

The Rev. Whiting Griswold, 1815-1849

by Bryan Cather

The Rev. Whiting Griswold was born in Ohio in 1815, and, with his father Caleb, was present for some of the earliest events in Ohio related to the Episcopal Church. In fact, Caleb Griswold's account of those early days, transcribed by hand by his son, Whiting, is considered to be the earliest history of the Episcopal Church in Ohio.¹ Information about Whiting Griswold's early life is unclear, but in the late 1830s began his studies at General Seminary in New York, where he graduated in 1841², and was ordained to the diaconate by Bishop Benjamin T. Onderdonk on June 27th of that year.³ He then returned west, and was immediately received in St. Louis by the Rt. Rev. Jackson Kemper, Missionary Bishop of Wisconsin and Iowa and Provisional Bishop of Missouri⁴ Griswold initially found work as an assistant at Christ Church in St. Louis, working under the Rev. Frederick F Peake.⁵

During the last three months of 1841, a series of meetings were held at Christ Church that led to the formation of a parish to serve the city's growth to the South. The first of these, on October 12, was chaired by the Rev. Peter Minard, rector of St. Paul's (now extinct). After obtaining permission to hold services in the Washington Engine House, near Second and Plum streets, the fledgling congregation held their first services there on November 13th. At the request of the organizing committee, Fr. Griswold, still officially an assistant at Christ Church, officiated. Fifteen days later, on Holy Innocents Day, December 28, 1841, the organizing committee met with Provisional Bishop Jackson Kemper, and formally organized St. John's parish. The first wardens were J.V. Garnier and Isaac W. Ayres and F.W. Southack was the first Secretary; the Rev. Whiting Griswold was elected rector.⁶ Two days later, at the organizing convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri, St. John's application to be admitted to the diocese was rejected, on canonical grounds, having been so recently organized as to not meet canonical requirements regarding the time between a parish's organization and its admission to the Diocese.⁷ Nevertheless, services continued to be held at the Washington Engine House until the summer of 1842, when the vestry leased a lot at the corner of Fifth and Spruce and built a building there.⁸

In 1843, the Rev. Griswold met with a number of women of his parish, and Provisional Bishop Jackson Kemper, with the intention of forming a home for the care of the orphaned population of St. Louis.⁹ As a result, the Episcopal Orphan's Home was chartered, and for over a century the institution provided much needed services to orphaned children in the growing community.

As early as 1844, the Rev. Mr Griswold was also actively involved in the administration of Kemper College, an Episcopal college and seminary established in accordance with Jackson Kemper's wish to provide suitable academic and theological training in the western region, so that candidates need not return east for their education, as Griswold had done. Griswold was a trustee of the college in 1844, and served as secretary.¹⁰ It was through his capacity as Trustee that Griswold became enmeshed in what may well have been the first significant controversy facing the new diocese.

Many people, apparently including Whiting Griswold felt that the president of Kemper College, E. Carter Hutchinson, had personal ambitions to be the first Bishop of Missouri, which was in the process of forming in 1841. Two years after Cicero Hawkes was elected Bishop, however, Hutchinson resigned as president, leaving the college with significant debt, and no leadership. Hutchinson's friends quickly petitioned the new bishop to allow them to create a church, St. George's, so that Hutchinson would have a place to continue his ministry – a highly irregular action. Furthermore, these same friends purchased the property of the now-defunct Kemper College, and sent Hutchinson back east to solicit funds for an institution they intended to run “on Episcopal principals” but outside of diocesan control. Whiting Griswold, and others saw these actions as being contrary to the welfare and growth of

the new diocese. As a result Griswold wrote letters to several church publications on the east coast, outlining what he felt were subversive activities on the part of Hutchinson and his friends, and hoping to bring attention to their actions. As a result of these letters, Hutchinson's role in the new diocese became increasingly diminished, and after a short time he returned to the East. Griswold, however, continued to serve both his parish, and the newly formed Diocese of Missouri.

St. John's parish continued to grow and prosper, and presented its first class of confirmands to Bishop Hawkes on March 16, 1845,¹² and Griswold's family grew, as well. On October 3, 1845, Benjamin Howell Griswold, the son of the Rev. Whiting Griswold and his wife, Ellen Maria Howell Griswold, was born in St. Louis.¹³ In keeping with this expansion and growth, plans were made to build a structure on land owned by the parish, rather than staying in the structure at Fifth and Spruce, the land for which was leased. Accordingly, a lot was purchased at the corner of Eighth and Gratiot streets, and construction begun.¹⁴ The Rev. Griswold continued to be active in diocesan affairs, serving locally on the Standing Committee,¹⁵ and at the national level, helping to represent the diocese at the General Convention of 1841¹⁶, and of 1847,¹⁷ where he served on the Committee on the State of the Church, and the Committee on the Consecration of Bishops. He was also elected to attend General Convention in 1850¹⁸.

However, in 1849, St Louis suffered a massive cholera epidemic that wiped out a tenth of the city's population. During the epidemic, Griswold worked tirelessly to provide assistance to the sick and suffering, bury the dead and comfort the grieving, working to the point of near exhaustion. At the height of the epidemic, on July 24, 1849, Whiting Griswold himself succumbed to the disease.¹⁹ Accounts of his demise tell that, during the final stages of delirium that accompany the disease, he could be heard reading the various Prayer Book offices, as if in perfect health and ministering to his congregation.²⁰

Word of the death of Whiting Griswold spread throughout the Episcopal church. A large memorial to him was eventually erected inside St. John's; it is today in the rear of the present structure. Another memorial was placed at the Orphan's Home.²¹ The following year, in a collection of poems titled "Echoes of the Heart", by the Rev. Edward C. Jones of Philadelphia, an ode to Griswold, titled "The Christian Hero, appeared.

"THE CHRISTIAN HERO".

STANZAS TO THE MEMORY OF THE REV. WHITING GRISWOLD, LATE RECTOR OF ST. JOHN'S CHURCH, ST. LOUIS, MO., WHO RECENTLY FELL A VICTIM TO THE PREVAILING EPIDEMIC, WHILE DISCHARGING HIS MINISTERIAL DUTY.

"Thou art fallen, young tree, with all thy beauty round thee; thou art fallen on the plains, and all the field is bare. The wind comes from the desert, and there is no sound in thy leaves."—Ossian—Poem of Berrathon.

And thou hast gone—the Archer's poison'd dart,
Hath sent the death-pang to thy noble heart,
Sepulchral stillness settles round thy form,
And that mild face, with generous feeling -warm,
No more beams out to light a kindred ray,
In eyes now doubly dimmed since thou hast pass'd away.

Thine was a Martyr's transit—hallow'd zeal,
Bore thee right on in deeds of Christian love,
But soon did angel accents downward steal—
" The crown, the palm-branch, wait thee now above."
In that soft cadence pain was lulled to rest,
And the dread scourge, to thee, a Messenger, how blest!

When to the trumpet's clang the warrior hies,
His life-blood pledging to his native shore,
And struggling nobly, rattling hail defies,
Shouts mid his pangs, and triumphs stained with gore,
Then Freedom chants her eulogistic song,
And bids the distant age the swelling strain prolong.

And when in Duty's van the Christian falls,
Foremost and first mid pestilence and death,
Prompt to respond wherever suffering calls,
And mid his labors yielding back his breath,
Perish the thought that *He* should die unwept,
And have no sacred shrine in which his name is kept.

Soldier of Jesus, thou has served thy Lord,
With faith unshrinking to the latest hour,
Pass onward, upward, to thy bright reward,
The starry crown, the amaranthine bower;
Thine was the turmoil of the battle plain,
Now thine with Christ for aye a "King and Priest" to reign.²²

Following the death of the Rev. Whiting Griswold, Ellen Maria Griswold returned in 1850 to Hagerstown Maryland with her infant son,²³ and remained there many years. She was still residing there at the time the present St. John's was built, in 1908²⁴.

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- i Citation needed
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- 6 "Church News" Episcopal Diocese of Missouri February 1890 p 21
- 7 "The Churchman's Year Book with Kalendar for the Year of Grace 1871" William Stevens Perry Hartford, Connecticut Church Press Co. 1871 p.236
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