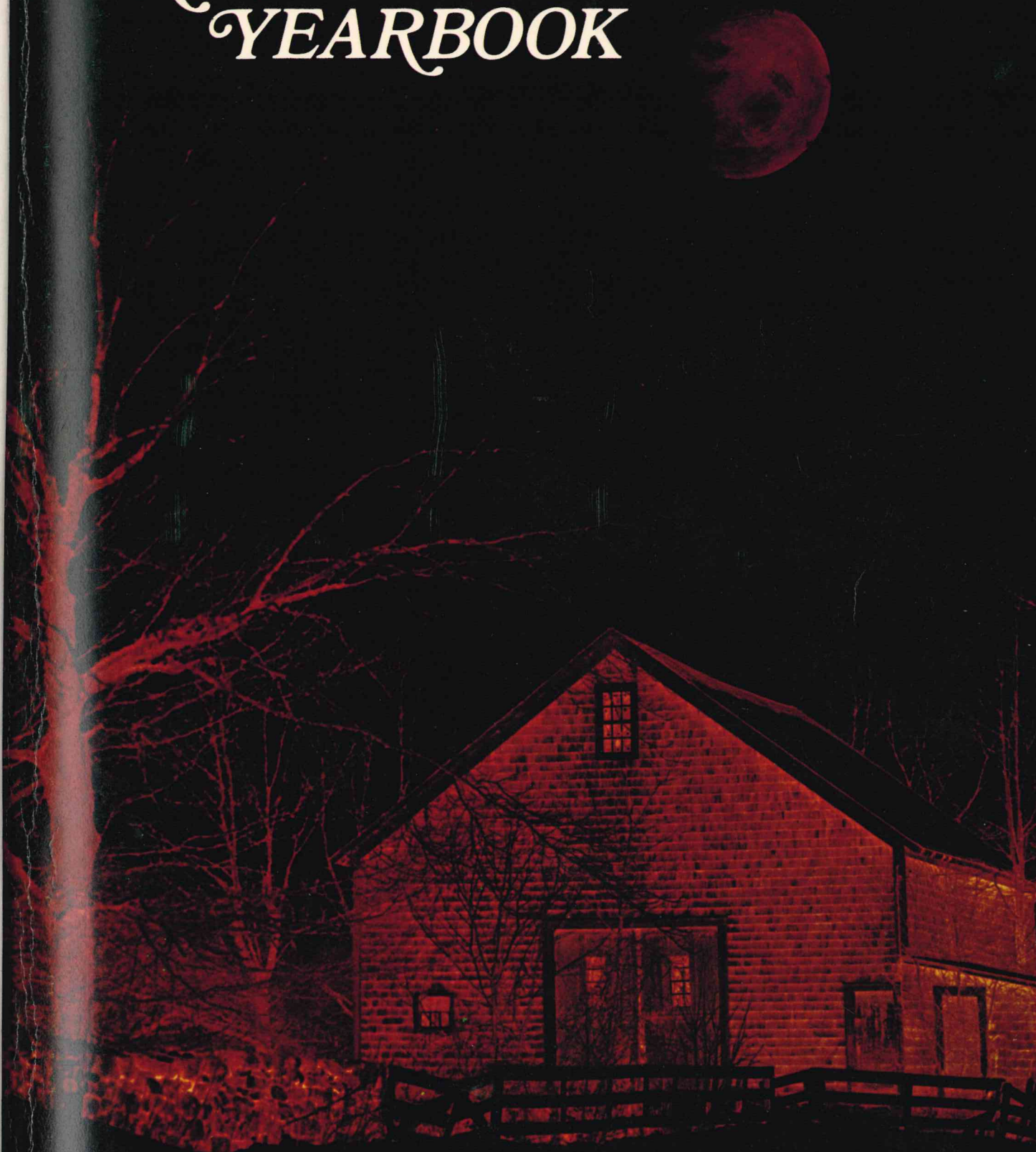


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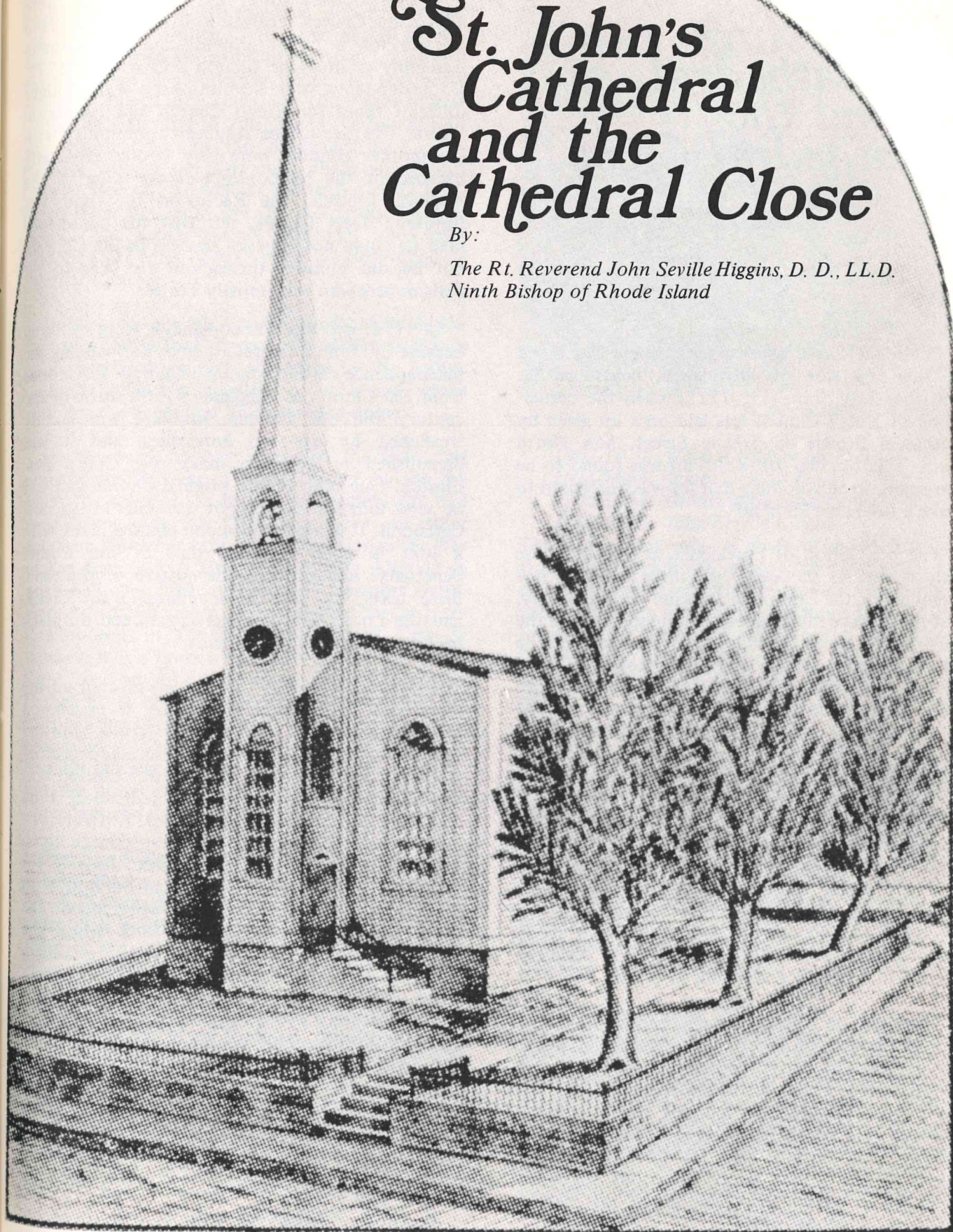




History of  
**St. John's  
Cathedral  
and the  
Cathedral Close**

By:

*The Rt. Reverend John Seville Higgins, D. D., LL.D.  
Ninth Bishop of Rhode Island*



*Exterior of Original Church*



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Cathedral Close, which now covers a city block of the east side of Providence, began on St. Barnabas Day, June 11, 1722, when the cornerstone of King's Church was laid on a lot given by Nathaniel Brown on Towne Street, now North Main. This original 70' x 40' lot was found to be too small, so an adjoining half lot was purchased to make a total area 90' x 60'.

The population of Providence at that time was only some four thousand, and there were very few members of the Church of England in the Colony. But there was dedicated leadership especially in the person of Gabriel Bernon, who was cast in the tradition of the Colony's founder, Roger Williams. Bernon, too, was a religious refugee from his native land, France, and like Roger Williams he followed the beacon of religious freedom and sailed for America. He settled in Newport in 1687 and was instrumental in the establishment of Trinity Church in 1698 and of the Old Narragansett Church in 1707. In 1698 he moved to Providence, purchased land on the former Towne Street, and built a home there. Spearheaded by Mr. Bernon, Colonel Joseph Whipple and others, funds were raised among the sparse Anglican community, and on the land donated by Nathaniel Brown across from the Bernon residence, the first Anglican Church in Providence was built in 1722.

When the modest wooden structure was completed, Bernon and his friends wrote to London to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, which had been founded in 1701 for the express purpose of supplying clergy to North America and other parts of the growing British Empire. The Society sent the Reverend George Pigot, at £65 a year salary, who thus began the long line of clergy, who have served this Church down to the present day.

In due course a tower and then a steeple were added, the Church received a gift of adjoining land to use for a burial ground, and the General Assembly granted the Church a Charter in 1772. Understandably, the Revolutionary War brought difficult times for King's Church and its parishioners. The ties of the Anglican community with the mother country were very strong, especially because of the relationship of the King to the Anglican Church. The Rector at the time, the Reverend John Graves, felt that for conscience sake he could not conduct services in the Church, but he did minister throughout the War to his parishioners who were mostly Tories.

In 1794, with the War concluded, King's Church became St. John's Church, thereby formalizing the independence of the Episcopal Church of America from the Church of England. By the turn of the century the old wooden structure was greatly weakened by age and hurricanes, and it was demolished in 1810 to make way for a new Church. One relic of the original Church can still be seen today at the top of the stairs in the new Cathedral. It is a piece of wood painted black with a text in gold, and was part of the former Sanctuary. According to the custom of the time, Bible texts, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer done in gold and on black background formed the reredos.

The new St. John's Church was erected on the same spot with plans drawn by a prominent architect of the day, John Holden Greene, many of whose buildings survive as historic landmarks including the splendid Beneficent Church on Weybosset Street. The formal dedication took place on St. Barnabas Day, June 11, 1811. The design marks a change in American church architecture from Georgian to Gothic revival, for basically the Church is a Georgian building with Gothic trim, Gothic detail and a Gothic tower. The eastern wall was removed in 1868 when the transepts and a shallow chancel were added, changing the plan from oblong to a "T" shape. In 1905 another major structural change took place with the building of the choir and sanctuary, which again changed the plan to cruciform. This addition was made possible by the generosity of Mrs. John Carter Brown in memory of her sons, John Nicholas Brown and Harold Brown. Again a major renovation of the entire structure took place in 1967 when, among other changes, ground was excavated underneath the Church for a Synod Hall.

Prominent inside the Cathedral is a plaque



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honoring Gabriel Bernon, which gives a summary biography of this remarkable man, who lived across the street and died in 1726 when nearly ninety-two. First buried in North Burial Ground, Bernon's remains were then interred under the northwest corner of the Church and finally they were moved under the high altar in 1967 when the Synod Hall was constructed. In the Baptistry is a 17th Century William and Mary chair which belonged to Gabriel Bernon, as well as a wooden cross fashioned from timber in the Old Narragansett Glebe House. The lovely marble baptismal font dates back to 1802 when it was part of the furnishings of the first Church.

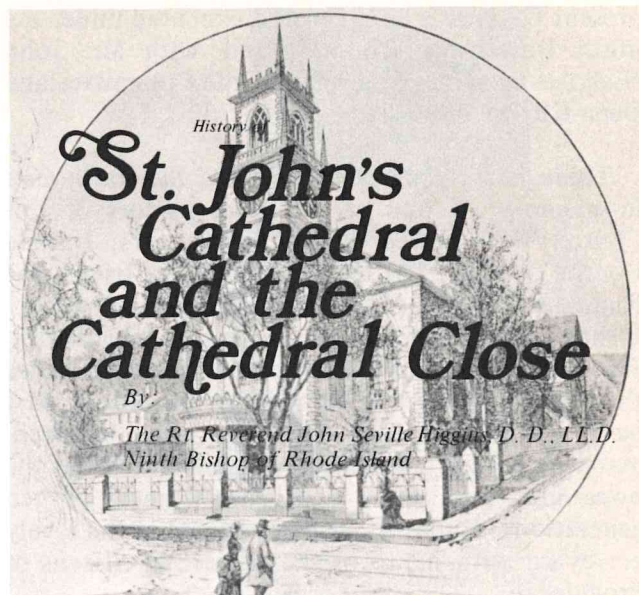
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In 1816 certain ladies of the Church donated the beautiful Waterford crystal chandelier which is now shown off to such advantage by the golden *umbrella* reflector installed in 1957 and which contains the lights that illuminate the dome.

On the north transept screen are the distinctive arms of the Diocese of Rhode Island and on the south the arms of the Bishop of London who had jurisdiction over this Church and over all other Anglican Churches in the Colonies prior to the War of the Revolution. The 18th Century Altar is an open ball claw table attributed to Newport craftsmen, which for many years was used at the Holy Communion in the Old Narragansett Church. Beneath it is a bronze replica of an ancient Saxon Cross set in a stone taken from Canterbury Cathedral. It is a reminder that Canterbury is the spiritual home of Anglicans and that its Archbishop is their father in God. The circular communion rail was added in the restoration of 1967, but the pulpit dates from the 1905 period when the Sanctuary and screen were added.

The Sanctuary is of Georgian revival style and is entered through a massive oak screen surmounted by an Agnus Dei, with an orb surmounted by a cross. Oak panelling extends around the wall and there is a carved panel from the famous English Bluecoat School (Christ's Hospital) of late 17th Century design and execution. The Déan's stall is on the right facing the altar and is surmounted by the official seal of the Cathedral. On the left is the *cathedra* or official seat of the Bishop with the seal of the Diocese of Rhode Island. The Bishops of Rhode Island from 1790 onwards are:

1790-1796 Samuel Seabury  
1798-1803 Edward Bass  
1811-1843 Alexander Viets Griswald  
1843-1852 John Prentiss Kewley Henshaw  
1854-1903 Thomas March Clark



*St. John's Cathedral 100 years ago*

1903-1910 William Nielson McVickar  
1911-1946 James DeWolf Perry  
1946-1954 Granville Gaylord Bennett  
1955-1972 John Seville Higgins

The top of the altar is made of wood from the Holy Table which was in use from 1867-1905. The pelican which surmounts the reredos, according to tradition, feeds its young with blood from its own breast and it is therefore a symbol of the Church. Interestingly, the pelican appears in many S.P.G. Churches as a symbol of the Venerable Society which did so much for our Church in Colonial days.

The Benefit Street side of the Cathedral Close comprises six Colonial houses, and the brick McVickar House given by the sister of the sixth Bishop of Rhode Island. All but one of the Colonial houses were bought between 1960-68. Known as the Edwards Fund Houses, they were renovated and redesigned inside to accommodate elderly people of limited means. Adjoining McVickar House is Hallworth House, a modern fifty-one bed Medicare facility opened in 1968.

As King's Church and then St. John's, it had been a parish church for over two hundred years, but in 1929 it became also the Cathedral of St. John and the official seat of the Bishop of Rhode Island. This move had been inaugurated by Bishop McVickar and it became a reality in 1929 under Bishop James DeWolf Perry, who also conceived a plan for the Cathedral Close in 1930. However, the depression and war years intervened with the result that those plans were abandoned, and in 1957 the



present Close was designed and executed under the ninth Bishop of Rhode Island with Mr. John Nicholas Brown as Chairman of the Committee and Dean Kite as Vice Chairman.

There is a plaque on the wall of the south aisle in memory of one of the great pastors of this Church who served it for sixty years; Nathan Bourne Crocker. The text written by his friend, the Right Reverend Mark Antony deWolf Howe, Bishop of Central Pennsylvania, is self-explanatory. The tablet symbolizes the tremendous importance the Church attaches to the work of its pastors, who have for two and a half centuries baptized, married, buried, counselled, taught and loved the boys and girls and men and women of ten generations. Some of them are buried in the lovely graveyard with many of the earliest of citizens of Providence.



One of the historic treasures of St. John's is its graveyard. In 1767 land was deeded to the church for a graveyard which remained open for burials until 1870. In it lie buried many people who influenced the history of the church and state. The Rev. Mr. Graves, the rector at the time of the Revolution, and his family are buried here. Also one of the patriots who assisted in the burning of the British warship, the Gaspee. Other priests and a Bishop of the Diocese lie at rest. In one corner slaves are buried. The names on the gravestones read like a street directory of early Providence.

The body of Gabriel Bernon, who was one of the leading men in the founding of King's Church in 1722, lies buried in the crypt of the Cathedral.

The Bible owned by the Rev. Mr. Graves before the Revolution is a treasured possession of the Cathedral. Some of the communion silver was given in 1733.

By 1829 St. John's had established St. Paul's Church, Pawtucket, and gave all its communicants on the west side of the river to establish Grace Church, Providence, presently the two largest Episcopal parishes in Rhode Island.

St. John's has held high the torch of faith through nearly two and a half centuries. In the words of the hymn:

Faith of our fathers! living still  
In spite of dungeon, fire, and sword:  
O how our hearts beat high with joy,  
When-e'er we hear that glorious word:  
Faith of our fathers, holy faith!  
We will be true to thee till death.

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