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Virginia’s Favoured Anglican Church Faces an Unknown Future, 1776

After 170 years the Anglican Church was not a fully-formed extension of the institution in Virginia nor was it an example of a distinctive American church. Its procedures and practices necessarily bridged the Atlantic; one foot was in England and one in the colony. The ministers were required to be ordained by a prelate of the English, Scottish, or Irish Episcopal Church and licensed by the Bishop of London to serve in the colony. It was placed in a difficult position. On the one hand it was an agent of a one-thousand-year-old legacy of the national church and state and on the other hand it faced an unknown, uncontrollable, and turbulent civil present and future.

Throughout the Church’s long history after its first worship services at Jamestown in 1608 it was one of the three most prominent faces and symbols of the English imperial establishment in Virginia, in company with the royal government, and the College of William and Mary. Yet each of these institutions was exposed to the consequences of the Declaration of Independence and the War for Independence. Abruptly, imperial administration and the royal governor were swept away in 1776 and replaced by a new state government with Virginia leadership.

The Anglican Church and its ministers were absorbed in the vortex of emerging civil circumstances over which it had neither influence nor control. The institution was an extension of the English state church over which the demon King George III was the Supreme Head. On the provincial landscape its buildings and services publicly reinforced the notion that the church was a vital instrument of the English government and English ways, and not a novel, distinctive, and unfettered colonial religious group. The church established in the province by the House of Burgesses in 1619 popularly represented ties to the homeland and the bonds of objectionable imperial authority and civil policies.

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We can only speculate and raise the question, would the English Church have flourished and survived in the province without the protection of official endorsement and support? We do not know. In the uncharted currents of the turbulent times following the Declaration of Independence the church was in a weak position, without leadership and without a unifying voice. A historically hierarchical institution, it was lacking a bishop to lead and speak on behalf of the band of Anglican parsons and congregations in Virginia. All ties with London ecclesiastical officials were severed in 1776 and the church’s destiny was lodged in the hands of the members of the new state’s General Assembly and not with the traditional custodians, the Bishop of London, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the crown, or parliament.

After about 1690 the Church was increasingly exposed to two contrasting cultural movements, the processes of anglicization and Americanization. On the one hand it enjoyed the favoured status and support of the stronger emerging imperial polices and administrative governance advocated by the Board of Trade in London; on the other, it was exposed to the gradually increasing anglicization movement that influenced American provincial culture. It was a transatlantic influence that was not limited to civil affairs but systematically extended to other aspects of the provincial experience including the architecture of houses, churches, and public buildings, and the dress of persons, and the topographical design of towns and cities. Richard L. Bushman has identified the era as the beginning of the ‘age of refinement’ in America that introduced ‘the changes in America [that] were a variant of changes occurring in all of the British provinces at roughly the same time’.¹ It is difficult to measure the depth and breadth of the movement in terms of design and popular impact but there are markers to identify the cultural force of the process.

A thread of two colours is woven through the structural fabric of the colonial English Church in Virginia and subsequently in the other American provinces, representing a tension between the twin cultural forces. Generally the movement is recognized by historians as paralleling the introduction of stronger imperial policies and royal government in America about 1690. But the chronicle in Virginia is somewhat different because the movement is found in the earliest days of settlement at Jamestown in 1607. The settlers were familiar with only English ways and there was yet to emerge a cultural force that could be characterized as distinctively American. Most obviously, anglicization operated as a political force reshaping institutions of law and government to conform to English practice.²