

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Prince Fredericks Church ©

On a drive down Plantersville Road, you may come to a sight both eerie and fascinating, and leaves strangers wondering how this ancient structure came to be. Prince Frederick's Church façade stands as a lonely sentinel of what may be described as "the church that was never meant to be."

In 1721, the Parish of Prince George, Winyah was established. The bounds of the parish were the North Santee River on the south to the Cape Fear River at the north and from the Atlantic Ocean on the east to as far as his Majesty's inhabitants could be found in the west. Named after George, Prince of Wales, who later became King George II, a small chapel was built on the banks of the Black River on a high bluff at a curve in the river at Winea Plantation. The center of population at the time was here at an Indian trading post.

By 1729, the new town of Georgetown was established and the center of population moved to the Sampit River. As Georgetown grew, an International Port of Entry was declared in 1732. Finally, in 1734, the Church of England decided to build the parish church in the town, and at the same time split the parish on the north side. Prince Frederick's Parish was established in the area where the Winea Church stood. She became the seat of this new parish.

The church on Black River was a small, but elegant edifice built on a high bluff, overlooking the Black River. Construction began in 1726 with services held in the unfinished building. The Rev. Mr. Morrith wrote that the church was of wood construction, 45 feet long by 25 feet wide. The vestry minutes show the church to be rather ornate when it was completely finished. It had a gallery with pillars, "cornishes", corner facings, rails about the altar, a polished altar table and a pulpit". According to Elizabeth Allston Pringle, "The first church building of this parish, as far as we know, could...not have been more beautiful and peaceful as this God's Acre, lying high above the fast-flowing river, shaded by stately water-oaks, rejoicing in their glistening new foliage, and the white marble monuments, peeping through a tangle of wild azalea, dogwood, and honeysuckle. There is no fence or enclosure around the graveyard which must cover two acres of space, but there are private brick enclosures with locked gates, and the marble monuments within are well kept and cared for."

The Rev. Mr. Hugh Fraser served of Rector of Prince Frederick from 1793 until 1810 when he left to go to All Saints Parish. This little church on the bluff was all but abandoned and soon fell into disrepair and finally ruin. The cemetery is still there and has graves of several of Revolutionary War General Francis Marion's troops. The decline was primarily caused by a shift of population to the rice plantations along the lower Black River and PeeDee River near Plantersville.

There is no record for many years, until 1827, Monday April 9th, of the Episcopalians holding services near Plantersville in a "universal" chapel when the Vestry met to take into consideration the best means of erecting an Episcopal church, between Dr. William Allston's plantation and Black River Ferry. Apparently, the vestry could not agree on a suitable place for the Church, for though the money was raised and a building Committee appointed, nothing was done. On January 28, 1855, a building committee was appointed with power to contract for and build a church of convenient dimensions on a bit of land given by the Rev. Hugh Fraser. The building was completed the ensuing Spring. The Parish

flourished but they seemed content with the wooden chapel until the Easter Meeting of 1857 when it was decided that a larger accommodation was needed for the growing congregation. An edifice of brick was planned at a cost of \$12,650. Mr. Louis Barbot was chosen as architect. There were many delays, one being the death of the Contractor, Mr. Gunn, when he fell from the roof, thus deriving the nickname of "the old Gunn Church". The furnishings and finishings which were ordered abroad, were lost running the Blockade, the War Between the States having been declared before the building was quite finished, and it remained an unfinished ruin almost until 1876, when by the generosity of John Earl Allston of Brooklyn, N. Y., the building was repaired and completed.

Upon completion of the neo-Gothic church, the small church was literally put on rollers and transported down Plantersville Road in the direction of today's Highway 701. It was installed only about a quarter of a mile from the highway. This chapel still stands today and is used by Prince George Church for special services. It is known as the Prince Frederick Summer Chapel.

Elizabeth Allston Pringle first became interested in the history of Prince Fredericks when it became necessary to repair the brick church which had been damaged by storms and was not thought safe, so that service had not been held there for a great many years. Being appointed on the Committee for raising funds for its repair, it was suggested that the publication of the Church Record by subscription, would be a means of adding to the fund; this idea was eagerly adopted and a long list of people whose family records were in the old manuscript, which was kept in a box in the Bank, being in a very frail and tattered condition, put their names down for a volume at five dollars. Then came the terrible European War [World War I] and no money was forthcoming. The publication had to be given up. It was then that the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America came forward and through its "Committee for the Preservation of Existing Records, " with great generosity gave the whole amount needed for the publication of the old Register.

The small congregation endured, but in the end, the Church was finally abandoned. By 1966, the condition was so derelict that it was deemed unsafe and the main body was demolished. The remaining façade still stands, but its fate is precarious. The cemetery remains, silent sentinels to guard what was begun in great prosperity.