

Trinity's First Church on Church Street

A good deed, a wooden church, a steeple and a crown

By Neil Olsen, August 2014

The First Church 1752-1752

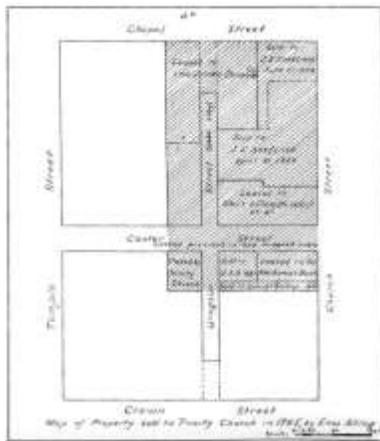


The painting of the First Trinity Church is from a nineteenth century painting by Trinity's own Dr. William Giles Munson -- a dentist by trade and a relative of Rev. Harry Crosswell's wife Susan. He is also well known for his paintings of New Haven's Green and Eli Whitney's factory.

Trinity's First Church was built between July 1752 and the summer of 1753, just at the start of the French and Indian War. Up until an investigation triggered by the formation of the Trinity Church New Haven Historical Society in 2011, the date of the deed that allowed the building of this structure was used as the foundation date of the parish; evidence now suggests 1723 as the parish's founding date, with 1727 being the first date that pledges were obtained to build a physical church building, and 1752 as the first date the deed to the lot was officially noted.

The Rev. Samuel Johnson, who founded the Anglican Trinity Parish in New Haven in 1723, and was a missionary priest in charge of the parish from most of the period from then until 1753, worked hard all those years to build a structure. Though he had built 24 other churches in other towns (and two in Stratford), Puritan resistance was high. Adherents to the [Church of England](#) were a minority in the state where the official established [Congregational](#) religion, the New England branch of the [Puritan](#) movement, was backed by the power of the colonial state government. So opposition to putting a Anglican church in the home town of Yale, the "School of the Prophets" of the Congregational Church, prevented construction until 1752 – even though Connecticut was a colony of Great Britain, and the King was the head of the Church as well as the State.

Church Street is named for it



The First Anglican "Church" in New Haven was located on the south side of Chapel Street and the east side of what we today call Church Street, about 100 feet from the corner. It was indeed the first church in the town, as the three established Congregational places of worship in New Haven each called their buildings a "meetinghouse". The first church was a small wooden structure measuring 58 feet by 38 feet and only sat 150 persons. The small wooden altar, preserved today the side altar still used at Trinity's early Sunday and Wednesday services, was flanked by two Gothic arch-shaped tablets listing the 10 commandments which presently hang in Trinity's vestibule.

The building was not actually consecrated officially at the time of its completion, as that requires a Bishop, and there was never a Bishop in Colonial America, and never one in Connecticut until 1785. In addition to being the first church, Trinity Church it was the first place of worship in New Haven to have a steeple – though the three New Haven Congregational meetinghouses, not to be outdone, would also add steeples. But it also had a chancel, something *not* imitated by good Puritan church designers who wanted to make the word, not the altar and its "popish ceremonies", the center of worship.

A Royal Crown



But there was one other difference: when the church was built, near if not quite on the Green, its spire was topped with a golden crown (see detail from the Munson painting), as if to remind their fellow citizens whose authority they worshiped under. It was not the “Demon Episcopacy”, but the Monarch of the British Empire, and the Defender of the Faith of the Church of England. It was a bold announcement of defiance to their Puritan neighbors. It worked well for them until the American Revolution – whereupon the crown disappeared on a dark night as either a prudent act or a revolutionary gesture.

Because of their neighbors' opposition, and their concern not “to have anything to do with the Demon Episcopacy” - in the words of Ed Getlein’s history of Trinity Church *Here Will I stand* - local craftsmen would not work on the church. So eight of the founding 24 families – including Thomas David, Benjamin Sanford, and Enos Alling -- “boarded in” imported craftsman. Each of the eight families bore the burden for a week in a rotation schedule over the entire year it took to build. Here is a tiny image of the first Trinity Church on a 1812 map drawn by Trinity member Amos Doolittle. Note the cupola – in 1807 the old steeple was taken down and a cupola built in its place; the Church was generally repaired and painted. Galleries had been added in 1797, but even so, the parish was outgrowing the church. By 1810, everyone agreed it needed to be replaced, and a building committee was formed. In 1812 it announced it had selected an architect. The new church was completed in 1815, and consecrated in 1816, while the old church and the lot it was on was sold to a Baptist congregation.



Rendering of Trinity’s First Church in the 2002 outfacing East Window.

The First Wooden Trinity Church is commemorated on Trinity’s outward facing east window, a unique stained glass window that was designed to shine *out* onto the busy corner of Temple and Chapel Streets in New Haven. Note that the window uses clear Lucite bars to hold it together and allow the back lighting of the window; it is indeed a light unto the world, with or without the gold crown.