

ST. STEPHEN'S CHURCH - 1769

The parish church of St. Stephens Parish

(From "Historic Ramblin's Through Berkeley" by J. Russell Cross)

The strip of land running along the south side of the Santee River up to the point where it makes a southward dip in its westward bend was a part of Colonial Craven County and was established as St. James, Santee Parish in 1706 at a time when the Huguenots were being told that they should come into the establishment and have State (Provincial) support for their church rather than pay taxes and also support their separate church. The lower part of St. James, Santee Parish was thickly settled by Huguenots, but the upper part, like upper St. John's, Berkeley, was first settled chiefly by English. The upper section became known as English Santee while the lower section was called French Santee. As the French families accumulated wealth and increased in numbers, they moved up the River in search of new lands. Another factor that entered the picture was the fact that at that time the lands of St. Stephen's and St. John's Berkeley that lay along the River did not flood as much as the swamp lands did along the lower Santee.

Many of the English moved on to new frontiers, but others remained here and inter married with the French. By 1754, when the upper part was cut off to form St. Stephen's Parish, that section had a large French population. It is not known whether or not a French Church ever actually existed here, but the influence was strong here and was found to a marked degree in civic and religious activities. This section prospered and we are told that it became the most thickly settled part of the Province outside Charles Town until the Revolutionary War.

When the Parish was established there was already here a wooden chapel and by 1759 plans were being made to replace this with a brick church. Samuel Gaillard Stoney tells that the new church was begun in 1767 and completed in 1769, being built with money from the "Indigo Prosperity" of the time.

The Commissioners did not let a contract for the entire construction but let the work out "piecemeal." Brick that was considered suitable was secured only after several attempts at making brick. The supervisors of the project were A. Howard and Francis Villepontoux. Most of the work on the building went to Villepontoux and William Axson. Axson, a member of the Wambaw Lodge of Freemasons, inscribed his name and the Masonic Insignia in ground brick above the window of the chancel.

At the beginning of the American Revolution, this section had an unusually high percentage of Tories, who made things difficult for their Whig neighbors and for Francis Marion and his patriots over in St. John's, Berkeley.

With the departure of the British troops many of the Anglican Clergy left the State. Bishop Albert S. Thomas, in his Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina, discusses in detail the increasing decline of the Church after 1802 and the efforts of various ministers to reopen and reactivate the parish. He states that the more extensive renovations of the building took place in 1808, 1870, 1934, and more recently.

For many years the doors of this fine old Church were open to the winds and to any comer. The cemetery appears to have always been a community cemetery, except for those families that long continued burying in the plantation family cemetery. These cemeteries were generally only a short distance from the plantation house spot and appear to have often been begun with the death and burial of a child in what had been a garden spot.

Just forty years before the brick church was begun here, this section was the frontier of the Province, which makes it that much more remarkable that this building is unique and represents the tastes and the resources of these grandchildren of laboring immigrant ancestors. Here, as elsewhere in the rural South, hard work and the accumulation of wealth brought about the evolution of a growing planter aristocracy from immigrants of all classes from most European countries.

An announcement in "The Berkeley Democrat" of May 20, 1970 stated that Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel had announced that this "small Georgian country parish church" was one among nine buildings in South Carolina and one among four in Berkeley County eligible for designation as National Historic Landmarks. See photograph, above.

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church by Jane Searles Misenhelter, published by The State Co., Columbia, S. C., 1977 is an interesting source of additional material on the Church, revealing such facts as that the old wooden chapel was still here where "it formerly stood" on Oct. 16, 1769 when Francis Villepontoux was authorized to move it and convert it into a "Vestry House" for the sum of 70 pounds currency. As in many rural churches in Berkeley County, this church spot and cemetery appear to have been located here originally on the oral authorization of the landowner, for in 1846 they took steps and obtained a Quit-Claim Deed (Book X-11, page 51, Recorder's Office, Charleston County).

Other interesting material on the Parish and its people may be found in A Contribution To The History Of The Huguenots Of South Carolina, consisting of pamphlets by Samuel Dubose, Esq. of St. John's, Berkeley and Prof. Frederick A. Porcher of Charleston, which was republished by T. Gaillard Thomas, M.D., The Knickerbocker Press, New York, 1887. In 1962 this book was again published.

Information and Article from
"Historic Ramblin's Through Berkeley"
Written by and used with permission of
Mr. J. Russell Cross



Two color photographs of the church and the above article are available online at:
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~scbchs/SS.htm>

J Russell Cross 1914 - 2000 --- a brief biography

Obituary from The State newspaper, (Columbia, SC) - July 18, 2000

CROSS, SC - Services for Joseph Russell Cross, 86, will be held at 4 p.m. Wednesday at Friendship United Methodist Church of Cross with the Rev. Stephen Gaither and the Rev. Kermit Shrawder officiating. Burial will be in the church cemetery. Active pallbearers will be Wiggins Ellison Singletary Jr., Russell Pressley Singletary, William Spencer Hutto, David Sebastian Cross, Arthur O'Dell Shuler III and Norman Dreyfus Cross Jr. The family will receive friends 6-8 tonight at Avinger Funeral Home of Holly Hill. Mr. Cross had many interests and was affiliated with many organizations. Memorials may be made to Friendship UMC, PO Box 189, Cross, SC 29436; The Adam Cross Endowed Scholarship, Wofford College, 429 Church St., Spartanburg, SC 29303-3663; or to any institution or charities with which Mr. Cross was involved.

Mr. Cross died Sunday, July 16, 2000 at the Methodist Oaks of Orangeburg. He was born Feb. 24, 1914 in Cross in Berkeley Co., the son of Joseph Pressley Cross and Addie Lea Russell Cross. He was a retired school superintendent and a tree farmer. He received his A.B. from Wofford College in 1935 and earned a Master of Education from the University of South Carolina. In 1941 he married Julia Harrington Rogers of Marlboro Co. They were married for over 58 years.

Mr. Cross served in the United States Army throughout World War II and was discharged with the rank of major. He had a 28-year career in public education. He was a life member of the National Education Association.

A devoted member of Friendship Methodist Church, he served the church in many capacities. He was active in the Democratic Party. He served as president of the Moncks Corner Rotary Club and the Cross Lions club. He belonged to and had been commander of the Hill-Weatherford Post of the American Legion. He was chairman of the board for the Berkeley County Library when the central library was planned and constructed. He was a Life member of the South Carolina Historical Society, life member and former vice-president of the Huguenot Society of South Carolina, founder and first president of the Berkeley County Historical Society, member of the Sons of the American Revolution, the Saint David's Society, and the University of South Caroliniana Society. He was an active public speaker, raconteur, and writer on the history of his region. His book *Historic Ramblin's Through Berkeley* was published in 1985.

Surviving are his wife of the Methodist Oaks; daughters, Gertrude Celeste (Mrs. W. Ellison Singletary) of Cross, Julia Harrington (Mrs. D. Warren Lambert) of Ellore; son, Joseph Russell Cross Jr. of Columbia; eight grandchildren; nieces and nephews. He was predeceased by a daughter, Elizabeth Rogers Cross Hutto; sister, Aline Cross Farland.