



Thomas Standard: The Minister Buried beneath St. Paul's Church

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Rev. Thomas Standard is surely one of the giants of the history of St. Paul's Church. The minister for 33 years, he purchased the small bronze bell from a London foundry in 1758 that still hangs in the belfry. His burial beneath the earlier wooden meetinghouse in 1760 and subsequent removal of the coffin bearing his remains for re-interment under the extant stone church in the early 1800s is the stuff of most of the popular ghost stories that have confounded the site for 250 years.

While he died an esteemed figure, for much of his tenure at the parish Rev. Standard was an outsider, even hostile toward the congregation for religious and social reasons. Gradually, over the course of more than three decades, he acclimated and become comfortable with the people and their spiritual proclivities. To make sense of this, we need to understand the context of his ministry.

The British seized New York as a colony in 1664, but did not establish the Church of England (Anglican) as the official religion until the 1690s. The Church of England carried the authority and convictions of the Crown and establishing it in a pluralistic colony with many Protestant denominations existing on an equal basis would more firmly cement New York as a Royal colony. A report on the weak state of the Anglicanism in New York disturbed church officials in London, who also maintained, of course, that their approach to Christianity represented the true church. In response, King William III in 1701 created the Society for Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in Foreign Parts, as "an organisation able to send priests and schoolteachers to America to help provide the Church's ministry to the colonists".

The parish in Westchester County that included St. Paul's was among the first to receive an SPG minister. Rev. John Bartow arrived in 1702. The original settlers of the town were Puritan dissenters, who had followed a Congregational or Presbyterian form of Protestant worship since the 1660s. Indeed, a principal reason for Puritan migration to the colonies was escaping the grip of the Church of England, and the residents of the St. Paul's parish shared these convictions. They saw no need for a missionary minister who preached a different understanding of Christianity. An astute clergyman, Rev. Bartow, recognized and even respected these religious preferences of his parishioners, and used what might be termed a soft approach to establishing Anglicanism, permitting Presbyterian services when he was preaching in another of his three churches in the county.

Rev. Standard, who arrived in 1727, was different from Bartow in temperament and in conception of his responsibilities. Born in England in 1680, Rev. Standard applied for an SPG position at least partly because the establishment of the Anglican church in lower New York guaranteed ministers an annual salary, supported by local taxation, a sharp contrast with the condition of many clergymen who were “starving at home.” He accepted the pulpit at Brookhaven, New York in September 1725, and was initially pleased, welcomed “with all imaginable marks of respect and affection.” But a year later he grumbled about the remote, rural Long Island post, which lacked a church building. Additionally, he blamed “the diet of this country whose meat is salt beef and pork,” for his health problems. Standard requested a transfer to the parish of Westchester County which was “but 4 or five hours ride from (New) York where I may be abundantly supplied with any convenience of Life, catechisms and common prayer books are much wanted here.”

Rev. Standard was dedicated to bringing the Puritans of the St. Paul’s parish, “who were in love with extemporary prayers,” to the Anglican Church, which he no doubt saw as the more genuine faith. The new rector was alarmed by the small percentage of residents who had accepted Anglicanism, criticizing his predecessor at the Eastchester church for keeping “quiet profession of it and all the time permitting the independents sometimes to assemble in it.” Under the new rector, Presbyterian services were discouraged in the meetinghouse even when Standard was not preaching, and he was considerably more confrontational with the community in seeking to embed the Church of England. Acknowledging forlornly that most of the adults were committed Puritans, Rev. Standard took considerable care in trying to inculcate the Anglican faith among the town’s children, the next generation.



Drawing of wooden meeting house that served as the church when Rev. Standard became the St. Paul’s minister in the 1720s.

Frustrated by his inability to convert more residents to his understanding of the Gospel, Rev. Standard seemed an outsider, criticizing the “indolence and restiveness of the inhabitants,” and claiming that “but few here improve in their fortunes.” Much like a visitor, he also disparaged the winter weather as “severely cold with very hard frost and deep snows which hold us at least four months beginning generally about the middle of November and ending about the middle of March but we have very cold winds some time before and likewise some time after the time aforesaid, so that we reckon, six months of cold and six of hot weather.”

Standard’s confrontational stance naturally led to a reaction by the community, and in 1735 several local residents attacked his “irregular life and evil deportment” in a blistering appeal to the leading SPG clergyman in New York, seeking the minister’s removal. Among other things, he was charged with labeling the parishioners as “cabbage stalks”, being “much given to strong drink and has sometimes been very shamefully overtaken by it,” and that he “makes very frequent journeys to the city of New York to the great neglect of his Parish and sometimes returns not till the Saturday and in liquor.”

A physician, Standard was even accused of visiting sick congregants under the pretense of offering ministerial comfort and then charging fees for medical services. Other parishioners, it should be noted, refuted these claims, and attested to Standard's abilities, indicating some support in the community; he was never dismissed by SPG authorities.

In the early 1740s he moved to a house adjacent to St. Paul's, and lived there until he died in January 1760. It seems fairly clear that over those years Standard changed, accepting the place of his established church in a community that jealously guarded its religious prerogatives, more in line with the approach of his predecessor, Rev. Bartow. Standard relented and permitted worship in the town meeting house by the non-Anglicans. Age and illness in the 1750s also contributed to a decline in confrontational energy, and probably some of the youngsters to whom he had ministered matured into committed Anglicans. While the community didn't fully embrace the Church of England, it's safe to say that Standard set in motion the eventual conversion of the parish to the Anglican/Episcopal church.

Burial beneath the church was reserved for honored, important figures in a colonial community, and Standard's interment below the small meetinghouse when he died at age 80 indicates how far he had traveled in gaining the respect of the parish. No doubt the small bronze bell Standard had purchased, inscribed "The Gift of the Rev. Thomas Standard, 1758," tolled to mark his death. His wife Mary, who had burned to death in a horrible hearth accident in January 1758, also was interred under the edifice. The wooden church was dismantled during the Revolutionary War by armies requiring fuel to heat the stone and brick St. Paul's church which they converted into a field hospital. The coffins of Standard and his wife were not damaged, but their exact location was difficult to determine since the building had been destroyed. In 1818, 58 years after his passing, parishioners exhumed the coffins of Standard and his wife, re-interring them under the east wing of the extant St. Paul's. A memorial tablet, visible today on a basement wall, was added in 1875. Those lengthy delays in re-interment and memorializing the former rector provide the backdrop for an array of tantalizing ghost stories still swirling around St. Paul's.

