

Planting the Church of England in Pennsylvania

From its Quaker inception, Pennsylvania has welcomed all religions and favored none. Unlike Virginia and the South, where allegiance to the Church of England was the norm, and New England, which was predominantly Puritan, Pennsylvania and the other "middle colonies" encouraged a diversity of religious practice. The implications of this diversity were clear: Anglican churches could be planted and thrive in Pennsylvania, but they would represent but one of many faith traditions.

This became apparent to The Rev. Thomas Bray in 1696, when he was appointed Commissary for the Maryland colony. Bray recognized that there were some members of the Church of England in each town, but their numbers were not sufficient to attract and support the services of a resident clergyman. When he returned to London, Bray convinced the Archbishop of Canterbury that the soil of Pennsylvania and her neighbors might also be nourishing to the Church of England. It was through these efforts that the London Society, more commonly known as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), was chartered in 1701.

To make a preliminary survey of the field, the Society sent the Reverend George Keith to the colonies. He reported that the only Church of England clergy present in Pennsylvania were in Philadelphia. As a result, the SPG sent the Reverend Robert Weyman to Pennsylvania in 1719. He ministered to a wide area, which came to include the earliest missionary activity in what was to become two centuries later, the Diocese of Central Pennsylvania.

In a letter to the Society dated October 1, 1726, he states that he often traveled to present day Churchtown, Lancaster County, and preached there to a congregation of Welsh settlers who had first formed a congregation in 1722. The homes of the settlers being too small to accommodate the congregation, services were held in the open under the shade of the trees. This became the common setting for much of the early ministry of the Church of England in Pennsylvania.

Two years later, in 1728, the Rev. Jonas Lidman, the Swedish Lutheran pastor of Wicacoa Church (later known as Gloria Dei) preached on two consecutive days, August 28 and 29 "to our congregation here at Conestogue."

In the next years the Rev. Griffith Hughes made visits to the congregation and a first church building was completed in 1734. This log church was built on the south side of Highway 23, nearly opposite the present church building. In 1738 the road was relocated, leaving the church on the south side of the road and its graveyard on the north.

They named the church "Bangor" in honor of the Bangor Cathedral, the cathedral church of the Welsh Diocese of Bangor. Bangor Church thereby became the earliest established church in the present Diocese of Central Pennsylvania. Records indicate that a bible in the Welsh language was used for services. In 1734, the village, which grew around the church, also began to be called, "Bangor Church Town."

Weyman and Hughes were in turn followed by the SPG missionary, the Rev. William Lindsey. And in 1744, the Society sent the Reverend Richard Locke to Lancaster. There on October 3, he organized the congregation that would become St James Church. In these early years this second Anglican congregation worshiped in the Lancaster Courthouse, a common practice in the new settlement towns, which began to spring up along the frontier. During his stay in Lancaster, Mr. Locke also ministered to the congregation at Bangor Church, and he sometimes visited families as far away as York. In 1745, he founded Christ Church, Huntington in northern York County, the first church planted across the wide Susquehanna River.

The fledgling Bangor congregation served a rural community of farmers. In response to their ties to the land and animal husbandry, the first Rogation Service was held by the congregation in 1750. That tradition has continued for over 260 years with outdoor services in the spring during which the congregation walks the “bounds” of the property and asks a blessing upon the animals and seeds of the farming community

Desiring to erect a more gracious and substantial stone building, the congregation began in 1754 to receive subscriptions from members and eventually fifty families contributed. A small stone church replaced the log building in Churchtown in 1756.

The French and Indian War had begun in 1754 and following the defeat of British forces in western Pennsylvania, under the command of Gen. Edward Braddock, peace on the Pennsylvania frontier collapsed as bloody Indian raids pushed settlers back across the Susquehanna and into Lancaster County. The Rev. Thomas Barton, Rector of St. James, Lancaster who also made visits to Bangor Church on some Sundays, reported to the convention of clergy in Philadelphia on May 2, 1760, “About twenty miles from Lancaster in Caernarvon is a thick settlement of Welsh belonging to this mission and they are sincere members of the Church of England. They have built a church of hewn stone and are now finished the inside of it. They have given it the name of ‘Bangor’ from their native diocese in Wales. A good glebe belongs to the church and the provision made for a minister is as good as can be expected.”

The Indian Wars and then two decades later, the Revolutionary War, represent watershed decades in the emergence of the new country and the people of rural Caernarvon Township. Clergy and members of the Church of England in the colonies were often divided in their loyalties, many supportive of the King (“Loyalists”) and many more “Patriots” who favored independence from Great Britain. The Rev. Thomas Barton espoused loyalty to the crown, leaving his post in Lancaster on Sunday, June 23, 1776. The following Sunday he officiated either at Bangor Church or in St. John’s Church in nearby Pequea. The Declaration of Independence was adopted weeks later and ushered in a time of uncertainty for most Anglican churches. With no clergy available to lead services, Bangor Church was closed for about six years (1776-1782) while the conflict raged.

One long standing tradition, although not authenticated, asserts that Gen. George Washington twice visited the village and the church. And during the American Revolution the nearby Caernarvon furnaces and forges manufactured supplies of the Continental Army. Following the war, services resumed, read from the English Book of Common Prayer (1662) and the sacraments administered whenever Anglican clergy were available to travel to Churchtown.