ABSTRACT

NO PEACE IN NEW LONDON: MATHER BYLES, THE ROGERENES, AND THE QUEST FOR RELIGIOUS ORDER IN LATE COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND

by Jonathan Blake Vaughan

In April, 1768 Congregational minister Mather Byles abruptly left his parishioners in New London, Connecticut and converted to the Church of England. Even though Anglicanism had been marginal in colonial New England, Byles joined a growing number of “apostates” who abandoned Congregational orthodoxy for the sense of order and stability afforded by the official church of imperial Britain. Byles stated that among his primary reasons for leaving New London and Congregationalism were the incessant conflicts that arose between him and the religious dissenters known as the Rogerenes. This thesis narrates the conflict between Byles and the followers of John Rogers—a little known series of incidents that occurred during Byles’s tenure in New London—as well as Byles’s subsequent reassessment of the viability of the New England Way and conversion to the Church of England.
NO PEACE IN NEW LONDON: MATHER BYLES, THE ROGERENES, AND THE
QUEST FOR RELIGIOUS ORDER IN LATE COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of History
by
Jonathan Blake Vaughan
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2009

Advisor__________________
Carla Gardina Pestana

Reader__________________
Andrew R. L. Cayton

Reader__________________
P. Renée Baernstein
Table of Contents

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1
Chapter 1: Land of Steady Habits? ..................................................................................... 6
Chapter 2: From Bliss to Crisis: Mather Byles’s New London Ministry ......................... 21
Chapter 3: A Congregational Loss—An Anglican Gain .................................................. 31
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................ 46
Bibliography ..................................................................................................................... 49
Introduction

In April, 1768 much of New England was abuzz over reports coming from New London, Connecticut about Congregational minister Mather Byles, Jr. At the end of the month the thirty-three-year-old clergyman returned to his hometown of Boston from New London, where he had served as the minister of the First Congregational Church for ten years. On April 12 Byles had announced to his stunned New London parishioners that he would soon sail to England for Episcopal ordination with the intention of returning to Boston to become minister of the Anglican Christ Church. Byles’s conversion to the Church of England was the most shocking defection from Congregationalism—the established religion of colonial Massachusetts and Connecticut—since former Yale Rector Timothy Cutler led a handful of Congregational ministers and students to convert to Anglicanism in 1722. Byles descended from a long line of illustrious New England divines who had labored to establish and maintain Congregational hegemony in colonial New England. Although Anglicans comprised only a small minority of the New England population, Byles joined a growing number of “apostates” who abandoned Congregational orthodoxy for the sense of order and stability afforded by the official church of imperial Britain. He also escaped an unpleasant situation in New London. In the Connecticut seaport town the young parson had participated in years of conflict with colonial Connecticut’s infamous religious sectarians—the Rogerenes. As Byles looked to embark on a new career as an Anglican minister in Boston, New Englanders wrote about and discussed the minister’s departure from the “New England Way.”

The New England Way was established by ministers who migrated to the new colonies in the first half of the seventeenth century. Men such as John Cotton and Richard Mather left England in the 1630s in hopes of establishing a society that would become religiously what Massachusetts governor John Winthrop had referred to in 1630 as “a city upon a hill.” In opposition to the Church of England, these early New England divines believed that religious authority should reside in individual churches and communities. They gave shape and definition to the ecclesiology which came to be known as Congregationalism—an ecclesiastical system whereby churches are self-governing congregations. In 1648 a synod of ministers from Massachusetts and Connecticut drew
up the Cambridge Platform. The declaration endorsed the Westminster Confession and upheld Congregationalism as the appropriate form of ecclesiastical organization.

The concept of a local covenant, or contract between God and his elect, pervaded the theology and social relationships of early New England Congregationalists. Power, therefore, was decentralized in seventeenth-century New England society and placed in many hands within local contexts. The ultimate authority in both political and religious spheres was the Bible, but the commitments made to congregation and community through voluntary obedience to covenants ensured order and a functional system of political and religious governance. Churches were established only by means of a local covenant and individual members could only be granted release from their sacred oath with the concurrence of their local congregation. As Harry Stout has noted about the power of the local covenant, “Persons leaving without the consent of the body sacrificed not only church membership but also property title, which was contingent on local residence.”

Thus, seventeenth-century New England towns achieved high levels of social cohesion as the organization of town life—the election of “selectmen” to run the town’s day-to-day affairs and the distribution of property titles—mirrored in practice the autonomous, self-ruling congregations that bound each community member to its minister and to one another. “By locating power in the particular towns and defining institutions in terms of local covenants and mutual commitments,” Stout argues, “the dangers of mobility and atomism—the chief threats to stability in the New World—were minimized.”

Most New England towns of the seventeenth century proved remarkably successful in maintaining internal peace, order, and uniformity of religious expression.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, however, the religious and social ideals established for New England society by the generation of John Cotton and Richard Mather had already faced significant challenges both from the expansion of communities and from the growing problem of religious dissent. The mid-century revivals of the Great Awakening further exposed the weaknesses of New England’s Congregational establishment, and by the American Revolution some individuals had simply lost faith.

---

2 Ibid.
altogether in the New England Way. New London’s Congregational minister—Mather Byles, Jr.—was one of those individuals.

Historians have paid little attention to Byles’s ministerial career even though it speaks to a number of significant developments in late colonial New England. For more than ten years, Byles ministered to the New London congregation that called him at the age of twenty-two to serve as its pastor. But his years in Connecticut convinced the parson that the religious and social institutions his forefathers established nearly a century and a half before failed to secure order in his New London church and community. In particular, Byles’s clashes with the infamous New London sectarians known as the Rogerenes revealed to the minister the inability of Congregationalism to contain religious dissent. This thesis narrates the conflict between Byles and the followers of John Rogers—a little known series of incidents that occurred during Byles’s tenure in New London—as well as Byles’s subsequent reassessment of the viability of the New England Way and conversion to the Church of England.

Byles’s conflict with colonial Connecticut’s most famous sectarians deserves the attention of historians for a number of reasons. The New London clash can help us to understand better the cultural diversity of colonial Connecticut. Scant scholarly research has been devoted to the religious, social, and cultural history of this colony as historians have regularly presented research on colonial Massachusetts as representative of all of New England. Denizens of eighteenth-century Connecticut often cultivated different socio-religious values from even their closest neighbors and were less entrenched in imperial affairs than those who lived in places such as Boston. The Rogerenes, for example, presented one of the earliest and most vitriolic criticisms of Congregational hegemony beginning in the 1670s in New London—a town that was also home to many of Connecticut’s most influential Congregational leaders during the colonial period.

Until recently scholars largely ignored John Rogers and the Rogerenes—the first indigenous sect in Britain’s mainland colonies. Susan Chongmi Kim’s doctoral dissertation written in 2006—“Mr. Rogers’s Neighborhood: Religious Dissent in New London, 1674-1721”—is the most complete work to date on the Rogerenes’ dissenting
beliefs and practices.³ Kim’s dissertation explores the sect’s position in the religious landscape of colonial New England and the wider Atlantic world during the decades of John Rogers’s life. But Kim centers her study on the actions of John Rogers and largely ignores many sources that illuminate the later history of the Rogerenes that begins with Rogers’s death in 1721 and extends into the second half of the eighteenth century. By outlining the conflict between the New London sectarians and Byles, this thesis offers a glimpse into a portion of Rogerene history overlooked by historians of colonial America.

Moreover, this study sheds light on the relationship between society and individual personality. In this sense, Byles stands as a case study which may enhance our comprehension of how certain individuals negotiated religious identity in New London and beyond. Byles is an excellent subject because his career seems representative of those of a multitude of men and women around the Atlantic and in other reaches of the British Empire. Byles joined a more general movement in the mid-eighteenth century among many British colonists toward identification with the institutions, emblems, and language of the established order in the British Empire as a whole. By examining Byles’s career we can better grasp the religious and social dimensions of that shift. Thus, this thesis joins the growing number of works that have emphasized the anglicanization of colonial American society during the first two-thirds of the eighteenth century.⁴

As a microhistory this study posits events uniquely related to New London, Mather Byles, and the Rogerenes as exemplary of the changes occurring throughout Connecticut and the rest of New England. The particular therefore intimates broader issues affecting the culture of New England and the British Empire as a whole. Religious conflict in New London was informed by the weakening of Congregational unity throughout New England. At the same time it is important to keep in mind that Mather Byles and the Rogerenes were key players in shaping their society as much as they were

influenced by the transitions within it. Byles’s conversion to the Church of England informs us about how Congregationalists in late colonial New England attempted to deal with issues of religious order and dissent within a rapidly changing religious and social milieu.
Chapter 1: Land of Steady Habits?

When Mather Byles arrived in New London to preach his first sermon at the First Congregational Church in the spring of 1757, he entered one of Connecticut’s most important towns. Since its founding, New London contained some of the wealthiest and most influential families in the colony, led in the expansion of Connecticut’s economy, and played host to many of the colony’s most controversial socio-religious incidents. By the first half of the eighteenth century, New London had one of the most complex and differentiated economic and social structures in all of New England. The town’s religious life, not surprisingly, reflected such conditions. While serving as minister of the First Congregational Church, Byles was forced to negotiate certain challenges unique to New London.

New London: Portrait of a Town

The town of New London was incorporated in 1646, at the start of the second decade of Connecticut’s existence.¹ For twelve years, the town was called Pequot because the Pequot tribe dominated the lands that would later comprise New London County. The tireless colonizer John Winthrop, Jr., was responsible for its English settlement beginning in the summer of 1645. “The blessing of the Lord be upon you, and he protect and guide you in this great undertaking,” Governor Winthrop of Massachusetts wrote to his son the following year.² Winthrop hoped that his son might claim the area for Massachusetts before the settlers of the Connecticut River Towns attempted a similar establishment. The younger Winthrop succeeded in establishing a permanent town, but two imperial court decisions in 1646 and again in 1647 dictated that it be part of Connecticut Colony.³

The town lay at the mouth of the Thames River—the colony’s second most important waterway, opening directly to Long Island Sound. As with the other Connecticut towns of Saybrook, Lyme, and Stonington, New London’s location on water

¹ For additional information on the formation of Connecticut’s earliest and most important towns see Bruce Daniels, The Connecticut Town: Growth and Development, 1635-1790 (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1979).
² John Winthrop to John Winthrop, Jr., October, 1646, Winthrop Papers, Volume V, 1645-1649 (Massachusetts Historical Society, 1947), 114.
made it an attractive location to plant a town even though its land was not especially conducive to farming.\(^4\) New Haven and New London, both located on the coast, possessed the colony’s two best harbors. In the west, New Haven’s harbor was ideal for trade with New York, and New London’s in the east was equally so for that with Boston and Rhode Island. New London’s harbor was the finest in the colony harboring more ships than any other Connecticut town during the eighteenth century. As a result, New London held the most extensive foreign trade links, first with Newfoundland during the seventeenth century and subsequently with Barbados throughout the eighteenth century.

New London, along with Hartford, Middletown, New Haven, and Norwich, emerged as economic centers by the mid-eighteenth century with nucleated business districts and appended outlying countrysides. While their central location on the Connecticut River meant that Hartford and New Haven were slightly larger and more influential, New Londoners could take pride in their town’s important history within the colony. Connecticut’s first three governors (Winthrop, Jr. being the first) were drawn from New London. Moreover, Thomas Short, commissioned as colony printer, established Connecticut’s first printing press in the town in 1709.\(^5\) Also, by an act of Parliament in 1710, New London was made the chief post office in Connecticut. As a populous urban center, New London contained not only prosperous traders but a concentration of professional men such as lawyers, doctors, public officials and well-to-do manufacturers. These men formed a large upper stratum both of status and wealth, contrasted with numerous laborers, mostly sailors and apprentices.\(^6\) New Londoners also purchased a surprisingly large number of African slaves who were used mainly as domestic laborers.\(^7\) While never cosmopolitan, New London was unquestionably a significant town and the seat of eastern Connecticut up through the revolutionary era.

\(^4\) The most immediate lands surrounding New London were for the most part hilly and stony.
\(^5\) Short died soon after printing the colony’s first book (the Saybrook Platform) in 1710, and Timothy Green was then named the government’s printer.
\(^7\) For more on African-American slaves in towns such as New London see Wendy Anne Warren, “Enslaved Africans in New England, 1638-1700,” PhD diss, Yale University, 2008.
The Elusive Goal of Religious Unity

Beginning in the first half of the seventeenth century, New England’s dominant ideal was to cultivate pious Congregational communities. As stated in the introduction, the local covenants that defined Congregationalism largely succeeded in ensuring order and restraining dissent in most New England communities. Exceptions, however, gave evidence to the fact that the New England Way was an ideal and not always a reality in seventeenth-century society. Congregational orthodoxy prevailed in Connecticut into the eighteenth century, but conflict and disorder could be found even during the seventeenth century in towns such as New London, where the colony’s religious establishment faced some of its earliest and most serious challenges.

New London was famous for its terrific harbor, but it became equally well-known as a center of socio-religious conflict during the century leading up to the American Revolution. The town and its surrounding communities were home to some of the most influential, and at times controversial, religious people and events in all of colonial New England. Like other important towns by the turn of the eighteenth century, New London struggled to sustain the New England Way in the face of a rapidly expanding population, increasingly complex economic structures, and the challenges of religious dissent. Congregationalism remained the most powerful religious presence in New London throughout the eighteenth century, but as early as the 1670s the Standing Order faced serious challenges by various groups in and around the town. Because of its proximity to religiously plural Rhode Island and the constant influx of people in and out of its harbor, New London proved more susceptible to dissent than most other towns in the “Land of Steady Habits.” Vestiges of Congregational hegemony and social homogeneity could still be found in the town in the first few decades of the eighteenth century. But more conspicuous in New London were the presence of religious diversity and the evidences that the colony’s established order had faced and would continue to face serious challenges.

---

8 The term “Standing Order” refers to the symbiotic relationship between church and state embodied in New England’s Congregational ministers and civil magistrates.

9 Mitford M. Mathews, ed., A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) defines “Land of Steady Habits” as “1. Connecticut, applied in allusion to the strict morals of its inhabitants,” (page 954). More commonly the term refers to the colony/state’s reluctance to change; Rhode Island’s 1644 charter granted religious freedom to all its inhabitants.
The Rogerenes

The first and most notorious challengers of Congregational hegemony in New London were the sectarians that came to be known as the Rogerenes. The religious group derived its name from its founder—John Rogers—who at his death in 1721 was perhaps the best-known religious dissident of colonial Connecticut. Beginning in the 1670s, Rogers constructed a theology and a religious community that clashed violently with the Standing Order of Connecticut. His faith combined various New England religious tenants, principally those of Baptists and Quakers. Rogers’s religious dissent served as a model for dozens of followers. Together, they challenged the parameters of religious expression and changed the religious milieu of colonial Connecticut.

By the 1660s, John Rogers was considered a promising young man of one of the most influential families in all of Connecticut. His father was the leading taxpayer in New London and owned vast acres of land north of the town. In 1670 Rogers married Elizabeth Griswold, the daughter of another wealthy family from nearby Saybrook. His status as an “honorable” New Londoner was questioned in 1674, however, when Rogers made public his own dramatic conversion which he later called God’s “acceptance of me in Jesus Christ.” His newfound faith was shaped by conversations with Baptists based in Newport, Rhode Island whom he met during business trips. Near the end of the year, Rogers, his brother James and his servant Japhet were baptized by a Baptist elder.

Rogers took his new religious identity seriously. Known by most as Seventh-Day Baptists, Rogers and the Newport sectarians reserved baptism for professing Christians alone and, as their name reveals, observed the Sabbath on the last day of the week rather than the first. Like these Baptists, Rogers was convinced that Congregationalists observed the Sabbath on Sundays based on tradition rather than scriptural warrant. Painstakingly studying the Bible after his conversion, Rogers developed a strong distaste for any religious practice he believed was not modeled in scripture. Rogers recounted that “upon diligent search of the Scriptures [I] found that the first-day Sabbath was no

---

10 See John R. Bolles and Anna B. Williams, The Rogerenes: Some Hitherto Unpublished Annals Belonging to the Colonial History of Connecticut (Stanhope Press: Boston, 1904), 152. The Rogerenes most often labeled themselves as “Baptists” or “Quakers,” and outsiders used several names to refer to the sect including “Baptists,” “Quakers,” “Quaker-Baptists,” “Rogerene Baptists,” or often “Rogerene Quakers.”
11 John Rogers, An Epistle to the Churches of Christ Called Quakers (New York, 1705), “To the Reader.”
12 Bolles and Williams, The Rogerenes, 123-149.
where commanded by any law of God and the scripture telling me, where no law is there can be no transgression, and that it is but vain to worship God by mens traditions.”

Deciding to observe strictly the Fourth Commandment by resting on Saturdays, Rogers began to work on the first days of each week.

But Rogers was not interested only in practicing his own convictions. He began to disrupt Congregational worship on Sundays in protest of what he saw as the unscriptural demand by Congregationalists that everyone in Connecticut observe the Sunday Sabbath on threat of fine or imprisonment. On a summer Sunday in 1678, for example, the thirty-year-old Rogers entered the New London meetinghouse and sat with his brother and father in the most prominent pew. After the Congregational service began, the three Rogers men stood up in the midst of the congregation. They denounced the observance of the Sunday Sabbath that was so diligently enforced within Puritan tradition, and they condemned the Congregationalists’ established protocols of Sabbath behavior. The three men were quickly ushered out of the church building, taken to prison, and soon thereafter put on trial. Fined £5 each, the Rogers men refused to pay these fines and were imprisoned. Forced to pay for their boarding expenses, they protested what they considered to be cruel persecutions against those who obeyed the teachings of God rather than the traditions of men.

Rogers’s continued study of the Bible soon led him to reject Sabbath observance altogether. He argued that the Scriptures revealed the Sabbath—instituted by God under the old covenant—was but a sign of the true spiritual rest that all future believers would enjoy in Christ under the new covenant. He compared the Sabbath to other signs from the Old Testament, including priestly sacrifices and circumcision, whose substances were revealed in the establishment of the second covenant in Christ. Rogers argued that Christ himself was the substance of these signs and “at his coming they were all nailed to his cross, and so ceased.” Thus, according to Rogers, the Congregationalists, like the Pharisees who persecuted Jesus and his followers for breaking the Sabbath, forced New Englanders to observe that which was no longer necessary. The sectarian was convinced

---

13 Rogers, *An Epistle to the Churches of Christ Called Quakers*, “To the Reader.”
14 See Bolles and Williams, *The Rogerenes*, 152.
15 Rogers, *An Epistle to the Churches of Christ Called Quakers*, 61.
that for those who enjoyed true and perpetual rest gained through genuine faith in Christ there was no longer a need to observe a Sabbath.

The more radical tone of his theology signaled Rogers’s desire to form a church more true to the Bible as he read it. He broke away from the Baptists in November, 1677 before the baptism of his wife Elizabeth. Rogers defied the Congregational authorities and usurped the Baptist leadership by baptizing Elizabeth himself. By this time, he felt he could no longer suppress his convictions.16 For Rogers this baptism confirmed his calling to establish and lead a new congregation of believers. He organized private meetings with family members and close friends to explain his understanding of scripture and to point out where existing religious groups were amiss in their theology or practice. A small group of these New Londoners soon agreed with Rogers’s understanding of the Sabbath, rejection of state-supported religion, and belief that ministers should financially support themselves. Within a few years several dozen neighbors joined Rogers’s group, and they became a highly visible segment of New London religious life.

The formation of the Rogerene community was shaped by a unique understanding of the Christian faith, and its ardent character emanated from the sectarians’ opposition to the Congregational establishment. Rogers led his followers in demonstrating against the First Congregational Church. Elizabeth’s family, however, grew angry over Rogers’s dissent and feared the social shame his heterodoxy might bring. Despite her husband’s pleading, Elizabeth was convinced by her family to recant her baptism and to secure a divorce from Rogers. Although his radical dissent cost him the love of his life, Rogers did not renounce his beliefs or waver in his convictions. Instead, he led his followers in “an open declaration of war” against “the false church” and “the beast,” which represented the Congregational churches and Connecticut’s civil authorities, respectively.17

Rogers continued his riotous demonstrations against New London’s First Congregational Church until his death in 1721. His willingness to oppose New London’s influential and popular minister Gurdon Saltonstall solidified his reputation within Connecticut’s Standing Order as an obstinate dissident. His disruptions of the

---

16 Until the eighteenth century, only Congregational ministers were authorized to baptize in Connecticut.
Congregational services earned him fines, imprisonments, and public ridicule—Saltonstall’s “harsh strokes of discipline” against disorder.\textsuperscript{18} For example, one Sunday in the spring of 1694, Rogers burst into the New London meetinghouse and wheeled in a barrel full of shoes. He proceeded to dump the shoes in front of the pulpit and call out for buyers among the stunned and offended worshippers. Swiftly carried to prison for breaking the Sabbath, Rogers claimed that “Christ drove the wheelbarrow.”\textsuperscript{19} According to New London court records, Rogers faced fines of £50 for disturbing the congregation and £5 for his ‘evil speaking against the ordinances of God,’ and was forced to ‘stand upon a ladder leaning against the gallows, with [a] rope about his neck, for a quarter of an hour’ for this serious violation against orderly worship.\textsuperscript{20} Such scenes became commonplace over the course of Rogers’s life. He refused to conform to Connecticut’s accepted protocols of religious or civic behavior. A model of perseverance for his followers, the sectarian leader refused to compromise his faith even when his dissent threatened both his social standing in the community and his physical safety.

Later Rogerene leaders found inspiration in Rogers’s memory, and they proved to be equally recalcitrant in the face of Congregational order throughout the eighteenth century. Their riotous demonstrations became less frequent, but these Rogerenes continued to document their beliefs, record their sufferings, explain their disruptive actions, and evangelize their readers. Despite the Rogerenes’ reputation as boisterous demonstrators “in the thickest of battles” they, like their founder, “picked up the pen rather than the sword” using words to challenge Connecticut’s Standing Order.\textsuperscript{21} The Rogerenes authored approximately forty titles during the eighteenth century. But the sect failed to secure significant sympathy or support in New London or beyond. Because of the Rogerenes’ reputation as radical dissidents, the works of their opponents, such as

\textsuperscript{18} Frances Manwaring Calkins, \textit{History of New London, Connecticut from the First Survey of the Coast in 1612 to 1852} (New London: Published by the Author, 1852), 377.
\textsuperscript{19} Connecticut State Library, Crimes and Misdemeanors, Volume 1, discussed in Kim, \textit{Mr. Rogers’s Neighborhood}, 1. See footnote 1 where Kim notes: “Court records mention ‘merchandise’ rather than explicitly stating ‘shoes,’ but most historians agree that the wheeled in items were shoes of John Rogers’s own manufacture.” Alongside his other business investments, Rogers worked as a cobbler to occupy his time.
\textsuperscript{20} Connecticut State Library, Superior Court Records at Hartford, May 1695, quoted in Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 2.
New London minister and later Connecticut governor Gurdon Saltonstall, however, were more respected and widely read.

The vitriolic diatribes from their contemporaries, however, did not deter the Rogerenes from defending the legacy of their founder and giving testimony to their faith. Polemics written against the Rogerenes most often cited their disregard of the Sabbath as deliberate, unlawful, and dangerous to the welfare of New London and to all New England communities. One such attack written in 1725 by Peter Pratt, who had once been a Rogerene himself, stressed the “molestations to the worship and people of God” caused by those who “oppose the Sabbath.”

Rogerene leaders such as John Rogers, Jr., John Bolles, and his son Joseph Bolles responded to these charges in two ways. First, the sect challenged any reader, often with promise of monetary compensation, to produce any biblical reference that might invalidate the Rogerenes’ denial of a Sabbath. “We desire people to search the Scriptures,” wrote a group of Rogerene leaders, “and the first person that shews us the chapter and verse in the Bible, that says one word about keeping the first day of the week for a Sabbath, shall have ten pounds lawful money reward for his trouble.” Second, Rogerene authors cited the Congregationalists’ persecution of the dissenters as an attempt to restrict the sect from practicing their faith as their consciences might dictate and as the ultimate source of the conflict between the two groups. In one pamphlet certain Rogerenes claimed that the Congregational authorities “persecute God’s children for not conforming to their idolatrous Sabbath, set up by men.” The Rogerenes saw their protests in New London as the appropriate response to Connecticut’s established religion.

A Different Religious Milieu

To John Rogers and his followers, no one posed a greater threat to the growth of their sect than did New London minister Gurdon Saltonstall. In the years surrounding the turn of the eighteenth century, Saltonstall held unparalleled influence on the social and

---

22 Peter Pratt, *The prey taken from the strong Or, An historical account, of the recovery of one from the dangerous errors of Quakerism* (New London, 1725), 56-57.
ecclesiastical affairs of New London and Connecticut as a whole. As New London’s Congregational minister from 1691 to 1707, Saltonstall was an assiduous exponent of Congregational orthodoxy and socio-religious order. Like all of New England’s Congregational ministers and magistrates, Saltonstall believed that in order to control society and to suppress sin a nexus between ecclesiastical and civil authorities was necessary. In addressing the Connecticut General Assembly in 1697, the New London minister charged that “God hath designed the Civil Government of his People, to concenter with Ecclesiastical Administrations: and (though by different Mediums) they are both levelled at the same end; the maintaining of Piety and promoting of a Covenant walk with him.”

New London’s minister judged that the alternative to such strong government was chaos. The Congregational establishment provided, Saltonstall believed, an umbrella over New London under which ecclesiastical and social order could be maintained and dissent checked.

After being called from the sacred desk to occupy the governor’s chair from 1707 to 1724, Saltonstall labored to establish as law the principles that he favored. After the crown demanded in 1708 that Connecticut tolerate religious dissenters, Saltonstall responded by urging the General Assembly to reform and strengthen the colony’s ecclesiastical structure with a “Confession of Faith for the Better Regulation of the Administration of Church Discipline.”

Under his leadership the Saybrook Platform was passed in 1708, which would be the colony’s “ecclesiastical constitution” until after the Revolutionary War. The Saybrook Platform adopted a Presbyterian model of ecclesiastical organization, establishing county consociations composed of the ministers and lay delegates to hear appeals. As Saltonstall desired, the authority of Connecticut ministers over their parishes was strengthened at the expense of congregational rule. Ultimately, the Platform sanctioned the state to enforce orthodox belief and church discipline, according to Christopher Grasso, “warranted by the perceived need for unity,

26 Saybrook Platform, quoted in Ibid., 40.
uniformity, and moral order under the covenant.”28 Certainly Saltonstall’s earlier experiences with the Rogerenes influenced the governor’s ideas concerning the need for new means of controlling religious dissent and preserving order in Connecticut. If the goals of unity, concord, and harmony were never fully achieved as envisioned in the seventeenth century, the Saybrook Platform represented the fact that neither were they ever fully abandoned in the eighteenth century.

Still, Congregationalists in New London, as in other parts of Connecticut, faced major social changes during the eighteenth century. New London’s First Congregational Church was forced to negotiate an expanding town alongside competition from other ecclesiastical societies and the Rogerenes. When Eliphalet Adams was chosen in 1708 to succeed Gurdon Saltonstall as minister, the whole town still contained only one meetinghouse, one regular church and congregation, and one ordained minister.29 By 1722, however, town growth led families in the North Parish of New London to raise their own meetinghouse—the Second Congregational Church of New London. As in New England’s other growing urban centers, rapid expansion in New London complicated earlier ideals of community life.

Some older denizens of the town and many newcomers to New London also began to form different ecclesiastical societies. As early as 1705, a Baptist church was established in nearby Groton.30 Regular Baptists and Seventh-Day Baptists joined together to build a house of worship in New London in 1730. The Regular Baptists first appeared in court records in 1704. Anglicans also made inroads in New London, forming a society in 1726 and erecting a church building in 1732. The growing number of Englishmen migrating to New London as merchants and traders had no ties to the New England Way and most often opted to attend the Anglican St. James Church.31

The expanding population and the presence of other religious groups altered the relationship between the First Congregational Church and the community as a whole. No longer the exclusive ecclesiastical body in New London, the Congregational members reorganized themselves as a society in the early 1730s. Their decision acknowledged both

28 Grasso, A Speaking Aristocracy, 83.
29 Adams was the last minister “settled” by the town.
30 Groton was originally part of New London but separated from it in 1704. A second Baptist church was formed in Groton in 1765.
31 Caulkins, History of New London, passim.
the presence of other religious groups in the town and the growing difficulties associated with collecting ecclesiastical taxes from a now more religiously plural community. The society decided that it would attempt to pay Adams’s salary at least partly through free contributions.32 For years, some New Londoners had complained about paying taxes to support a minister they did not call their own, and in a series of concessions during the late 1720s those individuals were exempted from supporting the Congregational minister. Members of the First Congregational Church, therefore, were forced to make up the difference in their minister’s salary. Those New Londoners who were not members of the First Congregational Church chose to funnel their support to their respective churches—Anglican or Baptist.33

Congregationalism in New London also continued to face challenges from the Rogerenes. Second and third generation Rogerenes, like their predecessors, refused to compromise on the central points of disagreement they held with their Congregational counterparts, especially those regarding Sabbath observance. While many Rogerenes married outside of the sect and shared social and fiscal interests with other New Londoners, these same individuals continued to resist any threats to the free expression of their faith. Rogerenes insisted that they be free to worship God as they saw fit, and their writings echoed their readiness to endure whatever punishments would come in response to their dissent.

The number of Rogerenes slowly declined during the middle decades of the eighteenth century, but a vibrant community of members could be found in and around New London for years to come. During the revival in New England known by most historians as the Great Awakening, Rogerene dissent was overshadowed by Congregational infighting. The mounting distrust within the Congregationalist churches in and around New London and the growth of other ecclesiastical societies also meant that Rogerene dissent was no longer the greatest threat to Congregationalism in the town. By 1740 it was as clear in New London as elsewhere in New England that

32 Ibid.
33 For more on the competing ideas about the relationship between church and state in colonial Connecticut see Bushman, *Puritan to Yankee*, 221-232. By 1729 those who proved they were members of other ecclesiastical societies in New London could simply apply to have their taxes sent to their minister of choice. Those who did not identify with any religious body, however, were still required to pay taxes to support Congregational ministers until the nineteenth century.
Congregationalism faced as great of a challenge from within as they would ever face from without.

**New London and the Great Awakening**

The revivalism associated with the Great Awakening shook New London as hard as any other town in New England. Eliphalet Adams, along with most of the ministers throughout New London County, was an early proponent of the series of revivals that touched much of the region from 1740 to 1743. Similar to his more famous contemporary Jonathan Edwards, Adams fell into the camp Thomas Kidd has defined as the “moderate evangelicals”—people who supported the revivals at their outset but became concerned with the chaotic, leveling extremes that the awakenings produced. Adams likely welcomed revival to New London’s First Congregational Church in part because the church’s position in the town had grown increasingly tenuous since the beginning of his ministry in 1708. Peter Onuf has noted that the number of Congregational communicants in the parish in 1740 was unusually small compared to other Connecticut parishes. The church’s relatively small membership was due in large part to the success of dissenting churches in the town during the first half of the eighteenth century. Adams’s reputation as a “chief pillar of our churches” could not occlude the fact that the Congregationalist church failed to attract significant numbers of new converts and families in the years leading up to the Great Awakening.

Nor could Adams restrain the threat to social order and the disruption to public life the revivals brought to the seaport town. New Londoners found themselves at the center of the Separatist controversy that painfully split many of New England’s parishes. Beginning with the preaching of revivalist Gilbert Tennant at the end of March, 1741 in New London, revival broke out in the First Congregational Church. But divisions soon

---

34 Thomas Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xiv. Kidd argues that the debates surrounding the evangelical movement that began in the 1740s should be thought about “in terms of three points on a continuum” with *moderate evangelicals* positioned between the *anti-revivalists* and the *radical evangelicals*.

35 Peter S. Onuf, “New Lights in New London: A Group Portrait of the Separatists,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 37, no. 4 (Oct., 1980): 632. Based on church records, Onuf concludes that only about sixteen percent of all parish residents were Congregational church members, despite notoriously lax admission standards.

arose among Adams’s parishioners. The dramatic preaching of James Davenport in the
town and surrounding areas just two months later resulted in more serious debates within
the church about the revival. Those members in greatest support of the Awakening
organized private meetings, and, in November of the following year, five prominent
members of the First Congregational Church withdrew from its communion. In early
1743, approximately one hundred New Londoners attended the Separatist services held at
the home of Samuel Harris.\textsuperscript{37} The Harris home also housed the Shepard’s Tent—a
fledgling seminary founded by Tennant and attended by a handful of aspiring New Light,
evangelical ministers beginning in the fall of 1742.\textsuperscript{38} Davenport’s supporter, Timothy
Allen, who was previously dismissed from his pastorate at West Haven for his
enthusiastic support of the revivals, became the principle leader of the church and the
seminary.

Much of New England was aware of the events occurring in New London, but it
was Davenport’s return to the town in March 1743 that sealed the town’s fate of being
“regarded abroad as the focus of enthusiasm, discord, and confusion.”\textsuperscript{39} Despite being
warned by Connecticut authorities to stay out of the colony, Davenport returned to his
supporters in New London. The Separatists had met without interference until he entered
the town, where, according to Thomas Kidd, “he would stage the defining event of his
career.”\textsuperscript{40} To begin, Davenport publicly proclaimed that David Jewett—pastor of the
Congregational church in New London’s North Parish—was in all probability an
unconverted person. Davenport’s protests against the established ministers grew more
radical. On March 6, he led his Separatist followers in a book burning of works he
believed were either theologically Arminian or opposed to his revivalist ministry. The
works of such notable divines as Increase Mather, Charles Chauncy, Joseph Sewell,
Benjamin Coleman, and New London’s own Eliphalet Adams were among those heaped
into the bonfire. The following day Davenport proposed another burning, this time made

\textsuperscript{37} C. C. Goen, \textit{Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800: Strict Congregationalists and
Separate Baptists in the Great Awakening} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 69. For demographic
information see Onuf, “New Lights in New London.”
\textsuperscript{38} Tennant hoped to provide an evangelical alternative to Yale College which was firmly under Old Light
control during Thomas Clap’s presidency (1740-1766). For more on Clap’s vision for Yale see Grasso, \textit{A
Speaking Aristocracy}, 144-184.
\textsuperscript{39} Caulkins, \textit{History of New London}, 452.
\textsuperscript{40} Kidd, \textit{The Great Awakening}, 153.
out of "wigs, cloaks and breeches, Hoods, Gowns, Rings, Jewels and Necklaces," and
anything else that represented the "world." Some in the crowd, however, became
convinced that Davenport had gone too far with his radical enterprise and the fever
reached its pitch. Even more shocked by these abuses, civil authorities moved quickly to
quiet the "wild confusion" and to bring Davenport and other ringleaders to trial. While
Davenport’s orgy of religious enthusiasm proved to be the most remarkable event of the
Great Awakening in New England, Connecticut’s Standing Order feared that such a
bizarre and sensational affair might occur elsewhere if such radical behavior was not
quelled.

The religious upheaval in New London factored heavily in the suppression of
radical evangelicals and Separatism by Connecticut’s legislature during the early 1740s.
With the inability of churches such as the one in New London to maintain order, many
ministers looked to the colony’s civil authorities for support and protection. “The
Standing Order in the state intervened to support its counterpart in the church” one
historian has noted, "when it became apparent that the latter could not preserve its unity
unaided." The Connecticut General Court outlawed itinerant preaching in May 1742
after a majority of the colony’s ministers expressed concern about the divisions brewing
over the revivalism. A month later, the general association of ministers met in New
London and endorsed the new law. In the following months and years others measures
followed: New Light extremists were fined and imprisoned on various charges, students
who sympathized with New Lights were expelled from Yale, and the Shepard’s Tent was
shut down by the legislature. Despite these measures, Connecticut authorities could not
restore the religious conditions that prevailed before the revivals. In truth, the
Congregational establishment had already faced significant challenges before the
Awakening in towns such as New London.

---

41 Boston Evening Post, April 11, 1743 quoted in Harry S. Stout and Peter Onuf, “James Davenport and the
43 Oscar Zeichner, Connecticut’s Years of Controversy, 1750-1776 (Chapel Hill: University of North
New London’s Congregational Minister

When named minister of the First Congregational Church of New London, Mather Byles became the successor to two of colonial Connecticut’s most renowned and respected ministers—Gurdon Saltonstall and Eliphalet Adams. Byles could look forward to a career as a minister in a major New England town, but the young clergyman also inherited the deep religious divisions that had developed in New London’s relatively diverse community. Beginning with the Rogerenes in the 1670s, Congregational hegemony had faced periodical challenges in the seaport town. By the 1750s, it was a significant, but a potentially distressing post: serving as New London’s chief ecclesiastical figure.

Byles would not have been ignorant of the possible difficulties associated with the position as minister of the First Congregational Church, but there is reason to believe that he may have thought that earlier conflicts would not pose a significant threat to his ministry. The Separatist church led by the supporters of Davenport had dissolved by the end of 1743, just months after Davenport’s arrest. Some of the Separatists rejoined the First Congregational Church while others became Baptists or chose not to attach themselves to any church at all. The Anglican and Baptist churches in New London continued to grow in the 1740s and 1750s, but it seems that a certain balance had been achieved among the various ecclesiastical options within the town. The Rogerenes remained a potential nuisance to anyone they perceived as a threat to their community, but the sect’s public protests had been infrequent and less caustic in the two decades before Byles arrived in New London. Finally, New London’s Congregationalists remained somewhat advantaged by the fact that their church continued to enjoy the support of the civil government. Like any minister, Byles had no pretentions that his ministry would be free of disagreements and disturbances, but the young preacher was optimistic about his chances for happiness in New London.
Chapter 2: From Bliss to Crisis: Mather Byles’s New London Ministry

Byles’s childhood and youth prepared him to be a successful minister in a major town.\(^1\) His birth in 1735 as the first child of Mather and Anna Byles granted him an immediate pedigree as member of one of New England’s most storied families. Mather Byles, Sr., pastor of the Hollis Street Church in Boston, was a well-known Congregational minister, humorist, and poet. Moreover, young Byles enjoyed recognition as the great-grandson of the famous Increase Mather (1639-1723), great nephew of Cotton Mather (1663-1728), and nephew of Massachusetts Governor Jonathan Belcher (1682-1757). “You derive from Ancestors who have been eminent in the World, and in the Church of Christ: Labour to serve your Lord, and shine as they did,” Byles, Sr. charged his son at the younger’s ordination ceremony in 1758.\(^2\) Surrounded by what historian Christopher Grasso has called New England’s “speaking aristocracy,” Byles would have recognized at an early age his potential place within the traditional colonial Standing Order of pious magistrates and learned ministers.\(^3\)

With the precocity one might have expected from such a child, Byles entered Harvard at the age of twelve. He was the youngest in his class. Having already learned Latin from his father, and considering Byles’s promise, Harvard awarded him several scholarships. Byles was ranked near the top of the class of 1751, and in 1754 he was awarded his Master’s Degree.\(^4\) After his second degree, Byles traveled around preaching in rural parishes with what one historian later described as “a clarity and freshness which packed the meetinghouses with hearers weary of sermons which were, in the manner of his father’s generation, patchworks of biblical quotations.”\(^5\) Byles rarely approached eloquence, but his sermons were lucid and insightful. One of his earliest sermons was

\(^2\) Mather Byles, Sr., *The man of God throughly furnished to every good work* (New London, 1758), 20-21.
\(^3\) Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy*, 1. By “speaking aristocracy,” Grasso means “the domination of the few over the production of formal speech and writing.” He claims that “this speaking aristocracy is a subset of the social elite, comprising primarily clergymen in the first half of the century and clergymen and other educated white males in the second half of the century.”
\(^4\) Compared to his ministerial career Byles’s college years appear to have been unremarkable.
even published in Boston in 1755.⁶ Although standing in the shadow of his father, young Byles began to make a name for himself. New Londoners took notice and invited the twenty-two-year-old to preach at their meetinghouse in April 1757.

A Pleasant Marriage between Parson and People

Byles could not have found a people more desirous of an established minister than his future New London parishioners. Since the death nearly four years earlier of the Reverend Eliphalet Adams, the First Congregational Church had been without a fixed preacher.⁷ Parishioners such as Joshua Hempstead longed for someone to remedy their “unhappy Circumstances: our want of a Settled minister.”⁸ Byles seemed an excellent candidate for the post. His first sermon in New London, according to Hempstead, drew “a great assembly, 3 or 4 times So Big as it hath been of Late.”⁹ His heritage and his own brilliant promise won Byles esteem in New London before he could earn it. For three months Byles preached as a candidate and charmed the New London church members who, on July 28, voted unanimously to name him their minister. Byles accepted their call without hesitation.

In the ensuing years pastor and people were happy. Byles used the £240 settlement given to him by the First Congregational Church to build a house on Main Street in the center of town.¹⁰ Later, hoping to start a family, he married his second cousin Rebecca Walter in the spring of 1761. The couple shared a number of close friends among the New London elite including the Adams, Coit, Hubbard, and Saltonstall families. Based on Byles’s diary entries in 1765, the parson dined at the homes of Judge Joseph Coit and Russel Hubbard on at least three occasions each that year, and

---

⁶ Mather Byles, Divine Power and Anger Displayed in Earthquakes (Boston, 1755). After an earthquake felt throughout much of New England, Byles’s sermon addressed the divine sanction and anger associated with the event. While this sermon is erroneously attributed to Mather Byles, Sr. (1707-1778) by the Library of Congress, it is listed among the works of Mather Byles, Jr. in the family manuscripts at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁷ Adam’s ministry had lasted for over forty three years. For more information on the history of New London’s ministers and churches see Caulkins, History of New London, passim.


⁹ “April 10, 1757,” Ibid., 684.

¹⁰ In addition to an annual salary, Congregational ministers were usually offered a settlement sum to help them secure a residence in the town. With a salary of £100 and a settlement of £240 Byles accepted an above-average financial package from New London’s First Congregational Church.
exchanged a number of gifts with them and other prominent New London denizens.\footnote{Mather Byles, \textit{Mather Byles’s Diary}, 1765, American Antiquarian Society. Byles’s diary notes and account records are interleaved in Nathaniel Ames, \textit{An astronomical diary: or, almanack for the year of our Lord Christ, 1765} (New London, 1764). Byles’s 1765 entries are the only one’s that have survived from his years in New London.} Records indicate that Byles had no less amiable relations with the majority of the townspeople.

During his years in Connecticut, Byles wrote regularly to his family back in Boston.\footnote{Byles attempted to sit down and write to his father every Monday and to his sisters frequently as well. Most of these letters have survived and can be viewed at the Massachusetts Historical Society in the collection entitled “Byles Family Papers, 1757-1837” (Hereafter cited as MHS-Byles).} The surviving letters reveal a man contented with his marriage and ministry. “The lovely Woman,” Byles wrote of Rebecca shortly after their wedding, “seems to make my Happiness her constant Study.”\footnote{Mather Byles to Mather Byles, Sr., July 22, 1761, MHS-Byles.} Byles, writing to his father, equally relished in his parishioners’ affection: “When I add to this the Love and Esteem of my florishing & united People, who, since my keeping House, have been liberal almost to profusion; I find my warmest Petitions, relating to the present State more than answered. I had formed to myself no romantic Ideas of visionary, unattainable Bliss: I really possess much more than I thought possible.”\footnote{Ibid.} Reared in a minister’s home, Byles certainly was aware of the potential for both harmony and discord between a minister and his parishioners. In the letter to his father, Byles’s emphasis on his flock’s affirmation and warmth reflected his natural desire to minister in a community that valued his position and his person. In describing his place in the important seaport town, Byles did not shy away from self-approbation. “Our garden is the Admiration of the whole Town,” he wrote to his sister Catherine.\footnote{Mather Byles to Catherine Byles, January 15, 1765, MHS-Byles.} On a separate occasion, Byles informed his father that he had “the frequent Pleasure of hearing my Situation remarked by strangers as one of the Pleasantest in the Place and of seeing it every day wear more and more the face of Improvement.”\footnote{Mather Byles to Mather Byles, Sr., August 8, 1763, MHS-Byles.} Given the frankness that characterizes Byles’s correspondence, there is little reason to question Byles’s sincerity in characterizing his situation in New London as pleasant.

\begin{footnotesize}

\footnotetext[11]{Mather Byles, \textit{Mather Byles’s Diary}, 1765, American Antiquarian Society. Byles’s diary notes and account records are interleaved in Nathaniel Ames, \textit{An astronomical diary: or, almanack for the year of our Lord Christ, 1765} (New London, 1764). Byles’s 1765 entries are the only one’s that have survived from his years in New London.}

\footnotetext[12]{Byles attempted to sit down and write to his father every Monday and to his sisters frequently as well. Most of these letters have survived and can be viewed at the Massachusetts Historical Society in the collection entitled “Byles Family Papers, 1757-1837” (Hereafter cited as MHS-Byles).}

\footnotetext[13]{Mather Byles to Mather Byles, Sr., July 22, 1761, MHS-Byles.}

\footnotetext[14]{Ibid.}

\footnotetext[15]{Mather Byles to Catherine Byles, January 15, 1765, MHS-Byles.}

\footnotetext[16]{Mather Byles to Mather Byles, Sr., August 8, 1763, MHS-Byles.}

\end{footnotesize}
His heritage led Byles to expect to wield social clout, and he voiced virtually no complaints about his position as the town’s leading religious figure. His authority, however, was not without challenge. Conflict with the Rogerenes troubled his seemingly otherwise blissful station in New London.

**Conflict with the Rogerenes**

At the beginning of Byles’s tenure, the Rogerenes had created an alternate religious milieu in and around New London for more than eighty years. The young minister was aware of the sectarians and their decades of radical dissent in the area when he first accepted the ministerial post at the First Congregational Church. He doubtless encountered some Rogerenes in town within weeks of his arrival. And Rogerene leaders attended a few of the new minister’s first sermons to make their presence known and to gauge Byles’s response. Not only practicing their faith according to their convictions, the Rogerenes protested against the practices and legal establishment of Connecticut’s Congregational churches. The Rogerene rejection of a Sunday Sabbath led them to “labour on it publickly as on other Days, and not fear what Man can do.”

Moreover, the sectarians often visited “the meeting-house at New-London” in the years when Byles was pastor “to put the minister and people in mind how contrary their worship was to the Scriptures, and that it was not the worship of God.” During his New London ministry, Byles was forced to negotiate the conflict between their challenges to his authority and his own ideals respecting socio-religious order.

From the start, Byles had little interest in conversing with the Rogerenes or engaging in public debate. “We could never persuade the minister nor congregation” John Rogers III later complained, “to stop and hear what we had to say.” At least once, however, Byles publicly spoke in opposition to Rogerene aims. The sectarians were at the forefront of the parson’s mind when he delivered the Sunday sermon on January 14, 1759, a year and a half after becoming minister at the First Congregational Church. He described the Rogerenes as “a party of deluded visionaries, blinded by prejudice, and

---

19 Ibid.
obstinate in their errors.”20 Byles’s sermon addressed the chief issue of contention between the town’s orthodox and their Rogerenne neighbors—the proper observance of the Christian Sabbath. “Take away the Sabbath, and what would be the Consequence?” Byles asked before concluding his sermon.21 His answer certainly intended to reference the Rogerenes as a case in point: “Errors in Doctrine, and Corruption in Practice, would break in upon us, like a Flood.”22 Byles partly delivered this sermon in response to the advertisements often sent out by the Rogerenes “promising Ten Dollars reward, to any person that could shew us one word in the Bible, that forbids labour on this pretended Sabbath.”23 Byles believed that his sermon provided an adequate defense of the Sunday Sabbath in the face of Rogerenne criticisms.

The Rogerenes were not impressed by Byles’s exposition. Later that year, Rogerenne leader, Joseph Bolles, published a scathing response to Byles’s sermon. Rogerenne theology revolved around a more literal interpretation of the Bible, and, like John Rogers earlier, Bolles had little trust in beliefs or practices that lacked direct scriptural support. In particular, the Rogerenes took issue with Byles’s assertion that “All these Evidences taken together, I think, amount, if not to an absolute Demonstration; yet, at least, to a very high Probability, that the First Day of the Week, the Day on which our LORD JESUS CHRIST arose from the Dead, should be observed as the Christian Sabbath.”24 For the Rogerenes, “Probability” was simply not a sufficient directive to observe a Sabbath they could not find in the New Testament. Bolles claimed that Byles and his fellow New England Congregationalists “had only a form of godliness, and persecuted them which had the power and life thereof: And by laws of their own making, have made this pretended Sabbath, an abomination, even a great idol.”25 Despite such charged language, however, tensions between Byles and the Rogerenes bubbled but never boiled over during the minister’s first five years in New London.

To Byles’s disappointment, the Rogerenes grew bolder in their protests. Beginning in 1762, and more resolutely from 1764 to 1766, the Rogerenes sought to

21 Ibid., 20.
22 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 20.
disrupt the parson’s ministry. In a letter to his father on January 24, 1762, Byles described the previous Sabbath’s disturbance:

I was assaulted…in my Pulpit, by the Rogerines, who entered the Meeting House, in a Body, to bear their clamorous Testimony against Idolatrous Worship, at a Time when I happened to be preaching upon the same Subject. …They had been quiet for a considerable Time past: and what animated them to this mad Expedition, I know not; unless it was immoderate Thirst for Persecution. As soon as they spoke, I paused, and pronounced aloud, “Public Worship applies to civil Authority for Protection” I closed my Bible, and the Justices, Sheriff, and Constables, with the unanimous Assistance of all the Young People in the Assembly, knocked off their Hats, and pushed them headlong out of the House.26

As Byles’s letter reveals, their demonstrations against the Sabbath resembled the archetypical protests modeled by the sect’s founder—John Rogers. As Rogers had harnessed his energies to beleaguer Guerdon Saltonstall, these third- and fourth-generation Rogerenes set their sights on Byles, whom they targeted in their protests against Congregational standards. In describing the incident, Byles claimed ignorance concerning why the dissenters chose to create such a commotion. In truth, it remains somewhat of a mystery as to what elicited the Rogerenes’s renewed determination to disrupt Congregational worship and their particular distaste for Byles. His 1759 sermon aimed at defending the Sunday Sabbath is the only evidence that Byles took the offensive in the conflict with the sectarians. That Byles largely ignored the Rogerenes while in New London, however, surely only fueled their determination to challenge the young parson. The Rogerenes chose to remonstrate against Byles, and, once again, against Congregationalism in general with a zeal that had not been seen since the days of John Rogers.

Rogerene leaders also took up their pens to criticize Byles and to defend their beliefs. John Bolles, for example, published several tracts during the late 1750s and early 1760s decrying civil interference in ecclesiastical affairs and calling the colony’s leaders away from their law books and back to their Bibles. In 1767, John Rogers III published A Looking-Glass for the Presbyterians at New London in which he painted Congregationalist ministers as petty autocrats bent on persecuting anyone who might disturb their parish fiefdoms. The Rogerenes, like other cynical opponents of

26 Mather Byles to Mather Byles, Sr., January 24, 1762, Connecticut Historical Society, Collections, XVIII, 197-198.
conservative Congregational ministers, argued that men like Byles had less interest in piety than in maintaining their salaries and the religio-political status quo. New London’s most famous dissenters would have agreed wholeheartedly with Perry Miller’s twentieth-century assessment that Congregational ministers were satisfied with pews crammed with hypocrites, as long as they behaved as expected.27

In the summer of 1764, the Rogerenes began a sustained offensive against Byles. Each Sunday in June Rogerenes attended the Congregational services and the women began to knit and sew while Byles led the congregation in prayer. John Rogers III later described the scene in his defense of his fellow Rogerenes. “And when Mather Byles, their priest, began to say over his formal synagogue prayer, forbidden by Christ, Matt. vi. 5, &c” Rogers wrote contemptuously, “some of our women began to knit, others to sew, that it might be made manifest they had no fellowship with such unfruitful works of darkness.” Among their many objections to Congregational worship, the Rogerenes also believed that public prayers were unscriptural and nothing more than prideful orations. It appears that Byles particularly relished the weekly invocation he prayed over the congregation. Rogerene disapproval of such formal practices provided additional motivation for the sectarians to oppose Byles. The First Congregational Church responded by defending their minister and their desire to worship without interruption: “But justice Coit and the congregation were much offended at this testimony, and fell upon them in the very time of their prayer, and pretended divine worship…for they drove us all out of the house in a most furious manner; pushing, striking, kicking, &c. so that the meeting was broken up for some considerable time, and the house in great confusion.28 In Rogers’s mind, Byles was nothing less than pharisaical and his prayer unscriptural. But Rogers was not interested only in asserting the Rogerene opposition to public prayers. He recorded these events to make the case that his fellow Rogerenes had been subjected to unnecessary physical abuse. For Byles, however, the Rogerenes invited such treatment. What other response could there be, Byles certainly wondered, to such an intentional effort to disrupt public worship?

Byles could not help but express the offense he took at the renewed interruptions. In a letter to his father, he wrote concerning the Rogerenes, “their Insolence is so astonishing that to bear it without Resentment, I must be something more, or something less than a Man.” 29 He believed something had to be done to suppress the intruders’ protests and to restore order during Sabbath services. At the end of the month, Byles met with Judge Coit and other authorities hoping to convince them “to exert themselves in protecting public worship against the insults of the Rogerenes.” 30 The justices decided to bar the Rogerenes from entering the meetinghouse altogether on Sundays and to place them in prison if they attempted to continue their disturbances. The fines and imprisonments increased in severity but so did the Rogerenes’s determination to disrupt the Congregational services and to target Byles as the source of the renewed “persecution” against them.

More than any other available source, Byles’s letter to his sister Mary on July 2, 1764 encapsulated the parson’s sentiments about the conflict with the Rogerenes. His tone was markedly different from his earlier descriptions of happiness in New London:

> The Patience of my People seems to be entirely exhausted by their [Rogerenes] continued abuses. Every Person I converse with seems to be exasperated to the last Degree & I don’t wonder at it. These unhappy obstinate People are indulged in every Privilege they can possible desire: & all we expect in Return is, that they would let us be Quiet. They are all the Persecutors; we are properly the persecuted: & it is now actually come to a Point that either we can have no public worship or they must be quelled. These are Difficulties that, in Boston, you have no Notion of: & I heartily wish you never may. 31

The letter reflects Byles’s exasperation and his desire for peace to be restored within his ministry. More importantly, it reveals a belief that he and his church were victims of persecution. Connecticut’s other Old Light clergymen shared such sentiments. After years of conflict with enthusiasts and pro-revival New Lights, they saw themselves as on the defensive. Byles’s letter to his sister reflects such a response, offering a personal glimpse into the angst many Connecticut ministers felt in light of the diminished authority of their office.

---

29 Mather Byles to Mather Byles, Sr., June 26, 1764, MHS-Byles.
30 Mather Byles to Mary Byles, July 2, 1764, MHS-Byles.
31 Ibid.
Byles Leaves New London

After months of disrupting New London’s Congregational worship, the Rogerenes could sense Byles’s disappointment and his increasingly reclusive demeanor. By the summer of 1766 the lengthy imprisonments, fines, and whippings led the Rogerenes to tone down some of their protests. Still resolute to trouble the New London parson, however, they changed tactics. Instead of simply arriving at the meetinghouse after services had already begun, some Rogerenes began to wait outside Byles’s house in order to converse with him about their grievances as he walked the considerable distance to the meetinghouse. Byles refused to step foot outside of his house until local authorities arrived and forced the Rogerenes away from his property. As a result, Byles continually arrived late to the weekly Congregational services. “Many a time has this bell toll’d for hours together,” Byles later complained to his New London parishioners, “and at last one single man condescends to come down and drive them off.”32 Older Rogerene women began sitting quietly with stern faces in front of Byles during Sunday services, and they began to stand near Byles’s house on other days of the week as well. In her history of New London, F. M. Caulkins commented, “They visited the lion on purpose to see him chafe at their presence.”33 The descendent of illustrious clergymen, Byles increasingly resented the lack of religious and social order in the town, longing for the day when Congregational ministers had enjoyed greater respect and protection throughout the colony.

Byles eventually reached a breaking point. Driven to despair from the incessant confrontations with the Rogerenes, he further limited his interactions with his New London neighbors. Then, on April 12, 1768, Byles abruptly announced to his congregation that he would soon leave New London and sail to England for Episcopal ordination. His parishioners were stunned and dismayed. New London physician and member of the First Congregational Church, Benjamin Gale, described Byles’s departure as “unexpected” because the minister “was so happily settled to all appearance.”34

---

34 Gale, *A Debate Between the Rev. Mr. Byles*, 1. Gale certainly disapproved of Byles’s decision to leave his New London congregation. Believing that Byles had something important to communicate to the church, Gale decided to record the conversation that ensued between “minister” and “people.” In publishing his account of Byles’s meeting with the New London parishioners, Gale believed he would find a receptive audience among New England Congregationalists who would join the church members in
Byles’s announcement that he had accepted a call from Christ’s Church (The Old North Church) in Boston incited an impassioned exchange between him and his parishioners. He cited the disruptions he endured from the Rogerenes as a major reason for his leaving New London. Despondent, Byles stated, “to be treated as I have been by the Quakers…disturbed upon the holy Sabbath. If I have not the Sabbath, what have I?” The minister expressed his disappointment that the civil authorities could not (or would not) ensure his protection from the Rogerenes. “I would not live such a life over again, for no consideration,” Byles carped, for “I see no prospect of amendment… our laws are not put in full execution.” The constant harassment was more than Byles believed he should have to endure. He feared that he would never find relief and a return to order in New London.

Byles’s New London congregants did not sympathize with his complaints. Parishioners responded by asking, “Is any man wholly free from persecution?” Contemptuous of his lack of fortitude, they added, “if that is all you have, you ought to be very thankful that you have no more than a few poor old women sitting round your gate.” They questioned Byles for seldom visiting his parishioners, complaining about his salary, and being so distracted by the Rogerenes. But they could not convince the minister to change his mind. “If we are persecuted in one city,” Byles concluded, “flee to another.” Aware of the widespread disapproval of his decision to leave, Byles departed in less than two weeks for England. He left “without time or inclination of seeing or bidding any of his best friends farewell,” Gale later complained. For Byles, however, the order and stability he envisioned the official church of imperial Britain would provide beckoned.

criticizing Byles’s departure from New London and the New England Way. Thus, it should be noted that Gale’s motivations for publishing his pamphlet stemmed from a desire to reprieve the First Congregational Church of New London from any blame in Byles’s unhappy parting from the town. Despite Gale’s bias, however, this pamphlet remains an important source of information respecting Byles’s dramatic ecclesiastical switch. The content of Gale’s account is supported directly by contemporary publications in Boston and by the fact that Byles never responded to Gale’s publication with a pamphlet of his own. Gale’s account stands in stark contrast to the later publication of Samuel Peters that is discussed in chapter three.

35 Ibid., 5.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 10.
38 Ibid., 10-11.
39 Ibid., 11.
Chapter 3: A Congregational Loss—An Anglican Gain

Mather Byles’s experiences as a Congregational minister from 1757 to 1768 were both unique to the setting of New London and representative of broader developments throughout late colonial Connecticut. As outlined in chapter one, the town’s distinctive history of religious pluralism and tension, particularly the decades of sparring between the Rogerenes and Byles’s predecessors, meant the potential for religious conflict was perpetually ripe in colonial New London. Byles’s struggles with the Rogerenes, however, were also indicative more generally of the increased difficulties eighteenth-century Congregational ministers faced in preserving order and controlling religious dissent in Connecticut’s communities. Congregationalism remained the religion of the majority throughout the eighteenth century, but it was little more than that by the 1760s. The religious establishment was no longer an agency of social control or a symbol of community coherence.¹ The diminished power of Connecticut’s Standing Order was a difficult pill to swallow for ministers such as Byles who chafed under his inability even to obtain respite from the Rogerenes much less to ensure social and ecclesiastical order.

The Breakdown of the Congregational Establishment

The changes in Connecticut’s religious landscape during the first two-thirds of the eighteenth century exposed the weaknesses of the religious establishment. The changes also validated the growing fears that one day the very idea of established religion might lose popular support. During the seventeenth century, New England’s parishes and towns essentially had become what Michael Zuckerman has called “peaceable kingdoms,” insular communities that rejected dissent and largely preserved the Standing Order.² But the decentralized character of the Congregational establishment precluded effective means of ensuring orthodoxy, or at best left them to local authorities and community oversight. The inability to enforce Congregational orthodoxy was conspicuous in towns such as New London, which by the 1730s held little resemblance to the seventeenth century ideal. Urban communities tended to give in to the increasing variety of opinion,

¹ Bushman, *Puritan to Yankee*, 231.
accepting the inevitability of the nonreligious and of dissenting worshipers in their communities.³ As Jon Butler has concluded, “Those looking for theocracies in the eighteenth century would have to look past Puritan New England.”⁴ In truth, eighteenth-century towns such as New London were not only not theocracies, but were no longer “Puritan” either.

Throughout the 1730s signs multiplied that people in Connecticut were disbursing themselves along a religious continuum that posited religious order as the supreme concern for those on one end and piety as the chief aim for those on the other. The debates surrounding the mid-century revivals calcified these divisions, threatening the continuance of Connecticut’s religious establishment. Within Congregationalism, ministers and laypeople alike intensely disagreed about the enthusiasm of the Awakening, models of church government, compulsory ecclesiastical taxes, the nature of piety, and the relationship between church and state. Disputes between ministers and congregations over salaries and church discipline reflected the precarious position of Connecticut’s Congregational ministers by the middle of the eighteenth-century as well as the burdens of supporting a church with only a portion of the population.

The passage of the Saybrook Platform in 1708 had been colonial Connecticut’s major attempt to provide its Congregational ministers with greater authority. Based on a Presbyterian form of church government, however, the Platform was never accepted by all of the colony’s churches, many of which continued to hold Congregational principles and kept authority decentralized. Fears that Presbyterianism would strip ecclesiastical power from the laypeople were commonplace. Both Joseph Moss in Derby and Jonathan Parsons in Lyme led their churches in renouncing the Platform in favor of remaining on the older Cambridge Platform.⁵ When a new minister arrived at the church in Canterbury

³ Jon Butler warns, however, against overemphasizing such diversity in New England’s churches: “It must be added, however, that the variety present in eighteenth-century New England can be exaggerated. It constituted only a shallow preview of modern American pluralism because most of it, Quakerism aside, circled a narrow Calvinist orbit.” See Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 171.
⁴ Ibid., 117.
in 1723, he was informed by a prominent member that he would be no more trusted than
a “Papish Jesuit” if he was not willing to sign a statement declaring his conviction that
Congregationalism was the best form of church government. Congregationalism placed
significant checks on clerical authority, and many of Connecticut’s churches, including
almost all in New Haven County, clung to the tradition established by New England’s
earlier generations. The First Congregational Church of New London supported the Saybrook
Platform during the first half of the eighteenth century but later turned back to the
Cambridge Platform. New London’s Gurdon Saltonstall had been the Saybrook
Platform’s architect, and his congregation supported its restructuring of ecclesiastical
authority. Fifty years later, however, the First Congregational Church in New London
voted to reject the Saybrook Platform: “The brethren of the Church met at the Meeting-
House Oct. 17th, 1757 and the question being put whether this church would henceforth
admit of the Saybrook Platform as a rule of discipline, it was voted in the negative:
nemine contradicente.” The dramatic reversal was a tribute to the depth of commitment
to Congregationalism in colonial Connecticut; while churches could agree to work
together through the county consociations, they could not be bound to remain in them if
they preferred to act independently.

The New London congregation’s decision to reject the Saybrook Platform was
also a response to the gains made during the 1750s by New Light ministers in the county
consociations, who now hoped to exercise greater control over the ordination of ministers
throughout the colony. The First Congregational Church voted on the Platform after
Byles had accepted the call to become its minister, but only a month before his
ordination. Perhaps the congregation feared that the New London consociation might
attempt to block Byles’s ordination, since he and his father were well known opponents

6 Connecticut Archives, Ecclesiastical Affairs, VIII, 330 quoted in Ibid., 152.
7 Comprising much of the densely populated center of Connecticut, New Haven County contained many
churches that never accepted Saltonstall’s Saybrook Platform. The Platform was supported more uniformly
in the eastern counties of the colony, including New London County.
8 Church Records of the First Congregational Church of New London, quoted in Caulkins, History of New
London, 489.
9 For more on the increased power of the New Light ministers in Connecticut’s Congregational
Consociations see Bushman, Puritan to Yankee, 198-220.
of the New Lights.\textsuperscript{10} Their fears would have been justified since just a year later the New Haven Consociation, dominated by New Lights, attempted to block the ordination of James Dana as pastor at Wallingford.\textsuperscript{11} Like many Harvard graduates of the mid-eighteenth century, Dana was suspected by Connecticut’s New Lights of subscribing to doctrines “unfounded, not agreeable to the Word of God, nor the Doctrines of Say-Brook Platform.”\textsuperscript{12} But the original ordaining council and the majority of the church members supported Dana and announced their independence by breaking their ties with the consociation.

By 1760, Connecticut’s Old Light ministers and churches had reversed course and became defenders of congregational autonomy against consociational control. New Lights had demanded religious freedom and decried Old Light institutional tyranny during the 1740s, but by 1760 the tables had turned with Old Lights clamoring for ecclesiastical liberty. The strict Congregationalism advocated by most New Lights, however, meant that their control of the consociations was problematic. New Lights used the consociation system to exercise greater political power even though it was not their preferred model of church government. Undermined on every hand, the Saybrook Platform was silently removed from Connecticut law books in 1784.

Byles accepted the New London church’s decision to reject the Saybrook Platform in favor of the Cambridge Platform, but he believed the latter did not afford ministers enough authority in New England’s churches. When he informed his parishioners he was leaving for Boston he reminded them, “I did not settle on Say-Brook platform; and you may remember that you were a mind for the Cambridge, but I told you

\textsuperscript{10} The First Congregational church also staunchly adhered to the Half-Way Covenant, a clear mark that the church was dominated by parishioners who would have been considered Old Lights. Congregational churches varied in their adherence to the Half-Way Covenant, but New Lights abhorred its practice, insisting that stricter standards of church membership be upheld. Beginning in the seventeenth century, New London’s First Congregational Church fully employed the Half-Way covenant, permitting the baptism of children whose parents were not full members of the church. When Byles’s successor, Ephraim Woodbridge, refused to baptized the children of such half-way members and required a profession of faith for membership, the New London church nearly voted to dismiss him as Jonathan Edwards’s Northampton congregation had done to him in 1749.


\textsuperscript{12} Jonathan Todd, \textit{A Faithful Narrative} (New Haven, 1759), 12-13 quoted in Ibid., 307. The New Lights were suspicious of Dana not because he rejected the tenets of Calvinism en masse but because of his insistence that other Christian traditions were worthy of respect. Unlike many of his Massachusetts contemporaries he did not become a Unitarian and remained the minister at Wallingford the rest of his career.
I tho’t it a weak performance, and that if you had ever read it, you would never have mentioned it.”13 While Byles understood the reasoning behind the church’s decision to reject the Saybrook Platform, he also was aware of why the Platform was adopted in the first place—to afford ministers more powers and protections in Connecticut’s churches.

During his childhood in the home of Mather Byles, Sr., his years at Harvard, and his tenure as Congregational minister in New London, Byles witnessed how ecclesiastical infighting and the growing problem of religious diversity weakened the power of New England’s Congregational ministers. Byles was willing initially to minister outside of the oversight of Connecticut’s county consociations, but he feared strict congregational principles could deprive him of the safeguards necessary for an effective ministry. For Byles, his experiences in New London justified widespread concerns about the breakdown of the Congregational establishment and the tenuous position of its ministers.

The Appeal of the Anglican Church

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Anglicans and Baptists had made significant gains in Connecticut, offering those disillusioned by Congregational infighting ecclesiastical alternatives. Those concerned about the breakdown of order and those who favored stronger support for clerical authority than what the Cambridge and Saybrook Platforms provided could look to the Church of England, with its hierarchy of bishops traceable to the king. New England’s Anglican churches also provided a different worship experience. The Church of England attracted those New Englanders who preferred liturgical worship and who appreciated the aesthetic beauty of the Anglican church buildings that stood in stark contrast to the relatively plain and unadorned Congregationalist meetinghouses. The splendor of Anglican services literally referenced the majesty of God and crown. Individuals who identified with Baptists had other concerns. Baptists in colonial New England, like their Rogerene, Quaker, and Separatist neighbors, rejected external controls and stressed piety at the sacrifice of homogeneity and order. Baptist worship offered a more democratic ecclesiastical atmosphere because of its stress on the individual’s relationship with God as opposed to the covenant theology of most Congregationalists. Given their numbers by 1765, Connecticut’s Anglicans and

---

13 Gale, A Debate Between the Rev. Mr. Byles, 6.
Baptists (and to a lesser degree its Separatists) were not simply religious nonconformists but serious rivals to Congregationalism. On opposite ends of the order-piety continuum, these two groups bookended the more moderate positions of most Congregationalists, including the members of New London’s First Congregational Church.

As many Separatist churches dissolved during the two decades after the revivals of the 1740s, the Congregational establishment became more concerned about the rising number of Anglicans than about the Separatists. “Post-Awakening schisms had not destroyed the Standing Order,” argues Grasso, “but they did signal to the ‘land of steady habits’ that the threat of pluralism and the problem of dissent would not go away.” Congregationalists perceived Anglicans as dedicated enemies of the established order. Anglican polemics against the Standing Order were especially alarming, writes Bushman, “because they frankly questioned the ability of the existing polity to keep order, voicing the very doubt that had long worried Congregationalists.” In the mind of Samuel Johnson, Connecticut’s most influential Anglican cleric, Congregational ministers were weak figures lacking either apostolic authority or support from the Crown. Johnson believed an episcopacy provided “the most direct and best tendency to promote, preserve and maintain peace and unity” in Connecticut’s churches. If Connecticut’s ecclesiastical constitution and clergy could not restrain popular dissent, king and bishops, with their exalted offices, could restore order. Many prominent families throughout the colony agreed, entering the Anglican communion “as their only ark of safety” after the “endless divisions and separations” occasioned by the Awakening. From 1761 to 1774, Anglican churches multiplied more rapidly in Connecticut than in any other colony. By 1765, Yale graduates reflected the inroads made by Anglicans in Connecticut. Of the four

14 Bushman, *Puritan to Yankee*, 223.
16 Bushman, *Puritan to Yankee*, 170.
17 Samuel Johnson, *Samuel Johnson, President of King’s College, His Career and Writings*, edited by Herbert Schneider and Carol Schneider, Volume 3 (New York, 1939), quoted in Ibid., 172.
18 Ibid., Volume 1, 28, quoted in Bushman, *Puritan to Yankee*, 222.
19 With thirty Anglican churches in the colony in 1761, Connecticut housed at least sixty-seven congregations by 1774. During the eighteenth century, Connecticut was home to several important Anglican converts who had previously been Congregationalists. Nancy Rhoden has argued that these converts had a “special zeal” with which they “defended the tenets of their faith and the necessity of a resident colonial bishop.” See Nancy L. Rhoden, *Revolutionary Anglicanism: The Colonial Church of England Clergy during the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 19, 44-45.
hundred ministers the school had produced during the eighteenth century, ten percent had become Anglican clergy.20

In converting to the Church of England in 1768, Byles joined a list of influential former Congregationalists whose confidence in the New England Way had soured. Beginning in 1722, with the conversion of Yale Rector Timothy Cutler in what came to be known throughout New England as the “Great Apostasy,” Anglicans succeeded in adding numerous well-known Congregationalists to their ranks. A former Congregational minister at Stratford, Cutler renounced his ordination and led the defection of several men to the Church of England. The “Yale Apostates” included the college tutor, Daniel Browne; Samuel Johnson, former Yale tutor and pastor at West Haven; North Haven minister James Wetmore; and three less outspoken Connecticut ministers. For years these men had discussed Anglican divinity and recent writings in philosophy, growing less attached to the stricter Calvinist doctrines of seventeenth-century New England and more doubtful concerning the validity of non-Episcopal ordination. After stating their convictions in a meeting convened by Gurdon Saltonstall at the Yale library a day after the 1722 commencement, the group proceeded to England for ordination. Cutler became minister at Boston’s Christ Church (the same church to which Byles would later be called) and Johnson moved to Stratford where he orchestrated the construction of the first Anglican building in Connecticut.21

But Byles could look even closer to home and see the appeal the Church of England held among his contemporaries. His brother-in-law and second cousin, William Walter, had himself converted to the Church in 1763, just five years before Byles’s defection.22 Graduating from Harvard in 1756, Walter headed the grammar school in

---


21 For more on the “Great Apostasy” or the Anglican Church and colonial society more generally see James B. Bell, A War of Religion: Dissenters, Anglicans, and the American Revolution (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 25-26.

22 For a biography of William Walter see Clifford K. Shipton, Sibley’s Harvard Graduates, Vol. XIV, 1756-1760 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1965), 111-121. Ironically, Walter and Byles’s conversions meant that two of Increase Mather’s great-grandsons had joined the Anglican fold.
Salem and later worked as a customs collector before turning his thoughts to the Anglican ministry. In October, 1763 Walter received a call to become the assistant of William Hooper at Trinity Church in Boston, and he immediately sailed for England to take orders.  

His popularity with the people of Trinity was so great that when Hooper died in the summer of 1767, Walter was the unanimous choice as successor.

Byles’s relationship with Walter certainly influenced the New London minister’s decision to follow his relative into the arms of the Church of England. No direct correspondence between Byles and Walter has survived, but Byles would undoubtedly have been intimately acquainted with the circumstances surrounding Walter’s decision to become Anglican. And the fact that Christ Church was apprised of Byles’s turn toward the Church of England may point to Walter, minister at Trinity Church, as the source of such information, despite Byles’s assessment that his call to the Boston church was “but a mere act of providence.”

Walter was the one to notify Byles of Christ Church’s intention to contact the New London minister: “This day at a meeting of the wardens and vestry of the north church in Boston, they have come to a determination of sending for you to Boston.” Byles knew that if he chose to accept the call to Christ Church he would immediately have the support and friendship of a fellow Anglican minister and kinsman in Boston.

Even earlier influences may provide clues as to why Byles later found the Church of England an attractive alternative to Congregationalism. Byles grew up in Boston, a city with a considerable Anglican presence, and he attended Harvard at time when a visible minority of students chose to minister in the Church of England. For example, his first roommate at Harvard—Edward Bass—became an influential Anglican cleric and

---

23 The Anglican presence in pre-revolutionary Boston included three churches: King’s Chapel, Christ Church, and Trinity Church. King’s Chapel was the most prominent of the three, having been the place of worship for successive royal governors, other high ranking officials, and many wealthy merchants.


25 Ibid., 4.

26 Byles’s later support of Walter was apt given both their close relationship and the probability that Walter had encouraged Christ Church to call Byles as their minister. When Walter traveled to England in January 1784 seeking compensation as a displaced Loyalist, he carried with him a letter that Byles wrote on his behalf. And when Byles stayed in England for nearly a year beginning in May 1784, he took advantage of his situation by obtaining an honorary D.D. for Walter from King’s College, Aberdeen.
later the first Bishop of Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{27} Moreover, his privileged upbringing presumably led Byles to have relatively high expectations for his career. Although an important New England town, New London, like all of Connecticut’s urban centers, was less occupied with imperial affairs than Boston. His father’s steady correspondence with many of England’s most famous ministers, poets, and politicians meant that Byles’s childhood experiences were anything but provincial. New London’s importance to colonial Connecticut did not prevent Byles from later claiming “I was not made for a country minister…my salary is not sufficient…and my friends are in Boston.”\textsuperscript{28} The position as minister of New London’s First Congregational Church was a respectable one. But a clergyman’s life there brought Byles into drastically different circumstances from what he had witnessed in Boston and that may also help explain Byles’s eventual discontentment with his New London post.

Byles’s conversion to the Church of England seems not to have sparked opposition from his father, a fact which may have made the decision easier. If his later years are any indication, the support Byles Sr. continued to show his son would not have appeared surprising. The elder Byles remained a Congregationalist until his death in 1788, never steering far in the message of his preaching from his Mather predecessors. But in his later years he held a more favorable view of the British Empire and its official church than that espoused by most of his Congregational contemporaries.\textsuperscript{29} It seems probable that Byles, Sr.’s later respect for Anglicanism was at least partially a result of his first son’s conversion. Both father and son remained loyal to the Crown during the years of the Revolutionary War. The elder Byles’s political concern about the preservation of imperial order earned him much derision from his Boston neighbors. His age and reputation, however, enabled him to be more outspoken in his loyalism than most. “They call me a brainless Tory,” Byles, Sr. commented to his friend Nathaniel

\textsuperscript{27} For general biographical information related to Edward Bass see Shipton, \textit{Sibley’s Harvard Graduates}, Vol. XI, 340-359. Shipton notes that Bass roomed with Byles whose conversion to the Church of England was to be “a seven-days’ wonder” (pg. 340).

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{29} Even as a middle-aged minister, Byles was the first Congregationalist minister in Boston to wear a gown with bands in the pulpit, his being a gift from the Archbishop of Canterbury. No date is mentioned regarding this reference in Clifford Kenyon Shipton, \textit{New England Life in the Eighteenth Century: Representative Biographies from Sibley’s Harvard Graduates} (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1963), 238.
Emmons, “but tell me, my young friend, which is better—to be ruled by one tyrant three thousand miles away, or by three thousand tyrants not a mile away?” Byles’s loyalism was coupled with his decision to attend the Anglican services led by Samuel Parker at Trinity Church (Walter’s former church) instead of a Congregationalist church beginning in the early 1780s. Byles and Parker were warm friends, and their relationship reflected the elder Byles’s respect for the Church of England and its ministers, including his son.

**Byles’s Conversion to the Church of England**

Byles’s interest in the Anglican Church began in earnest nearly three years before his decision to leave New London. After announcing his intentions to accept the post at Christ Church in Boston, he informed his New London parishioners that he had been a “churchman in heart…between two and three years past.” Naturally, the congregation wanted to know why then he had stayed in New London and why he had not voiced his opinions earlier. Byles offered little in response other than to say that he had “not a call till now” and that he continued to respect New England’s Congregational churches. He had undergone no drastic change regarding theology, claiming that “there is not a sermon that I have preached in this place, but what I shall in the church of England.” No evidence exists that Byles ever regarded himself as a “convert.” Thus, it may be more accurate to think of Byles’s move to the Church of England as an ecclesiastical switch from Congregationalism to Episcopacy, and not as a conversion in the usual use of that term. Unlike many New Englanders who opted for the Church of England, Byles never fully rejected his Calvinistic heritage. His “principles” changed, Byles claimed, “only in regard to the order, discipline, and ceremonies” of the Anglican Church.

---

30 *New England Magazine*, XVI, 735 quoted in Ibid., 244.
31 Byles surely would have attended the services of his son at Christ Church, but the younger Byles left Boston as a loyalist refugee for Halifax in May, 1776.
32 While there are references to changes in the elder Byles’s religious views, no evidence exists that he made any formal conversion to the Church of England. On his deathbed, Byles joked with Parker, the future bishop of Massachusetts, that he was “going where no Bishops will ever enter.” This was reported in the *New Hampshire Spy*, July 22, 1788 and is quoted in Ibid., 250.
33 Gale, *A Debate Between the Rev. Mr. Byles*, 7.
34 Ibid., 8.
35 Ibid.
36 The term “conversion,” however, is used as shorthand throughout this thesis and should be understood to denote an ecclesiastical switch and not an outright theological and ecclesiastical conversion.
37 Ibid., 7.
church of England,” Byles asserted for “there is no separations” and if joined to it “we should see no divisions, sub-divisions, &c.”38 His conversion to Anglicanism did not emanate from a radical shift in theological conviction but from his belief that the institutional foundations of Congregational orthodoxy had crumbled and Connecticut’s Standing Order weakened beyond recovery.

That Byles continued to regard the First Congregational Church of New London as “a true church of our Lord,” invited criticism from some observers who initially questioned the depth of his conversion to Anglicanism.39 When Byles arrived in Boston from New London he was met with demands by the press that he explain his assertion that “the churches of this and Old England are equal to me…I am call’d from one to another where I can be of more usefulness.”40 One Anglican enquired about the discrepancy between Byles’s assessment of the Congregational churches and the official Anglican position:

Hath this gentleman made an authentic renunciation of his former ordination, declared his belief of the divine right of diocesan Episcopacy, the absolute necessity of an uninterrupted succession; and that he really believes the Dissenters are destitute of a valid administration of the world and sacraments, and consequently that the baptism, as well as ordination, which He received from the hand of his Father, is, to all intents and purposes, null and void?41

According to his dialogue with the New London congregation, Byles believed that his ordination as a Congregational minister had been valid. Although he would be re-ordained into the Anglican ministry, Byles stopped short of rejecting his Congregational ordination conducted by his father in New London. As in his New London ministry, Byles hoped to avoid public controversy about the matter. One historian later went as far as to say that to the end of his long life, Byles “would have gladly extended his hand to the Congregational clergy had they been willing to take it.”42 Given this assessment, one has to wonder if Byles would have ever defected from Congregationalism had his experiences in New London been less turbulent. Even so, Byles eventually concluded, wrote New London Anglican minister Matthew Graves, that “Episcopacy opens ye

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 4.
40 Ibid., 4-5.
41 See Boston Gazette, May 9, 1768.
42 Shipton, Sibley’s Harvard Graduates, 15.
regular door into ye vineyard & Fold of Christ…”43 Byles’s long-acquired and cautiously assembled belief in episcopacy radically altered his career path.

Byles’s defection from Congregationalism and decision to become an Anglican minister ranked among the most surprising of such ecclesiastical moves during the eighteenth century. Despite his own effort to minimize it, the shocking conversion earned much attention throughout New England. In his published record of Byles’s last meeting with the New London congregation, Benjamin Gale claimed “the public are so very desirous of knowing the reasons of Mr. Byles’s leaving the church of Christ in New London.”44 People in Boston were as engrossed as New Londoners in the excitement of the events surrounding Byles’s conversion. An article about Byles entitled “A Wonderful Dream,” took up most of the front page of the Boston Gazette on April 25, 1768.45 The article’s author described a scene whereby a dreamer was transported to heaven, met Richard Mather, and informed the famous Puritan that his granddaughter’s grandson had chosen to join the Church of England.46 An account of Byles’s conversion also was published in the Boston News-Letter on May 5, only a week after Byles had arrived in Boston to meet with family before his trip to England.47

As illustrated in the newspaper article entitled “A Wonderful Dream,” Byles’s conversion was ironic because of his familial ties to New England’s most famous critics of Anglicanism. Increase Mather, Byles’s great grandfather, wrote shortly before his death in 1722 to remind New Englanders why their ancestors had left England and its official church:

Our fathers fled into this wilderness from the face of a lording episcopacy and humane injunctions in the worship of God. Now, if any of us their children should yield unto, or be instrumental to set up in this country, any of the way’s of men’s inventions, such as prelacy, imposed liturgies, humane ceremonies in the worship of God, or to admit ignorant and scandalous persons to the Lord’s table; This would be a backsliding indeed! It would be a backsliding to the things which we

43 Matthew Graves to Bishop of London, April 1, 1768, Fulham Papers XXII, 179.
44 Gale, A Debate Between the Rev. Mr. Byles, 1.
45 See Boston Gazette, April 25, 1768.
46 Richard Mather, father of Increase Mather and grandfather of Cotton Mather, was a Puritan clergyman who ministered in Boston from 1635 to 1669. Mather came to Boston from Liverpool after the archbishop of York, Richard Neile, suspended him from Church of England in 1633 for nonconformity in matters of ceremony.
47 See Boston News-Letter, May 5, 1768. Unfortunately, Byles’s reaction is unknown.
and our fathers have departed from, and have openly testified against to be not of God.48

During the 1720s, Byles’s great uncle, Cotton Mather, considered the “Yale Apostates” a threat to everything his New England ancestors had believed and for which they had fought. Speaking on behalf of Boston’s Congregational ministers, Mather described the Anglican belief in apostolic succession as “a vile senseless whimsy” no better than that of the Roman Catholics.49 Both Increase and Cotton Mather would have been appalled by Byles’s conversion in 1768 which marked a dramatic shift of allegiance for someone whose first name—Mather—so conspicuously reflected its legacy.

Anglicans in New England, the clergy in particular, celebrated Byles’s move to the Church of England. Like Byles, many of the SPG missionaries in New England were former Congregationalists who now zealously defended the tenets of their Anglican faith and called for a resident colonial bishop.50 They welcomed Byles into their ranks as one who had “returned into the Bosom of the Church of England.”51 In the spring of 1768, Samuel Peters, Anglican minister in Hebron, published his own account of Byles’s meeting with his New London parishioners.52 According to Peters, Byles realized the folly of “our over-zealous, puritan wild forefathers” and hoped his New London congregation would see “their unreasonable bitterness against the Church of England.”53 Although Peters’s account was more polemical than descriptive, it proved popular among Anglicans. Congregationalists, however, decried Peters as more than a supporter of Byles’s conversion. One New London parodist referred to Peters as the “tempter” who had led New London’s minister to his dramatic decision.54

48 Increase Mather, *Elijah’s Mantle* (Boston, 1722), 16.
53 Ibid., 6.
Christ Church agreed to pay for Byles’s journey to England and on May 14, 1768 he sailed to London. The Bishop of London granted Byles his ministerial license a month and a half later, and Oxford awarded him a doctorate that summer as well. By September Byles was back in Boston. Six months later he gladly reported to the SPG that he had “constantly officiated…to the general Acceptance of my Parishioners.” The clamor surrounding his conversion had quieted, and Byles’s new career had begun. Given his ecclesiastical preferences, the Church of England provided a more comfortable home for Byles.

**Order and Peace**

When Byles converted to the Church of England he hoped to find what had eluded him in New London: order and peace. Several factors led Byles to believe that he might better realize those desires in the official church of imperial Britain. The careers of Cutler, Johnson, Bass, and Walter certainly made Anglicanism a more attractive ecclesiastical alternative for Byles. In addition, his own personal study of “many volumes and thousands of pages on each side the controversy” confirmed in his mind that the Church of England “is the true, and only regular church.” But as explored in chapter two, Byles’s particular experiences in New London with the Rogerenes also contributed to his monumental decision to leave his Congregational parishioners and to accept the call of Christ Church in Boston. It is noteworthy that Byles’s personal interests turned to the works of Anglican divines in 1765, when conflict with the Rogerenes reached its zenith. Byles had not been ignorant before of the “controversies, about modes and forms, rites and ceremonies,” but his interest in them amplified at the same time that the Rogerenes harried him incessantly. Byles never explicitly claimed that the Rogerenes fueled his interest in Anglicanism. Still, the connection between his being “insulted by them almost continually” and his growing respect of the Church of England, “where government

---

56 Ibid. Note that Byles seemingly contradicted his earlier statements respecting the value of Congregational churches. Byles maintained that Congregational churches were true churches, but he believed that the Church of England was *the* true church.
57 Ibid., 10.
would be kept up,” seems not only logical but central to understanding Byles’s unexpected departure from New London.58

The debate over order and piety was at the heart of the conflict between Byles and the Rogerenes during the 1760s. Byles’s background and his experiences in New London converged to make him a man deeply concerned about social and ecclesiastical order. His decision to leave his New London congregation and convert to the Church of England reflected Byles’s belief that the order he sought would have to be found elsewhere. He would have strongly agreed with Samuel Johnson’s criticism of Connecticut society as “a meer Democracy…hence the prevalency of rigid enthusiasticals and conceited notions and practices in Religion and republican and mobbish principles and practices next-door to anarchy in polity.”59 The young minister was aware of and participated in the religious debates of his time. He heard the criticisms against his ministry and more generally against Connecticut’s religious establishment made by the Rogerenes, Baptists and Quakers. But Byles remained staunchly opposed to their aims. The small band of Rogerenes left in New London by the 1760s continued to promote their understanding of Christian piety at the Congregational minister’s expense. Distraught over his relentless struggle with the Rogerenes, Byles came to believe, as had dozens of ministers in the preceding decades, that the Church of England simply held greater hopes for preserving ecclesiastical and social order in the colonies than did the Congregational establishment.

58 Ibid., 5, 7.
Conclusion

For twenty-first century observers it may seem difficult to imagine the stir caused by Byles’s conversion from Congregationalism to the Church of England. But for Congregational ministers in colonial New England, such a move would have been seen as a severe breach of the covenant between parson and people. Typically Congregational ministers envisioned their entire ministerial career to be dedicated to the service of one congregation; they rarely left one congregation to pastor another. Byles’s decision to convert to the Church of England, however, freed him (at least in his mind) from his obligation to the First Congregational Church of New London. As explored in chapter two, the Rogerenes were the principal culprits behind Byles’s discontent in the seaport town. By the mid-1760s their relentless protests against Byles’s ministry left the New London parson reeling from the threat that he might never find respite.

Congregational hegemony had never been complete in New England, and, as explored in chapter one, Congregationalism was little more than the religion of the majority in places such a New London by the time Byles arrived to minister in the town. Although seventeenth-century New England divines had hoped to establish “peaceable kingdoms,” the history of colonial New London reveals how elusive that earlier vision proved to be. The Rogerenes, and later the Baptists and Anglicans, hoped to establish their own faiths as dominant in New London, and, despite its official support from the civil government, the power and prestige of the Congregational establishment suffered as a consequence. The religious and political changes in Connecticut in the middle of the eighteenth century disturbed ministers like Byles who cherished former ideals of socio-religious order. Rogerene protests against his ministry in the 1760s underscored the validity of Byles’s fears that he could not rely solely on his position for unquestioned support in New London. Byles concluded that the colony’s Standing Order failed to provide the needed protections from the aims of religious dissidents, and the young minister refused to remain the focus of Rogerene protests when he left New London in 1768.

In the midst of Byles’s long-standing conflict with Rogerenes, the descendent of famous New England leaders grew increasingly attracted to the institutional structures of
the Church of England. By the 1760s, Anglicans had succeeded in attracting scores of important New England individuals and families to their fold. These gains were not surprising given the general anglicization of colonial American society during the course of the eighteenth century.\(^1\) The prospect that an American bishop would be instated in the colonies seemed realistic to many Anglicans in New England and bolstered the confidence of converts such as Byles that a break from the Congregational establishment would carry them into an ecclesiastical system of increasing authority and stability.

Ironically, Byles did not find the peace and order in Boston’s Christ Church that he had hoped for when he left New London. Anglicans succeeded in erecting impressive church buildings and increasing their numbers in late colonial New England, but they failed to transplant the institutional authority of the official church of imperial Britain to the colonies. Without a bishop and the authority of the crown behind them, Anglicans could not secure disciplinary rigor and authority in prerevolutionary America. To Byles’s dismay, the majority of the members of Christ Church later supported the revolutionary cause despite Anglican expectations of religious and political allegiance to the crown and their minister’s pleas that they remain loyal. “In spite of his repeated exhortations to loyalty,” one historian later commented, “his people became the most Whiggish of the Anglican congregations north of Maryland.”\(^2\) In May, 1776 Byles found himself without a church as a loyalist exile in Halifax, Nova Scotia. There Byles supported his family as a garrison chaplain until he once again secured a ministerial post at Trinity Church in St. John where he served until his death in 1814.

Byles’s departure from Connecticut and from Congregationalism reflected his desire to recapture the peace and order which eluded him during his ministry in New London by identifying with the official church of the British Empire. Unfortunately for the clergyman, it seemed he could not escape controversy throughout much of his ministerial career. Outside of New London Byles was free of the eccentric protests of the Rogerenes, but in the years leading up to the American Revolution Byles once again found himself at the center of conflict at Christ Church. In Halifax Byles did not gain the friendship of senior Anglican clergymen in Nova Scotia and was never appointed to a

---

\(^1\) For more on the anglicization of colonial American society see McConville, *The King’s Three Faces.*

church. Byles’s later years, however, seem to have been some of his most contented. As rector of St. John’s Trinity Church, Byles informed his sisters in 1789 that he was among the happiest clergymen in the empire: “Thus after a long, tedious, tempestuous Day, it has pleased God to gild your Brother’s Evening Sky.”

It appears that Byles finally found what he initially had envisioned for himself in New London over thirty years before.

---

3 Mather Byles to Catherine and Mary Byles, May, 1789, MHS-Byles.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Pamphlets


Byles, Mather. *Divine Power and Anger Displayed in Earthquakes.* Boston, 1755.


________. *An Epistle to the Churches of Christ Called Quakers.* New York, 1705.


Todd, Jonathan. *A Faithful Narrative.* New Haven, 1759,
Newspapers

*Boston Evening Post*. April 11, 1743.

*Boston Gazette*. April 25, 1768.

_____. May 9, 1768.


*Boston Post-Boy*, March 28, 1743.

*New England Magazine*. XVI.

*New Hampshire Spy*. July 22, 1788.

Diaries


Letters

Byles, Mather to Catherine Byles. January 15, 1765. MHS-Byles.

Byles, Mather to Mary Byles. July 2, 1764. MHS-Byles.

Byles, Mather to Mather Byles, Sr. July 22, 1761. MHS-Byles.

Byles, Mather to Mather Byles, Sr. January 24, 1762. Connecticut Historical Society. *Collections*. XVIII.

Byles, Mather to Mather Byles, Sr. August 8, 1763. MHS-Byles.

Byles, Mather to Mather Byles, Sr. June 26, 1764. MHS-Byles.

Graves, Matthew to Bishop of London. April 1, 1768. *Fulham Papers*. XXII.


**Other Primary Sources**


Connecticut State Library. Ecclesiastical Affairs. Volume VIII.

Connecticut State Library. Superior Court Records at Hartford. May 1695.


**Secondary Sources**


Perry, William S. Papers Relating to the History of the Church in Massachusetts. N. P., 1873.


