Revisiting SPG Missionaries in the Lower Cape Fear
and
Some Sources for Anglican Research in Colonial North Carolina

The Church of England, an institution created by an English monarch in 1533 was set securely in England by acts of Parliament by the time Sir Walter Raleigh’s expedition landed on Roanoke Island in 1587.

However, more than a century passed before Anglicanism in North Carolina became the official faith in the province.

Fixed Caucasian settlements in North Carolina began in the 1650s, and for the next forty years it was confined to the region above the Albemarle Sound, principally along the river and creek systems. Established permanent residencies gradually spread south, with the Pamlico River area receiving settlers around 1691. By 1703 the Neuse was settled as well, and in the mid-1720s the Cape Fear region followed. The colony enjoyed no outward show of an urban center until the establishment of Bath Town near the mouth of the Pamlico River in the early years of the eighteenth century. This inconvenience promoted the lack of building churches or establishing an adequate parish structure on the Anglican model.

During the colonial period, the parish was a civil as well as a geographical unit and covered a large area.

The Lords Proprietors, who theoretically governed North Carolina from the date they received royal charters in 1663 and 1665 to their sale of seven eights of the province to the Crown in 1729, did little to encourage the growth of Anglicanism in the colony. 3

Other religious groups, predominately Quakers and Anabaptists, were very numerous. They were able for many years to block attempts by agents of the lords proprietors to legally establish the Church of England. 4

The act of 1715 reaffirming the acts of 1711 stated that the province was a member of the Kingdom of Great Britain and that the Church of England was the only established church to have public encouragement in it. The preamble went on to state that passage of the act was intended an expression of gratitude to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel for its zeal in promoting Christianity.

The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) was founded in London in 1701, the year in which official Anglican church establishment came to North Carolina.

Establishment acts in British America usually included the levying of a general tax in order to maintain Anglican clergy and to pay for the construction of Anglican churches. In November, 1701, with the enactment of the first of a succession of so-called “vestry acts,” this was doubtless an act for the establishment of the Church of England in the colony, it by no means required conformity to this. 4

Meeting monthly, usually in the archbishop of Canterbury’s library in the Church of St. Martin-in-
Lower Cape Fear Historical Society Bulletin
Volume XLVI, Number 1, February 2002
126 S Third St., Wilmington, NC 28401
e-mail: latimer@wilmington.net
www.latimer.wilmington.org
© Copyright 2002 All rights reserved

Officers
President............................................Jan Broadfoot
Vice-President.....................................John Golden
Secretary..........................................Jean Ann Sutton
Treasurer..........................................Beverly Wilson
Counsel..............................................William J. Boney, Jr.
Past President.................................Constance H. Knox
Executive Director............................Cathy Myerow

Directors
Charles Adams
Paul Allaire
Barbara Baker
Richard Boylan
Vesta Burroughs
Walter Conser
John Haley
Vollers Hanson
Jeanie Lessing
Peggy Perdue
Joseph Sheppard
Wade Wilson
Jerry Wine
Blonnie Wyche

Editor
Joseph E. Waters Sheppard

The Bulletin Committee warmly thanks the
Lower Cape Fear Historical Society members and
other interested readers for their kind comments in
regard to the October 2001 publication, Jane Dalziel
Wood, Local Relief Project.

Traditionally, new Bulletin editors are asked
to conduct a document for our readers. My
connection in local Christocentrism was the force that
induced this periodical's topic.

A religious agency that played an important
role in colonial North Carolina was the Society for
the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.
Chartered on June 16, 1701, the SPG
provided Christian missionaries until the American
Revolutionary War for Independence.

Though the Church of England was to be the
established church and political equality was not
guaranteed, other systems of faith, namely Quakers
and Baptists, were originally tolerated. These
provisions were more liberal in North Carolina than
those in England at the time. One example how these
groups successfully proliferated in this state.

The end part of this journal provides some
sources for Anglican Research.

Please remember to visit Moores Creek
Battlefield this February 23rd & 24th for the
celebration memorial. This year the Battlefield
Association, along with the Old New Hanover

Seal of the Society of the Propagation of
the Gospel in Foreign Parts adopted at the second
meeting of the society at the Cockpit in London, July
8, 1701. The meeting chose as the motto Sigillum
Societatis de Promovendo Evangelio in Partibus
Transmarinis, and as the “Device or Impression” of
the seal “A ship under sail, making towards a point of
Land, upon the Prow standing a Minister with an open
Bible in his hand. People standing on the shore in a
Posture of Expectation, and using these words:
Transiens Adjutus Nos [Help Us by Coming Over].”

Genealogical Society and other genealogical groups
are sponsoring a Genealogical Symposium. Good
luck to these organizations and to the Symposium
participants in finding their Loyalist and Patriot
Ancestors.

The Lower Cape Fear Historical Society
has many events coming up for our members and the
community at large. Notably the History Bowl
February 23rd, Edenton Adventure this April 20th,
Architecture of Wilmington, beginning March 5th and
Hootenanny Benefit March 28th, 2002. Please view
your For the Record...the newsletter of the LCFHS
for these programs. Editor Blonnie Bunn Wyche
provides a great service to us.

And finally, this February 2002 Bulletin is
dedicated to all who share my fascination in our
state’s history. Enjoy.

J. Sheppard
the Fields in London, the members of the society read letters from their missionaries and others throughout British America, and ordered the secretary to draft replies.

The monthly meeting also received recommendations from the Standing Committee, a small body convening biweekly in the chapter house of St Paul’s Cathedral in order to prepare business for the monthly meeting. The society often referred correspondence and other matters to the committee for report and recommendation. An annual general meeting in February featured a sermon, afterwards printed along with a report on the activities of the SPG and its missionaries during the preceding year. The society also drew up regulations for the orderly conduct of its business, as well as standing orders for its missionaries.

Included among the early membership of the SPG were two of the lords proprietors, Thomas Amy and Lord John Carteret, and proprietary Governor Edward Hyde, who helped to ensure the organization was from the first aware both of the existence of the province and of the problematic state of the church establishment there.

Approximately forty-six Anglican clergyman served in North Carolina from 1701 until 1783. The SPG provided thirty-three men to serve in twenty-two stations in the colony. The society paid them a modest salary and also provided a library, appraised at £10, for each man with an additional £5 for the purchase of books that were to be distributed among his parishioners.

Despite SPG missionaries, colonial North Carolina remained plagued by a severe shortage of Anglican clerics that seriously restricted its outreach. Reverend Thomas Bray organized the SPG to minister to the spiritual needs of all colonials, including African slaves and Native American tribes. Because proselytizing these last two groups was not the society’s first priority, Bray established Bray’s Associates in 1723-24 specifically to catechize and educate blacks in the colonies.

It was not easy for the SPG to procure missionaries for any of the colonies, and the steps to be taken in England by the individual missionaries presented considerable difficulties. The prospective missionary had to obtain testimonials and an interview with the Society and, if he succeeded in this, he still had to preach before a committee before receiving final approval. Only a small proportion of candidates reached this goal. To many, poverty was an insuperable barrier. They often lacked money for the journey to London and to defray their expenses there.

Although Anglicans could carry out some of their religious practices with only lay readers present, the absence of ministers severely weakened the church’s vitality because of its dependence on a learned clergy to preside over rituals and sacraments. Critics discontented with a provincial church were abundant. Some of these complaints undoubtedly were justified; others may have been nothing more than a means of expressing resentment over the necessity of paying taxes to support the Established Church.

Questioners asked where funds from the parishes went. Petitioners such as Rev. Thomas Bayle in Bath Town, May 12, 1726, who had a series of his own troubles with disgruntled parishioners, made mention of the “wolves in sheep clothing in his parish” who evidently kept part of the minister’s subsidy and blamed it on the late Indian Wars. The Commissioners of the Vestry of Hyde Parish even went so far to send a letter to the SPG requesting money for Rev. Bayle and for the leading community’s gentlemen’s names on a petition to verify the insufficient funds.

An Act of Assembly in 1729 made mention of many of these complaints by the inhabitants of several parishes of the misapplication of the parish taxes and of the connivance of the vestrymen in settling church warden’s accounts. The Assembly enacted that the free inhabitants in each and every parish in the government were empowered to meet the first Easter Monday to elect and choose twelve good and sufficient freeholders to serve as vestrymen for two years. The vestrymen chosen would have full power and authority to call any former church warden or vestrymen to account for the use of the parishes money or face the sum of one hundred pounds fine plus half of the defaulted funds. The Act went on further to empower the vestrymen with full authority to call any justice of the peace or other person on oath to account for whatever sums of money they received from fines such as adultery, breach of Sabbath or any other forfeitures that part of or all should be applied to and for the use of the parish. The vestrymen could levy taxes for the support of a minister and incidental charges of the parish.

The Act of 1729 established a distinct precinct called New Hanover. The parish of St. James was formed and it was to enjoy all such liberties and privileges as any other parish within the government. The following persons at New Hanover were appointed to be “present” vestrymen:

North Carolina changed from a Proprietary to a royal colony in 1729. The new precinct attracted eager developers and two Church of England ministers.

The first was Rev. John LaPierre (1681-ca. 1755). He was the son of a Huguenot clergyman who migrated with his family from France to London around 1700. In 1701, LaPierre enrolled at Trinity College, Dublin, receiving an A.B. in 1706. He was ordained in 1707, and the following year went to South Carolina as a missionary of the SPG to St. Denis Parish. For the next twenty years he served several parishes there with sizeable numbers of French speakers. In 1728, he moved to the settlement on the Lower Cape Fear after disputes with his former parishioners over money owed by his service to two parishes. LaPierre also claimed a certain man of the French and belonging to another parish took it upon himself to set his parishioners against him. In a letter to the SPG, LaPierre made these accusatory statements mentioned of his South Carolina Parish. No name of the usurping French man is listed but LaPierre did write “he contradicts whatsoever I propose in Church.”

Rev. LaPierre also reported a letter from an “…outrageous Presbyterian, containing all manner of reproachful reflections against the Church and State.” His former parishioners evidently didn’t think it so bad and for that alone LaPierre no longer wished to live among them. “For they chose to exclude themselves from the holy sacraments than to receive the same with the posture of humility required.”

LaPierre had traveled and baptized and preached in the Cape Fear area and he wrote later the people there had sent for him.

Richard Marsden (ca. 1675 - 1742) was the second Anglican minister to the Cape Fear area. A colorful and controversial cleric, he was a native of Yorkshire. He emigrated to Maryland, became a lay reader, and in 1700 returned to England for ordination. Marsden went again to Maryland and served as a minister there until 1706. He then went to South Carolina by way of North Carolina, where he held a communion service and baptized a number of people in 1706.

Arriving in Charles Town, SC, Marsden stated that he had been appointed rector of St. Philip’s but that the necessary credentials were blown overboard while he was at sea. He became so popular with the parishioners that when Rev. Gideon Johnston arrived in 1708 with a commission as rector from London, they wanted to retain Marsden in his place.

After serving in South Carolina until 1709, Marsden spent indeterminate periods in England and Barbados before proceeding to Pennsylvania to teach school. After two years Marsden returned to England, obtained an appointment from the duke of Portland as his domestic chaplain, and accompanied the duke to Jamaica when he became governor there in 1721. The duke’s death in 1726 led to more wandering by Marsden, this time to New England and Virginia.

In the latter colony he, by 1727, became the incumbent of Lynhaven Parish, Princess Anne County. In 1729 though, Marsden appeared in the Cape Fear region. Rev. James Blair of Williamsburg sent a letter on July 5, 1729 to the Bishop of London, stating that “Marsden is fled out of this Country for debt. If it had been known that he was under censure, I dare say the Governor would not have admitted him here.”

Marsden’s itching for trade, which he didn’t do very well, caused a lot of his misfortunes.

After making a commercial voyage to Lisbon, Portugal, Marsden returned to the Cape Fear, where he quickly became a popular figure.

So it came to be on Easter Monday, 1730 at the vestry held in New Hanover Precinct the following petition was written to Edmund Lord Bishop of London:

Right Reverend Father in God.

Sir

We the Vestry Men and Church Wardens of St. James Parish on New Hanover River alias Cape Fear do as in duty bound humbly pray your pious Affection and Religious Regard towards us in this Remote Part of the World; We are a New Settlement upwards of Fifteen Hundred Souls, and have had no Minister but what is some hundred Miles distance from us, till the Reverend and Worthy Mr. John La’Piere out of his great Goodness and pious Concern for us at our most earnest entreaties was prevailed with to leave his Benefit of five hundred pounds Per Annum which he reed. for Ministring to a French Congregation in the Parish of St. Thomas in South Carolina to whom he was sent above Twenty Years agoe by your Predecessor The old People being dead and their Children Speaking English, the end he was then sent for ceased which inclined him to consent and bring his Wife [Susanna] and three Children and resides among us where he constantly and Cheerfully
Officiates his holy Function notwithstanding all the hardships a New Settlement is exposed to. We therefore humbly pray for your approbation and Assistance to the Honorable Society for Propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts to whom we have now wrote. That he may be admitted one of their Missioners here and receive the Benefit of their Pious Bounty faithfully promising Reverend Sir, that we will make such provision for the Maintenance of our Minister as we hope will always encourage Godly Divines to live among us and forever pray for your health and prosperity here and Eternal happiness hereafter who are Reverend Sir Your dutiful and Obedient Humble Servants.


Rev. LaPierre for the first year of his residency was supported by an allowance from some people at Cape Fear and later by a parish levy without success. The insufficient maintenance was blamed on Richard Marsden. On November 29th, 1732, LaPierre wrote to Edmund Bishop of London. Stating that the people of his charge did at first carry a fair correspondence with him, this was until Richard Marsden became more active in the parish. Marsden claimed a commission from the Bishop and from the SPG to be an inspector over the clergy in these parts. LaPierre questioned this saying that he only knew of Reverend Garden in South and North Carolina as having any commission.

Moreover, Richard Marsden offered the parish to serve without payment. So the subscribers of St. James stopped paying LaPierre and disabled him as their minister.

He was forced to then work in the fields at his plantation, Sandy Bay, a short distance upriver from Brunswick, where he’d also served as a minister.

The appointed commissary for the Carolinas, Rev. Alexander Garden (1685 - 1756) started writing letters to the bishop of London in late 1729, mentioning Richard Marsden’s activities and his disapproval of Marsden’s character.

In a letter dated February 25, 1731/2, Garden mentioned Marsden’s voyage to Lisbon.

Evidently Marsden returned to the Cape Fear with a cargo of goods, to the value of £1500 sterling, which he somehow was able to credit with among English merchants in Lisbon. His bills soon followed but to no avail could his creditors collect. Marsden used the produce of his adventure to purchase a plantation, known as the Hermitage, and began peddling merchandise.

This information was confirmed by Rev. LaPierre in a letter to the Bishop dated November 29, 1732. Moreover he said Mr. Marsden thought it no inconsistency to traffic his cargo and provide holy sacraments, echoing Rev. Garden’s concern.

Gentlemen clergymen were under close scrutiny. Charity was the most obvious expression of religious devotion. It was polite for a Church of England minister to withdraw, or appeal, to his congregations for financial subsidy.

This thought pattern reflects the troubled 1720s. Financial disasters in England began the decade and followed with fears of plague.

The first three years of George II’s reign, which began in 1727, were afflicted by successive waves of smallpox and influenza-like infections. The demographic consequences were serious. Any population gains since 1670 were wiped out in what was evidently the worst mortality crisis since the 1580s.

The sense of sickness which pervaded the period was more than physiological. The greed, fraudulence, and hysteria which had characterized a corrupt regime, a naive investing public, and a well established national debt were denounced both in the press and from the pulpit as the ruling vices of the years which followed. Luxury and lavish living were seen as the causes, moral decay and dissolution as the consequences.

Rev. LaPierre wrote to Edmond Lord Bishop of London more letters describing his displacement by Richard Marsden.

“I shall make bold My lord, to send you a larger more satisfactory account, both of Cape Fear and of that new place. Your lordship’s pastoral letters which the Reverend Mr. Garden sent me, I dispersed among the people of Cape Fear: but too little purpose, for some of the chief inhabitants had already been secretly Seduced by the favourers of, one Chub, and by means of such seducers and underhand dealers, many have learn’d to quibble and cavill about the holy Scripture: and as their belief, so is their manner of life: in publick incest or polygamy (a first of which in a great man, was the first occasion of my gradual depression and degradation in their mind, when I spoke against it! Till at last they Substituted in my room, after I took my discharge,) one Mr. Richd. Marsden formerly a preacher in Charlestown who declined appearing before Commissary Johnson and the rest of the Clergy to shew his credential: after-
wards my lord Portlands chappelain in Jamaica."\(^{23}\)

John LaPierre continued his letter with more disparaging remarks towards the people of the Cape Fear. We can imagine his outrage of the circumstances.

All of colonial America was considered the See of Edmund Gibson, Bishop of London, and no clergyman was legally permitted to settle in any colony without a license from that prelate. He took a dim view of Marsden’s appearance in Virginia and later in North Carolina, without his license.\(^{24}\)

The Bishop sent a letter in 1733 to the governments in the colonies signifying that he had made no such appointment of one Marsden.\(^{25}\)

However, Richard Marsden mailed his own letter of explanation on June 20th, 1733.

His description of the Cape Fear and the growing number of settlers was favorable. When Rev. Marsden came to the Cape Fear he said he found Mr. LaPierre incapable of preaching to the fifteen hundred inhabitants in the most distant parts.

Marsden was “chosen as one of the vestry and gave LaPierre all the encouragement he could on all occasions” Rev. Marsden claimed, “Mr. Leapear being of a very unsettled temper, and having done several things to disoblige his friends (after he had taken his solemn leave of the People in a sermon) I was solicited to be their minister.”\(^{26}\)

Marsden went on to write the goodness of the port, better than that of Charleston for receiving ships. He also apologized for a bigamous marriage in 1724 to a wealthy Jamaican widow. This badly reflected on his holy character and in time became widely known.

After leaving Jamaica for England, Marsden had a statute of bankruptcy taken against him. Through the goodness of a chief creditor he left jail, “who was kind as to assist me to go over to North America, and settle at Cape Fear.”\(^{27}\)

His confinement was from defrauding a Mr. Austin of Liverpool or Chester of goods to a considerable value, also in London for fraudulently obtaining a cargo of goods by making bills of exchange on such persons in London who knew nothing of him. The kind assistance he received from jail was by imposing on the jailor. Marsden escaped leaving him in the lurch of £80.\(^{28}\)

Nevertheless, Marsden was generously talented with gifts useful to the pursuit of a clerical career. The gentlemen of the vestry of St. James Parish recommended him in a letter to the Honorable Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

On May 19, 1738 the SPG acted in favor of Marsden, appointing him missionary for that part of North Carolina south of the Neuse and authorizing him to reside at his plantation.

Bishop Gibson, though, acting on the negative reports from Commissary Alexander Garden, asked the society to revoke Marsden’s appointment.\(^{29}\)

To be continued in a future Bulletin

---

**Anglican Research Sources in North Carolina**

The Church of England as a state-supported denomination came to an end with the United States Independence of Great Britain. In 1790 former Anglicans in North Carolina organized as the Episcopal Church. The Diocese of North Carolina was organized in 1817. The colonial period vestries (the governing body of the parish) were popularly elected; vestry minutes include information about parish business, which included charitable activities such as caring for the aged, indigent and orphaned. Vestry minutes of only four colonial parishes have survived: St. Paul’s Church, Edenton (whose vestry minutes have been published); St. George’s Church, Northampton County; St. George’s Church, Beaufort; and Christ Church, New Bern. The earliest Anglican church still standing is St. Thomas’ Church in Bath, services first held in 1699. Ruins of St. Philip’s Church are still evident at Brunswick Town State Historic Site, Brunswick County.

Presently, parishes are organized into convocations, which are administrative in nature. The next higher level of organization is the diocese, presided over by a bishop. There are three dioceses in North Carolina:

- **Diocese of North Carolina**
  - 201 St. Alban’s Drive, Raleigh, NC 27619
  - 919-787-6313

- **Diocese of East Carolina**
  - P.O. Box 1336, Kinston, NC 28503

- **Diocese of Western North Carolina**
  - P.O. Box 369, Black Mountain, NC 28711

No North Carolina colonial Anglican registers (baptism, marriage, death) survive and there is no denomination wide depository for the Episcopal Church in this state. However, each diocese does have a historiographer who can be reached through the diocesan office. Source: Helen Leary, *North Carolina Research Genealogy and Local History* (Raleigh: North Carolina Genealogical Society, 1996) 499 - 501.

2. This despite the fact that the charter of 1663 stated as a principal motive of the proprietors their, "being excited with a laudable and pious zeal for the propagation of the Christian Faith." Charles the Second (1630 - 1685) vowed the increase and erection of Christian Churches within the country. He also promoted the cause of religious toleration for all non-Anglicans in England and America. Kenneth O. Morgan (ed.), The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 331.


