

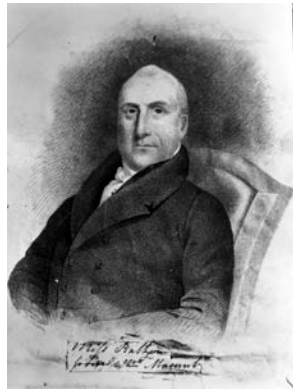
A Brief History

of the
Presbyterian Congregation in George Town

The year was 1780. Although the British Empire was approaching the greatest century of its imperial power, it was gradually being forced to yield to the relatively small, but resolute, group of colonists in North America who had vowed independence less than four years earlier. The adoption of the U.S. Constitution would not come for another seven years, and the decision to place the national capital in “the South” on a tract that would include George Town and Alexandria, as well as the open land in between, would not be made for ten years.

Stephen Bloomer Balch

In such epochal times it seemed of little note that a small group of Presbyterians under the gifted leadership of **Stephen Bloomer Balch**, soldier of the Revolution and servant of God, was establishing a church in George Town, the tiny, but thriving, Maryland seaport on the Tidewater Potomac. But, with the providence of God, that fragile church that first saw life in a borrowed log cabin has stood the tempering test of time and thrives today alongside the capital with whose life it has been so closely identified. It was the first Presbyterian church in what was to become modern-day Washington, D.C., and remains the oldest church of any denomination in the Washington area with an unbroken ministry.



In those early days, Protestants of every denomination, including many leaders of the young republic, were among its worshipers. A **charter**, still in effect, was granted in 1806 to “The Presbyterian Congregation in Georgetown” under an Act of Congress signed by President Thomas Jefferson. **The church’s seal**, with its seven stars and Bible (pictured on the cover), was designed by the Director of the Mint, Robert Patterson.

JANUARY 16, 1806.

Read the first and second time, and ordered to be committed to a committee of the whole House, on Monday next.

A Bill,

To incorporate the trustees of the Presbyterian Congregation of Georgetown, and for other purposes.

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1 Sec. 1. *BE it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives*
2 *of the United States of America, in Congress assembled,* That
3 Stephen B. Balch, William Whann, James Melvin, John Maffitt,
4 John Peter, William King, James Calder, George Thompson, Hen-
5 ry Knowles, and David Wiley, and their successors, duly elected,
6 or appointed, in manner herein after directed, be, and they are here-
7 by made, declared, and constituted a corporation, and body politic,
8 in law, and in fact, to have continuance forever, by the name, stile,
9 and title, of the Trustees of the Presbyterian congregation, in
10 Georgetown.

Historical records place the official date of the church's founding early in 1780, a year or two after the Reverend Balch had passed through George Town on his way south and preached several sermons in a log building belonging to the German Lutheran Church. It was then that he attracted the attention of the 15 or so local residents who were to band together and petition the Donegal Presbytery in Pennsylvania for his services. Despite the Presbytery's misgivings that the young minister was being sent to "an unpromising field of labor," he accepted the invitation to spend six months in George Town as a probationer and preached his first sermon on March 16, 1780. At the end of six months, "the people and the probationer having nourished a mutual friendship for each other," the call was made official and a ministry of 53 years began that was to transform the community as it solidified the foundations of Presbyterianism in the capital of the new nation.

A remarkable man in every respect, Stephen Bloomer Balch had been Captain Balch of the Maryland Volunteers before he was the Reverend Balch. He had learned of liberty as well as theology from John Witherspoon, signer of the Declaration of Independence and president of the College of New Jersey, which was to become Princeton University. Along with his pastoral duties in Georgetown he established a school, Columbia Academy, to which George Washington sent his nephews with the request that they live and study with Dr. Balch. Later he helped establish the Columbian Library, and is reputed to have published the first book in the District of Columbia. The degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred on him by Princeton, his alma mater.

The Bridge Street Church

In the beginning, having no church building of its own, the new congregation worshiped from house to house, and then in a rented room on Market Street (now 33rd Street). The first permanent

church, a small brick building, was built in 1782 at the southeast corner of Bridge and Washington Streets (now M and 30th) and was called the Bridge Street Church. Within a decade the congregation had outgrown it, and two enlargements—one in 1793 to which Thomas Jefferson contributed \$75, and another in 1801—were undertaken. Even then, the building was inadequate to serve the needs of the congregation, and by 1820 the Trustees decided to tear it down and erect a new one in its place.



They approached architect William Archer, who had recently assisted in the restoration of the White House after it was destroyed by fire in the War of 1812. In replying to their inquiry, Archer wrote, "If you may see proper to accept the offer, I shall only point out the President's House and the office of the Department of State as a specimen of my work." A contract was agreed upon to build a new church at a cost of \$20,000, and President James Monroe laid the cornerstone in 1821. When completed, the new Bridge Street Church was described by a contemporary as "the most commodious and elegant house of worship in these parts."

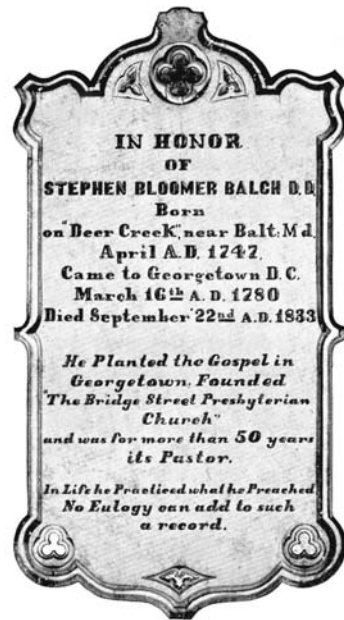
In 1833, in the 53rd year of his ministry at George Town, Stephen Bloomer Balch died at age 87. Signifying both his influence and the esteem in which he was held, the town was draped in mourning, all the bells tolled, and local business places were closed. His remains were at first interred in the front wall of the church,

but later moved to Oak Hill Cemetery, where a tablet over his grave reads in part: “He planted the Gospel in this town, and his example was for many years a light to its inhabitants. He being dead yet speaketh.”

Civil Conflict and Revival

The little congregation that had begun with 15 souls in 1780 had grown by the end of Dr. Balch’s pastorate to more than 100. But the church did not always flourish as it had in its formative years. The issues that divided the country at mid-nineteenth century also divided the congregation. When the minister, the Reverend Dr. John H. Boccock, left in 1861 to join the Army of Northern Virginia under Robert E. Lee, many members of the congregation left with him. In 1862, the church was used by the Federal Government as a hospital, and hundreds of soldiers, both Union and Confederate, were brought there after the Second Battle of Manassas and the Battle of Fredericksburg. During this period, the congregation held services on Sunday afternoons at neighboring churches. When the government released the church several months later, declining pew rents necessitated special levies that eventually lifted the congregation out of its indebtedness.

Within a decade after the end of the Civil War, the church carried out an extensive building program. A gift of “four large and desirable lots” on West Street (now P Street) had been accepted by the Trustees in 1864, and in 1865 a chapel was built on the eastern portion, named for R. S. T. Cissel, one of the major donors.



The same year, a new manse was built on the western portion, leaving the central portion vacant. When a gas works was installed adjacent to the Bridge Street Church, the congregation decided to move the church to West Street.



In 1873, the building was removed and rebuilt at its present location, utilizing as much of the original building material as possible, though embellished in the Victorian



style of the 1870s, with pointed roofs and spires, narrow stained glass windows, and a dark interior. The organ and choir loft were placed along the north wall, directly behind the pulpit. President Ulysses S. Grant laid the cornerstone of the new West Street Church where the Reverend Dr. Samuel S. Howe

was now the minister. From all accounts, his was a creative and healing ministry that did much to reunite the congregation after the divisions of the previous decade.

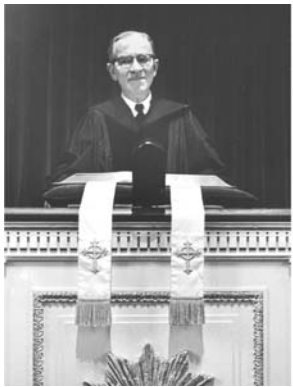
Around this time the church joined other Protestant denominations in replacing “common cup” communion with individual cups. The trays, still in use today, were made by the Thomas Communion Service Company of Lima, Ohio. A century later Dr. Sheffield was called from Lima to be our current Pastor.



At the beginning of the 20th century, the church was blessed with the third longest pastorate in its history, that of the **Reverend Dr. James T. Marshall**, who shepherded the congregation from 1908 to 1929 at a time when the Georgetown area itself was in decline. The affection in which he was held continued throughout his tenure as both pastor and pastor emeritus. With the revival of Georgetown in the 1930s, the congregation gradually gained in strength and numbers under the pastorates of Frank Niles, Robert Skinner, and John Bailey Kelly. The several youth groups formed during those years, often drawing more than a hundred each Sunday evening, promised a bright future for the church.



Building of the Present Church



A marked rebirth came with the arrival of the **Reverend Dr. Russell Cartwright Stroup**, who assumed the pulpit in 1950. It was he who awakened the congregation to its heritage and inspired the restoration and building program that produced the present church. In 1953, recognizing that no substantial improvements had been made to the physical plant in 80 years, the congregation committed itself to a major funding campaign that eventually raised nearly \$650,000. The goal was to enlarge

and modernize the educational and meeting facilities of the church while restoring the sanctuary, as closely as possible, to the original classic style of the 1821 Bridge Street Church.

To supervise the restoration, the church engaged Lorenzo Winslow, recently retired as White House architect, who consulted the drawings of William Archer, the earlier White House architect who had designed the original church. Further guidance was gained from a written description in the church archives by the Reverend Dr. Benjamin Bittinger, a Presbyterian minister who had grown up in the Bridge Street Church. In 1956, the buildings were completed and dedicated. The new three-story Balch Hall had replaced the one-story Cissel Chapel, and the sanctuary, while unchanged in dimensions, was vastly changed in character.



True to Presbyterian heritage, the emphasis was placed on the reading and preaching of the Word, with the pulpit and Bible commanding the central place of prominence. Standing in front of the church one sees the great seal of the church cut in stone with the open Book as its dominant feature, and inside the sanctuary the theme is repeated on

the pulpit itself. The scriptural plaques on the walls, illuminated by the clear glass windows, further emphasize the centrality of the Word in our worship tradition.

Because music has also played a prominent role in worship at Georgetown, a fine organ built by the Aeolian Skinner Company was installed during the restoration, and **William Franklin Watkins** became director of music, a post he was to fill with great distinction for the next 41 years.



Many new furnishings – the generous gifts of members and friends, including antique chandeliers dating from 1780, paintings and murals, vases and candelabra, and the imposing eagle console tables in the narthex – further enhanced the new church.

In the years following the restoration, membership at Georgetown almost doubled, at one point reaching 912 communicants. To serve the growing congregation, the Session and the Board of Deacons were expanded in number, an associate pastor was called, and new programs in education, the arts, and community service were initiated. In 1970, when Dr. Stroup retired and became pastor emeritus, a grateful congregation dedicated the pulpit in his honor.

Revitalization and Renewal

The decade of the 1970s brought a period of unrest to the church, as it did to the city and the nation, and membership declined. But a pulpit exchange in 1978 led to an eventual call to the **Reverend C. C. Campbell Gillon**. His arrival from his native Scotland in 1980 sparked an immediate revival. Even a destructive fire in the



church in 1981 failed to diminish the congregation's recaptured vitality. Over the next two decades, the church achieved a strong financial footing for the first time in its history, enabling the hiring of additional staff members, including a director of Christian education and a business manager.

At the same time, the congregation extended its outreach further into the life of the city and beyond, from soup kitchens to homeless shelters to career support groups to refugee care programs as well as to selected mission projects around the world.

When Campbell Gillon retired in 2002, he had completed his 50th year in the ministry and his 22nd year at Georgetown – the second longest pastorate in the church's history. In his honor a "Heritage and Hope" campaign was launched to upgrade the church's outdated mechanical systems, install an elevator, and renovate Balch Hall to create new Sunday School rooms and office space.

During this period of transition, as the search for a new senior minister was underway, the congregation was fortunate to have as interim pastor the Reverend Dr. Clarence Ammons, who fulfilled his multiple tasks as preacher, administrator, and even construction manager with grace and good humor and earned the lasting affection and admiration of the congregation.





The Church and Manse,
with new gated entry to Balch Hall,
looking west on P Street NW.

The 225th Anniversary Year

In 2005, as the Presbyterian Congregation in Georgetown celebrated its 225th anniversary, it also celebrated the arrival of **the Reverend Dr. Richard Louie Sheffield** as its 19th senior pastor. Dr. Sheffield holds a Master of Divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary (where 15 of his predecessors also studied) and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Having begun his career in the business world prior to entering the ministry, he has a breadth of experience that enhances his role as pastor, administrator, and counselor. As the first minister to reside in the manse since the 1960s, he looks forward to taking an active part in the Georgetown community.

Just as Dr. Sheffield continues the church's long tradition of outstanding preaching, Music Director John Lintner maintains a music



program of the highest quality, bolstered by a dedicated choir and one of the city's finest organs.

Over the past decade, the congregation has moved to preserve the records and recollections of its journey from the log cabin days of the late 18th century to the flourishing era of the new millennium. Records have been catalogued, microfilmed, and stored in a secure Heritage Room, and a program of collecting oral histories has been instituted. Art objects and memorabilia have been inventoried and procedures adopted for protecting them. The goal is to insure that the memory of that little band of witnesses who labored with Dr. Balch to “plant the gospel in this town” remains ever fresh, and that, inspired by the tradition they spawned, the congregation can continue to enhance that legacy by maintaining its witness for Christ not only in its own community, but also in whatever sectors of the world it finds needs to which it can minister.



Compiled by the Heritage Committee
from previously written accounts in the church archives
January 2005