

Gilbert F. Williams

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The Evening Star, January 1, 1898

Reverend Gilbert F. Williams resigned the pastorate of Christ Church, Navy Yard and members of the standing committee of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington acting as an advisory council to Bishop Satterlee made an investigation of alleged scandalous conduct on the part of the late rector. The charges embraced reflections upon Mr. Williams' character of a most serious sort.

The Evening Star, January 20, 1898

Rev. Mr. Williams' Trial

Former Rector of an Episcopal Parish Defending His Reputation Is Charged With Violation of Ordination Vows and Immortality-- Before Ecclesiastical Court

The trial of Rev. Gilbert F. Williams, former rector of Christ Church, Navy Yard, on the grave charges which have been preferred against him at the instance of Miss Nettie Denham, a former member of his congregation, began this morning at St. Mark's Pro-Cathedral Church, 3d and A streets southeast. The proceedings were had before an ecclesiastical court composed of the following ministers: Rev. A.R. Stuart, president of the court, Christ Church, Georgetown; Rev. C.E. Buck; Rev. Charles F. Sontag, Upper Marlboro, Md.; Rev. James E. Poindexter, Charles county, Md.; Rev. Charles H.S. Mayo, Hyattsville, Md. Rev. Thomas S. Childs, archdeacon of the diocese, it was stated this morning, was originally a member of the court, but he declined to sit. As he has not resigned, and there was, therefore, no vacancy, his place could not be filled, so there was one missing. While Bishop Satterlee is not a member of the court, it is stated that he will in all likelihood be present at the sessions.

The place of prosecutor is filled by L.A. Wilmer of Port Tobacco, who served as "church advocate." The charges, it was said, were two in number. The first of them alleged the violation by Rev. Mr. Williams of his ordination vows. The second was the still graver charge of undue familiarity, immorality and illicit intercourse. The accused was represented by Mr. William A. Meloy, who has as assistant counsel Mr. J. Holdsworth Gordon of Washington. Under a church canon prescribed for such cases only one man can appear for the prosecution and only one as counsel. It was stated, however, the point would likely be strained and Mr. Meloy would have Mr. Gordon to actively assist him in conducting the case. The trial took place behind closed doors, and only those closely connected with the case and with knowledge of the circumstances relating to it were allowed to be present. Reporters were rigorously excluded.

Mr. Williams Present

Mr. Meloy, counsel for the defense, said to a Star reporter this morning that Mr. Williams was in the city and would appear at the trial. He stated, in fact, that it was at Mr. Williams' urgent appeal that the trial was brought in order to clear his skirts of any grave charges as had been preferred against him. He said further that Mr. Williams, ever since the matter had been brought to public notice, had been endeavoring to have the trial brought. He is at present visiting a friend in Southeast Washington, having come here from Clifton Springs, N.Y., where he has been for some time on account of ill health. Since the charges were first brought against him, it is said, his health has been so bad that he could not have taken charge of a parish if it had been possible under the circumstances. His family is said to be in Baltimore.

Miss Denham, the young lady who is a party to the case with Mr. Williams, appeared as the chief witness against him at the trial. It is understood that a large number of other witnesses appeared, but their names were not given out for publication.

The Rector's Congregation

Rev. Mr. Williams was rector of Christ Church, Navy Yard, until something over a year ago. His health became so bad that he was granted a leave of absence by his congregation, in order for his recuperation. He went to South Carolina for this purpose. During his absence reports began to be circulated, in which Miss Denham's name was coupled with his. She was a prominent member of his congregation, one of the most earnest workers in the parish, being a member of the choir and taking great interest in all church work. Mr. Williams finally returned to Washington. After some little time he resigned the charge, ostensibly on account of ill health. Since then, it is stated, he has been at Clifton Springs, N.Y., undergoing treatment for a severe cerebral disease.

A child was born to Miss Denham, which lived a few months and died in the early part of the winter.

The outcome of the case will be awaited with the greatest interest, not only in ecclesiastical circles, but by a large number of those who have learned of the affair and the circumstances surrounding it. It may be several days before the conclusion of the trial is reached.

Evening Star, January 21, 1898

Rev. Mr. Williams' Case

Trial of the Charges Before an Ecclesiastical Court

Statement Made by the Father of the Young Woman

Who Brings the Accusation

The trial of Rev. Gilbert F. Williams, former pastor of Christ Church, Navy Yard, before the ecclesiastical court, on the charge of immoral conduct with a member of his congregation, continued this morning at St. Mark's Pro-Cathedral Church, 3rd and A streets southeast.

The session began this morning at 10 o'clock, with all the members of the court in attendance. Rev. A.R. Stuart of Christ Church, Georgetown, presided at his morning's session, which lasted until 1 o'clock, and then adjourned for an hour in order to allow the members to take lunch.

Little was done yesterday but to fully organize the court. The form of subpoena for the witnesses was decided upon, and they were sent out. It was stated that there are about fifty witnesses on each side, among whom, a Star reporter was informed, will be Bishop Satterlee himself.

Rev. Mr. Williams was present this morning at the proceedings as was his wife. She is firmly convinced of his innocence and has so asserted herself since the case was first brought to the public notice. The accused minister appeared as if he had undergone a terrible mental and physical strain, and seemed as if he felt his position keenly.

Review of the Case

This morning Mr. L.A. Wilmer of Port Tobacco, who was selected by Bishop Satterlee as church advocate to do the prosecuting, began a review of the case. He presented in a strong light the evidence which existed so far in the case, and made a plea for conviction. A number of witnesses were examined, it was stated, and Miss Denham, the accuser, was present with her father to make her statement before the court.

The young girl was firm as to the guilt of her former pastor and spiritual adviser.

Under the church canon, applied to this special case, it will be necessary for the plaintiff to bring strong evidence by other witnesses to prove the truth of her statement.

It was alleged that Miss Denham had provided for this.

There has not been a similar case to this in the Maryland dioceses, it was stated to the reporter this morning, for over fifty years. The last was in 1847.

The trial was still in session when this report closed. It was stated several days will probably be taken in which to finish the proceedings.

The Evening Star, January 22, 1898, p. 8

The Williams Case

Trial of the Rector Before the Ecclesiastical Court

The trial of Rev. Gilbert F. Williams continued at St. Mark's Pro-Cathedral Church this morning. The session of the ecclesiastical court began at 10 o'clock, and lasted until after 1, when proceedings were adjourned until 10 o'clock Monday morning. Miss Denham, the prosecuting witness, was on the stand for over an hour this morning. She told a story still further of her alleged seduction, and it was stated, although she was cross-examined closely, that she stood the test remarkably well. The defendant and his wife were present. It is believed the trial may take a week or ten days, as Miss Denham is about the only witness who has been examined.

The Evening Star, January 25, 1898

Dr. Williams' Trial

The Young Woman Who is Prosecuting Him Gives Her Testimony

The ecclesiastical court of the diocese of Washington, which has been engaged for some days in trying Rev. Dr. Gilbert F. Williams, formerly rector of Christ Church, Navy Yard, on charges of immorality while in charge of Christ Church, continued its questions yesterday. Miss Denham was on the stand in the morning and her father was summoned in the afternoon.

The Evening Star, January 26, 1898, p. 9

The Williams Trial

The trial of Rev. Gilbert F. Williams was continued at St. Mark's pro-cathedral Church at 10 o'clock this morning. The reading of the journal and the corrections, as usual, took some time. When this was finished the examination of witnesses was begun and took up a greater part of the day. Among those who gave testimony were some of the members of the vestry of Christ Church, navy yard, which was Mr. Williams' parish. Miss Denham was present at the church, but was not on the witness stand. It is thought probable, however, that she will be called again. Her parents have been examined. There are a number of other witnesses to be heard from, and the end of the trial will not be reached for a week or more, it is thought.

The Evening Star, January 31, p. 7

Rev. Williams' Trial

Prosecution Has Not Yet Closed Its Testimony

There are a few more witnesses to be examined for the prosecution in the trial of Rev. Gilbert F. Williams, which is being held at St. Mark's pro-Cathedral Church, 2d and A streets southeast. Among the number, it is stated by a gentleman closely connected with the trial, will be some lady members of the congregation, who will tell of the defendant's behavior toward them.

During the examination of some witnesses, who were members of the vestry of the church when Mr. Williams was pastor, some testimony was given which the defendant criticized severely and

declared to be false from beginning to end. It was declared that he said one of the witnesses had perjured himself in the testimony given.

Rev. Mr. Williams has not been put on the stand as yet, and it is not known when he will be. It is probable that Miss Denham will be recalled to the stand.

The Evening Star, February 1, 1898, p. 2

Trial of Mr. Williams

Proceedings of the Ecclesiastical Court Now in Session

The trial of Rev. Gilbert F. Williams, former pastor of Christ Church, Navy Yard, was continued before the ecclesiastical court at St. Marks' Pro-Cathedral Church this morning. The prosecution has not yet finished with its witnesses. One of those notified to be on hand today, it was stated, was a lady who had been a member of his congregation, the nature of whose testimony could not be given out. Some members of the vestry of the church were examined yesterday, and one of them stated that his evidence was of such a character as to be rather damaging to the accused minister.

It is thought the witnesses for the prosecution will be examined during all the rest of the week, and that it may be another week before the trial is finished.

Mr. Williams, it is stated, stands the trial with great fortitude, and shows little signs of the terrible strain which he must be undergoing. This, it is declared, is in marked contrast to his wife, who is with him each day at the trial and who looks so badly as to earn the sympathy of all who see her. She has all along had and still has faith in her husband's innocence, and thinks he will be acquitted without a doubt.

The Evening Star, February 7, 1898, p. 2

The prosecution in the case of Rev. Gilbert F. Williams, who is being tried at St. Mark's Pro-Cathedral Church, was concluded Friday. Two ladies testified as to Mr. Williams' behavior toward them. The court adjourned Friday afternoon until this morning, when it began again. The defense is now going ahead with its witnesses. A lady has testified, it is stated, in Mr. Williams' behalf, telling of conversations which she had with Miss Denham. It is thought the case will continue the rest of the week.

The Evening Star, February 12, 1898, p. 11

Trial of Rev. Williams

Testimony Still Being Taken Before Ecclesiastical Court

No decision has been reached in the case of the Rev. Gilbert F. Williams, who is on trial before the standing committee of the diocese of Washington, for alleged improper relations with Miss Denham while he was connected with a church in Southeast Washington. It will take Mr. Williams, it is said, two days to complete his testimony, after which a number of witnesses will be introduced in rebuttal, which will probably consume another day. The testimony being all in, the arguments of counsel for the prosecution and for the defense will be heard. There has been a great amount of testimony taken in this case, and it will all have to be done over carefully by the trial board before any decision is reached, and it is not believed the decision will be announced before the latter part of next week.

The statements published yesterday to the effect that the trial board had about concluded that Mr. Williams was innocent of the charge are said to have been premature, inasmuch as a large bulk of the testimony has not been gone over, and, in fact, is not in shape to be read.

The Evening Star, February 28, 1898

Trial of Rev. G.F. Williams

It is Thought All the Witnesses Have Been Examined A Case Which Has Created Tremendous Interest In the Church--The Charges

The first trial before an ecclesiastical court of the diocese of Washington seems likely to be a most memorable one. There remains a dim tradition, known only as such to churchmen of this generation, that once, long years ago, the ecclesiastical court of the parent diocese of Maryland was convened to try a clergyman for some alleged moral delinquency. But hardly is the name known and few recall whether he was found guilty or innocent.

This is not likely to be the case with the trial of the Rev. Gilbert F. Williams, late rector of Christ Church, Washington, charged with the violation of his ordination vows, and with immoral conduct with a young woman of his congregation, well nigh two years ago.

For eight years he had been the popular, laborious, successful and everywhere esteemed rector of this among the most important parishes in the diocese. Under Bishop Paret he had been in the office of dean and of archdeacon of the convocation of Washington, placed for several years at the head of all the clergy of the new diocese of Washington. Over-work, however, had so far undermined his health that in the summer of 1896 he was forced to take an extended leave of absence in the effort to regain his strength.

While so absent the condition of a young woman set going the gossips of the parish, and while a number of names were bandied about, the story spread that the absent clergyman was the guilty party. But it was not until some months had passed, nor until the minister had returned, been requested by his vestry to resign and had again gone away that the girl herself ascribed to him the paternity of her child. He then called for an investigation and a trial, by letters both to the bishop and the chairman of the standing committee, beseeching them to arrange for his speedy trial.

This was begun on the 20th of January last at the Pro-Cathedral of St. Mark's Church, Washington, and without intermission since, except two days, has been continued each day from 10 o'clock a.m. to 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

L.A. Wilmer of Charles county, adjutant general of the state of Maryland, represents the church, William A. Meloy, esq., appearing as sole counsel for the accused. The canons of the Protestant Episcopal Church declare the defendant's right to have one counsel, and in this case the court ruled that he should have only one. Another canon denies admission to the court to any save the clergy and the defendant, and by permission of the court a few of his friends. This court still further limited by excluding all witnesses save the one on the stand. In order still further to avoid publicity the bishop asked the clergy not to avail themselves of the privilege of attending, and so very few have attended, and none have followed the entire trial.

The high reputation of the reverend defendant, the volume of the testimony presented, the exciting and sensational nature of the evidence, would have inevitably attracted the greatest public interest and widespread attention, not merely among the churchmen of the country, but other classes as well, had not the court immediately upon its organization ordered its doors closed, its officers put under oaths of secrecy, and under the canons of the church excluded both spectators and all reporters.

The court stenographer and its secretary have been seen passing and repassing with a daily growing bulk of testimony taken, now quite near 2,000 typewritten pages.

Witnesses for the prosecution ceased to be called in the fourth week, and no more summonses go out for witnesses on behalf of the defendant. These are plain signs that the trial is practically ended. Both sides claim the victory.

Should a majority of the court find Mr. Williams guilty of the charge, or of improper conduct at all, it remains for the bishop to say whether his sentence shall be degradation from the ministry or mere suspension.

The Evening Star, March 15, 1898, p. 2

Rector No Longer

Rev. Gilbert F. Williams Formally Deposed From Ministry

Charges Against Him Sustained

Violation of Ordination Vows, Unbecoming Conduct and Immorality

History of the Case

Rev. Gilbert F. Williams, formerly rector of Christ Church, Southeast Washington, was today deposed from the ministry of the Episcopal Church by Right Rev. Henry Y. Satterlee, bishop of the diocese of Washington for "violation of his ordination vows, conduct unbecoming a clergyman of the Episcopal Church and immorality."

The trail of Rev. Mr. Williams on this charge grew out of his alleged improper relations with a young lady member of his congregation about two years ago.

The trial began January 20 in the Pro-Cathedral of St. Mark's before an ecclesiastical court appointed by Bishop Satterlee, and, with the exception of two days, has continued in daily session ever since, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

L.A. Wilmer, adjutant general of Maryland, represented the church, and the Rev. Mr. Williams was defended by Mr. William A. Meloy, the canons of the Episcopal Church allowing a clergyman under prosecution to have but one attorney.

Secrecy Observed

Every effort was made to keep the proceedings of the trial from the public, and non one was allowed in the room except the clergymen permitted by the canons, and Bishop Satterlee was so anxious to keep the proceedings quiet that he made a special request of the clergymen not to avail themselves of this privilege and not to attend the trial any more than possible. Only one witness in the case was allowed in the room at a time.

A large number of witnesses were examined, both for the prosecution and the defense, and the stenographers were kept busy transcribing notes, which filled more than 2,000 pages of typewritten matter.

The court finally concluded the hearing, and after carefully summing up the evidence which had been presented to them decided by a canonical majority that Mr. Williams was guilty of all the charges and specifications filed against him, which were "an act involving a breach of his ordination vows, conduct unbecoming a clergyman and immorality." The findings and proceedings of the court were transmitted to Bishop Satterlee and met with his approval.

The bishop decided that Rev. Mr. Williams should be deposed from the ministry of the Episcopal Church. This morning at the conclusion of morning prayer at the Pro-Cathedral of St. Mark's the bishop performed this painful duty in the presence of those members of the congregation who chose to remain, and with the bishop's chaplains, Rev. Philip M. Rhineland, Rev. Mr. Hayes and Rev. Mr. Devries, as witnesses to the ceremony, as required by the canons of the Episcopal Church.

This proceeding ends Mr. Williams' career in the ministry of the Episcopal Church, as he can never again be ordained by any bishop.

Pastor Eight Years

For eight years Mr. Williams had been rector of Christ Church, and a more popular divine could not be found in the diocese.

He was highly esteemed by every member of his congregation. Before the diocese of Washington was separated from the diocese of Maryland Mr. Williams served as archdeacon of the diocese for Bishop Paret.

About two years ago Mr. Williams health gave away and he was forced to take a vacation. He had not been away long before Dame Rumor had some ugly things to say about him in connection with one of his most ardent young lady church workers, and in a short while the young lady gave birth to a child, of which she claimed Mr. Williams was the father.

The matter was reported to the standing committee of the diocese of Washington, as required by the canons. Mr. Williams called for an investigation of the charges, and asked for a speedy trial, which, after dragging along for more than six weeks, resulted as stated above.

This is the first trial to be held in Washington before an ecclesiastical court, and on account of the prominence of both parties, has attracted attention throughout the diocese.

The Evening Star, January 2, 1899, p. 11

The trial of Rev. G.F. Williams for alleged immorality was begun on the 20th resulting in his being deposed from the ministry some weeks later.

Williams. Suddenly on Sunday, November 24, 1918 at his residence, 61 Randolph place northwest, Rev. Gilbert T., husband of Frances B. Williams. Funeral from his late residence, Wednesday, November 27th at 2 p.m. Interment private.