

**THE DIOCESE OF NEW JERSEY**  
*THE FIRST 300 YEARS*

Historiographer's Report to the 239<sup>th</sup> Diocesan Convention  
4 March 2023

FOREWARD: Benjamin Franklin famously said of New Jersey that it was a barrel tapped at both ends. For, acute observer that he was, this colony between the Hudson and Delaware Rivers found itself on the opposite shores of the two metropolises of North America: New York and Philadelphia. As a young man he crossed 'the Jerseys' while escaping indenture in Boston before starting a new life in William Penn's city of brotherly love. Later, first to his pride and then to his chagrin, his son William was our last colonial governor.

Early New Jersey was not fertile soil for the Church of England, for unlike most of the eastern seaboard it was not initially colonized by Great Britain. The Dutch with their Reformed Church ruled the colony of New Netherlands in the north, the Lutheran Swedes held sway in the south. When England captured the land between the rivers in 1664, the new colony was divided West and East. Pennsylvania Quakers gravitated to the former, and Scots and Scots-Irish Presbyterians found the company of their fellow Calvinists compatible in the latter.

Yet, New Jersey's advantageous location would draw English settlers as well, as this barrel between the metropolises had much to offer. There was lumber for building and fuel, fertile land for crops and cattle, iron from mines and bogs, fish from the Atlantic coast and shellfish from the Delaware bayshore and rushing rivers and streams to run the mills of nascent manufacturing industries. The colony also became a major transportation link, since to go between New York and Philadelphia, be it by water or land; you had to go through or around New Jersey.

It was along these routes that the English would settle, and the Anglican Church would put down its first roots. Elizabeth and Burlington, Perth Amboy and Salem, New Brunswick, Shrewsbury and Middletown would all be places where missionaries found townspeople eager for the familiar and formal worship they had known in the old country. Congregations thrived and churches were built.

REVOLUTION

Yet the church's association with Britain became problematic as dissatisfaction with royal rule grew. Like Governor William Franklin, many Anglicans were loyal to the crown, and a church which required prayers for King George in its liturgy was looked upon as traitorous to patriots. New Jersey's unofficial nickname "Crossroads of the Revolution" was painfully earned. Its location between the colonial capital, Philadelphia and the base of British operations, New York meant that armies marched back and forth, crisscrossed her fields and forests, colliding again and again. During the War of Independence, 'the Jerseys' would be the site of over 200 battles and skirmishes. Churches closed, clergy fled and congregations scattered. By the time of signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the new state was physically and economically battered. The 20 churches in the new state of New Jersey were in poor condition physically, numerically and spiritually. Every one of the congregations so painfully planted by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel over the previous century had ceased to offer public worship throughout the Revolution. While there were many Loyalists (those whose allegiance was to the British Crown) in the state, the church's association with England along with the cessation of support by the S.P.G. and the departure of most of the clergy for the mother country created conditions too difficult and dangerous to practice the faith publicly.

RECOVERY

On Christmas Day 1781, having been informed that the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London approved the omission of prayers for the monarch (to leave them out was after all, in England, a criminal offence!), the Revd Abraham Beach re-opened Christ Church New Brunswick for worship on the Feast of the Nativity. From this very modest beginning came the rebirth of the Church in New Jersey.

Beach thought it critical that the scattered clergy and churchmen in the new nation begin to organize in order in part to lay the foundation for Episcopal government. He invited clergy and laity from the middle colonies to New Brunswick, and in May 1784, a group from New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania gathered. They agreed to work in concert ‘for the purpose of forming a Continental Representation of the Episcopal Church, and for the better management of the concerns of the said church.’”

New Jersey gathered in its first convention the next year, on July 6, 1785, with three clergy and 14 laymen in attendance. They represented eight churches and began the process of organizing a state organization along democratic lines. Pointedly, they did not call themselves a diocese, since they had no bishop. Rather they referred to themselves as ‘The Church in the State of New Jersey’. They selected delegates to the first General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Philadelphia that September and agreed to meet the following year. The second convention saw a significant increase of interest, with four clergy and 22 laymen, representing 11 churches and a set of ‘Rules and Regulations’ were adopted. By the Seventh Convention in 1790, the Diocese was well ordered and organized.

During this period of recovery, the axis of four men and two cities became the consolidating force from which the explosive growth during the second third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would spring.

Thomas Chandler was a strong intellectual force and voice for the church (American born and educated, he received a DD from Oxford), faithfully served St. John’s in Elizabeth Town, and alongside his best known disciple, Uzal Ogden, Jr. at Trinity Newark, ministered to an area measured in the thousands of square miles throughout rugged and mostly unchurched northern New Jersey. Ogden’s contributions to the church’s organization were so much appreciated, that he was elected Bishop in 1798. But his zeal was his undoing, as his flexibility in leading worship among the unlettered persons committed to his charge, did not find favor with his more liturgically correct brethren and he was not approved for consecration by the General Convention of 1799 held in Philadelphia.

However, in spite of the heroic efforts of these men, precious little progress ensued. Only three churches were formed, and, as late as 1814, there were only seven clergymen in the entire state.

The boost that lifted the Church in out of this rut came from a surprising source: Trinity Church in Swedesboro, along with its sister congregation, St. George’s in Pennsville. These two congregations were founded by Swedish and Finnish Lutheran colonists who immigrated to America in the mid to late 17<sup>th</sup> century when that nation colonized upper Delaware Bay. By the end of the Revolution, they no longer received support from Europe, and wishing to connect with an ecclesiastical organization similar to that they had known, they joined the nascent Episcopal Church. Trinity Church sported a brand new building (1784) designed on the model of Christ Church Philadelphia and seating 300. The parish and its members, Lutheran during the war, was not burdened by association with Britain. They took a young student of Bishop White named John Croes for a ‘trial period’. He became Rector in 1792, and after many years of preaching and teaching, built up the congregation. He was called to Christ Church in New Brunswick in 1801, but he remained interested in the parish’s welfare. In 1809, he convinced his old mentor, Bishop White, to come across the river to offer the sacrament of confirmation. On Trinity Sunday of that year, 251 persons received the laying on of hands in Swedesboro, the first confirmation by any bishop in any church in New Jersey.

This act revealed a pent-up demand for others wishing to make this commitment to our Lord. In July 1812, John Henry Hobart, by now assistant Bishop of New York confirmed 74 persons in Elizabeth and another 50 in Perth Amboy during October, and 42 in Trinity Church Newark the following year. Bishop White came up river to confirm 36 at St. Mary’s Burlington in 1813. It was finally time for a Bishop of our own. During the Convention of 1815, held in Trenton, John Croes was elected Bishop at St. Michael’s Church, and he was consecrated on November 19<sup>th</sup> at St. Peter’s in Philadelphia.

Croes would remain Bishop until his death in 1832, holding that responsibility while continuing as Rector in New Brunswick, as the diocese could not afford a full-time diocesan. During his episcopate, the number of organized congregations went from 27 to 32, the number of clergy increased from nine to 18, and communicants doubled to approximately 900. Not spectacular by any standards, but he pioneered the path for his successors. For it can be honestly said that he was the originator of almost all the institutions connected with the diocese to this day. The church had recovered from her troubles, and the seeds of her revival were beginning to sprout.

### FULL STEAM AHEAD!

The year of our Lord 1815 would be a momentous year for state and church. John Stevens (later the founder of Trinity Episcopal Church in Hoboken) received the first railroad charter in North America. The same year, New Jersey, at long last had a bishop: John Croes. Neither Stevens nor Croes would see the fruition of their labors, but their successors would reap the benefits of their foresight.

Bishop Croes, ‘went down gradually and gently to his grave’ in 1832. A successor was speedily elected and consecrated: Trenton native George Washington Doane. And just as transportation began to transition from horse and buggy to steam, Doane’s episcopate exemplified the speed, power and range of this expansive new age. Organization, catholicity, missionary zeal, interest in education – especially girls and his wife’s money, fueled his energetic 27 year ministry to the diocese. He was able to integrate and incorporate all these many facets into one of the most fruitful episcopates in the history of the Episcopal Church.

Bishop Doane’s real genius came in his grasp and sophisticated use of modern technology and his ability to take advantage of the transportation revolution that was exploding during his episcopate.

He set up his headquarters in Burlington City, where he was also Rector of St. Mary’s Church. He built his mansion, Riverside, on a bluff overlooking the Delaware River, and this home became the nerve center for the diocese. Located on the navigable stretch of the river, not far from the Delaware and Raritan Canal, and on a stop of the Camden and Amboy Railroad (the vital link between Philadelphia and New York), Doane dispatched his clergy to parishes and missions along these expanding networks. Many of these clerics were members of the faculties of the schools he began in Burlington: St. Mary’s Hall and Burlington College.

But the good bishop did not expect more of his priests than he did of himself, as he followed an exhaustive schedule of visitations, confirmations, ground breakings, consecrations, and ordinations.

He was a tireless missionary as well as a man who had a strong sense of the authority of his office. A follower of the Oxford movement, which sought to revive many ancient liturgical practices, he wished to see his flock experience more fully ‘worship in the beauty of holiness’.

His strategy was successful beyond all precedent. During his episcopate, the number of clergy increased from 18 to 98, parishes and missions jumped from 27 to 85, and communicants increased more than five fold, from 900 to 5,000. All this while New Jersey’s population ‘merely’ doubled, meaning that the proportion of communicants to population went from 1 in 385 to 1 in 134!

To sum up George Washington Doane as a man and churchman, few descriptions are more apt than that offered in the Sesquicentennial booklet prepared for the Diocese in 1928. There he was said to have been “*a polished writer, a graceful poet, and an impassioned speaker. He is universally admitted to have been one of the great Bishops in the history of the American Church*”.

### Civil Strife and Prosperous Peace

When Bishop Doane died at his home in Burlington City in April 27, 1859, the succession to his office seemed assured. In his final days, he made it known that he thought the Revd Milo Mahon, a professor at General Theological Seminary in New York City would be his choice as the Third Bishop of New

Jersey.

A Diocesan Convention was soon convened at Christ Church New Brunswick, and Professor Mahan was considered to have such a lock on the election, that he was invited to preach BEFORE the balloting actually took place. While delivering his sermon from the high wineglass pulpit, a bat flew at him from nowhere, and harassed him for the rest of his address.

Some of the delegates took this bat attack as a sign that Mahan was not the right choice for the Diocese. With the front runner compromised, it took 13 ballots to elect a new Bishop, the Revd William Henry Odenheimer, Rector of St Peter's Church in Philadelphia.

Bishop Odenheimer was not the kind of star that his predecessor was, but he was a solid churchman, a good scholar, a prolific author and was the first bishop of New Jersey both to serve full-time in that office (Croes was also Rector in New Brunswick, Doane in Burlington), and to travel to the Holy Land.

The Diocese more than kept pace with New Jersey's explosive population growth. While the number of inhabitants increased from 600,000 to over a million during the 14 years Odenheimer was Bishop, communicants increased from 5,000 to 12,000 and churches opened at a rate of two per year, a pace never before or after attained.

Indeed, with this growth, the Diocese became too big for one bishop to handle. So in 1874, it was split, with the northern third of the state being formed into the Diocese of Newark. Odenheimer, whose health was not the best (he broke both his knees in separate incidents during parish visitations), decided to head the new, more geographically compact organization in the north.

### Growing into a New Century

It is unlikely that any of those who sat wearily through the 14th ballot in special convention at St. Mary's Burlington realized that they were on the cusp of an episcopate of superlatives. For on November 12th, 1874 the Revd John Scarborough, Rector of Trinity Church in Pittsburgh was elected the fourth Bishop of New Jersey. Scarborough was born on April 21, 1831, in Castlewella County Down in Ireland. He and his family emigrated to the United States when he was a child and received his early education at Queensbury, New York. He graduated from Trinity College in Hartford in 1854 after which he attended the General Theological Seminary in New York. He was ordained deacon in Trinity Church on June 28, 1857, by Bishop Horatio Potter. He became assistant in St Paul Church in Troy, New York where he was ordained priest on August 14, 1858. In 1861 he became rector of the Church of the Holy Comforter in Poughkeepsie, New York and in 1867 was made rector of Trinity Church in Pittsburgh. He was consecrated as Bishop of New Jersey at St. Mary's Church, Burlington, on February 2, 1875.

He faithfully served for nearly 40 years, by far the longest episcopate in diocesan history. The number of clergy grew from 92 to 130 (remember the diocese had been halved), the number of parishes and missions rose from 102 to 176, and the number of communicants increased from 7,100 to 24,000. More new churches (63, of which 60 are still open!) were founded than any other bishop. When not laying cornerstones and dedicating new churches, he began missions to African Americans, Italian immigrants and residents of the Pine Barrens, started the Women's Auxiliary (now the Episcopal Church Women) and the diocesan Altar Guild, introduced the Girl's Friendly Society and the Brotherhood of St. Andrew and began the first diocesan newspaper. A diocesan Committee on Social Service was developed and in 1912 women communicants were permitted at last to vote at parish meetings.

### CONCLUSION

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the church's ministries expanded to include schools and colleges, camps and

retreat houses, along with associations of men and women, boys and girls, acolytes and choristers. The church continued to grow for the next six decades, through World Wars and worldwide depressions, reaching its peak membership in 1971.

With the decline of interest in organized religion and increasing ethnic diversity, the Diocese of New Jersey is struggling to meet the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century in the nation's most densely populated state. But we are a church that has reached out to the people of this wonderful land between the Hudson and Delaware Rivers for over 300 years. Today we are a church colonial Swedes and newly arrived Latinos, former slaves and former slaveholders, pineys, farmers and city folk, field workers, politicians, captains of industry and college students – Ivy League and community college. This year as we embark on the new ministry of our XIII Bishop, the church can still take her call from Bishop Doane's inspiring hymn,

Fling out the banner!  
Let it float  
Skyward and seaward, high and wide:  
The sun that lights its shining folds,  
The cross, on which the Saviour died.

Fling out the banner!  
Wide and high,  
Seaward and skyward, let it shine:  
Nor skill, nor might, nor merit ours;  
We conquer only in that sign.

Respectfully submitted

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