

F  
89  
P9  
H52

*A NARRATIVE*

*of*

*King's Church*

*St. John's Church*

*The Cathedral of St. John*

*1722—1972*

1.3.2000

RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Gift of

Frederick Griffiths

To

Fred R. Griffiths

Chairman of the 250th Anniversary

Committee of the

Cathedral of St. John

With the high regards and  
affectionate appreciation of  
his Friend

+ John S. Little Higgins

A NARRATIVE  
of  
King's Church  
St. John's Church  
The Cathedral of St. John  
1722—1972

By

THE RIGHT REVEREND JOHN SEVILLE HIGGINS  
D.D., LL.D.

Ninth Bishop of Rhode Island



Almost everybody knows that Roger Williams was the founding father of Providence in 1636 but fewer realize that an Anglican clergyman, the Reverend William Blackstone, established himself at 'Study Hill' in Lincoln the year before Roger arrived in Rhode Island! The Blackstone River is Blackstone's best known memorial, for although he was a priest of the Church of England, he made no attempt to build churches. Rather, he confined himself to riding around Rhode Island on his famous white bull, preaching and administering the Sacraments. He was a good friend of Roger Williams and of the Indians, and he must often have taken the six mile journey into Roger's city. The latter was a very small affair with a few houses strung between the present Canal Street by the Moshassuck River, and the steep bluffs to the east. There were only a little over a hundred dwellings in that and the surrounding area until the Indian wars, when the Indians burned most of Providence in 1676 and left standing about twenty houses.<sup>1</sup>

The town recovered slowly and in due course some of the citizens began to think about building churches. The Episcopalians had founded one in 1698 at Newport, and another in Narragansett in 1707. The rectors of both parishes came to preach occasionally in Providence. The Rev. James Honyman of Trinity, Newport, was very sanguine about the prospects of a Church at the head of the Bay for, in 1722, on one of his visits to Providence, he reported preaching in an open field "to more people than he had ever seen together before in America."<sup>2</sup>

With Mr. Honyman's encouragement a small group of men set about the founding of King's Church on Towne Street (now North Main) just east of the Moshassuck River and Roger Williams' spring. The two principal citizens in the enterprise were Gabriel Bernon, who had acquired the Roger Williams lot, called the Spring Lot in 1721 and had built a house there; and Colonel Joseph Whipple, a former tavern keeper, who in 1722 was a well known merchant in town. Gabriel Bernon deserves more than passing mention for he was one of the most remarkable men of his time. Born in 1644 in LaRochelle, France, he was a substantial merchant there. However he was a Huguenot, a Protestant, and so he was imprisoned for two years after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, at which time the Roman Catholics resumed their per-

---

1. *The Defenders of Providence* (Pamphlet) by Howard W. Preston, p.7f.

2. *History of Old Narragansett Church* by D. B. Urdike, Vol. I, p.351 ff.

secution of Protestants. Upon his release from prison he escaped to England, where he became an Anglican. He then made his way to America, and after a period in Oxford, Massachusetts, he moved to Rhode Island in 1697 where he lived in Providence, Newport and Narragansett until he died thirty-nine years later.<sup>3</sup> Bernon was a leading spirit in founding Trinity, Newport, in 1698; he took a major part in founding St. Paul's, Narragansett, in 1707; and he also played a leading role in starting King's Church, Providence, in 1722. Firm in the faith of his adopted Church, Bernon was also charitable to those of other denominations, including the Roman Catholics, whose adherents had ruined and imprisoned him. He may be justly considered as the first really ecumenical man of Rhode Island.

Colonel Joseph Whipple (1661-1746) Bernon's chief founding companion,<sup>4</sup> gave the considerable sum of £100 towards the cost of the new Church which was £770. The Rev. Dr. Honyman at Newport and the Rev. James McSparran gave £10 and £5 respectively, and the rest came from various people, among them Sir Francis Nicholson, a former Lieutenant Governor of New England (1688) and from 1720-25, Governor of South Carolina.

The original lot on which the Church was built was the gift of Nathaniel Brown of Kettle Point, Rehoboth, who began shipbuilding in Providence in 1711;<sup>5</sup> an event that marked the passing of the community from agriculture to commerce, and its consequent growth into a worldwide shipping trade. Mr. Brown's gift measured only 'forty by seaunty foote', and it became evident that it was too small even for the modest building contemplated. Thus the founding fathers paid Mr. Brown the sum of £30 for an adjacent L-shaped half lot. The plain wooden Church, measuring sixty by forty-one by twenty-six feet, was thus erected on a piece of land sixty by ninety feet. It was named King's Church.<sup>6</sup>

The next obvious move was to secure a worthy clergyman of the Church of England to be the first rector. This was easier desired than done, because the supply of such clergy came only from one source: The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts which

3. Bernon bought the original 'Spring Lot' across from the Church site in 1721, cf. Weedon, E.B. *Early Rhode Island*, pp. 21-25.

4. Other prominent men were: Nathaniel Brown, John Whipple, Joseph Abbott and Robert Currie the Town 'Sargant'.

5. Nathaniel Brown, one of the Church wardens, was put in jail at Bristol for refusing to pay for the support of the Puritan ministry there. cf. Updike, *op.cit.* Vol.I, p.360. Brown's shipbuilding yard was the first in Providence "up Canal Street nearly abreast of St. John's Church". *Reminiscences* by T. P. Noyes, p.28.

6. There is extant a floor plan of the first Church drawn before 1792 by John Chase, grandfather of Lewis J. Chase. Presented by Saval Butler Chase c.1907.

had been founded in London in 1701. This Society, popularly known as the 'S.P.G.' was the first significant overseas missionary effort of the Church of England in a century and a half. The chief purpose of the Society was to supply clergy for the American colonies, to provide them with an annual stipend, and to supply them with books. Since 1633 the Bishop of London had been given spiritual oversight for America, but it soon became obvious that only resident bishops could properly govern an Episcopal Church. Sad to say, bishops were not consecrated for America until after the Revolution, and this because of the hostility of the Puritan colonists to the idea, as well as the timidity of Church leaders in England.

The first ten rectors of King's Church were supplied by the S.P.G. and on the whole they were surprisingly good and able men. The first rector was the Rev. George Pigot who came up from Stamford, Connecticut. He was known to have directed the reading of Timothy Cutler, president of Yale, who with three others, left congregationalism for the Episcopal Church in 1722, the same year Pigot left Stamford for Providence.

The Society gave Mr. Pigot a stipend of £60 a year and he seemed happy enough in his new post, although he made this sapient observation in his report to S.P.G. January, 1723: "The inhabitants here are generally well inclined to the Church of England, but not so much out of principle as out of opposition to the Massachusetts profession . . . for these Providence people are now utterly estranged from their persuasion."<sup>7</sup> He also adds that the towns of Warwick and Greenwich want him to perform divine service for them once a month and that he is willing to do so with the honorable Society's approbation. Gabriel Bernon reports also to the Society that "Sunday last Mr. Pigot did administer the Sacrament in our Church . . . on Monday following we elected a Vestry to the satisfaction of all them that compose the Church. The same day Mr. Pigot went back to Stratford to fetch his family."

Rhode Island was a convenient spot for Mr. Pigot since he had a brother, Edward, in Warwick and had found and married his wife there while he was in Stamford. She was the granddaughter of Caleb Carr, the Quaker Governor of Rhode Island, and she built her husband a fine house on her own inherited land. It became the first manse for the Church, and, remarkably, it still stands to this day. The Pigots also gave a tract of land in Cowesett to S.P.G. on which the people of Warwick erected a Church. They used timbers from the first Trinity Church in

7. *A History of the Eastern Diocese* by Calvin R. Batchelder, Vol. II, p.272.



Newport, which had been dismantled and shipped across the Bay for them in 1726. Mr. Pigot and his successors in Providence ministered to the Warwick people until 1764, when the Church there was once again dismantled and made ready to ship to Warwick Neck for re-erection. Unhappily, it never even started on its way to the Neck for its timbers were dispersed in a severe storm. Mr. Pigot did not stay too long in Providence but moved to the Church at Marblehead, Massachusetts in 1727. When he had been there for nine years he asked the Society to move him back to Rhode Island to Cowesett which was of course familiar ground to him. The Society refused its permission but even so Mr. Pigot went to minister temporarily to the good people at Providence at their request. Tragically, the troubles of Job descended on him for when he got home, he found that three of his children had died of a 'distemper' and another died subsequently. Then the poor man broke his arm on two different occasions, all of which discouraged him so much that he eventually returned to England where he became the rector of his home town parish in Chaldon, Surrey.

The second rector, Joseph O'Hara, lasted only a few months, for while he possessed an engaging personality, he tried to get himself engaged to one of Colonel Whipple's daughters on the grounds that he was an eligible and single man. Fortunately and dramatically, Mrs. O'Hara turned up in the nick of time before any more harm could be done! Thus Mr. O'Hara has the distinction, held down to the present, of being the only rector of the Church who has been sent to jail!<sup>8</sup>

The Society did better next time in sending the Rev. Arthur Browne,<sup>9</sup> a Trinity College (Dublin) man, who was ordained by Bishop Edmund Gibson of London in 1729, and who came right out to Providence to his new Church. He received £60 a year with an extra £15 for officiating in Warwick. Rector Browne went to work diligently, the congregation grew, and in three years he had baptized fourteen adults and fifty-four infants besides having a congregation of about one hundred persons. It was in his time that His Majesty's tax collector, Nathaneal Kay<sup>10</sup> at Newport, gave the 'Queen Anne' silver, flagon and beaker. They are now among the priceless possessions of the Cathedral.

8. "1729 July 11. this day Mr. Joseph O'Hara ye Church priest at Providence was committed to Gale here for his breaking open ye Church which his people had fastened up after they had hailed him out of his pulpit on the 9th inst. for his irregularities. Boston Sunday Ledger, Sept. 14, 1902.

9. History of the Eastern Diocese by C. R. Batchelder, Vol.II, p.273 ff.

10. Kay came to R.I. as Collector of Customs in 1702. At his death he left two farms, one to Trinity, Newport, and one to St. Michael's Bristol, to support a school in each. He also left money to buy communion silver for both those Churches as well as for King's Church.

The Society provided the clergyman and stipend but the Church was supposed to furnish him with a house and land which was called a 'Glebe'. In the case of King's Church the situation was reversed. Colonel Whipple and others sold Mr. Browne eighteen acres of land and a house in 1734 for £250 lawful money in New England currency. This was on Providence Neck, just north of Cat Swamp, near the present Brown Gymnasium. This parson's house and land glebe were located purposely half way between Providence and Rehoboth. Many Anglicans who lived in Massachusetts had ties with King's Church and in this way they escaped the Massachusetts Church tax. It was in this period, 1735, that one John Taylor, an Anglican, got permission to use a room in the Colony House on King (now Meeting) Street for the operation of a school.

Apparently finances were a problem at the Church for Mr. Browne left Providence after six years for Queen's Chapel, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. As the Society put it: "the inhabitants of Providence did not pay their promised contributions towards a Missionary's stipend." In spite of this, Mr. Browne gave the parsonage and glebe back to the Church for it is recorded in 1737, he "presented the Church with a valuable lot of land, containing about eighteen acres, with a dwelling . . . houses, and other conveniences upon it."<sup>11</sup> It was said of Mr. Browne that he was "of good learning and a consistent Churchman, just and dignified, gentle and charitable, an excellent preacher and orator and a faithful parish minister." One of the last sad offices he performed as rector of King's Church, in 1736, was to officiate at the burial of Gabriel Bernon, ninety-two years of age.

The next rector, the Rev. John Checkley,<sup>12</sup> stayed for fifteen years (1739-1754). Born in Boston, he went to study at Oxford and travelled extensively in Europe. He was a collector of paintings, manuscripts, and curiosities in his earlier years, and he was well known in Boston long before he came to King's Church, for he had a book store there and had created a literary circle at his residence, "The Crown and Blue Gate". Checkley also published works in London and Boston that were quite uncomplimentary to the Puritan brethren who then reigned in the latter town. Indeed, Checkley was fined £50 in 1723, for his controversial writings and he had to find surety also for his future good behavior.

11. The Rev. Arthur Brown sold "to William Coddington, John Brown and Charles Bardiner in trust . . . eighteen acres on Providence Neck for the sum of £. 250 for the 'repairing and upholding the Church of England in Providence'. Records of Deeds, Aug. 30, 1737. cf. also Act of Incorporation Booklet 1795 p. VII.

12. History of Eastern Diocese. Vol.II,p.275 ff.

He was a notable apologist for the Church of England and its doctrine of Apostolic succession but even so the Bishop of London would not ordain him, largely for political reasons. However, Checkley persevered and finally, when he was almost sixty, he obtained orders from the Bishop of Exeter in 1739. He came immediately to Providence and there began his duties as the fourth rector of the parish. He lived at the parsonage on the glebe and besides his major responsibility in Providence, he managed also to give services to the people at Warwick, Attleboro, and Taunton. He also ministered to the Indians with whom he possessed great skill and whose language he understood. It is good to record that Mr. Checkley not only instructed and baptized Indians but he did the same for negroes. Mr. George Taylor, the schoolmaster at the Colony House, reported that he had twenty-nine scholars of whom several were negroes. Unfortunately, Mr. Checkley had a long illness of two years' duration when the services were taken by various clergy. When he died in 1734, he left a library of almost one thousand volumes and a reputation for fidelity, wit and humor. He was, indeed, always rough on the non-conformists but he did much to strengthen the Church of England in the Colonies and to show the reasons for its doctrines and liturgy. They buried him in front of the Church, but, unhappily, during the rebuilding of 1810, both his remains and his gravestone were carted away by the sexton, no man knows where.

Mr. Checkley's replacement was the Rev. John Graves, formerly vicar of Clapham in the diocese of Chester, England, and whose brother, Matthew, was rector of St. James', New London. Before Mr. Graves arrived in Providence in December 1755, the Society had requested the Vestry to 'put the Church in good and decent repair, purchase a good and decent house, with a good glebe . . . and pay their rector at least twenty pounds sterling per annum'.<sup>13</sup> A notable but sad event in Graves' ministry was the funeral he took with his brother for the redoubtable Dr. James McSparran who died in December, 1757 at the Narragansett Glebe House after a thirty-six year rectorship of St. Paul's.

It was about this time that Mr. Graves got into a dispute with his senior warden, the generous and wealthy Mr. John Merritt, who was driven to Church every Sunday in a large and imposing carriage. Apparently the argument was about the distribution of the Communion alms, and the rector's brother had to be called in to help settle the matter. However, Mr. Merritt cannot have held any long-time grudge, for shortly

13. Evidently an 18th century 'communication gap'! They had a glebe. cf. Footnote #11.

after the dispute he gave a plot of ground to the south and east of the Church and he also left a handsome amount of money to the parish when he died. This was a period when commerce was growing rapidly, when the State House on Benefit Street was built (1761), and when Rhode Island College (later Brown) moved from Warren to Providence (1770) much to the annoyance of Newport.

King's Church also entered in a period of growth at this time, for the communicant strength doubled and structural alterations to the building indicated growing interest and competence in the congregation. Between 1762 and 1771 a tower and steeple and bell were added to the west end facing Towne Street, the original south door was closed and a new entrance made in the new tower. Inside they built a gallery and shortly thereafter an organ was put in and dedicated at a special service with an appropriate sermon by the rector. Besides being a status symbol this organ was quite an innovation for those days; it also became a long-time embarrassment since the congregation took about thirty years to pay for it! On a happier note, in 1767, Colonel Whipple's son, John, gave a piece of land north and east of the Church measuring one hundred and seventy feet by one hundred and sixty feet for a burying place. As far as the congregation was concerned a further advance in corporate identity took place when the Vestry applied for and received from the Legislature an Act of Incorporation under Governor Wanton in 1772. Although this was not signed until 1792, all of the original provisions were then ratified.

By this time the revolutionary storm clouds were gathering and it is not surprising that Mr. Graves regarded himself in honor bound by his solemn ordination vows. He could not therefore with a good conscience omit the prayers for the King, the High Court of Parliament, and the success for his Majesty's arms during Church services. Since this point of view was understandably not popular at the time, Mr. Graves withdrew from public duties in the Church after July 1776. The edifice was closed until 1785, but the rector did continue to minister faithfully to his people, baptizing, marrying, and burying them throughout the whole period of the War. He also occupied the parsonage until 1781, when he was asked to leave and to turn over the books and other effects. To his credit, Mr. Graves offered to 'come back' after the War but his proffered olive branch was refused by the Vestry on the grounds that 'for various reasons the offer cannot be complied with'. Understandably the whole issue had so bitterly divided people during the Revolution that a reconciliation with a British-minded Loyalist was difficult, if not impossible. It is surprising, indeed, that there was anything left of the Church of



England in the Colonies after the War! Graves died in November 1785, and the Rev. Moses Badger, destined to be his successor once removed, preached and conducted the funeral and interment in the Church Yard. Said the local paper of Mr. Graves: 'He was a gentleman of exalted and unaffected piety in life and conversation truly exemplary and in the cause of Christianity remarkably zealous. His funeral was yesterday attended by a large and respectable concourse of people when a sermon suitable to the occasion was preached by the Rev. Mr. Badger after which his remains were interred'.

Thomas Fitch Oliver<sup>14</sup> embraces the three and one-half period 1782-1786. Bishop Seabury, the first American Bishop, had just returned from his consecration at Aberdeen when he ordained Oliver in 1785. During this rector's short but popular tenure, a chancel was built, but the few people who were left in the congregation after the upheaval of the War simply could not support him and so he moved to Marblehead with the best wishes of the Vestry for his "health, worldly peace, and future eternal felicity." What more could one ask for?

Fortunately, the next rector, the Rev. Moses Badger,<sup>15</sup> stayed for seven years (1785-1792) which was long enough to stabilize the congregation and to witness the organization of the Episcopal Churches of Rhode Island into a Diocese. Badger was born in Haverhill, Massachusetts, in 1745. He went to Harvard and was ordained in England, and had his Massachusetts property confiscated in 1776 for suspected disloyalty to the Colonial cause. He arrived in Providence in 1785 and had the joy of welcoming Bishop Seabury to King's Church for a Confirmation and preaching service in April of the following year. It was at this time that King's Church decided to dispose of the glebe and parsonage<sup>16</sup> and to pay off the long-standing organ debt also. Significantly, the first Convention of the Diocese was held in Newport in 1790, with Mr. Badger elected as President. His was a good, sound ministry wherein the Church took heart again and managed to recover some of the ravages of the war years. Still, his incumbency ends on a rather sad note for his wife died in 1790, the year before his own demise. Right after Mr. Badger's funeral they sold his library at public auction and there was a notice in the paper asking persons who might have borrowed books to please return the same so that they could be sold. He is buried in the Church Yard.

14. History of the Eastern Diocese. Vol.II, p.290 ff.

15. Op.cit. II, p.291 ff.

16. Land was bought for another parsonage on Benefit and Meeting Streets next to the first public school.

Bishop Seabury said of the next rector, the Rev. Abraham L. Clarke, (1793-1800) 'He is not only a gentleman of good character and understanding, but also of easy and polite manners and of diligence in his profession.' The salary had now gone up to £ 150 per annum and when the Convention of the Diocese met for the first time in King's Church in 1793, Bishop Seabury presided and the Rev. John Usher of Bristol was ordained during the proceedings. Clarke was a man of parts and he was elected President of the Diocesan Convention three times in 1794, '98 and '99. He also made a proposal to start a singing school in order to train youth in the music of the Church. Although it was not adopted the circumstance testifies to the rector's wide-ranging interests.

The changed political situation made it necessary to change the name of the Church, for 'King's Church' was now an anachronism and an annoyance. In 1794 the Legislature granted a new Charter for "The Minister, Church Wardens, Vestry and Congregation of St. John's Church in Providence." This was the property holding corporation. Then, with that love for complicating things so dear to the human intellect, the Vestry obtained another Charter for fund raising entitled "The United Society of St. John's Church." Fortunately simpler counsels prevailed by 1812 when the two corporations were legally merged.

When Bishop Seabury died in 1796, the diocese with its four Churches was still a long way from having its own bishop. Accordingly Mr. Clarke was one of a committee to ask the Rt. Rev. Edward Bass of Massachusetts if he would take Rhode Island under his episcopal wing. Generously Bishop Bass consented and he served as bishop of both dioceses from 1798 until his death in 1803.

The post Colonial period ends with the ninth and tenth rectors of the Church whose tenures were both short ones. The Rev. Nathaniel Bowen (1801) whose father had been a Harvard colleague of Checkley, was ordained by Bishop Bass in 1800, and he came to St. John's the following year. He was ordained priest in 1801, and became rector but left soon afterwards to be assistant at St. Michael's, Charleston, South Carolina. He became Bishop of South Carolina in 1818. It was in Bowen's short rectorate that Miss Ann Allen gave the Font which still graces the baptistry. The Rev. John Blackburne lasted only a year, from April 1806 to March 1807, for he was apparently of a quarrelsome disposition especially over matters of authority and salary.



## THE NEW CHURCH IN THE NEW CENTURY

The nineteenth century opened for St. John's as it did for the rest of the country with a time of mourning for its first President who had died 14 December 1799. Since Washington was both an Anglican and a Mason, Rector Abraham Clark preached a special memorial sermon at a Masonic observance held at St. John's on 22 February, 1800. As an honorarium he was given the cloth used in the Church for mourning drapery with which to fit himself out with a suit of clothes.

Those first few years of the century were uncertain ones for the Church but after that time and with only a four-year gap, St. John's was blessed for almost a hundred years with really great pastoral leadership in the persons of Nathan Bourne Crocker (1803-1865) and Charles A. L. Richards (1869-1901). When the former pastor began his ministry in Providence, St. John's was a small and struggling parish in a little frame church. When the latter ended his ministry at the turn of the century, St. John's was one of the really notable parishes on the Eastern seaboard.

Crocker had wanted to be a doctor and at first had no intention of seeking Holy Orders, but he made such an impression on the congregation when he conducted services that the Vestry called him to be their rector even though he was still a layman. Bishop Bass had died that same year, 1803, and the diocese set about looking for another bishop to take care of them since they could not afford a bishop for themselves. After some failures they turned to New York, and Crocker was one of a committee to inform Bishop Benjamin Moore of New York of his election to Rhode Island in 1806 and to solicit earnestly his acceptance of the same. The good Bishop very courteously declined the honor lest he "continually live under the painful consciousness of undertaking a task that could not be performed." So it was that Rhode Island had no further episcopal supervision from 1803 to 1811 when the Eastern Diocese was formed under Bishop Griswold.

Mr. Crocker proceeded to ordination in due course and from all accounts he 'had everything' with which to become a successful rector in the best sense of that word. A contemporary description of him reads: 'Of a distinguished presence, grave and courteous manners, positive convictions and decisive action, and a fluent writer, a zealous and earnest preacher, an admirable reader, a moderate and conservative low church-

man'!<sup>17</sup> He had 'everything' those first few years except the experience of conversion to Christ, but even that was added in 1815. From that time onward he possessed a passion for souls so different from his former life-style, which more nearly approximated the faithful but unenthusiastic and often non-contagious ministry of his predecessors. Quite fittingly and early in his ministry, the new St. John's came to be built. It was, indeed, a favorable moment for expansion because commerce was developing and the United States had become the neutral ocean carrier for Europe during the period from the French Revolution to the Battle of Waterloo. All of these events helped the Port of Providence to develop considerably, which it did at the expense of Newport.

Since the average life-span was considerably shorter in those days, it is not likely that there was anyone alive in Providence in 1810 who could remember eighty-eight years back when King's Church was built. From the sketch we possess the wooden Church was unimpressive architecturally and it had been weakened structurally by hurricanes and age. Nevertheless, it must have been dear to its people who doubtless mourned its passing and grumbled a little at its demolition to make way for the new structure.

The Vestry and others cautiously decided it was "deemed expedient to erect a new Church where the present one stands of larger dimensions, if sufficient encouragement should be offered." Since sufficient encouragement was offered they retained a well-known builder, John Holden Greene,<sup>18</sup> and appointed a committee with Moses Lippitt as chairman and George Olney as agent. They all went deliberately and enthusiastically to work on what was after all a very considerable enterprise. Although the clerk recorded in an acidulous postscript to the Vestry meeting of 10 April, 1810 "At this meeting much was said but nothing done,"<sup>19</sup> this must have been exceptional. We find them ordering Smithfield stone for the foundation, deciding what distance the tower front should be from the street (30 feet); determining what size glass panes were to be used for the windows (11 x 16 inches); and considering a hundred and one other matters important and trivial that concerned the

17. The One Hundred and Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of St. John's by C. A. L. Richards. 13 June 1897, p.15ff.

18. John Holden Greene bought the old Church for \$240 in April 1810. The congregation worshipped in the Towne House during the building. Greene is described as a 'carpenter' in the contemporary records. He had no architectural training, and in fact there were no professional architects at that time nearer than Boston. Greene lived in Providence 1800-1850. He designed most of the public buildings and many of the houses in that era. He combined Gothic detail with Classic motives with originality and vigor. St. John's was his first public building. A few years later he designed Beneficent Church, and he also did the Sullivan Dorr House and the Truman Beckwith House on Benefit Street.

19. Records of the Committee appointed to Superintend the erection of St. John's Church, Providence 1810. The new structure cost \$25,266.71.

building of the new Church. Much to their dismay they discovered after the foundation was well and truly laid that they had built on neighbor James Burr's land! Happily, the owner was mollified and re-imbursed and the building project proceeded.

The west side of Towne Street was then an open field and boats came up the Moshassuck River to unload their cargoes of stone and lumber with which to build the Church. Smithfield and Connecticut stone, beams, boards, mouldings and shingles were piled high on the river bank. There were times to be sure when a particularly high tide floated some of the lumber down river again and various people were paid to retrieve it. There was also the perennial problem of incipient vandalism when one "Mr. Thomas was paid for attending at the Church yesterday Sunday, to prevent the boys from injuring the windows, etc."

In spite of such hindrances, the corner stone was duly laid at the north east corner by the rector on 5 June 1810; and from then onwards the work must have proceeded rapidly directed by "Master Builders Smith and Asa Bosworth, stone-layers, and John Holden Greene, carpenter!" Also some time before 29 May that year one Chauncey Cooley cut the date '1723 and G. B.' on a stone taken from the old foundation. It can still be seen on the wall near the south west corner of the south transept, a reminder both of the first Church and of Gabriel Bernon.

The long-awaited dedication day arrived and on the Feast of St. Barnabas, 1811, there was a great procession from the Market House up Towne Street to St. John's; there was music by the "Psallonian Society" whatever that was; and the new Church was solemnly dedicated by Alexander Viets Griswold, Bishop of the Eastern Diocese,<sup>20</sup> who also preached and celebrated the Holy Communion on that occasion. The congregation found themselves worshipping in novel surroundings: a stone Church eighty-two by sixty-seven feet and thirty feet high with a sixty-two foot dome. Additions were a shallow chancel of twenty-eight by sixteen feet and a massive tower fronting Towne Street. The architectural style was Georgian but Georgian with Gothic detail; which made the building one of the earliest and one of the finest examples of 'Strawberry Hill Gothic'.<sup>21</sup> The Church is basically a sober Georgian structure but it has a Gothic tower and Gothic trim and detail, which latter is especially marked in the fascinatingly exuberant narthex. The

20. This comprised all of New England except Connecticut. The vestry minutes for 1838 contemplate withdrawing from the arrangement. By 1843 they show a desire for their own Bishop. In the same year they feel that St. John's is a suitable place for consecration ceremonies.

21. So named after the villa near Twickenham on the Thames which Horace Walpole converted to a small Gothic castle. Cf. *Early Homes of Rhode Island* by Antoinette T. Downing.

congregation, however, must have been re-assured that all was well for the solid three-decker pulpit was put in the same location as in the former Church, — at the head of the aisle!

The young rector proved to be an innovator and actually had a service on Christmas Eve of 1815, the first of its kind in town. It was a 'happening' that caused 'the streets leading to the Church to be alive with people for two hours before the service wending their way to the novel and strange sight of St. John's opened after night for Divine worship.'<sup>22</sup> Probably it was the evening services, which soon became popular, that revealed the need for more lighting, because in 1816 certain ladies of the congregation commissioned one Major J. B. Wood to procure a chandelier for the dome. The Major procured a beautiful Waterford glass fixture and the ladies promptly thanked him 'for his exertion' in getting it.<sup>23</sup> Since it cost less than five hundred dollars, the Major well deserved their thanks, and ours. Today it remains one of the loveliest features of the building and a treasure of the Church.

Then there was the matter of the bell, which they had saved from the first Church and installed in the new tower. It was judged too small and its notes too feeble in its more majestic situation, and therefore a new and larger bell was ordered in 1811 from one George Holbrook of Brookfield, Massachusetts. He modestly promised the Vestry to supply a bell that "would be the best in America." Difficulty arose because the War of 1812 was on with a consequent scarcity of copper and tin with which to make the bell, but finally one was cast and hung. Sadly this was not satisfactory and so the Vestry asked Paul Revere and Son of Boston to have another try in 1817, which they did. Then this one cracked in spite of the maker's name, and it was replaced by one made by the above-mentioned Mr. Holbrook. The latter's work, an amalgam of Holbrook and Revere bell metal still hangs in the tower. It has been rung on many historic occasions, among them on that day in June in 1845, when a citizens committee asked that it be 'toll'd for the space of one hour' in mourning for the death of Andrew Jackson! To finish off the tower and improve its usefulness, a clock was added in 1850.

As we have seen, a schoolmaster and a school were part of the Church's regular responsibility in Colonial days, but during the nine-

22. Memorial to Dr. N. B. Crocker, p.48.

23. Notebook 'A'. \$584 paid for chandelier and other conveniences for evening services in the Church . . . and for the taste by him displayed in the selection of the same" (i.e., the chandelier). The chandelier was taken down during the alterations of 1867, stored until 1874, and re-hung for Christmas services that year at the urgent request of parishioners. It was electrified in 1911, but fortunately it was properly restored soon after.



teenth century the Sunday School movement began to take hold in America.<sup>24</sup> It was destined to grow and to be a major instrument for the Christian instruction and education of children until recent times. A few enthusiastic ladies of the Church started a Sunday School for St. John's in rented rooms. It proved so successful that the Vestry put up a small wooden building back of the Church in 1827 both for the use of the School and for the monthly lectures that were a feature of Church life in that era. The wooden structure was replaced by an Upjohn stone Chapel in 1855, and this was lengthened ten years later to make the superbly proportioned building which still stands, east of the Church.

The nineteenth century has been properly termed the 'Great Century' in the worldwide expansion of Christianity, and it is good to record that St. John's Church bore its share in the missionary task. Indeed, the attitude of the congregation was surprisingly well balanced, for they not only interested themselves in the expected way towards the 'romance' of overseas missions in Africa and China. They also concerned themselves with the domestic mission field in the middle and far west, and just as importantly in the work to be done within the State and in Providence. St. Paul's, North Providence, (now Pawtucket) was founded in 1816 by the people of St. John's and it was the first Church in the Diocese to be added to the original four Colonial foundations.<sup>25</sup> Grace Church made a sixth in 1829 and it likewise was an outgrowth of St. John's in the now expanding area across Weybosset Bridge. Indeed, this was a time of marked growth for the entire Episcopal Church; and the expansion was greatly helped by the founding of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society for the whole Church in 1821. Fourteen years later General Convention declared that all baptized members of the Church were members of the Missionary Society, a policy which gave a new impetus and new vision to all Church people from 1835 onwards.

During these years the Rector, Dr. Crocker, became an increasingly significant figure in the community. He served as a member of the School Committee of the City Council, as a Fellow of Brown University from 1808 onwards, and for fifteen years as Secretary of the College Corporation. On the national Church scene he was a member of the Board of Missions, and a delegate to no less than nineteen General Conventions, which latter must be something of an all-time record. Dr. Crocker had also been elected Bishop of the Diocese by the clergy at

24. Robert Raikes began one in Gloucester, England, and the idea spread rapidly to America and elsewhere.

25. Trinity, Newport. 1698; St. Paul's Narragansett, 1707; King's Church, Providence 1722. St. Michael's, Bristol (then in Mass.) 1790.

the Convention of 1854, but the laity declined to concur. As a result, Thomas March Clark was elected at a subsequent Convention in that same year.

The Rev. Richard B. Duane, who succeeded Dr. Crocker in 1865, had a short but significant four-year term of office during the difficult Civil War period, when wooden boxes were used to take up the collection of the paper currency that largely replaced coins in that era. A new rectory, which is still standing, was built on Benefit and North Court<sup>26</sup> Streets, and transepts were added to the Church which changed its original oblong shape to that of a 'T'.<sup>27</sup> The pews in the transepts faced north and south and there was a shallow chancel and curved communion rail.

Then began the second long rectorship of the century in the person of Charles A. L. Richards (1869-1901) under whom the congregation continued to grow and to greatly increase its interest in and service to the neighborhood. St. John's Lodging House began at 14 Star Street in 1874<sup>28</sup> for the purpose of accommodating 'poor persons travelling through the city in search of work or friends'. Some two thousand people annually, mostly women and children, availed themselves of this prototype 'Salvation Army and Travellers' Aid' and it was reported that 'the privilege of free bathing has been much appreciated'. The sexton of the Church who was also the keeper of the House reported that the assistance of the police was required only twice during the first year of operation which is a credit to all concerned! This work was undertaken by St. John's Guild, which represented the working groups of the parish. Divided into several departments it directed many activities of the Church. They sponsored among other things a neighborhood kindergarten in 1886 wherein were children from four to seven and where it is recorded that 'fifteen were black, thirteen Jewish, one Russian, one English and one American'. The neighborhood around the Church was obviously very mixed racially and just as obviously the Church was trying to respond to neighborhood needs. There were classes in sewing and handwork because 'girls, early placed in mills or shops, without adequate instruction in childhood, graduate into wives and mothers, and it is then too late to begin to learn what they sorely need'.<sup>29</sup> It was abundantly true, as Dr. Richards remarked in an address he made

26. It still stands, overly large one would think, for a rectory at any period.

27. Robert Hale Ives was a major contributor to this enterprise. The architect was Clifton A. Hall of Providence. It cost \$13,643.

28. The Diocese bought and demolished this house in 1964.

29. A sermon preached on behalf of St. John's Guild, 1887, p.9.

towards the end of the century, that "the Church may have been once socially more influential, financially more able than it is now; but I know no period in its long history when it was doing more truly its Master's work, no period when it was more a social bond between all sorts and conditions of men, no period when more of its people were busy in loving their neighbor, and doing him good as they find opportunity."<sup>30</sup>

Some further changes were made in the Church building during the last decade of the century, one of which was the electrifying of the cut glass chandelier in 1892. Fortunately, this lust for modernizing was short-lived and the candles came back into their own before long. More importantly the wing galleries were removed in 1899 and a larger and more convenient vestibule erected with two stairways leading up into the Church. It was during this same period that the organ received a long-overdue overhaul, and when a generous donor added a new organ in the north transept. Both organs were tied into a single console.

As early as 1889 the rector had been pressing for an adequate parish house which could house the several departments of St. John's Guild, which represented the working groups of the parish. Dr. Richards pointed out that such a building 'would give a visible token that St. John's recognizes its responsibility as a working parish among the poor, neglected and outcast'.<sup>31</sup> Three especially generous donors got the project off to flying start with the result that in 1893 a building was erected and dedicated by Bishop Clark. It was built on the Crawford lot north of the Church and it had coffee, reading and various work rooms, an employment bureau and a gymnasium. At a cost of \$35,000 the parish house became a beehive of activities that focused on the needs of the poor. It was also the first parish house in the city. Similar programs have continued until recent times, for in 1911 as many as ten thousand men, women and children made use of the parish house in that year. Also in 1911 the Federation of Churches assigned a 'responsibility District' to St. John's which consisted of its immediate and very racially mixed neighborhood: thirty per cent Jews, ten per cent Roman Catholics and the rest Protestants, Poles and Armenians.<sup>32</sup> A similar pattern of neighborhood work continued in which Miss Sarah A. Potter was a leading figure. This work kept going during the first four decades of the twentieth century, in spite of restricted funds and periods of depression.

30. The One Hundred and Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of St. John's by C. A. L. Richards, p.27.

31. Notebook 'A', p.48.

32. An appeal for further Endowment 1911, p.11.

Dr. Richards had been obliged to retire in 1902 after a most distinguished and long-time incumbency. He was a master of the English language, a notable preacher and citizen, and a man greatly beloved by all. Under his leadership the Church had grown tremendously in depth and outreach although there was much 'unfinished business' such as inadequate endowments and reliance on rented pews as a primary means of church income. The issue of rented pews was a burning issue until recent times, for pews were owned by persons who had either inherited them or paid money for them and who also paid a rent every year for them to support the Church. It took a bold spirit to challenge the whole idea of pew rents and the owning of pews in those days and to maintain that all pews should be free and that anybody could sit in them on a 'first come, first served' basis. Dr. Richards waged a long battle on this issue, but by the end of his rectorate victory was clearly in sight, and there emerged a new way of financing Church activities, through regular annual pledging by the Church members.



## THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND THE CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN (1902-1972)

Dr. Leicester Bradner's relatively short twelve year rectorship (1902-1914) was marked by great attention to the Sunday School and Christian education generally, together with another extension of the Church's floor plan which took the form of a new chancel. Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson, the 'in' ecclesiastical architects of that period were retained and one Berkeley Updike acted as advisor in the project. Fortunately, he did not wish to have 'a chancel that derives its inspiration from late Gothic work and the Oxford revival . . . in a Church built about 1800.'<sup>33</sup> The picture of the 1868 chancel with its Gothic additions and detail illustrates clearly what Mr. Updike was anxious to avoid! The new chancel, made possible by a major gift in 1904, was a considerable enterprise which involved excavating the rising land to the east and the relocation of a number of graves. The oak-panelled chancel in the Georgian mode contained choir stalls, organ console, reredos with a carved pelican and a massive oak screen with columns and central broken pediment. Outside the screen was a new pulpit similar in construction to the former one. An interesting feature in the chancel is a carved panel over the credence table which came from a famous English public school, Christ's Hospital, the original building of which still stands in London. The gift of a bishop's throne and other seats together with a communion rail completed the sanctuary while other donors enabled the end of the south transept to be finished as a chantry. Bishop W. N. McVickar dedicated these important additions to the Church in May 1905. The interior remained substantially the same from 1905 for more than sixty years, although twenty-five years after the sanctuary was finished St. John's changed its status from that of a parish Church to the Cathedral of the Diocese.

When the Anglican Church began its rapid overseas expansion in the nineteenth century most of the several hundred dioceses formed during that time had some sort of Cathedral or Bishop's Church. For various reasons the Cathedral idea was slow of adoption for American Episcopalians after the Revolution, so it is not surprising that Bishop McVickar, the sixth diocesan, (1903-1910) was the first to express the need for a Cathedral. Many historical circumstances militated against

33. The One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Laying of the Cornerstone of St. John's. 11 June 1960.

the idea: there were only four Churches in Rhode Island until 1816, the Congregational influence was strong, and until the last quarter of the nineteenth century the Bishops of Rhode Island either had other dioceses to look after or else they had additional responsibilities as rector of Grace or All Saints', Providence.

When Bishop McVickar raised the Cathedral question in 1907 these negative factors were no longer determinative. Accordingly, a Cathedral Corporation was formed in 1909 but it was not until twenty years later, in the episcopate of James de Wolf Perry, that St. John's finally became the Cathedral of the Diocese with the Bishop as its rector.<sup>34</sup> In that year, 1929, the Church conveyed its real estate and endowment of more than \$340,000. to the Cathedral Corporation.<sup>35</sup> In keeping with the sturdy spirit of independence common to New England and perhaps to humanity in general, one lone priest, the Rev. Alva E. Carpenter, voted against the whole pernicious idea!

During World War I Bishop Perry had been overseas with the Red Cross, and he also served as Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church from 1930-1937. This meant that he was away from the Diocese for considerable periods; and these facts, together with the Great Depression of 1929 onwards precluded any successful development of a Cathedral plan. Nevertheless, it had been obvious for some time that the Diocese needed a carefully thought out scheme for the Cathedral and the adjacent area, one that would envision a diocesan office and other facilities. Over the years the Diocesan headquarters had moved from place to place somewhat like royal courts in medieval days. It is recorded that "the quest and selection of permanent headquarters continued through twenty-four years of successive experiments, enforced moves and dis-appointments".<sup>36</sup> Alternate plans were indeed drawn up in 1931 for a Cathedral Close with appropriate related buildings. One of them enclosed the present historic block only, while the other more ambitious scheme envisioned using the other block to the south as well. Since both plans contemplated the demolition of most of the Colonial houses in the area, it is perhaps fortunate that the hands of the planners were stayed for a season. In the Bernon Square project of 1942, the Diocese gave its land opposite the Cathedral to the City, and this together with the Roger Williams Spring area formed the first land for the present Park. Unfortunately, the two decades from 1930 onwards saw the

34. Since the founding of The Cathedral Corporation, the Bishops of the Diocese have been rectors of the Cathedral. Bishop Perry 1929-46, Bishop Bennett 1946-55, Bishop Higgins 1956-72.

35. St. John's Record. Nov. 1946.

36. Op. cit. Nov. 1946.

steady deterioration of the whole area and it was not until the College Hill plan came into being in 1956 that the trend began to reverse itself.

During the trying period from 1915 to 1948 the parish continued its ministry to the neighborhood, largely under the inspiration of Deaconess Frances Semle, who at the time of her death in 1948 had given more than thirty-five years to Christian social services from the Cathedral.

Dean Brooks (1950-1955) addressed himself to the general deterioration of the Cathedral buildings and during his regime the tower was given a major overhaul. Dean Betts, his successor, not only took part in plans for College Hill but he also was able to effect a modest but important restoration of the Cathedral itself; the most striking change being the 'Strawberry Hill' Gothic inverted gold-leafed 'umbrella' for flood-lighting the dome. Gilded rosettes replaced the unsightly circle of electric bulb sockets installed for lighting the dome in the previous century.

The next major development was bringing together the Diocesan Headquarters and the Cathedral, and the development of the entire square. Within a few days of becoming diocesan, Bishop John Seville Higgins announced in January 1955 his intention to move the Diocesan office from 'Crooker House' (101 Benefit Street) to the Cathedral and to develop an overall plan for the area. Over the next few years two houses north of the Cathedral were bought and demolished, two houses on the east side of Benefit Street were sold, and six Colonial houses were purchased on the west side of Benefit Street between Church and Star Streets. These latter were restored and remodelled and made into apartments for elderly people of limited means under the Edwards Fund. The cemetery walls, which were badly deteriorated, were all restored, a Cathedral House was built in 1964 and four years later Hallworth House, a fifty-one bed Medicare facility, was erected. McVickar House<sup>37</sup> which had been successively a Diocesan House and a home for aged clergy, was connected with the new medical facility. The years 1966 and 1967 were occupied with the demolition of the 1893 parish house which had done such yeoman service, to make way for the modern office building that connects Cathedral House to the Church. This same period witnessed a major renovation and restoration of the Cathedral itself, the most extensive it had undergone since its erection in 1811.

37. McVickar House was given to the Diocese in 1910 by Miss Eweretta Constable McVickar, sister of the Bishop. The house was built between 1833 and 1835 by John Slater, II. A third story was added in 1901, and a wing sometime later. For some years the house was used by the Church Army and afterwards for elderly clergy and widows. In 1967 the wing and the third story were removed and the structure tied in to Hallworth House.

A Synod Hall was excavated under the Church, and a columbarium space provided for the future. The bones of Gabriel Bernon were re-entombed under the high altar surrounded by the remains of other early members whose graves were disturbed by the excavation on the north side. A new floor and new pews were built, but the latter retain the original doors and their original mahogany rails. An antique communion table occupies the center of the crossing surrounded by a circular communion rail. This arrangement both ties the Church together architecturally and it also enables the celebrant at Holy Communion and the congregation to worship together more meaningfully. At the same time the choir pews were removed from the choir to the organ loft and a marble floor was installed in the former choir. The pulpit was moved out from the screen to be closer to the congregation. In addition the baptistery was moved back to the Bishop Perry memorial area in the north transept. Extensive work was done on the foundation, the woodwork, the walls and roof, so that when the Presiding Bishop, the Most Reverend John E. Hines, re-dedicated the restored Cathedral on St. Barnabas' Day, 1967, it was the climax of a dream of sixty years. There are also current plans for completing the Columbarium while the Chapel is now a Diocesan library and muniment room. The latter project was completed in 1972 and was dedicated in May of that year.

The Cathedral is not merely an historic building, but it is also the very heart and center of the Diocese, the spiritual hub from which radiate the prayers and plans of the Bishop, clergy and people. Here Bishops are elected, and clergy ordained. Here notable civic and religious events are held, as well as the annual Diocesan Convention. More than this the Dean, as the Bishop's vicar, must of necessity be a significant person in the community, serving on a variety of civic as well as religious boards. Each one of the successive Deans: Roebuck, Brooks, Betts, and Stenning has given of his particular gifts, but it is to Dean Kite, who was either Archdeacon or Dean during the strenuous sixties, and to the Bishop's Warden, Mr. John Nicholas Brown, to whom the Church owes its major gratitude for the development of Cathedral Close.

The congregation of St. John's has grown over the recent years and it received major impetus on an autumn day in 1959 when the black members of the Church of the Saviour marched down Constitution Hill from their Church and were greeted by the white members of the Cathedral parish. One white and one black marched into the Church



service together. More recently St. Thomas' Church, Providence, merged with the Cathedral congregation thus adding numerically and spiritually to the strength of the Mother Church of the Diocese.

A quarter of a millenium is a long time, humanly speaking, and it comprises one eighth of the life of the Christian Church. It is no mean achievement for 'King's — St. John's' to have stayed in one place for two and a half centuries preaching the same Gospel, administering the same Sacraments, worshipping the same Lord, and ministering in His Name to the poor, the friendless, and the needy.

+ John Seville Higgins

## BISHOPS OF THE DIOCESE OF RHODE ISLAND

The Right Reverend Samuel Seabury

1790-1796

The Right Reverend Edward Bass

1798-1803

The Right Reverend Alexander Viets Griswold

1811-1843

The Right Reverend John Prentiss Kewley Henshaw

1843-1852

The Right Reverend Thomas March Clark

1854-1903

The Right Reverend William Neilson McVickar

1903-1910

The Right Reverend James DeWolf Perry

1911-1946

The Right Reverend Granville Gaylord Bennett

1946-1954

The Right Reverend John Seville Higgins

1955-1972

The Right Reverend Frederick Hesley Belden

1972-