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HOT CENTERPIECE

Millwood church gets stolen silver back after century-and-a-half

By CATHY KUEHNER | The Winchester Star
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Terry Chandler, of Boyce, the sacristan at Christ Church in Millwood, holds part of the church's communion set that disappeared more than 150 years ago and was returned this week.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchest

MILLWOOD — After traveling who-knows-where for more than 150 years, a silver communion set that was given to a Millwood church in 1856 — and taken from the church during the Civil War — was returned this week. A FedEx driver delivered the package containing the long-lost church

property to the Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Episcopal Church on Wednesday.

“I love liturgy, and I love history. This is an instance where the two intersect,” Rhodes said Thursday. “Since the pieces arrived yesterday, I can’t stop looking at them and thinking of all the people who used them when they were used by the congregation here.”

The communion set includes a flagon (a covered pitcher), chalice (a goblet), and a paten (the plate used to hold the Eucharistic bread).

Rhodes, who graduated from Virginia Seminary in May, has been the deacon-in-charge at Christ Church since mid-June.

In late July, a woman called from North Carolina to say she found a communion set belonging to Cunningham Chapel in Millwood. Cunningham Chapel dates to the late-1700s and is now known as Old Chapel, Rhodes said. The congregation outgrew the chapel and moved farther south on Bishop Meade Road to its present location — Christ Church — in 1832.

The woman, Cheryl Lawrence, is a volunteer helping the Knights of Columbus Council 3303 in New Bern, N.C., prepare for its October rummage sale.

“All we know is that in late June an elderly woman dropped off two boxes of silver. We don’t know who she is,” Lawrence said in a phone interview Thursday. “I found the [flagon] in a box and knew it was special, so I started to polish it.”

She first found the maker’s mark — Meridan Co. — then “Cunningham Chapel from J.C. Terrell.” She looked through the boxes of silver and found the chalice and paten, which each had the same maker’s mark.

“Then, I became a detective,” Lawrence said. “I found Cunningham Chapel. Then, I started looking for J.C. Terrell and any connection to Virginia,” she said.

Using the internet, including cemetery records, she learned J.C. Terrell was born in Tennessee in 1831 and eventually settled in Fort Worth, Texas. He had family in the Northern Shenandoah Valley; Lawrence found some Terrells buried in Berryville’s Green Hill Cemetery.

Lawrence and Rhodes surmise Terrell gifted the communion set to the church while visiting relatives in 1856.

To the best of anyone's knowledge, the communion set was taken from the church during the Civil War.

"We'll never know who took the set, where the pieces have been or how they ended up in North Carolina," said Terry Chandler, who serves as the sacristan at the Episcopal church.

As sacristan, Chandler works with the Altar Guild and is responsible for handling the sacred items used during services.

"The Knights of Columbus in North Carolina packed the set like they were shipping the Crown Jewels," Rhodes said with a laugh.

The set, which Chandler has gently polished, needs repair. The paten is a little wobbly and the flagon is dented.

"Ideally, I'd love to use the set again, but that is entirely contingent on preservation," Rhodes said. "Preservation is more important than using it. But, as a priest, it would be so exciting to use a chalice that pre-dates many generations of our families."

The communion set currently used at Christ Church is about 100 years old, Rhodes noted.

"It is amazing that the set came back to us," said Chandler. "It's very exciting."

Christ Church will celebrate the return of the communion set during its 9 a.m. service on Sunday. "We will retell the story before unveiling it."



Learn more about Cunningham Chapel and Christ Church at cunninghamchapel.org, or call 540-837-1112.

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