

Other Altarpieces in Virginia

An altarpiece is a framed artistic representation of a sacred subject or combination of subjects typically situated behind and above an altar.

Altarpieces arose in the Middle Ages to enhance the liturgy with visual images. In Europe and South America there are elaborate pieces of art, often massive in size to fit the churches. In British North America, the designs were more text based with the idea of education and keeping the fundamental religious documents in front of the people. Bibles and printed works were scarcer than in Europe.

Canon Law LXXXII of 1604, the Church of England required "the Ten Commandments be set up on the East end of every Church and Chapel, where the people may best see and read the same, and other chosen sentences written upon the walls of the said Churches and Chapels, in places convenient."

While only the 10 commandments were required by British law, it was common to include the Apostle's Creed and Lord's Prayer. Also yellow letters on a black background was the predominant format as we have at St. Peter's. There are still some colonial churches with the tablets intact and most have been restored over the years.

St. Peter's altarpiece is unique with its gothic design and its later appearance in the 1850's. However, the documents included follows after the colonial churches as well as some of the artistic elements.

The actual design of the altarpiece was not standard. Some churches had altarpiece with a set of tablets in the middle and separate tablets beside them. Other churches had one main unit. Churches in other states had a window in the center with tablets surrounding.

Here are some other examples of Colonial altarpieces:

1. St. Mary's White Chapel – oldest altarpiece in Virginia

The Lord's Prayer and Apostles' Creed tablets at St. Mary's date to 1718 and the Lord's Prayer 1702



2. Christ Church, Lancaster



At the east end of the church is the walnut altarpiece or reredos, which contains the tablets for the Ten Commandments beneath a segmental arched pediment. The tablets are new but the rest of the woodwork around the altar is original including the nicely turned balusters of the communion rail. An eighteenth-century table serves as the present communion table. To the right of the altar is a stone font made in England with cherub heads around the bowl. To the left of the altar is a monument on the floor memorializing John Carter, father or Robert Carter.

3. Aquia, Stafford



These were lettered in white by William Copein (1730-1805) at the time was completed in 1757. This is one of the rare cases where we know the identity of the artist.

4. Abington Black Marsh



The building represents one of the last expressions of the Virginia cruciform plan that began with Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg

Four black tablets hang within the space, bearing the words of the Ten Commandants and two prayers inscribed in golden letters. Above them, rising in the center of the pediment, is a finely carved pineapple form mounted on a graceful classical urn.