

**THE ISLAND'S FIRST MINISTER**

A pre-Revolutionary War road on Hilton Head Island has a proper name at last. Beaufort county officials announced recently that the road which branches left from U.S. Highway 278 at Zion Cemetery near Folly Field Road, crosses the head of Broad Creek, passes the Children's Day Care Center, Mid-Island Plaza, Hilton Head Terrace and the Plantation Shopping Center where it crosses Highway 278, curves past Triangle Square and ends at Beach City Road is now Mathews Road. It makes the heart glad.

The Rev. Philip Mathews was Hilton Head Island's first resident minister, its first real pastor to the great planters and their people. He initially saw the Island in late May 1811 when he left his horse at Buckingham Landing, was moved across to Ferry Point on Jenkins Island and was met by Squire Pope's carriage and coachman. More than an hour's drive over sandy, shelled roads beneath a canopy of live oaks, past fields waist high with cotton brought him to Coggins Point Plantation on Port Royal Sound. There he refreshed himself from the arduous trip from Bull Hill Plantation, site of the original St. Luke's Parish Church, now on Highway 170 on the mainland west of its junction with Highway 278.

On Sunday he read Morning Prayer and the Litany, preached a sermon and celebrated the Holy Communion for the faithful at nearby Zion Chapel-of-Ease, a frame building, 30x40 feet, on brick foundations, built in 1788 by Isaac Fripp and Captain John Stoney. He used the 1789 edition of the Book of Common Prayer, the first American version. It was his first visitation to Zion, a chapel of St. Luke's Parish of which he had been elected Rector on April 27<sup>th</sup>, the third cure or charge for the young bachelor priest. Present were the members of the Stoney, Webb, Davant, Pope, Chaplin, Scott, Kirk, Frickling, Barksdale and Baynard families, all the Island's great plantation families.

When the 1804 Convention of the Diocese of South Carolina adjourned without having elected a Bishop to succeed deceased Rt. Rev. Robert Smith, its beloved Bishop since 1795, young Philip Mathews had to journey to Virginia in order to be episcopally ordained to the ministry. As a resident, but not a native, of South Carolina he was ordained deacon and priest in April 1804 by the Rt. Rev. James Madison, 1<sup>st</sup> Bishop of Virginia (1790-1812).

He began his work at Trinity Church, Columbia, then a tiny and unpromising mission, which he officially represented in February 1805 at the 18<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Diocese in St. Michael's Church, Charleston. In 1808 he was elected Rector of St. James' Parish, Santee in the fabulous rice growing area of the low country. Here he ministered to great planters and their people, including the Rutledges of nearby Hampton Plantation. Little did he dream that two of his yet unborn children would later marry descendants of the founder and first Rector of St. James' Parish, the Rev. Dr. Pierre Robert (1656-1715) who had arrived there in 1686 and by special permission of the Lords Proprietors was allowed

to use the Book of Common Prayer translated into French. Dr. Robert and all his parishioners were French Huguenots forced to flee from France following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

Then came the challenge of the call to St. Luke's Parish where the ( ) found little organized religious activity among the large, widely separated plantations. Hilton Head was different. It's Zion Chapel, centrally located at the head of Broad Creek, astride the main road from Ferry Point to Braddock's Point, was easily accessible for baptisms, weddings, funerals and the worship of Almighty God. But there was too little organized religion in St. Luke's Parish to support a resident minister. Less than a year later in March 1812 he accepted his election as Rector of St. Helena's Episcopal Church on St. Helena's Island, a more settled cure with a handsome brick and tabby church built between 1748 and 1756 on two acres given by planter Jonathan Norton and his wife, the former Ann Chaplin. And his Church Warden, Col. John Jenkins, lived at Land's End Plantation on Port Royal Sound opposite Hilton Head. The earnest young priest was about to inherit the best of two Island -worlds. The most cogent force in the universe was drawing him back to Hilton Head-love.

In 1813 Hilton Head became his official residence when he married Rebecca, daughter of the late Island planter James Davant.

James was born on Edisto Island 9 Sept 1744, third child of planter John Davant who had married on April 11, 1740 in St. Philip's Church, Charleston, Isabella, widow of Joseph Watson of Edisto. James Davant settled on Hilton Head after his 30 Jan 1769 marriage to Lydia Page and all eight of their children were born here. Revolutionary War records in Columbia show that he served in the South Carolina Militia 285 days in 1779-1780 and 200 days during the period when Savannah, Beaufort and Charleston were occupied by the British whose superior naval forces also controlled the sea. He was a member of the Bloody Legion under the command of Captain John Leacroft which avenged the 1781 murder from ambush of his younger brother, Charles Davant. His wife, Lydia Page Davant died 20 April 1795 and was buried in Zion Chapel Cemetery where her grave may still be seen. Their youngest child, Rebecca, had been born at their Point Comfort home 2 Jan 1793. The four-year old "motherless child" doubtlessly welcomed her stepmother when her father married in 1797 Elizabeth, widow of Charles White of Savannah. When James Davant made his will on 30 Dec 1801 he provided extremely well for all his children; when he died in Savannah on 13 Jan 1803, Rebecca became a substantial heiress with a 314 acre estate, Sand Hill Plantation, maintained by her own five slaves; Friday, Molly, Nancy, Little Peter and Castillo (notice the lingering Spanish influence), with her own herd of six cows and calves plus assorted livestock.

The Rev. Philip and Rebecca made Sand Hill Plantation their home, expanding it to 600 acres. They also acquired adjoining 500-acre Folly Field Plantation, the entire 1100 acres being frequently referred to as Mathews Land. In February 1814 he attended the 26<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Diocese of South Carolina in Charleston as Rector of St. Helena's Island and also reported on the state of the church on Hilton Head Island as its "official visitor".

In 1815 their daughter, Sarah. L. Mathews, was born. She would grow up to marry in December 1835 Winborn Benjamin Lawton who had been born in Robertville, eldest child of the Rev. Winborn Asa Lawton, a Baptist preacher, and his wife Mary Elizabeth Cater, widow of Thomas Rhodes of nearby Callawassi Island Plantation. Also in 1815 and again in 1817, the Rev. Philip Mathews attended the 27<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> Conventions of the Diocese of South Carolina as Rector of St. Helena's Island and Visitor to Hilton Head, his home. His failure to attend the 1816 Convention is explained by the birth of his son whom he named for his ecclesiastical superior, the Rt. Rev. Theodore Dehon, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bishop of South Carolina (1812-1817), hoping the boy would grow up to become a priest and "inherit his robe". This was not to be. Young Theodore Dehon Mathews would grow up to fall in with Mary Elizabeth Lawton, first cousin of his brother-in-law. She steadfastly refused his suit, insisting she could only marry a Baptist. In desperation Theodore abandoned his dreams of following his father's steps into the priesthood. He enrolled in the Medical College in Charleston from which he graduated in 1841 and having already been baptized, had himself immersed by the Baptists. In May he married Mary Elizabeth and began practicing medicine in Albany, Georgia but returned to Robertville in 1847, dying there in 1860 after 19 years of wedded bliss.

In 1818 a third child was born to Rev. Philip and Rebecca at Sand Hill Plantation. Given the name Mary Elizabeth, she would grow up to marry a Baptist preacher, Rev. Joseph George, and settle in Savannah where two of her infants were buried in Laurel Grove Cemetery. The same year that the Rev. Philip attended the 30<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Diocese, the last reported in Dalcho's History of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina (Charleston 1820). he reported as Rector of St. Helena's Island that he had officiated at no less than 32 funerals during the preceding year. One funeral at Zion Chapel was that of his sister-in-law, Mary Whaley, wife of James Davant, Jr. who later became doubly his brother-in-law by marrying in 1832 Martha C. Mathews. Perhaps one might say triply because following the 1842 death of Martha Mathews Davant, her widower married in 1843 Rebecca Mathews, a still younger sister of the Rev. Philip.

These were the halcyon days with the Rev. Philip shepherding the great planters of both Hilton Head and St. Helena's Island, all intimately connected by religion, marriage and blood. Cotton became undisputed king as the plantation families flourished and fattened on the profits of the extra-long-stapled Sea Island variety developed by Island planter William Elliott and his Adisto Island colleague William Seabrook who was still awaiting opportunity to acquire Hilton Head acreage. For the Rev. Philip Mathews the end of his earthly ministry came early when he died in 1828, "not yet fifty years old". His widow continued planting the 1100 acres of Mathew's Land.

By 1833 Zion Chapel had fallen on hard times as many of the Island's Episcopalians had migrated to larger and more fertile cotton lands. Aided and abetted by wealthy Martha Sarah Stoney Barksdale, whose Episcopal husband, Thomas Henry Barksdale of vast Skull Creek Plantation had died in August 1832, Baptist evangelists had overrun the Island, taking possession of Zion Chapel itself. It was necessary for the Rt. Rev. Nathaniel Bowen, 3<sup>rd</sup> Bishop of South Carolina, to visit the Island to formally reconsecrate Zion Chapel to the use for which it was originally intended. The widow

Mathews and her three children, still residing at nearby Sand Hill Plantation which remained her home until her death in September 1859, 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, exactly three decades after the 1804 ordination of the Rev. Philip. These chalices would be stolen when Zion Chapel was looted during the federal occupation of the Island, be found in Philadelphia in this century and ultimately returned to Hilton Head Island where they are cherished treasures of contemporary St. Luke's Episcopal Church.

These chalices and newly named Mathews Road commemorate the life and work of the Island's first minister, the Rev. Philip Mathews.