

The day before Independence Day in 1791, President George Washington was walking the streets of York, looking for the Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist. He found the church in the same location that it is today, 140 N. Beaver St., and tried to enter its door to worship. As he did, though, he realized no one was inside. In his diary, Washington wrote that he instead went to worship in the German Reformed Church, which was located about where the Police Heritage Museum stands today at 54 W. Market St.

"He said that he was in no danger of being converted as he didn't understand a word of the sermon," said Jan Barnhart with a smile. "The service was in German." Barnhart serves on St. John's anniversary committee. This year, the church will celebrate 250 years in downtown York. The church will host several observances, speakers and celebrations throughout the year. Every couple of months, it will also hang a plaque showcasing its prominent events in 50-year increments. The first was hung in time for the First Night York New Year's Eve celebration.

St. John's was founded in 1755 by missionaries sent from England by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. The society planted many churches in the American frontier, including two others in the area in Carlisle and Huntingdon (present-day York Springs). It was during the rectorate of the Rev. John Campbell that Washington would have paid his visit. At the time, Campbell would have preached in the building on what is thought to have been a six-week cycle between the three area churches. That cycle of care is probably why Washington had to worship in German. In the eight years before the founding of St. John's, Episcopal services were held in barns, people's homes or anywhere English-speaking people wished to hear the Gospel. Even when Thomas Barton became the church's first official rector 250 years ago, St. John's still had no formal home.

It wasn't until 1769 that the church vestry chose the Beaver Street location for its first building. Ground was broken and a foundation laid at a cost of 1 pound and 10 shillings. In today's currency, that amount equals a little more than \$300, a large sum for the time. The money to build the church came from a lottery authorized by the Quaker government of Philadelphia. "Many of today's church people bemoan gambling and the lottery," said Polly Stetler, 250th history committee chairperson. "But many churches, like St. John's, were beneficiaries of the practice."

Over the years, the church has changed in both appearance and size many times, though not in location. The church that Washington tried to enter would have been the shape of a rectangle with basic, clear arched windows. Today, the clear windows have been replaced with electric-blue, Bible-themed stained glass that has been donated periodically by past parishioners. The light pours onto the worshippers in the nave through the pointed arch frames, which hold the glass. Ceiling fans, light fixtures and microphones are also electric, but do little to dissuade attention from the church's Victorian Gothic architecture. The main church has also been rearranged in a more traditional British-cross shape.

In 1948, a hand-carved rood screen was placed in the church to separate the nave from the pulpit, sanctuary, organ and choir sections. A rood is an open-work, wall-like structure that was used to keep animals from wandering out of the nave area in the earliest days of the church. As they still are today, churches were often used for public events other than church services. Centuries ago, many of those events involved animals. "It was quite a controversial decision to add the rood," Stetler said. "Even with all of the changes that we had already been through, new changes are always met with opposition."

Since the church is older than America, it has also seen its share of oppositions on a global scale. From the American Revolution of the 1700s to today's Operation Iraqi Freedom, St. John's has seen it all. But the way the clergy deal with these issues has changed dramatically. On July 23, 1861, clergyman J. Rambo wrote then Rector Charles W. Thomson a letter with news of the Civil War. He wrote about the thousands who had been killed or injured in recent battles and about the injured troops he visited in Cockeysville, Md. But if Thomson was sympathetic to Rambo's mood, he didn't show it from the pulpit. Thomson kept meticulous records of his activities and sermons. In the sermon dated July 12, 1863, less than a week after York's own occupation at the hands of the Confederate Army, Thomson made no mention of the war or the occupation. "(Thomson) really hated preaching about politics," Barnhart said. "His pacifist leanings came from his Quaker upbringing."

On Sunday, Jan. 2, 2005, St. John's assistant rector, Gretchen Rehberg, was more in-tune with current events. She made an impassioned plea that church members pray for those at war overseas and for the victims of a devastating tsunami. David Lovelace, the church's rector of the last eight years, said St. John's always prays for the country's political leaders and the needs of the world, starting in its own back yard. In recent years, the church purchased and renovated three neighboring properties, renting them out as low-income housing. The church is also involved with Habit for Humanity projects, Girl Scouts and the United Way. "I can't think of one organization in this city that someone from our parish isn't affiliated with," Lovelace said. "But that is the history of St. John's. For 250 years, this church has been, and continues to be, a faithful witness to the Gospel and a cornerstone of York's history."