

## Samuel Seabury

### First bishop in the Episcopal Church in the United States

Each year on November 14 the Episcopal Church remembers the consecration and ordination in 1784 of Samuel Seabury as the first Bishop of Connecticut and first Episcopal Church bishop in the United States of America.

Looking today at a sketch or painting of Seabury, one might not associate this portly and respectable Yale-educated clergyman with controversy. But in his day Seabury fought the good fight against odds that would have made a less determined and committed man retreat.

Like many clergymen of the Church of England, Seabury, who served several congregations in the colony of New York, was a Loyalist during the Revolutionary War, siding with the British. He even wrote pamphlets denouncing the rebellion that so angered local patriots that they had him imprisoned for some six weeks. Once freed, he took refuge behind British lines in New York City and was chaplain to a Red-coat regiment.

Loyalty to the British crown came naturally to many Anglican clergymen; when they were ordained—always in England, for there were no bishops in the colonies—they took an oath of obedience not only to the Church, but to the English monarch, who was (and is) head of the English Church. Breaking with England meant breaking that oath, which some clergymen refused to do.

When the war ended, Anglican clergy and parishioners—now citizens of the United States of America—found themselves in a most difficult position. The theology and practice of the Church required clergy. Clergy must be ordained by bishops. But bishops in the Church of England were barred by law from ordaining any person who had not sworn fealty to the king whose rule the former colonies had rejected.

It became clear to American church leaders that they must have their own bishops in order to continue in the succession handed down from the first bishops, the apostles of Jesus, and to assure a supply of clergy for their new church.

A group of clergy in Connecticut elected Seabury, the former Loyalist, but “a man

of great good sense,” as a contemporary put it, to become the first bishop of their diocese.

Seabury sailed for England to seek ordination. But Seabury could no longer swear the loyalty oath. Bishops of the Church of England refused his application.

In ever-rebellious Scotland, however, the Episcopal Church was not the established church, and bishops were not bound by any political oath. Three bishops of the Scottish Episcopal Church ordained Seabury at a church in Aberdeen.

Back in the United States, Seabury met further resistance: some former Anglicans refused to accept his ordination, since it did not come directly from the Church of England. But the 1789 General Convention of the new Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America affirmed his consecration. In time, the Church of England, realizing the advantage of keeping close ties with the Church across the sea, persuaded Parliament to drop the loyalty oath requirement, making possible the consecration of additional bishops, including William White, Bishop of Pennsylvania, who was the new church’s first Presiding Bishop, serving for one year in 1789. He was followed by Seabury, who led the Church from 1789 to 1792.

Seabury faced the challenges of a church reforming itself to meet changed circumstances, and had a great influence on its structure and polity. He helped establish the House of Bishops. He preached, taught, and wrote books. He actively advocated for an American prayer book based on the Scottish rite. He is said to have confirmed 10,000 Episcopalians during his years in the episcopate. He also continued to serve as rector of St. James’ Church, New London, Connecticut, and was buried in a chapel there upon his death on February 25, 1796.

*We give you thanks, O Lord our God, for your goodness in bestowing upon this Church the gift of the episcopate, which we celebrate in this remembrance of the consecration of Samuel Seabury; and we pray that, joined together in unity with our bishops, and nourished by your holy Sacraments, we may proclaim the Gospel of redemption with apostolic zeal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

—Lesser Feasts & Fasts



Portrait of Samuel Seabury by Raalph Earl (1751-1801) is part of the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery collection.



Stained-glass window shown above is in St. George's Church in Dayton, Ohio.

# ELW

Tell us what YOU would like to see in your weekly bulletin insert. Complete the Episcopal Life Weekly survey online at [www.episcopalchurch.org/bulletininsertsurvey](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/bulletininsertsurvey)