



William S. Coffey: St. Paul's Longest Serving Rector

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William S. Coffey presided over important religious and structural changes while attending to the spiritual needs of thousands of parishioners in his 57 years as the rector of St. Paul's Church, the longest serving minister in the parish's history. Fresh out of the Episcopal General Theological Seminary in New York, Rev. Coffey assumed the pulpit in 1852 and guided St. Paul's through its period of greatest growth, although he lived long enough, until 1909, to witness the transformation of the character of the neighborhood which ultimately ended the life of the parish.

As a religious leader, Coffey's chief impact was incorporating changes in styles of worship and physical alterations in the church. These changes were part of reforms often called the Oxford movement which stressed a return to elements of the Christian heritage that had been omitted during the Protestant Reformation, and they affected almost all Episcopal churches in America.

Originated in Anglican churches in England, the Oxford movement, also called Anglo Catholicism, sought a more powerful emotional symbolism and energy in church worship. Under Coffey's aegis at St. Paul's, these changes included the introduction of colorful stained glass windows depicting religious scenes, installation of an altar and incorporating the Holy Eucharist as a regular element of Sunday service and building a decorative tin ceiling, as well as increased use of candles, processions and ministerial vestments.



Interior of St. Paul's, late 1850s, during Rev. Coffey's tenure as rector.

While the 1942 restoration of the interior of the church to its original 1787 appearance has obscured most of these alterations for today's visitors to St. Paul's, the lone stained glass window preserves a vestige of the Coffey influence on the sanctuary. But many other physical testaments of Coffey's stewardship are evident, including the east wing of the church, slate roof, stone and brick steeple capped with a cross, black wrought iron fence, marble walkway, and the underground holding vault and stone retaining wall bordering the cemetery.

An undergraduate at Columbia University, Rev. Coffey earned a doctorate in divinity studies, and established a reputation as a gentleman of letters. Influenced by his leadership of a church that was coming to be seen as a special historic place, Rev. Coffey



Rev. Coffey, late 1800s.

was particularly drawn to research and writing about history, and this pursuit facilitated his participation in the intellectual and social life of the community. A gifted historian, the rector wrote widely and his articles and addresses on local history and the history of St. Paul's remain useful to researchers today. Coffey was a long-time member of the county historical society, and served as an unofficial historian for other groups in which he participated, including the Masons, the local Farnsworth Post of the Grand Army of the Republic, the Civil War veterans' organization, and historic Trinity School in New York City.

Coffey eventually became an esteemed and widely honored figure, but when he arrived at St. Paul's, only 25 years old, impatient and combative, he argued with the church's ruling vestry council over various matters, and was nearly deposed.

An even more stormy conflict involved nearby Trinity Episcopal Church. The rector helped found the church in 1857, about a mile from St. Paul's, in the newly created village of Mt. Vernon. Rev. Coffey understood Trinity as a satellite of his more established St. Paul's located in what was then the Town of Eastchester, but the lay leaders of Trinity wanted their church to establish an independent identity and after a protracted quarrel the vestry ousted Coffey in the 1870s.

As a clergyman, Rev. Coffey combined a reverence for the church as a house of worship and careful attendance to the needs of his parishioners. Social conversation was prohibited within the sanctuary. Parishioners who missed service might receive a stern letter reminding them of the importance of worship. Over 57 years, he joined 240 men and women in holy matrimony, baptized more than 1,000 children, confirmed 680 young people in the traditions of the church and gave last rites at about 1,100 funerals in the St. Paul's cemetery. Among those baptized were his two sons; Rev. Coffey was married twice and survived by his second wife.

Beyond the stone walls of St. Paul's, the tall rector, walking slowly, slightly bent forward as though deep in thought, was a familiar night-time figure on the local streets, especially near the many saloons located in the vicinity by the late 1800s. Men who had consumed an excess of spirits and were observed leaning against lamp posts or trees were ushered into an all-night restaurant where Rev. Coffey paid five cents for a mug of hot coffee before escorting them home. During the Civil War, the rector visited families of parishioners who were fighting for the Union and wrote to the soldiers at the front with news of home and family, telling one private that he had visited his "wife yesterday and found her looking as I thought pretty well. She misses you very much. She was engaged about her garden."

As a historical figure, Coffey bridged the gap between a rural, pre-industrial community and a town experiencing the beginnings of modern America. When he arrived in 1852, worshippers traveled to church on horse-drawn carriages, the St. Paul's bell was a major

instrument of local communication and the parsonage where he lived required an outdoor privy. When he suffered a heart attack and died on the street near his home on Jan. 21, 1909, at age 82, indoor toilets, telephones, and automobiles were emerging as fixtures in the vicinity. A similar pattern of industrialization had generated the transformation of the parish area from a quiet residential community to a manufacturing zone, which eventually led to the decline of St. Paul's Church.