

January 1960

Historic St. Paul's Organized Christmas Day, 1832

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Dunn, Hampton, "Historic St. Paul's Organized Christmas Day, 1832" (1960). *Hampton Dunn Phototouring Florida Collection*. 213.

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Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



HISTORIC ST. PAUL'S ORGANIZED CHRISTMAS DAY, 1832

By HAMPTON DUNN

KEY WEST --- Though situated way down here on the southernmost tip of the Florida peninsula, church life in Key West has been active and extensive since the community was acquired by the state. St. Paul's Episcopal Church is the oldest in Florida Diocese.

This unit of the church was organized on Christmas Day in 1832 by a young (24) minister, the Rev. Sansot K. Brunot who fled to this tropical isle from Pennsylvania. He was apprehensive that he might become, like many of his family, a victim of "consumption" (tuberculosis), if he continued a resident of the colder climate. Even here, his health declined, he was able to officiate only a few times, and finally went back to Pittsburgh, and died there in May, 1833.

Leading citizens were involved in formation of this historic church. William A. Whitehead, who was collector of the port and mayor of the town, had called the original organizational meeting. John Fleeming, one of the four original owners of Key West, is buried here. His widow donated the property at Eaton and Duval Streets, stipulating that the pews be free. The vestry, however, ignored her request and sold all the pews, except four. One of the early pastors went on a nationwide tour and solicited funds for a building, collecting \$3,000.

A lime stone church was erected on the Fleeming site in 1840; it was "totally destroyed" by the memorable hurricane of 1846. A wooden edifice replaced it in 1847. A frame church built in 1886 was destroyed in the 1909 hurricane and the present structure was erected in 1912.

The religious history of Key West was reviewed in a speech given on July 4, 1876---on the Centennial of the Declaration of Independence---by "Colonel" Walter C. Maloney. He noted that the Episcopalians were the denomination that "pioneered the way to our present ecclesiastical status."

"Suffice to say," Maloney recalled, "that the entire church desiring portion of the population, however differently trained in matters of ritual, peculiarities of religious dogmas, and sectarian prejudices, united for purposes of public devotion, under the name of the Protestant Episcopal Church."

