

The Rev. Philip Mathews

by the Rev. Dr. Robert E. H. Phelps

In April 1804 as a resident of South Carolina, but not a native thereof, the Rev. Philip Mathews was ordained Deacon and Priest by the Rt. Rev. James Madison, 1st Bishop of Virginia (1790-1812). On 18 Feb. 1805 he represented Trinity Church, Columbia, then a tiny mission, at the 18th Convention of the Diocese of South Carolina, held in St. Michael's Church, Charleston. In 1808 he was elected Rector of St. James Parish, Santee. Coincidentally, two of his children married descendants of the founder and first Rector of that parish, the Rev. Dr. Pierre Robert (1656-1715) who arrived in South Carolina in 1686 and by special permission of the Proprietary Government was allowed to use the Book of Common Prayer translated into French, since he and all his parishioners were French Huguenots.

From St. James Parish the Rev. Philip Mathews was elected Rector of St. Luke's Parish in Beaufort District on 27 April 1811, which parish included Zion Chapel-of-Ease on Hilton Head Island. Less than a year later on 6 March 1812 he was elected Rector of St. Helena's Episcopal Church on St. Helena's Island, a more settled cure with a substantial tabby and brick church built 1748-1756 on two acres given by planter Jonathan Norton and his wife, Mary Ann Chaplin, in 1756. He attended the 26th Convention of the Diocese in Charleston 15-17 Feb. 1814 as Rector of St. Helena's Island and also reported on the state of the Church on Hilton Head Island as its official Visitor. He attended the 27th Convention in 1815 and the 29th Convention 18-20 Feb. 1817, still as Rector of St. Helena's Island and Visitor to Hilton Head Island. The 30th Convention 17-21 Feb. 1818 is the last reported in Dalcho's History of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina; the Rev.

Philip Mathews reported as Rector of St. Helena's Church, St. Helena's Island, that he had officiated at no less than 32 funerals during the past year. (2)

Around 1813 he became the first Episcopal priest to reside on Hilton Head Island when he married Rebecca Davant (2 Jan. 1793-4 Sept. 1859), daughter of Hilton Head Island planter James Davant.

James Davant was born on Edisto Island 9 Sept 1744, the third child of planter John Davant who had married Isabella, widow of Joseph Watson of Edisto Island, on 11 April 1740 in St. Philip's Church, Charleston. He settled on Hilton Head Island after his marriage on 30 Jan. 1769 to Lydia Page and all eight of their children were born there. Revolutionary War service records in Columbia show that he served 285 days in 1779-80 and 200 days in 1781-82. He was a member of The Bloody Legion under the command of Capt. John Leacraft which avenged the Dec. 1781 murder from ambush of his younger brother, Charles Davant. Lydia Page Davant died 20 April 1795 and was buried in Zion Chapel Cemetery, the Chapel having been built in 1786 or shortly thereafter. On 19 March 1797 James Davant married in Savannah, Ga. Elizabeth, widow of Charles White. When James Davant made his will dated 30 Dec. 1801, proved 7 Feb. 1803, he left his daughter Rebecca a 314-acre estate, Sand Hill Plantation, five slaves (Friday, Moll, Nancy, Little Peter and Castillo), plus six cows and calves.

The Rev. Philip and Rebecca Mathews lived at Sand Hill Plantation which they expanded to a total of 600 acres. There their daughter, Sarah L. Mathews was born in 1815. She grew up to marry in Dec. 1835 Winborn Benjamin Lawton who had been born in Robertville, eldest child of the Rev. Winborn Asa Lawton, a Baptist preacher, and his first wife, Mary Elizabeth Cater, widow of Thomas Rhodes of Callinassi Island Plantation.

In 1816 a son was born whom Rev. Philip named for his ecclesiastical superior, the Rt. Rev. Theodore Dehon, 2nd Bishop of South Carolina (1812-1817), hoping the boy would grow up to become a priest and "inherit his robe". A third child was born to the Rev. Philip and Rebecca; given the name Mary Elizabeth, she would grow up to marry a Baptist preacher, Rev. Joseph George, and settle in Savannah. Two of her children: Rebecca Davant George (14 Nov. 1847-14 March 1855) and William Wiley George (22 Nov. 1849-22 March 1855) are buried in Laurel Grove Cemetery there. A third daughter married a Bailey and has descendants in southwest Georgia. The Rev. Philip Mathews died in 1828; no stone marks his grave.

A sister of the Rev. Philip, Martha C. Mathews (5 Feb. 1798-13 Aug. 1842) married on 8 Aug. 1822 as his second wife a brother of Rebecca Davant Mathews, James Davant (14 Feb. 1783-4 Sept. 1859). They settled in Green Co., Georgia, near Union Point and became the parents of twelve children who have left many descendants. After the death of Martha Mathews Davant, her husband married on 26 March 1843 her sister, Rebecca Mathews (1 Aug. 1800-6 Oct. 1849) who left no posterity.

By 1833 Zion Chapel had fallen on hard times as many of the Island's Episcopalians had migrated to larger and more fertile lands. Aided and abetted by the wealthy Martha Sarah Stoney Barksdale, whose Episcopal husband, Thomas Henry Barksdale of vast Scull Creek Plantation had died in August 1832, Baptist evangelists had over run the Island and had taken possession of Zion Chapel. It was necessary for the Rt. Rev. Nathaniel Bowen, 3rd Bishop of South Carolina to visit the Island and formally reconsecrate Zion Chapel to the use for which it was originally intended. Mrs. Mathews and her three children, still residing at nearby Sand Hill Plantation, long since expanded to 600 acres, were present. Her father and her husband had taught her to be

- faithful to the discipline and teaching of the Book of Common Prayer. Plans were made at the reconsecration service to order two eucharistic chalices for Zion Chapel. They were made by Bernard Brothers of London and arrived the following year, bearing the date 1834. They would be stolen during the Confederate War era, be found in Philadelphia in this century and ultimately returned to Hilton Head Island where they are cherished treasures of contemporary St. Luke's Church.

Then young Theodore Dehon Mathews fell in love with Mary Elizabeth Lawton, first cousin of his brother-in-law. But she steadfastly refused his suit, insisting she would marry no man who was not a Baptist. In desperation Theodore gave up his dream of following his father's steps into the priesthood. He enrolled at the Medical College in Charleston from which he graduated in 1841, had himself baptized in the Baptist Church and in May of that year married Mary Elizabeth. They settled in Albany, Ga. where he began to practice medicine. Her father, planter Benjamin Themistocles Dion Lawton, founder of Lawtonville, came to visit them in April 1846, became desperately ill, died and was buried in what would become that city's oldest cemetery. Finding Dougherty County so unhealthy, the Mathews returned to South Carolina in 1847 where he resumed the practice of medicine in Robertville and Lawtonville. They were the parents of six children, all of whom survived his death in Robertville in 1860. Five years later Sherman's arsonists burned Robertville and Lawtonville on their way to burn Columbia. Mary Elizabeth Lawton Mathews would have welcomed her husband's share of his inheritance: 600-acre Sand Hill Plantation and 500-acre Jolly Field Plantation on Hilton Head. But these had been confiscated by the U.S. Direct Tax Commission under the control of her uncle, Baptist preacher William Henry Brisbane. Under the Redemption Act of 1874 the three heirs were able to redeem only 200 of the 1100 acres, the remainder being permanently lost.

Mathews Road on Hilton Head Island commemorates the life and work of the Rev. Philip Mathews, its first resident priest.