

Religious Freedom Religions of Stafford

by Marion Brooks Robinson

From the beginning of the Jamestown settlement until 1786, the Anglican or Episcopal Church of England was the “state” church in Virginia. Many dissenters, however, moved into the early colony. Many settled in what is now Stafford County. Chief among these groups were Catholics, Quakers, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodists denominations.

The first Catholic colony in Virginia was founded near Aquia Creek in 1646 by Colonel Giles Brent. In 1633, Elias Legardo became the first Jewish settler in the Virginia colony and by 1652 a number of Jewish tradesmen lived and worshiped in the Stafford area. In 1768, 34 Baptist ministers from Virginia were imprisoned for “causing dissension.” Two of these ministers served a Stafford Baptist church built on Horspen Run in 1715. A Spotsylvania Baptist minister, John Waller, constantly petitioned the House of Burgesses to abolish “state” churches.



However, the “state church” was quite strong in Stafford. Aquia Episcopal Church was the second Anglican church established in the Virginia Colony. Episcopal worshipers in southern Stafford attended St. Pauls Episcopal Church (which is no longer standing.)

The first Quaker immigrants in the area settled in Stafford County about 1660. Led by Joseph Janney, they suffered persecution from the beginning. Most of this was caused by the Quakers outspoken objection to any form of slavery. Many of Janney's descendants still live in the Stafford and Fredericksburg area.

The Presbyterians formed a church in Hartwood about 1730. Methodist groups were settling in Stafford, Spotsylvania, and Fredericksburg by 1740. In 1786, Thomas Jefferson's Bill of Religious Freedom, drawn up in Fredericksburg, ended the era of a "state" established church.



The Crucifix Monument on U.S. 1 honors the Brents who established the first Catholic settlement in Virginia. They allowed people of all religions to settle along Aquia Creek, the first instance of Religious Toleration in Virginia.