

400 years ago today, Bermuda's tribal representatives together with Governor Nat Butler, gathered under the cedar 'belfry' tree behind the town church ready to enter the newly constructed cedar building for the inaugural session of the General Assembly.

The members of the Assembly were the Governor, the Council, the bailiffs of the tribes, the tribal representatives, a secretary and a clerk.

Following the swearing in and oath-taking, the Governor, in opening his protracted address, said "Thanks be to God that we are assembled here with firm intention to draw up and decree good and beneficial laws...for the particular good and welfare of this plantation."

Such a significant event calls for a commemoration and The Friends of St Peter's Church started planning well in advance! Alas, plans were curtailed due to the pandemic.

The proposed recreation of the gathering of the General Assembly will not take place today but plans are well under way for a major event in November together with the members of the House of Assembly.

In the meantime, the town church, consecrated St Peter's in 1826, holds the title as the site of the first Assembly because the stone built State House was not quite ready for occupancy in August 1620.

Just as the first Acts to be passed formed a foundation for the laws of the colony, so did the wooden structure provide a base for the eventual stone church building, still in continuous use today.

Anti-expat attitudes are not new to Bermuda.

Not only were many of the early settlers distained but some had to be shipped home!

In 1620, one of the first bills brought before the initial General Assembly recommended that unsuitable settlers be returned to England at the expense of the manager who sent them.

Governor Lefroy in his Memorials reports (sic):

(2) an act concerning the disposing of aged, diseased, and impotent persons.

'there can be found noe greater disease and canker to a new settled plantacon than the stuffing yt with idle and unprofitable persons whose bellies for the most part also are extraordinarylie craving and there mouthes as Ravenous.'

The issue was raised again in Act # 10 "Whereas divers ill chosen psons sent out of England having been bred in a lazie and vagrant life and soe not easily nor sodainly to be Reclaymed from there lewde conditions...

According to Butler's History of the Bermudas (thanks to Mrs Hollis Hallett's excellent contemporary version of Act 2 'it seemed as though they (the managers) just snatched up anyone who came their way and among some of the recent emigrants there were several who had been thrown in and forced upon the colony."

No wonder some immigrants were considered a 'hindrance' and 'a disturbance to orderly government.'

Unsuitable expats were just one of the issues dealt with in the lengthy first meeting of the Assembly,.

The first session of the General Assembly was a lengthy affair with a sermon taking up the entire first day.

The fifteen bills passed in 1620 make interesting reading.

The 15 Acts were, in brief:

1. The unjust sale and hiring out of apprentices and other servants
2. The arrangements for aged, diseased and feeble settlers
3. The necessary maintenance of King's Castle
4. ...against producing rotten and unmerchantable tobacco
5. Construction of public bridges
6. A continual public supply of corn in the forts
7. Two fixed days every year to hold the general assize
8. The making of public highways
9. The preservation of tortoises (turtles)
10. Punishment of vagrants and prohibition of hiring other men's servants
11. Maintaining a public store and supply of corn
12. The care of planted corn (fencing of poultry)
13. Maintenance of adequate fences and prohibition of cutting down trees used as boundary marks
14. A tax of one thousand pounds of tobacco towards public works for 1620
15. An order for resident Governors to be approved and their authority recognised.

The Friends of St Peter's Church, who are dedicated to 'the preservation, restoration, maintenance and promotion of the church,' decided to mark the 400th anniversary by readying the structure to survive in good order until the 450th Anniversary!

The clocktower and clock face have been painted, the 200 year-old blinds have been repaired and replaced, repair and painting of the windows and frames is underway and eventually the street wall will have a fresh coat.

The interior memorials have all been re-lettered making them readable, the historic chandeliers will soon be on their way for polish and sealant.

A mobility accessible brick pathway has been created and an unveiling is planned for the near future.

Financing of The Friends of St Peter's Church is with thanks to the UNESCO Heritage Fund, the BTA and the many members of the Friends.

