

# The First Years: from Missions to Revolution

## The Beginning of the Episcopal Church in New Haven



New Haven was founded by Puritan settlers in 1638. New Haven, along with the rest of Connecticut, was established and ruled by Puritan Congregationalists for most of its early years. It was a sort of democratic theocracy. All citizens could vote, but all citizens were required to pay taxes to the Congregational meetinghouses, and no other churches were allowed to exist for decades. To the left is *The First Sunday in New Haven*, an 1881 engraving, of Rev. Davenport preaching in April of 1638, the year 500 settlers sailed into New Haven

harbor. They wanted to establish a Christian Utopia, and had left Boston because they found the colony there “too lax” in their religious practices.

As early as 1669 the first petition to the General Court or assembly was made to establish an Episcopal Church, and it was ignored. Not until 1708 was the Episcopal Church recognized in Connecticut. The Toleration Act of 1708 allowed the Episcopal Church to exist, but still required everyone to pay taxes to the Congregational meetinghouse. The Relief Act of 1727 finally allowed members of the Church of England (later to become the Episcopal Church) to be exempt from paying the church tax.

Much of the Episcopal Church’s roots in New Haven can be traced to the [Yale University](#) library. In 1719, Rev. Samuel Johnson minister of the West Haven Congregationalist church along with eight other Congregationalist men – including seven ministers, and the Rector and senior tutor at Yale – began to read the once forbidden Anglican authors in the Yale library, and discuss them at each other’s homes. They soon began to doubt the validity of their Presbyterian ordinations, and at the Yale Commencement in September of 1722 they [declared for the episcopacy](#). While five recanted, four of these men were dismissed from Yale and left New Haven. Johnson was ordained the next year in London in the Episcopal Church.

After being ordained in England, the “American” Samuel Johnson returned to Connecticut in 1723. He worked as a missionary priest for The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) based in Stratford, Connecticut.

There are records of parishes being formed this year in North Haven and West Haven, though no record of one being formed in New Haven has been found. But almost certainly, he would have founded a New Haven parish as his first order of business after settling in Stratford even before

North Haven and West Haven; he was planning on using New Haven as a base to convert Yale students to the Episcopacy so they in turn could take orders and fill the newly founded parishes of his missionary territory in Connecticut. Rev. Johnson traveled to New Haven frequently between 1723 and 1740. During this time, services were conducted in private homes until a church could be built.

He faced bitter opposition, finding what he calls “a great deal of odium, and obloquy, spite and opposition from a wicked world”, a world filled with bitter and angry Puritans. His house in Stratford was “branded”, and for sometime “he was obliged to send to Long Island for the actual necessities of life.” This ended fortunately, as he met his wife Charity there, the widow of a wealthy judge who had family connections with merchants and politicians in New York City.

In a letter to the Bishop of London, he tells of the persecution he found visiting his parish of Fairfield, Connecticut:

“The complaint was drawn up, and some of the persons were in prison before I was sent for. Upon their request I came to the prison, and found it full of them, and an insulting mob about them. I administered what comfort I could to them, but I wish your lordship, or some of your sacred character, could have been by to behold the contempt and indignity which our holy religion here suffers among an ungrateful people. It could not fail to excite your utmost zeal and compassion; and I assure your Lordship, the Church here is in a gasping condition, though, indeed, our people bear it with as much meekness and patience as can be expected.”

The Puritan Governor responded:

“The law in this colony is such, that the major part of the householders in every town shall determine their minister’s maintenance, and all within the precincts of the town shall be obliged to pay their parts in an equal proportion to their estates in said town or societies and so in the precincts of each ecclesiastical society. Under this security all our towns and ecclesiastical societies are supplied with orthodox ministers. **We have no vacancies at present.**“

The Connecticut Governor and state Assembly passed laws to prohibit the church beyond Stratford; when Johnson visited his parish in Fairfield in 1727 he found all the adult men of his parish there in jail for refusing to pay taxes. It did not work, and Johnson tirelessly strived for the emancipation of the Anglican people of New England. The Congregationalist authorities at once point decided to send their best man, the Rev. Hezekiah Gold, to Stratford. Gold pronounced Johnson and his people “unconverted, and not only so but intruders and workers of all manner of mischief”. Gold was no more successful against Johnson than any other Puritan; when asked if his Church was increasing, in a quip worthy of his namesake in London, Rev. Johnson replied:

“Yes, it is increasing. I am a feeble instrument in the bands of God; but thanks be to Him, he has placed my left handed brother Gold here who makes six churchmen while I can make one.”

Johnson over the next 25 years founds or co-founds with his disciples parishes and churches in Norwalk, Fairfield, Ridgefield, Danbury, Fairfield, Redding, Bridgeport, Newtown, Stratford, Huntington, Milford, Derby, West Haven, New Haven, Woodbury, Wallingford, Guilford, Norwich, New London, Waterbury, Middletown, Litchfield, Simsbury (where the missionary Rev. Graves was

thrown in jail for protesting paying taxes to Puritan churches), Middleton, Hebron and many other places in New England and New York that have escaped the records of history; in fact, any place where fifteen or even seven families professed for the Church of England in South and Western Connecticut, despite being severely taxed by the established order, probably merited a periodical visit by Johnson. He also preached often at Setauket, in Brookhaven across the sound in Long Island, and in New York City, as well as Rhode Island (at Weatherly and Providence). Of the 41 churches listed in Lucy Jarvis's [Sketches of church life in Colonial Connecticut](#) as founded before Johnson's death, Johnson was directly responsible for 25 of them, and or indirectly responsible through his disciples for founding or finding a minister for them all.

His disciples and converts took over parishes in New England, New York, and New Jersey, built churches, and they themselves as SPG missionaries spread out and founded new parishes. Johnson's disciples eventually grew to about fifty clergymen, who occupied the highest Anglican pulpits in the land, in Boston, New Haven, Elizabeth New Jersey, and New York City, and dozens of other towns. For his incredible success in growing the Church in Connecticut, he was awarded the second honorary Doctor of Divinity degree given to an American by Oxford in 1743, and the first one that recognized accomplishment. He is regarded as "The Father of the Episcopacy in Connecticut."

## The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel



The bookplate depicts a missionary Church of England priest bringing the light of the Gospel to Native Americans who are rushing to greet him. The society's mission was documented in the report of the Society in 1703 (published in London in 1704). It was "to provide for the conversion of the Indians and settling there of religion in Her Majesty's Foreign Dominions by supplying with able and good Ministers the natives as well as English, appointing Catechists and Schoolmasters for the slaves with other ignorant persons, and sending over select Libraries for the improvement of the Clergy as well as practical treatises for the edification of the laity."<sup>[1]</sup> The SPGFP image above is taken from a fairly intact bookplate on a book donated by Trinity Parish's missionary minister the Rev. Dr. Samuel Johnson to King's College (now Columbia University) – a school Johnson founded – from a work written by Samuel Parker, his mammoth *Bibliotheca Biblica: Being a commentary upon all the books of the Old and New Testament* (1720).

The bookplate depicts a ship under full sail with flags flying on a choppy sea heading towards a point of land, while on the ship a minister in wig and gown stands holding out an open book in his right hand with a second open book clutched at his chest with his left hand – a sailor would fear a lee shore at this point. On the point are natives in a "Posture of Expectation" with some running towards the cliff on the point to greet the incoming vessel: on the windblown banner between them and the ship is the phrase *Transiens Aduva Nos* [Come over and help us] from Acts 16:9. Overhead is a sun with a human face with rays emanating from it beaming solemnly down on the ship – a common

image in the period for the “Solar *Logos*”, the divine work emanating from Christ, the “true light” of John 1.

The missionary ministers in the colonies reported back to the society twice a year, and their reports provide an excellent view of the Anglican community in the years before the Revolution that terminated their missionary funding, though not their activities.

## The Early days of Trinity Parish

While it is likely some form of Anglican parish was created by the young and energetic Rev. Samuel Johnson in 1723, the first record of an Anglican community that gathered in New Haven is found in his semi-annual reports to the SPG. The former Yale tutor, minister of West Haven’s Congregationalist Church, and now frequently traveling rector of the Anglican Christ Church, Stratford, continually visited his various parishes in south east Connecticut. His missionary region went from Norwalk to Fairfield to Stratford to New Haven to Guilford to New London along the coast, and inland to Newtown, Derby, and even as far north as Waterbury. He was technically obliged to visit each parish once a month, which meant he must have spent a great deal of time in the saddle. He reported in a letter to the SPGFP in April, 1728, that:

“I have likewise since preached to a considerable number of people at New-London... At Norwalk, where I preached since I wrote last, there are several families who are reconciled to the Church... **I have also (besides other neighboring parishes) lately preached at New Haven**, a large town about fourteen miles eastward [from Stratford], where there is a College. Great pains were taken to hinder people from coming to Church, and many well-wishers to it were over-persuaded not to come; however, I had near a hundred hearers, and among them several of the College; after service about ten of the members of our Church there subscribed £100 towards building a Church in that town, and seem very zealously engaged to prosecute the design, and I hope in a few years there will be a large congregation there.”<sup>[2]</sup>

It must have been a most effective sermon indeed. Since he reported twice annually to the society, it is hard to pin down a date for the sermon that inspired ten listeners to pledge such a large amount, the price of a small home, and twice the yearly salary of a Yale tutor at the time. But as the Puritans did not celebrate Christmas, it is likely that he traveled around the towns on the holidays to minister to recent English immigrants who would have missed the holiday services, so Christmas 1727 is a likely founding date for Trinity Church – if you take the first pledge as the founding date of a church.

But first they had to spend 25 years trying to get permission from the Puritans.

Johnson himself was very active in New Haven. His strategy to expand the church required him to convert Yale students to the “episcopacy”. He was also the co-administrator of the Berkeley scholarship program since 1732, and two-step sons and two sons went to Yale in the 1730s and 1740s. Johnson wrote that at the Yale commencement in 1748 nine Connecticut Anglican clergy men, and that among the candidates for degrees ten belonged to the Episcopal Church. Among the masters candidates were Sturges, Leaming and Chandler. Among the bachelors candidates were Johnson’s own son William or “Billy” Johnson, Ogilvie, and Seabury – the future Bishop. Johnson writes of the future Bishop that “as he has lived four years much under my eye, I can truly

testify of him that he is a solid, sensible, virtuous youth, and I doubt not, may in due time, do good service.”

Johnson was running a sort of virtual seminary within Yale at this time, with as many as twenty percent of the students attending his house church. Though the Rev. Richard Mansfield was based in Derby, he seems to have officiated on a salary of £20 a year, to the villages of Derby, West Haven, Waterbury and Northbury. Apparently Dr. Johnson handled Stratford, Milford, and West Haven, while Rev. Ebenezer Punderson took charge of Guilford and points east as far as Charleston, Rhode Island. If the labor was so divided, then it was likely Johnson not Punderson who appointed Enos Alling and Isaac Doolittle as Wardens for Trinity Church, New Haven, sometime around 1750.

Now they only had to buy a plot of land.

## The First “Church” in New Haven



It was not until 1752 that the Episcopalians in New Haven secured a site to build their house of worship. In a town of Congregationalists, one of the major obstacles they faced was finding someone willing to sell their land to Episcopalians. On July 28, 1752, Mr. Samuel Mix “did give, grant, bargain, and sell unto Enos Alling and Isaac Doolittle, for the building of a house of worship agreeable and according to the establishment of the Church of England,” a lot on the east side of Church Street, south of Chapel Street. This street was actually not named Church Street until Trinity was erected. Trinity was the first house of worship in New Haven to be called a “church” as opposed to a meetinghouse.

Our first church was built at the south-east corner of present day Church and Chapel Street between July 1752 and the summer of 1753. The first church was a small wooden structure measuring 58 feet by 38 feet and only sat 150 persons. The small wooden altar was flanked by two arch-shaped tablets which are presently in Trinity’s vestibule. There were 24 families and 87 “souls” at the time the first building was completed — a somewhat unusually low proportion for the time, where a family might have 9 people in it. They may have been a young parish of recent immigrants.

Trinity would exist completely outside the theocratic Congregationalist structure of New Haven. Trinity parishioners challenged the structure of New Haven and also caused controversies at Yale. Trinity parishioners thought that Yale’s purpose was only to teach the arts and sciences and that Yale should not require its students to conform to any religious doctrine; students should be allowed to worship as he or his parents wished. It can be argued that Trinity introduced the whole concept of church and state separation to the colony.

## The Legend of Grigson’s Deed

Rev. Samuel Peters of Hebron writes in A general history of Connecticut that an Englishman named Grigson,

“bequeathed part of his lands toward the support of an Episcopal clergyman, who should reside in that town, and the residue to his own heirs. Having deposited his will in the hands of a friend, he set sail with his family for England, but died on his passage. This friend proved the will, but died also soon after. The record was dexterously concealed by glueing two leaves together; and after some years, the Selectmen sold the whole estate to pay taxes, though the rent of Mr. Grigson’s house alone in one year would pay the taxes for ten. Some persons, hardy enough to exclaim against this glaring injustice, were soon silenced, and expelled the town.”

In 1752, “an Episcopal clergyman was settled in New Haven; and, having been informed of Mr. Grigson’s will, applied to the town clerk for a copy, who told him there was no such will on record, and withal refused him the liberty of searching.”

While this colorful story of Puritan deception and glued pages is fascinating as legend, Frederick Crowell debunked it in his ► [History of Trinity Church, New Haven.](#)

The Loyalist Rev. Peters is writing this from exile in London after the Revolutionary War from memory, and though apocryphal, it reflects not only his bitterness but the memories of Trinity’s parishioners in New Haven of a time of persecution and oppression.

## Deed to Church Street Lot

On July 28, 1752 Samuel Mix executes a deed conveying for the consideration of £200 old tenor, to Enos “Bishop” Ailing and Isaac Doolittle, 20 square rods of land “for the building of a house of public worship, agreeable and according to the establishment of the Church of England.” The building of the wooden First Trinity Church begins this year on what we today call Church Street — named after this first Church — just a lot or so down from the corner of Chapel on the east side of the street. Because the deed provides an official historical record, this day of July 28, 1752 is taken as the beginning of Trinity Church on the Green, New Haven. The church is built over the next year.

Rev. Dr. Samuel Johnson happily writes to Francis Astry of the SPG on October 30, 1752, that, “The Church yet continues to increase much in these countries, a new Church, which is the 25th in this colony within 25 years, was lately raised in New Haven, where the College is.” But he notes the lack of a Bishop means that “many worthy young men have lost their lives in going [to London] for Orders”, and that one out of four or five men die on the trip to London for ordination. In 1753, the SPG missionary Rev. Ebenezer Punderson leaves Groton and goes to New Haven to become the first Rector of Trinity Church on the Green, remaining there until 1767. He opens the First Church officially for services in September of 1753.

As both a missionary priest ministering in house churches, and the de-facto Bishop of the state, Rev. Dr. Samuel Johnson has led Trinity Parish for 30 years – not only providing ministerial services and educating future clergy, but working for the emancipation of Anglicans from the “Standing Order” of the state government. With the establishment of an Anglican Church in the largest town in

Connecticut, home to Yale the “School of the Prophets” and bastion of Congregational orthodoxy, Dr. Johnson’s missionary goals in working for the SPG have not only been met, but far exceeded. Starting with just one parish with no church and about 40 families in 1723, Rev. Johnson has expanded to over 25 churches in 30 years, and he now is free to leave his mission and his Stratford Church to others, and go off and found King’s College, now Columbia University, in New York City, which opens its doors in 1754.

## Trinity and the American Revolution

Surprisingly little is recorded about Trinity and the role we played in the War for Independence. Prior to 1776, we know the Rev. Bela Hubbard was sent as a missionary to New Haven around the year 1767 to minister to Trinity Church. Hubbard, educated at Yale and a Guilford native, also had Christ Church in West Haven under his care. He held services throughout Connecticut, taking over the missionary role of the aged Rev. Dr. Samuel Johnson.

It is said that during the war about one-third of the citizens were for independence, about one-third were Loyalist or Tory, and the remaining third were neutral. Trinity Church members, because of their ties to the Church of England, were in large part Loyalist or neutral. The Rev. Bela Hubbard is on record praying for the English King — who was, after all, the head of the Church. Not surprisingly, there were parishioners who disagreed with their clergy.

Isaac Doolittle could often be found in Westville with fellow Trinity parishioners Elijah Thomson and Jeremiah Atwater. Since 1776, the three men had been operating a powder mill that supplied gunpowder to the patriot army. Amos Doolittle is one of the most famous heroes of the Revolution in Connecticut. When war broke out in Lexington and Concord, he joined the militia and went marching up to the battlefields. Arriving too late to engage the enemy, he instead sketched the scene of the battlefields: his work appears in almost every account of the early revolution.

Even as the British landed in New Haven, Hubbard decided to remain in his home. He is rumored to have shouted to his wife, “What shall I do?” His wife instructed him, “Silly, put on your robes.” The Rev. Bela Hubbard did just that and stood in the doorway in full vestments with prayer book in hand. As a result, the British troops spared his house and his property.

Trinity Church itself suffered little damage during the war. The only items plundered were some damask hangings and the Rev. Hubbard’s surplice (church vestment). British Redcoats were not to blame for the missing items. Some militia from Farmington stole the items, but only the surplice was recovered. Even as the British landed in New Haven, Hubbard decided to remain in his home. He is rumored to have shouted to his wife, “What shall I do?” His wife instructed him, “Silly, put on your robes.” The Rev. Bela Hubbard did just that and stood in the doorway in full vestments with prayer book in hand. As a result, the British troops spared his house and his property.

Of the 47 men listed as killed, captured, or wounded in the British invasion of 1779, some 20 of their family names also appear on Trinity marriage records between 1769 and 1800: this is about 40% of the casualties. If not Trinity members in 1779, their surviving family members intermarried with Trinity members.<sup>[3]</sup> Given that Trinity comprise only 503 “souls” (about 80-90 families) out of a

population of almost 8,000 people in New Haven (just over 6% of the total), they were actually numerically more supportive of the Revolution than their Congregationalist neighbors.

[1] Anderson, Stuart Murray, *The History of the Church of England in the colonies and foreign dependencies of the British Empire*, Rivingtons, 1856, Volume 3, p. 577

[2] Hawks, Francis K, and Perry, William Stevens, *Documentary History of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, James Pott, New York, 1863, Volume 1, p. 128

[3] Townshend, Charles Hervey, *The British Invasion of New Haven, Connecticut: Together with Some Account of Their Landing and Burning the Towns of Fairfield and Norwalk, July, 1779*, New Haven, 1879, p 22