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"The Old Stone Bank"

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The 42 Episcopal Church in Rhode Island

R. I. Hist. Soc.



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"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.

January 30, 1933

The Episcopal Church in Rhode Island



THE Church of England, to which the Episcopal Church in the United States is indebted for its first foundation, can rightfully claim official representation on Rhode Island territory before any other Christian denomination. In the year 1635, several months before the arrival of Roger Williams at Providence, a regularly-ordained English clergyman established himself permanently at what is now the village of Lonsdale, Rhode Island, and it was this clergyman, William Blackstone, who contributed considerable of the influence that led to the founding of two of the Colonial parishes, King's Church, Providence, and St. Paul's, Narragansett. Although no claim is made that would attribute the founding of the Episcopal Church in Rhode Island to William Blackstone, nevertheless, writers of ecclesiastical history in this state cannot afford to disregard the importance of this earnest apostle who journeyed far through an unbroken wilderness to administer the

Sacraments and to preach the Word according to the ritual and doctrine of the venerable church in which he had been reared.

It was many years after the death of William Blackstone before any movement was started to establish the English Church in the Colonies. During the last few years of the seventeenth century, Sir Francis Nicholson, in succession a royal governor or lieutenant-governor of New York, Virginia and Maryland, is said to have been commissioned by Queen Anne to inquire into the condition of the churches in America. In the course of his duties in the service of the Queen, he visited Newport, Rhode Island and was surprised to find there no gathering for worship according to the forms of the English Church. Evidently the visit of Sir Francis inspired several Newporters, who were friendly toward the faith, to take definite action that finally led to the earliest movement in favor of an Episcopal Church in Rhode Island.

A number of the people of Newport who preferred the service of the Church of England, began in the latter part of 1698, under the ministry of the Rev. Mr. Bethune and the Rev. Mr. Lockyer, to meet for public worship. Soon they petitioned the Earl of Belle-

mont to intercede with the home government that aid might be extended to them in support of a settled minister. This paper was signed by sixteen persons, headed by two old Huguenot names, whose establishment in Narragansett had been abandoned amidst the distractions occasioned by the contest for jurisdiction. Among the names of these first petitioners were those of Gabriel Bernon, Huguenot refugee, Piere Ayrould, a physician, also a French Protestant, William Brinley, and Robert Gardiner, naval officer and collector of the port, upon whose gravestone, in Trinity churchyard, may be read, "Here lieth interred the body of Mr. Robert Gardiner, Esq., who was one of the first promoters of the Church in this place."

Without waiting for the official answer to their petition the signers proceeded to build a church and the building was completed in 1702, "finished all on the outside, and the inside pewed well, but not beautified." The same year, the wardens of the Church called Trinity Church, applied to the Bishop of London for assistance. In answer to this application for aid, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts appointed the Rev. James Honyman the missionary

at Newport. At first his salary was £55, and later it was increased to £70. At the same time, the Society sent to the parish a library of seventy-five volumes, and, in 1709, Queen Anne presented the church with a bell.

Mr. Honyman was very successful in this pioneer Episcopal parish and his spiritual leadership attracted many followers. In 1724, he proposed to his parish members that they undertake the construction of a new church building to take the place of the old one which had become too small to accommodate the growing congregation, although the religious sects of the Baptists and Quakers were not inactive throughout these years. The people responded heartily and finally subscribed nearly £2000 for the venture. Two years later, the new house of worship was ready, and Mr. Honyman held his first service in it. The old church building was presented to a group of people who had no church of their own, which fact establishes conclusive evidence that the new building, the present Trinity Church, was actually erected upon the site of the old, since the earlier structure was disposed of by gift to make room for the new. In 1726, not more than four of the original members of the Church were living, yet the

congregation had grown to four times the size of the first group in 1702. Mr. Honyman had under his care, besides Newport itself, the outlying towns of Freetown, Tiverton and Little Compton.

A number of families, attached to worship according to the tenets of the Church of England, prior to 1700, settled in the Narragansett country. At first, they worshipped in private homes, but, in 1706, the Rev. Christopher Bridge became their minister. The following year, these people of the Narragansett country made application to the Bishop of London for a missionary, and they built a church building by voluntary contributions. This petition was not answered for several years until the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel transferred the Rev. William Guy from South Carolina to this church, and he, too, successfully ministered unto the South County flock until he was allowed, at his own request, to return to his former home in the South.

In June, 1720, this parish of St. Paul's Church wrote to the authorities in England to obtain the services of a missionary, and, in answer to this application, the Rev. James MacSparran was appointed officially as a missionary

to Narragansett. For thirty-six years this beloved, respected and honored man labored among his parishioners ministering to their physical as well as to their spiritual ills for he had acquired a reputation as a "Doctor" in the medical sense of the term. His home on the east side of MacSparran Hill and called "The Glebe", once a veritable shrine of hospitality, still standing and sadly neglected, should be acquired, preserved and eventually restored by responsible parties, since the structure was once the rendezvous for many illustrious figures in early American history and because of its importance during the early days of the Church. The Church building originally stood on the site now called "The Platform", the burial-place of Dr. MacSparran and many of his distinguished associates, but the precious house of worship was moved to Wickford in 1800 where it stands today, one of the most interesting Colonial buildings remaining in New England.

The first Episcopal Church in Providence, and the third in the Colony,—originally named King's Church,—owed its origin, in a great measure to the persevering piety of Gabriel Bernon, who was also zealous and active in the interests of the Church at

Newport and Narragansett. Prospective members of the faith in Providence were able to collect a sufficient amount of money to plan the erection of a church building, and soon construction work was begun on the plain edifice, with its low belfry and round-headed windows, a building that supplied the wants of the parish for eighty-eight years. The first missionary sent by the Society, the Rev. George Pigot, came to Providence in 1723 from Stratford, Connecticut where he had been previously stationed. By act of incorporation, in 1794, the name of the parish was changed to St. John's Church in Providence. The original building on North Main Street was taken down in 1810 and the present stone structure was erected and later enlarged.

The fourth Episcopal parish in Rhode Island was formed at Bristol thirty-nine years after the founding of the town—aid was asked of the English Church authorities in 1720 and work was started immediately on the construction of "St. Michael's Church". Thereafter, membership in the Episcopal Church throughout Rhode Island increased rapidly and today there are approximately twenty-five thousand communicants in the state. There are fifty-five parishes and a large number

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of churches and chapels in which services are held during a portion or all of the year. Many distinguished members of the Episcopal clergy have served in the Rhode Island diocese; several important academic, diocesan and charitable institutions have been established in the state, and the present Episcopal Bishop of All the Americas, the Most Reverend James DeWolf Perry, is a native of Rhode Island and a descendant of one of the most illustrious families in the annals of Rhode Island.

Additional Copies of this Booklet sent upon request.

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"THE OLD STONE BANK"

86 South Main Street, Providence

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THE PROVIDENCE INSTITUTION FOR SAVINGS, familiarly known as "The Old Stone Bank", is in its own right a historic institution of Rhode Island. Founded in 1819 as one of the first mutual savings banks in the country, it has since contributed vitally to the development and life of this community.

Proud of its own historical significance, "The Old Stone Bank" has adopted this method of educational advertising to bring to light much that is of value and significance in the colorful annals of Rhode Island and national history.

The sketches and vignettes of old-time Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders that are broadcast weekly and then printed in this form are selected from local historical records which are full of the picturesque, romantic, and adventurous. In the hope that these glimpses into the lives, customs, and environment of our progenitors may be both revealing and inspirational to young and old, this booklet is presented with the compliments of

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