

# The First Church of Epsom

By J. M. Moses

The pastorate of Rev. John Tucke began September 23, 1761, and ended June 18, 1774. His records were for many years lost. As late as 1823, the pastor and historian, Rev. Jonathan Curtiss, did not know of their existence. They were recovered by the antiquarian, Samuel G. Drake, and deposited with the New Hampshire Historical Society. They seem to be complete, except that a little is gone from the top of one page, which probably contained two or three entries of admissions of members about 1768.

They begin as follows: "April 18, 1761, I went to Epsom to preach. June 25, they gave me a call. August 14, they renewed the call. August 17, I accepted the call. September 23, I was ordained. My venerable father preached the sermon from 2 Timothy 2-1,\* and then gave me the most sacred charge. The Reverend Mr. Aaron Whittemore gave me the right hand of fellowship."

The pastor thus ordained was a young man, barely twenty-one -years of age, who had graduated from Harvard College in 1758. His father was the Rev. John Tucke, for forty-one years pastor at Gosport, Isles of Shoals. Mr. Whittemore was pastor at Pembroke.

That the town had been allowed to wait nearly thirty years after its settlement before settling a minister, was no doubt due to its recognized inability to support one. Those thirty years had been a sad period of poverty and slow growth. Towns settled later made much more rapid progress.

There is reason to think that the first twenty families, required by the charter, were not permanently settled before 1750. The census of 1767 found only forty married men under sixty, forty married women, five men over sixty, and two widows. In 1773 the corresponding numbers were fifty-three, fifty-three, one, and four. It is not likely that the number of families in 1761 much exceeded thirty.

The meeting-house was not built until 1764, and there is no record of a schoolhouse before 1765. We need not, however, suppose that the people had lived thirty years without religious and secular instruction. Still less can we impute mental and moral inferiority to people who could rear families and build up a town under such difficulties as they encountered.

Mr. Tucke was to have as a settlement one hundred acres of land, as provided by the charter. His salary was to be thirty pounds sterling a year the first two years, then thirty-five pounds, to be increased to forty pounds when the number of families reached fifty; also thirty cords of wood a year. Six hundred pounds, Old Tenor, in labor, was voted to build a parsonage. He married, March 4, 1762; probably about the time the parsonage was finished, Mary, daughter of Rev. Samuel Parsons, pastor at Rye.

The church was organized September 23, 1761, its covenant being signed by the following persons: Rev. John Tucke, John Blake and wife Mary, Abraham, Isaac, Isaac, Jr., and Reuben Libby, Nathan Marden, William Wallace, Margaret, wife of Reuben Sanborn, Sr., and Widow Sarah Nason. October 9 there were added the wives of the two Isaac Libbys, and Joanna, daughter of Isaac, Sr. These fourteen were regarded as the original members.

The records of the next twelve years show additions as follows :

In 1761, John McClary and wife, Thomas Blake and wife, George Wallace and wife, Ephraim Locke, and the wives of Reuben Libby and Deacon Nathan Marden.

In 1762, Widow Love Wormwood and Elizabeth, wife of Reuben Sanborn, Jr., then of Chichester.

In 1763, Samuel Blake and wife, John McGaffey and wife, Jonathan Chapman and wife, Eunice, wife of Samuel Jackson, Mary, wife of Thomas Bickford, and Nanny, wife of Richard Tripp.

In 1764, William Blake and wife, Sarah, Sarah Marden, and Hepzibah Blake.

September 7, probably 1765, Widow Agnes McClary.

December 5, 1766, John Worth and wife, Hannah, and Hannah, wife of Samuel Davis, were received by dismissal from churches at Hampton Falls and Exeter.

In November, 1767, Nathaniel Morrill and wife and Jeremiah Eastman and wife, from South Hampton and Kensington.

April 3, 1768, Anna, wife of John Cass, from Epping.

In 1769, Samuel Bickford and wife, Mercy, and Samuel Perkins of Deerfield.

In 1770, Joseph Worth and wife, Anna (dismissed from Hawke), Benjamin Goodwin and wife, Lydia, Hannah, wife of Robert Mason of Deerfield, and Enoch Robie of Deerfield.

In 1771, Moses Locke and wife, Mary, and James Gray and wife, Jane.

October 3, 1773, Mary, wife of John Worth, Jr.

There is a list of members, without date, which includes the following names, not mentioned above. Andrew McClary, Samuel Marston, Joseph Chapman, Elizabeth Sanborn, John Worth, Jr., John Mason, Jonathan Leavitt and wife, James Marden and wife, and the wife of a William Wallace.

The last is in a list of members that had moved away, which has the following names: William Wallace and wife, Reuben Libby and wife, Widow Wormwood, Widow Nason, and William Blake and wife. Only one member is reported as deceased: Anne Libby. To this should be added, at least, the names of Abraham Libby and Samuel Bickford.

There are records of seventy-two members. They may not have been all; as it is plain that Hr. Tucke failed to enter some admissions, as well as other facts, that he intended to record. The records are not free from mistakes in names of women and children.

Besides the members in full communion, the following twenty-six are recorded as received into the baptismal covenant relations: James Wood and wife, Mary; Andrew McClary and wife, Elizabeth; Eliphalet Sanborn and wife, Margaret; Samuel Moses and wife, Bridget; William Moses, Jenny Moses, Jeremiah Prescott and wife, Jenny; Abraham Wallace; Ithiel Clifford; Josiah Sanborn; Simeon Chapman and wife, Mary; Edmund Rand and wife, Abigail; Ebenezer Wallace and wife, Sarah; Edmund Leavitt and wife, Mehetabel; Daniel Page and wife Mary (of Deerfield), and Betty, wife of Benjamin Hill, later of Northwood. These were not all, as children of others were baptized.

There are records of one hundred and sixty-seven baptisms of children, and among them, of the following three adults: Mr. Tucke's servant, Abraham; Phebe, a young woman, about twenty, no surname given; and Samuel Blake's man-servant, who seems not to have had even a first name.\* The infant baptisms were printed in the Boston Transcript January 23 and February 11, 1907. It was evidently a large proportion of the town's people that became connected with the church; though the lists include quite a number from Chichester and Deerfield, where churches had not yet been established. From Mr. Tucke's antecedents, and evident success in a pioneer community, there is every presumption that he was a man of ability and personal worth; and, although his pastorate ended in a storm, there is no reason to think his faults were greater than are common to both clergy and laity. There is not enough preserved, in records or tradition, to give us much acquaintance with his personal peculiarities.

By the latter part of 1773, some of the leading citizens had become seriously disaffected; among them, Capt. Andrew McClary, Doctor Williams and Jeremiah Prescott, who made formal complaint. Ephraim Locke, also had "grievances," quite a number, it would seem, as a meeting was appointed to settle "some" of them. A change of pastor had become expedient.

Had the church been free to act, this might have been effected without scandal. But the consent of a council was necessary; and, as in a divorce case, there must be charges.

January 3, 1774, the town voted to call a council "to settle the difficulties subsisting between the Rev. John Tucke and the inhabitants of Epsom." Six weeks later a church meeting, thinly attended because of a

snowstorm, voted the same.

The council met March 15, and reported March 18. The report fills four finely written pages of the town records. As twelve men had spent three days investigating complaints against Mr. Tucke, we should be well informed of his faults.

No serious charge was sustained. In some small business transactions he had taken liberties, apparently not complained of at the time. In general, he was not disposed to over-reach, as "it evidently appears to us that Mr. Tucke did not take the advantage when he had fair opportunities, and freely offered to pay in divers instances what persons knew of no claim to."

As to discharge of pastoral duties, the only serious criticism made by the council was the following: "We think Mr. Tucke chargeable with neglect of duty in not visiting Mr. Ward when desired; and we can't but censure his hard speeches with regard to some of the church and people."

Mr. Tucke humbly acknowledged himself guilty of the "faults and follies" of which the council had convicted him, and asked the forgiveness of church and people, promising reparation to any that had been wronged. Thereupon the council advised the continuance of his pastorate for three months, in the hope that the discontent would subside, giving the town permission to dismiss him after that time.

The council also gave good advice to the people, deploring the "heat and passion" shown by Mr. Tucke's accusers, and their efforts to "magnify small and trivial matters" into grave crimes, and regretting "that many have forsaken the house, and some the table, of the Lord, and (as some express it in your articles of charge), wandered among devouring wolves."

June 18 the town voted to dismiss Mr. Tucke, and "that the meetinghouse' shall be shut up till the town sees cause to open said house again." One almost wonders if they did not nail up the door.

Thus Mr. Tucke's ministry closed under a cloud. His life went out a few years later, under circumstances of unusual sadness. He died at Salem, New York, February 9, 1777, probably of smallpox, while on his way to join the Revolutionary army as chaplain, leaving a widow, and at least six children.

The census of 1790 found Widow Mary Tucke in Epsom, as head of a family of five: two males over sixteen and three females. The homestead was sold February 15, 1797, to Simon Ames Heath, the deed being signed by the following heirs: Samuel Rand of Rye and wife Polly (Tucke), Samuel J. Tucke of Boston and wife Judith (Gardiner), Simeon Drake of Pittsfield and wife Love (Tucke), and Joseph, Richard and Abigail Tucke of Boston. October 3, 1797, the widow, then of Pittsfield, deeded her interest in the same.

We may imagine that Mr. Tucke's dismissal and sudden death left the people divided in sympathies.

Whether from this cause, or from the burdens of the Revolutionary War, it was nearly ten years before another pastor was settled. Then came the thirty years' pastorate of the Rev. Ebenezer Haseltine (beginning January 21, 1784, and ending November 10, 1813), who had the good fortune to die in office, and have his virtues proclaimed in his funeral sermon, instead of his faults, in the report of a council. His gravestone declares him "An Israelite, indeed, in whom was no guile." He left, however, a smaller number of church members than were left by Mr. Tucke. Perhaps Mr. Tucke caught them with guile.

It is greatly to be regretted that Mr. Haseltine's records are lost. It is hoped they are in existence, and may yet find their way to companionship with those of Mr. Tucke in the Historical Library.

A memorial stone marks the site of the first church. The cemetery, in the rear, is at least one hundred and fifty years old, and contains many hundred graves. At least two hundred and fifty may be counted that are marked with only common fieldstones, uninscribed.

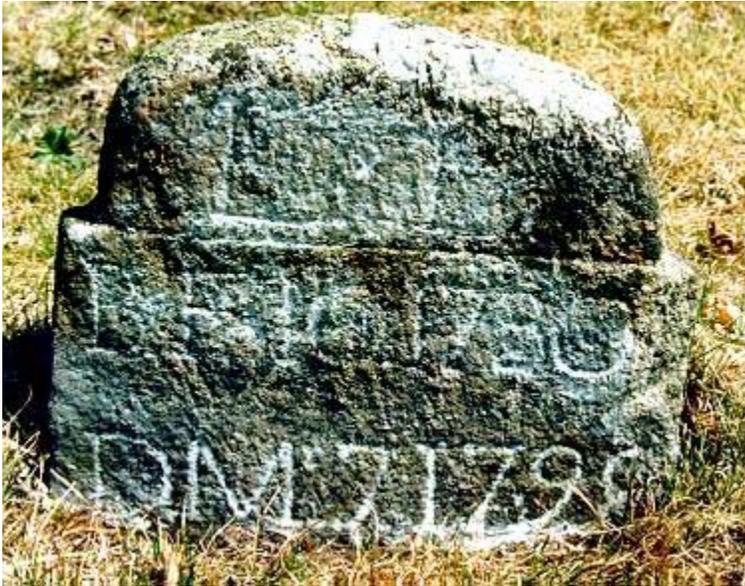
The oldest inscribed stone, on which only a few letters are now traceable, is among the McClary graves, near the south wall, and is probably that of that the first Andrew McClary. Near by are the graves of the Sanborns, Eliphalet and others; and near them, those of Samuel Blake and wife Sarah. He "died Aug. 19, 1801, aged 83 years. One of the first settlers of Epsom." Sarah "died June 27, 1804, aged 68 years."

Their gravestones, and many others, have pious sentiments and tributes of affection, in prose and verse.

That of Col. Daniel Cilley (1768-1842), has the following interesting profession of faith: "He died in the full

belief of the universal salvation of all mankind."

Among the Locke graves we find a rough stone lettered as follows: "E. L. B. P. 10, 1730. D. M. 7, 1798"; and at the left of it another, lettered "E. L. J. B. M. 5, 1761. D. F. 7, 1771." These are supposed to be the graves of Ephraim Locke and a son, Ephraim, Jr.



Among the Bickford graves is a rough stone, with letters now only partly legible. We can trace the letters "M.B.B. ... D .." This is evidently the grave of Widow Mercy Bickford, who died at great age in April, 1824. The unscribed grave beside it is doubtless that of her husband, Samuel Bickford, who died in April or May 1773. These were probably the earliest settlers that now have descendants in town bearing the family name. One of them is the venerable Benjamin Bickford, who has lately passed his ninetieth birthday.

\* II Timothy 2:1. 'o Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."

\* As regards slavery In Epsom the census of 1767 found no slaves there. That of 1773 found two.