



Founding of the Episcopal Church, Part III

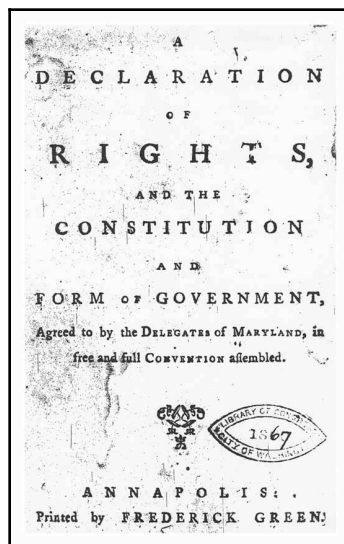
Previously in This Series

Although most Episcopalians in the 1780s wanted a unified church nationally, their points of view about how to proceed and what to aim for depended on geography. The New England states tended to want top-down management while the other states wanted bottom-up management. By 1783 people were already taking steps to implement their own points of view. At the same time the southern states were struggling with the consequences of disestablishment of the Church of England. Earlier articles in the series introduced Samuel Seabury (1729-1796), William Smith (1727-1803), and William White (1748-1836), and the present article introduces the last of the four main characters, Samuel Parker (1744-1804).

Disestablishment in Maryland and Virginia

South Carolina already handled questions of ownership of property in Anglican churches in 1778, but the corresponding efforts in Maryland took longer and those in Virginia led to a legal tangle that lasted well into the 1800s.

In Maryland, Article 33 of the 1776 Declaration of Rights settled some but not all of the issues of disestablishment. It took clergy off the state payroll with a few months' notice, and it said that the real estate and other property associated to the Church of England "ought to remain to the church of England for ever." Religious liberty was guaranteed to all Christians, and each person paying the tax for the support of Christian religions could designate what church or minister would receive the money or could insist that the money be used for the support of the poor. Nevertheless, the Church of England remained the established church, and any changes in governance, liturgy, etc., remained subject to state approval. Thus the resolution made by clergy and lay people at Chestertown in 1780 changing the name of the church to the Protestant Episcopal Church was not binding. In 1783 the Episcopal clergy had to petition the General Assembly to make appropriate changes to the liturgy and services. This petition, written by William Smith and another clergyman, was granted, and the Maryland clergy met in Annapolis on August 13, 1783, to adopt the name "Protestant Episcopal Church" officially. The declaration approved by the delegates made it clear that they wanted only minimal changes to the liturgy, only those that "may be found expedient in the change of our situation from a daughter to a sister church." Shortly thereafter the oversight of the church by the General Assembly was dropped, and the churches could do what they wanted.



Maryland Declaration of Rights, 1776

Virginia was unable to handle these questions as tidily as Maryland. Section 16 of the Virginia Bill of Rights as passed in June 1776 included a clause respecting freedom of religion. Public salaries of ministers were suspended one year at a time until 1779 and then canceled completely. A law of 1785 disestablished the Church of England as far as self-governance was concerned, and then Virginia was ready at least to participate in the formation of a national Episcopal Church. However, further laws concerning vestries, incorporation, real estate, and other property passed in 1780, 1784, 1786, 1788, 1798, and 1801, some intended to cancel parts of previous laws. The situation remained somewhat unsettled, and the details need not be recited here except to say that the legal problems in Virginia were one of the reasons for the official adoption of the church name nationally in 1814. In 1815 the Supreme Court of the United States in *Terrett v. Taylor*,* a case involving Virginia church lands, observed that

some parts of the cited laws could not Constitutionally be repealed by subsequent laws. What effect these matters will have on today's contested real estate of the Episcopal Church in Virginia is unclear.

The Planning Meeting of 1784

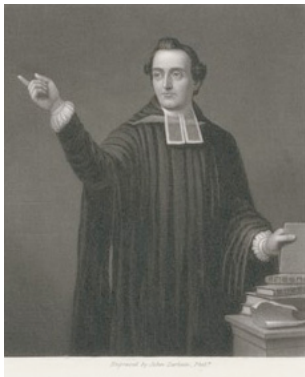
As a result of the secret plans of the Episcopal clergy of Connecticut, which were quietly shared with New York clergy in order to obtain their endorsement, Samuel Seabury (1729-1796) of Connecticut had left for England on July 7, 1783, in order to be consecrated a bishop, and he was waiting there for various obstacles to be removed. Episcopalians in the other states meanwhile made their own plans. At a meeting in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on May 11-12, 1784, to revive an organization known as the "Corporation for the Relief of the Widows and Orphans of Clergymen in Communion of the Church of England in America," some clergy and lay people from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York were discussing the general situation of the church. Those from Pennsylvania broached the subject of unifying the Episcopal Church nationally; but one of the New York clergy drew William White aside to reveal the steps taken by the Connecticut clergy toward getting Samuel Seabury consecrated as bishop, and the endorsement of those steps by the New York clergy.



William White

Although the discussion did not proceed further at this point, those present did agree to issue a call for a national conference of clergy and laity of the

Episcopal Church from all states, to take place in New York on October 6-7, 1784, for the purpose of discussing unification. Preparatory meetings took place beforehand in Philadelphia and Boston, the latter including clergy from Rhode Island.

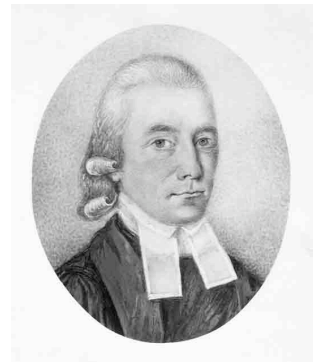


William Smith about 1770

Fifteen clergy and eleven laymen from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia attended the October 1784 conference, and William Smith of Maryland presided. For the most part, those in attendance were not official representatives of the churches in their states and could give only their own opinions. The Virginia delegate was constrained by the fact that Virginia had not yet disestablished the Church of England. Connecticut could not really commit itself to anything until Seabury had returned from England and in any event thought it necessary to have a bishop in place before proceeding. Also the Connecticut clergy had invited no lay person; the thinking of the clergy there, according

to a letter from one of them, was that "the laity did not expect or wish to be called in as delegates on such an occasion; but would, with full confidence, trust matters purely ecclesiastical to their clergy."

Samuel Parker (1744-1804), rector of Trinity Church Boston, who was attending to represent Massachusetts and Rhode Island, brought with him a letter from the clergy in those states saying that "[I]t is our unanimous opinion that it is beginning at the wrong end to attempt to organize our church before we have obtained a head."



Samuel Parker



Trinity Church, Boston

Nevertheless, the group listed some principles that it recommended for adoption by the churches in the various states toward forming an "Ecclesiastical Government." These were built around the notion of a General Convention of the Episcopal Church in the United States, a term used to refer both to an organization and to a meeting. The principles were that the church in each state send clergy and laity as delegates to the General Convention, that "associated

congregations, in two or more states, may send deputies jointly," that the church is to maintain the doctrines and liturgy of the Church of England as much as possible consistently with the American Revolution and the state constitutions, that any duly consecrated bishop shall be a delegate ex officio, and that the clergy and laity should deliberate as one body and vote as two (with an affirmative vote by both needed for approval). The group proposed that the first such General Convention occur in Philadelphia starting on September 27, 1785.

Preparations for the First General Convention

William Smith and William White independently both wrote to Samuel Seabury in the summer of 1785, congratulating him on his consecration as bishop and inviting him to the General Convention. After being recognized as bishop at a meeting of the Connecticut clergy beginning August 2, Seabury wrote back to White briefly, criticizing two points in the principles for an ecclesiastical constitution and including a list of the changes in the liturgy that would accommodate it to his own state's constitution.** In reply to the invitation, Seabury made an excuse why he could not attend the General Convention. This letter was dated three days later than a reply to Smith at greater length on the same topics, which was sent via White in such a way that White could see it and forward it to Smith. The letter to Smith in addition listed the obstacles that Seabury had encountered while seeking consecration in England.

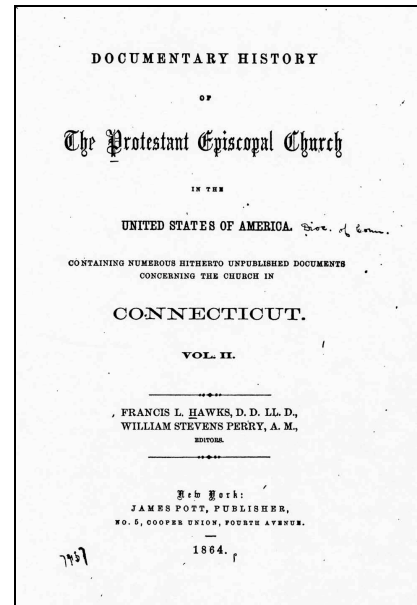
Several state conventions occurred during 1785 in preparation for the General Convention. Notable among these are ones in the spring in South Carolina, which decided that it did not want its own bishop under any circumstances, in May in Virginia, whose church had been recently disestablished and was now free to reorganize itself, in August in Connecticut as mentioned above, in early September in Boston to establish a united position for the churches in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire, and on September 14 in New Haven. The early August meeting in Connecticut was attended also by one clergyman from New York and one from Massachusetts. The latter was Samuel Parker, who would be able to communicate the results of the meeting to the group in Boston in September.

At the August meeting in Connecticut, a committee of four was set up to make "some alterations in the liturgy needful for the present use of the Church"; the committee was chaired by Seabury in his capacity as bishop, and Parker was a member. The Boston meeting in September tinkered with these changes and communicated its results to Seabury in time for the New Haven meeting in September and to Smith just after the beginning of the General Convention on September 27. In the meantime the clergy in Connecticut found that these alterations were not at all to the liking of the laity, so much so that the alterations were not even brought up for consideration on September 14. This fact, however, was not communicated to William Smith in Maryland in time for the General Convention.

First General Convention: The Need for Three Bishops

The First General Convention met for the interval from September 27 to October 7, 1785, with 16 clergy and 26 laymen present, representing seven states---New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina. William White presided. There were three principal items of business---the problem of having at least three bishops, the writing of an ecclesiastical constitution, and the modification of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

For the problem of having at least three bishops, it was decided to write a letter to the bishops and two archbishops in England (Canterbury and York) to express the desire of the new Episcopal Church to



Hawks-Perry Book of Documents, 1864

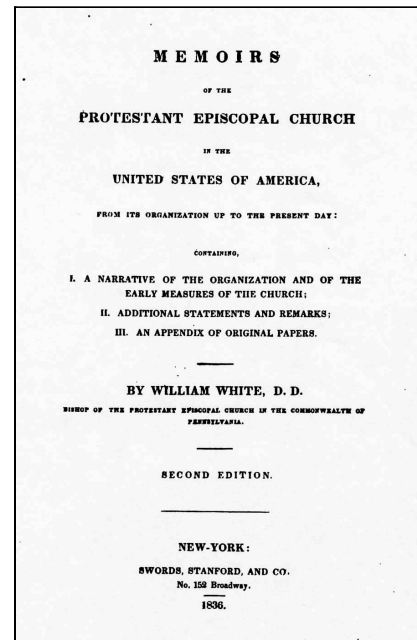
continue the principles of the Church of England insofar as they were consistent with the new civil government, to remain on amicable terms with the Church of England, and to seek their help in setting up an "Episcopacy" in the United States. The convention sought to resolve all problems in advance, so as not to repeat Seabury's experience. White drafted this letter, with advice from some other delegates,** and it was signed by all delegates to the convention on October 5. A committee of correspondence was set up to handle the details of the communication, both then and later, and a Second General Convention was scheduled for June 20, 1786, in the expectation that a reply would have been received by then.

--Tony Knapp

* *Terrett v. Taylor*, 13 U.S. 43 (1815). See <http://supreme.justia.com/us/13/43/>.

** Many of the letters from this period that concern the Episcopal Church in Connecticut appear in transcribed form in Volume II of *Documentary History of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, edited by F. L. Hawks and W. S. Perry. An illustration here shows the title page. The book is available online; search in www.google.com/books for "perry" and "documentary history of the protestant" simultaneously.

*** The letter is notable for its great tact and is worth comparing in style to the style of the Lord's Prayer. The letter appears in transcribed form in White's memoirs. An illustration here shows the title page of the memoirs. The memoirs are available online; search in www.google.com/books for "william white" and "memoirs of the protestant episcopal church" simultaneously.



White's Memoirs, 1836

Picture Credits

1. Title page of 1776 pamphlet containing the Maryland Declaration of Rights: aomol.net/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/html/convention1776.html.
2. William White: Wikipedia, "William_White_(Bishop_of_Pennsylvania)".
3. William Smith as Provost of the College of Philadelphia, engraving by John Sartain (1808-1897) from an original oil painting, engraving in the collection of the New York Public Library: digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/index.cfm.
4. Samuel Parker: Picture courtesy of the Diocesan Library & Archives, Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts.
5. Modern view of Trinity Church, Boston: photograph by Mary Ann Sullivan, www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/bostonrich/distantm.jpg.
6. Title page of Hawks-Perry, *Documentary History of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, Vol. II, 1864: accessed via www.google.com/books.
7. Title page of William White, *Memoirs of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, second edition, 1836: accessed via www.google.com/books.