

PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION  
(St. James' Episcopal Church)  
Lafayette Square  
North Arlington & West Lafayette Avenues, southeast corner  
Baltimore  
Independent City  
Maryland

HABS MD-1145  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
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1849 C Street NW  
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## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION (St. James Episcopal Church)

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Location: North Arlington & West Lafayette Avenues, southeast corner, Lafayette Square, Baltimore (Independent City), Maryland. UTM: 18 358955E 4351224N (WGS84/NAD83) [39.2989°N, 76.6357°W (WGS84/NAD83)]

Significance: The Protestant Episcopal Church of the Ascension holds the distinction of being the first church built on Lafayette Square, a distinction matched, if not altogether surpassed, by that of the present congregation: St. James Episcopal Church, the steward of the building since 1932, is the nation's second oldest African Episcopal congregation (founded in 1824), and the first Episcopal church organized by African Americans south of the Mason-Dixon line.

Description: Built 1867-9 by architects [Nathaniel Henry] Hutton & [John] Murdoch, the quarry-faced Beaver Dam marble Church of the Ascension is sparingly ornamented on the exterior and relies mostly on texture, repetition, a limited repertory of Gothic revival architectural elements and a massive gable roof to communicate a sense of religiosity and permanence. The building's main attraction was its northwest tower, which, when topped by its wood-framed spire, is said to have risen to a height of 120 feet.

The Church was described as “decorated Gothic, freely treated,” and “of the transition period between the early English and Gothic styles,” in contemporary newspaper accounts of its construction. It is safe to say that Hutton & Murdoch's design was English Gothic in inspiration, the hammer-beam roof trusses and the square-ended chancel being two of the most obvious stylistic borrowings. Just beyond the main entrance, a ten-foot wide vestibule, anchored on the north end by a tower, opened into the central aisled auditorium, at the opposite end of which were arranged, from north to south, a small sacristy, the chancel, and a small organ room. Above the vestibule was a small gallery intended, or so it was reported, for African American worshippers. Rooms for Sunday school use were located in the church basement. The simplicity of the design for the church is made all the more palpable when the church is compared to the architects' other Baltimore church designs from the same period: St. Peter's Protestant Episcopal Church (1868; currently Bethel AME) on Druid Hill Avenue and Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church (1869-70) in the Bolton Hill neighborhood, while built simultaneously and of similar materials, are larger in size, more pronounced and varied in form and elaborately ornamented with architectural sculpture and stained glass.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, “Corner Stone Laying of a New Episcopal Church,” Baltimore Sun (19 July 1867); also “The New P.E. Church of the Ascension,” Baltimore Sun (13 January 1869).

Although a fire in 1873 destroyed the church's wooden spire, roof, windows and interior furnishings (evidence of which is preserved in a contemporary pen-and-ink sketch by Baltimore architect J. Appleton Wilson), an 1869 newspaper account of the opening services at Ascension offers some insight into the church's original appearance:

The interior is lofty and churchlike, the roof being a single span supported by five principal buttresses on the Gothic system known as the "hammer beam." The ceiling is of yellow pine oiled, and it is believed the roof is the largest of the kind in this city. The chancel is surrounded by moulded wainscoting in two colors. The communion rail is of walnut on an iron moulding, colored blue and pecked out in gold. The floor of the chancel...is reached by wide walnut steps on the sides, the pulpit being in the center. The pews are of walnut, plain and rich. The side windows, which have effective traceried heads, are of stained glass, harmonious in color, and of handsome design.<sup>2</sup>

The most substantial modification to Hutton & Murdoch's 1867 church was the addition, nine years later in 1876, of a parish hall off the east end of the chancel. Designed by Baltimore architect Frank E. Davis, the parish hall is connected to the chancel of the church via the sacristy and, like the church, is built of quarry-faced white marble, sparingly ornamented with arched openings (windows and doors) and covered by a large gable roof. The parish hall, with rooms below and a large assembly room above, is situated perpendicular to the church proper, an arrangement for such buildings frequently employed in Protestant churches after mid century, including Grace & Mount Vernon Methodist Episcopal and Lafayette Square Presbyterian Churches.

History: The Church of the Ascension was the first congregation to build on Lafayette Square. The reasons given for the move from its original building at Lexington and Pine Streets—then just 27 years old—were ostensibly financial in nature, with other factors playing a role. According to the then Reverend Charles M. Callaway, the church had been "burdened with debt in some form or other almost from the beginning and thus not only [had] its efficiency been greatly impaired, but as is always the case with a church long burdened with debt it [had] acquired for itself a most unenviable reputation." Mortgages, ground rents, a floating debt, and a balance sheet in which operating expenses had exceeded revenues since at least 1860 made it difficult for the congregation to attract or retain new blood, especially rich members upon whose shoulders the Church's financial burdens were to rest.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>"The New P.E. Church of the Ascension," *Baltimore Sun*, 13 January 1869.

<sup>3</sup>The Reverend Charles M. Callaway to William Rollinson Whittingham, Bishop of Maryland, 21 March 1867, as recorded in the records of the Vestry of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Ascension, 9 April 1867, Maryland Diocesan Archives, Baltimore. See also other pieces of correspondence between the two churchmen recorded in the 9 April 1867 Vestry minutes. For an overview history of nineteenth-century congregations in Baltimore, see Michael Stephen Franch, "Congregation and Community in Baltimore, 1840-60" (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1984).

Another reason for the move was that the Vestrymen and other members of the Ascension congregation “who had chiefly born the burdens of the Parish were not willing to bear them any further, so long as the Church remained in its present locality.” The outward migration of wealthy congregants from the area to new and more exclusive residential neighborhoods north and west of the central city, the influx of poor residents in their place, increased competition for congregants among both new and existing churches, and the expansion of business and commerce into areas that were historically residential created a situation, not only for Ascension but for nearly all downtown congregations, in which a move to a more desirable and proximate location seemed vital to the congregation’s survival.<sup>4</sup>

A third reason for the move was an offer from the Lafayette Square Association of “a donation of property in fee, amounting to \$10,000.000 ... in one of the most beautiful and what must be within a short time, one of the most desirable portions of the city,” provided that the congregation relocate. From the Association’s perspective, the donation must have seemed a small price to pay in exchange for a religious presence on Lafayette Square—a neighborhood amenity that potential residents would have found attractive. As for Ascension, the prospects of cashing in on the spiritual and financial windfall generated by a relatively isolated and rapidly developing neighborhood far outweighed the risks of uprooting itself, especially since it was to be the first Protestant congregation open for business there.<sup>5</sup>

Founded in 1824, St. James Episcopal worshipped at a number of locations before arriving at Lafayette Square. It first met in rented space on Park Avenue, building its first church at the corner of Saratoga and North (Guilford) Streets in 1827, where it ministered to both free and enslaved parishioners. An act of condemnation in the 1880s forced the congregation to another space at Park Avenue near Dolphin Street. The congregation endured two more moves to rented space—in 1890 and 1901—until a second church was completed at the corner of Park Avenue and Preston Street (in the vicinity of the Meyerhof Symphony Hall). Seeking a larger church in a residential neighborhood, St. James, working with the Protestant Episcopal Archdiocese of Maryland, acquired the Ascension site from the founding congregation while that congregation was negotiating a merger with the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Prince of Peace.<sup>6</sup>

Sources:

“Burning of the Church of the Ascension, Lafayette Square.” Baltimore Sun, 13 May 1873.

“Church of the Ascension—Reopening of the New Building, &c.” Baltimore Sun, 5 January 1874.

“Corner Stone Laying of a New Episcopal Church.” Baltimore Sun, 17 July 1867.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Henry Knell to Reverend Charles M. Callaway, 19 November 1866, as recorded in the records of the Vestry of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Ascension, 7 December 1866, Maryland Diocesan Archives, Baltimore.

<sup>6</sup>George M. & Amelia J. Brooks, “A Walking Tour of Lafayette Square Churches,” Baltimore: African-American Heritage Society, 1990.

Franch, Michael Stephen. "Congregation and Community in Baltimore, 1840-1860." Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1984.

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Wilson, J. Appleton. "Church of Ascension After Fire of May 12, 1873." J. Appleton Wilson Sketchbook 1958.52.5a. Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.

Historian: Martin Perschler, Ph.D. for HABS. August 2004.

Project Statement: In the Spring of 2003, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), a division of the National Park Service, David H. Gleason Associates, Inc., Architects, and Baltimore Heritage, Inc., in coordination with the City of Baltimore's Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP) and the Goucher College Graduate Program in Historic Preservation, recorded a number of historic buildings and sites on Baltimore's Lafayette Square in large-format photographs and historical research. The project, resulting in over 50 photographs by HABS photographer James W. Rosenthal and supplemented with historical research by Martin Perschler for HABS and Angela Shaeffer of Goucher College, grew out of an interest on the part of David H. Gleason Associates and its partners in raising public awareness of one of Baltimore's most historically significant urban neighborhoods.