

St. Peter's  
Episcopal Church



HEBRON, CONNECTICUT

Chuck Eaton  
April 20 1987  
Per G. Conn. History

**ST. PETER'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH**  
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**By: Chuck Eaton**  
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## History of St. Peter's Church

With the settling of the town of Hebron, which began in 1709, state law required that a Congregationalist society be established. The call went out for a minister and also for a location for a meetinghouse. Each landowner had quite a stake in the site, for this would probably become the center of the town and would definitely affect all property values. The original township of Hebron included parts of Andover and Marlborough. Andover and Gilead landowners hoped that a site closer to them, Godfrey Hill, would be chosen (see map). Other parties wanted the site to be further south. A special committee of the General Assembly fixed the site approximately where the traffic light is now. Building began in 1716. All townsfolk worshipped together, but many did not forget their differences.

John Bliss, a 1710 Yale graduate, was called to be the town's first settled minister.

In 1731 a new and larger meetinghouse was in order. Again, the northerners spoke in favor of changing the site. Mr. Bliss agreed with them. The southern party tried to rid themselves of Mr. Bliss by bringing charges against him. The charges were found unfounded, but problems continued. In 1733, Rev. Bliss and his followers asked to be separated from the others in the congregation, in order that they might establish a congregation of their own. The request was denied, but strong feelings continued, and it was during this time that the meetinghouse on the green was burned down.

The Rev. Bliss later resigned but continued to hold services in his own home (on Godfrey Hill), for which he was again brought to court. In 1734 Rev. Bliss and his followers declared themselves for the Church of England. It is said that most were originally from the Church of England and so this was a natural move.

The Rev. Bliss gave the land for the first church site and the building for the first St. Peter's was begun in 1735. It was the sixth Episcopal Church in the colony. The church was not completed until 1766, because of lack of funds. All that is known of that first church is that it was fifty-eight by thirty feet in size.

The Episcopal Church did not recognize Mr. Bliss as an Episcopal Priest but he conducted services for about six years as a lay reader. It was necessary at this time to travel to England for Ordination. Bliss died of smallpox the night before he was to sail to England to take his Holy Orders. The Rev. Bliss is buried in the old churchyard on Godfrey Hill, close by the original church site.

Barzillai Dean, a 1739 Yale graduate, and lay reader at St. Peter's, sailed to England and was ordained. On his return voyage, his ship was lost at sea.

Jonathan Coltan was ordained in England in 1762 and died of smallpox on the ship returning to St. Peter's.

James Usher also was ordained in England, but was taken prisoner by the French on his return voyage and died.

A Mr. Fairweather was also ordained for St. Peter's, but died on his return trip.

Samuel Peters, born in Hebron in 1735, and a 1757 Yale graduate, sought the rectorship of St. Peter's in 1758. He sailed for England and received the Holy Orders in 1759. He nearly died of smallpox while in England, but recovered and safely returned to Hebron the following year. The Rev. Peters was described as having an iron will as well as an iron frame.

His nephew, Connecticut Governor John S. Peters, described Rev. Peters as one who admired the British Government, and the royalty which surrounded it. His loyalty to the Mother Country was very strong during a time when people here were feeling resentment toward the Crown. He spoke openly against the colonists and for the British in many matters, including the Boston Tea Party. He was the target of many mobs of Patriots, including the Sons of Liberty. He was later forced to flee for his life, reaching Boston and escaped on a British ship. All his personal properties and nearly all the papers of the Episcopal Church in Hebron were lost. While in exile in England, he wrote "A General History of Connecticut". (see Bibliography #1)

In the early 1800's Rev. Peters returned to his native land and settled in New York City. He died in 1826 at the age of 91, and was buried on Godfrey Hill beside his three wives. In 1841, his remains were moved to the cemetery behind the present St. Peter's Church. A large brownstone monument marks his final resting place.

St. Peter's Church remained alive throughout the Revolutionary War, with a Thomas Brown reading services regularly on Godfrey Hill. The minister from Christ Church in Norwich made several visits as a priest. Records were kept in Christ Church from 1776 on.

With independence from Britain, parts of the service dealing with the Royal Family and loyalty to the Crown were removed.

In the fall of 1787, Bishop Seabury confirmed about thirty people in Hebron. Following several part-time clergy, in 1794 the Rev. Jillotson Bronson became the church's first resident minister since the Rev. Peters.

In 1821 the Rev. William Jarvis came to replace the Rev. Ammi Rogers, who had ended his rectorship in scandal. The growing church family began to outgrow the tiny church on Godfrey Hill. The beginnings of the church in 1824 resulted in a structure costing \$5,460.69. The bricks were made in a local kiln and the building done by a local builder. The new church was located south of the center of town. (see map). Some thought it to be a very impressive and beautiful church, while others ridiculed its unconventional design. The Gothic turrets and pinnacles were removed within thirty years of its completion.

The old Godfrey Hill church was soon torn down, the only remains being three wooden candlesticks and the pewter baptismal basin, still in use today.

After settling down to several uneventful years, the only excitement was the installation of a new organ in 1860. The interior of the church was renovated during the winter of 1871.

Even with the coming of the railroad and a short-lived industrial boom, Hebron's population went from about 3,000 to about 1,000 at the close of the century. By the 1920's, St. Peter's Parish consisted of the rector's family and only a handful of others.

St. Peter's enjoyed a rebirth with the founding of St. Peter's School of Liberal and Humane Studies. In 1938 the interior of the church was restored again and a new and larger altar was built. In the middle of the village of Hebron, the State put a highway. Almost overnight, Hebron grew, as did the church. In 1955 a confirmation class of seventeen was the largest since 1877.

In 1956, other church activities that had previously been held in the small house across the street, expanded and thus, Phelps Hall was built. Still later, in 1972, more rooms were added, under the direction of Charles Eaton. Also, about this time, the church walls were found to be drifting apart and so tierods were installed into the church. Most recently the old chimney has been torn down and a new one built.

Presently, Phelps Hall serves as a nursery school and community center, hosting many varied activities.

St. Peter's, built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is so very much alive now, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I'm proud to have been Baptized, Confirmed and to serve as an Acolyte in a church which has meant so much to so many people and to the history of Hebron.

## Architecture of St. Peter's Church

The interior of the church, built in 1826, was modeled after an Italian church but had many English Gothic characteristics as well. The wooden turrets and pinnacles did not weather well in New England, and were removed less than thirty years after being built.

Five years later, the church bell in the tower was added. It was recast in 1921, reproducing the original tone and pitch of the first bell.

The interior of the church looks much different today than it did then. There were two main isles, there were no choir pews up front, the organ was located in the front of the church and there were corner pews in the front and rear reserved for Blacks.

The present organ was installed in 1860. It was placed in the balcony, and is today one of the oldest restored organs of its kind.

The exterior brick was painted white, but left unpainted for several years, has left the brick with its original color and texture.

In 1871, the high pulpit was removed and replaced with a smaller pulpit, and a small altar was added. Stained glass windows designed by Tiffany Company were added to the existing frames. The windows on the existing wall contain their original glass.

A center isle was put in to accommodate the installation of a furnace in 1871. The pews are the originals.

Most of the interior woodwork was painted a sage green. In 1900 the pews were grained to imitate golden oak, and in 1938 they were painted white. Also in that year, choir stalls were put in the front of the church in the form of old pews.

In the late 1960's, tierods were installed to check the bowing walls. In 1976 the altar was made free-standing, pushing back the wall behind the altar into a "V", letting the minister face the congregation.

St. Peter's was considered to be ahead of it's time when it was built. It is unique in its style, a combination of the old and the new.

Rectors of St. Peter's Episcopal Church

Samuel Peters 1760 – 1774  
Jillots Bronson 1794 – 1799  
Evan Rogers 1799 – 1803  
Ammi Rogers 1815 – 1819  
William Jarvis 1821 – 1826  
George C. Sheppard 1827 – 1829  
Alpheus Geer 1829 – 1844  
Solomon Hitchcock 1846 – 1849  
Charles R. Fisher 1850  
William Warland 1851 – 1865  
Hilliard Bryant 1865 - 1880  
Jared Ellsworth 1880 – 1889  
Edward C. Johnson 1889 – 1892  
John Farrar 1893 – 1895  
J. H. Fitzgerald 1897 – 1915  
Sherwood Roosevelt 1916 – 1918  
Theodore D. Martin 1919 – 1929  
Harold Keen 1934 – 1954  
Richard Day Clark 1954 – 1955  
Douglas Fraser Pimm 1955 – 1959  
Gordon W. Weeman 1959 – 1972  
William N. Persing 1972 –



# MAP OF HEBRON



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