

## Slavery and the Building of the Old Christ Church

The first gatherings of Episcopalians in Nashville, in the late 1820s, usually took place in the basement of the city's Masonic Hall. The first vestry was elected in 1828. A year later they purchased land at the northwest corner of Spring and High Streets (now Church Street and 6th Avenue) and commissioned architect Hugh Roland to design Christ Church's first sanctuary. The building was 53 feet wide by 73 feet long with a short, square tower over the main entrance on Spring Street. Its walls were built of rough stone (some later accounts claim they were brick) that was coated in plaster rendered to look like higher-quality stone, a common technique of the era. The interior furnishings—pews, pulpit, gallery railings, and so on—were all constructed of dark-stained woodwork. The main entry and stained-glass windows all culminated in pointed arches that, together with the shallow buttresses and crenellations along the exterior of the nave, made the building “a very pure and chaste specimen of Gothic architecture,” as the *National Banner* and *Nashville Whig* acclaimed. The cornerstone was laid on July 5, 1830, and the building was consecrated one year later by Rev. William Meade, suffragan bishop of Virginia.

In addition to designing the church, Hugh Roland also superintended its construction, working with contractor Robert L. Duff, builder William Shields, and plasterer David J. White. All these men owned slaves. According to the 1830 census, Roland, Duff, and White enslaved between one and three people, mostly women, meaning they were likely domestic servants. Shields owned one woman and nine men, all aged between 10 and 55 years old, which suggests at least some of the men were forced to work as Shields's construction crew or as part of it.

This was not at all uncommon. Most enslaved Tennesseans worked in the households or fields of rural farms and plantations. In addition to those more familiar roles were enslaved artisans and craftsmen, some of whom were highly skilled, working in cities like Memphis and Nashville. Though precise numbers are difficult to determine, around the time the original Christ Church was built, enslaved people made up about one-third of Nashville's population (or about 1,850 of the city's 5,566 residents in 1830). They worked in a wide range of domestic, industrial, and municipal jobs, skilled and unskilled, from the cooks and coachmen who maintained the city's wealthy white households to the construction crews who built and maintained the city's sewers, streets, and railroads. The most relevant occupations, in the context of the Isaac Project, would include brick masons, carpenters, laborers, plasterers, plumbers, sawyers, stonemasons, and woodworkers. Depending on the trade, these enslaved artisans and craftsmen might labor with or alongside the city's smaller population of free people of color (there were about 470 in Davidson County in 1830) and white workers.

Take, for example, Isaac, this project's namesake. He was described as a “valuable carpenter” when sold by Dr. James Roane to Christ Church parishioner Thomas Washington in 1833, a description that speaks to the skill and versatility of enslaved artisans and craftsmen. Some of these laborers, like the men enslaved by builder William Shields, worked directly for their owners. Others were “hired out,” or contracted by their enslavers to perform work for another, often for a set fee and time period. Some contracted laborers were able to retain any wages they earned

above their owner's fee, eventually using the funds to emancipate themselves or their family members. A March 1929 deed document lists Isaac as at the time hired out by Dr. Roane to a local carpenter. Roane was not a parishioner but was well acquainted with Christ Church's leadership. So, it is possible to at least entertain the idea that Isaac could have been hired out to assist in the building of Christ Church.

In the absence of more detailed parish records, it is impossible to say who exactly built the original Christ Church. Yet, the construction of the church involved trades in which enslaved craftsmen were not only common but held a virtual monopoly—stonemasonry, carpentry, and plastering, in particular. Plus, as one Northern engineer recalled around the turn of the 20th century, "One only needs to go down South and examine hundreds of old southern mansions, and splendid old church edifices, still intact, to be convinced of the fact of the cleverness of the Negro\* artisan, who constructed nine-tenths of them." Other Episcopal churches built around the same time, of similar materials, and in a similar visual style—Christ Church, New Bern, NC (ca. 1824); St. John's, Ashwood, TN (1839–42), Chapel of the Cross, Chapel Hill, NC (1840–48)—have all documented the use of enslaved labor in their construction.

Church records and newspaper accounts concerning the construction of Nashville's original Christ Church make no reference to the use of slaves in its construction. But given how commonplace the use of enslaved labor was at the time, the lack of direct comment on the role of slaves is not surprising. In the context of antebellum Nashville, a major construction project that did not make use of enslaved labor would have been the exception rather than the rule and would likely have invited comment from contemporaries. The sheer ordinariness of enslaved labor in that time and place makes it a near certainty that enslaved men helped build the original Christ Church.

\*Note that well into the 20th century the term Negro was a commonly used ethnic descriptor and not a term of disparagement.

### **Sources and Further Reading:**

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Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, eds., *The Black Worker*, Vol. 1: *The Black Worker to 1896* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978)

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NASHVILLE: THURSDAY, JULY 8, 1830.

EPISCOPAL CHURCH.

On Monday last, July 5, the Corner Stone of the new Church, about to be erected at the corner of Spring and High Streets, for the use of the first Protestant Episcopal Congregation in Nashville, was laid with solemn and appropriate ceremonies.

At 9 o'clock, a procession was formed at the Masonic Hall, (the lower apartment of which is now used as a temporary place of worship,) in the following order, viz.

Wardens of the Church,  
Builders,  
Choir,  
Aldermen of Nashville,  
Mayor,  
Clergymen of different denominations,  
Vestrymen of the Church,  
Rector,  
Congregation,  
Citizens.

On arriving at the site of the new building, the Rector of the Church, the Rev. Mr. Weller, commenced the services of the occasion by solemn prayer. He then took a small box, on which was inscribed "*Christ Church, Nashville, founded 1830,*" and deposited therein a copy of the Holy Scriptures "in token that the Church is to be built on the truth revealed by God"—a copy of the Book of Common Prayer "as a testimony that the Church is to be built on a pure faith, and a spiritual worship"—some small coins of the United States of recent date—and a scroll with the following inscription—

"In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, one God.

THIS CORNER STONE

Of the first Protestant Episcopal Church

Erected in Tennessee,

By the name of

CHRIST CHURCH, NASHVILLE,

Was laid July 5th, 1830,

George Weller being Rector;

Thomas Claiborne and James Stewart, Wardens;

And together with

John Shelby, Francis B. Fegg, Matthew Watson, and Godfrey M. Fegg, Vestrymen;

Hugh Roland, Architect; William Shields, Builder;

ANDREW JACKSON, an inhabitant of this county, being President of the United States;

William Carroll, of this city, Governor of Tennessee;

William Armstrong, Mayor;

The whole number of ministers of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Tennessee being but three, viz. Daniel Stephens, D. D. of Columbia, Maury county; James H. Otey, of Franklin, Williamson county; and George Weller, of Nashville.

Neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth, but God that giveth the increase. 1 Cor. III. 7.

Establish thou, O God, the work of thy hands. PSALM XC. 17.

The box, containing these articles, was solemnly deposited within the Corner Stone, which was then laid, and an anthem was chanted by the Choir, after which the Rev. Mr. WELLER delivered, to a numerous and attentive audience, the following

ADDRESS.

The devoted apostle of the Gentiles, fleeing from the persecution which always followed close upon the steps of his



The original Christ Church, photographed by Calvert Bros. shortly before its demolition in 1892.

Source: Gus Dyer Scrapbook (no. 6), Christ Church Cathedral Archive, Nashville, Tennessee



Nashville in 1832 with the short, square bell tower of Christ Church visible to the left of center

Source: Detail of Map of the State of Tennessee Taken from a Survey by Matthew Rhea (1832), Tennessee State Library and Archives