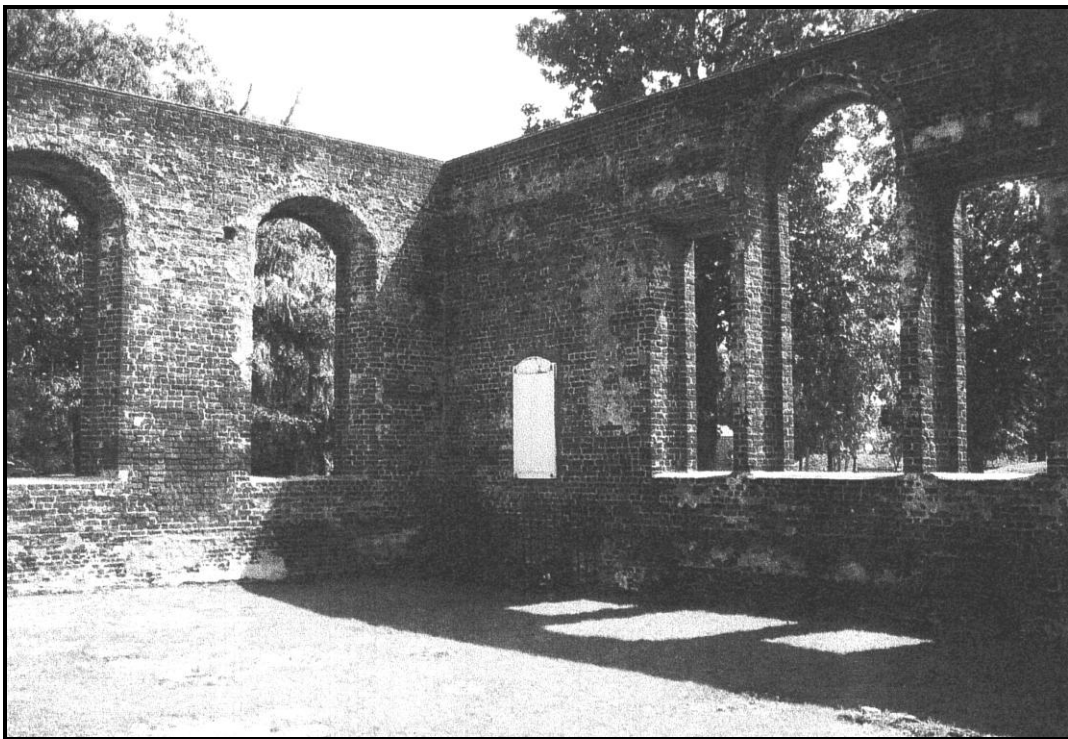


# **ANGLICAN CHURCH BUILDING IN COLONIAL NORTH CAROLINA, 1701-1776: A STUDY IN FRUSTRATION**



**Interior of Ruins, St. Philip's Church, Brunswick, NC, built 1754-1768  
Now Part of Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson State Historic Site**

**The Rev. N. Brooks Graebner, Ph.D.**

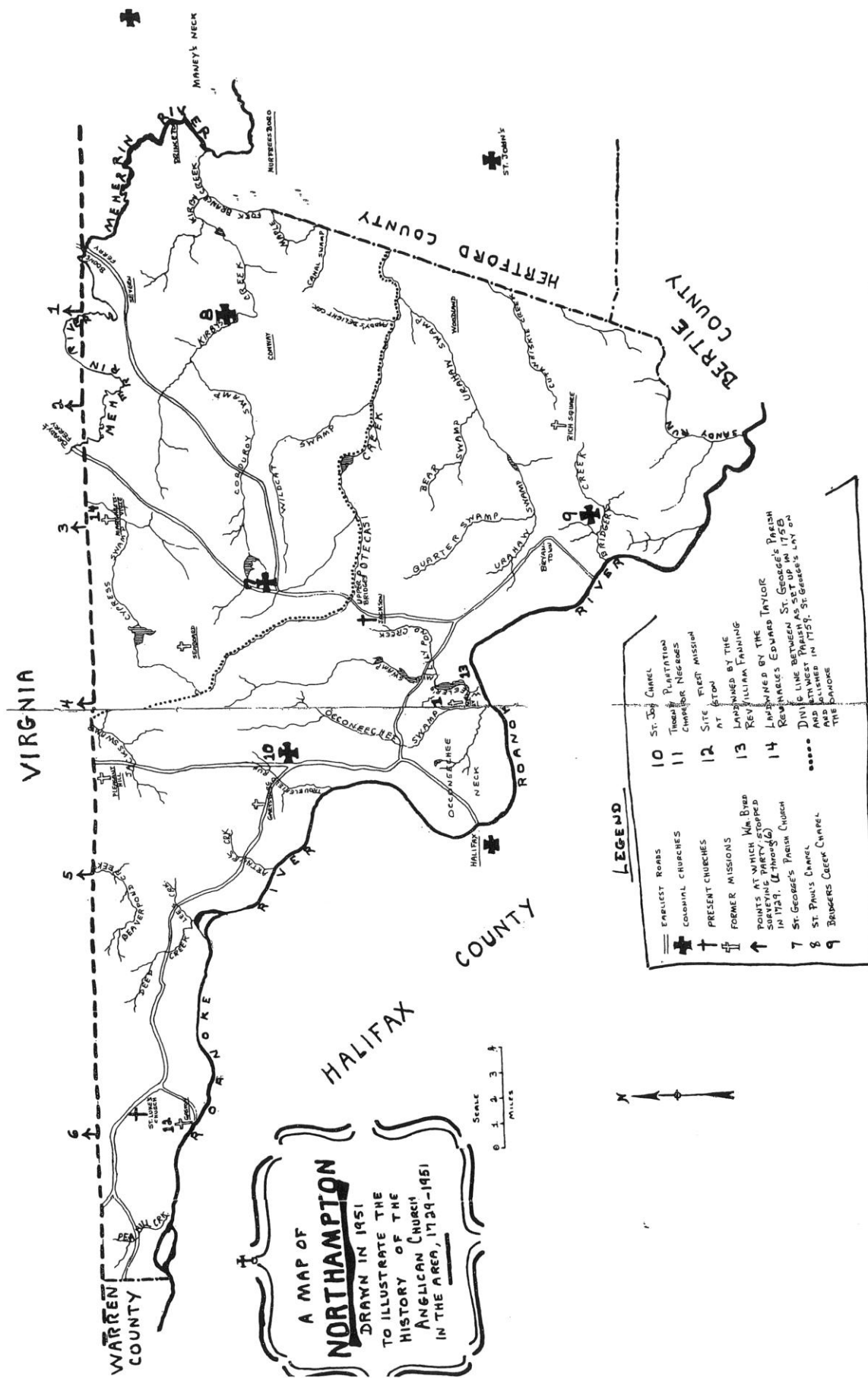
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**Edited for Publication by Lynn Hoke**

**Project Archivist, Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina**

**2011**





**Map from Northampton Parishes, Henry Wilkins Lewis, 1951**

Note dotted line showing division between the earlier St. George's Parish and Northwest Parish.

The following description of Northampton County's original boundaries is typical of the colonial survey records:  
" . . . , That Part of Bertie county which lieth North and West of Sandy Run and in a direct Line from the Head of the said Run, to the Head of the Beaver Dam Swamp, and down the said Swamp and Meherrin Creek and River be, and is hereby erected into a County, by the name of Northampton County." [The Formation of the North Carolina Counties 1663-1943, David L. Corbitt, p. 163]



**B**efore 1701 there was no structure to provide for the worship of the Church of England in North Carolina. This state of affairs reflects three things about local conditions: (1) the Proprietary government was not interested in establishing churches, as English attitudes towards religion had been changing in the 1600s; (2) the demographics of North Carolina showed sparsely settled areas, with Albemarle becoming a refuge for Quakers; (3) the physical conditions were harsh and daunting.

All these are reflected in John Blair's account of the conditions he encountered upon entering North Carolina in January, 1704. Blair was an earnest young missionary, sent here by English patrons, to serve the newly-established church in the colony. Writing to his English patrons, he explained:

*Immediately I was obliged to buy a couple of horses which cost me 14 pounds, one of which was a guide because there is no possibility for a stranger to find his road in the Country for if he once goes astray, it's a great hazard if ever he finds his road again. Besides there is mighty inconveniencies in traveling there, for the roads are not only deep and difficult to be found, but there are likewise seven great rivers in the country over which there is no passing with horses except two of them, one of which the Quakers have settled a ferry over for their own convenience, and nobody but themselves have the privilege of it, so that at the passing over the rivers, I was obliged either to borrow or hire horses, which was both troublesome and chargeable insomuch that in little more than two months I was obliged to dispose of the necessities I carried for my own use, to satisfy my creditors. I found in the country a great many children to be baptized, whereof I baptized about a hundred, and there are a great many still to be baptized, whose parents would not condescend to have them baptized with godfathers and godmothers. [Church of England in North Carolina: Documents, 1699-1741, Colonial Records of North Carolina, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, v. 10, pp. 27-28]*

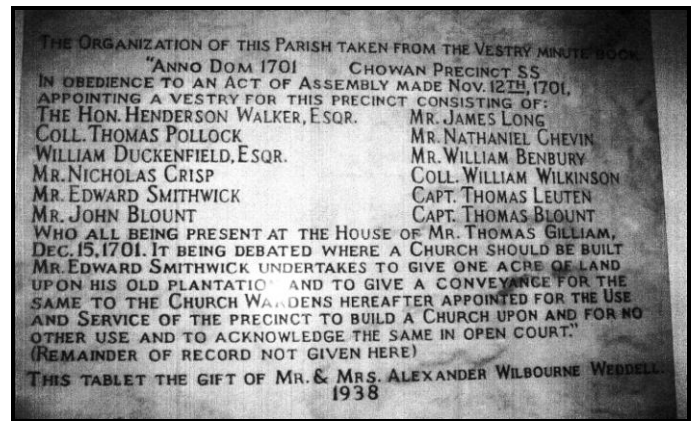
Blair later summed up North Carolina by calling it "the most Barbarous place in the Continent." Scarcely surprising, then, that he stayed only eight months before packing his bags and returning to England, penniless.

### 1701: The First Vestry Act

Perhaps Blair was expecting too much. Steps to organize the Church here in North Carolina had just begun in 1701, when the colonial assembly passed its first Vestry Act, thereby making the Church of England the officially sanctioned faith in North Carolina. This act provided for the creation of precincts – or parishes – run by vestries. (These political units should be distinguished from our local church parishes and vestries of today.) Principally through levying taxes and fines, colonial vestries in each parish were called upon to make provision for church buildings and ministers, oversee the parish poor, and serve other delegated political functions. The precincts of Chowan, Pasquotank, Perquimans, and Currituck along Albemarle Sound and Pamlico precinct in Bath County date to this time.

### St. Paul's Church, Edenton

The most complete picture of church activity in colonial North Carolina comes from Chowan County. Chowan Precinct was one of those created by that initial Vestry Act of 1701. It is the one vestry for which we have an almost complete set of vestry minutes, and it is the one precinct in which there was evident eagerness to translate the Act into action.



First Vestry, Chowan Precinct, 1701  
(Photograph by Brooks Graebner)

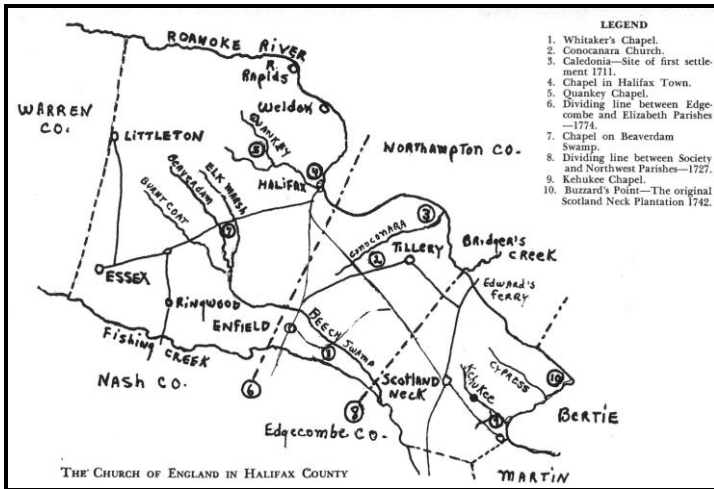
To address the need for church buildings, the vestry quickly erected a simple frame church on land donated by Edward Smithwick at Hayes Plantation. The building was to be 25 feet long and cost no more than 25 pounds. It was ready by December of 1702. In construction it was extremely simple, little more than a roof on posts with a floor of packed earth. The following year, the vestry gave orders to make a pulpit and reading desk, and procure a copy of the Prayer Book and Book of Homilies.

To be sure, that was a promising and rapid response, but it provided for only one small building in a precinct which ran from the present Virginia State line south through present-day Chowan County to include Washington and Tyrell counties on the south side of Albemarle Sound and west to include present-day Bertie County. Clearly the entire parish couldn't possibly assemble in one place on Sundays. For this reason, the vestry also encouraged the building of chapels to serve outlying areas. In Chowan Precinct at least five other chapels are known to have been built in the early 1700s. Here services could be held on Sundays, and if no ordained minister were present, a local lay reader or clerk could be appointed to read the service instead. The vestry supported the work of the readers with a small stipend. [A Celebration of Faith: 300 Years in the Life of St. Paul's, Anne Rouse Edwards, p. 24]

Throughout the colonial period, the erection of such small chapels was a principal form of church building. Made of log or simple frame construction, none of them was particularly durable, and none has survived. Indeed, in only a few cases do we know for certain the precise location of these chapels, and it would take archeological investigation to learn more. But they were a highly important step in the development of the church, and in most places were built before a parish church could be



undertaken. Indeed, shortly after taking office in 1765, Governor Tryon wrote a report on the state of the church in which he noted that only five church buildings existed, of which only one (New Bern) was finished and in good repair. But in the same report, Tryon states that all 32 parishes had chapels. [The Episcopal Church in North Carolina, 1701-1959, Lawrence F. London & Sarah M. Lemmon, p. 24]



### Colonial Chapels & Parish Boundary Lines

(The Church of England in Halifax County, Claiborne T. Smith, Jr.)

The building of more substantial parish churches proved much more time-consuming and challenging. In the case of Chowan Precinct, even the parish church was not durable. By 1708, the vestry was discussing building a replacement, and even went so far as to produce a design. By 1711 the 'old' building [not yet ten years old] was reportedly "ready to drop down" and "the key being lost the door, the door was left open" so that "all the Hogs and Cattle flee thither for shelter in the summer and warmth in the winter, they first dig holes and bury themselves, then with the rest make it a loathsome place." In 1718 the church was simply abandoned, and public worship was relocated to the newly-constructed Edenton courthouse instead. The building of a new parish church in the new colonial capital of Edenton was discussed in the assembly in the 1720s, but efforts were blocked by the secretary, John Lovick, who the churchwardens described as "a man of no religion, fears not God nor man, believes neither, seldom seen at any place of divine worship, his money is his God, ridicules all goodness. While such a man is in power no good can be expected." [A Celebration of Faith: 300 Years in the Life of St. Paul's, Anne Rouse Edwards, p. 33]

Finally, in 1736, steps were taken which would lead to the building of the handsome colonial brick church in Edenton, St. Paul's, but even that effort would take until 1760 to complete, 24 years from when construction began. The delay, in part, may have been a result of having the Chowan County Courthouse at hand for public worship, as was the case for about twenty years in Wilmington. In any case, the long delay in starting and finishing St. Paul's means that the distinction of having the oldest church building in North Carolina belongs instead to St. Thomas, Bath, erected in 1734.

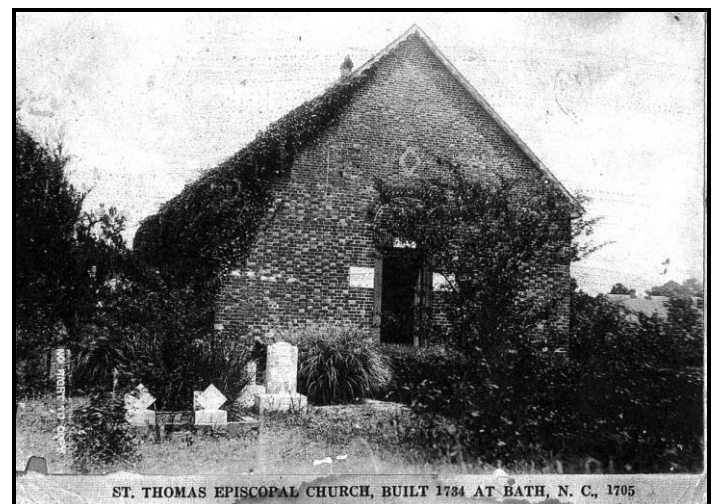


St. Paul's Church, Edenton, 1736-1760

(Diocese of North Carolina Archives)

### St. Thomas' Church, Bath

The 1734 Episcopal Church in Bath is a charming building, a quaint and beloved building, but not a fine building. The walls are out of square and decorative elements are almost nonexistent (save for the brickwork over the door). But it was substantial, and happily, it has survived both hurricanes and periods of neglect, so that it continues to support the worship of an active congregation today. It has the honor of being North Carolina's oldest church building.



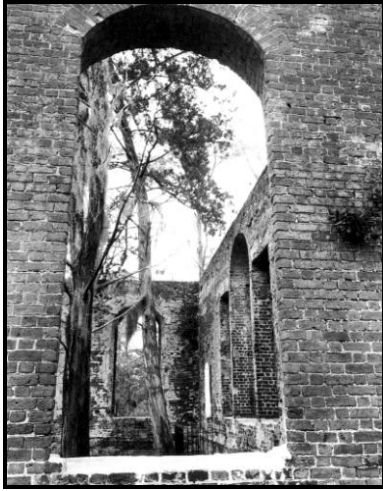
Undated photograph by T. R. Draper, Bath, NC

(Diocese of North Carolina Archives)



### St. Philip's Church, Brunswick

There are also impressive colonial ruins of the large brick church erected for St. Philip's parish in Brunswick, where the walls remain standing, even though the roof and interior were destroyed by fire during the War of Independence.



Ruins of St. Philip's Church, Brunswick, 1754-1768  
(Diocese of North Carolina Archives)

The story of St. Philip's, Brunswick, brings into sharp relief the problems that beset efforts to build Anglican churches in North Carolina. One chronic problem was lack of funds. Although vestry acts authorized the levying of taxes to build churches and pay the salary of ministers, vestries were often loathe to impose such a burden when so many residents were indifferent to (and sometimes actively hostile to) the established church. One way around this hostility, was to ask for subscriptions, or donations, from those actively interested in supporting the church. This could go a long way toward easing the tensions created by levying taxes, or lessen the tax burden.

In 1751 we see precisely this strategy being employed in neighboring St. James' Parish to fund the building of a church in Wilmington, for which "voluntary" offerings were collected, but a "further sum is yet necessary to carry on and compleat the same." Another act levied a "tax of one shilling and four pence Proclamation Money be laid on all the Taxables of the said Parish of St. James's for the space of three years from the ratification hereof to be collected yearly and every year as all other Taxes usually are by the Sheriff of New Hanover County." [Society in Early North Carolina, Alan Watson, p. 243]

At the same time, an act was passed to collect subscriptions for St. Philip's, Brunswick, but nine years later new legislation sought to tap another source of revenue:

*And whereas the finishing the building of the said Two Churches will be greatly expedited, provided the Money arising by the Sale of the Slaves, and other Effects saved out of the Wreck of the Spanish Privateer that blew up before Brunswick, in the Year [1748], and is now in Private Hands, unapplied to any Public use, might be appropriated to the compleating the said Two Churches: Be it Enacted by the Authority aforesaid, That the Slaves and other Effects, saved*

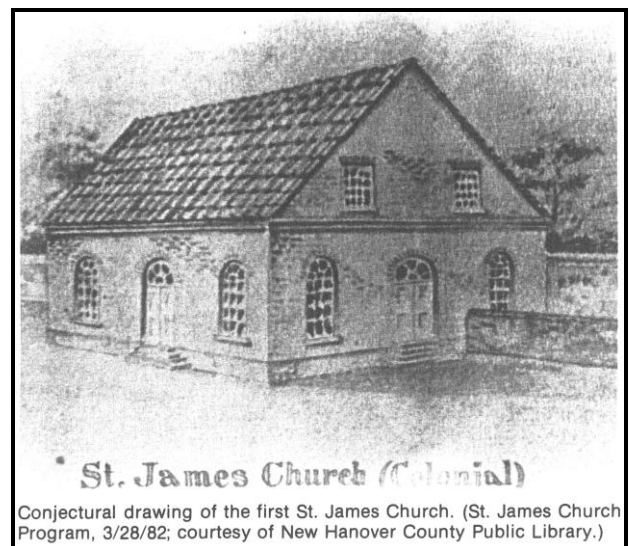
*out of the Spanish Wreck as aforesaid, or taken from the Spaniards at the Time of their Invasion, not already sold: as also the Money arising by the Sale of those which have been sold, after deducting the Expences of such Sales, shall be applied towards the compleating the building the said Two Churches, in Manner following; that is to say, Two third Parts of the Net Proceeds towards finishing the Church at Brunswick; and the other third Part towards finishing the Church at Wilmington, and to no other use or purpose whatsoever.* [Society in Early North Carolina, Alan Watson, p. 244]

Even then, it would be 1768 before the church was considered complete – by which time, the Colonial Capital had moved to New Bern and the Port to Wilmington, leaving St. Philip's the largest and handsomest church building in the colony – but with little or no congregation. Thus, when the roof and interior were destroyed by fire, when the British burned the town in 1776, no effort was made to rebuild the church. Bishop Ives, in the 1830s, noted that the building needed only a roof to be made usable, but there wasn't a congregation willing to undertake it, and so the church relinquished control to the state of North Carolina in 1952 and it is now operated as part of a state historic site.

That said, the ruins of St. Philip's remain truly impressive. This is the one colonial church that in size and construction would be the equal of fine colonial churches in Virginia. The walls are 22' high, 76' l x 56' w. (approximately four times the size of the church in Bath). Governor Dobbs may have had a hand in the planning. [A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Eastern North Carolina, Catherine Bisher & Michael Southern, p. 267]

### St. James' Church, Wilmington

The church in Wilmington, St. James, may have been similar in material and construction to St. Philip's – torn down in the 1830s to accommodate a new church – and the growth of Wilmington.



Reproduced in St. James Historical Records, 1737-1852

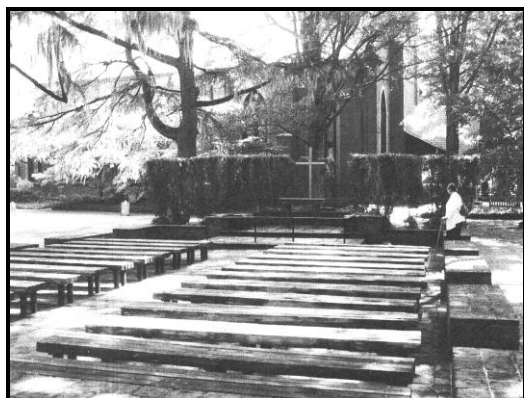


The first church was actually built partially in the middle of Market Street, so that was another reason to start again, and church fashion was changing with the beginning of the Gothic Revival style. The 1839 St. James' Church is generally credited with being the first Gothic Revival Church in North Carolina.

Wilmington was the largest city in North Carolina and center of the revival of the Episcopal Church in the nineteenth century – the one truly viable parish in the entire state when the Diocese was formed in 1817.

### Christ Church, New Bern

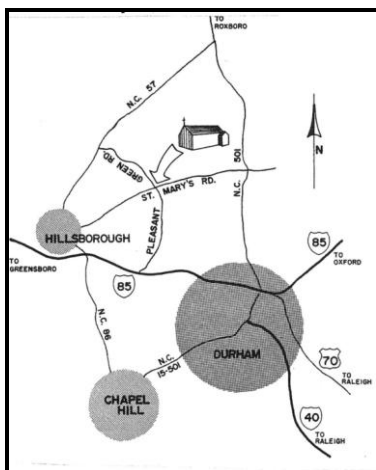
The Church in New Bern had a fate similar to Wilmington's. A colonial church building (1750) survived until a better church could be built in the 1820s. The original church footprint, which is almost exactly the same size as St. Thomas, Bath, has been creatively transformed into an outdoor chapel area.



Site of 1<sup>st</sup> Christ Church, New Bern, 1750  
(Photograph by Brooks Graebner)

### St. Mary's Chapel, Orange County

The first St. Mary's Chapel in Orange County was built in 1759 six miles east of Hillsborough. Because it lasted until the present chapel was built on the same site in 1859, it is one of the few colonial chapels with a known location.



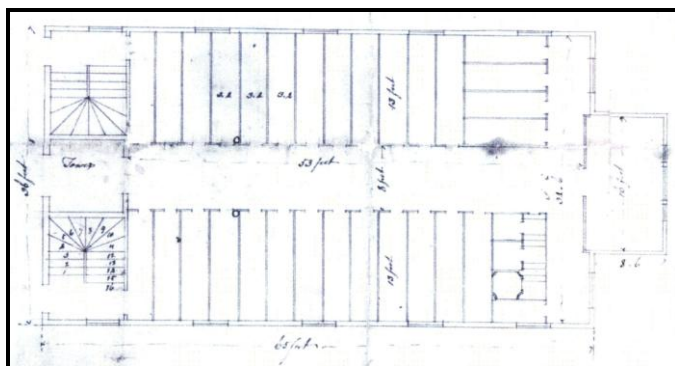
Location of St. Mary's Chapel, Orange County  
(Parish Files, Diocese of North Carolina Archives)

### St. Matthew's Church, Hillsborough

In Hillsborough the original frame church for St. Matthew's Parish was built in 1768, from plans drawn by John Hawks, most famous for designing Tryon Palace in New Bern. All we know of the design and detail of this building comes from an elevation drawing and an accompanying floor plan. The only surviving artifact from the first building is the town clock, now located atop the Orange County Courthouse.



Elevation, 1<sup>st</sup> St. Matthew's, Hillsborough, 1768  
(Southern Historical Collection, UNC-Chapel Hill)



Floor Plan, 1<sup>st</sup> St. Matthew's, Hillsborough, 1768  
(Southern Historical Collection, UNC-Chapel Hill)

While the first location of St. Matthew's was always known, the kind of adaptive reuse we see in New Bern was not possible because the site was already reused, in this case for the building of Hillsborough Presbyterian Church. Old St. Matthew's was nearly destroyed by the Regulators, then done in by the American Revolution. The tower was so badly damaged that it had to be pulled down after the war. The building was still standing in 1788, when the constitutional convention met in Hillsborough. It was gone by 1800, through circumstances that are still a matter of speculation – as is the precise mechanism by which the Presbyterians took possession of the site.



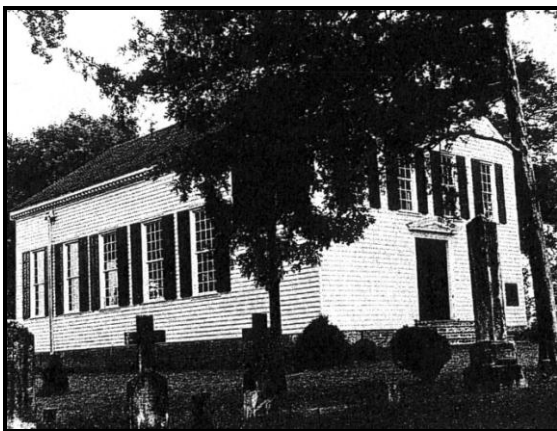
### St. John's Church, Williamsboro

Fortunately, the 1773 colonial frame building of St. John's, Williamsboro, did survive. Built by John Lynch, the contract between him and the vestry has also survived. Today St. John's is the oldest frame church, and the third oldest church standing in North Carolina. After the Raleigh & Gaston Railroad bypassed Williamsboro in 1840, the town gradually declined as a center of commerce, and St. John's declined in membership. Between 1947 and 1959 a committee raised funds and interest to restore the old building. Each year St. John's is open for Homecoming and other occasions.



St. John's, Williamsboro, Before Restoration  
(Diocese of North Carolina Archives)

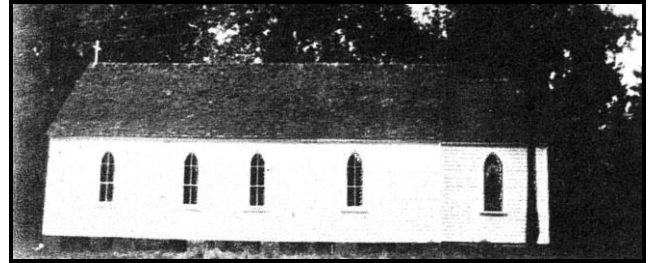
After a careful examination of the church (located nine miles north of Henderson on State Hwy 39), Thomas T. Waterman, the well-known authority on colonial architecture, supported the restoration of St. John's as "a remarkable survival of a colonial church of its period. While simple in form, the woodwork, both exterior and interior, is extensive and well preserved. It constitutes the best exemplar of colonial church woodwork in North Carolina, as the other churches of the period have lost their interiors through alteration or fire." In closing this report he said, "Both as an example of colonial church building in North Carolina and as a historic monument, the value of St. John's cannot be overestimated." [Pamphlet, c. 1950]



St. John's, Williamsboro, after 1959 Restoration  
(Diocese of North Carolina Archives)

### Blount's Chapel/Trinity Church, Chocowinity

Blount's Chapel is the only other building that carries traces of colonial fabric. Now known as Trinity, Chocowinity, it was built in 1774 by "Parson" Nathaniel Blount, a Beaufort County native, shortly after his ordination in England. The edifice was enlarged in the 1800s and moved several miles east to its current location in 1939, at which time a vestibule and further enlargements were made. [A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Eastern North Carolina, Catherine Bisher & Michael Southern, p. 183]



Blount's Chapel/Old Trinity, Chocowinity, 1774  
(A Pictorial History of the Episcopal Church in North Carolina, 1701-1964, The Rev. Norvin C. Duncan, p. 9)

### Conclusion

Four colonial-era church edifices survive in North Carolina, three of which (Edenton, Bath, Williamsboro) retain much of their colonial appearance. Additionally, there is one impressive colonial ruin (Brunswick). Three of the surviving buildings (Edenton, Bath, Chocowinity) are in use on Sundays and serve 21<sup>st</sup> century congregations. The other is open occasionally (Williamsboro). All have been subject to periods of decline and extensive alteration. The American Revolution, colonial politics, and the culture of North Carolina made building and preserving these Anglican structures difficult. It was hard to raise the money from resistant tax payers – and the legislature could scarcely count on Spanish ships blowing up in the harbor. Even with subscriptions from leading citizens and the support of Governors, it was an uphill battle. Thus we are fortunate indeed to have the buildings we do have. The Church of England never enjoyed prosperity and stability in colonial North Carolina, and the paucity of colonial buildings reflects that overarching reality. Compare our number to Virginia's, where 41 colonial buildings survive in some form.

It was not until the Episcopal Church was re-organized in 1817 that significant church building would occur. Some Episcopal Church buildings in this state can be traced to the 1820s, but it is really in the 1840s that an era of church building would produce many of the substantial Episcopal churches that we still see in North Carolina today.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

*North Carolina Architecture*, Catherine W. Bisher, University of North Carolina Press, 1990

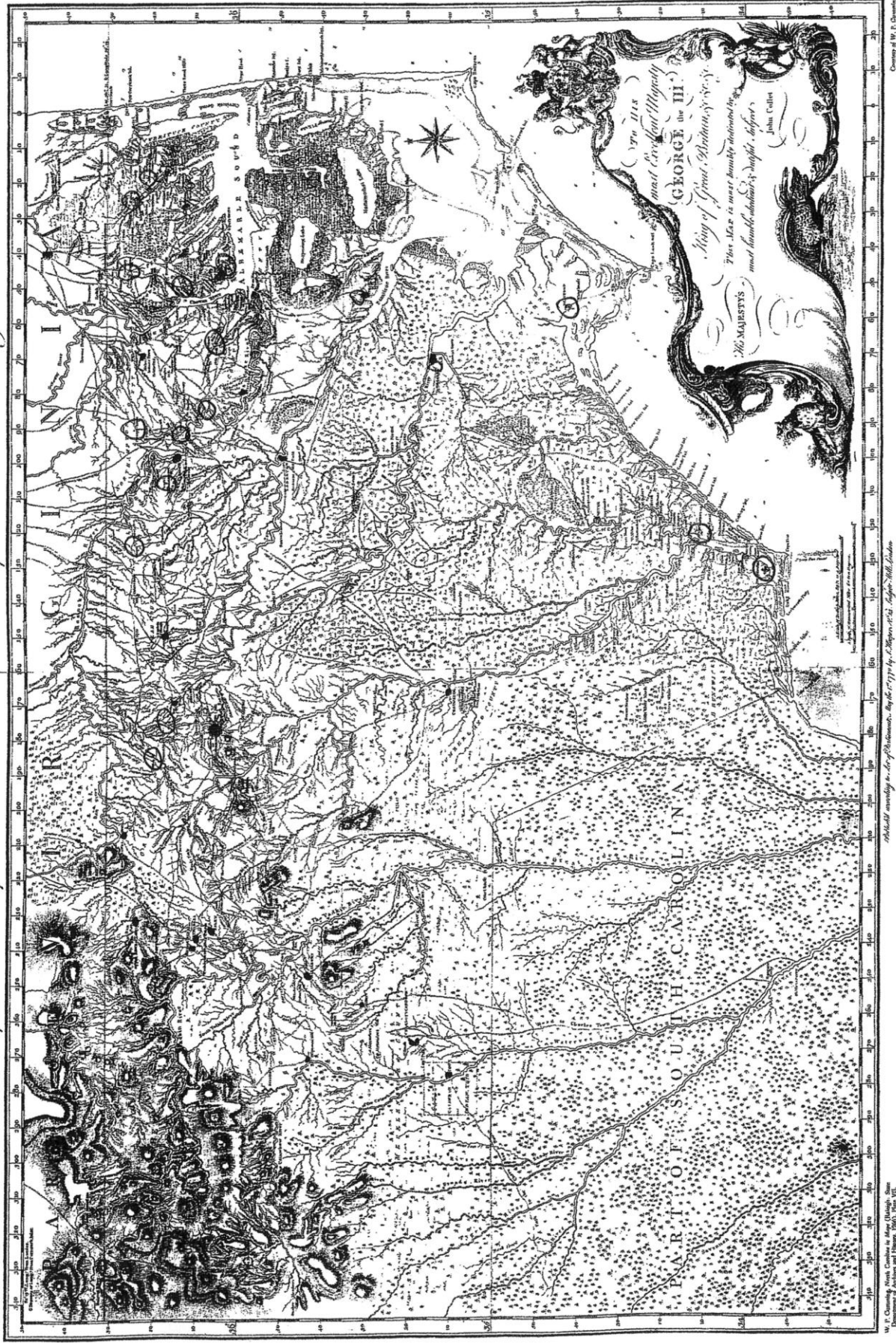
*Holy Things and Profane: Anglican Parish Churches in Colonial Virginia*, Dell Upton, Yale University Press, 1997

*Anglican Churches In Colonial America 1607-1776*, Aaron Woolley Cornwall, Hunter Publishing, Winston-Salem, NC, 1988



# *A Compleat MAP of NORTH-CAROLINA from an actual Survey*

By Capt. John Collett, Surveyor of that Province. Enlarged by W. Bladen.



## Collett 1770

"To His most Excellent Majesty George the IIIrd. King of Great Britain, &c. &c. this Map is most humbly dedicated by His Majesty's most humble obedient & dutiful Subject John Collett". Published according to a May 1, 1770 Act of Parliament, this now-famous map depicts cities and towns, natural features, roads and paths, mills, chapels (Collett's + symbols are circled on this map), landowners, soundings, swamps, pocosins, forts, and Native American tribes (Meherrin, Catawba, Tuscarora). [North Carolina in Maps, W. P. Cumming, State Department of Archives & History, Plate VII]