

Duncan Cameron's Contributions to the Episcopal Church, 1817-1842:
A Profile in Lay Leadership.

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In November 1908, Annie Ruffin Collins wrote to her brother, Bennehan Cameron, recollecting their grandfather's signal contributions to the Episcopal Church. She wrote to express her complete agreement with her brother's desire to honor their grandfather with these words: "that Judge [Duncan] Cameron was the Chairman of the Committee of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, which established the General Episcopal Seminary in New York City, for the sons of this Church, & he founded St. Mary's school for the education of Her daughters, proving himself a son, in sympathy with the work of his revered Father, the Rev. John Cameron."¹ Annie Collins wrote these words because her brother's desire so to honor their grandfather with a memorial tablet at Old Blandford Church in Petersburg, Virginia, had become a source of contention. The descendants of the Rev. Dr. Aldert Smedes, the educator who started St. Mary's School for girls and ran it for 35 years, took exception to the use of the word 'Founder' to describe Duncan Cameron's contribution. To the Smedes family, Cameron and his descendants were simply the landlords who happened to own the school property and lease it to the Smedes's. When the trustees of the St. Mary's School and Bishop Cheshire went on record supporting the Smedes family interpretation, going so far as to pass a resolution stating "that the Rev. Aldert Smedes, D.D., was the sole founder of St. Mary's School and that it cannot be truthfully claimed that anyone else has any part in that honor," Bennehan Cameron dropped the matter entirely.²

Duncan Cameron's service to the Episcopal Church is no longer a fiercely contested subject, merely a somewhat neglected one. Particular contributions are documented, but the full scope of his engagement in the governance and building-up of the church has gone unreported and unexamined. And so this afternoon, I want to share with you an account of what Duncan Cameron did for our church, both here in Orange County and beyond, during the 25-year period from 1817 to 1842, and to allow a profile in lay leadership to emerge.

As the year 1817 drew to a close, Duncan Cameron (1777-1853) was forty years old and a man of considerable achievement. Born and raised in Virginia, the son of colonial Anglican clergyman John Cameron, Duncan instead trained as a lawyer and left

¹ Annie R. Collins to Bennehan Cameron 5 Nov 1908, Cameron Family Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill

² Martha Stoops, *The Heritage: The Education of Women at St. Mary's College, Raleigh, North Carolina 1842-1982* (Raleigh, NC: St. Mary's College, 1984) 184.

Virginia for North Carolina, settling in Hillsborough in 1799. Quickly he began to gain both wealth and a reputation as an orator. In 1803, he married Rebecca Bennehan and fought a duel with rival lawyer and suitor William Duffy. Moving first to the Bennehan plantation Stagville in 1807, and then to his own neighboring property, Fairntosh, in 1813, Cameron in 1817 was well on his way towards amassing what would become holdings of 8,000 acres, spread across several North Carolina counties and eventually several states. Moreover, he had developed a lively interest in politics, serving Orange County in the House of Commons in the early 1810s as a Federalist, before accepting appointment to the bench of the North Carolina Superior Court in 1814.³

By contrast, the Episcopal Church in North Carolina could scarcely be said to exist in 1817. For it was not until April, 1817 that three clergymen and six laymen met in New Bern to organize a diocese in this state and to ask for admission to the national Episcopal Church. Before then, there were but a few widely-scattered congregations in places like Edenton and New Bern, and only one of those, St. James' in Wilmington, could lay claim to substantial membership and the services of a full-time minister.⁴ But the prospects for the North Carolina Episcopal Church were soon to change for the better, and Duncan Cameron would play a prominent role in its revival.

February of 1818 brought Duncan Cameron a letter from Adam Empie, Rector of the Church in Wilmington and the driving force behind the creation of a diocesan organization in the state. Empie had heard through the grapevine that as many as 70 men in the vicinity of the old St. Mary's Chapel in Orange County were sympathetic to the Episcopal Church and needed only the assistance of a strong and able leader to organize them. Empie was hoping that Cameron might be that man.⁵ In the letter Empie did not spell out the ground of his confidence in Duncan Cameron; he simply presumed upon Cameron's "zeal for the Church." Most likely, Empie was referring to the fact that Cameron had been named President of the newly-organized Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church in North Carolina, formed to raise funds to "send into the destitute parts of this state, pious and devout ministers of the Church."⁶ But whatever his reason for turning to Duncan Cameron, it was to prove fortuitous, and not merely for the prospects of the Church in Orange County.

By August of 1818, public worship was restored to St. Mary's Chapel, and by 1819, St. Mary's was ready to be admitted into union with the convention of the diocese.⁷

³ Jean Bradley Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation: The Bennehan-Cameron Family and Lands in North Carolina* (Durham: Historical Preservation Society, 1985) 20-26; Charles Richard Sanders "Duncan Cameron" in William S. Powell, ed. *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979) I, 311.

⁴ Henry S. Lewis, "The Formation of the Diocese of North Carolina, 1817-1830" in Lawrence F. London and Sarah M. Lemmon, eds. *The Episcopal Church in North Carolina, 1701-1959* (Raleigh: Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, 1987) 96.

⁵ Adam Empie to Duncan Cameron 5 February 1818 Cameron Family Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill.

⁶ Notice of the establishment of the Society with the Hon. Duncan Cameron as President appeared in *The Christian Messenger*; July 19, 1817. On the relationship of the Society to the Diocesan Convention, see Lewis, "The Formation of the Diocese," 98.

⁷ Thomas Bennehan to Richard Bennehan 18 August 1818 Cameron Family Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill. The letter mentions a chapel service conducted by "Parson Syme."

This meant that St. Mary's was now entitled to send delegates to the annual state-wide convention, and Duncan Cameron stepped in to fill this role. In 1819, he was prevented from attending the convention because of a horse-riding accident. But at the 1820 convention, Cameron assumed multiple leadership roles: he chaired the Committee on the State of the Church; he presided over the Missionary Society; he made the resolutions of thanks to the convention preachers, and he was elected a Lay Delegate to the next General Convention in Philadelphia.⁸ This ushered in a remarkable seven-year period of intense and varied involvement in the life and governance of the Church at every level.

During that time, Cameron kept up his work on behalf of the church at the state level, attending diocesan convention five times (1820-1823; 1826) and serving on various committees. He was asked to head up or lend support to fundraising efforts, such as the Missionary Society and the Committee for support of the Episcopate. He was asked to put his legal training to work in reviewing proposed canonical changes. And he was asked to put his political skills to work as an emissary to the Lutheran synod of North Carolina, as both bodies sought to establish a closer working relationship.⁹

Those same political skills were on display in Cameron's work on behalf of the national Church. Although Cameron was attending his first General Convention in 1820, he was placed at the helm of the committee charged with overseeing the General Seminary of the Church. The General Convention of 1817 had authorized the creation of such an institution, and it had opened in New York City in 1819 with two professors and a handful of students. But the Seminary was in perilous condition, and some dioceses, New York and Virginia in particular, were actively working to establish diocesan seminaries instead. Cameron's committee proposed moving the Seminary to New Haven, where Connecticut bishop, Thomas Brownell, was a strong supporter. They also proposed vesting the management of the Seminary in a board of trustees consisting of all the bishops, twelve clergy, and twelve laymen, elected at General Convention. These proposals passed, and Judge Cameron was among the dozen laymen now elected as a trustee of General Seminary.¹⁰

Following the 1820 Convention, New York and Virginia continued with their plans to create diocesan schools, and opinion within the Episcopal Church remained divided over the wisdom of establishing a national seminary. The strong sentiment for a diocesan school in New York was an especially serious challenge to the viability of the General Seminary, since New York was one of the largest and wealthiest and most influential dioceses of the church. But the issue was suddenly thrown into turmoil in April, 1821, when it was learned that New York builder Jacob Sherrard had died, leaving an estate valued at over \$60,000.00, for a Seminary in New York "under the direction or by the authority of the General Convention ... or of the Convention of the State of New-York."¹¹

⁸ *Journal of the Annual Convention, Diocese of North Carolina*, 1819, 4; 1820, 7,10.

⁹ *Journal of Convention*, 1821-1823.

¹⁰ Powel Mills Dawley, *The Story of the General Theological Seminary: A Sesquicentennial History 1817-1967* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969) 56-59.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 68-73.

Friends of the General Seminary saw a splendid financial opportunity, should the Seminary relocate from New Haven to New York. In May, Bishop Brownell summoned the trustees to New Haven to consider the move, and a special session of General Convention was issued for October. With Judge Cameron heading a joint committee of Bishops and Deputies, a new constitution for the General Seminary was crafted which returned the Seminary to New York and which merged it with the nascent diocesan school. The formula for determining representation on the Seminary's Board of Trustees was the arena for intense negotiation between the local interests of New York and the general interests of the national Church. Remarkably, a formula was hit upon which satisfied all parties. And to whom should the credit go for this happy outcome? Let me quote directly from the official history of the General Theological Seminary: "The chief credit for the spirit in which the union was achieved belongs to Duncan Cameron. His irenic efforts overcame the doubts of many who disliked the influence of New York."¹²

Among those skeptical of the viability of a General Seminary was J.C. Rudd, rector of St. John's Church, Elizabethtown, New Jersey. But Rudd was duly impressed with Cameron's accomplishment, and wrote to tell him so:

No event which has ever taken place in our church has, in my estimation, been more fortunate than your presence in the late Convention. You were from a section of the Union which precluded the idea of local feeling and while it was probably generally believed that you would be hostile to N. York as a place of location, it was in the total absence of such feelings that you gave a turn to the affair which no man from any of the northern states could have given, and at the same time succeeded in reconciling N. York and N. Carolina. The present appearances in N. York are that there will be great union of effort on all sides.¹³

Judge Cameron's efforts on behalf of the General Seminary were grounded in his Federalist conviction that as the Episcopal Church grew, it would benefit from having strong national institutions. Virginia convention delegate (and later bishop) William Meade, recalled Cameron's sentiments as follows: "In glowing prophetic vision, [Cameron] saw the Church extending itself over the land; new dioceses rising up in every part and rapidly filling themselves with ministers and churches,—sending their funds to the treasury of the General Seminary, and, on their account, as well as on account of the ministers, having the right to regulate the seminary; by which means the power of the General Church would be increasing, and that of New York proportionally decreasing."¹⁴

Having witnessed first-hand the value of a timely and generous bequest in securing an institution, Cameron evidently took steps to apply the same lesson back in North Carolina. This time the greater object in view was the building of an Episcopal Church in the capital city of Raleigh. Foresighted diocesan leaders such as Duncan Cameron and his brother John saw the importance of establishing a presence in the state capital, and sought as early as 1820 to effect it. As part of their strategy, they arranged to

¹² *Ibid* 77 See also Lewis, "The Formation of the Diocese" 103-105.

¹³ J Rudd to Duncan Cameron, 15 December 1821, Cameron Family Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill. Rudd's opposition to the General Seminary is noted in Dawley, *The Story of the General Theological Seminary*, 62.

¹⁴ Quoted in Dawley, *The Story of the General Theological Seminary*, 78.

hold the 1821 diocesan convention in Raleigh, even though there was no congregation yet formed in the city. Another missionary strategy was to send John Phillips, rector in Tarboro, to preach periodically in Raleigh. A third came in the form of a bequest from a wealthy and childless widow in Tarboro, Mary “Jackey” Blount, who signed a will in April, 1822, the year of her death, that instructed Duncan Cameron and William Hooper, as executors of her estate, to use the whole of it for “the Building of a Protestant Episcopal Church in the City of Raleigh.”¹⁵ Of this bequest, historian Davyd Foard Hood writes: “It seems likely that the goodly influence of the Reverend John Phillips, then rector of Trinity Church, Tarboro, and the counsel of Duncan Cameron guided Mrs. Blount’s decision to make what was probably the earliest such munificent gift to an Episcopal church in North Carolina.”¹⁶

Soon thereafter, Cameron was again taking an active interest in the expansion of the Episcopal Church, this time back home in Orange County. Although services were being held regularly at St. Mary’s Chapel out in the country, in the town of Hillsborough itself the site of the colonial Anglican church building had become the site for a new Presbyterian church instead. Formation of an Episcopal congregation in Hillsborough and the building of an Episcopal Church started in August, 1824, under the clergy leadership of William Mercer Green and the lay leadership of Francis Lister Hawks, Thomas Ruffin, and Walker Anderson, among others. Although Duncan Cameron was not personally involved in these efforts, he kept an active interest through his family members who were, notably his widowed sister Mary Anderson, and her two sons, Walker and William. Duncan instead put his personal time and wealth into building a chapel on his Fairintosh Plantation. St. Matthew’s was completed and consecrated in May, 1826; Salem Chapel in October, 1827. Both were served by the Rev. William Mercer Green, and both were designed with the help of State Architect William Nichols. Indeed, Cameron would continue for twenty years to pay Green to lead worship and catechize slaves monthly at Salem Chapel, even after Green had moved from Hillsborough to Chapel Hill and Cameron had moved from Orange County to Raleigh.¹⁷

In the late 1820s we do not find evidence of Duncan Cameron’s involvement with diocesan institutions, but he re-entered the leadership of the diocese in the early 1830s, when he was called upon to serve as trustee of a new Episcopal School in Raleigh, a venture undertaken at the behest of Bishop Levi Silliman Ives. Soon after becoming Bishop in 1831, Ives began calling for the creation of an Episcopal boys’ school, and in

¹⁵ Lewis, “The Formation of the Diocese” 110f; Davyd Foard Hood, *To the Glory of God: Christ Church 1821-1996* (Raleigh, Marblehead Publishing, 1997) 9.

¹⁶ Hood, *Christ Church*, 10.

¹⁷ For the early history of St. Matthew’s, Hillsborough, and the involvement of the Cameron family, see Joseph Blount Cheshire, *An Historical Address Delivered in Saint Matthew’s Church Hillsboro, N.C., on Sunday, August 24, 1924* (Durham, 1925) 19-25. For the building of Salem Chapel, see Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation*, 31,32. For Wm. Mercer Green’s involvement with Salem Chapel see also the *Journal of Annual Convention, 1826-1847*. For the involvement of William Nichols in the plans for both St. Matthew’s and Salem Chapel, see William Nichols to Duncan Cameron 3 May 1824 and Walker Anderson to Duncan Cameron 14 February 1825, Cameron Family Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill.

1833 the Convention honored his request. The governance structure called for a board of four clergymen and eight laymen, and Cameron was among the laymen chosen.¹⁸

By this time, Cameron was President of the State Bank, and when the bank underwent reorganization in 1834, Cameron decided to leave Fairtosh and move his family to Raleigh.¹⁹ Cameron now became a communicant of Christ Church, Raleigh, a church he had earlier helped to establish, and he became a representative from Christ Church to diocesan convention, starting in 1835. Over the course of the next twelve years, Cameron served as a delegate six times (1835; 1838-1841; 1846).²⁰

Cameron and the board of the Episcopal School for Boys set right to work: they purchased land from Colonel William Polk; they erected buildings with the leftover stones from the building of the State Capitol, and they found a headmaster willing to leave Massachusetts and take up residence in Raleigh. Student enrollment exceeded expectations, and early reports were glowing. By 1837, however, prospects for the school had turned bleak. In anticipation of rapid growth, the school had borrowed to build more buildings and hire more teachers, so when the Panic of 1837 struck, the school was saddled with mounting debts and meager prospects. Moreover, the school had enrolled more students than it could prudently manage, and problems with discipline harmed its reputation. In 1838, the school suspended operation, and efforts to seek a partnership with the Diocese of South Carolina in establishing a regional seminary came to naught. By 1840, the school committee recommended to convention that the property be sold. But a year later, no buyer had come forward.²¹

The Diocese was in severe and protracted financial distress. It still owed the Polk family over \$14,500.00 for the original land purchase, and it had borrowed \$7,400.00 from the Episcopal Fund, the source of money for meeting the Bishop's salary. But when the property was offered again for sale in late 1841, this time at public auction, a buyer at last came forward: none other than Duncan Cameron. In payment, he offered the precise amount owing to Sarah Polk and the Episcopal Fund, thereby relieving the diocese of all its indebtedness. He then offered the school buildings to the Rev. Dr. Aldert Smedes, for the creation of a Female Seminary, which Smedes named St. Mary's.²²

Bishop Ives offered the following account of these developments in his 1842 report to Diocesan Convention:

¹⁸Accounts of the Episcopal School can be found in Stoops, *The Heritage*, 6-13; Marshall DeLancey Haywood, *Lives of the Bishops of North Carolina* (Raleigh, 1910) 103-108; Blackwell P. Robinson, "The Episcopate of Levi Silliman Ives," in London and Lemmon, eds., *The Episcopal Church in North Carolina, 176-185*, and Michael T. Malone, *Levi Silliman Ives: Priest, Bishop, Tractarian, and Roman Catholic Convert* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1970) 84-102.

¹⁹ Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation*, 39,40.

²⁰ *Journal of Annual Convention 1835-1846*. Michael T. Malone mistakenly asserts that Duncan Cameron was not a confirmed communicant of the church, but the letter he cites as evidence refers to Duncan's son, Paul C. Cameron, and not to the father. See Malone, *Levi Silliman Ives*, 85 and Anne R. Cameron to Paul C. Cameron, 1 April 1833, Cameron Family Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill.

²¹ Malone, *Levi Silliman Ives*, 98,99.

²² Stoops, *The Heritage*, 12.

On Tuesday, [November] 29th [1841], I returned to Raleigh, and immediately applied myself to the work of devising some plan by which to prevent the sacrifice of the Episcopal School property, (which was advertised for public sale on the following Monday,) or its passing into the hands of some other Communion. God heard my prayers, and blessed my efforts in this hour of the Church's danger and humiliation. Just as every project seemed to fail, the Hon. Judge Cameron, ever the able and active friend of the Church in her need, came forward, and by an arrangement which secured the buildings and adjacent grounds to the purposes of a FEMALE SEMINARY of the highest order, so greatly needed at the South, restored the funds which the Diocese had invested in the property, and saved the Church from the deep dishonor of suffering it to pass irrevocably from her control. Through this act of liberality, we have a *Female Seminary* already open, under able direction, and with complete and ample accommodations. All we ask for its success, is the patronage which the institution may deserve. It has been established by individual enterprise, and rests upon individual responsibility. The Church, however, is not without a deep interest in its prosperity, which, I doubt not, her members will duly recognize, by securing for their children the benefits which have thus been provided at some risk and self-sacrifice.²³

This time the school prospered, and in 1897, the Diocese once again took possession of the property, purchasing it from the heirs of Duncan Cameron.²⁴

In light of Bishop Ives' generous words and the passing of another century, the 1908 controversy over who should get credit for the founding of St. Mary's now seems harsh and petty. Certainly the Episcopal Church in North Carolina has reason to look upon Duncan Cameron as one of the most significant of her early leaders among the laity.

Often it is hard, in a collaborative effort, to assess individual importance. Many of Cameron's contributions cannot be isolated and identified, since they came in the form of committee participation or the private encouragement and counsel of family and friends. We find Duncan Cameron's name often linked in diocesan records with those of his brother John, his nephew Walker Anderson, and his former law student William Haywood, Jr. From surviving correspondence it is possible to know something of what they were thinking on ecclesiastical matters, but we can only infer what Duncan Cameron thought, since he left us few readable letters. Nevertheless, over the course of his 25 years of service to the Episcopal Church, Duncan Cameron left us enough evidence of his leadership to draw some conclusions.

First, Duncan Cameron cared about public religion and sought consistently to strengthen the national and diocesan institutions of the Episcopal Church. In this, his ecclesiastical contributions are of a piece with his social and political views as an ardent Federalist and a promoter of internal improvements. As a rule, he valued centralized schools, churches, railroads, banks, and agencies. He demonstrated that in his contributions to the State of North Carolina as a supporter of the railroad, the University, and the State Bank, and he demonstrated that in his contributions to the Episcopal Church such as his work on behalf of the General Seminary and the building of a church and a school in Raleigh.

²³ *Journal of Annual Convention 1842*, 13.

²⁴ Stoops, *The Heritage*, 130.

But Cameron did not restrict his support of religious institution-building to denominational agencies. The American Bible Society, the American Sunday School Union, and the North Carolina Tract Society, also counted him as officers. Indeed, at the time of his death, Cameron was the longest-tenured Vice President of the American Bible Society, having been so elected in 1820.²⁵ Although this put Cameron at variance with the strict preference of such bishops as John Henry Hobart of New York and John Stark Ravenscroft of North Carolina, both of whom taught that Episcopalians should reserve their religious benevolence for denominational causes, it was consistent with the position taken by other staunch supporters of the church, both in North Carolina and New York.²⁶

Secondly, Cameron possessed a remarkable ability to rise to meet a challenge. At three junctures, his singular ability to step in and resolve a problem is apparent. One was the need to establish a presence and profile for the Episcopal Church in Orange County in the early years of the diocese. Cameron's standing in the state and community as a judge, planter, and politician was such that he accomplished that result simply by making his home a place of worship and hospitality for the clergy; by lending his public support for the revival of the church at St. Mary's, and by taking an immediate and active role in the governance of the diocese. He thereby set a pattern for strong, engaged diocesan participation which gave the Episcopal Church in Orange County a prominence it might not otherwise have enjoyed.

Another crisis was the need to resolve the competing interests of the diocesan school in New York and the General Seminary. He accomplished that by deft handling of strong personalities, by shrewd balancing of competing interests, and by setting before the church the larger prospect of its continued expansion alongside the growth of the nation.

The third was his timely rescue of the diocese from the consequences of poor timing and unwise management of the Diocesan School for Boys. Here he stepped in to use his financial assets to restore financial solvency to the diocese and to put the physical assets of the property in service to the church, trusting in his own management and the skill of headmaster Aldert Smedes to make the enterprise successful.

Finally, there is no evidence to suggest that Duncan Cameron had a lively interest in theological topics, or that he highly valued personal spiritual pursuits. When he had the opportunity to encourage such pursuits in others, such as his nephew Walker Anderson, he made him stick to studying law instead.²⁷ But for twenty-five years,

²⁵Notice of Duncan Cameron's death appeared in an account of the meeting of the American Bible Society in the *New York Daily Times* January 8, 1853. For notification of election, see S.S. Woodhull, Secretary of the American Bible Society, to Duncan Cameron, 5 August 1820, and Sunday School Union, Philadelphia to Duncan Cameron, 1 June 1826, Cameron Family Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill. See also Richard Rankin, *Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen: The Religion of the Episcopal Elite in North Carolina, 1800-1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 138-141.

²⁶ Rankin, *Ambivalent Churchmen*, 139,140; Dawley, *The Story of the General Theological Seminary*, 63.

²⁷ Walker Anderson to Duncan Cameron, 13 November 1819, Cameron Family Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill. From the contents of the letter, one can infer that Duncan Cameron was displeased to learn that his nephew was considering giving up the reading of law for divinity. Anderson served as lay reader at St. Mary's

Duncan Cameron provided something else. In the words of Bishop Ives, Cameron was “ever the able and active friend of the Church in her need,” someone who sought the Episcopal Church’s institutional wellbeing through foresight, financial acumen, political savvy, and legal training. For the offering of these gifts, the church should indeed be grateful to Duncan Cameron.

Chapel, but did not enter the ministry. He had a distinguished career as a jurist, eventually serving on the Supreme Court of the State of Florida. Duncan’s brother, John A. Cameron of Fayetteville, also sought counsel about possibly entering the ministry. See John A. Cameron to Duncan Cameron 23 March, 1825, Cameron Family Papers, Chapel Hill. Again, all we know is that the brother, like the nephew, received insufficient encouragement to make the choice of a ministerial career. John Cameron, like Walker Anderson, continued in the legal profession, eventually moved to Florida, and became a judge. Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation*, 37.