

THE HISTORY OF MASON'S THREE EPISCOPAL CHURCHES

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September 2024

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Mason's first Episcopalians were, by necessity, a hardy and courageous bunch. The town's Episcopal community unofficially got its start with the arrival of Henry and Lucia Holmes in 1874. Henry, a native of Bristol, England, had come to America at age fourteen with the East India colony. He joined the U.S. Army and was sent to Texas and the American West, eventually attaining the rank of major.¹ During the Civil War, he remained with the Union Army, having no sympathy for the Confederate cause.² Shortly after the war, when he was stationed in Rhode Island, he married Lucia Sheldon, a judge's daughter from Newport. They were sent to Fort McKavett, Texas, during Reconstruction.³

Henry settled on law for his post-military career. He was elected justice of the peace in Menardville (now Menard) in 1872. He and Lucia relocated to Mason in 1874, the same year the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas was formed.⁴ They purchased a small sandstone house just off the southeast corner of Mason's courthouse square, which had probably been constructed the previous year. At first Henry kept his law office there. He eventually formed a real estate partnership with a neighbor, Charles Bierschwale. Lucia, an accomplished seamstress, set up a sewing room in their house where she made many of the dresses worn by Mason women of her era.

Henry and Lucia Holmes had picked the worst possible time to move to Mason. They would become unwilling witnesses to the bloody events of a range feud known as the Mason County War or "Hoodoo" War. Based partly in ethnicity, the dispute over cattle rustling pitted German immigrants against their neighbors who had come from the southeastern states. 1875 was the most terrifying year. Around ten o'clock on the night of February 18, 1875, Lucia Holmes and Kate Gamel watched from the front porch of the Gamel house across the road while a lynch mob passed by with five men suspected of stealing cattle, who had been taken by force from the jail to be hanged. Henry led a group that tried in vain to rescue the prisoners, firing into the lynch mob until they were out of sight. Lucia wrote in her diary, "We were dreadfully frightened and horrified."⁵

¹ Sue Kaan, "Henry Marcus Holmes," in *The Anthology of the Hoo Doo War: The Participants in the Mason County, Texas Cattle War, 1874-1877* (Mason, Tex.: Mason County Historical Commission, 2006), 75.

² Lucia Holmes, *The Lucia Holmes Diary, 1875-1876: The Hoo Doo War Years* (Mason, Tex.: Mason County Historical Commission, 1985), introduction.

³ Velela Boyd, "Lucia Sheldon Holmes," in *The Anthology of the Hoo Doo War*, 78-79.

⁴ L. H. Warburton, Jr., "Henry Marcus Holmes: A Texas Law Practice, 1874-1895," *Texas Bar Journal*, Sept. 1979, 710.

⁵ Lucia Holmes diary, 5.

A few days later, she lamented, “How I wish we had never come to this place.”⁶ Henry, however, didn’t shy away from the trouble. The following month, he “made out a paper for men to sign for the preservation of law and order in the county.”⁷ Henry also wrote to the *San Antonio Herald* so that the general public would learn what was happening in Mason County.⁸ At one point during the feud, the notorious outlaw John Ringo threatened Henry, who “got his arms ready if [Ringo] should come to the house.”⁹ On another occasion, saloon owner Michael Foley was “in town drunk” saying that Henry’s “days are numbered,” just before Foley “fell off his horse and hurt himself again.”¹⁰

The *Mason County News* opined that Henry was “always pronounced and candid in his views, never dodging an issue for the sake of policy.”¹¹ There is no doubt that he was outspoken and, in the words of some of his contemporaries, “boisterous.” It was widely suspected that Mason County’s sheriff, John Clark, had been complicit with (or at least sympathetic toward) the lynch mob that stormed the jail. Holmes reportedly went around town saying that Clark, by his suspicious conduct, had “destroyed his usefulness” as a sheriff.¹² Henry and the sheriff were both members of McCulloch Masonic Lodge No. 273, and a fellow lodge member leveled charges against Henry for openly disparaging Clark. Lucia was outraged when she found out about the charges. She wrote sarcastically: “A nice place this is to live in.”¹³ A three-man committee took testimony concerning the accusations against Holmes at the regular lodge meeting on September 11, 1875. The deliberations must have continued for several hours, for Lucia waited at the home of a friend, Elizabeth Stewart, until nearly three o’clock in the morning. Finally, a majority of the lodge members voted to acquit Henry of the charges.

Captain Dan Roberts was one of several Texas Rangers sent to Mason to try to keep the peace, and his wife, Lou, was Lucia’s houseguest for several days. On the morning of September 29, 1875, the two women were at home having breakfast and visiting with Anton Hoerster, a local contractor who had added a front porch to the Holmes residence earlier that year. (One of the men who helped build the porch, Deputy Sheriff John Wohrle, had been murdered the preceding month.) They were startled when they heard gunfire coming from across the courthouse square. Lou Roberts wrote a vivid account of what happened next:

Rushing out into the yard, we saw two men, bareheaded, with guns in their hands, come toward us at full speed. We rushed into the house, locked the doors, and Mrs. Holmes and I went into her room, which had but one window. To our horror the men rode right up to the window. I looked for a place of safety, and the only one I could see was the space under the bed, which I pointed out to my hostess. She refused to take that shelter. She was looking out for the safety of her husband; I was looking after my own. Mrs. Holmes asked them what they wanted; they replied that they had come to inform Mr. Hester

⁶ *Id.*, 6.

⁷ *Id.*, 10.

⁸ C. L. Sonnichsen, *Ten Texas Feuds* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), 93, 99-100.

⁹ Lucia Holmes diary, 79.

¹⁰ *Id.*, 87.

¹¹ *Mason County News*, Aug. 23, 1895.

¹² Peter R. Rose, and Elizabeth E. Sherry, eds., *The Hoo Doo War: Portraits of a Lawless Time* (Mason, Tex.: Mason County Historical Commission, 2003), 40.

¹³ Lucia Holmes diary, 28.

[Anton Hoerster], who was Major Holmes' guest, that Scott Cooley [a former Texas Ranger gone rogue] had killed his brother [county cattle inspector Dan Hoerster]. ... I was very restless after having a gun pointed at me at such close range, and I confess that the western town of Mason suddenly lost its charm. It was altogether too unsafe a place to be.¹⁴

The murder victim, like Deputy Sheriff Wohrle, had also helped build the Holmes' front porch, which Lucia had wanted so badly and which had used up most of their savings. No doubt the airy, shaded gallery served as a permanent reminder to Lucia and Henry of the killings that they had witnessed in the year it was built.

During this period, Lucia Holmes attended church services fairly regularly, alternating mostly among the Methodist, Christian and Lutheran churches. Both the Methodist and the Christian churches were formally organized in the town of Mason in 1876, and Lucia referred to the Methodist as "our church."¹⁵ She sometimes played the organ and taught Sunday school there. She was often impressed by the preaching but occasionally had a few quibbles: "Mr. Gibson preached one of his rambling sermons." "Went to the Christian church. ... Loud and very common preaching." "Heard a sermon fighting against us poor Methodists." "Found Mr. Gibson preaching [at a camp meeting,] which rather dampened pleasure."¹⁶

In the dark days of 1875, Lucia and her friends encouraged each other by gathering around the pump organ in her parlor and singing hymns. In particularly stressful times, Lucia would serve everyone toddies, or fix one for herself when she was alone. The Hoodoo War had the unintended effect of prompting a rise in religious fervor in Mason,¹⁷ and several revivals and camp meetings were held in 1876. Lucia got Henry to join her in attending the Methodist church that year.¹⁸

It is unknown when Mason gained enough Episcopalians to start holding their own services in private homes. Local historian Margaret Bierschwale, a daughter of Henry's business partner, thought that Mason had about sixteen Episcopalians by 1883. A Dr. Stanley conducted services.¹⁹ In the summer of 1884, Henry Holmes spearheaded a drive to start construction of a sandstone church building. The local newspaper commented that Henry was "[o]f the Episcopal faith, yet he was liberal toward all, and no matter how widely he might differ from others, he saw and honored persistent, straightforward Christianity as the believer understood and accepted it."²⁰ Lucia suggested that Henry's beliefs might not have been completely orthodox when she recorded one evening that he was "talking on religion in his own funny way."²¹ It was also Henry's nature to be forgiving. Although he "wore the blue with honor" during the Civil War, he

¹⁴ Mrs. Dan W. Roberts, *A Woman's Reminiscences of Six Years in Camp with the Texas Rangers* (Austin: Von Boeckmann-Jones Co., 1928), 8-9.

¹⁵ Lucia Holmes diary, 93.

¹⁶ *Id.*, 69, 71, 74.

¹⁷ *Mason County Communities* (Mason, Tex.: Mason County Sesquicentennial Committee, 1986), 154, 159.

¹⁸ Lucia Holmes diary, 74.

¹⁹ Margaret Bierschwale, *A History of Mason County, Texas Through 1964* (Mason, Tex.: Mason County Historical Commission, 1998), 186.

²⁰ *Mason County News*, Aug. 23, 1895.

²¹ Lucia Holmes diary, 69.

called on his fellow Union soldiers in Texas to “do something for the Confederate home in Austin,” and he was praised for “his generous and sympathetic nature.”²²

Henry Holmes and James Ranck, a local businessman and promoter known as the “Father of Mason,” purchased a lot for the new church, each paying \$250. Ranck himself was not a religious man and had a “complete hatred” for “priest craft and humbuggery,” although he “recognized the civilizing influences of church.”²³ The lot was conveniently located at present-day 125 Broad Street, one block north of the courthouse square. (The site has been occupied by Mason Warehouse since 1938.) Ten days after the purchase, Holmes and Ranck deeded the lot to the Episcopal Church in the name of the Bishop of West Texas, Robert W. B. Elliott, for a sum of one dollar.²⁴ The cornerstone of the church building was laid on December 28, 1885, and contained a Bible that had been carried into the battle of Shiloh in 1862.²⁵

Fundraising for the church building proceeded slowly. Henry’s aunt in England gave a donation, as did local rancher and philanthropist John Gamel, the Holmes’ neighbor and friend across the road. J. T. Parish of Park Avenue, New York City, also contributed.²⁶ His connection to Mason or to Henry or Lucia Holmes is unknown. Some of the money for the building had to be borrowed. A decade later, Bishop James Steptoe Johnston would receive confirmation that the diocese had paid off the loan for the church at Mason from the American Church Building Fund Commission in New York (now the Episcopal Church Building Fund).²⁷

Construction of the native sandstone building was expected to take three years. Holmes wanted it to be “the prettiest church in West Texas.” It was to be called St. John’s Episcopal Church.²⁸ Two items from the *Mason County News* in 1888 indicate that the building was not substantially completed until late that year. On August 18, the newspaper reported:

Next Tuesday night, the 21st inst., the ladies of the Episcopal church will give an entertainment on the square in front of Postmaster Lowry’s residence. The proceeds will be devoted to seating their church, which will soon be completed.

Mrs. J. M. Lowry hosted the lawn festival, which netted \$34. In addition, Lucia Holmes made a beautiful quilt of silk, satin and sateen to be raffled for the church.²⁹

Another item from September 1 suggested that the church was close to finished:

²² *Mason County News*, Aug. 17, 1889.

²³ *Id.*, Sept. 3, 1892.

²⁴ Bierschwale, 186.

²⁵ Kathryn Burford Eilers, “A History of Mason County, Texas” (M.A. thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1939), 181.

²⁶ Bierschwale, 187.

²⁷ Letters from E. Walter Roberts, assistant treasurer, American Church Building Fund Commission, to J. S. Johnston, Feb. 25, 1895, and Mar. 2, 1895, Henry M. Holmes Papers, Doc. 8967, DRT Library, Bexar Archives, San Antonio, Tex.

²⁸ Bierschwale, 187.

²⁹ *Austin Weekly Statesman*, Aug. 30, 1888; *Mason County News*, Dec. 15, 1888.

S. F. Bridges [a local contractor and hotelier] is pushing the carpenter work on the Episcopal church. D. H. Loring will roof it with tin shingles.

In later years, the newspaper would describe the building as a “handsome stone edifice.”³⁰ Unfortunately, no documented photograph of St. John’s is known to exist, although the roof is visible in some of the early pictures of Mason’s courthouse square. (The church appeared to resemble Grace Episcopal in Llano, which was finished around the same time.) Historians Margaret Bierschwale and J. Marvin Hunter thought that the structure was never entirely completed, although services were held in it for several years. In 1893, the Rev. O. Wilson was listed as the rector, but services were only held once every two months.³¹ In addition to the Holmes and the Lowrys, some of the early members were Theodore Splittgerber and his mother, Sophie, along with the families of George and Sara Cooper, William and Jane Higgins, and M. F. and Julia Carter.³² Like Henry Holmes, both George Cooper and William Higgins were natives of England.

Henry and Lucia Holmes left Mason for Austin in 1887, where Henry served as private secretary to his good friend from his early days in Texas, Governor Lawrence Sullivan Ross. They returned to Mason in 1890.³³ In the fall of 1894, the bishop appointed Henry lay reader at St. John’s in the absence of a rector. For several months, he conducted services every Sunday morning, which was “a source of much satisfaction to himself and family, and those who attended learned to know more of the true workings of this church.”³⁴ Failing health finally forced him to stop, and he died in 1895. The Rev. D. F. Ward conducted his funeral.

Shortly afterward, Lucia left Mason and went to live with her sister, Mary Sheldon, in Danvers, Massachusetts. After Mary died in 1909, Lucia spent nine months with her adopted daughter May in Memphis, Tennessee, before briefly returning to Mason. She settled permanently at St. Mark’s Home for Women in Augusta, Maine, where she occupied her time volunteering for St. Mark’s Episcopal Church. She enjoyed good health and even attended Sunday services two days before she died in 1918.³⁵ Her body was sent to Mason to be buried beside Henry in the Gooch Cemetery.

Meanwhile, St. John’s Episcopal Church languished without the leadership of Henry and Lucia Holmes. The Lowrys, who had helped raise money for the church in 1888, left Mason around 1890.³⁶ Services appear to have been discontinued shortly before January 1900, when the church building was temporarily used by the postal service after Mason’s post office was destroyed by fire that month.³⁷ The church building was repaired and briefly used by the Baptists in 1905.³⁸ In August 1910, the county commissioners directed that the pews from the abandoned

³⁰ *Mason County News*, Aug. 23, 1895.

³¹ Bierschwale, 187; *Frontier Times*, Nov. 1928, 68; *Mason County News*, Aug. 11, 1893.

³² Eilers, 181.

³³ Bierschwale, 187.

³⁴ *Mason County News*, Aug. 23, 1895.

³⁵ *Id.*, Dec. 26, 1918.

³⁶ Julius E. DeVos, *Mail’s Up! The Mason County Post Offices* (Mason, Tex.: Mason County Historical Commission, 2008), 39.

³⁷ *Mason County Communities*, 106, 144.

³⁸ *Mason County News*, Feb. 17, 1905.

Episcopal Church be taken for use as benches on the porches of the newly-completed courthouse.³⁹ The church building was “going to rack very fast” by 1917 and was home to bats.⁴⁰ The Bishop of West Texas apologized to Mason’s Clean Town Club that the church had “been the means of holding in your beautiful little city a piece of property that has marred the appearance of its neighborhood.”⁴¹ In 1918, the Mason National Bank purchased the deteriorated church, demolished it, and reused the stones in its new building at the corner of Broad and Ft. McKavitt Streets, which was completed in 1919.⁴² It now serves as the school administrative office. Some of the rocks from St. John’s were also used to construct the water tower at Ernest Lemburg’s residence at 320 Moody Street.⁴³ More than half a century would pass before Mason again had an active Episcopalian community.

³⁹ Mason County Commissioners Court Minutes, Vol. 4, 354.

⁴⁰ *Mason County News*, Mar. 15, 1917.

⁴¹ *Id.*, Apr. 14, 1921.

⁴² *Id.*, Jan. 9, 1919, Feb. 27, 1919.

⁴³ *Mason County Communities*, 148.



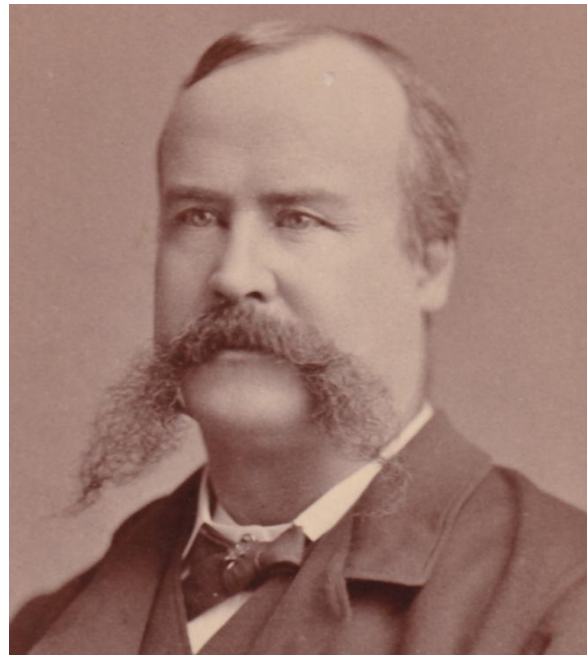
The roof of St. John's behind the frame buildings, 1890s.



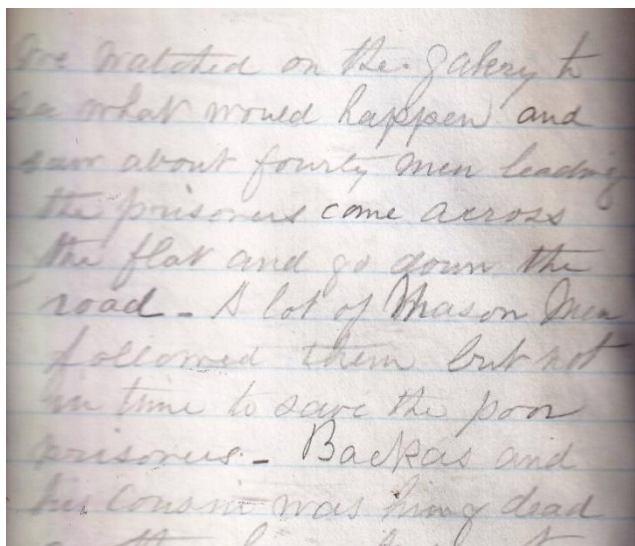
Possible but undocumented photo of St. John's. The man on the left appears to be Henry Holmes.



Lucia Holmes, 1882.



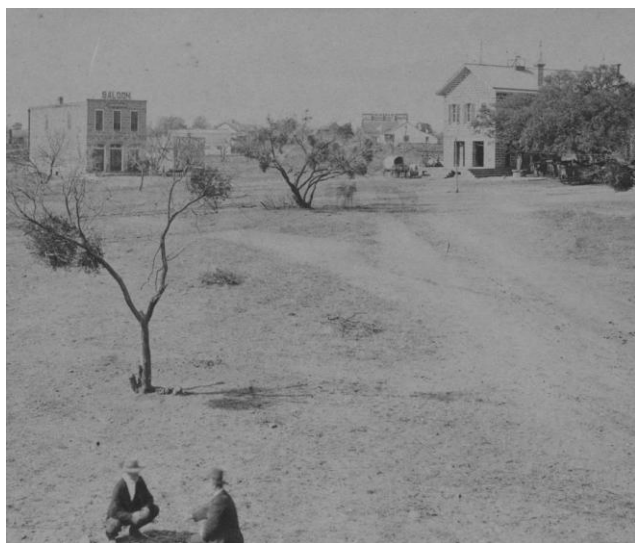
Henry Holmes.



Lucia Holmes diary describing lynching, 1875.



Holmes house, 1972.



Mason's square looking northwest, 1877.



Bank built with stones from St. John's.

ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The driving forces behind the reestablishment of the church in Mason were two cradle Episcopalians, Edwin Sharpe and Mary Jane Wood. Sharpe, during his college years, had been torn between becoming an educator and entering the priesthood. Shortly after graduation, he was offered a teaching position in Longview, Texas, and he decided to follow that path.⁴⁴ In Longview, Edwin and his wife, Marie Hill Sharpe, formed a friendship with Ellis and Mary Jane Wood. Ellis, an accomplished band director, had been raised a Quaker in Pennsylvania. Both families were active in Trinity Episcopal in Longview.

By the mid-1950s, both the Sharpes and the Woods were living in Mason. Edwin Sharpe was hired as Mason's school superintendent, and Ellis Wood served as the high school principal. Marie Sharpe taught school in Mason and later completed her master's degree at the University of Texas at Austin. Mary Jane Wood is fondly remembered in Mason for introducing its residents to the "tavern burger," a loose meat sandwich similar to a "Sloppy Joe" that served as the staple snack at Mason High School athletic events for decades. Her daughter, Diane Wood Covey, recalled that Mary Jane had learned to prepare tavern burgers while volunteering for band fundraisers in Longview. She contributed her much-loved recipe to the 1958 Mason cookbook. It is still used in Mason at church and community dinners and is the town's most-requested recipe.

The Sharpes and the Woods determined that Mason had enough Episcopalians to reactivate the church. The Rev. Edward Haffner of Grace Episcopal in Llano assisted with establishing St. Stephen's, along with seminarian Joseph Fasel of the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest in Austin.⁴⁵ Ed Haffner was known in the Diocese as the "cowboy priest," because he always wore his boots.⁴⁶ On November 6, 1955, the first service was held in the home of Ellis and Mary Jane Wood. Fasel conducted morning prayer, and Edwin Sharpe was elected warden. Seventeen people attended the first service: Edwin and Marie Sharpe and their children Edwin Jr. and Maribelle; Peggy (Mrs. Billy) Martin and her children Ann, Nancy, Bill and Judy; Dr. and Mrs. W. F. Key, Jr.; and Ellis and Mary Jane Wood and their children Anne, Diane and Walter. A gift of \$100 was received from the Women's Auxiliary of Trinity Episcopal in Longview. Grace Episcopal in Llano gave the mission a lectern and prayer desk, and St. Luke's Episcopal in San Saba donated a plaque.⁴⁷

Services were then held at the American Legion Hall behind the jail until a permanent facility could be secured. The congregation leased the Ed Lemburg house, a frame building dating from 1904 and located at present-day 754 Wheeler Street.⁴⁸ Its owners and most recent occupants were the family of the previous school superintendent, H. M. Carnes. The house was reconditioned for use as a church.

⁴⁴ Interview with Maribelle Sharpe Hoerster, Mar. 11, 2024. Unless otherwise stated, all the information about St. Stephen's is from this interview.

⁴⁵ Bierschwale, 187.

⁴⁶ Cynthia Joost, "A History of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Cypress Mill," 12, available at <https://stlukes-cm.org/uploads/resources/St.LukesHistory-Joost.pdf>.

⁴⁷ *Mason County News*, Nov. 10, 1955, June 19, 1958.

⁴⁸ Bierschwale, 187.

At various times, five to seven families were active in St. Stephen's, including some of the Stevensons and the Whites from Junction. The mission was served by seminarians from Austin, primarily Joseph Fasel and Keith Miller, who later authored the influential Christian book *The Taste of New Wine*. Fasel's wife, Lois, recalled a story of a visit from Suffragan Bishop Richard Earl Dicus in Junction. She drew him aside and told him, "Bishop, I'm afraid Joe isn't doing his job. He's off hunting and fishing with people all the time." The bishop got a big grin on his face and said, "That's great! That's exactly what I want him to do."⁴⁹

The Woods left Mason after the 1958-1959 school year, and the Sharpes' daughter Maribelle graduated from Mason High School at the same time. After that, St. Stephen's fell dormant. Again, it would be more than half a century before the Episcopal church was revived in Mason.

Ed Haffner later served churches in Brownwood and Coleman and was chaplain for the Marine Military Academy in Harlingen. After retiring from the priesthood, he moved to Brownsville in 1980 and founded a real estate appraisal business there. Haffner taught accounting at Texas Southmost College and the University of Texas at Brownsville for many years. He died in 2012.⁵⁰

Joseph Fasel became the vicar of Trinity Episcopal in Junction in 1957. In the early 1960s, he served as curate at St. Paul's on the Plains in Lubbock for four years and then became rector of St. James Episcopal in Clovis, New Mexico, for seventeen years. He moved back to the Diocese of West Texas in 1982 to be vicar of St. Andrew's by the Sea in Port Isabel until he retired in 1993.⁵¹ Joe died in 1996 and Lois in 2009. They were buried at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery in San Antonio.⁵² Their son, the Rev. William J. (Bill) Fasel, was ordained in the Diocese of West Texas in 1990 and relocated to Missouri in 1993. He served as assistant to the bishop of the Diocese of West Missouri for leadership development from 2011 until 2023.

Edwin and Marie Sharpe and their son, Ed, attended St. Paul's Episcopal in Brady until they left Mason in 1965. They moved to Austin, where Edwin was on the vestry of St. David's Episcopal. (His son, Dr. Ed Sharpe, later served on the same vestry.⁵³) When he was 58 years old, Edwin retired from school administration and entered seminary. On September 23, 1977, he was ordained as an Episcopal priest at the Cathedral of St. John in Albuquerque, New Mexico.⁵⁴ He served as vicar of St. Michael's Episcopal in Tucumcari, New Mexico, for about three years. The Sharpes retired to Wimberley, where the Rev. Edwin Sharpe occasionally served as priest at St. Stephen's Episcopal. He died in 1982, and Marie followed him in 1994. They were buried in the cemetery at St. Stephen's.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Email from Bill Fasel to Scott Zesch, Aug. 12, 2024.

⁵⁰ <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/brownsvilleherald/name/edward-haffner-obituary?id=21023551>.

⁵¹ Email from Bill Fasel to Scott Zesch, Aug. 12, 2024.

⁵² <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/639459/joseph-h-fasel>.

⁵³ *Mason County News*, July 25, 1984.

⁵⁴ *Id.*, Sept. 29, 1977.

⁵⁵ *Id.*, Nov. 18, 1982 (Edwin Sharpe obituary), June 1, 1994 (Marie Sharpe obituary).

In 1962, Kenneth and Carolyn Loeffler purchased the frame house on Wheeler Street that St. Stephen's had used. They built a new house on the front part of the lot in 1967. The Loefflers dismantled the old frame house behind it and reused the materials.⁵⁶ In 2018, Carolyn presented St. Martin's with a wooden cross made by Chris Habecker out of lumber salvaged from St. Stephen's.⁵⁷

TAVERN SANDWICHES

Mrs. Ellis Wood⁵⁸

1 pound ground hamburger meat; 1 medium onion, chopped; 1 garlic bud, minced; 1 teaspoon salt; pepper to taste; 1 cup water; ½ bottle (regular size) catsup; 1 teaspoon (heaping) dry mustard; 1 teaspoon (heaping) chile powder; 10 hamburger buns. Brown meat, onion and garlic. Add salt, pepper and water. Cover with lid and simmer for 30 minutes. Add catsup, mustard and chili powder, and simmer with lid on, until mixture is spreading consistency (about 30 minutes). Spread on hot buns and serve at once. Makes 10 sandwiches. [NOTE: In 1958, a “regular” bottle of catsup was 14 ounces.]

⁵⁶ Interview with Carolyn Loeffler, Mar. 12, 2024.

⁵⁷ Letter from Carolyn Loeffler to St. Martin's, Nov. 2018.

⁵⁸ *Through the Years With Mason Cooks*, Centennial Edition—1958 (Mason, Tex.: The Mason Parent-Teacher Association, 1958), 169.



Ed Lemburg residence (St. Stephen's), 1962.



Edwin Sharpe and his daughter, Maribelle, at the 1958 high school prom.



Ed Haffner.



Joe and Lois Fasel.



Keith Miller.



Cross from Carolyn Loeffler.

ST. MARTIN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Like Henry Holmes, Edwin Sharpe and Mary Jane Wood, the lay organizer of St. Martin's was a lifelong Episcopalian and a Mason resident, Rob Welch. In 2011, Rob and his wife Karen were attending St. Barnabas Episcopal in Fredericksburg. Karen was on the vestry, and Rob served as an usher. The interim rector at St. Barnabas was the Rev. Richard (Dick) Elwood, who had retired from St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston. He was completing his four-year stint at St. Barnabas before spending a year at Grace Episcopal in Llano. In the first week of October 2011, Rob invited Dick to have lunch in Mason. When Dick saw Rob's office in the S&H Building on the north side of the courthouse square (102 Ft. McKavitt Street), he thought it would be an excellent place to hold church services.

Dick proposed coming to Mason every other Sunday from Llano and holding services at four o'clock in Rob's office. Rob placed an advertisement in the *Mason County News*, and about eight to ten people showed up for the first gathering in Mason on October 23, 2011. Some of the early attendees, like Rob and Karen Welch, were Mason Episcopalians who had been attending other churches in the area (Kent Rabon and Doug and Carol Holmes from St. Paul's in Brady, Scott Zesch from Grace in Llano). Others came out of curiosity. Dick Elwood always showed up for services with his Australian shepherd Martin, the protagonist of his award-winning children's book *Martin in the Narthex*. Martin the dog became the inspiration for selecting the church's name.

The Diocese of West Texas was supportive of the Mason group but was not sure exactly what to call it, since it had not applied for mission status. In 2013, Bishop Gary Lillibridge and Suffragan Bishop David Reed came up with the name "St. Martin's Episcopal Worshipping Community." One of the early members, Dan Barton, built an altar for St. Martin's. In addition to Martin the dog, the services were attended by the cats that inhabited Rob Welch's office. They curled up in the laps of members during the homily and occasionally played solos on the electronic keyboard.

Dick Elwood stayed with St. Martin's about a year. He was succeeded by the Rev. Mary Margaret Mueller, a Mason native who had retired from Grace Episcopal in Llano. She remained with the group about three and one-half years before relocating to San Antonio. After that, St. Martin's relied on supply clergy once or twice a month, primarily the Rev. Phil Mason and the Rev. Linda Kelly.⁵⁹ Phil, who began services by playing his Native American flute, crafted the altar stand that holds the liturgy book. (Like Edwin Sharpe, he sometimes served as priest at St. Stephen's in Wimberley, where he resided.) Church members, primarily Sharon Keilin, Rob Welch, Kent Rabon, and Robert McDonald, led morning prayer when no priest was in attendance. More members started bringing their dogs to services, and St. Martin's became the first dog-friendly church in Mason.

St. Martin's continued to worship in Rob's office through 2014. In 2015, the group moved into the vacant First Christian Church building at the invitation of its owners, Sykes and Nancy Houston. The small congregation was concerned about its ability to meet the expense, but

⁵⁹ Interview with Rob Welch, Mar. 20, 2024.

the Houstons offered the building free of charge on a trial basis. The altar made by Dan Barton was installed at the new location. The walls were decorated with Ugandan tapestries purchased through the organization Threads of Blessing. The large pastoral reredos behind the altar was made by a Ugandan woman who died of AIDS shortly afterward, and the \$1,500 purchase price paid by St. Martin's was used help fund her children's education.⁶⁰ Mary Margaret Mueller presided at the first service in the new facility on Easter Sunday 2015.⁶¹

St. Martin's became more visible in Mason County when it hosted a public Blessing of the Animals on the courthouse lawn in conjunction with Old Yeller Day in 2016.⁶² The church also participated in hosting the Mason Ministerial Alliance's annual Lenten lunches, always serving the popular St. Martin's gumbo.

On Easter Sunday 2016, the Rev. G. Thomas (Tom) Luck celebrated the Eucharist for the first time at St. Martin's. Before relocating to Fredericksburg, Tom was the dean and rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in Syracuse, New York, and canon theologian of the Episcopal Diocese of Central New York. Prior to that, he had been the rector of the Episcopal Church of St. Mary in Falmouth, Maine. In 2018, Bishop David Reed appointed him part-time vicar at the Episcopal Church of the Ascension in Montell. During that year, he went to Ascension twice a month and came to St. Martin's twice a month. In 2019, he agreed to start coming to St. Martin's four times a month and became its sole priest.⁶³ In addition to his duties for the church, Tom worked as a tasting room ambassador for Lost Draw Wines and Wine for the People in Fredericksburg.

Since its founding, St. Martin's has endeavored to introduce meaningful innovations into its liturgical worship. Mary Margaret Mueller instituted the practice of allowing time after the priest's homily for comments, questions, and group discussion. In addition, St. Martin's has actively sought to engage with residents of Mason County who may not feel well served by other churches, especially LGBTQ people and those who do not subscribe to religious orthodoxy. It invited local artists Bill Worrell and Spider Johnson to give homilies. On Christmas Eve 2015, the Eucharist was celebrated by the Rev. Ted Durst, a Mason County native and resident of Chicago who became the first openly gay priest to conduct a worship service at any church in Mason.

In addition to volunteering for the church, many of St. Martin's members are leaders and active volunteers in Second Chance—Mason Animal Rescue, Mason Community Kitchen, and Mason County Food Pantry. In addition, St. Martin's supports and promotes Threads of Blessing by selling its tapestries at local events, and it has sent cash contributions to the Diocese of West Texas's LGBTQ+ Family Camp. In the tradition that Jesus established of engaging with "the other," St. Martin's has also contributed funds to non-Christian and secular nonprofits, including: RAICES Refugee & Immigrant Legal Services; Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA); a mosque vandalized in Victoria, Texas; household goods and cash contributions for victims of

⁶⁰ Email from Sharon Keilin to Scott Zesch, Mar. 23, 2024.

⁶¹ Email from Karen Welch to Scott Zesch, Mar. 29, 2024.

⁶² *Mason County News*, Sept. 21, 2016.

⁶³ Email from Rob Welch to Scott Zesch, Mar. 22, 2024, based on information provided by Sharon Keilin; text correspondence with Tom Luck, Mar. 22, 2024.

Hurricane Harvey; and the Mason County Courthouse Reconstruction Fund.⁶⁴ Following the example set by Mason Episcopalians' outspoken patriarch, Henry Holmes, several members of St. Martin's participated in a demonstration in support of the "Black Lives Matter" movement on the courthouse square (and gave out free hot dogs) on July 4, 2020.

St. Martin's has held confirmation three times, in 2015 (Bishop David Reed; Amelia Zesch, Tom Gibbons, and Laura Lee Henderson were confirmed), 2022 (Bishop Rayford High; Sue and Keith Kaan and Jill and Bill Skinner were confirmed, Mariana and Glover Davis were received), and 2024 (Bishop David Read; Larry Brewer was confirmed). It hosted a memorial service for George Capps in 2017. In 2023, the church celebrated its first two baptisms, Elena Tamer and Josephine Cecilia Welch.

St. Martin's applied to the Diocese of West Texas for mission status in 2022.⁶⁵ At the diocesan council in Corpus Christi in February 2023, the church was welcomed as a new member. Tom Luck was appointed part-time vicar. Later that year, Mark Britt, husband of Ted Durst, launched St. Martin's website, www.stmartinsmason.org. James Morris was elected Bishop's Warden in 2024. Sharon Keilin and Scott Zesch continued in their previous roles as treasurer and music director, respectively.

ST. MARTIN'S GUMBO

4 pounds chicken thighs, bone in; 1 pound (or more) pre-cooked andouille or smoked sausage (or combination), sliced; 2 white onions, diced; 1½ green bell peppers, diced; ½ bunch (about 5 stalks) celery with leaves, diced; 6 cloves garlic, minced; 8 to 10 cups hot chicken stock; 1 cup ready-to-use (jarred) dark roux; 1 14-ounce can diced tomatoes with liquid; 1 14-ounce can tomato sauce; 2 pounds frozen cut okra; 2 tablespoons Tony Chachere's Original Creole; 1 teaspoon salt; 2 teaspoons black pepper; ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper; dash of tobacco; 1 bunch green onions, chopped; ¼ cup vegetable oil; 4 cups (dry) white rice, cooked. Cover chicken with water seasoned with salt, pepper, and a little Tony's. (If desired, add some onion, garlic, celery, and carrots to the water.) Bring to a boil, then cover and simmer until done, about 40 minutes. De-bone, cut in large chunks, very finely dice some of the skin, and set aside. Sauté onions, peppers, celery, and garlic in oil. Stir roux into vegetables and add some hot stock to help dissolve it. Keep stirring so the roux doesn't burn. Add the remainder of the stock, tomato sauce, tomatoes, sausage, okra, diced chicken skin, and seasonings. Cook about 30 minutes until most the fat from the sausage is rendered. Skim off excess fat. Add chicken and green onions and heat through. Serve over rice. Makes 25 servings.

EPILOGUE

Mason's Episcopalians have come full circle since the days of Henry and Lucia Holmes. Today, the people of St. Martin's meet for worship at the former First Christian Church, which Lucia occasionally attended. After services, they gather for a covered dish meal at the Holmes residence, now called Sandstone Wine Bar. Lucia's pump organ in the parlor has been replaced

⁶⁴ <https://www.stmartinsmason.org>.

⁶⁵ See "Petition for the Establishment of a New Diocesan Mission."

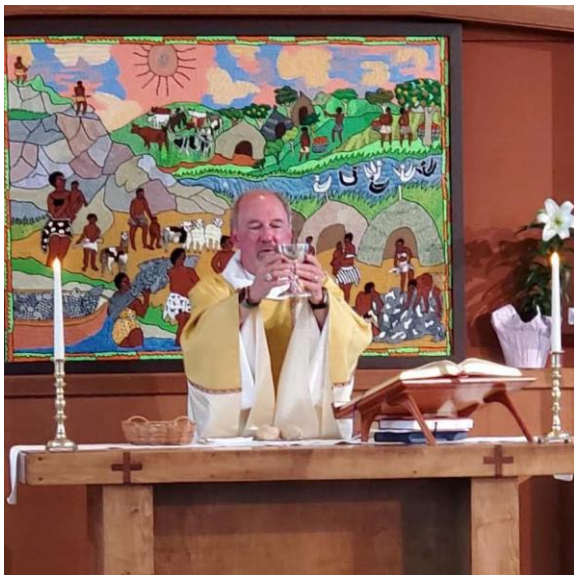
by an electronic keyboard, and the walls of her sewing room are decorated with paintings by local artists. Her toddies have given way to Texas wines, some of which are made by proprietors Scott Haupt and Manuel (Manny) Silerio, Mason's first professional vintners. The window where Lucia confronted two armed men in 1875 is now used to serve the wine bar's drive-through customers. The parishioners of St. Martin's have continued Henry's tradition of speaking out about issues of importance in their community. In 2023, St. Martin's held its Christmas Eve service in Lucia and Henry's/Scott and Manny's parlor. On pleasant days, the parishioners of St. Martin's enjoy their lunch on the long porch built by two men who were shot down during the Hoodoo War. No doubt Lucia Holmes, who spent many fretful and sleepless nights in this house, would be delighted that her fellow Episcopalians are enjoying her home in a much more relaxed era.



First Christian Church (now St. Martin's), 1972.



St. Martin's at Sandstone Wine Bar (Holmes house), Easter Sunday 2022.



Rev. Tom Luck at the altar built by Dan Barton, 2023.



Rev. Phil Mason, Blessing of the Animals, 2016.



Confirmation, 2024.



Diocesan Council, 2023.



Diocesan Council, 2023.



Lenten lunch, 2019.



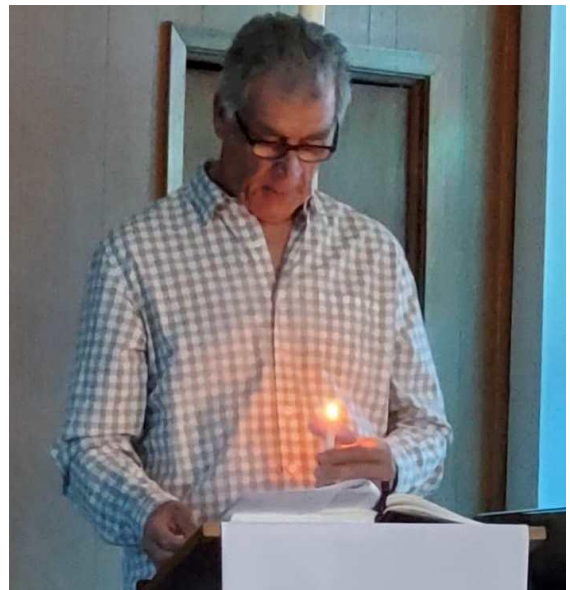
Rev. Ted Durst, Christmas Eve, 2015.



Baptisms, 2023.



Black Lives Matter demonstration, 2020.



Bishop's Warden James Morris, 2023.