

Episcopal Life THIS WEEK

Looking Forward, Looking Back

Episcopalians will mark 400-year milestone in new year

Virginia's First Landing preceded Plymouth's Pilgrims

First in a four-part series

The new church year — which begins December 3 with Advent's first Sunday — will bring significant 400th anniversaries for Christians in the Americas, for the Episcopal Church, and for the United States nationally.

On December 19, 1606, the Virginia Company of London, formed by charter of King James I, dispatched to the New World three ships — the *Susan Constant*, the *Godspeed*, and the *Discovery* — for purposes of colonization and in pursuit of trade routes to Asia. With some 105 aboard, the ships entered Chesapeake Bay and made landfall on April 26, 1607, at a coastal point the settlers named Cape Henry, near what is now Virginia Beach.

This "First Landing" is memorialized by a stone cross at Cape Henry, now a centerpiece of the surrounding First Landing State Park. The monument commemorates the site where, upon their safe arrival, the settlers erected a wooden cross.

Among the settlers was Robert Hunt (1568-1608), priest of the Church of England, from which the Episcopal Church is descended. It was under his leadership that the group offered its first prayer services in the New World, notably on May 13, 1607, when the settlers reached the point they would call "Jamestowne," the first permanent English settlement in the Americas. Located about 60 miles inland along the James River, this site afforded the settlers greater security from aggressors or other explorers sailing under the flag of Spain.

At Jamestown the settlers later built a church, but for their first service they suspended "an old saile" between several trees to shelter the congregation, and are said to have fashioned a communion rail by affixing a sapling to two trees. There, the Rev. Mr. Hunt conducted the prayer service, likely from the 1604 *Book of Common Prayer*. He later led the first service of Holy Communion, in June 1607, on the third Sunday after Trinity Sunday.



Robert Hunt Shrine, Jamestown

A stone memorial shrine, given by the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Virginia, honors Hunt and his ministry of planting the first Protestant congregation in America. Highly esteemed and accustomed to hardship, the pioneering priest was beset with illness on the voyage, and all his books and other possessions burned in the Jamestown Fort fire of 1608.

The region's spiritual and cultural history also includes the traditions of the indigenous First Nation peoples, whose contributions are documented by local historians and museum. They are also recognized by the Episcopal Church's Office of Native American Ministry, which in 1996 marked their significance with a major observance at Jamestown.

The 1607 Virginia services were not, however, the first to be observed from the English Prayer Book in the New World. The first occurred after Sir Francis Drake and the *Golden Hind* made landfall north of San Francisco Bay on June 17, 1579 — just 20 years after Parliament approved the religious "settlement" crafted by Elizabeth I to unite both Protestant and Catholic traditions in one church, the *via media*, or "middle way," prized by Episcopalians and other Anglicans to this day.

Next in this series: Jamestown and its Church . . . The Colonial Period . . . Virginia and its Dioceses.

Sources, and for more information, visit:

- The National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov>
- The Episcopal Diocese of Virginia, <http://www.thediocese.net>
- The Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia, <http://www.diosova.org>
- The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, <http://www.apva.org/jr.html>
- The Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov>
- And for more on Jamestown, where "the nation's first representative government, free enterprise system and culturally diverse society began". . . <http://www.jamestown2007.org>



The 400th anniversary of the First Landing will be marked in 2007 by various local commemorations, including an April 26 civic gathering which the Episcopal Church's Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, is scheduled to attend. Queen Elizabeth II has announced her intention to visit Jamestown in May. (Also: A celebration of Virginia Episcopalians is set for June 24 in Jamestown; a national meeting of Episcopal Church historians is slated for June 24-27 in Williamsburg; the Episcopal Communicators will meet April 25-28 in Virginia Beach.)

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