

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ANGLICAN CHURCH AFTER THE REVOLUTION

The foundations of Christ Church, founded in 1702, are rooted in conservative leaning principles. These principles, shared by most of the church's clergy, were challenged at the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1765. The church's leadership was mostly sympathetic towards the loyalists and, with some exceptions, supported England throughout the conflict. However, the church inevitably had to confront the changing political landscape created with the onset of the revolution. These changes forced the church to rethink its prior allegiances and also forced institutional changes in order to reach a congregation that no longer recognized the king as their sovereign ruler. This political evolution proved difficult, not only because of resistance from within the church, but it hinged on removing a legacy that was inherent in the church's founding.

The denomination of the church, Episcopalian, played a crucial role in delineating the church's political stance during the American Revolution. The Episcopalian church was closely aligned with the crown and one of its main functions was to instill into its congregants an uncompromising devotion, and loyalty, for the king of England. This created a centralizing authority structure within the church that helped foster a sense of cohesiveness among the congregants. Also, the congregants were used to the king's extensive reach regarding religious matters in England and the church's commitment to the status quo was hardly surprising during the early 18th century. However, the strains of this system were beginning to surface, even before the rebellion in the thirteen colonies broke out in the 1760s. By the 1720s, the leaders of the church were struggling to contain the advanced stages of the disintegration of clerical

authoritarianism.¹ This struggle, and the erosion of an authoritarian mindset within the church, had a profound impact on the Episcopalians who followed the church's orthodoxy. These challenges for the church spread from its origin point, in New England, and sharply impacted clerical leaders throughout the colonies.

The violence and instability caused by the American Revolution exacerbated the internal struggles the church was experiencing in the 1760s. The church's stance during the hostilities, for the most part, was solidly loyalist. This stance alienated many members of the church who had joined the patriotic cause. The schism caused by the church's steadfast loyalty to England was made worse by the lack of a centralizing authority structure, and substandard organization, that later proved almost disastrous for the church.² Leadership from the church was especially needed during the unprecedented political turmoil unleashed during the rebellion against Britain. However, the disparate organization of the Episcopal Church, entrenched since the Great Awakening in the 1740s, and most notably felt in New Jersey, made a united front, by clerical leaders, almost impossible.³ This eventually culminated in a clergy that, because of internal bickering, lost its moral legitimacy to guide its congregants through the revolution. The lack of leadership was even prevalent after the war was over with numerous dioceses scrambling to erase their previous connection with the British crown.⁴ This attempt, by the church, to shape a revisionist history of its involvement in the revolution was most acutely felt at Christ Church in Shrewsbury.

¹ Thomas C. Reeves, "John Checkley and the Emergence of the Episcopal Church in New England", *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, Vol. 34, No. 4, (December 1965), 352.

² J.M. Edelstein, "The Ordinal of 1793," *Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions*, Vol. 12, No. 4, (August 1955), 181.

³ Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 48.

⁴ Ian T. Douglas, "A Light to the Nations, Episcopal Foreign Missions in Historical Perspective," *Anglican and Episcopal History*, Vol. 61, No. 4, (December 1992), 450.

Christ Church, before the revolution, proudly demonstrated its support for the king of England. The bell of the church, a gilded ball featuring the British crown, was placed on top of the structure when it was built in 1769.⁵ Its clergy had brought their affection for the king to American shores and this later created a considerable degree of tension with the surrounding community. This tension was shaped by the events leading up to the eruption of hostilities between Britain and its American colonies. Numerous unpopular measures, including the infamous Stamp Act of 1765, built up popular resistance against the crown and a country, Britain, which many colonists no longer felt an attachment for.⁶ Many colonists felt a separation from their home country because of British policy that allowed the colonies a great deal of autonomy over their own affairs. This policy prevented the British from adequately securing their colonial holdings in the Americas. It also ensured that the colonists' shared collective identity was to prove beneficial in any standoff with the British. However, there was still a significant portion of the population, especially in Monmouth County, where Christ Church is located, that still saw themselves as loyal to the crown.

The Tories, or loyalists, although not as numerous as the revolutionaries, were significant enough to give the revolutionaries considerable difficulties in their rebellion against the British. It is estimated that there were about five thousand Tories in the state of New Jersey, making the state fourth in the country in this respect, and this contributed to a groundswell of support for the crown.⁷ This support also, inevitably, led to a backlash from the revolutionaries in the state. However, the Tories in New Jersey, and Monmouth County specifically, were more violent than their allies in the other colonies.

⁵ Richard L. Kraybill, *The Story of Shrewsbury, 1664-1964*, (Red Bank, New Jersey: Commercial Press, 1964), 38.

⁶ Jonathan Clarke, *A World by Itself: A History of the British Isles*, (London, England: Random House Group, 2010), 428.

⁷ Ruth M. Keeseey, "Loyalism in Bergen County, New Jersey," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (Oct., 1961), 559.

Revolutionaries in the area considered the Tories in Monmouth County very dangerous. The Tories, in Monmouth County, were also more violent prone than their contemporaries from the other colonies and, some of them, created roving gangs that destroyed property and executed patriotic sympathizers on sight.⁸ This contributed to increased instances of violence and vandalism that increased tensions within the county between loyalists and patriots. The brutality of the Tories also created widespread outrage that intensified the punishment the loyalists received after the war. After the Treaty of Paris was finalized in 1789, New Jersey passed a series of laws that confiscated and redistributed the property of large estates owned by Tories.⁹ These measures were aimed at diluting the financial power and influence of Tories in the state. The laws hit especially hard for the Tory community in Monmouth County where Tories used their influential positions, during the war, to exert “injurious influence on the patriot cause.”¹⁰ In Monmouth County, providing material support to the British extended beyond wealthy landowners and was also the domain of the clergy as well.

The clergy at Christ Church was solidly behind the loyalist cause during the revolution, with some few exceptions. The most notable of the Tory clergymen was Reverend Samuel Cooke. Cooke, rector of Christ Church during the revolution, divided and dispersed his flock due to his loyalist stance during the war.¹¹ Cooke’s inflammatory posture is not surprising considering the degree of support the Tories enjoyed in Monmouth County and also the degree of enmity that existed between the two sides. Cooke, like many other wealthy Tories, paid the price for his loyalty to the British. State officials seized Cooke’s property after the war under the punitive laws passed by the victors in the conflict. However, Cooke was not alone in losing his

⁸ *History of Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1664-1920*, (New York and Chicago: Lewis Historical Publishing Company Inc., Historical Biographical Illustrated, Vol. 1.) 343.

⁹ Keesey, “Loyalism in Bergen,” *William and Mary*, 564.

¹⁰ *History of Monmouth*, 105.

¹¹ *History of Monmouth*, 343.

property and John Throckmorton, a notable and wealthy member of Christ Church, also lost his property.¹² Some members not only contributed to the Tory cause but also fought in the battlefield besides British soldiers against the colonists.

The exact number of Christ church congregants, or clergy, that actively fought on the side of the British is unclear. However, there is some evidence that linked some Tory sympathizers at Christ Church to the battlefield. For example, Richard Lippincott, whose family were prominent members of the church in the 18th and 19th centuries, fought on the side of the British during the war and, similar to what happened to Cooke and Throckmorton, also lost his property after hostilities ended.¹³ Lippincott was one of the more influential members, because of his standing in the community, of Christ Church that fought in the war. Lippincott was also a valued member, for the British, in the war effort and he received accolades for his service. Lippincott, in 1778, raised a company of Tories and he received a captain's commission for his efforts during the revolution.¹⁴ The presence of a Lippincott on the Tory side helped define Christ Church's standing during the conflict. Lippincott's unpopularity during the war and his exodus from the newly independent United States, he fled to York which is now Toronto, after the peace treaty was signed also did not endear Christ Church to the patriotic cause.¹⁵ Besides one of their own members serving with the British, the clergy and other prominent constituents of Christ Church also witnessed the war as bystanders as well.

The Battle of Monmouth transpired on June 28, 1778 and was most notable for the bravery and strategic thinking that Washington employed against the British. The battle, occurring in Freehold and not that far away from Christ Church, was the largest battle that

¹² *History of Monmouth*, 111.

¹³ *History of Monmouth*, 119.

¹⁴ *History of Monmouth*, 119.

¹⁵ *History of Monmouth*, 119.

occurred, not only in Monmouth County, but in New Jersey as well during the American Revolution. During the last half of the battle, which occurred around a ravine, Washington's troops, numbering about five thousand, confronted Cornwallis's troops, which was mostly infantry at this point, which stood at two thousand men.¹⁶ The battle and its disastrous impact on the surrounding county only fueled tensions between the wealthy Tories, affiliated with Christ Church, and the minority patriots. The German mercenaries, who were hired by the British, and ransacked several homes in Monmouth County for supplies also, heightened anti-British, and xenophobic, feelings in a state that still considered itself Tory aligned.¹⁷ After the hostilities at Monmouth, the war moved to New York and Monmouth County was mostly quiet except for the guerilla Tory bands that travelled through the area. However, the clergy at Christ Church still found themselves embroiled in a conflict that became more politicized as the war dragged on into an uncertain future.

The gilded ball, atop the tower at Christ Church, that bore the crown inspired little controversy before the rebellion broke out in the thirteen colonies. This very much changed when the war was well underway in the 1770s and 1780s. The political activism of the church left it open to acts of vandalism from opponents of British rule. During one occasion, the exact year is unclear, a company of Continental Army soldiers fired at the gilded ball.¹⁸ This anger from the soldiers at the church, which resulted in destruction of church property, was evidently rare. However, the scope of the attack, where the church caught fire and was only rescued by a Quaker, William Parker, who was nearby, put the clergy on edge.¹⁹ The nervousness and fear was unnecessary, however, because Christ Church sustained no further assaults on its property

¹⁶ Middlekauff, *Glorious Cause*, 430.

¹⁷ Middlekauff, *Glorious Cause*, 552.

¹⁸ James Steen, *History of Christ Church, Shrewsbury, New Jersey, from 1706 to 1903*, 74.

¹⁹ Steen, *History of Christ Church*, 74.

during the rest of the war with Britain. In fact, according to the preeminent historian on the church, James Steen, “the revolution failed to disturb church life in any meaningful way.”²⁰ This meant that services continued and Christ Church continued to provide the varied functions its members had come to expect from the establishment. However, after the war, the church lost its prized prestige, and status, as being a state church of the Home government.²¹ The church’s connection with Britain was irrevocably shattered after the war and, as a result, left many of the loyalist clergymen disillusioned. However, not all of the clergy, and laity, were disappointed by Britain’s defeats as there were a notable presence of patriotic clergy that provided services for the church, as well.

The exact number of rebel clergy at Christ Church is unclear because those numbers do not exist and because many rebel sympathizers kept their true allegiance hidden due to the overwhelming support for the Tories in Monmouth County. However, the most notable of these rebel-aligned clergy was Revered Charles McKnight. McKnight, the leader of the church during the revolution, was a strong supporter of the rebels and lent the government \$600, this was never repaid because the United States government, in 2003, later denied the transaction ever took place.²² McKnight was not the only clergymen to side with the rebels during the conflict. Josiah Holmes, one of the most influential men in the church during the revolutionary period, also supported the rebels. Holmes’ ardent, and outspoken support, for the rebels may have provoked, undocumented, attacks on Christ Church.²³ The bitterness between rebels and loyalists continued to divide, not only Christ Church, but also Monmouth County for years after the conflict.

However, once the centennial of the war approached, in the 1860s, the political fractures had

²⁰ Steen, *History of Christ Church*, 72.

²¹ Steen, *History of Christ Church*, 72.

²² Kraybill, *Story of Shrewsbury*, 42.

²³ Steen, *History of Christ Church*, 74.

healed with the passage of time. In 1869, President Ulysses S. Grant attended the church's centennial with his son.²⁴ This legitimacy, by having a sitting president attend the church's celebration, helped close a chapter in a contentious period during Christ Church's history.

The history of Christ Church's involvement during the American Revolution sparked a conflict within the clergy that almost proved ruinous to the institution's future. Christ Church's support is not surprising because churches are mostly politically conservative institutions. The church wanted to maintain the status quo and its influence over its own members. The American Revolution threatened the moral legitimacy, and influence, of the church and this was not to be tolerated by most of the clergy at Christ Church. Clerical resistance to political change can also be noted in France during their revolution in 1789, which was even more radical than the uprising in the thirteen colonies. Christ Church, however, managed to weather the political storm the revolution unleashed and managed to stay relevant as a body of worship for its many followers during the 19th century.

²⁴ Kraybill, *Story of Shrewsbury*, 42.