

An Episcopal Monastery¹

By Andrew Peeples

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Entry to the oratory which contains the chapel, the monk cells, a sacristy, a bell tower, and an open cloister in between.

The first community of monks living under a common roof was established in the year 340, at Tabenna, an island of the Nile. The first, and only, religious community in South Carolina, was also established on an island. It is known as the Community of the Good Shepherd and is located on Good Shepherd Island² in the lower end of Beaufort County.

1 Reprinted from *South Carolina Magazine*, December 1947 issue.

2 Located in Bluffton, S.C., on the May River.

The last of the nine religious orders for men established in the United States and recognized by the Episcopal Church, the Community of the Good Shepherd was organized in 1948 in Marion, N. C., under the leadership of the Rev. David Stephen,³ a former rector of St. Paul's Church in Savannah, Ga. In October of that year the order was moved to its present site.⁴

Good Shepherd, the largest in a group of coastal islands given to the order by a friend, comprises about 50 acres. It was chosen not only for its seclusion, but also for the singular beauty and adaptability to a practically self-contained community.

Completely isolated, with deep-channelled May River flowing between it and the mainland two miles from Bluffton, and with no distractions other than the muted whispering of tall pines and the distant crying of waterfowl in the endless marsh flats encompassing it on three sides, Good Shepherd Island affords an almost perfect environment for the contemplative ideal which the Community stresses.

Viewed from across the river, it is the most picturesque of all coastal islands. The northern side, which faces the mainland, has a high bluff and a sand beach admirably suited for swimming. The shore line is a jungle of vine covered, moss draped trees which excites the imagination and impels a desire to explore its inner depths.



Dedicated to the ministry of prayer, the monks of Good Shepherd Island take their places in the chapel nine times each day of the week for the offering of the Church's liturgy, mass, and the entire Divine Office. The nine daily services begin each morning at 5:30 with the ringing of the monastery bell.

3 Andrew's brother, David Nathaniel Peeples.

4 Apparently, when the order was created, Nathaniel took the name of David Stephen as his "order name." Known as *Father David*, he was the organizer and head monk in the Bluffton Location.

Inside the pale,⁵ from one end of the island to the other, all of the variegated flora which characterize the coastal section may be found. Red-berried holly and yaupon, or cassena, sassafras, yellow jasmine, pink and white honeysuckle, sweet bay, magnolia, American tea, and Carolina laurel and cabbage palmettos add their sylvan charm to every wooded area.

At low tide a gravel-sand bar in the middle of May River runs parallel with the island and serves as a feeding and resting ground for hundreds of blue and white herons, kingfishers, sandpipers, poor-Joes, and of course the ubiquitous sea gulls.



Very important to the physical life of the community is the refectory, where meals are taken. The refectory is a room of dignity next in importance to the chapel itself. During the meal, one of the religious reads aloud from the Bible or some other book of interest to the Community. Turns are taken by the monks at reading and waiting on table.

To the right of Good Shepherd, Sacred Heart, a smaller island owned by the order, rises from the marsh; and further to the right, on the river side of a 26,000 acre game preserve, the former winter home of the late General Cornelius Vanderbilt towers above the trees. A few hundred feet from the mansion, a lichen-covered slab of stone marks the grave of Pendarvis, the famous, or infamous, pirate, who is said to have been killed there by the son of a man he murdered.

To the left of Good Shepherd, Bull Island, owned by a wealthy automobile manufacturer, and reputed to have more deer and wild turkeys per square mile than any other private game preserve in the country, extends eastward for several miles toward Calibogue Sound and the Atlantic Ocean.

Myrtle Island, where several prominent Savannah families maintain attractive country houses, is directly across the river from Good Shepherd and is connected to the mainland with a causeway. Recently the Community of the Good Shepherd was given a large lot on Myrtle Island to be used as a mainland landing, and on which to erect a chapel, so that the many friends and associate members of the order who live in Bluffton, Savannah, and other nearby communities may attend services of the monastery without the inconvenience of crossing the river.⁶

The climate of Good Shepherd Island is mild and equable. In summer, it is fanned by cool ocean breezes; in winter, the thermometer seldom goes below 50, except at night. The soil is rich. Tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, collards, beans, peas, corn, potatoes, figs, pecans, grapes, all have been grown with astonishing success. Poultry thrive on a year-round diet of insects, herbage, and wild berries. Cattle, pigs and goats require little feed other than what is found in the pasture and woods. Fish, shrimp, crabs and oysters abound in the river and creeks surrounding the island.

Since the island is dedicated to the ministry of prayer, the main building of the monastery is the oratory, or place of prayer. Built of cement and painted white, it is shaped like the letter U, with the bottom line forming a large chapel, while the other two lines are divided into cells and a sacristy, with an open cloister between and a bell tower rising in the midst. The cells, in which the monks study as well as sleep, are equipped with running water and each is furnished simply with a cot, chair, and table or desk. The cells are a place of privacy for rest, prayer, study, and certain kinds of work.

Not far from the oratory, a smaller building of cement blocks includes a library, refectory, community room, kitchen and bath. A barn, poultry run, vegetable garden, and a pasture for milk cows, beef calves, goats and pigs are located on another part of the island. A wharf has been built on a navigable creek which winds through the marsh to the river.

In the wooded northwest section, the 14 Stations of the Cross, beautiful in design and made of white marble dust, have been set up along a circular path. A monk may pause for meditation and a brief prayer in front of each station. The stations were presented to the Good Shepherd Monastery by a friend.

6 Whether or not this ever took place is not known by the editor.

5 Within the borders of the island.



The wooded trail where the stations of the cross were erected.

The order has been frequently approached about building a home on the island for retired priests. It is felt that living there, in the environment of ordered worship, study and quiet, and in an atmosphere quite in keeping with their active ministry, without being bound by the discipline of monastic life, these men of God will find a happiness and contentment not otherwise available to them. If such a building is in accord with God's will, the monks know the necessary funds to construct it will be donated, and they will gladly care for the aged priests as their needs may require.

The monks of the Community of the Good Shepherd are both priests and laymen. The habit of the Community is a white tunic and scapular with a hood attached. The tunic is bound at the waist with a white cord which has three knots, signifying the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Postulants wear a black cassock.

Men who wish to try their vocation with the order are invited to visit the island. If accepted by the Community they are received as postulants for the

usual period of training preliminary to the reception of the habit. Training continues throughout the novitiate, which is two years in length. If elected to the profession, they may then make life vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Following the traditional monastic custom, daily life on the island is divided between prayer and manual labor, four hours each day being allotted to the latter. The remainder of the time is taken up with the offering of the Church's liturgy and other spiritual duties. Mass⁷ is offered daily and also the entire Divine Office,⁸ that is, the seven Day Hours and Night Office of Matins. In addition, each religious spends one half hour daily in meditation and at least another hour in spiritual reading.

Living by a modified Augustinian Rule, the monks are always under orders, always busy. Because of their vows of poverty, they make every effort to eliminate all expenses not absolutely necessary, and have no hired help. They do their own cooking and cleaning; grow their own food, or as much of it as possible; clear the land for planting and pasture; build and repair the fences; plow the fields and garden; milk the cows, and do all the many other chores incumbent on a life such as theirs.

The day begins on Good Shepherd Island every morning at 5:30, with the ringing of the monastery bell – 33 times in memory of the number of years Jesus lived as man in Palestine. During the day, it is rung to announce each of the eight Offices, the beginning and ending of manual work, studies, and other duties. The day ends at 8:30 p. m., and the bell tolls while the monks kneel and pray for the dead.

The purpose of the Community, as explained by the monks, is "to serve the Church, which is the Body of Christ, in her work of continuing the ministry of Jesus on earth. Preaching and teaching orders help her to preach the Gospel and to instruct the ignorant. The function of a contemplative community is to assist her to continue Christ's ministry of prayer."

7 Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist.

8 The Daily Office refers to the Episcopal/ Anglican Order of Morning, Midday, Evening and Compline prayers. From ancient times the Church has had the custom of celebrating each day the liturgy of the hours. In this way the Church fulfills the Lord's precept to pray without ceasing, at once offering its praise to God the Father and interceding for the salvation of the world.

“The Church has always recognized the necessity of having those whose primary duty is to pray. In fact, as one of their initial acts in organizing the Church, the Apostles ordained the first deacons to look after the ‘daily ministrations,’ in order that they might give themselves ‘continually to prayer, and to ministry of the word.’ It is very significant that the Apostles regarded the ministry of prayer as being so necessary and so important that they reserved it to themselves, whom Jesus Himself had trained, and restricted themselves to it.”

“In like manner, the Church has always made it incumbent upon her Sacred Ministers to pray the daily Office, regardless of whatever else they may be called upon to do, so that the ministry of prayer might ascend continually from their lips.”

“The first monks were those who ‘went apart’ and spent their lives in prayer and contemplation. It is said that a certain bishop, when sent to establish a mission among the heathen, requested two or three contemplative monks too accompany him, explaining that he wished to lay the foundation of his work on prayer before asking for teachers and preachers.”

In answer to the question: How can one spend his whole life in prayer? The Monks reply that “one might just as reasonably ask: How can one spend his entire life in the medical profession? The doctor does not cease to be a physician when he takes time to eat, sleep or rest. He is not always ministering to the sick, but he is always a physician. The contemplative is by vocation a pray-er. His life is dedicated to the ministry of prayer. He is not always on his knees, not is he always repeating prayers or making meditations. Such is not humanly possible. But he does devote just as many hours in the exercise of his vocation as the professional man does in his. There is, however, one important difference; the monk has no free time. Every hour of the day and night he is ‘a man under orders’.”

Worship, the monks explain, is only “one of several forms of prayer. It is the most important, however, and the contemplative devotes about 5 hours daily to it. At other time he is exercised in prayers of reparation for the sins, neglect, and blasphemies of people; in intercessions for the general and particular need of the Church and her members, or for the conversion of unbelievers; in silent adoration of the Holy and Undivided Trinity; in mental prayer; in thanksgiving for God’s mercies and blessings of his children.”

But prayer is not restricted to the oratory, nor yet to words. “The contemplative learns to pray through the medium of manual work, in the kitchen, in the fields, in the garden. He may offer the chore of washing dishes or weeding the garden to the glory of God. He may milk the cows, feed the chickens, or plow a field to the glory of God. He may dust the library to the glory of God.”



Father David “praying” on his tractor.

Thus, the contemplative learns through his daily experience that he can truly “pray without ceasing,” and that he can offer up to God even his night’s rest, and his last agony on earth.

As a setting for the serenity and quiet beauty of monastic life, Good Shepherd Island has an incomparable charm and enchantment. To enter its cloistered bounds is to enter another world, a sacred world, where one, regardless of his religious belief, cannot but feel the mystical lure of a sanctuary consecrated to the holy ministry of prayer.

That the performance of this ministry of prayer is rendering a real service, a most vital one, to the Church, is the conviction of all who visit the monastery. Even the most skeptical leaves the island with the feeling of having been spiritually enriched; for, as one visitor expressed it, “the life of Good Shepherd is simple, beautiful, and radiant because it has at its heart the life of our most Blessed Lord.”

The monastery functioned on the Good Shepherd Island from 1943 to 1950, at which time it moved to Orange City, Florida. David Nathaniel Peeples (Father David) eventually converted to Roman Catholicism and is buried in the Pinckney Family Cemetery. There are many posts on graveshouse.org about the Peeples/Graves/Guilford/McCracken/McCreary families, as well as some new updated material about their genealogies. Visit the **Genealogy Tab**.