

# Va. church where George Washington prayed honors its enslaved builders

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Retropolis

By Dave Kindy

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Whenever George Washington was back at Mount Vernon, he worshiped at Pohick Church in Lorton, Va., six miles from his family plantation. In fact, Washington helped design and build the church, which opened its doors for services in 1774 and still stands today. He had plenty of assistance, though. Virginia planter and politician George Mason was actively involved in its planning and construction, as were scores of local tradespeople and businessmen.

But much of the work was done by enslaved people.

To honor their contributions, Pohick Church installed bronze plaques Tuesday with the names of all known individuals who worked on the structure, including those in bondage. The markers were placed inside the Episcopal church on the back wall near two other historical signs and will be dedicated in a ceremony Saturday.

“We fully embrace our historic and spiritual heritage,” the Rev. Lynn Ronaldi, the church’s rector, said in a statement. “We are also aware that our church was built in part by slave labor. So it became a passion to recognize all who came together ‘as a village’ to build Pohick Church, including and especially those who had no choice — the enslaved persons.”

Ronaldi long suspected that enslaved people were forced to construct the small structure, which measures 66 by 45 feet. She asked docent Dick Hamly, who was married at the church in 1990, to look into the history and see what he could find. Thanks to vestry records dating back to 1732, when the church occupied a wooden chapel — and assistance from Fairfax County Circuit Court Historic Records — Hamly and his team of researchers learned a lot.

“We were able to identify many different individuals,” he said. “They include 25 enslaved people, as well as an infant and at least one indentured servant. Presumably, the infant was the child of one of the enslaved working on the new church.”

Known as the “Mother Church of Northern Virginia,” Pohick was the first permanent church north of the Occoquan River in the Virginia colony. Built circa 1724, the structure was first known as Occoquan Church but later was called Pohick, after a nearby creek.

Pohick became the center of Truro Parish after the ecclesiastical jurisdiction was established by the Virginia General Assembly in 1732. Augustine Washington, George Washington's father, played a central role in the early development of the parish.

By 1767, the Pohick vestry decided the old chapel wasn't stately enough to serve as the parish's main church, so they looked into building a more elegant structure. With George Washington and Mason leading the way, planning and construction began on a colonial-style church with boxed pews in 1771.

"The two were in disagreement about where to put the new church," Ronaldi said in an interview. "Mason wanted another location while Washington advocated for this site. They went before the vestry in 1767, where Washington made a compelling argument and got approval."

The land for the new church was sold to the vestry by local plantation owner Daniel French, who also agreed to erect the new building at a cost of 877 Virginia pounds, or about \$160,000 today. French died soon after construction started, so Mason took over the role of general contractor — then known as undertaker — while acting as executor of French's estate.

Most of the enslaved people working on the church were enslaved by French, though it is believed that people enslaved on other plantations — including Washington's and Mason's — may have been involved at some point. Vestry minutes, contractor invoices and census records were used to identify those building the church, but the documents are not clear as to what role certain enslaved people played, Hamly noted.

"For some, their exact contributions are not known because they didn't have specific skills or were not listed as working on a particular job," he said. "Many probably made bricks, but we just don't know. They belonged to Daniel French and were surely quartered there to work on the new church."

A few enslaved people were identified with first and last names, as well as occupations, such as joiner or carpenter. Most were listed only by their gender and first name, including Man Jack, Lad George, Woman Viner, Girl Fanny and Boy Abraham.

According to Hamly, many likely lived in slave quarters near the construction site. Most were probably also compelled to work in the plantation fields during busy periods.

Church records show that the vestry also paid for goods and services from dozens of local workers, including one woman, Mary Wilson, who served as cook for those building the church. Others included masons, plasterers, painters, carvers and carpenters.

According to Ronaldi, the vestry at Pohick Church decided to post the plaques to honor its history and to acknowledge the role of slavery in this storyline. Although Washington was a major enslaver, she noted that he was conflicted about slavery.

“Washington struggled with the institution of slavery throughout his life,” she said, pointing out that his view of human bondage changed as he grew older and came to consider it incompatible with his faith. Yet he didn’t emancipate the 123 people he enslaved until after his death, through his will.

One of the new plaques states: “Completed in 1774, this historic church was built in part with slave and indentured labor. Enslaved Americans were also employed in the fabrication of its original fixtures and furnishings. The financial support of prominent early parishioners toward the work of the church was made possible by the labor of enslaved Americans.”

The bronze tablets list the names of all known people who helped with construction, including Washington, Mason, French and other parishioners, as well as the vestry and church officers, tradesmen, other workers, suppliers, transporters and businessmen.

They also include the name of the indentured servant — Ben Burton — and those who were forced to work at the site: “Metalsmiths: Enslaved Men George, Joe and Tom; Firewood Cutter: Enslaved Man Peter; Enslaved Africans on site in 1772, whose particular contributions were not recorded: Jack Goddert, Will Goddert, Kate, Jack, Exeter, George, Viner, Lett, Sue, Phylis, Betty and her child Humphrey, Bett, Fanny, Dinah, Abraham, Isaac, Joe, Sam, Gilbert and Emanuel.”