

# St. James Episcopal Church

## Wilmington, North Carolina

*Text and photos by Dan Hardison*

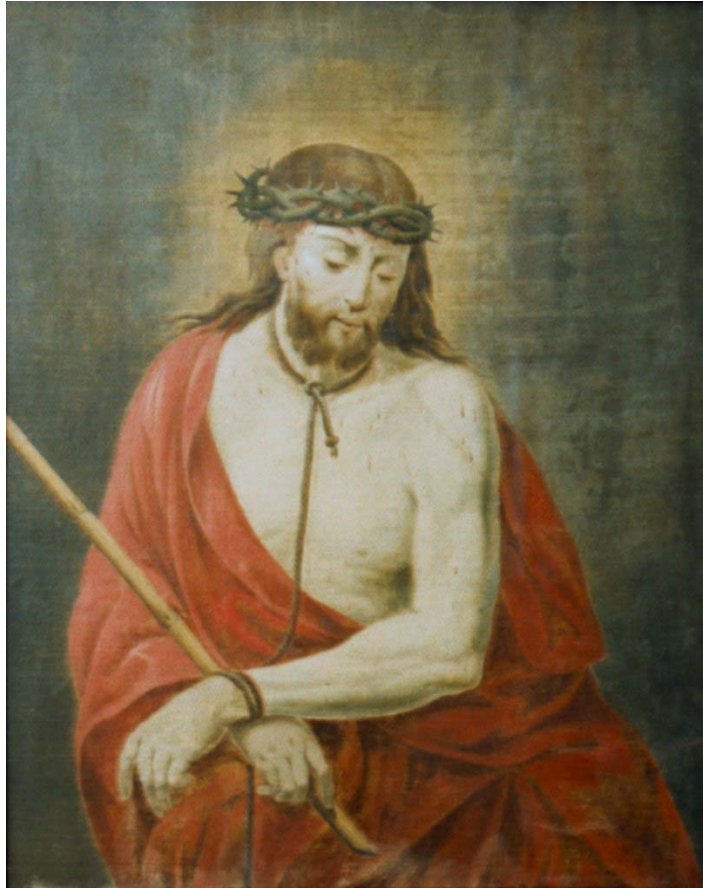
**F**rom the days the Spanish roamed the coast, through the fight for independence from the British, and the dark years of the Civil War, the port city of Wilmington, North Carolina, has been a vital link to the sea. And standing at its center has been St. James Episcopal Church. After a failed attack by the Spanish in 1748, they left behind a heavily damaged ship. On board the ship was discovered a painting of Christ that would find a new home in St. James Church.

Wilmington sits on the bank of the Cape Fear River just fourteen miles from the Atlantic Ocean and has a long history in shipping. In 1748 three Spanish ships sailed into the Cape Fear River and attacked the colonial settlement of Brunswick Town below Wilmington. After four days of fighting, the Spanish were repelled – leaving behind a badly damaged ship. When the “Fortuna” was searched, a painting of Christ was found in the captain’s cabin.

The painting called *Ecce Homo* – Latin for behold the man – is a portrayal of Christ with a crown of thorns. It is a haunting depiction of Christ in a red robe, with bound hands, and a crown of thorns. The painting has been attributed to Francisco Pacheco (1564-1654) – a Spanish painter, teacher, and scholar.

St. James Parish and its sister church, St. Philips Parish in Brunswick Town, were established in 1729. Proceeds from the sale of the salvaged goods from the *Fortuna* went to the construction of a building for St. James and for St. Philips. The Francisco Pacheco painting of Christ was given to St. James in 1751.

The original building for St. James was completed in 1770. During the Revolutionary War, British General Cornwallis had his headquarters in a house located across the street from St. James and the church was used as a



*Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)* by Francisco Pacheco.

hospital and then a riding school for the British army. In 1839 the old colonial church was torn down and a new building constructed reusing the old bricks. T.U. Walter, architect of the U.S. Capitol dome, designed the new church.

After the fall of Fort Fisher during the Civil War, Wilmington was occupied by Union troops and St. James was again used as a hospital. Wilmington was the last remaining supply route for the South and the war would come to an end just months after its fall.

Silas McBee – Episcopal educator, writer, and architect – carved an elaborate oak altar and reredos for St. James in 1892 depicting the Nativity, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. He also designed the Bishop’s chair and two stained glass

windows for the church including *The Resurrection of Christ* that is seen above the reredos.

Through the years St. James has been expanded, but great care has always been taken to maintain its original gothic design. The Parish House was built in 1923 and a house next door that was built in 1901 and designed by Henry Bacon, architect of the Lincoln Memorial, is now used for the church offices.

Behind the church is the traditional churchyard cemetery where tombstones can be found from the 1700's. Over the years St. James has become the resting place for three Episcopal Bishops. Bishops Robert Strange, Thomas Atkinson, and Thomas H. Wright are all buried beneath the church.

Today St. James sits in the heart of the Historic District of Wilmington – three blocks from the Cape Fear River. It is the oldest church in Wilmington that is still in continuous use. St. James and Wilmington have a rich history that has always been entwined. The painting, *Ecce Homo*, serves as a link to that history and of its earliest days. †



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TOP RIGHT: The altar and reredos carved by Silas McBee.

BOTTOM RIGHT: St. James Episcopal Church, designed by T.U. Walter, consecrated 1840.

BELOW: The Church House, designed by Henry Bacon and built in 1901.

