, Smith held non-sectarian views. He believed in the value of a religious-based education for youth and stressed that cadets should be able to attend churches of their choice. He also established a tradition at VMI of presenting a Bible to each graduating cadet.

**T**HE BUSINESS OF organizing a local Episcopal parish began on February 29, 1840, when Smith and Henry Norgrove, a Lexington tailor who had emigrated from England, met with several men from Buchanan. Together they created Woodville Parish, and appointed the first vestry, composed of five men from both towns. They also applied to have the parish admitted to the Diocese of Virginia.

Records from the first few years of the parish’s existence are sketchy, particularly with respect to how often and where church services were held. It does appear, however, that the first Episcopal service in Lexington was conducted in 1840 by a visiting evangelical minister. Interestingly, the service took place in the Presbyterian Church, a brick

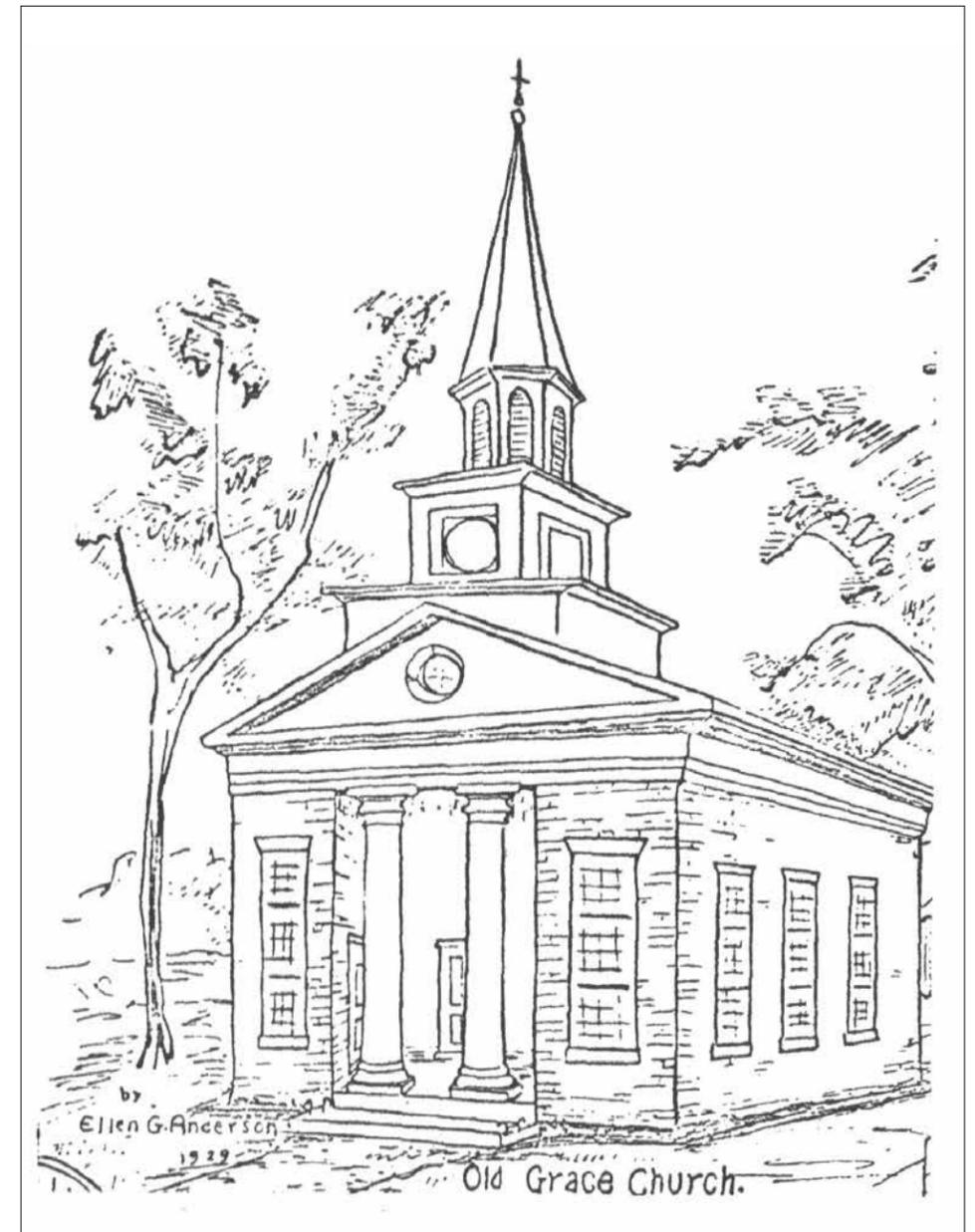
This drawing of the original Grace Church was made by Ellen Graham Anderson, a parishioner and artist, based on descriptions provided by two congregants who had attended the old church. Royster Lyle Jr. and Pamela H. Simpson, in *The Architecture of Historic Lexington*, confirmed the drawing’s accuracy.

sanctuary that in 1802 had been completed in the northwest corner of what is today Oak Grove Cemetery. In September 1841, the vestry called the Reverend William Bryant, who had graduated from West Point in 1826, as its first rector.

Lexington then was a solid Presbyterian community, and Washington College had its roots in the Presbyterian evangelical movement. As a result, most locals regarded the new Episcopal congregation with suspicion. In 1848, for example, when Washington College was searching for a new professor of mathematics, one college trustee wrote to another: “I trust we will not have an Episcopalian introduced into our faculty.”

The small size of the Episcopal congregation in Lexington also meant that it was difficult to finance any large projects. Yet the congregation clearly needed to build its own worship facility, for until one was constructed, the faithful would continue to meet at a temporary site, usually the county court house, or the Methodist church, then located on Randolph Street.

Strongly encouraged by William Meade, bishop of Virginia from 1841 to 1862, efforts to purchase property for this purpose began in earnest in late 1842. Although the owners of several available lots refused to sell when they learned the purpose to which it was to be put, a site on West Washington Street was finally



acquired in December 1843 for \$500 — the location of the present Grace Episcopal Church. (The vestry’s first choice had been a lot at the corner of Nelson and Main streets, but it was soon acquired by the Presbyterians for the purpose of erecting their own new church, which was completed in 1845.)

**C**ONSTRUCTION of the new church was completed in only six months, and it was consecrated as Grace Church on May 21, 1844. The bishop confirmed eight people, including four cadets, the next day. How the name “Grace” was chosen has not been recorded.



prolonged absences by the rector. Informed of the problems by the vestry, Pendleton submitted his resignation, which was accepted on the last day of 1862.

In July 1863 the Rev. George Norton accepted the vestry's call to become rector of Grace. Little is known about him because he resigned in April 1865 and no vestry minutes were kept during his tenure. The church seems to have operated as well as could be expected during wartime, however, conducting regular services, baptisms and confirmations. General Pendleton's wife, Anzolette, organized a ladies sewing group that made clothing and blankets which were sent to soldiers at the front throughout the war.

The war also brought Grace its fair share of tragedy. In May 1863, Henry Norgrove and his wife, Matilda, who had been among the first communicants when the church had been organized in 1840, were notified that both of their sons had been killed. VMI cadet Samuel Atwill, who had been confirmed by Bishop of Virginia John Johns on May 8, 1864, was killed a week later at New Market. And in September 1864, Pendleton's own son, Sandie, who had been chief of staff of the Second Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia since Stonewall Jackson had commanded it, was mortally wounded at the Battle of Fishers Hill in the northern Shenandoah Valley.

With the end of the war in the spring of 1865, General Pendleton returned to Lexington and, although the vestry could not afford to offer him a salary, agreed to become interim rector until a permanent replacement could be found. The church facility had largely escaped the war unscathed, but the same could not be said of the parishioners who, besides their family losses, had been left impoverished by Hunter's Raid on Lexington in June 1864 and by the war's devastation in general.

There were also problems with the Union occupation troops. In July 1865, while conducting a service, General Pendleton was arrested, ostensibly because he had refused to take the amnesty oath. Subsequently he was confined to the rectory, and had to conduct services there. In the fall, under pressure from his own family, he agreed to take the oath and his civil rights were restored.

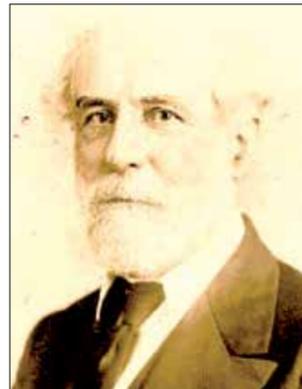
Still, the church remained closed until the last Union troops departed Lexington in January 1866. In April the Grace vestry asked him to become its permanent rector once again, and he accepted. General Pendleton, as he subsequently would prefer to be addressed, remained rector of Grace for the remaining 17 years of his life.

The church received a significant morale boost when General Robert E. Lee arrived in September 1865 to be the president of Washington College. Lee was an Episcopalian, and a week after his arrival he was unanimously elected senior warden by the vestry, a position that he held until his death five years later.

The poverty of the South in the aftermath of the war was reflected in Grace Church's financial straits. The church found it impossible simultaneously to pay the rector a decent regular salary, established at \$800 by the vestry in April 1867 — or to generate adequate operating expenses, fund the church debt, and pay the director of the brand-new church choir.

Ironically, Grace's financial problems were exacerbated by the rebuilding of the two colleges, because it led directly to an increase in the number of communicants. Recognizing the need for more space, General Pendleton began to push as early as May 1868 either to enlarge the church or to build a new one. In this he was opposed by several of the older church members, and he lowered his objective to building a separate Sunday school.

Money brought in by church bazaars and ice-cream festivals, parishioner donations, and the vestry's decision to begin renting pews in 1867 was simply insufficient. Therefore, in the fall of 1869 General Pendleton embarked on the first of what eventually became a lengthy series of fund-raising trips to cities in both South and North. This trip, primarily to visit old acquaintances and fellow clergymen, brought in several thousand dollars.



Lee in 1865  
as a civilian

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On October 12, 1870, General Lee died at his home. This tragedy served as a catalyst. Two weeks earlier, at Lee's final vestry meeting, the vestry had discussed the perennial issues of enlarging or rebuilding the church and of increasing the rector's salary. The latter had become so pressing that General Pendleton had offered his resignation, citing his age, then 60, and lack of income. Once again, decisions were deferred.

**M**EETING A FEW DAYS after Lee's passing, the vestry unanimously decided to build a new church in his memory, to reject the rector's resignation, and to pay him \$1,200 per year. General Pendleton was given two months' leave to conduct another fundraising tour.

Cost was a key concern, and initial plans for a 1,200-seat facility had to be downsized. Finally, in November 1871, the decision was made to build a church that could seat 450 persons, at an estimated cost of \$15,000. It would be built of stone donated by a parishioner, James White, from a quarry on his land. In May 1872, the old church was demolished and work on the new building began.

Once authorized, completion of the new church took far longer than the vestry had expected. Financing was a constant challenge, and it was further hindered by the recession that followed the Panic of 1873. Funds had to be raised piecemeal through donation, subscription and selling bonds. Meanwhile, cost continued to rise. By 1875 the original \$15,000 estimate had grown to exceed \$40,000. Despite General Pendleton's periodic fundraising trips and appeals to the memory of General Lee, and the earnest efforts of parishioners, it was a fact that the South was poor and would be for years to come. Fortunately, occasional generous donations would arrive from the Northern states.

One positive result of the delay was that it allowed the vestry to debate how the new church should be furnished and decorated. One key decision was to place a large, central stained-glass window dedicated to the memory of Robert Edward and Mary Custis Lee at the

rear of the chancel. There were other memorial window proposals as well, though in the end cost constraints ensured that only two of those came to fruition: one dedicated to the Norgrove boys who had been killed in 1863 and the other to Sandie Pendleton.

Between 1872 and 1875, the congregation met regularly at the Methodist Church. In 1875, the new Grace Church basement, now the church undercroft, was finished, and services began to be held there. Sunday school continued to be conducted at the Lexington Odd Fellows Hall.

One unfortunate legacy of the Civil War was the failure to integrate the new freedmen into Southern society, and Lexington was no exception. As rector of Grace, General Pendleton recognized the problem, and with the support of the bishop, made active efforts to include African Americans in the life of the church, stressing the importance of a moral and religious education in developing the character of the former slaves. By the late 1870s, the numbers of African American Sunday school teachers and pupils approximated those of their white counterparts. Sadly, however, there were greater forces at work, and this success story would evaporate under Pendleton's successors and the social environment of the times.

In 1882, the vestry received a check for \$5,000 from Mrs. Josephine L. Newcomb, of New York. This provided sufficient funds for the completion of the church steeple, the remaining unfinished portion of the building structure. In

appreciation, the initials of Mrs. Newcomb's daughter, Sophie, who died in 1870 at the age



Josephine Newcomb, of New York, widow of Warren Newcomb, and their daughter, Sophie, in whose memory Grace Church received a major gift

SOPHIE NEWCOMB COLLEGE OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

of 15 and in whose memory the gift had been made, were inscribed in the rose window above the church entrance.

The requirements placed upon General Pendleton during the long rebuilding process, particularly the extensive number of fundraising trips and the difficult family separations they entailed, had exhausted him. His health had been poor when he had agreed to return as interim rector in 1865, and in 1875 he asked the vestry for an assistant. The vestry agreed, but the position could be filled only for a year. Finally, on January 15, 1883, shortly after conducting a prayer service at VMI, General Pendleton died.

His funeral, conducted the next day, was the first service held in the completed church.

Soon after General Pendleton's death, the vestry called the Rev. Robert J. McBryde, the rector of St. George's Church in Fredericksburg, offering a salary of \$1,200 a year and use of the rectory. He accepted and arrived to conduct his first service on April 29, 1883. He stayed as rector for the next 22 years.

The massive and beautiful church edifice in which we are now met, the completion of which is largely due to his persistent energy is perhaps the best monument to him, and it must be thought a happy circumstance that its entire completion was coincident in time with the close of his well-rounded life.

LEXINGTON GAZETTE,  
JAN. 25, 1883

Excerpt from a resolution of the Grace Church vestry on the death of the pastor, W. N. Pendleton

In March 1883, with construction completed, the vestry took a careful look at church finances, and what it saw was not encouraging. In the end, the cost had exceeded \$56,000, and there were still outstanding liabilities of \$10,630, mostly in the form of bonded debt. Through two fortuitous events, however, the church soon emerged entirely free of debt. In December 1884, longtime parishioner General Custis Lee, eldest son of Robert E. Lee and then himself president of Washington and Lee University, informed the vestry that he would return \$6,000 in church bonds he held and cancel the interest on them. And in April 1886, VMI's General Smith announced that he had been able to collect enough contributions from friends to pay off the remaining bonded debt.

In the vestry's view, elimination of the debt finally made it possible to consecrate the new church building. On May 30, 1886, this blessing was performed by the Bishop of Virginia, the Right Reverend Francis Whittle, using a copy of the Book of Common Prayer that belonged to General Smith.

With the consecration, Grace Memorial Church, as it had been known since 1880, now directed its efforts into new areas such as mission work. The vestry remained acutely conscious of the importance of staying free of debt — and as a result, Grace Church was able to assume what might be termed a “normal” church life. 

