

Parish History

Bruton Parish, formed in 1674 from the merger of several colonial parishes dating back to 1633, took its name from the town of Bruton in county Somerset, England. Governor Sir William Berkeley and the prominent Ludwell family had strong ancestral ties to this town. In 1678 Colonel John Page, a wealthy colonist, donated the land and some funds for a brick church and a churchyard. The first brick church, completed in 1683, lay to the north and west of the present building.

After the College of William and Mary was founded in 1693 and the capital of the Virginia colony was moved from Jamestown to Williamsburg six years later, the existing church was too small. In 1715 this church building was completed and began serving as the "court" church for the colony. In colonial times, church and state were one and all officeholders had to attend the established Anglican church. Yet Virginians George Mason and James Madison included religious toleration in the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776 and Thomas Jefferson in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1779.

With American independence, ties between church and state were severed, and the Anglican Church became the Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA. Bruton's membership declined and the building deteriorated. In 1840, remodeling placed the altar toward the west and stripped the interior of its colonial furnishings.

A restoration (1905-1907) partially returned the church to its colonial appearance by moving the altar to the east end of the building, and interior excavations unearthed 42 graves. Soon after he became rector in 1926, the Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin persuaded John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to underwrite the restoration of the entire city, and Bruton Parish Church regained its colonial glory with the completion of the work in 1939.

The Churchyard

Bruton has probably the largest colonial burial site still existing in Virginia. By 1754, a brick wall enclosed the area. Some of the early tombstones and memorials in the forms of chest and table tombs, obelisks, sculptural designs, headstones, and ledger stones are examples of the Baroque style of funerary art. Beginning in 1678 with the burial of Thomas Ludwell, secretary of the colony,

the churchyard received the remains of important residents such as Governor Edward Nott, as well as many others of more modest status. Of the hundreds buried in the grounds, only 148 have permanent markers, and these are made of limestone, marble, sandstone, slate, or granite. In recent years, the cinerarium area has provided a final resting place for cremated remains of parishioners.

Architectural Notes

Bruton's cruciform shape, unusual for Virginia colonial churches, was intended to accommodate the governor's entourage and members of the General Assembly, college students and faculty, as well as townspeople. Governor Alexander Spotswood designed the building in 1711, and the General Assembly and the parish funded the construction. Completed four years later, the church was 75 feet long with transepts (wings) extending 14-1/2 feet. An addition in 1752 lengthened the chancel 22 feet and gave the church its symmetrical form with chancel and nave of equal length. Laid in Flemish bond with glazed headers, the brickwork is strikingly lovely. The erection of the tower in 1769 completed the structure.

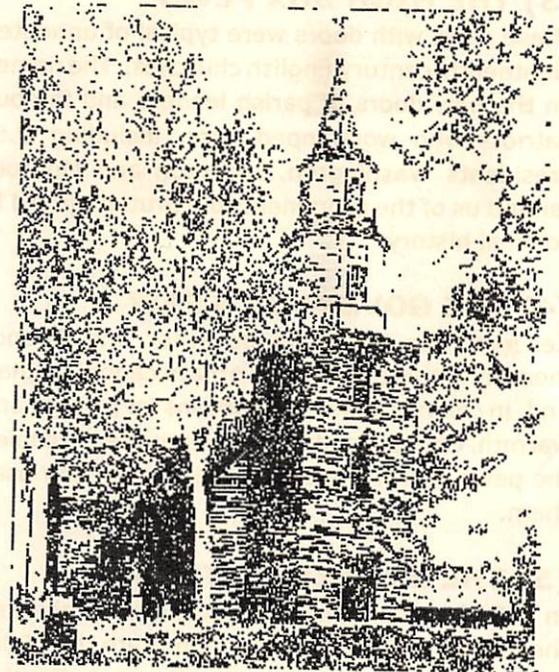
The Parish Today

Today, Bruton Parish is an active, vibrant church as well as a colonial architectural masterpiece. Nearly 650 families, as well as college students and visitors attend the numerous services on Sundays, weekdays, and Holy Days in the building that accommodates more than 400 people. Bruton offers a full array of Christian Formation classes for adults and children and many other activities in the Parish House one and a half blocks west on Duke of Gloucester Street. Bruton Parish Church members volunteer to serve as trained guides to interpret the building and its history to our visitors.

Bruton Parish Church
Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia
Post Office Box 3520
Williamsburg, Virginia 23187-3520
Telephone (757) 229-2891
www.brutonparish.org

A Brief Guide to Bruton Parish Church

Williamsburg, Virginia



Dating from 1715, this Episcopal Church
welcomes all who enter.

(1) THE TOWER

Added to the church in 1769, the Tower houses the historic Tarpley Bell (also called Virginia's Liberty Bell), given to Bruton in 1761. It continues to summon worshippers every day. Inside the doorway of the Tower is a bronze bust of the Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin, rector, 1903-1909 and 1926-1938.

(2) THE WEST GALLERY

Erected for The College of William and Mary students and the only original part of the interior, this gallery has a handrail with visible initials carved nearly 300 years ago.

(3) THE HIGH BOX PEWS

These pews with doors were typical of unheated eighteenth-century English churches. The names on the pew doors of parish leaders and famous patriots who worshipped here, including U.S. presidents Washington, Jefferson and Monroe, remind us of the prominent role Bruton played in colonial history.

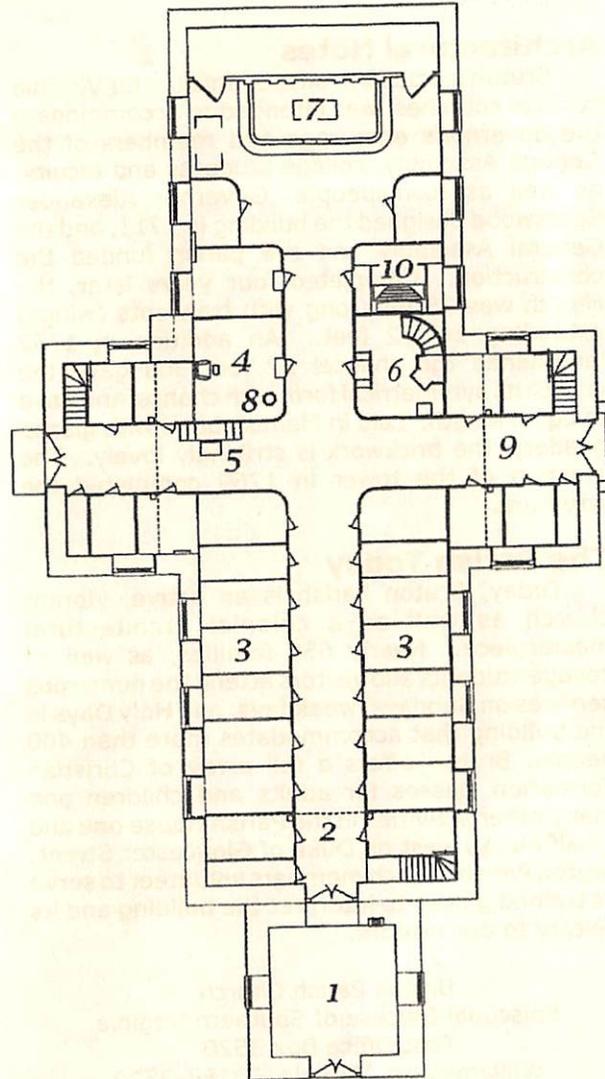
(4) THE GOVERNOR'S PEW

Reserved for the royal governor and Council members, this pew has an ornate canopied chair and, in colonial days, had curtains for privacy and warmth. Church wardens and vestrymen occupied the pews nearer the altar. Today, the choir uses them.

(5) THE BRONZE LECTERN

In 1907 President Theodore Roosevelt presented the lectern to Bruton to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the first permanent English settlement and the establishment of the Anglican church at Jamestown. Near the lectern are the gravestones of royal Governor Francis Fauquier and patriot Edmund Pendleton. For the same occasion, King Edward VII presented the church a Holy Bible.

Interior of Bruton Parish Church



Contributions help keep this church open daily.

(6) THE RECTOR'S PEW

Towering over the rector's pew is the eighteenth-century style pulpit. It features a cantilever-supported sounding board to help project the voices of those addressing the congregation. The service was conducted from this pew.

(7) THE ALTAR

The altar and communion rail, made of black walnut, and the gold gilt cross are the central features of this historic church. The panel behind the altar, called a reredos, contains the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. These fundamentals of faith, law, and prayer reflect canon law mandating their display in Anglican churches.

(8) THE BAPTISMAL FONT

The font, used regularly for baptisms, occupies a central place in the governor's pew at Bruton, a reminder of the central focus on baptism in the church. It came to Bruton circa 1758 from the church at Jamestown via its successor, the Church on the Main, located about two miles west of Jamestown on the mainland.

(9) THE SOUTH GALLERY

Used by college faculty and other dignitaries, this gallery overlooked such famous services as the day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer on June 1, 1774, held in sympathy for the people of Boston after the English Parliament closed their port.

(10) THE ORGAN

Bruton's four manual Aeolian-Skinner organ, built in 1939 and rebuilt and enlarged in 1955 and 1994, has 5,686 pipes with their sound projected through ceiling grilles. The 1785 Samuel Green organ case stands in the east gallery and is symbolic of Bruton's 1756 organ. A harpsichord is also in the chancel.