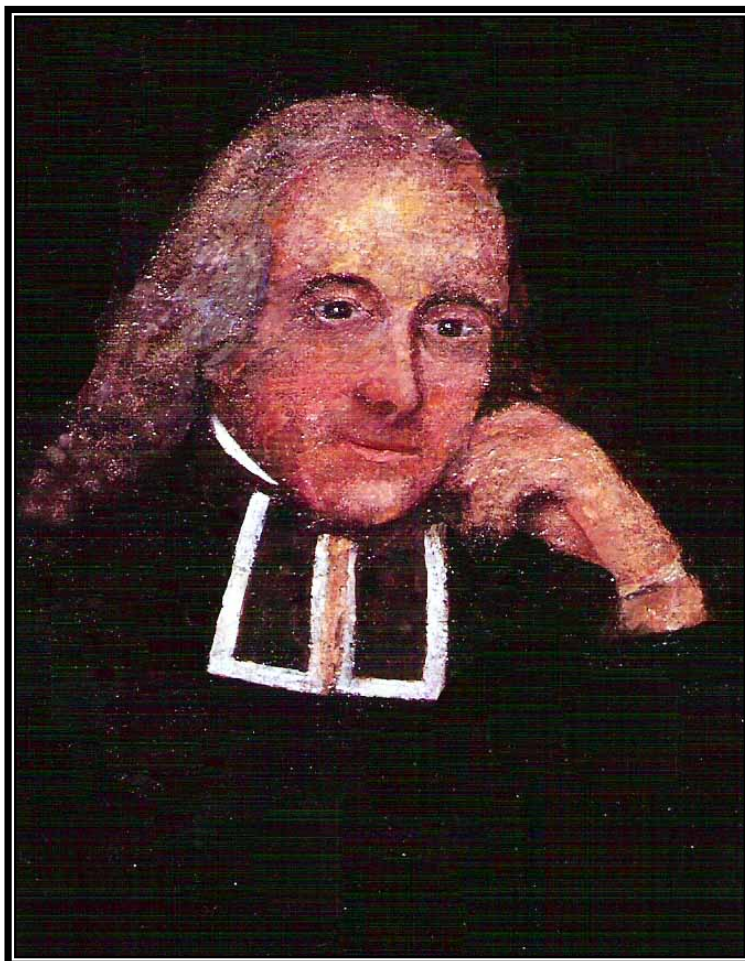


PASTORS OF FAIRFIELD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Rev. William Hollingshead
Pastor from 1773 – 1783



While the venerable Ethan Osborn is rightly designated "The Pastor of the Old Stone Church," the Rev. William Hollingshead was Fairfield's pastor when the Old Stone Church was constructed in 1780. He shepherded the Fairfield flock during the trying times of the American Revolution and then was called to follow Gilbert Tennent in leading the famous Independent Church (known now as Circular Congregational Church) in Charleston, South Carolina.

Current Pastor Albert H. Keller in his brief history of this historic church writes:

When the British captured Charleston in 1780, this church was bitterly rewarded for its love of freedom by the illegal exile of 38 heads of families to St. Augustine (in Spanish territory) and then to Philadelphia. Their families were left destitute in an occupied city. The Meeting House, vacant since the cannonball episode, was used as a British hospital and left a shell.

Yet these years of suffering were a furnace that forged the Independent Church into an Instrument that would exert great influence on the political, religious, and cultural renaissance of its city after independence. In 1782, acting in astonishing faith, the church-in-exile held a congregational meeting in Philadelphia where they made arrangements to call a minister to Charleston "as soon as may be feasible." (Tennent had died in 1777.) Members remaining in Charleston began the week of British evacuation to rebuild the Meeting House.

By 1787, the vigorous congregation had built a second meeting house on Archdale Street to accommodate their growing number. For 25 years, Drs. Hollingshead and Keith, co-pastors of the church, preached one sermon in both houses each Sunday, alternating morning and afternoon services.
(<http://www.circularchurch.org/history.htm>)

Lawrence Roff records the ministry of Pastor Hollingshead at Fairfield Church in his booklet, *The Fairfield Presbyterians, Puritanism in West Jersey from 1680:*

A year and a half after Ramsey's premature death, the congregation welcomed a new pastor, Rev. William Hollingshead. He had been born in Philadelphia in 1748 and entered the communion of the church in his youth. He attended the University of Pennsylvania, studying for the ministry. After graduation, he was licensed in 1772 and ordained by the First Presbytery of Philadelphia on July 29, 1773. A few months later he married Sarah McCalla from Roadstown. (62) His must have been a most difficult task, laboring as he did through the years of the Revolutionary War. Both church cemeteries bear testimony to the losses incurred by families across the country side.

Hollingshead's work in the community intersects the life of another of the distinguished residents of the area in colonial history. The journal of Philip Vickers Fithian, remembered best for his "meticulous observation and human character analysis," (63) especially during his travels through colonial Virginia, records a most valuable visit with Rev. Hollingshead during the summer of 1773. Fithian was in the midst of serious contemplations about offering himself to the presbytery for ordination. Hollingshead was ordained that summer, giving Fithian excellent opportunities to weigh his own decisions more carefully and intelligently.

On Friday evening, July 16th, having crossed over from Greenwich, he had dinner with Mrs. Ramsey. He then spent the evening talking with Hollingshead, "who entertained me with a long and agreeable Narration of the State of Affairs in Philadelphia. We went to rest about two." (64) They rose early the next morning, and discussed the issues of ministerial responsibilities. Though only then entering the work himself, Hollingshead clearly had a great deal of wisdom to share with Fithian.

I had this Day a long Conversation with Mr. Hollingshead on my Offering Myself to the Care of the Presbytery, which is to sit there in about ten Days, when he is to be ordained & settled. I have several Objections to offering so soon, but he calls them all frivolous, & strongly persuades me to offer myself to them now for Examination. Mr. Hunter, also, & Mr. Green are of the same Opinion, & have both advised me some few Days ago, in

the Same Manner, but I cannot yet determine. Mr. Hollingshead shewed me his Library, which tho small as yet seems to be made up of useful, & well-chosen Books. (65)

Their discussions continued the next day, turning to more theological matters, focusing on the subject "The States of Man," which had been the topic of Hollingshead's sermon that morning. Fithian was quite impressed with the young minister's abilities. "He performed, both parts of the Day, in a beautiful, and I hope in a profitable Manner. And he seems happy, in having gained the Esteem & Affection of his People." (66)

On Tuesday, Fithian recorded in his journal that he had been successfully persuaded by Hollingshead and others to proceed with his examination for ordination. This meant that both he and the Fairfield pastor were studying toward the same end. Hollingshead's trials came on Wednesday, July 18. Andrew Hunter of Greenwich, John Duffield, Benjamin Chestnut, and Enoch Green of Deerfield were the ministers present for the examination. Hollingshead was approved for ordination, but it was determined to delay the examination of Fithian until the regular meeting of the Presbytery in Philadelphia the following November. (67)

The great day for the people of the Fairfield Presbyterian Church came on Thursday, July 29, 1773. With all parts of the examination having been found in order, William Hollingshead being acceptable to the people, to the Presbytery, and to the Lord, the service of ordination was accomplished in the church at New England Towne Crossroads. Fithian's journal provides a wonderful eye-witness account of the festivities.

Rose at half after five as we walked home the Misquitoes seemed as numerous as the spires of grass. This day is observed as a Day of fasting & Humiliation on account of setting Mr. Hollingshead apart by ordination to the Work of the ministry.

About ten we rode to Church; where the sermon was delivered by Mr. Hunter to an extraordinary Assembly of Hearers from (illegible)

After which, Mr. Hollingshead was first ordained & set apart to the Word of the ministry & immediately after installed, & set over the Congregation at Fairfield. Mr. Duffield gave the charges both to the Minister & people, in a plain, pathetic & judicious Manner!

The Sermon & whole Exercise being over, the People dispersed. I dined with the Miss Hollingsheads at Squire HARRISES, while we were dining there came on a violent Tempest of Rain, Thunder, & Wind!

After the Rain about four o'clock, the Minister & People, as many as could attend, went down to Bridge-Town, where Mr. Duffield appointed to preach at six. (68)

Fithian travelled to Princeton soon after this, but headed south through Fairton, having heard of a tutoring job available in Virginia. On August 2 1st, he spent the night at the home of Hollingshead's mother. He remained a while longer to be present for a most wonderful occasion, Hollingshead's wedding.

"About nine in the Evening the Rev'd William Hollinshead & Miss Sally McCalla were married, by Mr. Sproat, without a numerous Train of Guests, as is much the most decent – or a Splendid Entertainment – which is always Superfluous." (69)

Hollingshead and Fithian would meet again, but under most unhappy circumstances. When the Revolutionary War drew men into conflict, chaplains were needed to minister to their spiritual needs. Fithian, along with his pastor from Greenwich, Andrew Hunter, offered their services. Diseases of many kinds swept through the army camps. On September 23, 1776, Fithian, having been stricken with illness several times, was found to be seriously ill. Hollingshead had apparently also become a chaplain for the army (at approximately the same time that the young Ethan Osborn was serving with Washington's troops). The Fairfield congregation must have given him a leave of absence, as did many congregations through the colonies. Hollingshead found Fithian "lying upon a thin bed raised from the floor only by a little straw covered with a blanket or two... reduced to the lowest state one would imagine possible for human nature to support under." (70) Hollingshead's friend succumbed to the fever on the morning of October 8, one more of the many souls he comforted in those extremely trying times.

Hollingshead's ministry has been most remembered for the relocation and rebuilding which took place during his stay. The frame building in use for so many years (since 1717) had to be torn down in 1775. Pulpit and benches were set up in the shade of an enormous oak tree near the site of the old building. Public worship was held here in fair weather. Plans were undertaken for a new site and a new Meeting House.

The hallowed and grateful association of the old place, even though sanctified by the graves of their parents, were made subordinate to the prosperity, convenience, and welfare of the people, and of posterity. The good of the township required that the church should stand on the main road running through its centre from one end to the other. Accordingly, they bought land here, and determined that a suitable edifice should be erected. (71)

Notes in the session records at the time of the church's bicentennial celebration recall that during 1775 and 1776, two hundred loads of stone and eight hundred feet of lumber were gathered on the newly purchased property. Local tradition preserves the story that British troops confiscated the materials and used them to build a docking facility on the Fairfield side of the Cohansy River across from Greenwich, the town where local youths, dressed as Indians, burned British tea stored in community basements, imitating the "Boston Tea Party." (72) Whether such confiscation occurred or not is uncertain, but stones left at Laning's Wharf suggest the possibility of its having taken place. At any rate, construction of the new church home was understandably delayed by the demands and uncertainties of the Revolutionary War. The congregation met for six years on rough benches set outdoors among the trees at the old New England Towne cemetery. The harshness of the more severe seasonal weather must have been a sorely trying experience for the faithful of the congregation. But Mr. Hollingshead's ministry was adequate to hold them together and lead them on to the long-awaited erection of their new building.

Finally in 1780, most of the British forces in the area were transferred further south, and work was begun.

Providence greatly favored the design, and no rain fell from the time the foundations were laid, on the first day of May, until the rafters were raised and the roof put on in the middle of June.

Thus in spring and summer the work advanced so rapidly that before the first week of autumn was past, the Rev. Mr. Hollingshead, sharing the joy and thankfulness of his people, could, in this house, lead their profound and grateful devotions. He preached his first sermon here, September 7th, 1780, from Philippians, 3:7. 'But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.' (73)

The building was erected on a lot one mile east of the former site, on the main road connecting Fairton with Cedarville. The walls were constructed of native stone, exposed on the exterior, plastered inside. A balcony extended from three walls, with a tall wineglass pulpit, capped by a sounding board, at balcony level on the fourth wall. Clear windows on both levels permitted light to pour in from all directions. There was ample seating space for prospective growth in the congregation. That growth was not long in coming. Forty-eight additions were made in the spring of 1781, and almost that many more before the end of the year. (74)

In 1783, Hollingshead left the Fairfield Presbyterian Church, having accepted a call to serve as pastor of the large and prominent Circular or Independent Church of Charleston, South Carolina. He continued there until 1815, when he was stricken while in the pulpit on the Lord's Day. His health deteriorated until his death on January 16, 1817. (75)

62 "Whitaker Address," Bicentennial Celebration, pp.22-23.

63 Arthur D. Pierce, *Smuggler's Woods; Jaunts and Journeys in Colonial and Revolutionary New Jersey* (New Brunswick; Rutgers University Press, 1960), p. 144. Pierce includes quite a bit of information about Fithian, including an especially enjoyable chapter about the romance between Philip and his beloved wife, Laura.

64 "Journal of Philip Vickers Fithian", July 17, 1773.

66 Ibid, July 17.

67 Ibid, July 18.

68 Ibid, July 28.

69 Ibid, July 29.

70 Ibid, August 21.

71 Pierce, *Smuggler's Woods*, p. 165.

72 Nevin, *Encyclopedia of the Presbyterian Church*, p. 226.

73 Pierce, *Smuggler's Woods*, pp. 118-143.

74 "Whitaker Address," Bicentennial Celebration, pp. 23-24.

75 Ibid, p. 24.