

A TALE OF TWO WORLDS

We are used to a world where if the President of the United States sprains a finger playing hoops, it goes viral in a few seconds. When St. Paul's was completed in 1865, it was a totally different world. Our church building is not just turning 150 years old, but the changes in our life styles that it has witnessed are phenomenal. Here is one example; actually it is a reality check.

When I was the sexton at St. Paul's one of my most fun duties was giving tours of our beautiful and historically significant church. I am a history junkie after all. The most common question was, "How old is it?" I noticed that if I gave the dates, I often got blank looks. Remembering the general dates of the Civil War, I started explaining that construction began within weeks of the Confederates firing on Fort Sumter, and it was completed about the time that the war ended. People could relate to that; they had all seen movies, documentaries or photos. So the blank looks turned to nods of appreciation.

Then one evening Ruff and I were watching "April 1865, The Month That Saved the Union" on the History Channel. By this time April 16, 1865, the date of the first service at St. Paul's on Easter Sunday was indelibly etched in my brain. Suddenly the narrator pointed out that General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House on the 9th of April. Without thinking, I computed that into Palm Sunday.

This immediately raised a question: Did the congregation at St. Paul's know as they celebrated the maiden voyage of their new worship space that they were also celebrating the end of a tragic and devastating war that had rent our country in two? Well Google is grand because I was able to type in "Telegraph: Seattle." And sure enough up popped a very informative article.

The cross country telegraph reached Seattle and became operational in October 1864. So the technology was in place. It also explained that it took two days for a message to cross the United States. Therefore, such an important message should definitely have arrived in Seattle by some time on 11 April. While Port Townsend temporarily was not the Washington Territory Port of Entry after a controversial move to Port Angeles in 1862, a fast packet had to pass by PT to reach PA. Fort Townsend was also in use as a military hospital. So it is highly likely that the news of Lee's surrender had reached PT by the 12th or 13th.

But here is where the plot thickens. President Lincoln was shot late on Good Friday and died in the early hours of Holy Saturday. At the earliest, the news of the shooting could have reached Seattle by Easter Sunday afternoon. Therefore, the congregation of St. Paul's may have very likely been reveling in the twin joys of that Happy Easter without the slightest idea that President of the United States was dead.

Today St. Paul's exists in a brave new world of instantaneous communication. This is just one illustration of the difference that 150 years can make.

Mary and Toby Kell