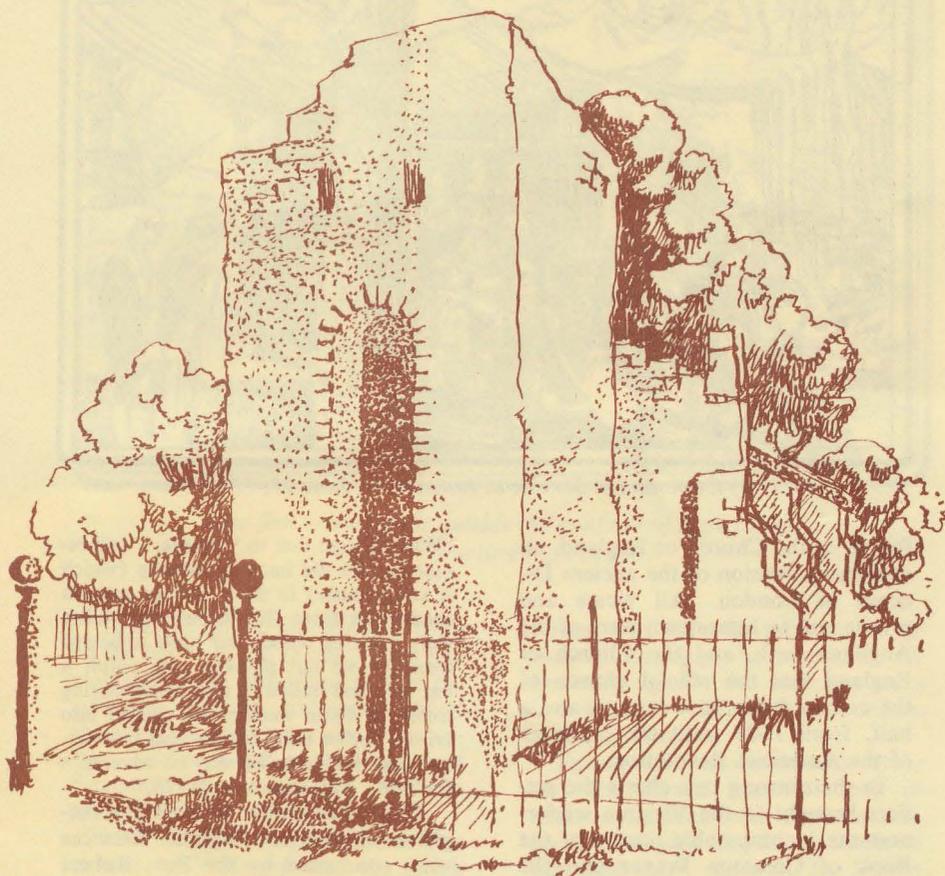




# JAMESTOWN CHURCH

At Historic Jamestown, Virginia



**F**rom the time plans were conceived for the establishment of an English colony in Virginia, it was intended that the settlement would be a full-fledged

and faith of an ancient church.

The first place of worship at Jamestown was a simple shrine in the forest covered with a tattered sailcloth. Captain John Smith described the temporary structure:



*Holy Communion Service at Jamestown, June 21, 1607.*

Parish of the Church of England, an overseas extension of the ancient Diocese of London. All vicars and priests sent to Jamestown were of the Anglican faith, and the Church of England was the official church of the colony for over a century and a half, from 1607 until the outbreak of the American Revolution.

In their strong oak chests the settlers brought to the Virginia wilderness the incomparable liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer and the Bible in the English language. At Jamestown the indomitable settlers built a new nation with the strength

“When I went first to Virginia, I well remember we did hang an awning (which is an old saile) to three or four trees to shadow us from the Sunne; our walles were rales of wood, our seats unhewed trees till we cut planks; our pulpit a bar of wood nailed to two neighbouring trees. In foule weather we shifted into an old rotten tent; for we had few better, and this came by way of adventure for new. This was our church.”

This crude shelter was the first Anglican church in Virginia. Services were conducted by the Rev. Robert Hunt, who had been sent to Virginia with the first settlers by the Bishop of London.



*The first frame church at Jamestown, 1607-1608.*

The timber church which the colonists started building shortly after they arrived was located inside the palisaded fort. It appears to have been completed by late summer or early autumn. John Smith described it as "a homely thing like a barne, set upon cratchets, covered with rafts, sedge, and earthe; so was also the walls."

This rustic wood building served as a place of worship for only a few weeks, as it accidentally burned to the ground in January, 1608.

After the January fire the colonists, with grim determination, rebuilt James Fort during the early cold and bitter months of 1608, including new houses and a new frame church. One colonist described it as:

"... a pretty Chappell . . . It is in length three-score foote, in breadth twenty foure, and shall have a Chancell in it of Cedar, and a Communion Table of the Blacke Walnut, and all the Pewes of Cedar, with faire Broad windowes, to shūt and open as the weather shall occasion; of the same wood, a Pulpet of the same, with a Font hewen hollow

like a Canoa, with the two Bells at the West end."

In this primitive frame church, April, 1614, Pocahontas, daughter of Chief Powhatan, married John Rolfe.

In 1617, ten years after the planting of the colony, a frame church was built outside the confines of James Fort. Erected during the administration of Deputy Governor Samuel Argall, it was a timber-framed structure built on brick and cobblestone foundations. These ancient foundations, three and a half centuries old, may be seen today inside the brick Memorial Church. Captain Argall wrote that the new frame church was "50 foote in length by twenty foote in breadth."

The frame church built in 1617 is of great historical importance. Within its walls, in 1619, met the first representative legislative assembly in the New World. This meeting of elected planters, held July 30 through August 4, set a pattern of self-government for all the American colonies.

The frame church erected at Jamestown in 1617, where the Memorial Church stands today, served as a place of worship for the colonists until about 1639. At this time it appears to have been razed to make way for a new brick church. In January, 1639, Governor Sir John Harvey wrote that he, members of his Council, certain ships' captains, and a few planters "had largely contributed to the building of a brick church."

While services probably were held in the new brick church as early as 1639, the entire building was not completed by 1647, as a record dated that year mentions that settlers living south of the James River (in Southwark Parish) were being assessed taxes "for and toward finishing and repairing the church at James City."

The brick church tower which stands today belonged to the 1639 church, although it undoubtedly was erected after 1647. In the 17th century builders of English churches

usually constructed the tower *after* the church building itself had been completed. The partially-ruined brick tower is of great historical importance: it is the only 17th-century structure standing above ground at Jamestown today; also it is one of the oldest English-built edifices standing in the United States. The tower is approximately 18 feet square, with walls 3 feet thick at the base. Originally the tower was about 46 feet high, and in the 17th century it had two upper floors. The floor levels are indicated by the large beam niches observable in the inner walls. Six small ports or windows look out from the top story. These openings permitted some light to enter the upper room and also let the sound of the bell (or bells) resound across the town site.

The brick church served as a place of worship less than four decades, for in 1676, during Bacon's Rebellion, it was set to the torch by Nathaniel Bacon and his rebel followers.

After the collapse of Bacon's Rebellion in October, 1676, the gutted

*A new frame church is built, early 1608.*



brick church was repaired and restored. The restoration work appears to have been completed by late 1676 or during the early months of 1677. The restored church was certainly being used as a place of worship by 1678.

In October, 1698, a disastrous fire destroyed the statehouse and many private dwellings at Jamestown. On May 18, 1699, the House of Burgesses initiated action that led to the removal of the seat of government from Jamestown to Williamsburg.

ing this span of time, when Williamsburg grew and prospered, the population of "James Citty" dwindled and the town activities almost came to a halt.

About 1758 services in the brick church were discontinued. The ancient structure fell rapidly into ruins, the roof and brick walls gradually disappeared and vandals removed every vestige from the sacred site, including ornamental brasses from a knight's tomb inside the abandoned church. Before the 18th century



*The first church built outside the confines of James Fort:  
A frame structure built in 1617.*

Thus the small but historic town on the banks of the James, which had played such an important part in the religious, political, and social life of the Virginia colony for almost a century, was replaced as the capital of England's first successful overseas colony.

After the seat of government was moved to Williamsburg, the brick church at Jamestown continued to be used as a house of worship for another half-century or more. Dur-

bowed out, only the brick tower remained standing above ground, silhouetted against the blue sky as a lone sentinel—defying time, vandals, and the elements.

Saving the historic church tower and churchyard was the work of many individuals and organizations. Special mention should be made of Mr. and Mrs. Edward E. Barney who, in 1893, donated the brick church tower and graveyard and 22½ acres of land surrounding the



*The first brick church built at Jamestown, 1639.*

early church sites to The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities.

At the invitation of the Jamestown Committee, Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, Mr. John Tyler, Jr. excavated portions of the church foundations (which lay east of the church tower) in May, 1901. He reported:

"I have found that there remains of the original church all four walls, to a height of from 6 inches to 3 feet above their foundations. Starting with excavations at the southeast corner, I carried the work along the south wall, keeping down to the top of the foundations, or beginning of the neat work. At 3 feet 4 inches west of the southeast corner, I struck the east side of a buttress, extending 3 feet 1 inch north and south, by 2 feet 8 inches east and west.

At 8.45 feet from this was discovered the east side of a tile pavement in front of the minister's door, which entered through the south wall, into an aisle crossing the church in front of the chancel."

The brick Memorial Church which stands today east of the 17th-century brick church tower was erected in 1907 by the National Society, Colonial Dames of America. Inside the Memorial Church one may see (covered with plate glass) the brick and cobblestone foundations of the 1617 frame church and the brick foundations of the 1639 brick church.

Here where the Memorial Church stands many of our most cherished traditions of freedom were planted and took root.