

Trinity Episcopal Church, Collinsville, Connecticut

The Parish of Trinity Episcopal Church in Collinsville, Connecticut ("Trinity") was incorporated under state law and admitted into union with the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut in 1875.¹ My immediate inclination in thinking of a research topic was to do a history of Trinity's early years, but I found that this had been done at the seventy fifth² and again on the hundredth³ anniversary of the church. I decided, therefore, to focus my research on the founding, lay members of Trinity. I wanted to understand who they were in terms of their place within the local community, and to determine, if possible, their motivation(s) in establishing an Episcopal church in Collinsville.

I had a general knowledge of local and state history which along with a popular perception of the Episcopal Church suggested some more specific questions. I knew that the Congregational Church which had not been disestablished under state law until 1818, dominated the religious landscape of Connecticut from its founding through much of the nineteenth century. I also knew that Collinsville's experience from 1826 until well into the twentieth century had been closely linked with the Collins Company,

¹ Parish Register, Vol. I. 1873-1898. Trinity Episcopal Church archives, Collinsville, CT. 6.

² History, Trinity Episcopal Church, Collinsville, Connecticut November, 1950.

³ Eleanor Tallmadge, Centennial Vignettes: 1875-1975, Trinity Episcopal Church, Collinsville, Connecticut 1975.

a manufacturer of axes and other edge tools. I was aware that the Collins Company had provided housing for its employees and such things as a fire department, library, railroad station and church to the village. Finally, I had heard on many occasions the popular notion that the Episcopal Church was an elitist haven for the most wealthy and influential members of society.

I decided to test the elitist Episcopal stereotype with respect to Trinity's founding members. I also wondered whether the careers of any who worked at the Collins Company had been adversely affected because of their Episcopalian affiliation in Congregational Collinsville. Finally, I was curious about their religious heritage prior to their association with Trinity.

My initial task was to gain a working knowledge of the history of Canton and Collinsville (the latter being a village within the town of Canton), the Collins Company and the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, in order to provide a context for my primary research. I began this background study with secondary source materials from libraries in Canton and at Trinity College.

I learned that the first white settlers bore distinctly English surnames like Case, Humphrey, Mills and Dyer and began to arrive in present day Canton around 1737.⁴ They were observant puritans, and by 1763 they had built a small meeting house, the precursor of the modern day Canton Center Congregational Church.⁵ This was the first church organized in Canton. By the time Trinity was officially organized in 1875, Canton had Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic and two Congregational churches⁶

Nor, I learned, was Trinity one of the earlier Episcopal parishes in Connecticut. There were forty Episcopal churches in Connecticut one hundred years prior to Trinity's organization, and by 1875 there were well established parishes in the neighboring towns of Farmington and New Hartford.⁷ Episcopal priests from these towns conducted mission services at various locations in Collinsville beginning in a "store room" in 1854.⁸

The Collins Company was founded in 1826 on the Farmington River in South Canton (later renamed Collinsville in honor of Samuel Collins, one of the company's founders)

⁴ William E. Simonds, "Historical Address Delivered By William Edgar Simonds," Hartford, CT. 1877.

⁵ Simonds, "Historical Address."

⁶ Lois Bristol, "Canton Churches," Canton Sequi-Centennial, 1806-1956, A Short Illustrated History of Canton, ed. Canton Sesqui-Centennial Committee, Inc. 1956. (Randolph VT: Beacon Printing, 1994).

⁷ Nelson R. Burr, First American Diocese: Connecticut; Its Origin, Its Growth, Its Work (Hartford, CT: Mission Publishing Company, 1970).

⁸ Record Book. 1875-1893. Trinity Episcopal Church Archives, Collinsville, CT. 6.

and rapidly grew into a thriving enterprise.⁹ The company was an extremely paternalistic employer. One example of this paternalism was the construction of the First Congregational Church in Collinsville, entirely at the company's expense. Samuel Collins had urged the organization of one strong church in the village for his employees to attend. He "found that Congregationalists predominated" in Collinsville and that prompted his support for a church of that denomination. Collins even purchased an organ, hymnals, a communion service and other furnishings for the church out of his own pocket. The Collins Company further assisted the church by deducting pew rents directly from the workers' wages and turning them over to the church.¹⁰

My reading of secondary sources turned up two definitive propositions which influenced the formulation of my final research questions. The first was a statement made by the author of a short history of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut that, "until late in the nineteenth century Connecticut Episcopalians were almost entirely of British origin."¹¹ The other, found in a short history of Trinity written in 1975, sought to debunk the notion of Episcopalian elitism with respect to Trinity's founding members. Eleanor Tallmadge wrote the following in the conclusion to her work.

⁹ Dr. Paul W. Wittmer, "Early History of the Collins Company," Bicentennial Lectures, 1976, comp. 1976 Canton Bicentennial Commission (Canton, CT: 1977) 28.

¹⁰ Wittmer, "Early History" 44-45.

¹¹ Burr, First American Diocese 26.

Episcopalians are sometimes referred to as the religious elite, but here in Collinsville, factory workers of the Collins Company established our church. People from all walks of life breathed life into Trinity: blacksmiths, factory workers, carpenters, teachers, road workers, janitors, insurance workers, store keepers, constables, selectmen, farmers and housewives. Some were more affluent than others, but goals remain the same.¹²

This statement was offered, however, without any apparent support in the text, so I was encouraged rather than dissuaded from pursuing my research on the socioeconomic station of Trinity's founding members.

Ultimately, I focused my research with respect to Trinity's founding members on two areas of inquiry.

1. Where did they come from? I framed this question in terms of national origin and religious heritage. In answering it I sought to test the theory that almost all Connecticut Episcopalians of this era were of British descent.
2. Who were they in terms of their socioeconomic status within the local community? My intent in researching this question was to test the picture of social and economic diversity advocated by Eleanor Tallmadge against the old saw of Episcopalian elitism which she rejected so categorically.

My goal in researching these questions was to develop answers which might suggest the collective or individual motivations that prompted the original members to organize an Episcopal church in Collinsville.

¹² Tallmadge, Centennial Vignettes 16.

I began my primary research with Trinity's archives, seeking to identify as well as to find relevant information on the first lay members of the church. The archives are a somewhat disorganized collection of records, minutes and memorabilia. They appear to be, however, fairly complete, and they are of a manageable size.

The earliest document I found was a handwritten minute book of the Trinity Episcopal Society dated 1870-1-2. This contains two undated and overlapping lists of members with eleven names between them. I was unable to decipher one name which seemed to appear on both lists. The book also contains minutes of meetings beginning on December 26, 1870, including elections of officers and meeting locations as well as records of expenditures and members' pledges. The archives also contain sequential parish registers with handwritten records commencing in 1873, and historical notes tracing the history of Episcopal services in Collinsville from 1854 through 1876. The first three volumes of the parish register are actually exact copies made for the church in 1938 when the originals were sent to the Connecticut State Library. The registers contain membership lists as well as records of baptisms, confirmations, marriages, burials, offerings and miscellaneous notes. I read them (copies or originals) through the eve of the Second World War as many of Trinity's original members lived well into the twentieth century.

Volume I of the parish register contains a list of "Families" which indicates the date of membership, the age of family members at the time and a record of their baptism, confirmation and status as a communicant of the church. The first thirty-four families listed are shown with a membership date of May 8, 1875, five days after the incorporation of Trinity under state law on May 3, 1875 and a month prior to its acceptance into the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut.¹³ The next four families are shown with membership dates later in May, 1875. The date of the thirty-ninth entry is more than two months later on July 30, 1875. Twenty-three more families with dates of membership through 1880 conclude the list.

I also found a "Record Book of Trinity Church, Collinsville, Connecticut, May 8, 1875." This volume is also an exact copy made in 1938 from the original now at the state library. It is a minute book containing church history, by-laws, a constitution and reports of meeting of the vestry and wardens from 1875 to 1893. It also contains a list dated May 8, 1875, of eighteen men, "legal members" of the Society of Trinity Church, who served as incorporators for Trinity's incorporation as a parish under state law. I suspect that these men were the most prominent males among Trinity's founding members.

¹³ Parish Register, Vol. I. 1873-1898. 6.

From all of these sources found in Trinity's archives, I ultimately developed a list of forty-four adults divided evenly between males and females from twenty families on which to focus my research. I first chose the seventeen lay incorporators and their spouses. I supplemented this list with the four men (whose names were legible) and their spouses who were not incorporators but were included on the first lists of members of the Trinity Episcopal Society from the 1870-72 minute book. I later added one family from among the first thirty-eight on the "Families" list because I recognized the name relative to both Trinity and the Collins Company. I thus ended up with a list of twenty out of the first thirty-eight families or 53% of the identifiable founding families. Ideally, I would like to have researched all thirty-eight families, but I chose, in the interest of time, to focus on those given more prominent or earlier mention in Trinity's records.

Armed with my list of forty-four subjects, I began to gather basic personal data from several sources. I spent two days at Trinity collecting information on age, baptism, confirmation, burial, financial contributions and church offices held.

I then went to the Canton town clerk's office and spent two days researching vital records. Canton's vital records are contained in volumes marked "Births, Marriages and Deaths." I went through volumes covering 1838-1853, 1852-1869 and 1870-1923.

All records prior to 1838 were lost in a fire. The birth records give parents' names, ages, places of birth and father's occupation as well as the name and birth date of the child. I found the birth records of my subjects' children to be a rich source of information on the parents. Death records often indicate the names of the deceased's parents as well as a cause of death which, as in the case of "grinder's consumption," can suggest occupation. Marriage records list occupations as well as age, residence, place of birth and the bride's maiden name. The religious affiliation of the celebrant may also suggest that of the parties to the marriage.

I next went to the Simsbury (Conn.) Genealogical and Historical Research Library where I spent several afternoons with Schedule 1 of the 1870 and 1880 Federal Census reports for the Town of Canton. I found the census reports, which were on microfilm, to be often incomplete and sometimes illegible, but I was able eventually to extract a fair amount of useful information from them. The 1870 census provides a person's age, gender and race, occupation, value of estate, birthplace and an indication if the parents were of foreign birth. The 1880 census also includes the birthplaces of a person's parents.

After having finished with the census, I created a chart of my forty-four subjects using information compiled from my research in the Trinity, town and census records. I

charted their age in 1875 (the year Trinity was founded), birthplace, occupation, religious background, offices held at Trinity, pledge amounts and parents' birthplaces. I then did some simple analysis to test my premises and attempt to answer my research questions.

It appears that the statement concerning the overwhelmingly British ancestry of nineteenth century, Connecticut Episcopalians has much validity. I was able to determine the birthplace of thirty-one (70%) of my subjects. Nineteen were born in the United States including thirteen from Connecticut, but only two from Canton. All of the American born subjects had American born parents, and most of them had distinctly English surnames such as Case, Holcomb, Lewis and Mills. Many of these names are those of old and prominent families in Simsbury and Canton. This is consistent with a local historian's claim that Canton is "a great-grandchild of Plymouth Colony" ... with "the chronological sequence of settlement (from) Plymouth-Windsor-Simsbury-Canton."¹⁴ Even more telling in my opinion is that of a dozen foreign born subjects, eleven (or 36% of thirty-one) were from the British Isles. Only one came from outside of the United States or the British Isles, having been born in Bavaria, but his wife was born in Scotland. I suspect that she was the Episcopal influence in the family. I was surprised originally to find that seven members were born in Ireland, but the 1880

census revealed that with but one exception their parents were born in England. This high incidence of British birth and of apparent British origin among the American born founding members of Trinity runs counter to the contemporaneous trend of foreign immigrants moving to Collinsville for employment in the ax factory. I was unable to find aggregate census data for Canton, but a brief survey of the 1880 census showed significant numbers of Swedish, Irish, French-Canadian and Alsatian residents in town. In 1884 a German Lutheran Church was founded in Collinsville, followed in 1887 by the Swedish Pilgrim Church. Both of these churches held their services in their members' native language.¹⁵

It is a more difficult matter to assess Anglican heritage from this data, especially in view of Canton's connections to the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony, but a few clues are available. Three of the women in the subject group were either baptized or confirmed in the Church of England according to records at Trinity. One of them also had a married sister in the subject group. One of these women was born in Ireland as were her parents. I did not find the birthplaces of the other two, but it is likely that they also were born in the British Isles. This evidence suggests that at least four (20%) of the twenty subject families were motivated to join Trinity, at least in part, due to their

¹⁴ Dr. Lawrence S. Carlton, "The Canton Center Church and Early Days in Canton," Bicentennial Lectures, 1976. Comp. 1976 Canton Bicentennial Commission (Canton, CT: 1977) 4.

¹⁵ Bristol, "Canton Churches" 21.

Anglican heritage. Two other couples in the subject group were married by the Congregational minister in Collinsville. This information from the Town of Canton's vital records seems to suggest that some of Trinity's founding members came out of a Congregational background. This would be a logical assumption given the predominance of Congregationalists among the non-immigrant population. However, there was no Episcopal church in Collinsville at the time these marriages were performed so they might simply indicate a choice of venue dictated by expediency.

My question with respect to the socioeconomic status within the community of Trinity's founding members proved even less amenable to a definitive answer. I was able to determine the occupations of sixteen of the twenty-two (73%) men in the subject group. In every case that a woman's occupation was listed, it was invariably that of a housewife. Nine of the sixteen men appeared to be employed at manual labor with six of them shown in census data as "working at ax factory." The other seven men were engaged in professional, commercial or managerial roles. These included a physician, lawyer, clothing store owner, ax factory superintendent, builder, tailor and "watch repairer." The physician and the attorney were both Yale graduates and very prominent citizens in the community. They were the only individuals about whom I was able to develop significant substantive information. The tailor and the clothing merchant made the highest pledges to the church, and they were, according to

obituaries and articles found in "The Hartford Courant," also prominent members of the community.¹⁶

It would appear from this data that the founding members of Trinity were indeed a socioeconomically diverse lot. Trinity itself, however, appears to have been acutely aware of its members' respective standing in the community. I found that only two of the nine members engaged in manual labor held any sort of church office and never the highest ones. Conversely, five of the seven white-collar members held church office including a monopoly of the highest offices of warden and lay delegate to the diocesan convention.

The only direct link I could establish between membership at Trinity and career fortunes at the Collins Company was through the person of Charles Blair. Blair's family is shown in Trinity's records with a membership date of May 25, 1875.¹⁷ His name was familiar to me because Trinity has stained glass windows with inscriptions memorializing Blair and his daughter. Blair was employed by the Collins Company in 1831,¹⁸ rising to the office of Superintendent in 1875,¹⁹ the year Trinity was founded. He

¹⁶ "Alfred Allen" (obituary), Hartford Courant 2 Jan. 1907: 15. And "Mrs. Mary Laubenstein" (obituary), Hartford Courant 18 Dec. 1905: 10.

¹⁷ Parish Register, Vol. I. 1873-1898. 17.

¹⁸ Wittmer, "Early History" 37.

¹⁹ Simonds, "Historical Address."

is listed as a warden in a July 14, 1886 pamphlet.²⁰ Blair's experience suggests that the Collins Company did not discriminate against employees who did not attend the Congregational Church. This is consistent with the theory that Samuel Collins simply wanted a strong church in Collinsville (and churchgoers in his work force) and picked the Congregational denomination only because of its popularity among the townspeople.²¹

Perhaps the most colorful example of seemingly amicable relations among the Collins Company, Congregationalists and Episcopalians in Collinsville may be found in the life of William Edgar Simonds. Simonds is one of Canton's most famous sons. After I had finished my quantitative research, I wanted to try and flesh out my findings with some more substantive information on Trinity's founding members. I went, with names and dates in hand, to the Canton Historical Society in Collinsville and to the curator of the local history collection at the Canton Public Library. Unfortunately, I found a woeful dearth of information with respect to any of my subjects except Mr. Simonds and George F. Lewis, the town doctor.

²⁰ Rev. Samuel Hall, The Parish Church, A Sermon Delivered by the Rev. Samuel Hall, M.A. at the Re-opening of Trinity Church, Collinsville, Conn., July 11, 1886 1886. 1.

²¹ Wittmer, "Early History" 44.

I did find a wealth of information on William Simonds (sometimes spelled Symonds), only a small part of which was directly relevant to my research questions, other than to confirm his considerable prominence in the social and political circles of Canton. He was born in Canton, and his father died when he was only four years old. He went to work for the Collins Company at age sixteen.²² He enlisted for service in the Civil War as a private and was promoted to lieutenant.²³ He graduated from Yale Law School in 1865 and began his practice in Canton that year.²⁴ In 1867, Simonds married Sarah Jane Mills, the daughter of a prominent farmer, land owner and scion of one of the oldest families in town.²⁵ He was elected to the Connecticut House of Representatives in 1883, the United States House of Representatives in 1889, and in 1891, President Harrison appointed him Commissioner of Patents for the United States.²⁶

Simonds also held high office at Trinity Church. He was elected Junior Warden upon Trinity's founding in May, 1875, and he was head of the church building committee.²⁷

²² "Hon. W. E. Simonds, Death of the Ex-Congressman Saturday," Hartford Courant 16 Mar. 1903: 7.

²³ Some Observations by the Canton Republican Club on the next Republican Nomination for United States Senator from Connecticut, 1898 (The Canton Republican Club, 1898) 6.

²⁴ "Hon. W. E. Simonds," Hartford Courant 7.

²⁵ "Births, Marriages and Deaths, 2, Town of Canton." 1852-1869. Canton Town Hall, vital records, Collinsville, CT. 40.

²⁶ Some Observation 8, 19 and 30.

²⁷ Record Book. 1875-1893. 2.

He served as Trinity's Lay Delegate to the Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut from 1876 through 1879.²⁸

I found an interesting testament to the success of Simonds' career through a comparison of census reports from 1870 and 1880. In 1870 William and Sarah were living in her father's house with seven other people.²⁹ In 1880, however, they had their own house, and they had two children and two black servants, a woman listed as a "cook" and her husband whose duties I could not decipher.³⁰

Simonds was a prolific writer. He authored and published several works on patent law, his specialty, as well as a number of historical books, articles and addresses. In an article on the history of Canton, he wrote that "the Rev. Charles B. Maclean was ordained pastor of the (Congregational) church in Collinsville in 1844; the writer (Simonds) grew from childhood to manhood under his teachings."³¹ It would thus appear that Simonds was raised in the Congregational church and only became an Episcopalian in adulthood. His obituary which filled one and a half columns in "The Hartford Courant" only serves to confuse the issue. It notes that..."Funeral services

²⁸ Journal(s) of the...Annual Convention(s) of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Connecticut. 1875-1880.

²⁹ 1870 Federal Census-Canton, CT- Schedule 1. 62.

³⁰ 1880 Federal Census-Canton, CT- Schedule 1. 20.

³¹ William E. Simonds, "Canton," Connecticut Quarterly Vol. 1. January, 1895 to December, 1895: 62.

will be held at the Congregational Church in Collinsville..., the Episcopal service being used." The rector of Christ Church (Episcopal) in Hartford led the funeral service, but he was assisted by the Congregational minister from Collinsville. The pall bearers included the president and the treasurer of the Collins Company.³² Sarah survived her husband by six years, and her funeral was held at Trinity.³³ This suggests to me that Sarah was the Episcopal influence in the Simonds family.

I spent a long afternoon at the Hartford Public Library searching microfilm editions of "The Hartford Courant" for obituaries. I found six and a related article concerning a death that was suspected to have been a suicide. All of them related to the most prominent members of my subject group: the lawyer, the doctor, the clothing store owner, the (church) builder and the tailor. Unfortunately, it seems that only the more prominent citizens of Canton warranted obituaries at that time.

I looked at three obituaries for women and three for men. Each of the women's mentioned that the deceased had been a member (in one instance an "active member") of Trinity.³⁴ Funerals for each were held at Trinity. Conversely, none of the men's obituaries made mention of their affiliation with Trinity, even though each one of them

³² "Hon. W. E. Simonds," Hartford Courant 29 Mar. 1909: 2.

³³ "Mrs. William E. Simonds" (obituary), Hartford Courant 29 Mar. 1909: 2.

³⁴ "Mrs. John Wheelock" (obituary), Hartford Courant 1 Dec. 1919: 11.

had occupied the parish's highest lay offices. Only one of their funerals took place at Trinity. This might suggest a difference in the importance of church activity and membership between upper class men and women of the time.

The different emphasis in the obituaries considered together with William Simonds' Congregational roots, the Bavarian member's Scottish wife, the Church of England connections of three of the women, and the fact that at least two women in the subject group were sisters led me to a thesis not directly related to my research questions. I suspect that the women of the first families may have been the driving force behind the founding of Trinity. Their husbands may have been the legal incorporators and lay officers of the church because the theology of the day dictated it, but I have a sense that their wives and mothers exerted the greater influence in sustaining Trinity.

In conclusion, the results of my research seem to confirm the assertion that Episcopalians of the time were almost entirely of British descent. It also appears that many of the founding members had roots in the Church of England, while others probably came from the Congregational Church. The founding members appear to have been a socioeconomically diverse group. There was, however, a distinct correlation between the holding of high office in the church and one's prominence in the greater community. Membership in Trinity does not appear to have impeded career

success at the Collins Company or anywhere else in town. While I cannot answer with any degree of certainty the underlying question of why this group of people founded Trinity, I think it is probable that British origin and Anglican heritage were important contributing factors.

I would like to have found more substantive material on more of the founding members. In fact, I would like to research the eighteen families which I did not include in my subject group. I also think that some in depth genealogical research on the founding families could be enlightening, and I would check the vital records of surrounding towns as it appears that some of the members may have lived in Burlington or elsewhere outside of Canton.

One area I really would like to focus on more closely is the period between 1854 and 1870 when the Episcopal presence in Collinsville was sustained by missionary priests from the older, surrounding parishes in Farmington and New Hartford as well as from places farther afield such as New York. Trinity's records contain only a skeletal account of this mission period and offer no names other than those of the priests. I think that records in the archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut in Hartford as well as other parishes might shed light on this formative period. Clearly my research on

Trinity's birth is not finished but only stopped. I enjoyed and learned from my experience, and I will probably continue this research in the future.

SOURCES

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