



St. Stephen's and St. Stephen

by The Rev. Mary Slenski

There's a small brown notebook, more like a composition book with a grocery sack paper cover that usually lives in the safe deposit box for safekeeping. Its handwritten cover says

Register
St. Stephen's Episcopal
Church
Commencing May 7th 1840
Including Births, Marriages
And Burials, etc
Written by the
Reverend Robert B. Croes
Rector from Sept 25th 1842
To Sept 1845 - June 1850

Did the church commence that day or just the record in this notebook? It's hard to tell. Inside, the first entry under Register says: "The Rev. Charles Prindle commenced missionary labours in Terre Haute Nov 10th, 1839. On that day he held divine service in the Congregational place of worship in the morning...." Here we are 174 years later in Terre Haute celebrating divine service. Rev. Prindle was busy baptizing, marrying and burying. In just a couple of years, the name of St. Stephen's appears in the record of a lease of some property and associated with a building. The 150th Anniversary was celebrated at Easter 1990, and if I follow the history correctly, understood to be within the 150th year starting in November. So, I believe we're actually on the same timeline.

Why Stephen? One plausible, if a bit imaginative, explanation is that the founders were sitting around someone's dining table the day after Christmas perhaps at the home of John and Mary Routledge. Their infant daughter, Isabella, had been baptized just a few days before. Perhaps Christmas worship had been so reverent, so beautiful, that they wanted to see that it would continue into the future. So, they were putting to paper their plans. Rev. Prindle was with them. He knew that the Feast of Stephen was that very day and suggested that this new mission church take the name of the saint. Who knows?

Another possibility, from looking over the brown notebook, is that they gathered after the burial of Mrs. Henrietta Hebb, the wife of R. H Hebb, Esq. She was 28 years old and was buried on May 7, 1840. Perhaps she had been exceptionally wise for her years, known for caring for the widows of Terre Haute, and full of the Holy Ghost. Perhaps, as they were remembering Henrietta's life, as one does after funerals, the scriptures of Stephen, one of the

first deacons, came to mind (Acts 6:1-6). Maybe they decided that the coincidence was inspired and they would honor her through naming the new church after the saint her ministry evoked.

“Stephen was full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people....some of those...stirred up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and Spirit with which he spoke. They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him and brought him before the council...And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” (Acts 6:8-15) Stephen spoke to the council—a long speech recounting salvation history through Moses and the prophets. It didn’t end well for Stephen. The council was so outraged they just took him out and stoned him. As the story goes, “While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’” (Acts 7:58-59) Thus, Stephen, one of the first deacons, also became the first recorded martyr.

Churches named for saints have the option to celebrate their saint’s day as a Patronal Feast on a Sunday. Since December 26 is a difficult day to gather for that occasion, Bishop Cate has granted us permission, as is her prerogative, to allow us to transfer that feast to a different day this year, and next year. So, today marks the beginning of the 175th year of Episcopal divine worship in Terre Haute. Somewhere in this year, is the birthday of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church. I have yet to find the evidence for a particular birth day. It might be in the diocesan records and I hope to have time to check. Nonetheless, this is a good year to consider with mind and heart how we are being faithful to the witness of Stephen, Deacon and Martyr. It’s clear that thus far either we haven’t been so bold in our witness as to be taken before the council and stoned, or the powers that be have become far more generous. What little deaths have we died publicly so that the witness of the risen Christ can be renewed? How are we serving the least in our community? How does our face to Terre Haute reflect the glory of God? It may be that the most important death we have to die is that of coming out from behind the walls that hide our witness and our beauty.

For the fellowship of Stephen, our patron, and of all the Saints, we thank you, Lord. Amen.

Collect for Saint Stephen *December 26*

We give you thanks, O Lord of glory, for the example of the first martyr Stephen, who looked up to heaven and prayed for his persecutors to your Son Jesus Christ, who stands at your right hand; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting.
Amen.