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America's Greatest Churches

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Introduction

America's religious landscape is a vibrant mosaic shaped by centuries of history, a multitude of faith traditions, and profound cultural transformations. From the moment European settlers first set foot on its shores, churches have been at the very heart of American life—serving not only as places of worship, but also as gathering places, centers of learning, and symbols of community identity. The story of America's churches is inseparably linked with the nation's journey, embodying its highest ideals as well as the struggles and aspirations of its diverse people.

The concept of "greatness" in relation to America's churches is multifaceted and complex. Some churches are deemed great for their monumental influence on history—witnesses to turning points in the quest for independence, abolition, and civil rights. Others are celebrated for their architectural splendor, standing as works of art that inspire awe and reverence both within and outside their congregations. Still others exert a powerful influence by bridging communities, confronting injustice, or adapting to changing times in ways that profoundly shape American society. Megachurches, with their vast congregations and powerful reach, represent a modern evolution in the American tradition of faith gathering, reflecting new methods of spiritual connection and community building.

Over the centuries, churches played a pivotal role not only in spiritual life but also in the political and social development of America. The earliest colonial churches were centers where settlers convened for both religious observance and civic debate, laying the groundwork for the country's tradition of religious liberty. The First and Second Great Awakenings stirred revival and transformed the spiritual landscape, fostering new denominations and igniting an enduring spirit of evangelicalism. In the twentieth century, Black churches became crucibles of hope, resilience, and activism—powering the Civil Rights Movement and carrying forward the fight for equality and justice.

The architectural story of America's churches is as rich and varied as the beliefs they house. From the simple wooden meetinghouses of Puritan New England to the soaring Gothic spires of urban cathedrals and the glass-walled sanctuaries blending into wild landscapes, church buildings are among the country's most important physical and cultural landmarks. Their design, craftsmanship, and symbolism often speak to the broader values of their congregations, as well as the ambitions and imaginations of their communities.

In selecting the churches featured in this book, the goal is not to form a definitive list, but rather to create a portrait of diversity, resilience, ingenuity, and faith. Each chapter explores a single church that has achieved a unique position of greatness,

whether through its foundational role in the nation's history, its contribution to major social movements, its architectural acclaim, or its ability to draw and inspire large communities of worship. Together, these churches offer a rich reflection of the deeply intertwined forces of faith and culture in American life.

As you embark on the journey through these twenty-five remarkable churches, you will encounter stories that are both familiar and surprising, each providing insight into the American spirit. Whether you are inspired by the vision of a steeple on a city skyline, the power of a congregation united in worship, or the legacy of leaders who changed the course of history, America's greatest churches stand as enduring witnesses to a nation's hopes, challenges, and ever-evolving quest for meaning.

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CHAPTER ONE: Jamestown Church, Jamestown, Virginia

The story of America's religious life, and indeed the nation itself, begins in a rather damp and mosquito-infested corner of present-day Virginia. Here, in 1607, a hardy band of English settlers established Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America. While their primary motivations were often economic and strategic, they brought with them the deeply ingrained religious practices and beliefs of the Church of England. Their faith was not merely a private matter; it was intrinsically woven into the fabric of their society, a cornerstone of their identity and a guidepost in a harsh and unfamiliar world.

The very first religious services at Jamestown were, fittingly, quite humble affairs. According to the accounts of Captain John Smith, these initial gatherings took place outdoors, utilizing a sail stretched between three or four trees to provide a makeshift awning against the elements. The walls were simply made of rails, the seats were unhewn logs, and a bar of wood nailed to two trees served as the pulpit. This rudimentary setting underscores the challenging circumstances of the early colonists, where survival was paramount and established structures were a luxury.

This initial, exceedingly rustic, open-air church was soon followed by a more substantial, though still simple, structure built within the confines of the fort in 1607. Smith described this first enclosed church as a "homely thing like a barn set on crachetts, covered with rafts, sedge and earth." While perhaps not a soaring architectural marvel, it represented a significant step towards establishing a more formal place of worship and community gathering within the precarious palisade walls of James Fort. This building, like much else in the early settlement, was constructed primarily of wood.

Unfortunately, this first church building did not stand for long. A fire that swept through the fort in January 1608, just months after its construction, consumed the wooden structure. Undeterred, the resilient settlers rebuilt the church, likely in a similar style to the first, as part of the broader effort to reconstruct the fort after the fire. This second iteration of the Jamestown Church served the community during a critical period, witnessing some of the earliest events of colonial life.

It is believed that this second church was the setting for significant early colonial milestones, including the marriage of Ann Burras, one of the first women to arrive at Jamestown, to John Laydon. Their daughter, Virginia Laydon, believed to be the first English child born in the colony, was also likely baptized in this church. Perhaps most

famously, this wooden church may also have been where Pocahontas was baptized and later married to John Rolfe in 1614, an event that fostered a brief period of peace between the colonists and the Powhatan Confederacy.

However, the early years of Jamestown were marked by hardship and instability, including periods of severe food shortages and conflict. This took a toll on the settlement's infrastructure, and by the time Lord De La Warr arrived as governor in 1610, he found the church in a state of significant disrepair. Recognizing the importance of the church to the morale and order of the colony, he ordered its restoration and improvement.

Under Lord De La Warr and his successors, church attendance was not merely encouraged; it was mandatory. Under the strict martial law implemented by De La Warr, colonists were required to attend services, which were held remarkably frequently—fourteen times a week. This included sermons on Sundays and one weekday, as well as daily morning and evening prayer services. Skipping church could result in the loss of a day's food ration, with repeated absences carrying increasingly severe penalties, even potentially death, though there are no records of such extreme punishments being enforced for this particular infraction.

The third church building at Jamestown was constructed between 1617 and 1619 during the tenure of Governor Samuel Argall. Argall found the settlement in a sorry state upon his arrival in 1617, with the previous church "downe" and the palisades in disrepair. He directed the inhabitants to build a new church measuring "50-foot long and twenty foot broad." This timber-framed structure was built on a foundation of cobblestones capped by a single brick layer.

The cobblestone and brick foundations of this 1617 church are of immense historical importance, as they are visible beneath glass panels in the floor of the present-day Memorial Church. These foundations mark the exact location where a pivotal moment in American history occurred. It was within the walls of this relatively modest wooden church that the first representative legislative assembly in English North America convened on July 30, 1619.

This assembly, known as the House of Burgesses, brought together the governor, his councilors, and 22 elected representatives (burgesses) from the various settlements and plantations in the Virginia colony. Their meeting in the "quire" (choir) of the church for six days marked the beginning of representative government in what would become the United States. While certainly not a fully democratic body by modern standards – only English men were initially permitted to vote – it was a foundational step towards self-governance.

The significance of the 1619 assembly cannot be overstated. It demonstrated an early commitment to the idea that the colonists should have a voice in their own

governance and the creation of their laws. This principle, nurtured in the chancel of a wooden church in a struggling settlement, would eventually blossom into the democratic ideals that shaped the nation. The fact that this momentous political event took place within a church underscores the interconnectedness of faith and civic life in early colonial Virginia.

Following the 1619 assembly, the colony continued to grow and evolve, and so too did its church. In January 1639, Governor John Harvey reported that efforts were underway to build a brick church at Jamestown. This marked a shift from the earlier, less durable wooden structures. The brick church was planned to be slightly larger than the 1617 building and was constructed around it over the next few years. Building with brick was a more substantial undertaking, signifying a greater sense of permanence and investment in the colony.

Construction on the brick church was still ongoing in November 1647, indicating that it was a multi-year project. This fourth church building served the Jamestown community until September 19, 1676, when it was tragically burned during Bacon's Rebellion. This rebellion, a complex uprising against Governor William Berkeley, resulted in the destruction of much of Jamestown.

Even after the burning of the brick church, the site remained important. Around this time, or perhaps slightly earlier, a brick church tower was added to an existing church building in two distinct stages. This tower, standing approximately 46 feet high with a wooden roof and belfry, became a prominent landmark. It is this tower, albeit now shorter than its original height, that is the only remaining above-ground structure from the 17th century at Jamestown.

After the destruction of the brick church in 1676, a fifth church was functioning at Jamestown within about a decade, likely utilizing the surviving walls and foundations of the previous brick structure. This church, with its accompanying brick tower, remained in use until the 1750s, at which point it was abandoned. Over the following decades, the building fell into ruin, and by the 1790s, bricks from the decaying structure were salvaged and used to build the wall around the churchyard.

For over a century, the brick tower stood as a solitary sentinel, a silent witness to the history that had unfolded around it. In the late 19th century, as interest in preserving America's historical sites grew, the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (now Preservation Virginia) acquired 22.5 acres of Jamestown Island, including the church tower site, in 1893. Their explicit goal was to protect this last standing piece of the 17th-century Jamestown colony.

These preservation efforts led to archaeological investigations of the site, which unearthed the foundations of the earlier churches, including the crucial cobblestone and brick foundations of the 1617 church. Recognizing the historical significance of the

site, particularly the location of the first assembly, plans were made to construct a new church for the 300th anniversary of the settlement in 1907.

The current Memorial Church was built in 1907, funded by the National Society of Colonial Dames of America. Designed by Boston architects Edmund Wheelwright and Ralph Adams Cram, the church was modeled after St. Luke's Church in Smithfield, Virginia, one of the oldest surviving Protestant churches in America. It was intentionally built adjacent to, rather than directly on top of, the unearthed foundations of the earlier churches, allowing visitors to see the historical layers beneath the floor.

The 1907 Memorial Church incorporates the original 17th-century brick tower, seamlessly blending the past with the present. Inside the church, glass panels in the floor provide a window into the past, allowing visitors to view the brick foundations of the 17th-century churches, including the footprint of the 1617 church where the first representative assembly gathered.

Recent archaeological excavations within the Memorial Church between 2016 and 2019 have further illuminated the history of the site. These investigations have re-examined the foundations of the earlier churches and uncovered hundreds of artifacts, providing deeper insights into the lives of the early colonists and the evolution of the church buildings. Archaeologists have also explored burials within the church, traditionally the resting place of high-status individuals.

While the identity of some remains remains a mystery, these excavations continue to contribute to our understanding of the people who lived, worshipped, and shaped history at Jamestown. The discovery of the western wall of the 1617 church's foundations, previously thought to be lost, has allowed researchers to document the complete original footprint of the building where American representative government began.

The Jamestown Church, in its various iterations, stands as a powerful symbol of the enduring role of faith in American history. From the rudimentary outdoor services of the first settlers to the more substantial wooden and brick structures that followed, the church was a constant presence in the lives of the colonists, a place of worship, community, and governance. The surviving brick tower and the unearthed foundations serve as tangible links to this foundational period, reminding us of the humble beginnings of both the American church and the American nation.

Today, the Memorial Church at Historic Jamestowne is an active place of worship and a vital historical site, welcoming millions of visitors who come to explore the birthplace of America. It stands not only as a testament to the resilience of the early colonists and their faith but also as a reminder of the complex and sometimes challenging, journey towards the ideals of self-governance and religious liberty that are central to

the American identity. The story of the Jamestown Church is, in many ways, the opening chapter in the grand narrative of America's greatest churches.

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