

St. Thomas' Church
Croom, Maryland

Prince Georges Co.

HABS No. MD 631

HABS
MD.

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Washington, D.C.

Historic American Buildings Survey
Delos H. Smith, District Officer
1707 Eye St., N.W., Washington, D.C.

Addendum To:
ST. THOMAS CHURCH
14300 St. Thomas Church Road
at Croom Road
Croom
Prince Georges County
Maryland

HABS NO. MD-631

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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ST. THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

HABS NO. MD-631

Location: 14300 St. Thomas' Church Road at Croom Road, Croom, Prince George's County, Maryland

Present Owner: The Vestry of St. Thomas' Parish, 10303 Croom Road

Present Use: Episcopal Church

Significance: St. Thomas' Episcopal Church is one of the earliest Episcopal churches in Southern Maryland, and one of the most intact. It is also notable for its associations with important early citizens, particularly Rev. John Eversfield and Bishop Thomas John Clagett. The original main block was built in cruciform plan in 1742. The Gothic Revival pointed-arched window and the apse were added in 1858, and the bell tower, in 1888. The church--an important county as well as community landmark--is in excellent condition, having had its few missing original features restored after careful study in 1958.

Description: The church sits atop a knoll and is surrounded by large shade trees and cedars. The church yard is enclosed by an ornamental, Gothic-design wrought-iron fence with arched gates which open onto a brick path which leads the to the front entry. The twenty-three acre church property includes a cemetery surrounding the church where the graves of many prominent citizens and old county families are located.

This is a single-story, three-bay-by-five-bay, gable-front-roofed structure in a cruciform plan, with the additions of a three-story bell tower to the west front and an apse to the rear. The church is of brick laid in Flemish bond. It has pointed-arched, one-over-one-light-sash, stained-glass windows with pointed-arched brick lintels in the main block. In the bell tower, the windows are fixed pointed-arched, except in the west front of the second story where there is a rosette window. At the top of the tower is a bell cote with pointed-arched openings. The front entry, at the base of the bell tower, also has a pointed-arched opening and lintel, with double, pointed-arch, six-horizontal-panel doors. The three stories of the tower are divided by wide belt courses. The cruciform wings at either side are not as high as the main block, and have hipped roofs. There is a window in the end of the north wing, and the south wing is open as a porch. There is a gable-roof apse to the rear, with a tripartite stained-glass window to the front, and pointed-arched stained-glass windows to the sides. There is a small brick sacristy addition to the north side of the apse. The gable-front roof, with a pent at the front, is covered with wood-like synthetic shingles.

The interior has an entry vestibule with double doors with a pointed-arch transom light. It enters into the long, rectangular nave with a barrel-vaulted ceiling. There is an organ loft at the west end, supported by rounded columns resting on

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high pedestals. The loft has an antique pipe organ, and is accessed by a closed-string winder stairway in the southwest corner. To the east is the apse, in a vaulted, coffered alcove. The walls are plaster with a crown-molding cornice (with recessed lighting). The floors are brick. The windows are recessed into the walls, with splayed reveals but no surrounds. There are boxed pews with paneled doors. There is a break in the pews mid-way into the church where doorways lead to the cruciform wings (one is now a boiler room and the other, a porch). At the east end, there is a raised pulpit to the north side, and a communion rail before the altar which lies within the apse.

History:

St. Thomas Church was built in 1742-45 as a chapel of ease for the parish of St. Paul's Church at Baden. According to the vestry minutes of St. Paul's parish, the articles of agreement for the construction of the church were signed by Daniel Page, its builder, and for many years the church was referred to as "Page's Chapel." The contract was very specific about the building's architectural details, size and materials, and called for it to be completed by Christmas of 1745. The cost was set at 1,000 pounds Maryland currency. The construction was overseen by Rev. John Eversfield, an Oxford-educated minister ordained by the Church of England. He arrived in Maryland in 1728 and served as rector of St. Paul's parish until 1778.

Rev. Eversfield's nephew, Thomas John Clagett, later served as rector of this, his home church. The Rev. Clagett was the first episcopal bishop consecrated in this country. His consecration as the Bishop of Maryland in 1792 marked the end of the influence of the Church of England. Clagett received his early education from his uncle and was later schooled in England, where he was ordained by the Bishop of London in 1767. In addition to serving as rector of St. Thomas and other churches in the area, Thomas Clagett served as a chaplain of the U.S. Senate, and founded Trinity Church in Upper Marlboro. The bell tower added to the front of the church in 1888 reads, "This tower was erected by this church and other churches of the diocese to the Glory of God and in memory of the right Rev. Thomas J. Clagett, S.T.D., First Bishop of Maryland and for many years Rector of this church. A.D. 1888."

In 1850 the area to the north of Spicer's Creek became a separate parish and this chapel became the Parish Church for the newly created St. Thomas' parish (no longer a chapel of Ease for St. Paul's). The church was later renovated in 1859, under the direction of New York City architect John W. Priest. Priest, an associate of A.J. Downing, was influential in the spreading of early Gothic Revival with his articles in the *New York Ecclesiologist*. Priest was also a founding member of the American Institute of Architects. His renovations to St. Thomas Church--undertaken by William H. Allen of Baltimore, contractor--included the replacement of the old windows with the current pointed-arched, stained-glass windows, and the addition of the apse.

The tower at the west front of the church--a memorial to Rev. Thomas Clagett--was added in 1888. Further changes occurred in 1954 when Milton L. Grigg, FAIA, was hired to execute plans for restoration based on the specifications of the original contract. The congregation elected to retain the Gothic Revival changes but to otherwise restore the church to its ca. 1745 appearance. Thus, in 1958, the wood cornice on the exterior was restored, the south porch was returned to its original appearance and the hipped roofs of the wings replaced. On the interior, the removal of the 19th-century floor revealed the original brick floor, and the box pews were again installed (a central heating system was also installed at this time).

Buried under the floor, to the south side of the area where the cruciform wings cross the main block, are the bodies of a few important early citizens including Benedict Leonard Calvert (son of the fourth Lord Baltimore) and his daughter, Eleanor Calvert Custis (wife of John Parke Custis, step-son of George Washington). In the early days, burial within the church itself was viewed as the only way to protect the body from evil spirits and insure entrance to heaven. Generally, this was done by only the most prominent citizens (as it probably entailed a sizable donation to the church). Also, during the 1857 addition of the apse, the body of Rev. Eversfield was moved from the church yard to a spot beneath the new altar.

Sources:

King, Marina and Susan G. Pearl (PG Co. HPC). Maryland Historical Trust, Historic Sites Inventory Form, St. Thomas Church, Croom, prepared June 1988.

Virta, Alan. Prince George's County, A Pictorial History, Norfolk, Va.: Donning Publishing Company, 1984.

On site investigation and interview with wife of Rev. Edward Raffetto, current rector, by Catherine C. Lavoie.

Historian:

Catherine C. Lavoie, HABS, January 1992.