

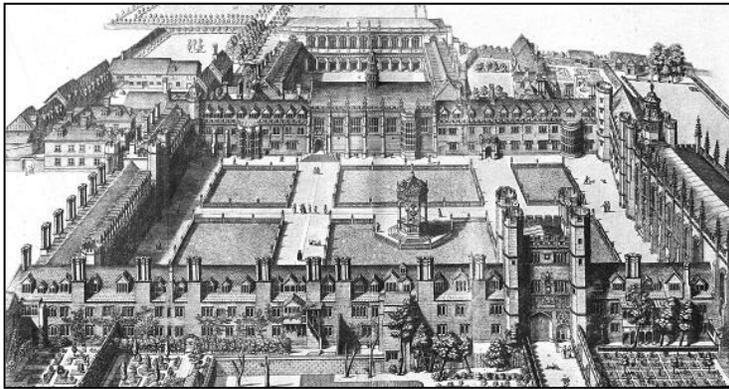


By *David Osborn*  
*Site Manager, St. Paul's Church National Historic Site*  
*April 2016*

## **Rev. John Bartow: First Anglican minister of the parish of St. Paul's Church**

Reverend John Bartow confronted the difficult religious and political challenges of serving as the first Church of England rector of the parish of St. Paul's from 1702 to 1725, establishing a legacy that endured until 1980 when St. Paul's was de-consecrated as an Episcopal Church.

A loyal minister of the English (Anglican) Church, the mild mannered Bartow might at first glance seem poorly suited to the enormous task of establishing a church in communities that were satisfied with their religious institutions, and not really looking for missionaries. Yet, his patient, non-confrontational demeanor and dutiful persistence over two decades perhaps represented the correct approach to gradually integrating the Church of England into the religious life of the town.



**Cambridge University, in England, in the 17th century.**

Bartow was born into a family of modest means in Devonshire, England in 1673. Their ancestors were Huguenots who left Brittany as the Bertauts when the 16th century religious strife threatened French Protestants. At age 16, Bartow enrolled in university at Cambridge and supported his studies as a sizar, receiving free boarding and tuition in return for

menial service in the kitchen and on the grounds. Ordained an Anglican priest, the young clergyman ministered as an assistant in several parishes and Church authorities characterized his comportment as “soberly and gravely becoming his High Calling, and is of an unblemished Life and conversation.”

This commendable profile recommended him as one of the pioneers for the new missionary task undertaken by the Anglican Church in 1701 under the aegis of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG). Part of a strategy to firmly establish the English church in British North America, the Society proposed to assign Anglican ministers throughout the Crown's colonies. This initiative conflicted

with a tradition of religious autonomy in many provinces, including the parish of St. Paul's, the town of Eastchester. The small Westchester County village about 20 miles north of New York City had functioned since the 1660s as an independent church, retaining non Anglican, or dissenting Puritan ministers, mostly Presbyterians.

New York was among the first provinces addressed by the SPG. The colony's Ministry Law of 1693 had created six publicly supported parishes in southern New York, including Westchester County, and called for "a good sufficient Protestant Minister, to officiate, and have the care of souls," in each district. The Royal Governor interpreted this directive to mean an Anglican clergyman, and used it as the basis for establishing the Church of England in the southern portion of Westchester County.

### **A Large, Rural Parish**

Bartow's parish included the towns of Eastchester, Westchester Square, New Rochelle, Yonkers and Pelham, stretching over 100 square miles. While his residential quarters varied, for most of his tenure he lived at Westchester, located about five miles south of St. Paul's. His progress reports to Church authorities in London outline a rural, sparsely settled, pre industrial venue bearing little resemblance to our understanding of the northern Bronx and southern Westchester County. In a congested urban/suburban corridor now home to perhaps 600,000 people, Bartow's sprawling 18<sup>th</sup> century parish included about 200 families, or 1,500 to 2,000 colonists. Energy and lengthy travels on meager dirt roads were required to fulfill constant obligations of ministering to the sick and dying because of epidemics which scoured the county; burying the dead with religious rites; comforting parents who lost children to disease, in Indian raids and to attacks by animals. Since the Church of England had ambitious goals for the New York area and a shortage of personnel, Rev. Bartow was occasionally assigned to preach at churches in New Jersey and Long Island as well.

In a religious sense, the principal conflict the clergyman confronted was between his Anglican Church and the most common dissenting denomination, the Presbyterians; but Bartow also mentioned theological arguments, or "ganglings and contentions," with farmers and tradesmen who were Deists, Atheists and Quakers. In addition to focusing his ministry on the English colonists, the Cambridge graduate also labored to persuade African Americans (both enslaved and free) and Native Americans in the vicinity to accept his interpretation of Christianity.

Beyond a tradition of religious autonomy in the towns of southern Westchester County, divergent views on spiritual practices contributed to his challenges. In the broadest terms, Anglicans emphasized Godly behavior, faith and ritual observance, while the dissenting churches, including the Eastchester community, placed greater stress on the inner spiritual life, with an expectation of a dramatic, private transformation, and an anticipation of more emotional expressions in the service. In one surviving example of his religious custom -- the text of a homily preached in 1722 to the Eastchester congregation -- Rev. Bartow expressed a modest, consistent message interpreting the precept from Acts XX:35 of the Bible that: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

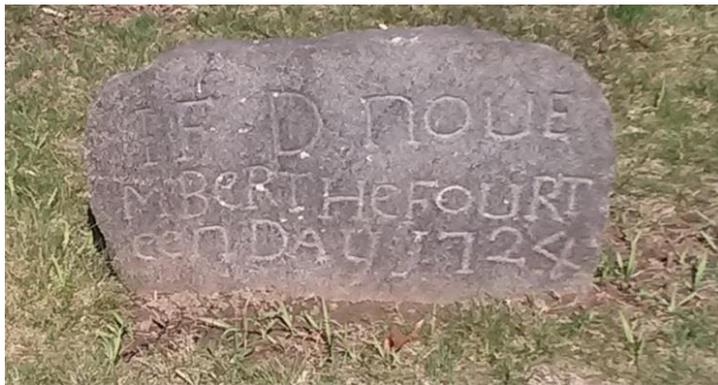
Over the course of a sermon that probably ran about 50 minutes, the rector employed Biblical references, behavioral analogies and admonishments to support his contention that a benevolent God favored those who helped others.

In the implementation of religious exercises, the tension between Bartow's church and the dissenters was obvious in the ritual of the Lord's Supper. The Anglicans offered communion to all baptized parishioners, while the Presbyterians allowed only communicants who had received evidence of salvation to accept the sacrament, a distinction which troubled Bartow throughout his ministry. The priest also encountered resistance to the Anglican emphasis on the sacrament of baptism.

Bartow had official support through the Royal Governor of New York, and, at least on paper, a guaranteed livelihood through required collections of money or produce among the towns to help cover his living expenses. Compliance with that provision was irregular, and enforcement against violators was inconsistent. Church lands were provided, so he wasn't forced to purchase property or pay quitrents, but his correspondence to SPG officials in London chronicle a continuous struggle to provide for his family. He and his wife Helena raised six boys to maturity.

### **The St. Paul's Community**

Rev. Bartow's introduction to the religious life of the St. Paul's community presented challenges and opportunities that defined his ministry here for the next 20 years. The Englishman entered a town that jealously guarded its religious independence, and at least among the founding generation, was consciously opposed to the hierarchy, formalities and ritual of the Church of England. "Tho some there had given out threatening words should I dare to come," he reported back to London, the clergyman reached the village of about 200 people on a cold November day in 1702. The Presbyterian minister led a service in the morning, while Bartow sat at the rear of the small, wooden meetinghouse and waited until the afternoon to conduct the town's first Church of England service.



**St. Paul's gravestone of Jeremiah Fowler, who died in 1724, a parishioner of Rev. Bartow.**

Bartow indicated his displeasure with this dichotomy in correspondence to England, although on the ground there was a quiet acquiescence that he had little choice but to accept the pre-existing religious preferences of the village, at least in the short run. Locally selected officials would not have supported an effort to suppress the dissenting tradition. In addition, Bartow witnessed firm resistance to forceful attempts to impose

the Church of England on Presbyterians in nearby Jamaica, Queens. At that Long Island parish, an attempt to introduce Anglicanism produced physical battles over control of the church, demonstrations and vocal disruptions of the sermon, and even removing the seats during a service. The Cambridge graduate recognized the limitations of his ministry at Eastchester. Because of his myriad responsibilities, he could only offer service to the St. Paul's congregation on a monthly basis, and at some periods less often, leaving ample opportunity for the community to hold Presbyterian services.

His eventual acceptance was hardly a steady, linear progression, but rather a series of advances and retrenchment -- three steps forward, two and a half steps back. While there was no literal interference with his services, the community remained loyal to their previous religious proclivities. Town residents attended his sporadic services and listened politely, but the digestion of his message was limited. Bartow was an acceptable outsider, who visited monthly, and articulated a religious faith that probably required consistency and firm institutional support in order to develop into the community's dominant church.

In a candid 1711 assessment, he conceded that while the parish seemed, on the surface, inclined toward his Church, "but we know not how soon the old leaven may work again, prejudice and education are might Tyrants upon men's manners, we have very few but what have been educated dissenters and have imbibed prejudices therein, and we cannot be secure when they will be thoroughly worn out." Like many missionaries, he took solace in the consolation that while the adults of the town were Presbyterians (dissenters), their children would eventually be committed Anglicans.

In 1718, sixteen years after his arrival, Bartow sighed in acknowledging that the Eastchester community was again enlisting a Presbyterian minister to preach on the weeks when he could not reach the church. In apologies to the SPG office in London, Bartow conceded that he had "labored to dissuade but in vain for they told me if I would undertake to come and Preach every Lords day in the(i)r Town they would be contented(.) otherwise they would have a minister of their own and this has bred a division amongst the people." Seven years later, in October 1725, Bartow reported with pride that the pulpit has been completed at the Eastchester church, and wainscot installed and painted, and a "new gallery built, and the presbyterian minister when he comes not permitted to officiate therein."

In that regard, the Englishman had registered some degree of success by the end of his ministry. He died in 1727, followed by burial at St. Peter's Church, located at what is today the Tremont section of the Bronx. Three subsequent SPG ministers presided over the Anglican parish of southern Westchester County before the Revolution, and those men continued to struggle with the same challenges Bartow encountered. After the war, St. Paul's emerged as an Episcopal Church, the successor to the Church of England in the new republic. While the dissenting tradition probably lingered until the 1850s, the denominational affiliation endured through 1980, when the Diocese gifted the property to the Park Service.