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## **PLYMOUTH IN THE GREAT AWAKENING: THE PHANTOM PARISH AND THE MISSING MINISTERS**

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Any consideration of Colonial Clergy in Plymouth centers on the admirable ministers of First Church (in Town Square) and Second Church (in Manomet). Both churches are still vigorous, and the clerical “line of descent” unbroken. There was, however, another church in colonial Plymouth: Third Church.

For us, the name “Third Church” evokes the current Third Church, the Church of the Pilgrimage, whose glorious white steeple in Town Square is such an integral part of Plymouth’s historic landscape. The ministers of the Church of the Pilgrimage, however, do not qualify as “Colonial Clergy” because that church was formed AFTER the Revolution. What is almost forgotten, however, is that there was another Plymouth Third Church, an earlier church formed before the Revolution, a church that flourished briefly and disappeared. This is Plymouth’s “Phantom Parish.” And its two pastors, Plymouth’s “Missing Ministers.”

During the 1740s, a religious revival, known as “The Great Awakening,” swept through England and North America. Revivalism, the use of emotion to evoke a religious response, was not a new concept. It has its roots in the Puritan (and Pilgrim) Day of Fasting and Humiliation, the counterpart to the better-known Day of Thanksgiving. During a Day of Fasting and Humiliation, there would be thundering from the pulpit about how the congregation’s sins brought about (or could bring about) calamity. The adults would then be asked to reaffirm their baptismal covenant with the church.

The revivalism of the Great Awakening had two significant differences. First, the preachers involved were not the settled clergy, they were itinerant evangelists. Second, the response sought was not so much a reaffirmation of faith from a committed congregation, as a conversion experience for new churchgoers.

When the Great Awakening began, most ministers welcomed the increase in attendance and membership (and decrease in public drunkenness). Wariness set in, however, as revivalism intensified and the religious scene became characterized (as in Plymouth) by “Some singing, some praying, some exhorting, some shaking of hands, some crying, some laughing for joy, others opposing &c, all at once.”

As the Great Awakening became even more uncontrolled, communities across New England divided into two groups: “New Lights” and “Old Lights.” “Old Lights” were traditionalists, believers in the rational and not the emotional. “New Lights” were younger evangelicals who emphasized individualism over hierarchy. “New Lights” accused the “Old Lights” of being enemies of God and true religion. The “Old Lights” accused the “New” of hysteria and deviation from scripture.

Plymouth’s “New Lights” were led by Nathaniel Leonard, pastor of First Church. He invited itinerant evangelists to preach in his church to dramatic results - hundreds jammed the meetinghouse and many declared their conversions. Josiah Cotton, prominent and conservative, led Plymouth’s “Old Lights.” Josiah had favored the Great Awakening for its sometimes-beneficent results, but came to believe that its emotionalism did not lead to a true and lasting reforming. He was particularly annoyed when boys took the pulpit and characterized the respectable (Josiah among them) as “old gray headed sinners.”

In most New England towns where division occurred, evangelical “New Lights” broke off from the more traditional and established church. In Plymouth it was the conservative “Old Lights” who took the radical step of breaking away from the geographic hold of the mother church.

In Plymouth, as in all New England, there was only one church per settlement, one minister, one parish council, one source of power. Second churches were formed NOT when there was a churchly disagreement, but when a congregation physically outgrew the meetinghouse. The new church would be established as a new precinct of the town (or even as a

new town), at some geographic distance from the first church. The founding of a church needed the approval of the civil government. The usual process was that a portion of a church would ask to be "set off," usually for the purpose of more convenient worship. The petition would go to Town Meeting and, if denied, to the Massachusetts General Court, which would set up a committee to solve the dispute and make sure that any new church could be adequately supported.

We think of "separation of church and state" as an absolute that arrived on the *Mayflower* and was then enshrined in the Constitution. Not so! In Massachusetts, the church in any given precinct (and there was only one per precinct) was tax-supported. The result is that, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Massachusetts maintained a Congregational Church system (without any clerical control "from the top" to regulate the individual churches' practices), where each church had a geographic "monopoly" and was supported by tax money collected from all the residents, who were thus forced to support the church whether or not they agreed with it, even though the government of Massachusetts was formally committed to upholding liberty of conscience. Paradox upon paradox! (And a situation that did not end until 1833, when Massachusetts became the last of the original 13 colonies to "disestablish" its church!)

So, in 1744, the petition of Josiah Cotton and some 80 other members of First Church that their precinct be set off as a distinct church was granted, partially because the increase in church goers brought about by the Great Awakening made a new meeting house imperative. The names associated with Third Church were the names of Plymouth's leading families: White, Winslow, Warren. One name towered above them all. Thomas Faunce. Best known today as the man who identified Plymouth Rock as the landing place of the Pilgrims, Faunce was ruling elder of First Church. Following in the footsteps of Brewster and Cushman, Faunce was only the third elder in that church's history. The elder was the highest layman in the parish and, next in authority to the pastor, responsible for the maintenance of doctrine. Faunce's defection would have been earth shattering in any other community.

The other unusual aspect of the Plymouth experience, however, is that the separation was seemingly amicable. When Elder Faunce died in 1745, First Church, as a gesture of respect, raised a contribution to help with his funeral. Pastor Nathaniel Leonard of First Church prayed for Third Church "that the God of all grace may Enrich them with all Spiritual blessings & give them a Pastor after his own heart."

The new Third Church called as their pastor the Reverend Thomas Frink.

Frink, born in Sudbury in 1705, was a Harvard graduate, who received his MA in 1725 and then began his preaching career in Vermont. *Sibley's Harvard Biographies* (often brutally honest in its evaluations) notes that Frink "was not particularly popular among his associates and certainly not a popular preacher for reasons apparent in his printed sermons of later years. His discourse before the General Court was notorious as an exceptionally long accumulation of pseudo-historical facts and confident dicta, such as that the end of the antichrist's reign would come in 1868." Frink, however, abhorred revivalism, arguing "that even the clearest call of the spirit did not justify preaching by men who did not have formal academic education and ordination at the hands of the established clergy." This outlook being shared by Josiah Cotton, Frink was chosen in 1744 as pastor of the new Third Church of Plymouth.

After several years, Frink became unhappy with his salary. Third Church offered a very generous 600 pounds, Frink wanted 700 or 800. Frink DID have extraordinary expenses, being the father of nine (with another one yet to come). Frink left Third Church in 1749.

Frink was replaced with Jacob Bacon, a single man (but about to be married). Another Harvard graduate with an MA, he had served as pastor in Connecticut and New Hampshire. Bacon seems to have led a happy and quiet life and, with an eventual family only half the size of his predecessor's - 5 living children - able to live on the Third Church salary of £500.

The religious fervor of the Great Awakening had, by now, subsided and the town of Plymouth returned to its usual quiet state. Only now, it had TWO churches in the center of town. Third Church had built their meetinghouse on Middle Street. Plymouth's great 19<sup>th</sup> century historian, James Thacher, characterized it as "a neat, convenient edifice, of wood, with a tower and spire in front." Perhaps in response, First Church had also built a new meetinghouse in 1744. The two churches quietly and amicably coexisted for a number of years. As time went on, it became apparent that there was no longer any need for a divided church. Events that had little to do with the nature of salvation displaced religion as a primary concern. The political furor of the 1750s picked up steam, with the French and Indian War of 1755 highlighting the struggle for dominance between France and England. The 1760s saw uneasiness with England's colonial policy, eventually leading to the Revolutionary War. The congregations of the two churches actually petitioned for reunion in the 1760s but, just as official permission was necessary for a new church to be formed, so official permission was necessary for a church to be dissolved. The General Court, for reasons unknown, denied the request.

A few years later, the rigors of the Revolutionary War so diminished Third Church that it could no longer pay its pastor's salary and, although still officially alive, it became moribund. Bacon went to preach at Second Parish of Plympton (now in the town of Carver). In 1780, he moved to Rowley where he spent the last years of his life until his death in 1787.

On April 11, 1784, Third Church officially dissolved and rejoined First Church. The pastor of First Church, Chandler Robbins, noted it "as a very affecting & remarkable dispensation of divine Providence - observing to them, that after 40 years separation (ye 4<sup>th</sup> of next month), there should be brought about a reunion of the churches."

The Great Awakening was part of a wider shift that occurred in the colonies in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The power of younger men was enhanced against the unspoken inherited leadership of the older and the wealthier; community participation was encouraged in decision-making; the evangelical "circuit" created the first truly national communications network. All these were factors that helped lead to the American Revolution. The Revolution, in turn, brought about an end to Third Church. Many of its leading members, originally conservative and traditional, became the leaders of Plymouth's Patriot movement, made possible by the very social and religious turmoil that they had opposed.

After the war, with the two churches reunited, the Third Church meetinghouse was razed. Third Church's memory was lost in the shadow of the NEW Third Church. Its two ministers, however, certainly deserve remembrance among the "Colonial Clergy" of Plymouth. Reverend Jacob Bacon in particular - his wife Mary, infant son Thomas, daughter-in-law Abigail and two infant grandsons are on Plymouth's Burial Hill.

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