

The History of Christ Church

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Episcopal worship in Oyster Bay dates to the beginning of the 18th century. Although a healthy parish now, the church, in its various manifestations, did not flourish except in fits and starts until the 1870s, growing in particular under the 1876-1880 rectorship of the Rev. George Roe Van De Water. The rectory originally was built as an academy in 1801; the August 30, 1931 issue of Christ Church periodical, *Christ Church Confidences* (the complete volume for 1931 is in the Diocesan Archives for the church), says that at that time the rectory contained two desks from the early 19th century academy. The parish house was remodeled in 2008. The present church building was erected in 1878 on the site of three previous church buildings. Its worship space was enlarged in the 1920s. The pew used by the Roosevelt family is so-marked. Near it is a plaque commemorating a celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.

The first recorded Episcopal services in Oyster Bay were conducted early in the 18th century by the Rev. George Keith, a missionary for the Society of the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (S. P. G.). In the Diocesan Archives for Christ Church there is a one-page history published in the Diocese of Long Island's *Church Militant* in December 1927 by the then rector, the Rev. George E. Talmage, in which he quotes from George Keith's diary to say that Keith conducted services in Oyster Bay on September 20, 1702 and again on December 6, 1702. The church was organized soon afterward: "On January 12, 1703, at a town meeting, one church-warden and four vestrymen were chosen for Oyster Bay". The first church building in Oyster Bay was erected between 1704 and 1707, and in 1710 the town set aside land for the church. S. P. G. historian C. F. Pascoe (*Two Hundred Years of the S. P. G.*) says that the Rev. John Thomas served both St. George's Church, Hempstead, and Christ Church, Oyster Bay, from 1704 to 1724; in regards Christ Church, he quotes a statement from one of Thomas's reports to the Society which may an indication that the 1703 organization had failed, or simply that they never celebrated the Eucharist. He says that at his arrival the population had been "wholly unacquainted with the Blessed Sacrament for five and fifty years together". From the 1720s onward Oyster Bay and Hempstead were served by a priest resident in Hempstead until the American Revolution (to include the Rev. Samuel Seabury, 1706-1764). Both churches fell into decline after the war, when St. George's Church Loyalist priest, Rev. Leonard Cutting, who served from 1766, had to flee.

Oyster Bay historian James E. Hammond (*Oyster Bay*, 2009) says that James Farley led the effort to raise funds to build the Baptist Church-affiliated Oyster Bay Academy in 1801. The Episcopal congregation used the academy for worship, as noted in the Diocese of New York diocesan journal of 1806. The Rev. John H. Hobart, of Trinity Church, says there of Oyster Bay that the Rev. John Churchill Rudd, in Deacon's orders, was employed as a Missionary for several months to the destitute congregations of this Church at Huntington, Oyster-bay, Setauket, and Islip, on Long-

Island. The three former of these, before the late revolution, were numerous and respectable congregations; but since that period they have only had occasional service, and of consequence were fast fading away.... At Oyster-bay, the building for public worship had become totally decayed; the few materials that remained from dilapidation were sold, and on the lot on which the building stood an academy was erected, the right being reserved to the Church to use it on Sundays for the purposes of public worship. The Church families in the village and its immediate neighborhood, had either become extinct or united themselves to other denominations; and apparently owing to the apprehension that the re-establishment of the Church would divert the property from the purposes to which it is now applied, the efforts of Mr. Rudd for the re-organization of the Church did not succeed.

From 1834 to 1843 the churches in Oyster Bay and Huntington were part of the see of the Rev. Isaac Sherwood, rector of St. John's Church, Cold Spring Harbor, from May 1834 until August 10, 1850 (N.B. the Cold Spring Harbor church had been incorporated in October 1831 as "St. Thomas, in Cold Spring, on Long Island"). Sherwood can be credited with reviving both Christ Church, Oyster Bay, and St. John's Church, Huntington. In his report to the October 1-2, 1835 convention of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, he said of Oyster Bay that a church was founded in this place in 1742. For many years past they have labored under depressing circumstances. During the past year they have assembled at regular intervals, and Divine service is now well attended. In June last the parish was reorganized under its former corporate title of Christ Church. Measures have since been adopted for the erection of a building.

Eight years later, in his missionary report to the September 27-29, 1843 convention (p. 155-156), Sherwood (here described as "Missionary") again speaks of the efforts of the parish to erect a church building: The prospect here is now encouraging. From January to July, I celebrated a third service, in the academy of this place, once every fortnight; since that time, the service is performed on Sunday afternoons. Here the interest in the Church remains firm; a regular and devout attendance upon its worship is given. All seem animated by the desire of accomplishing the long-delayed work, of erecting an edifice for our holy worship in this beautiful place. In aid of this pious design, a considerable sum has been subscribed, and the work will probably be commenced early in the following month of October. As no election for wardens and verstrymen has taken place for several years past, it was feared that the charter of incorporation had become null and void; and to guard against any legal difficulty hereafter, a reorganization has taken place.

An unnamed author (perhaps the rector at the time, Talmage) writing in the September 6, 1931 issue of Christ Church periodical, *Christ Church Confidences* says that the files of the church contain an incorporation document for the church dated June 8, 1835, and endorsed by the Rt. Rev. Benjamin T. Onderdonk, Bishop of New York, and that the minute book contains another incorporation document which was recorded by the Queens County clerk on September 26, 1836. He also says there is yet another document (incorporation?) which is dated September 1, 1843. Reuben W. Folger and James E. DeKay, M.D. are listed in the journal of the September 25-27, 1844 convention of the Diocese of New York as lay delegates from Oyster Bay (p. 28), the first instance I have found in a convention journal in which delegates are listed for Christ Church.

The journal of the 1844 convention of the diocese had much good news about Christ Church, including that a new church had been built. It was erected on the site of the two previous church buildings. On Friday, July 23, 1844 Bishop Benjamin T. Onderdonk consecrated Christ Church, Oyster Bay, and confirmed three persons. Of the church he says “The erection of this beautiful Gothic edifice was the consummation of a desire long anxiously cherished by me. It is erected on the site of a Church built before the Revolution, but long since destroyed. I never cast my eye on the ancient cemetery without longing to see therein another temple. Now it is there, and with every prospect, I am thankful to be able to say, of great efficiency in the cause of Christ and His Church. Thus, in the good providence of God are there now three Churches instead of the old one of which I have just spoken, St. Paul’s at Glen Cove, and St. John’s at Cold Spring Harbour, both erected within a few years, being also in the town of Oyster Bay”. The “deacon, minister”, the Rev. Edwin Harwood, reported (p. 140) “As I have but very recently taken charge of this church, I have no statistical report to offer. A great change, however, has taken place in the condition of the parish, since the last Convention of this Diocese met. It is no longer a Diocesan Missionary Station. A beautiful church edifice has been erected, and consecrated; the interest in the church and the number of worshippers have consequently increased. Indeed, from the appearance of things, we have every reason to believe, that this ancient parish, by God’s blessing, will be strengthened and prospered.”

Harwood led the church until May 1, 1846. The journal of the September 24-30, 1845 convention of the Diocese of New York (p. 113) lists him as “deacon, minister of Christ Church, Oyster Bay, Queen’s County”.

The journal of the September 30 – October 3, 1846 convention of the Diocese of New York includes the name of “Christ Church, Syosset”. This church is the same as “Christ Church, Oyster Bay” as the entry for the Rev. John Stearns, Jr. reads “deacon, minister of Christ Church, Syosset, Oyster Bay, Queen’s county” (p. 100). Lay delegates from the church (p. 10) included: “J. E. De Kay, M.D., R. W. Folger, and Thomas Floyd Jones”. Stearns led the church from August 2, 1846 to July 4, 1849.

In the journal of the September 29, 1847 convention of the Diocese of New York Stearns is described as “deacon, minister of Christ Church, Syosset, Oyster Bay, Queen’s county” (p. 11), and “Jas. E. DeKay, M.D. [and] R. W. Folger” are listed as delegates, but in the journal of the September 27, 1848 journal Stearns is described as “rector of Christ Church, Oyster Bay, Queen’s county” (p. 11). No lay delegates are listed for Christ Church.

Stearns is said to be at St. Peter’s, Brooklyn, in the journal of the September 26, 1849 convention (p. 11). The record of attendees (p. 95, 98) shows that Christ Church had no representative, clergy or lay, at that convention.

The Rev. Edmund Richards led the church from December 1, 1849 to October 21, 1851. Richards’s name does not appear in the 1849 journal, but he attended the November 27, 1850 special convention of the diocese to implement in New York the General Convention’s legislation that

provided for the election of a “Provisional Bishop” in dioceses where the regular bishop was not able to function (p. 5, church affiliations are not stated in the journal), a convention to which Christ Church sent no lay delegates. In the journal of the September 24, 1851 convention of the Diocese of New York Richards is described as “rector of Christ Church, Oyster Bay, Queen’s county” (p. 11). No lay delegates from Christ Church attended this convention.

The Rev. Joseph Ransom led Christ Church from 1851 to the spring of 1861. He came to Christ Church from Trinity Church, Plattsburgh, New York (1851, p. 11). In the journal of the September 29, 1852 convention (p. 11) he is listed as “rector of Christ Church, Oyster Bay, Queen’s County”. He continued to be listed so through his tenure. Parochial reports, which had been suspended from the January 3, 1845 suspension of Bishop Benjamin T. Onderdonk to the election of the Rt. Rev. Jonathan M. Wainwright, as Provisional Bishop of New York; these resumed in the journal of the September 28, 1853 convention; however, Ransom made no report on Christ Church in this journal or the 1854 and 1855 journals. In the journal of the September 24, 1856 journal of the Diocese of New York (p. 214) he made the following report on Christ Church, Oyster Bay:

Baptisms; adult 1; infants 11 – total, 12. Confirmed, 9. Burials, 4. Communicants: admitted, 2; removed from the Parish, 6; died, 1 – present number, 60. The Holy Communion: celebrated the first Sunday in every month. Catechists and Sunday School Teachers, 9; Sunday Scholars, 70. Celebration of Divine Service Sundays, 50 times; Holy Days, 3; other days, 1 – total, 54.

In the journal of the September 30, 1857 convention “Timothy P. Burger” is listed as the delegate from Christ Church. Ransom reported (p. 192) 7 infant baptisms, 3, burials, and 60 communicants, 10 “Catechists and Sunday-School teachers”, and 67 “Catechumens”.

There is no lay delegate from Christ Church to the September 29, 1859 convention. Ransom’s report (p. 194) in that convention journal included no information about instruction. He lists 6 adult baptisms, 14-20 infant baptisms, 10 confirmations, 4 marriages, and 7 burials.

There is also no lay delegate from Christ Church to the September 28, 1859 or to the September 26, 1860 conventions, and to those conventions Ransom made no parochial report.

In the journal of the September 25, 1861 convention Ransom is listed at St. John’s Church, Fort Hamilton. The Rev. Richard Graham Hutton, who succeeded him at Christ Church on October 9, 1861 is described (p. 9) as a deacon. There are no lay delegates from Christ Church to that convention, nor is there a parochial report.

In the September 24, 1862 journal of convention, “Thomas F. Youngs and John Henry Adam” are listed as lay delegates for Christ Church, Oyster Bay. On page 9 of that journal Hutton’s name is associated with Christ Church, but he is not given a title. He was priested (p. 139) on July 10, 1862 by the Rt. Rev. Horatio Potter, Bishop of New York, at Christ Church, Oyster Bay (p. 133). In his parochial report (p. 198) Hutton calls himself “rector”:

Number of families, 40. Number of individuals, about 250. Baptisms: adult, 1; infants, 13 – total 14. Confirmed, 6. Marriages, 2. Burials, 4. Communicants: admitted, 7; removed from the Parish, 1 – present number, 57, of whom 16 were summer residents. The Holy Communion: celebrated on the first Sunday of every month, and at Christmas, Easter, and Whitsunday. Catechists and Sunday-School teachers, 9. Sunday scholars, 70. Daily Parish School: paid school for boys (collegiate), scholars, males 16. Celebration of Divine Service: Sundays, morning and afternoon of every Sunday; Holy Days, Christmas, Epiphany, Ash-Wednesday, every Wednesday and Friday in Lent; every day in Holy Week; Monday and Tuesday after Easter Day, Ascension Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Friday preceding each Communion Sunday.

In the journal of the 1863 convention Hutton reported 62 communicants at Christ Church. He said that he also held services at Oyster Bay Cove and Syosset. In the following year, he said of the church that “it is in a healthful and flourishing condition” and that it was free of debt. By 1867 he reported 100 communicants and regular services in Syosset.

Hutton attended the primary convention of the Diocese of Long Island on November 18-19, 1868 which elected the Rt. Rev. Abram N. Littlejohn, the first Bishop of Long Island. Hutton left Christ Church on April 29, 1874. To the journal of the May 19-20, 1874 convention he reported on Christ Church, Oyster Bay, as follows:

Baptisms: Adults, 4; Infants, 6. Total, 10.

Marriages, 2. Burials, 6.

Communicants: Admitted, 4; Received, 3; Removed, 1; Died, 1.

Present Number, 91.

Holy Communion; First Sunday of every month and the greater festivals.

Friday in Lent, and the second Sunday of every month at St. George’s,
Syosset.

Sunday-school: Teachers, 7. Scholars, 42.

Hutton’s letter-dismissory to the Diocese of Maryland was granted on June 26, 1874 (p. 74).

The following three rectors served Christ Church, Oyster Bay, for brief periods: the Rev. Charles W. Ward, October 18, 1874 until May 2, 1875; the Rev. James B. Murray (minister in charge) from November 21, 1875 until May 21, 1876; and the Rev. George Roe Van De Water, from October 1, 1876 to 1880. Of these Van De Water is the most important for the history of Christ Church. Van De Water was born in Flushing, New York, on April 24, 1854. He began at Christ Church as minister-in-charge on the day of his ordination to the diaconate by the Rt. Rev. Abram N. Littlejohn, Bishop of Long Island. He reported 75 communicants and the successful progress of a capital campaign to build a new church in the journal of the 1877 convention. The last service in the 1844 building was March 17, 1878. Van De Water was ordained to the priesthood at St. Paul’s Church, Brooklyn, on April 25, 1878, also by Littlejohn; he then became rector of Christ

Church. Van De Water was dynamic. By the journal of the May 1878 convention he reported that all money needed for a new church was in hand, the cornerstone had been laid on May 1, 1878, and that it was being built, and to the following convention he said that the space was occupied. This is the center of the present church; it is built on the site of the three previous church buildings. In his parochial report to the May 20-21, 1879 convention he reported 115 communicants (p. 128-129).

Van De Water married Cornelia Townsend Youngs, of Oyster Bay, in Christ Church on April 24, 1879; the marriage was solemnized by Bishop Littlejohn (1879, p. 82). Van De Water left Christ Church for St. Luke's Church, Brooklyn on January 31, 1880. He was at St. Luke's from February 1, 1880 to June 1, 1887. Subsequently, he was from 1887 to 1920 rector of St. Andrew's Church, Harlem, and from 1920 until his death rector of the Church of the Beloved Disciple on East 89th Street in New York City. A chaplain in the Spanish-American War and Chaplain of Columbia University from 1892 to 1905, he died on March 15, 1925, and he is buried alongside his wife in Youngs Memorial Cemetery in Oyster Bay.

Following Van De Water as rector was the Rev. William Montague Geer, who served from 1880 to 1888, and the Rev. Henry H. Washburn, who served from July 1, 1888 to 1911. The parish grew slowly but continually in these years. Geer reported 134 communicants in the journal of the 1880 convention. In subsequent years of his rectorship, the parish furnished him with a horse and remodeled the rectory, which had been erected in 1800. According to the journal of the May 1887 convention a large hall was erected in the village in the summer of 1886, of which the parish had the exclusive use. Geer tried to begin a school in October 1887, but the school was not a success, and he resigned in March 1888 to become an Assistant Minister of Trinity Church, in New York City. Previous to coming to Christ Church Washburn had been rector of St. Barnabas' Church in Brooklyn. In the 1890 journal he reported 151 communicants, ten more than the previous year. To the 1892 convention he reported 157 communicants and the near end of a capital campaign to erect a Sunday-school building. To the following convention he reported the building was nearing completion. To the 1894 convention he reported that in the winter of 1893 and 1894 electric lighting had been installed in the church. In his report to the 1895 convention Washburn reported 173 communicants. The September 15, 1902 issue of the *New York Times* contains an article (headlined "Clergyman Angers President Roosevelt") narrating how a sermon the previous day by Washburn at Christ Church, Oyster Bay, eulogizing Roosevelt had angered him. Washburn was named Rector Emeritus on his retirement in 1911. He died in Plainville, Connecticut, in 1921.

The Rev. George Edwin Talmage was rector from 1911 to 1934. Born in Amoy, China, on August 16, 1865, and a former minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, he was ordained to the diaconate in 1907 and to the priesthood in 1909 by Bishop Greer. He married Eugenie Florence Sweet on June 10, 1890. He became canonically resident on June 24, 1911, coming to Long Island from the Diocese of New York. He reported 199 communicants at Christ Church, Oyster Bay, to the 1912 convention, and to the following convention he reported 273 communicants, an increase that suggests his dynamism. In 1914 he reported 281 communicants and mission activity sponsored by the church: "Italian work carried on since Advent, with the help of the Rev. H. L. Filosa". The

1878 building of Christ Church was enlarged in 1925 and 1926, and Talmage reported 548 communicants at Christ Church, Oyster Bay, to the May 1929 convention. Talmage was named Rector Emeritus on his retirement. He died on July 26, 1944.

After the relatively brief rectorship of the Rev. Harold Pattison, D.D., who served from 1934 to 1940, the Rev. John N. Warren was rector from 1940 to 1967. Pattison had been born in Newcastle-on-Tyne, England, September 16, 1869. A former Baptist Minister, he was ordained to the diaconate in December 1930 by Bishop Mitchell and priested in May 1931 by the Rt. Rev. Ernest M. Stires, Bishop of Long Island. Before coming to Oyster Bay, he had assisted the Rev. Arthur R. Cummings at the Church of the Resurrection, Richmond Hill. Warren was born in Cornwall, England, on November 7, 1900. He was ordained to the diaconate in April 1931 and to the priesthood in October 1931 by Bishop Mitchell. Before coming to Christ Church he was rector of Church of the Epiphany, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The Rev. Robert Titus Hollett was rector of Christ Church from 1968 to 1987. He was followed by the Rev. Bruce Derby Griffith from 1987 to 2002 and the Rev. Peter Frasius Casparian, who began in 2004. Born in Rockville Centre, New York, on February 15, 1923, Hollett was ordained to the diaconate in April 1954 and to the priesthood in November 1954 by the Rt. Rev. James P. DeWolfe, Bishop of Long Island.

The journal of the May 21, 1968 convention of the diocese listed 668 communicants at Christ Church. On his retirement Hollett was named Rector Emeritus of Christ Church, Oyster Bay. Griffith was born in Braham, Minnesota, on June 14, 1944. He was ordained to the diaconate in June 1968 by Bishop H. H. Kellogg. He was priested in March 1969 by the Rt. Rev. Kenneth Daniel Wilson Anand, Retired Bishop of Amritsar (India), for the Bishop of Minnesota. The church was remodeled in 1995. Casparian was born in New York City on January 17, 1951. He was ordained to the diaconate in June 1974 and priested in February 1975 by Bishop Reed. The parish hall was remodeled in 2008.

Clergy of Christ Church Oyster Bay

Rev. George Keith, Rev. John Talbot	1701-1704
Rev. John Thomas	1704-1724
Rev. Robert Jenney	1726-1742
Rev. Samuel Seabury (1706-1764)	1742-1764
Rev. Leonard Cutting	1766-1784
Rev. Andrew Fowler	1786
Rev. John Churchill Rudd	1805
Rev. Edward K. Fowler	1822-1826
Rev. Samuel Seabury (1801-1872)	1826-1827
Rev. Joseph E. Phillips	1832-1835
Rev. Isaac Sherwood	1835-1844

Rev. Edwin Harwood	1844-1846
Rev. John Stearns, Jr.	1846-1849
Rev. Edmund Richards	1849-1851
Rev. Joseph Ransom	1851-1861
Rev. Richard Graham Hutton (began as deacon)	1861-1874
Rev. Charles W. Ward	1874-1875
Rev. James B. Murray (minister in charge)	1875-1876
Rev. George Van De Water	1876-1880
Rev. William Montague Geer	1880-1888
Rev. William T. Fitch (minister in charge)	1888
Rev. Henry Homer Washburn	1888-1911
Rev. George Edwin Talmage, D.D.	1911-1934
Rev. Harold Pattison, D. D.	1934-1940
Rev. John Nankervis Warren	1940-1967
Rev. Robert T. Hollett	1968-1987
Rev. Bruce D. Griffith	1987-2002
Rev. Peter F. Casparian	2004-2014
Rev. Michael Piret	2016-