"Let All Things Be Done Decently and in Order": Gender Segregation in the Seating of Early American Churches

Caroline Everard Athey Warner

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"LET ALL THINGS BE DONE DECENTLY AND IN ORDER":
Gender Segregation in the Seating of Early American Churches

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
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the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Documentary evidence suggests a strong tendency to segregate the sexes in many Protestant churches in colonial and early republican America. References to the practice by architectural historians and religious scholars, however, have generally been brief, often included in larger studies that focus on a single denomination or religious movement. This thesis concentrates on the religious practice of gender segregation as a cultural and architectural phenomenon in the Protestant churches of early America.

This thesis compares the application of gender segregation in the Anglican/Episcopal tradition with two additional and distinct religious groups: the sectarian Shakers and the evangelical Methodists. This cross-denominational analysis is conducted using two main sources of research: church records from colonial Virginia and travel narratives from the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Together these resources provide two frames of evidence that allow us to observe the evolution of the practice within and among various Protestant denominations in America over an extended period of time.

This thesis underscores the fidelity of American denominations to traditional Protestant ideals of order and decency. In addition, this thesis examines the various architectural manifestations of the practice in which gender segregation was one of a number of ways in which churchgoers were segregated. Socio-economic pressures from the period of political transformation before and after the Revolution resulted in real consequences for the practice of gender segregation, and it took a strong theological foundation and leadership to sustain the practice in America’s churches.
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INTRODUCTION

For eighteenth-century Americans, the local church served as a community center, offering its members not only a place of worship, but also an opportunity to interact with various social groups. Bruton Parish Church, with its location in Virginia's second colonial capital, Flemish-bond brick construction, and high-profile parishioners, represented the authority of the Church of England, as well as the dominance of the colony's landed and slave-holding gentry. On Sunday mornings, the tolling of the church bell called the parishioners of colonial Williamsburg and the surrounding countryside to worship. While many of the lower classes walked to church, the parish’s male gentry made flashy arrivals on horseback. Their wives, daughters, and other elite females, dressed in their finery, arrived in escorted carriages. The churchyard soon bustled with social activity, business transactions, and gossip as men and women, young and old, white and black, and rich and poor assembled prior to the service.

The hierarchal distinctions witnessed outside were reflected in the church interior as parishioners entered the sanctuary to be seated. Pews were assigned to the governor,
members of the General Assembly, and other notable gentlemen of the community, while space in the gallery was reserved for the male students of the College of William and Mary. As for all colonial parish churches, the placement and size of the pews proclaimed the status of their occupants to the entire congregation, with the best seats located in close proximity to the pulpit. The vestry, as part of its official function, purposefully ordered every aspect of seating according to eighteenth-century Anglican standards of rank, age, race, and gender.

The Bruton Parish vestry records for January 19, 1716 were clear on the separation of gender. The parish vestry "Ordered that the men sitt on the North side of the Church, and the Women of the left." The instructions for seating the sexes at Bruton Parish Church demonstrate a deep commitment on behalf of the vestry to Protestant tradition and attitudes toward gender. Although the image of husbands and wives seated on opposite side of the aisle in the local church might appear odd to the modern day worshipper, for eighteenth-century Americans, the practice seems to have been widely observed.

Architectural historians and religious scholars agree on the existence of gender segregation in early American churches. Documentary evidence suggests a strong tendency to segregate the sexes in many of the diverse Protestant denominations that established themselves in colonial and early republican America. References to the subject, however, have generally been brief, often included in larger studies that focus on


Goodwin, 43.
a single denomination or religious movement. This thesis will concentrate on the practice of gender segregation itself as a cultural and architectural phenomenon in the Protestant churches of colonial and early America.

**CATEGORIES OF INQUIRY**

The study of gender segregation in Protestant American churches raises a number of questions that range from the practical—how, when, where, why, and to what extent did gender segregation exist?—to more complex themes regarding social and economic constructs and the influence of religious plurality in the creation of American identity. In preparation for research, I divided the questions into four distinct categories of inquiry.

The first category concerns the universality of the practice. How prevalent was the practice among the various Protestant denominations in early America? Was the practice limited to the colonial period or did it extend beyond the Revolution and continue into nineteenth century? Were there regional variations?

The second series of questions involves origins and rationale. What were the theological underpinnings for gender segregation? What role did gender ideology play? In other words, how did changing notions of the ideal attributes and correct behavior of women influence religious interpretation of the practice? How did this practice become integral to ideals of order and decorum in America’s churches? How did this practice become

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become associated with the diverse range of Protestant theologies in America for almost
two centuries?

The third set of questions relate to the various architectural manifestations of
gender segregation. How did its physical appearance vary according to the theological
assumptions of each individual denomination? How did the application of gender
segregation change in response to the marked shift in church design from the traditional
European forms of the colonial period to a cross-denominational, national church
architecture in the first decades of the nineteenth century? Gender segregation produced
varying ways of conceptualizing spaces of worship and church design. There were
different ways in which the sexes could be arranged inside the church, as well as a
number of architectural features that could be employed as tools for segregation. This
was especially true for many sectarian groups such as the Shakers and the Society of
Friends. All the denominations included in this study share the same the parallel layout
in which the sexes are seated in rows separated by a center or dual aisles. In contrast the
colonial Dutch Reformed Church in Schenectady, New York stands as a dramatic
example. The men sat on benches along the wall or in upper galleries, forming a semi­
circle that surrounded the women, who were seated in rows in the center of the church
floor facing the pulpit (Fig. 1).5

The fourth category places the practice of gender segregation in early American
churches in a broader American context. Gender segregation acts as an important lens
through which we can observe the social, economic, and political issues of a particular
historical period. This thesis suggests something about the themes proposed by Joan

5 George Rogers Howell and John H. Munsell, History of the County of Schenectady, N.Y., from 1662 to
Scott in that the practice of gender segregation, as a reflection of both the masculine and feminine identities, serves as “a primary way of signifying relationships of power.”

Thus, the concrete relationship of men and women in church can tell us something about the larger society. By looking at the practice of gender segregation in various Protestant denominations, we can ask questions about: a) the role of various Protestant groups in the creation of American identity; b) the way the practice of gender segregation was influenced by historical, social, economic, and political circumstances; and c) the way gender segregation was interconnected with other forms of social stratification based on race, age, rank and economic circumstances.

**RESEARCH METHOD AND SOURCES**

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the practice of gender segregation in early America, I began by examining colonial Virginia church records. These documents were selected for a number of reasons. First, Virginia has well preserved and extensive colonial records, which allowed me to go directly to the source and see what church leaders themselves had to say on the subject. Church minutes often recorded valuable information regarding the administrative decisions of church leaders, such as the selection of ministers, charges of disorderly conduct, instructions for the construction and repair of buildings, as well as the seating of parishioners. Second, colonial Virginia church records provided a chance to study a range of Protestant denominations set within a temporally bound and defined socio-political and geographic area. Third, despite its unique tobacco cultural and plantation aristocracy, colonial Virginia was fundamentally

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English in nature. Religious historian Jon Butler has suggested that religions in colonial America were European in character, arguing: “it is impossible to understand America’s religious origins apart from Europe.” Therefore, because colonial Virginia derived its religious and social identity from England, the collection of Virginia church records allows us to explore the connections from theological underpinnings of gender segregation directly from the English Reformation to the colony.

In looking for references to gender segregation in Virginia, I reviewed a sampling of colonial Anglican, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Congregational, Society of Friends, Methodist, and Baptist church records. The survey yielded surprising results. With the exception of colonial Anglican parish vestry records, which frequently mentioned gender segregation applied in varying degrees in connection with family pews, church records were virtually mute on the subject. Where are accounts of the practice in Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and other churches? There are references to systems of pew rentals but not to gender segregation. Did this mean gender segregation only existed in the Anglican Church of colonial Virginia, or was it so fundamental in the other denominations that it was not discussed? The question cannot be answered using this source material alone. However, because there are so many relevant references in the Anglican vestry records, the Anglican Church presents an important case study for

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8 I examined colonial church records from three main Virginia depositories, the Library of Virginia, the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, and the Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School. The sampling was somewhat random, but attempted to represent the broad spectrum of Protestant denominations in colonial America. For example, I review all of the colonial Baptist records available at the Baptist Historical Society, while I randomly selected colonial Anglican and Society of Friends records from the list at the Library of Virginia. For some groups, like the Methodists, there were very few colonial records available. See bibliography for a complete list of church records.
examining gender segregation in the dominant denomination of the colonial period in Virginia.

At this point, it is important to note that the survey of colonial Virginia church records should not be taken as representative of all American colonies. It does not attempt to make assumptions about the application of gender segregation in other regions during the colonial period, such as the Quakers in the Delaware Valley and the Congregationalists in New England. The ranked, gentry-class society associated with the Anglicans of colonial Virginia was quite different from the labor and familial structure of the Anglicans in New England.9

An extensive collection of travel narratives from the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provides the necessary evidence of the practice in other Protestant denominations.10 In their exploration of early republican America, many British and European travelers visited churches across a range of denominations from New York, to Virginia, to South Carolina. While the evidence from these outside perspectives is often piecemeal and random, there are numerous references to the practice in many of the Protestant denominations in late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century America, specifically in sectarian and evangelical congregations. Of note is the absence of accounts of the practice in the Episcopal Church, which represented the Anglican tradition following the Revolution. Though it established itself as an independent organization, the Episcopal Church adopted the Anglican form of public worship and the Book of Common Prayer, and was generally the chosen house of worship for elite in many regions.

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9 See Butler.
The church records and travel narratives are two different types of research documents from two different periods. At first glance, the research model might appear problematic. Yet, they are valuable and instructive research materials that provide two snapshots of gender segregation in early America - one from the perspective of the Anglicans in colonial Virginia, and one from a variety of denominations in early republican America. Supported by evidence from letters, journals, and religious texts, the combination of colonial Virginia church records and nineteenth-century travel narratives creates two distinct frames of evidence that allow us to observe the evolution of the practice of gender segregation in America and its various denominational interpretations over an extended period of time from the colonial period through the early republican and antebellum periods. Together these resources provide useful insights about the rise of religious diversity and the shift from European colonialism to a politically, economically, and religiously independent nation with a distinctly American identity.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Using the research method described above, this thesis is divided into four chapters examining the practice of gender segregation in early America churches. The first chapter traces the theological underpinnings of gender segregation from its roots through the Protestant Reformation in England. It argues that the practice was derived from Paul’s writings in I Corinthians "that all things be done decently and in order."\textsuperscript{11} The chapter discusses how gender segregation became embedded in Protestant tradition as an

interpretation of Paul’s verse, and came to embody the notion of the proper ordering of
curch members.

Chapter 2 explores the application of gender segregation in the seating plans of
the Anglican parish churches of colonial Virginia. The chapter provides an overview of
colonial Anglican Church architecture and discusses the role of the vestry and the state-
supported church in the seating of parishioners. Vestry records reveal that the practice
was interconnected with the granting of family pews. This research supports
architectural historian Dell Upton’s theory in *Holy Things and Profane* that the sacred
and the secular were intertwined in the parish church in colonial Virginia. The church
was thus a microcosm of colonial society. This chapter discusses how the practice of
gender segregation reflects not only theological interpretations but also the hierarchal
structure of eighteenth-century Virginia and the power of the gentry.

Chapters 3 and 4 move away from a discussion based solely on the church records
of the colonial period in Virginia to a broader analysis of gender segregation informed by
travel narratives in post-Revolutionary America. Chapter 3 focuses on the Episcopal
Church. It follows the dissolution of the Church of England to the establishment of the
Episcopal Church as an independent denomination free of state-sponsorship and tax
revenues. A selection of late-eighteenth-century Virginia vestry records reveals no
mention of the practice of gender segregation. Instead, discussions of seating seem to
focus on private pew rentals. The chapter suggests that as the Episcopal Church sought
to retain its elite membership, they reoriented and remodeled its churches at the
beginning of the nineteenth century according to the latest trends and adopted a system of
pew rentals to finance their congregations and churches. The lack of evidence for gender

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12 Upton, *Holy Things and Profane*.
segregation in the Episcopal Church of this period calls into question the practicality of the practice in a privately funded church.

While Chapter 3 examines gender segregation in one church tradition (the Anglican/Episcopal) over time, Chapter 4 examines the practice from two additional, distinct forms of Protestantism in early America. It compares gender segregation in Anglican/Episcopal churches with the sectarian groups, as represented by the Shakers, and the evangelicals, as represented by the Methodists. Travel narratives reveal the existence of the practice in both Shaker and Methodist congregations well into the nineteenth century. For the Shakers, as a small and isolated sect, ideologies supporting gender segregation defined their community life, directly impacting the built environment. In dramatic descriptions of gender segregation among the Shakers, we can follow the practice carried in an extreme fashion within a religious community.

For the Methodists, who began to amass an enormous following at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and who along with the Baptists initiated the great evangelical awakening in America, the practice of gender segregation represented a more widespread phenomenon. This chapter examines the rationale of Methodist leaders in support of gender segregation. Both the Methodists and Shakers viewed architecture as a primary means of keeping the sexes separate. This chapter will highlight the ways in which the Methodists used architecture to sort and seat churchgoers, specifically in the installation of double doors and the split entry vestibule.

As with the Anglicans and Episcopalians, the Methodist case will allow us to study the impact of changing socio-economic and political forces on church practice. Methodism historically adhered to a strict policy of gender segregation at the insistence
of its founder John Wesley. At the same time the Methodist Church, according to its notions of “equality,” offered free seats to all members. As an independent denomination under the pressure of the need for funding to support its growing membership, pew rentals grew and gender segregation waned. The practice of gender segregation was also influenced by the fact that Methodism spread at the same time as the nation became increasingly divided over slavery. The sorting and seating of church members took on new forms as churches tried to deal with the issue of segregating along both racial and gender lines.

**SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS**

The period I have studied reflects a change over a politically transformative period in American history that had consequences for organized religion. Marked by the period of Revolution, this shift can be seen in political changes (monarchical rule to a representative democracy), economic changes (an agrarian economy to urban development and industrialization), and religious changes (a state-supported faith in which parishioners were taxed and required to attend church in many colonies to a nation of a Christian pluralism and religious freedom). Historian Nathan Hatch argues that it was the influx of Protestant denominations that established themselves in colonial and early republican America, which influenced the politics and enlightened ideals of the founding fathers and gave rise to the nation’s cultural and social identity.\(^1\)

\(^1\) John Butler adds that it was the complex plurality and spiritual eclecticism of Christian theologies from which American

religious tradition was born.\textsuperscript{14} Despite the striking diversity of religious faiths that made up the early American landscape, gender segregation was viewed as a Protestant ideal and was a key practice across the range of denominations in the colonial and early republican periods.

\textsuperscript{14} Butler, 291. Butler argues that it was not New England Puritanism or evangelicalism but the critical period from 1680 to 1820, which included the post-1680 Anglican resurgence, the return of religious authority following the Revolution, and African notions of the supernatural in the antebellum period, that shaped patterns of Christianity in American.
CHAPTER I

THE THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF GENDER SEGREGATION:
FROM THE TEMPLE OF SOLOMON TO THE ENGLISH REFORMED CHURCH

The theological origins of gender segregation in the Anglican Church and other Protestant denominations of early America are founded in ancient Judeo-Christian precedent. Although there is no direct mention of the practice in the Bible, I Corinthians 15: 40 asserts, “Let all things be done decently and in order.” This verse, written circa 54/55 C.E. by the Apostle Paul, provided the biblical justification for the practice of gender segregation throughout the evolution of the Christian faith and all of its varying reforms. As perceptions toward women and gender evolved from the early Christian period, through the Middle Ages, the Protestant Reformation, and into the colonial period in America, Paul’s verse was used to perpetuate a universal Christian practice, which served to maintain order and decorum in the church.

ORIGINS AND THE JEWISH TRADITION

Segregation of sexes can be traced back to the Temple of Jerusalem, which stood as the center of the Jewish faith following its construction by King Solomon circa 960 B.C.E. The Hebrew Bible describes Solomon’s Temple as a grand structure built of stone, cedar, cypress, and gold, comprised of a series of chambers and courtyards of increasing levels of sanctity and segregation.1 According to the writings of Josephus, the temple was open

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1 Holy Bible, King James Version, I Kings 6.
to men and women of all faiths. The second courtyard could be accessed by both sexes, but was restricted to members of the Jewish faith. In the early years of the Temple Cult, women actively participated in public worship and sacred ceremonies. Only women regarded as unclean due to menstruation or childbirth were excluded. Here families worshiped together, attended religious festivals, and prepared offerings. The inner spaces of the temple, however, were increasingly segregated. The third courtyard was restricted to Jewish males. The interior chamber was reserved for priests and rabbis, and only male, high priests in full ceremonial garb could enter the gilded innermost sanctuary, also known as the Holy of the Holies.²

Between 20 B.C. and 63 C.E., the Temple was reconstructed and a woman’s court added (Fig. 2). This segregated space was delineated by columns and accessed by its own set of gates, which prevented the mixing of Jewish men and women during religious worship.³ According to Karla Goldman in her book *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery*, segregation in the Temple represents “women’s marginalization” in both public worship and public space.⁴ Many feminist scholars regard this period as the beginning of the subordination of women in the Western world and the creation of patriarchy, when concepts of a maternal creator and female fertility cults were replaced with the belief in a monotheistic male deity.⁵ During this time, Jewish priests sought to remove women from synagogue life. Jewish theology and scholarship became almost exclusively the pursuit of men and directions for segregation were included in the Talmud. The establishment of

a patriarchal hierarchy in the Judeo-tradition gave way to a redefining of the relationship between men and women, and a shift in the proscribed decorum of women in the temple/church. A strict policy of gender segregation in the Jewish synagogue would continue well into the nineteenth century, often relegating women to screened upper galleries where they were shielded from the view of male worshippers.

PAULINE CONCERN FOR ORDERING THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

As one of a number of small reform movements in first century Judaism, the early Christian church derived its gender ideology and the role of women from two main sources: the Hebrew Bible’s Book of Genesis, which established the natural order of the sexes and original sin, and the scriptural teachings of Paul.6 Referencing contemporary Jewish laws, Paul placed three restrictions on women in church; they were to “keep silence in the churches,” to cover their heads during worship, and to desist from teaching the gospel outside the home, which would “usurp authority over the man.”7 Gender segregation in the early Christian church, however, is never specifically mentioned in Paul’s writings. More significantly, there is no reference to the practice in any other book in the Bible.

This is not to suggest that Paul, raised as a Jew, was unfamiliar with the sexually segregated courtyards of the synagogue. On the contrary, he would have been keenly aware of the lack of women at worship in the Temple, and may have assumed that the

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7 Holy Bible, 1 Corinthians 14:34, 1 Corinthians 11: 3-7, 1 Tim 2: 11-12. These restrictions may have been put in place to prevent women from gossiping during worship, as the sex was seen as having a tendency toward such outbursts.
practice would and should be carried on in the Christian church. For Paul, Christian reforms were not meant to alter the conventional roles of women.

Early Christian scholars, however, doubt the occurrence of gender segregation in the earliest Christian houses of worship, as the practice would have been difficult to regulate in a small residence open to both of the sexes. In *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, Michael White describes the house-church or domus-ecclesia of the Pauline period, at its simplest, as a “private house . . . used for casual assembly.” The earliest Christians, including Jesus and his disciples, often assembled in secrecy in each other’s homes for prayer, study, and to partake in the Sacrament. Women were among the earliest converts to Christianity. They were welcome to worship alongside men as their spiritual equals, and were offered leadership positions in the church typically reserved for men. In contrast to the ordering of the sexes in the Jewish temple of the period, the open space and arrangement of worshippers in the domus-ecclesia reflected a relative equality among early Christian women and men.

**EARLY CHRISTIAN SOURCES FOR GENDER SEGREGATION**

This period of gender equality would not last for long. In the first few centuries following the death of Christ, Christian leaders attempted to bring order and stability to a rapidly expanding religious movement. For guidance on the proper order and structure of the church, theologians turned to Paul’s I Corinthians. Similar to the process of

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9 White, vol. 1, 103.

subjugation of Jewish women, Christian women were virtually silenced in the church by the fifth century, excluded by canon law from preaching the word of God. Concern for Pauline order and decency along with Judaic notions of the role of women provided a basis for gender segregation that carried through the ecclesiastical texts of the early Christian period.

Written between 217-235 C.E. by Hippolytus, the Presbyter and Schismatic Bishop in Rome, the *Apostolic Tradition* included guidelines for Catechumen’s prayer and his Kiss. Two of them specifically ordered gender segregation:

2. And let the women stand in the assembly by themselves, both the baptized women and the women catechumens. . . . 4. But the baptized shall embrace one another, men with men and women with women. But let not men embrace women.11

The late 3rd century Syrian text, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, or *The Teachings of the Apostles*, provided a detailed set of instructions for a properly organized church service, ranging from the role of the minister to the conduct of the laity. It states:

And in your congregations in the holy churches hold your assemblies with all decent order, and appoint the places for the brethren with care and gravity . . . For so it should be, that in the eastern part of the house the presbyters sit with the bishops, and next the laymen, and then the women; that when you stand up to pray, the rulers may stand first, and after them the laymen, and then the women also. . . . And let the young girls also sit apart; but if there be no room, let them stand up behind the women. And let the young women who are married and have children stand apart, and the aged women and widows sit apart.12

Not only were men and women separated, but also women were further divided into smaller groups according to age and marital status. Church officials and/or deacons were given the task of enforcing the practice of gender segregation.

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12 Ibid., 82.
As these ecclesiastical texts suggest, the sexes became increasingly segregated as Christianity shifted from a small, communal sect into an organized, state-supported religion. Built specifically in support of Christian sacraments, the basilica church was comprised of a long, open rectangular space or hall for gathering marked by a center aisle and two side aisles, divided by a colonnade. An altar located in a semi-circular apse at one-end acted as a delineated and prominent space for the Eucharist.

In his book *Protestant Worship and Church Architecture*, James White argues that gender segregation was adhered to in the basilica despite the open floor plan, which allowed people to move about freely. It was not uncommon for women to be relegated to the side aisles or galleries. Commenting on the basilica circa 380 C.E., Saint Augustine observed “the masses flock to the churches and their chaste acts of worship, where a seemly separation of the sexes is observed.” From the domus-ecclesia to the basilica church, gender segregation became a fundamental component of a properly ordered church as early Christians began building structures specifically designed for their own form of worship.

**GENDER SEGREGATION IN MEDIEVAL CATHOLICISM**

Declared the state religion of Rome in 324 C.E. by the Emperor Constantine, the Christian church, led by an increasingly powerful papal office, spread across the western world, unifying the diverse communities of medieval Europe under universal but

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13 White, vol. 1, 4-5, 57, 103.
adaptable beliefs and symbols. The structure of medieval Catholicism depended on a strict hierarchal order with distinct divisions between the clergy and laity.

These distinctions between the clergy and laity are reflected in the churches of the Middle Ages. Derived from the evolved basilica, medieval church buildings, from the cathedral to the parish church, contained two liturgical centers, the nave and the chancel. The clergy and their acolytes recited mass in Latin and partook in the Eucharist on behalf of the congregation in the chancel, separated from the laity assembled in the nave by a semi-transparent partition known as the rood screen. In viewing the service through quatrefoil piercings in the heavily carved rood screen, the laity acted only as witnesses to the ceremony.

In many early medieval churches, churchgoers generally stood or knelt during mass. Stone ledges were occasionally mounted along perimeter walls, at the bases of compound piers for use by the elderly or those in poor health. The lack of fixed seating allowed the congregation to move freely about the nave, converse with others, and learn about the life of Christ from the narrative paintings, carvings, and stained glass windows that decorated the church. Despite the open architectural space of medieval churches, the

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16 Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 4. Christianity defined the daily life of medieval men and women, from birth, to marriage, and death. With a chiefly illiterate populous, the parish church, including its clergy and architecture, often served as the sole source of information, education, and amusement for many medieval communities.


18 James White, 65-67. Unable to understand the recitations, the congregants took a passive role in their own worship.

order of worshippers was established by the rood screen, and there is evidence that
gender segregation was practiced throughout the Middle Ages.²⁰

Eamon Duffy suggests that rood screens painted with groupings of female saints
or martyrs may reflect the separation of men and women in the medieval church.²¹ At the
parish church in North Elmham, Norfolk, nine female saints are portrayed on the south
side of the screen (Fig. 3). At Belstead in Suffolk, Sitha, Ursula, Margaret, and Mary
Magdalene share the north side of the screen with a single male figure. Duffy believes
that female parishioners most likely congregated on the side of the church that
corresponded to the female groupings on the rood screen.

In her book Patterns of Piety, Christine Peters argues that attitudes toward women
in medieval society were directly related to purity. With virginity among the primary
means for women to achieve salvation, Peters believes that gender segregation in
medieval Catholicism had more to do with “social propriety than a visible assertion of
spiritual inequality.”²² The path to heaven was made clear to those women who stood in
contemplation in front of the female martyrs and saints depicted on the rood screen.

Backless benches were slowly introduced for worshippers’ comfort in the
fourteenth century. With seating being first provided for elderly women and other
members of the “weaker sex”, it seems logical, according to Peters, that the installations
of benches made gender segregation “seem appealing and appropriate.”²³ Benches were
not provided for a majority of the congregation until the late fifteenth and early sixteenth

²⁰ In reference to the standing room only, French Canonist Guillaume Durandus, writing in the thirteenth
century, asserted that “the men are to be in the fore part, the women behind: because the husband is the
head of the wife, and therefore should go before her.” Durandus quoted in Christine Peters, Patterns of
Piety: Women, Gender and Religion in Late Medieval and Late Reformation England (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2, 22.
²¹ Duffy, 171.
²² Peters, 2, 22.
²³ Ibid., 23.
centuries in connection with the increasing popularity of friar preaching in parish communities. Some of these early seats were not only functional but also beautifully decorated and instructive. Examples of bench ends from East Anglia and the West Country are heavily carved with narrative images, such as the Passion of the Christ and the Seven Deadly Sins (Fig. 4).

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

In regards to seating the sexes, the Protestant Reformation drastically changed the liturgical layout of the parish church and offered new interpretations of ancient gender philosophies. When Martin Luther tacked his 95 theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg in 1517, he set in motion a chain of events in which the sermon became the core of the Protestant movement and the focal point of worship services. As one of the Reformation’s leading theologians, Luther broke down traditional divisions between the clergy and laity. Believing the church stood as a representation of the body of Christ, he encouraged a return of congregational participation during public worship, and felt that the sermon should be preached in the common language of the people.

With the passage of the “Act of Succession” in 1534, Henry VIII became the supreme head of the English Church, and a Protestant Church of England was secured during the reign of Edward V and more specifically Elizabeth I. For the next, often tumultuous, 200 years the church would impose a number of royal injunctions and other

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25 Luther wrote: “The Christian congregation never should assemble unless God’s Word is preached and prayer is made, no matter for how brief a time this may be.” Martin Luther, “Concerning the Ordering of Divine Worship in the Congregation,” Works of Martin Luther, vol. VI (Philadelphia: Mulenberg Press, 1932, 60). See also James White, 35.
ecclesiastical laws, which defined and refined the order of Anglican service. Retaining much of the clerical hierarchy and traditional formalism of Roman Catholicism, the English Reformation sparked numerous reforming factions, such as the Puritans, who found the use of a common prayer book and many of the ceremonies of the Church of England, such as the placement of the altar, to be extravagant and often lacking a Biblical basis.\(^{26}\) Despite the misgivings of many reformists, canonical law required all people living within a parish to attend Sunday services. Following the restoration of royal authority, Parliament approved in 1662 a revised edition of the Book of Common Prayer, which stood as the official guide to Anglican worship well into the twentieth century.\(^{27}\) Incorporating the fundamentals of Luther’s Protestantism, the order of service in the Book of Common Prayer included an English-read sermon, public recitation of the morning and evening prayer, and participation of those qualified in the Eucharist ceremony.

**THE PROTESTANT CHURCH: PULPIT AND PEWS**

The Protestant emphasis on the sermon resulted in a physical reordering of the Anglican church interior, with the pulpit as the chief liturgical center. Church leaders were faced with the practical problem of converting unreformed medieval buildings into churches

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\(^{26}\) Foster, 192.

\(^{27}\) The order of services for a many American denominations, such as the Lutherans, Methodists, and Episcopalians, are derived from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. And many of these denominations have issued their own versions of the prayer book. The structure and character of the 1549 and 1552 Book of Common Prayer is often credited to Thomas Cranmer, Protestant theologian and one-time Archbishop of Canterbury under Edward VI. Cranmer’s Prayer Book is heavily influenced by the Lutheran order of service. Cranmer studied Lutheran doctrine when he lived in Germany for more than a year during the peak of the Reformation movement there. His marriage to the daughter of Andreas Osiander, a leading German theologian, reveals the close connection to the reforming church in England and the reforming church in Germany. Charles C. Heffling and Cynthia L. Shattuck, eds., *The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2006) 21 and 222.
suitable for Protestant worship according to the order of services in the Book of Common Prayer and a new participatory congregation. The removal of images and the dismantling of the rood during the reigns of Edward VI and Queen Elizabeth served to remove the physical division between the laity and the clergy, and helped focus attention on the preacher. The eyes of parishioners would now be drawn to the raised, wooden pulpit capped with a sounding board that reflected the authority of the speaker and the spoken word of God.\textsuperscript{28}

As a result, fixed seating quickly became a necessity for the comfort of churchgoers who attended the often-lengthy, sermon-based services. In the early years of the English Reformation, the wealthiest families would hire local carpenters to construct individual box pews for personal use. Enclosed by wood paneling, sometimes reaching more than six feet in height, box pews were accessed by a door and often contained benches on three sides. This construction was believed to provide additional warmth and comfort to the parishioners in the cold and drafty church.\textsuperscript{29} Once inside the pew, the occupants were completely hidden from view and could not see the rest of congregation. This was thought to encourage concentration and spiritual reflection as those seated could focus their attention on the pulpit and the preacher.\textsuperscript{30}

Over time, the nave became crowded with the benches, seats, and box pews of the leading parishioners. Some owners embellished his or her own pew in an attempt to outdo another. Writing about his church in Hampshire, Gilbert White commented that the

\textsuperscript{28} Foster, 205.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 209-210.
pews were “of all dimensions and heights, being patched up according to the fancy of the owners.” At the most extreme, the parish’s elite members could be easily identified by their ornamented pews, extravagantly adorned in velvet and silk curtains, cushions, fine furniture, and sometimes heated by a small stove. Movable benches were set out for those who could not afford to build their own pews. The result was a sometimes disorganized and cluttered interior, with seats of all shapes and sizes that ran in all directions.

THE PROTESTANT WOMAN: PIETY OVER PURITY

In providing instructions for the proper ordering of Protestant worshipers, leading reformers Luther and John Calvin articulated a new gender ideology that redefined women’s role in society and their relationship to men. Both Luther and Calvin participated in the querelle des femmes. This century long debate among theologians and scholars across sixteenth-century Europe pondered questions such as: were women by nature good or bad, did they have reason, and were they even human? Because God created the female sex, Luther reasoned that women were inherently spiritually equal to men, and thus could achieve salvation not only through virginity but also through motherhood and devotion. On earth however, Luther claimed women functioned best as subservient wives, mothers, and “administrators of the household,” and should be admired for their dedication to those roles. Gender historian, Christine Peters sums up the

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31 White quoted in Cunningham, 70.
32 Ibid., 88.
34 Karant-Nunn, 28. Luther, himself married to a strong woman, stated: “Women . . . have been made by God to bear children, to delight men, to be merciful.” See Martin Luther, “Table Talk,” Luther’s Works, Weimar edition, TR 1, no. 12, 5-6.
Protestant perceptions of women, stating: "the godly women became an emblem of piety, faith and devotion, and a vital counterpart to the potentially sterile understanding of the rational male who could interpret scripture but might lack a living faith."\textsuperscript{35}

PROTESTANT JUSTIFICATIONS FOR GENDER SEGREGATION

Concurrent with theological attitudes toward women, the application of gender segregation was encouraged by Reformation leaders as one means of keeping order in the Protestant church. In “The German Mass and Order of Divine Service, January 1526,” Martin Luther wrote: “And for the sake of good order and discipline in going up [for the Sacrament], not men and women together but the women after the men, men and women should have separate places in different parts of the church.”\textsuperscript{36} John Calvin believed that the standardization of such church discipline helped promote moral conduct and curb acts of indecency, thus honoring the Lord and advancing salvation.\textsuperscript{37} For Calvin, while the word of God was the supreme authority, not all doctrines were divinely inspired, such as Paul’s request that women cover their heads during worship. In discussing Paul’s verse on head coverings for women, Calvin stated:

We see that some form of organization is necessary in all human society to foster the common peace and maintain concord . . . This ought especially to be observed in churches . . . If we wish best to provide for the safety of the church, we must attend with all diligence to Paul’s command that ‘all things be done decently and in order’.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} Peters, 5.
\textsuperscript{36} Martin Luther, “The German Mass and Order of Divine Service, January 1526,” Luther’s Works, sermon on-line, available from <http://history.hanover.edu/project.html#ma>.
In his quote, Calvin argues that each church has the right and obligation to establish their own rules of order and decency according to the social standards and theological interpretations of the time. Thus for early Protestant reformers, gender segregation, though not ordained by God, was necessary for the clergy in the maintenance of proper order and the promotion of social civility and morality in the church.

ANGLICAN PRECEDENTS FOR GENDER SEGREGATION

Following early Protestant rationale for gender segregation, Anglican clergy and church leaders instructed and supervised churchwardens in the proper ordering of men and women in the church. The 1549 Book of Common Prayer included a Rubric, which stated:

So many as shall be partakers of the Holy Communion, shall tarry still in the quire, or in some convenient place nigh the quire, the men on the one side, and the women on the other side.

Anglican bishops made formal visitations to parish churches in order to inspect for well-ordered buildings and rectify lax execution of ecclesiastical practices. By 1552, however, gender segregation had been written out of ecclesiastical law. The 1552 and 1559 editions of the Book of Common Prayer do not include guidelines for

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40 Peters, 5 and Karant-Nunn, 3. Examples of social indecency are documented as early as 1360. In his poem *Vision of Piers Ploughman*, William Langland writes:

> Among wyes and wodewes
> Ich am ywoned seete
> Yparroked in puwes
> The parson him knoweth.

The poet confesses to sitting with the wives and widows in their assigned pews. Langland's exploit, while acknowledged by the parson, went overlooked. See John Charles Cox, *English Church Furniture* (London: Methuen & Co., 1907), 282.
42 Cunningham, 7.
the separation of men and women during the Sacrament. Richard Hooker, a leading theologian during Elizabeth’s reign, saw gender segregation during Communion as an outdated Jewish practice. In addition to the practice being written out of ecclesiastical law, the charge of seating the parish church slowly shifted from Anglican Bishops and upper-clergymen to the hands of local vestries. Following these changes, gender segregation would be addressed on a church-by-church basis.

**APPLYING GENDER SEGREGATION IN THE ENGLISH PARISH CHURCH**

Despite being written out of ecclesiastical law, an insistence on modesty and decency helped sustain the practice of gender segregation in local parish churches. In 1617, shoemaker Henry Dawrant, serving as a witness in the archdeacon’s court in Oxford, observed:

> he was heretofore lived in many several counties and towns . . . and he never knew but that the custom in all the said churches was always for men to sit there in seats by themselves apart from the women, and the women likewise by themselves.

In some parish churches, however, the application of gender segregation was less consistent. In 1603, at Much Hadham in Hertfordshire, the congregation ignored the vestry directed gender segregation, as it was reported that:

> ther is great disorder amongst the parishioners in their sittinge in the churche that boyes and young men doe place themselves very disorderly amongst the aunscient sort of parishioners ther and both women and men, maydens and mens wives

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44 Woodcuts from the period show both segregated and non-segregated congregations. See Peters, Figs. 32 and 33; the frontispiece of the 2nd edition of C. Wheatly’s *A Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer*, 1714, Addleshaw, Plate 1; *Interior of St. Martin's-In-the-Fields* published by R. Ackermann in 1809, Addleshaw, Plate III.

45 Peters, 171.

promiscue sitt together.47

In response, the churchwardens ordered the sexes to sit apart, with the exception of those “better and aunscienter” parishioners who were seated according to their status. So there is a developing complexity in whether family status or gender segregation should be the primary determinate for seating assignments.

For the hierarchically inclined Anglicans, an emphasis on family morality and the ideal of the godly housewife resulted in an increasing desire to guard the women of elite families from any inappropriate acts and vulgar behavior on the part of the lower classes. During a break from the construction of a new set of pews for their parish, the carpenters of West Bowden in County Durham discussed the effects of seating the parish by gender. Robert Atchinson voiced specific concern that this would allow parishioner Richard Clay to make “cuckolds” of them all, his fear being that segregation would leave the women of prestigious households vulnerable to the wandering eyes of ramblers (Fig. 5).48

Atchinson’s quote suggests that there was some concern for gender in the proper ordering of the church in County Durham. While the true motivation for those that did and did not segregate the sexes cannot be ascertained from the evidence here, it is clear that the elite saw the private pew as a means of solidifying the rank and status of their family within the parish community.

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48 Ibid., 172, 174. See E. A. Foyster, Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage (Longman, 1999), 19-20; Durham University Library Archives, DDR/EI/CCD/2 (formerly DDR Box 414); Peters, 5; Karant-Nunn, 3. Examples of social indecency are documented as early as 1360. In his poem Vision of Piers Ploughman, William Langland writes:

Among wyes and wodewes
Ich am ywoned seete
Yparroked in puwes
The parson him knoweth.

The poet confesses to sitting with the wives and widows in their assigned pews. Langland’s exploit, while acknowledged by the parson, went overlooked. See John Charles Cox, English Church Furniture (London: Methuen & Co., 1907), 282.
SEATING BY RANK

By the second-half of the seventeenth century, a number of parish churches decided to fit their seating in a more systematic and uniform manner. Soon, parish vestries began ordering box pews fashioned of uniform wood panels as a set, and newly constructed churches were outfitted with rows of pews.

The addition of fixed seats coincided with the creation of a new function for English vestries, arranging the church in proper order. It became the task of parish vestries and/or churchwardens to assign a seat to every member of the congregation. Parishioners were arranged according to both the religious and social standards of the period and were seated by their gender, age, and rank in the community.\textsuperscript{49} For example, the 1617 pew plan for Holy Trinity in Dorchester, Dorset, combined both gender segregated and mixed seating assignments. The plan depicts men seated in the center rows pews, while their wives sat in the side aisle pews. Seated along the south aisle, wealthy male parishioners shared pews with their wives. Daughters of respected families sat in the rear of the church.\textsuperscript{50} The location and size of the pew reflected the status of its occupant. In most Anglican churches, the most prestigious families were granted seats near the pulpit or in the chancel in the best box pews.\textsuperscript{51}

Parishes depended upon both local and national funding for the support of the minister and the construction and maintenance of the building. The system of taxation in Reformed England varied from location to location. For some churches in the

\textsuperscript{49} Addleshaw, 90.
\textsuperscript{51} For example, the elderly were seated in front of younger congregants, while young women were regulated to the “maidens’ pew.” Nigel Yates, \textit{Buildings, Faith and Worship: The Liturgical Arrangement of Anglican Churches 1600-1900} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 37.
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, taxes were levied and in a few urban areas parishioners were charged pew rents. Often, however, local landowners had feudal rights to the upkeep of the church and the selection of the rector. This allowed the wealthy members of the parish to purchase a prominent position in the largest pews in front of the church. Those who could not afford to pay the levies or barter for a private pew were assigned to inferior locations, such as seats in the galleries or on benches in the rear of the church, or given no seat at all, but were forced to stand in the aisles or at doorways. 

Architect Christopher Wren was an advocate of free seats for every worshipper, rich or poor. Given the task of rebuilding the city’s churches following the Great Fire of London in 1666, he expressed his concern for vestry determined seating assignments in a “Letter to a Friend on the Commission for Building Fifty New City Churches:”

the Church should not be so fill’d with Pews, but that the Poor may have room enough to stand and sit in the Alleys, for to them equally is the Gospel preach’d. It were to be wish’d there were to be no Pews, but Benches; but there is no stemming the Tide of Profit, and the Advantage of Pew-keepers; especially too since by Pews, in the Chapels of Ease, the Minister is chiefly supported.

In response, Wren designed a house of worship specifically suited to Protestant liturgy. Arranged in a manner for “all to hear the Service, and both to hear distinctly, and see the Preacher,” his auditory church would become a prominent building type for the Anglican Church, especially in urban English parishes until 1840, and would influence the design and of America’s Protestant churches at the turn of the nineteenth century (Fig 6).

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54 The design consisted of a single, open rectangular space, with the altar placed at one end, divided only from the congregation by a low railing. The pulpit, placed slightly diagonal to the altar, was the focal point of the room, and was surrounded by pews lined along one central aisle or two side aisles. Galleries lined up to three sides of the church so that as many people as possible could hear the sermon. The gallery would
It was not until the nineteenth century that Anglican churches in England began to provide more free seats. Parishioners in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were seated by their rank in the community, and ultimately, by their monetary contribution. In these cases, socio-economic status trumped gender.

CONCLUSION

This chapter traces the practice of gender segregation from its Judeo-Christian conceptions through the Protestant Reformation and the establishment of the Anglican Church in England. As Christianity became an organized religion, the Pauline notion of order and decency was interpreted in the early Christian basilica, the medieval cathedral, and the parish churches of Reformed England to support the segregation of the sexes. With the development of fixed pews and vestry-determined seating assignments, gender segregation became one of a number of possible ways and combinations in which parishioners could be seated, whether by gender, age, class, and rank. The use of gender segregation in combination with other seating assignments reflected the hierarchical social structure of early Protestant England.

As England’s churches increasingly gained their economic support from varied systems of taxation, donations, and pew rentals, it became difficult to enforce the practice of gender segregation. While this chapter reinforces the theological underpinnings of gender segregation, it reveals the tendency of economic pressures in undermining the practice. Nonetheless, the chapter shows that the practice was deeply embedded in Protestant and English tradition. Gender segregation would readily transfer to the

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become a distinctive characteristic of Protestant churches. Some German Lutheran churches housed five-tiered galleries. At St. Mary’s Church in Whitby, for example, galleries and pews crowd the interior space in a dynamic fashion, allowing more people to hear the sermon. James White, 85, 97.
Anglican Church in eighteenth-century Virginia, and be applied by parish vestries according to their own regional notions of seating and order.
CHAPTER II

SEATING THE SEXES IN THE COLONIAL ANGLICAN CHURCH: GENDER SEGREGATION AND THE FAMILY PEW

Colonial Virginia church records indicate that gender segregation was one of the most common seating arrangements in the colony’s first Anglican churches.1 Its application in these churches is consistent with the theological underpinnings of early Protestant order and decorum. As was the case in England during the early to mid-seventeenth century, the vestries of each colonial parish church were in charge of assigning seats to every parishioner. However, the vestries of colonial Virginia, most often comprised of members of the local gentry, took on a much more authoritative role than their English counterparts and assumed functions generally reserved for the Anglican Bishops and clergy. For many parish vestries, gender segregation remained the ideal for the proper ordering of the church. However, the extent to which the sexes were segregated varied from church to church.

While Bruton Parish’s 1716 order for gender segregation is clearly stated, other parishes offered less specific directions. Similar to seating assignments in England

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1 A representative sampling of colonial Virginia church records from a number of Protestant denominations revealed little evidence of the practice of gender segregation, with the exception of Anglican church vestry records. Vestry records from colonial Virginia’s Anglican churches often commented on seating practices, either by gender segregation or the granting of family pews. In order to use the Anglican churches of colonial Virginia as a case study for the application of gender segregation I turned to the work of Dell Upton, who has conducted extensive analysis of the vestry records from the parish churches of colonial Virginia as a set. In Holy Things and Profane, he cites references to gender segregation at Bruton Parish Church, Pohick Church, and the parishes of Newport, St. Peter’s, Frederick, Stratton Major, St. George’s of Spotsylvania County, and St. George’s of Accomack County. His research provides a useful account of seating in Virginia’s Anglican churches, but does not offer an in-depth analysis of the practice of gender segregation in isolation.
during this period, colonial Virginia seating was often determined by the rank of its parishioners. Vestries often allowed the most esteemed members of the congregation to sit together with their families in private pews. This chapter looks at the practice of gender segregation in a number of parish churches in colonial Virginia, as it is intertwined with seating by age and the granting of family pews. The segregation of the sexes in the Anglican Church provides intriguing insights into the status of the women of colonial Virginia. The chapter also examines the various architectural manifestations, and looks at the role of the vestry in the state-supported church. Ultimately, the seating of the sexes reflects the symbiotic relationship between religious and socio-political order or, as Dell Upton contended, the sacred and secular, in colonial Virginia's Anglican Church.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND IN THE COLONIES

From the first crudely assembled church at Jamestown in 1607, the Anglican Church was established by precedent as the state religion of England in Virginia.² By the late seventeenth century, oversight of the Church of England in Virginia was shared by the colonial governor and a commissary, who represented the bishop of London under whose diocese all of the North American colonies were placed.³ Together they appointed clergymen to fill vacant positions. A self-selecting vestry, however, administered the everyday operations of the parishes. The vestry was usually comprised of members of

² Captain John Smith described the first church as “an awning” hung from “three or foure trees to shadow us from the Sunne, our walles were railes of wood, our seats unhewed trees.” Smith quoted in Edward Arber, ed., Travels and Works of Captain John Smith: President of Virginia and Admiral of New England, 1580-1631, vol. II (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1910), 95.
the local landed-gentry and could include gentlemen farmers, politicians, military officers, and patriarchs. Unlike their role in England at the time, the colonial vestry in Virginia came to be a powerful force in determining parish affairs, overshadowing the authority of the Anglican clergy. They levied taxes to support the state church, supervised church maintenance, oversaw the welfare of poorer parishioners, and ensured the preservation of public piety. They managed both the ritual and social functions of the church. In addition, the vestry was also in charge of seating parishioners.4

Every Virginian, with the exception of a few who formally dissented, was considered a member of “the Church of England as by law established,” and in the seventeenth century faced a fine valued at fifty pounds of tobacco for not attending services regularly.5 Church attendance was less strictly enforced in the late colonial period. With little urban development in the agriculture colony, the parish church served as a central gathering place for the community, and by the time of the American Revolution, some of the hundred parishes in Virginia had as many as four churches.6 As Virginia historian Rhys Isaac states, “The services of the Book of Common Prayer had been given their vernacular shape in the sixteenth century and expressed strongly an ethos of English Christian gentility.”7 Thus the transplanted parish church physically and symbolically dominated the colonial Virginia landscape and arranged the community in proper order.

THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR IN THE ANGLICAN ARCHITECTURE OF COLONIAL VIRGINIA

4 Nelson.
5 Isaac, 58.
6 Nelson.
7 Isaac, 60-64.
Architectural historian Dell Upton has identified a very close connection between religious and social values and traditions in the built parish churches of colonial Virginia. According to Upton, these Anglican churches contained "architectural elements and ritual objects that presented in vivid, concrete form a proposition about the relationship between the sacred order and the social order of eighteenth-century Tidewater Virginia."  

By the mid-eighteenth century, brick had become the most sought after construction material for both domestic and religious architecture (although because of its expense it never became the predominant material for homes and churches). Exterior decorations were standard yet distinct. Features and materials typically reserved for the dwellings of Virginia's most elite families, such as rubbed and gauged frontispieces, molded watertables, glazed headers, and large-scale compass headed openings, transformed the parish church into a monumental public architecture. Architectural historian Carl Lounsbury explains: "Their appearance in an ecclesiastical setting provided a costly but highly symbolic architectural device to signal the transition from secular to sacred space."  

Lounsbury argues that with the exception of a few regional influences on the fringes of the Anglican stronghold in the Tidewater, the Virginia parish church of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries retained the "internal arrangements and proportions" of "traditional English forms."  

Unlike the trendy and contemporary auditory church of Christopher Wren, which appealed to Anglicans in Maryland,

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10 Ibid., 22.
Colonial Virginia's vestries were more comfortable using an older established model similar to the early Reformed parish church of England. They generally built their churches with either an elongated rectangular or cruciform plan. In other words, the Anglican Church in eighteenth-century Virginia was by architectural model, ecclesiastical tradition, and social order, a hybrid product of the Church of England set within the unique tobacco culture of the colony.

The plain, white plastered walls of the parish interior reinforced the protestant affiliation of the Anglican Church, where visual, figurative art was kept to a minimum. A number of fittings and "ornaments" were required by English canon law to promote Anglican liturgy. The symbol of the Protestant faith, the pulpit, took center stage and was often located on the north side of the cross aisle (Fig. 7). A Bible and two copies of the Book of Common Prayer were required to be present in accordance with clerical and state law. The Ten Commandments, Apostle's Creed, and Lord's Prayer hung above a fabric-draped altar table, generally placed beyond the cross aisle in the east end. A low communion rail surrounded the altar. In addition, some churches may have prominently displayed the royal coat of arms in the parish church, reminding members of the congregation that the monarch was the head of their faith.

FREE SEATS AND THE POWER OF THE VESTRY

By the late-seventeenth century, the vestries of colonial Virginia began installing seats for the members of their congregation, as box pews became the standard for seating parishioners in Anglican churches. In 1684, the vestry of Christ Church Parish in

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12 See Architectural Research Dept., CWF.
Middlesex County ordered simply “that there be Benches and Forms provided for all
Thre Churches, for Convenience of Seating the people.” More than half a century later
in 1747, the vestry of Albemarle Parish in Surry and Sussex Counties gave more specific
instructions for the construction of a set of finely crafted, high-box pews for their new
“Church or chapel” at Spring Swamp. Here the vestry ordered:

the pews to be 4 feet high & close to the front to be guarded round and raised
pannel, the Partitions plain Wainscoat; all the pews to be neatly cap’d plank seats
on three sides, . . .

In general, pews ran along both sides of the central aisle of the parish church and
followed the rectangular or cruciform plan from the main entrance to the altar in the east
end. Following the English traditions of the period, the pews, along with their location
and size in the Anglican churches of colonial Virginia, directly reflected the social status
of their occupants. The pews closest to the altar and pulpit were often larger. Known as
“double pews,” these seats were considered to be of higher rank.

Parish churches of colonial Virginia thus began to reflect a dramatic departure
from the seating practices of Anglican churches in England because in eighteenth-century
Virginia seats were by law free and would be provided to every member of the parish
population. This law was a reaction by the colonial government to the perceived
inequalities that resulted from heavy state taxation, private bartering, and the sporadic use
of pew rents in England. Although the seats in Virginia’s state-sponsored churches

14 Albemarle Parish, Surry Co. and Sussex Co., Virginia, Vestry Book, 1717-1787, 4 vols., photostat,
Church Records Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
15 Upton, Holy Things, 183. In England in the eighteenth century, pew rents often dictated the seating
arrangements of the parish church, with the gentry being able to afford and buy the best seats. The colonial
government’s decision to provide free seats to its parishioners is not without irony. The law was made in
response to the social inequalities that had resulted from pew rents in England. However, social inequality
was never more apparent than in the ranked seating of the Anglican church of colonial Virginia as decided
were free, they were far from equal. Social inequality was never more apparent than in the ranked seating of the Anglican Church in colonial Virginia.

Parish vestries evaluated the status of each parishioner and assigned the free seats accordingly. Colonial vestries had a variety of seating arrangements and options from which they could choose that included gender, age, race, and rank. Churchwardens were elected by the vestry to ensure that parishioners sat in their assigned seats.

The following sections look at the various ways in which the parishioners of colonial Virginia’s Anglican churches were seated, starting with viewing evidence of the practice of gender segregation. The second section examines the compound application of gender segregation in conjunction with age. Section three looks at evidence for the growing popularity of private family pews. The next section views the seating plan for Stratton Major Parish as an example of the intertwined application of gender segregation and family seating. This is followed by a discussion of the vestry record for Lynnhaven Parish, which reveals possible conflicts between the vestry and parishioner in the combined use of gender segregation and private pews. The final section of this chapter will look at the practice of seating the parish church in colonial Virginia from women’s point of view.

GENDER SEGREGATION IN THE VESTRY RECORD

In keeping with Protestant tradition, gender segregation was seen as fundamental to the proper ordering of parishioners in the Anglican churches of colonial Virginia. The practice of gender segregation is mentioned in at least ten individual parish vestry books.

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The direct order for gender segregation at Bruton Parish in 1716 exists as the oldest surviving documented example of the practice in colonial Virginia vestry records.\textsuperscript{17} References to the practice are found in vestry records’ discussions of seating plans, conflicts with parishioners or, as was the case at St. Peter’s Parish Church, in the instructions for the building of a new church. On May 8, 1731, regarding the laying of a new floor, the vestry of St. Peter’s Parish in New Kent and James City counties noted:

Mr. James Nance hath agreed with this Vestry to take up the plank in the Chansil & the Mens Side & the Ile of the Church . . . \textsuperscript{18}

The seating assignments for the new Pohick Church in Truro Parish show that gender segregation was strictly enforced during its heyday from 1750 to 1774. On February 24, 1774, the Truro Parish vestry, whose members included George Washington and George Mason, ordered:

that the Upper Pew in the new Church adjoining the South Wall be appropriated to the Use of the Magistrates and Strangers, and the Pew opposite thereto to the use of their Wives, and the two Pews next below them be appropriated to the Vestrymen and Merchants and their Wives, in like manner. And it is further ordered that the eight Pews below and adjoining the Cross Isle of the Church be assigned to the use of the most respectable Inhabitants and House Keepers of the Parish, the Men to sit in the four Pews next the South Wall, and the Women in the other four next the North Wall.\textsuperscript{19}

In ordering that the church’s most elite parishioners be segregated by sex, the parish vestry reinforced the role of traditional Pauline order and decency at Pohick Church. In addition to gender segregation, the Magistrates, Vestrymen, Merchants, as well as all

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[17]{Goodwin, 43.}
\footnotetext[18]{The Vestry Book and Register of St. Peter’s Parish, New Kent & James City Counties, Virginia, 1684-1786, trans. and ed., C. G. Chamberlayne (Richmond: The Library Board, 1937), 224.}
\footnotetext[19]{Truro Parish Vestry, \textit{Minutes of the Vestry, Truro Parish, Virginia, 1732-1785} (Lorton, VA: Pohick Church, 1974), 58. Gender segregation is also uncovered in instructions for building repairs at the old Pohick Church. On February 19, 1749/1750, the Truro Parish vestry ordered: “that a Window be made in the Justices Pew & another in the womens to be opposite of the Same size of the other windows of the Church . . .”}
\end{footnotes}
other “respectable” parishioners, (and we can assume by process of elimination) the lower classes, were seated in ranked order. The status of the congregation’s most prominent members was acknowledged by their seating location in the front of the church near the pulpit at the cross aisle. Nonetheless even in this esteemed location, the men and women of the elite in this church were segregated on opposite sides of the center aisle.

AGE REQUIREMENTS

An important component to the practice of gender segregation was the separation of adolescent boys and girls. Following Anglican tradition in England, many parish churches in colonial Virginia sought to order their parishioners by age. Like gender, the age of the members of the congregation had moral implications for many of the Protestant denominations that established themselves in early America. Innocence and virtue were values that needed to be protected in the congregation’s children. In her book, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, Patricia Bonomi explains that “maximum involvement in the church’s life was delayed until late adolescence or young adulthood” due to a supposed lack of religious maturity.²⁰

While young parishioners were generally not allowed to partake in communion until the age of sixteen, they were still eager to take advantage of the social opportunities that Sunday services afforded. In his journal, Philip Vickers Fithian writes that he was often “begged” by Ben and Bob, the teenage sons of Robert “King” Carter III, for permission to attend church despite bad weather or the absence of their parents.²¹

²¹ Bonomi, 115-116. See Fithian.
Included in their instructions for seating the church in 1716, the vestry of Bruton Parish Church directed:

liberty shall be given the College to take that part of ye Gallery for the use of the College Youth, . . . also that farther leave be given them to put a door, with a lock and key to it, to the stairs of the Gallery, and the Sexton to keep the key.22

The male students of the College of William and Mary were seated in the west gallery. The staircase door to the gallery was locked, and the key given to the Sexton for safe-keeping. It is unknown whether the intended purpose of the locked door was to curb disorder among the students and keep them from slipping out of the sermon before its conclusion, or if it was installed to keep unwanted visitors out of the student gallery. A separate gallery on the south wall was also reserved for the young boys of Bruton Parish’s grammar school.

The majority of age-related seating assignments in the Anglican churches of colonial Virginia were in reference to male students. On October 9, 1750, the Elizabeth River Parish vestry:

Ordered that Mr. Matt Godfrey, Mr. Willm. Nash, Capt. Trimagan Tatum, & Mr. Willm Ashley shall have Leave & are hereby impowered to build a Gallery in the Church in—Norfolk Town reaching from the Pulpit to the School Boys Gallery . . . 23

In 1785, the Bristol Parish vestry requested that the churchwardens reserve two pews “for the use of the Studien’s and four for the use of the poor.” Girls most likely sat with their mothers, or as was the case of Newport Parish, in a pew specifically allotted to young

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22 Goodwin, 43-44.
women. The separation of adolescent boys and girls from one another as well as from other members of the congregation reflected the Anglican church's particular attitude toward Protestant order and decency. It was most likely the hope of vestry members that the segregation would prevent disruptive behavior and outbursts during services and work to generate pious young adults.

Age requirements were not always limited to the younger members of the congregation. Seats were often reserved in the front of the church for the elderly, particularly widows. A seat may have been provided for the aged, poor, or infirm, as was the case at Lynnhaven Parish Church. A pew on the south side of the church was set aside for “Such women as the Churchwardens with the approbation of the vestry Shall think fit to place therein.” Most of the attention was given to the wives of deceased gentry. The vestry of Stratton Major Parish assigned a pew in the prestigious chancel of Stratton Major Church to the widow and family of John Robinson, a former Treasurer and Speaker of the House of Burgesses. In 1734, the vestry ordered: “that Mr. John Smith & his wife Sit with his mother.” Like many denominations in early America, the colonial Virginians viewed the widow as the most pious member of society, and her care was seen as charity by the church. In a pew reserved for the private use of her and her family, the widow held both a symbolic and physical place of honor in the colonial

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25 According to architectural historian, Carl Lounsbury, there is evidence in early Protestant church records of the disruptive behavior of children, specifically young boys, that included talking during services, sliding down the banister to the gallery stairs, and carving a peep hole in a box pews.
26 Ibid., 194-195. See The Colonial Vestry Book of Lynnhaven Parish, Princess Anne County, Virginia, 1723-1786, ed. George Carrington Mason (Newport News: editor, 1949), 21-22. It is unclear what “such” women the vestry had in mind. In general, it was elderly women or widows that were regulated to gender segregated pews.
27 Ibid., 180 and 187; The Vestry Book of Stratton Major Parish, King and Queen County, Virginia, 1729-1783, trans. and ed. C. G. Chamberlayne (Richmond: The Library Board, 1931).
Virginia parish church. These examples suggest that gender segregation was applied to the young as a means of keeping order, while it was a means of reinforcing status and the protection of the church when applied to the older widow.

THE DISTINCTION OF A FAMILY PEW

In a letter to vestryman John Dalton in 1773, George Washington found the decision of the Fairfax Parish Vestry to reserve the right to reclaim private pews, which had been paid for with subscription money, "repugnant." An infuriated Washington contended that in his intention to "lay the foundation of a Family Pew in the New Church," he could see no reason why a Subscriber could not assemble "his whole Family into one Pew, or, as the Custom is have them dispers'd into two or three?" Washington’s quote suggests that the seating assignments in the church were such that the men, women, and children of his family sat in separate locations in the church. Washington’s anger over the reclaimed pew, however, stemmed from the fact that in paying the prescribed Subscription fees he felt he was entitled to certain rights as the pew’s owner. To the

28 George Washington, The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931-44), 3: 113-4. “Letter to JOHN DALTON, Mt. Vernon, February 15, 1773: If the Subscription to which among others I put my name was set on foot under Sanction of an Order of Vestry as I always understood it to be, I own myself at a loss to conceive, upon what principle it is, that there should be an attempt to destroy it; repugnant it is to every Idea I entertain of justice to do so... As a Subscriber who meant to lay the foundation of a Family Pew in the New Church, I shall think myself Injured; For give me leave to ask, can the raising of that £150 under the present Scheme be considered in any other light than that of a deception? Is it presumable that this money would have been advanced if the Subscribers could possibly have conceived, that after a Solemn Act of Vestry under faith of which the Money was Subscribed the Pews would be reclaimed? Surely not! the thought is absurd! ... I own to you I am at a loss to discover, for as every Subscriber has an undoubted right to a Seat in the Church what matters it whether he Assembles his whole Family into one Pew, or, as the Custom is have them dispers'd into two or three; and probably it is these families will increase in a proportionate degree with the rest of the Parish, so that if the Vestry had a right to annul the agreement, no disadvantage would probably happen on that account.

Upon the whole, Sir, as I observed to you before, considering myself as a Subscriber, I enter my Protest against the measure in Agitation...."

29 The Truro Parish Vestry minutes of 1774 reveal that George Washington owned a deed to a private pew at the old Pohick Church. Yet, even as a vestryman and church member, it is unlikely that Washington shared the pew with his family (as is suggested by his reference to the assembly of families in his letter to John Dalton). Washington’s eagerness to join Christ Church in Alexandria may have been influenced by
elite, private pews were considered a symbol of distinction, a means beyond the simple location of a pew, of asserting one’s rank and prestige within the parish community. Thus, the ability to seat an entire family together in one pew became an increasingly sought after luxury among the gentry.

Requests to build or stake claim to family pews increased among Virginia’s gentry in the mid-to-late-eighteenth century, and numerous examples, such as the pew granted to Colonel John Page by the vestry of Bruton Parish, appear in the vestry record. While the local church was state-supported and seats remained free to all parishioners through the eighteenth century, the parish churches often had a prominent local benefactor and were sponsored in part by the community’s gentry. This financial support led them to a sense of entitlement. Virginia’s colonial gentry often engaged parish vestries in a system of bartering in which goods and property were donated to the church in exchange for the rights to a private family pew.

On October 14, 1745, the vestry of Dettigen Parish, in Prince William County, “Ordered that Maj. Thomas Harrison have the Liberty of Building a Gallerie for the use of himself and Family in Broadrun Chappel.” John Armistead offered to donate the land on which Blisland Parish Church stood to the parish vestry in exchange “for a Pew in the: Brick Church of this parish for himself and: his families use.” The most notable

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30 John Page donated the land on which the first Bruton Parish Church was built plus an additional 60 feet for a church yard. Lyon G. Tyler, “Bruton Church,” The William and Mary Quarterly, vol. 3, no. 3 (January, 1895), 172. See Rev. J. C. McCabe, The Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register, vol. III, 1855-56.


family pew belonged to Robert “King” Carter at Christ Church in Lancaster County. Virginia’s wealthiest plantation owner felt entitled to a family pew in the elegant brick church that he and his father had sponsored, and he demanded of the parish vestry a great pew, the largest in the church, for the use of himself and his family.34

As Dell Upton has argued, gentry identity was founded on a fundamental competition of status between members of the group, a result of colonial Virginia’s unique, hierarchical plantation culture. Upton explains: “Having built, or been given, personal pews and galleries, parishioners regarded them as their private possessions, symbols of their independent existence, and vestries usually acknowledged the property right.”35 Access to his own vestry-approved, family pew gave the elite parishioner a significant advantage over his competitors, allowing him to personally select those with whom he would share his pew during Sunday services. In turn, he extended Protestant goodwill and hospitality by asking everyday parishioners to sit with him.36 This not only elevated his own status, but also the status of his family and guests.

Because only the privileged few were granted such rights, while a majority of parishioners were subject to vestry-ordered seating arrangements, the family pew signified to the congregation the wealth, power, prestige, and benevolence of its subscriber. In comparing seats and pews, Dell Upton contends: “if seats were provided to promote attention to ritual, they attained a social significance entirely apart from [their] utilitarian intention.”37 The family pew served as the ultimate means of ranking

34 Ibid., 183. See “Carter Papers,” VMHB 6, no. 1 (July 1898): 3.
35 Ibid., 183.
36 Ibid. See Chapter on Hospitality.
37 Ibid., 176-177.
parishioners, specifically the gentry, and served as a reflection of colonial Virginian society.\textsuperscript{38}

A MIXING OF THE SEXES AT STRATTON MAJOR PARISH

In 1760, construction began on a new church for Stratton Major Parish in King and Queen County, Virginia. Despite its rectangular plan, the addition of east and west aisles quadrupled the size of the building, making Stratton Major Parish Church the largest Anglican house of worship in colonial Virginia. On December 11, 1767, the vestry included in their minutes a detailed roster of “Pews Allotted to Families &c in the New Church Vizt” (Fig. 8).\textsuperscript{39} Pew 6, located on the south wall directly adjacent to the pulpit, was reserved for the minister and his family. Carefully placed east of the cross-aisle near the pulpit were three reserved family pews. Included in Pews 10 and 11 on the north side of the church and Pew 11 on the south side were Richard Corbin, Esq., the county’s most esteemed gentleman and donor of the property for the new church, and his family, the widow and family of John Robinson, and four vestrymen and their families.

With the exception of these few family pews, gender segregation was ordered for the remaining parishioners. According to Stratton Major’s seating plan, the remaining vestrymen and their families were segregated by sex, despite their seats beyond the cross-aisle in the prestigious east end of the church. These men sat in the two center pews, both numbered 9. Their wives sat across the aisles from their husbands in the corresponding

\textsuperscript{38} Seating the parish church in ranked order had always been one of the primary objectives of Anglican vestries in colonial Virginia. On August 13, 1737, the vestry of Truro Parish “Ordered that the Church Wardens place the people, that are not already placed, in Pohick and the new Churches, in pews, according to their several ranks and degrees.” Truro Parish Vestry, \textit{Minutes}, 18.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{The Vestry Book of Stratton Major Parish}. Upton provides a detailed description of the seating roster and plan, and identifies the widespread application of gender segregation despite the allocation of several family pews. See Upton, \textit{Holy Things}, 180.
Number 8 pews. No reason is provided for the deviation in the segregated seating for the vestrymen and their families. However, the combination of family pews and gender segregation reflects the hierarchal distinctions that existed not only between the upper and lower classes but also between members of the gentry.

The secondary status of ordinary parishioners was made clear to all by their assignment to pews west of the cross-aisle and pulpit. The remaining 27 pews, numbered 1 through 7 (four of each number), were segregated by gender. One hundred and thirty-two men were assigned to pews in the center of the church, while one hundred and eighteen women were seated in a subordinate position along the north and south walls, relegated to the outer fringes on the opposite side of the aisles from their husbands.

Gender segregation coexisted with a mixing of the sexes in elite family pews at Stratton Major Parish. The seating roster indicates that the vestry considered the traditional practice of gender segregation to be the appropriate method for ordering the majority of parishioners. Yet, the practice was overlooked for a select few. The seating of parishioners at Stratton Major underscores the relaxing of the application of gender segregation in the parish churches of colonial Virginia and the trend toward family-combined seating.

DISORDER AT LYNNHAVEN PARISH CHURCH

In 1736, the churchwardens of Lynnhaven Parish issued seating assignments to the parishioners of the newly constructed church. The assignments were typical of seating arrangements in the Anglican churches of the period in that they combined ritual gender segregation with the fashionable family pew. Four pews were reserved for the church’s
major sponsors and their families; one to the magistrates and their wives, one to vestry
members and their wives, one to the Thorowgood family for their gift of the land on
which the parish glebe house stood, and one to the Walke family for their substantial
donations and long term service to the church. A pew on the south side of the church was
set aside for “Such women as the Churchwardens with the approbation of the vestry Shall
think fit to place therein.”40 The remaining parishioners were assigned to the outstanding
pews and benches in a fashion “For preserving order peace & Harmony in the New
Church.”

The result of the imposed seating assignments was far from the “order, peace, and
harmony” originally intended. The vestry cited this incident at their meeting the next
month:

Several of the inhabitants of this parish has not thought fit to accept off [sic], &
others to keep to the Seats & pews the church wardens have assigned to & placed
them, in the new Church lately built; to the great disturbance & disorder of the
congregation.41

As the account relays, some parishioners refused to sit in the seats to which they were
assigned. The disorder that ensued suggests that these disruptive parishioners were not
content with their ranked placement in the church, and further implies that forms of
segregated seating were difficult to enforce in a ranked society.

The Lynnhaven Parish Vestry did not take the disregard of the churchwardens’
instructions lightly. They issued this stern warning to those members who continued to
disrupt an orderly service:

we the vestry of the Said parish have meet at the parish Church, & after due
consideration, have assigned & Register’d the adjacent person & family’s
according to their Several Stations, the most proper Seats or pews; & do

41 Ibid.
hereby publish and declare, that who, or whatsoever person or persons Shall assume to themselves a power; or take the Liberty to place themselves or others in any other Seats or pews in the Shall Church: Shall be Esteem'd a Disorderly person & may Expect to be dealt with according to Law: and we Doe further impower and appoint the church wardens for the future to place all persons in the church of the Said parish.42

The vestry decided to take legal action against those parishioners who continued to challenge their “station” and sit in pews reserved for others. To prevent future disruptions, the vestry registered the rank of each adjacent parishioner and family. By refusing to comply with the vestry ordered seating assignments, parishioners violated not only religious order and decorum, but also, and more importantly, social order and decorum. The vestry’s endorsement of family pews created additional class tensions and conflicts between elite congregants and those who continued to be subjected to traditional seating assignments.

SEATING THE PARISH CHURCH FROM THE WOMEN’S PERSPECTIVE

Family pews provided the opportunity for gentry-class women to sit together with their husbands and other men in private pews that publicly displayed their family and friends. Thus, what were the effects of gender identity and the granting of family pews on the Anglican women of colonial Virginia?

In *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, & Anxious Patriarchs*, Kathleen Brown explains that the bond between husband and wife “was vital to class formation and gentry identity.”43 Thus, the relationship of marriage “was one of the primary means by which Virginia’s planters maintained their dominance for the rest of the century.” The wife was

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42 Ibid.
seen as the pious counterpart to the power-driven male, who not only carried out her domestic duties at home, but also played an integral role in parish life. Like her husband, the elite woman engaged in gender specific "public performances," in which she was judged on social etiquette, clothing, conversation, and acquaintances, as well as her seat in church. The male head of the household most likely believed that by sitting with his wife and daughters in the same pew during Sunday services, he could not only protect them from physical or verbal indecencies, but could also promote the status of his family in the parish community. Despite her respected and useful position in society, the Anglican woman was always subordinate to her husband. Through marriage the women of the gentry participated in a partnership that enforced the rank and order of colonial Virginia society.

The desire for a family pew and the perceived prestige that went with it is quite apparent during the conflict between the Parke and Blair families at Bruton Parish Church. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, James Blair served as Anglican commissary and minister of James City Parish. His wife, Mrs. Blair, often attended church in Williamsburg where the family lived. With no pew assigned to the Blair family, Mrs. Blair often sat in the private pew of Philip Ludwell. One day, however, Mrs. Blair arrived to find vestryman Daniel Parke, her husband's political opponent, had, in Philip's absence, taken over his father-in-law's duties as "head" of the Ludlow pew. Tensions quickly rose between Mr. Parke, a political rival of the Reverend James Blair, and Mrs. Blair, and the following incident was reported:

On a certain Sunday, Mr. Parke, determined to mortify Mr. Blair by insulting his wife, in [Ludlow's] absence . . . came into the church, and, rudely seizing Mrs.
Blair by the arm, drew her out of the pew, saying she should not sit there.⁴⁴ Daniel Parke’s removal of Mrs. Blair from the private pew of Philip Ludwell at Bruton Parish Church was shocking not only because of Parke’s physical mistreatment of a woman and breached gender values, but also, as Dell Upton states, “Parke . . . publicly denied Mrs. Blair the courtesy of hospitality, implying that she stood outside the realm of polite consideration.” Upton continues: “Symbolically, Daniel Parke expelled Mrs. Blair from parish society.”⁴⁵ Yet, Mrs. Blair served her husband, acting as a representative of his interests at Bruton Parish Church. Thus, the rude comments of Mr. Parke disgraced not only Mrs. Blair, but also the Reverend himself and the Blair family name. The conflict highlights the competition that existed between the great patriarchal families that controlled colonial Virginia society, and the use of the family pew as a vehicle for establishing rank. As a wife, Mrs. Blair shared both the social benefits and potential injuries of the colonial gentry with her husband.

The elite woman in colonial Virginia defined herself not only by her relationships to men, but also through her relationships and position to women and men of various social classes. Parish seating arrangements served as a stage on which these social encounters could unfold. In a journal entry from 1763, Colonel James Gordon, a member of the Presbyterian meetinghouse in Lancaster County, expressed the widespread opinion that Anglican parishioners were less prone to “piety” and more to “pride”. He feared that the women of his congregation had become susceptible to the arrogance that plagued the Anglican community in Virginia. Gordon stated:

I understand people are displeased with the single seats, which we thought would be more convenient for the people, as they faced the minister. But as it seems disagreeable to some, especially Mrs. Miller & some other women, & as it is cheaper to have them double, thought it proper to order more to be made. But I have great reason to fear that there is much more pride than piety among us.46

Like their male counterparts, Anglican women constantly worked to improve their social standing in the parish community. Through her separation from other women in a private family pew, the elite woman set herself apart in parish society where most were likely seated according to traditional gender segregation.

CONCLUSION

With the establishment of the Church of England in the American colonies, vestries adhered to traditional seating methods, and parish congregations were often segregated by some extent by sex. This chapter finds that while colonial Virginia vestries were in charge of assigning seats and believed in the ideal of gender segregation as a means for ordering parishioners, they were pressured by the gentry-class in the granting of private family pews. The use of these seats served to further stratify the gentry-led vestry from the average parishioner. In fact the ability to command a private pew became an important symbol of status in colonial Virginia society. Elite women who were able to sit with their husbands played a role in reinforcing the social systems of the ranked society. The compound application of gender segregation in Virginia’s parish churches reflects not only the religious beliefs of the Anglican vestries but also the hierarchical structure of colonial Virginia society and the authority of the gentry.

CHAPTER III
INTO THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GENDER SEGREGATION IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

This chapter shifts the focus from the Anglican Church of the colonial period in Virginia to a broader regional discussion of the Episcopal Church in the new American nation.¹ Discussions of the practice of gender segregation can be found in late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century travel narratives for many of the Protestant denominations in early America. However, there are no references to the practice in these accounts of Episcopal services. This contrast leads us to the following questions: 1) to what extent were Episcopal congregations in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries still segregated by sex and 2) was the practice of gender segregation still a relevant component of Anglican/Episcopal theology, as the church adapted to the socio-economic systems and gender philosophies of early republican America?

The tradition of gender segregation in the Anglican Church began to erode as the American colonies headed toward independence. Conventional means for the ordering of parishioners were undermined following the Revolution, with the dissolution of the Anglican Church in Virginia and other places and the political break with England. The Episcopal Church was as established an independent religious entity in the 1780s in America and remained the chosen denomination of many of the nation’s elite. The

¹ The discussion of the colonial church is based primarily on research from the vestry archive, while the discussion of gender segregation beyond the colonial period relies more heavily on evidence from travel narratives as well as journals and letters.
church reworked some of its traditional forms of worship, and like other denominations, embraced new architectural styles in the first half of the nineteenth century. In Virginia, the authority of the gentry was slowly undermined by a new class of wealthy citizens and, perhaps more importantly by the nationwide spread of pew rents, which replaced for the most part traditional vestry assigned seating as a way to pay for the upkeep of the church and the minister’s salary in the absence of compulsory taxes.

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN AMERICA

In the years leading up to independence the Anglican Church in Virginia and the other American colonials came under attack for its ceremonial pageantry, formal hierarchy, and state-sponsorship. The divided loyalties of many Anglican clergymen during the war tarnished the image of the church among many Americans and contributed to a substantial loss in membership. Following the Revolution and the disestablishment of the Church of England, Anglican membership in the new commonwealth shrank and many congregations disappeared as the unrestricted choice of denominations led to the rapid increase in membership of Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists.³

Yet, the Episcopal Church remained the preferred denomination for many of America’s elite in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Episcopal congregations in many states and colonies were often made up of the most respected

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² During the colonial period the traditions of the Anglican Church depended on its regional identity, this was especially true in colonial Virginia. After the Revolution, the Episcopal Church took on a more universal national identity and practices tended to be similar across regions. Therefore it is easier to make references to gender segregation from region in region in the early republican period.
³ From the Presbyterians of the First Great Awakening in the 1740s to the evangelicals at the end of the century, reform denominations offered more animated forms of public worship than then more strict and scripted services of prayerbook worship that appealed to the sense of the everyday worshiper and his family. Nathan O. Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity (New Haven,: Yale University Press, 1989), 3-16.
families, and in Virginia included members of the landed gentry as well as a growing number of newly rich citizens who ascertained rank by wealth. In the nineteenth century, the Episcopal Church experienced a burgeoning growth in some urban areas, as emerging industrialized centers spawned a new class of elite businessmen or merchants eager to adopt Anglican formality and ceremony as markers of their desired social status.

Many of the practices of the Anglican Church carried forward to the Episcopal Church. The Anglican liturgy with the slightly modified Book of Common Prayer was retained when the old Anglican order was reestablished in the 1780s as the independent Episcopal Church of America complete with its hierarchal order of bishops. In America’s Episcopal Church, the vestry system remained intact and male pew holders continued to elect members that would serve the congregation. It was this formalism and traditionalism that attracted upper class citizens.

SUBSCRIBING TO A NATIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Despite its traditional identity as a product of the Anglican Church, the Episcopal Church was eager to assert itself as a prominent American institution, and it subscribed to the national architectural language that characterized church building for the first half of the nineteenth century. Carl Lounsbury contends: “Deeply influenced by the social and cultural consequences of the American Revolution, . . . the architectural attributes that had been associated with an Anglican church or a Congregational meetinghouse in the

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previous century began to disappear, replaced by popular forms that transcended denominational boundaries."^6 From 1790 to 1840, many of America's diverse Protestant denominations, despite differences in biblical interpretation and liturgy, engaged in a massive building boom in which old churches and meetinghouses were remodeled and new churches built with a reoriented floor plan in a style that reflected the republican ideals of public worship.

The influence of Christopher Wren's auditory church made its first appearance in the Georgian designs of New England's Congregational churches in the first half of the eighteenth century (Fig. 9). Soon Protestant churches across the country from New England to the South, with the exception of a number of architecturally distinctive sectarian groups, pierced the nation's skyline with Wren-inspired steeples. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, neo-classical elements were deemed best suited to church building, as American leaders hoped their use in the nation's public architecture would draw comparisons to the great civilizations of classical antiquity. From the grand brick churches of urban America with large-scale temple fronts, columned porticos, and classical motifs to the simple frame-vernacular churches of rural America with flat pedimented gables, pilasters, and Venetian windows, these buildings were instantly recognizable as houses of worship.^7 The size of the church, its location, rank, and degree of decoration varied considerably with the wealth of each congregation. These forms, dressed in first neo-classical and then Greek Revival details, were boosted by the publication and distribution of pattern books, as displayed in Asher Benjamin's _Country Builders' Assistant_ in 1797. With the skills of an architect available to a mass audience, a

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^6 Lounsbury, "God is in the Details," 1.
^7 Williams, _Houses of God_, 10.
small rural congregation for example needed simply to select a design in order to have its own fashionable house of worship. A local builder could recreate the floorplan and other classical details from the richly detailed, measured drawings.

By the late 1820s and 30s, the Greek Revival temple front combined with a gable-end steeple was particularly well suited to the re-orientated floor plan of America’s Protestant churches. Generally rectangular in design, the church could easily be identified by the location of its main entrance in one of the short gable-end walls, a change from the so-called “meetinghouse” plan of the eighteenth century with its entrance located in one of the long walls and the three sided gallery that faced the pulpit.8 A pair of front doors was often included in the design, which added to the distinct appearance of these churches (Fig. 10). In addition, the interior was often fitted with a partitioned vestibule as a component of the entranceway. This divided space cut down on drafts in the main body of the church and curbed disturbances as churchgoers were seated. From its location opposite the entrance on the rear wall of the long axis, the pulpit was now the focal point of the sanctuary. By the 1830s, low, broad podiums, often situated on a slightly raised platform, had replaced the enclosed tiered-pulpits of the colonial period, physically and symbolically lowering the preacher to a level equal to that of his congregation.

As part of the re-oriented church plan, the longitudinal arrangement of seats in rows divided by one or two aisles that faced the pulpit supported the new tenets of public worship. Galleries, placed either above the main entrance or along both of the long sides, were frequently included in churches, providing additional seating for larger congregations. The staircase to the upper gallery was typically located in the interior

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8 Lounsbury, 10, 15; Williams, *Houses of God*, 10.
vestibule. This reduced disruptions caused by worshipers who arrived late and left early and aided in the proper seating of churchgoers.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the Episcopal Church in America began remodeling and reorienting churches according to this new architectural plan. The enclosed, high box pews of the colonial period with their paneled partitions and doors were slowly replaced with low profile and eventually open slip pews. Even the orthodox Episcopal Church agreed with the evangelical ideal that worshipers should be able to not only see the preacher but also hear him as well.9

A SEAT TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER

Changes in fashion may have provided the necessary encouragement for many Episcopal vestries to modify traditional church layouts and install rows of simple slip pews beginning in the early nineteenth century.10 The architectural remodeling of these churches following the Revolution corresponded to a fundamental shift in the way in which Episcopal churches were funded. As an independent denomination, the Episcopal Church was no longer under state control and could not depend on tax subsidies to supplement gentry-class patronage for funding. With dwindling funds and declining membership rosters, many Episcopal congregations, despite an earlier tradition of free seats, looked to the annual pew rental system to increase parish income. According to

9 Lounsbury provides a description of a typical renovation of an Episcopal Church in the nineteenth century. “... the vestrymen of St. James, Goose Creek, Episcopal Church, located outside of Charleston, South Carolina, reconfigured the interior of their early eighteenth century church so that all congregants would have a clear view of the pulpit. They rebuilt the pulpit and moved it from the south side of the center aisle to a raised semicircular platform in the center of the east wall in front of the old plastered reredos where the altar originally stood. Craftsmen refashioned or replaced the earlier pews, reduced their height to a little more than three feet, and arranged them so that all parishioners would face the refurbished pulpit in the east end.” Lounsbury, 16.
10 Ibid., 18.
Episcopal minister Henry Caswall, vestries assigned a value to each pew “often as high as 100 or 200 dollars on a single pew, and frequently as low as thirty, twenty, or even five.”¹¹ The vestry gave the public a predetermined amount of time to examine the list of pew rents with the belief that every member of the congregation would have an equal chance to procure a seat. The seats were then sold at public auction to the highest bidder. Vestries sponsored pew rents to pay the preacher’s salary, maintain the church building, and perhaps even build a new church in the latest design that would reinvigorate the faithful and attract new members.

The vestry book for Dettigen Parish illustrates the shift from vestry assigned seating in the colonial period in Virginia to a more widespread adoption of the pew rental system by the late eighteenth century. On October 8, 1757, the Dettigen Parish vestry granted William More the “Liberty to build a Gallery in the new Church near Cedar Run . . . & the vestry have the preference in purchasing the same when finished.”¹² On December 2, 1771, the churchwardens of Cedar Run Church were ordered to “sell the several pews on the said Gallery to the highest biddings.” Fifteen years after William More was allowed to build his own pew in the gallery of Cedar Run Church, it was placed for sale at public auction. Together these entries suggest important changes in the social structure of the Episcopal Church in early America. In Virginia for example, a growing population of nouveau riche, eager to establish themselves as prominent members of the community, challenged the ranked status of the landed gentry by

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purchasing the valuable seats in the church. As Carl Lounsbury states, “Money rather than family or piety provided the best seats.”\textsuperscript{13}

Englishman Henry Caswall traveled throughout the United States circa 1828 visiting a number of Protestant churches before becoming the minister of the Protestant Episcopal Church of Christ Church in Madison, Indiana. His observations of the history and traditions of the Episcopal Church in America were published in \textit{America, and the American Church} in 1839. On the use of pew rentals in the seating of churchgoers, Caswall wrote:

There are but few free-seats in Episcopal churches, and, in fact, there is not the same necessity for them as in England. Few persons are so poor as to be unable to pay for a seat, and still fewer would be willing to accept it as a gratuity.\textsuperscript{14}

While an outcry for free seats in England by Christopher Wren and others had led to a lessening in use of pew rentals in the nineteenth-century, the majority of seats in American’s Episcopal churches at this time were up for sale. From Caswall’s perspective, few Americans were so poor that they could not afford a seat in the local church. Carl Lounsbury explains that many churches continued to “socially stratify” their members even though vestries had less control in determining seating assignments, as the pew rental system divided congregations in many cities “into those who could afford a seat in church and poorer neighbors who had to look elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{15} Thus, in the first half of the nineteenth century in the American Episcopal Church, social status had been redefined as the realm of the wealthy elite.

\textsuperscript{13} Lounsbury, 18.
\textsuperscript{14} Caswall, 282.
\textsuperscript{15} Lounsbury, 18. Vestries continued to reserve sections of seats in many Episcopal churches, either for the elderly, adolescents, students, or blacks.
While documentary evidence of seating practices in the Episcopal Church in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is dominated by discussions of pew rentals, these resources are conspicuously silent on the subject of gender segregation.

EVIDENCE OF GENDER SEGREGATION IN TRAVEL NARRATIVES

Evidence of the practice of gender segregation in many of the Protestant denominations in early America can be found in the travel narratives of the early republican and antebellum periods. Such narratives became popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as advances in transportation made traveling to America and other destinations around the world possible for many Europeans. Beyond the descriptive quality of the writing, travel narratives were in essence autobiographical and relayed both the personal interests and dislikes of the author. Experiences or practices seen as new and unusual were often included in the text. Visits to church services provided many international travelers with opportunities for entertainment as well as and spiritual fulfillment. During their tours of the new American nation, many travelers attended worship services at multiple churches. Those travelers who witnessed the practice often commented on the segregation of the sexes.

Foreign visitors, however, failed to singularly observe any evidence to support the practice of sexual segregation in the Episcopal Church. Descriptions of church services and their congregations from three British travelers, Episcopal minister Henry Caswall, Scotsman Thomas Hamilton, and Congregationalist Andrew Reed, provide no mention of the practice of gender segregation in the American Episcopal Church in the late

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eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries. They do underscore the presence of the practice in other Protestant denominations in America at this time.

Following his arrival in New York City in 1828, Henry Caswall stopped at the prestigious Grace Episcopal Church. Widely considered to be the “most fashionable place of worship in New York”, Grace Church on Broadway had become a popular destination for international travelers who hoped to find a bit of European elegance and English refinement in the young nation. Caswall “obtained” his “first impressions of the American Episcopal Church” when he attended Sunday morning services there. Following which, he noted:

The appearance of the congregation was highly respectable; indeed it appeared to contain none of the lower classes of society. The church itself was beautifully clean and neat; . . . The service is almost identically the same with that of the Church of England; . . . Some minor alterations, chiefly verbal, are admitted; some of which are unquestionably improvements.

That same day he attended afternoon services at St. George’s Episcopal Church, to which he simply stated: “I observed the same peculiarities in the mode of conducting the service, which I had noticed in the morning; and heard an eloquent sermon delivered by a popular preacher, Mr. M’Ilvaine.”

There is no mention of the practice of gender segregation in either of these two observations from Caswall. Instead, his remarks focus on the visible “respectability” of the congregation and the popularity of the preacher. As a student of the Episcopal ministry, Caswall was pleased to find Anglican ritual and etiquette still intact in at Grace Church, its standards of order and decorum now reflected in the wealth of its members.

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17 Thomas Hamilton wrote this about the congregation: “On the first Sunday after my arrival, I attended divine service in Grace Church, which is decidedly the most fashionable place of worship in New York.” Thomas Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America*, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1834), 44.
18 Caswall, 11.
19 Ibid., 12.
The church was seated in ranked order by a system of pew rents and included only the most elite members of society.

These observations alone do not disprove the existence of the practice of gender segregation in the Episcopal Church of the period. However, on that same Sunday in September, Henry Caswall attended evening services at a comparable Methodist house of worship in the city. There he witnessed the following:

In the evening, out of curiosity, I stepped into a large Methodist chapel. Here I found an immense congregation, the females seated on the left, and the males on the right. They appeared to be an entirely different class of persons from those whom I had seen at Grace Church and St. George’s and were listening with the most profound attention to a sermon in which I could discover neither point nor connection; . . .

In his account of the Methodist chapel, Caswall specifically comments on the separation of men and women. A number of factors, such as the large size of the congregation, the lower class status of the worshippers, or his dislike for the Methodist sermon, may have influenced his experience. Caswall’s memory of the arrangement of the sexes at the Methodist chapel suggests that gender segregation was not visibly apparent at Grace Church and St. George’s Episcopal Church.

Thomas Hamilton documented his tour of the United States in *Men and Manners in America*, published in 1834. During his own visit to the same Grace Church, he offered this colorful account:

The congregation, though very numerous, was composed almost exclusively of the wealthier class; and the gay dresses of the ladies—whose taste generally leads to a preference of the brightest colours—produced an effect not unlike that of a bed of tulips.

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20 Ibid.
21 As was referenced in the previous chapters, discussions of proper seating order by Anglican an Episcopal clergy and others, such as Christopher Wren, in England were dominated by the argument over taxation, pew rentals and free seats in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
22 Hamilton, 44.
Hamilton’s account offers no specific reference to gender segregation. It does, however, provide insights into the shared identity of Episcopal women in nineteenth-century America. Much like the gentry-class women of the colonial period in Virginia, the women of America’s Episcopal Church continued to be defined by social status and display, their flamboyant gowns a symbol of the competition that existed among female worshippers.

In a final set of observations, Andrew Reed recalls an experience that was surprisingly similar to the one of Episcopal minister Henry Caswall. Reed was sent by the Congregational Union of England and Wales to observe the varying forms of Protestant worship in America. On one Sunday in 1835, he visited both an Episcopal Church and an Episcopal Methodist Church in Morristown, New Jersey. He made no mention of gender segregation following his attendance at the Episcopal service in the afternoon. However that same evening, Reed witnessed the following seating arrangement at the Episcopal Methodist Church:

The men occupied one side of the place, and the women the other; an unsocial plan, and more likely to suggest evil than to prevent it.\(^2\)\(^3\)

With men on one side of the church and women on the other, gender segregation was noteworthy. Like Caswall, Reed mentioned gender segregation only when describing the Methodist congregation. This suggests that Reed did not witness the segregation of the sexes in the Episcopal church that he visited earlier that afternoon. In fact, Reed goes so far as to argue that “evil” would result from the segregation of the sexes. Perhaps he believed that groups of gossiping women or the gazes of vulgar men were more likely to

disrupt worship services than men and women seated together as a family, a reverse of the traditional Protestant ideal of the proper ordering of the church. The lack of evidence for gender segregation in the travel narratives of Caswall, Hamilton, and Reed leads us to question the actual existence of the practice in the American Episcopal Church at least by the mid-nineteenth century.

THE PURPOSE OF PAIRED FRONT DOORS IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Protestant denominations in early republican and antebellum America remained preoccupied with the proper sorting and seating of churchgoers, and this was reflected in architectural design. A pair of front doors was a common feature of many churches across the diverse range of denominations in America in the 1820s and 30s. The origins of the idea of placing two side-by-side entrances in the front of the church can be traced to the architecture of early Protestant reform sects in England. These separate entrances were originally utilized by religious groups, such as the Society of Friends and later the Methodists, specifically for the purpose of gender segregation.

The feature of paired front doors was not a tradition of Anglican architecture in early Reformed England and colonial Virginia. It was, however, often found in American in the Episcopal Churches built in 1820s through 40s. A sampling of three Virginia churches shows the incorporation of these ideas into Episcopal church design. Historic Hungars Episcopal Church in Northampton County, Virginia was abandoned for many years following the Revolution. Its disestablished Anglican members worshipped with a local Methodist congregation until the church was reorganized under Episcopal leadership and the building finally restored in 1819. From 1819 to 1850, Hungars church
was refitted and reoriented such that it reflected both the Methodist influences of the congregation as well as the tastes of the period. These modifications included the addition of paired doors, a new seating layout with dual aisles (which would be later replaced with a single center aisle) and paneled slip-pews, a split entrance vestibule and upper gallery, as well as the installation of a pair of front entrances that corresponded to the re-oriented location of the pulpit (Fig. 11).

Ware Episcopal Church in Gloucester, Virginia, like Hungars Episcopal, was also built as an Anglican parish church in the eighteenth century in typical English fashion. The rectangular-plan brick church originally included three entrances along the north, south, and west elevations. In 1854 the building was reoriented. The west door became the main entrance of the church and the interior was outfitted with a partitioned vestibule that provided access to the sanctuary and contained stairs to an upper gallery. Following the remodeling, worshipers would enter the church through a single front entrance and be sorted inside the vestibule, according to the proper order of the day.

Situated in the small town of Accomac on Virginia’s Eastern Shore, St. James Episcopal Church was built in 1838 with grand aspirations. With its temple front façade and imposing Doric columns, the Greek Revival church has a pair of side-by-side front doors and is a classic example of the new national church architecture (See Fig. 10). These entrances corresponded to another set of doors in the interior vestibule that allowed churchgoers to make their way in an orderly fashion down one of the two aisles to their

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seats, or access the T-shaped staircase located in the sanctuary to seats in the upper
gallery.²⁶

Everything about the design of St. James Church speaks to some form of ordered
seating. The layout of doorways and arrangement of seats is more in keeping with the
popular Methodist Church, which provided specific instructions for building for gender
segregation, than the Episcopal Church, which did not. The center section of pews is
divided along its length by a center partition, and the dual aisles would easily allow for
the segregation of the sexes (Fig. 12). Yet, small roman numerals nailed to the locking,
slip pew doors reveal that seating at St. James Episcopal Church in the mid-nineteenth
century was arranged not by gender but was in fact determined by a system of pew rents.

There are several possible explanations for the incorporation of paired front doors
and spilt entrance vestibules in these and other Episcopal churches in America in the first
decades of the nineteenth century. First, the design may have simply been an attempt by
the Episcopal Church, widely considered the church of America’s elite, to keep up with
the latest trends and appearances. There is evidence that when Episcopal congregations
remodeled their churches they often incorporated features made popular by the
Methodists and their theology, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Second, the
two front doors may have been utilized for other kinds of sorting by Episcopal vestries
beyond the widespread application of gender segregation, such as the seating of the
elderly or adolescents, as well as the elite who had purchase a pew. Third, the use of two
separate front doors fits into new preoccupations with racial segregation in America in
the early nineteenth century. Henry Caswall noted that many Episcopal vestries often
reserved a free space in their churches for black congregants. On which he wrote:

Still, for the benefit of strangers, and others who may be attracted by curiosity, a few places are always reserved. Negroes and other coloured persons have also the privilege of occupying free seats by themselves, distinct from the rest of the congregation.²⁷

The two separate entrances would have made it possible for blacks and whites to maintain lines of segregation. Whereas the use of paired front entrances had its origins in gender segregation and was utilized for that purpose in early sectarian and evangelical churches in England and America, it became a decorative part of the Greek Revival design of many Episcopal churches in the 1820s and 30s and, as we will see in the next chapter, was used in both the Episcopal and Methodist denominations for racial segregation.

CONCLUSION

The chapter discusses the shift from the colonial Anglican tradition to the establishment of the Episcopal Church as an independent denomination in the 1780s. The Episcopal Church was increasingly the church of the elite, who paid pew rents to support the church, clergy, and its charities. These changes in seating practices were utilized by the new class of wealthy to reinforce their social status.

The adoption of pew rents coincided with the spread of a new Protestant church architecture at the beginning of the nineteenth century that reflected the ideals of the nation. Traditional Protestant values of piety and familial morality continued to be reinforced by the church and carried over in support of America’s national identity. The Episcopal Church remained focused on the proper ordering and seating of its members specifically the elite. The new architectural design, which often incorporated a pair of

²⁷ Caswall, 282.
front doors and/or an interior partitioned vestibule enabled Episcopal churches to sort and seat its members in ways beyond the traditional practice of gender segregation, and more specifically by wealth, race and other factors.
CHAPTER IV

GENDER SEGREGATION IN A BROADER AMERICAN CONTEXT: A COMPARISON WITH SHAKERS AND METHODISTS

The previous chapter traced the practice of gender segregation through the Anglican/Episcopal tradition in both colonial Virginia and early republican America. It outlined the theological origins that fostered the use of the practice in that religious tradition, and discussed how economic, political, and social changes following the Revolution led to its decline. While an examination of late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century travel narratives revealed a lack of evidence for gender segregation in the Episcopal Church, the records showed the practice as a predominate feature of many other Protestant denominations in America well into the nineteenth century. This chapter will examine the practice of gender segregation in two additional distinct Protestant groups: the isolated and communal sectarian communities as represented by the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, or the Shakers as they are more commonly known, and the increasingly dominant evangelical denominations as represented by the Methodists.1 We will find that both of these religions utilized architecture in significant ways in support of segregating the sexes. More importantly, the persistence of the practice depended on an overriding emphasis on religious doctrine.

A CURIOUS RITUAL: REACTION TO SHAKER WORSHIP HIGHLIGHTS GENDER SEGREGATION

1 Sources include travel narratives and journals, as well as some Virginia church records. See bibliography.
Word spread quickly of the religious society known as the Shakers whose celibate members chanted, wailed, and shook their bodies with spasmodic fervor during devotions. Early accounts, such as Valentine Rathburn’s scathing report of the Nisqueunia Society in 1781, ignited wild rumors about the zealous howling and dancing that took place at these services and the unholy process of separating husbands from wives.2 Throughout the following century, hundreds perhaps thousands of American and foreign travelers flocked to Shaker villages to witness the spectacle for themselves. While some sought spiritual awakening or social equality, the majority of visitors attended Shaker services purely out of curiosity as they promised to bring a bit of excitement to a Sunday afternoon. Surprisingly, the isolated Shakers opened their doors to the gawking spectators, who frequently matched or outnumbered them, as this was one of the only ways for the celibate sect to recruit new members. Their services were often recorded in travelers’ accounts and documented in lithographs and drawings (Fig. 13).

Reactions to Shaker worship varied from Elkanah Watson’s immediate reaction of disgust “in contemplating the revolting scene” (an opinion that would shift in later years to one of appreciation for the society), to the dismissive attitude of Andrew Bell, to the shock and horror of Fanny Appleton Longfellow.3 The Boston socialite and the wife of

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow saw the Shaker service more in keeping with a “witches Sabbath” than praise to God, describing it as “uneARTHLY, revolting, oppressive, and bewildering.” Herself a woman of high social and moral standing, the pious Longfellow feared for her sex.

Though reactions to Shaker services varied considerably, accounts of the order of Shaker worship are surprisingly similar. Englishman Andrew Bell’s account of Sunday service at New Lebanon Springs Society of Shakers in New York in 1835 is strikingly comparable to Elkanah Watson’s 1790 account written forty-five years earlier.4 It is no coincidence that both Watson and Bell utilized military terms to describe the precision of the Shaker dances and the strict formations of the Believers.5 While many observers saw the wild howling and spontaneous manifestations as unholy and extreme, the worship service was actually carefully ordered and choreographed. Brothers and Sisters made two columns and then circled one another chanting and lifting their legs up and down in “labor for God.” The ritual was designed to keep the sexes separate at all times.6

Gender segregation is consistently mentioned throughout these narratives as an integral component of Shaker services from the arrival and seating of Brothers and Sisters to the segregated dance routines and concluding manifestations. These accounts reinforced the fundamental role of gender segregation in the faith. Beyond traditional notions of Pauline order and decency, the practice was embedded in the fundamental tenets of Shaker theology.

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4 Watson, 289-90 and Bell, 66.
5 Watson states: “The discourse finished, the elder ordered them ‘to prepare to labor, in the name of the Lord.’ At once they broke their ranks; the men stript off their coats, the women divested themselves of all superfluous articles of dress. They then re-formed in the same order with the celerity and exactness of a military column.” Andrew Bell also used military terms to describe the dancing portion of the service, noting about the columns of men and women: “No two lines were ever more admirably dressed by any drill-sergeant.” Watson, 289-90, and Bell 88.
6 Deborah Burns, 43 and Stein, 17.
ANN LEE AND THE FUNDAMENTAL TENETS OF SHAKER THEOLOGY

One of a number of sectarian groups that established themselves in eighteenth-century America, the Shakers were founded on a unique theology that combined the sometimes conflicting notions of gender equality, celibacy, regulation, strict segregation, and isolation from the society at large. Touted by her followers as a Christ in female form, English-born Ann Lee is often credited with the establishment of the fundamental tenets of the faith and with bringing the worship style of the “Shaking Quakers” to America in 1774.⁷

Compiled in 1812 and published in 1816 almost four decades after her death, the Testimonies of the life of Ann Lee described the two main revelations of the Shaker founder.⁸ Her first revelation came during two weeks spent in jail in Manchester, England. In her commune with God, Lee purportedly stated “it is Christ that dwells in me,” and the dual nature of Christ as both male and female was revealed.⁹ This served as the basis for the Shaker doctrine of the equality of men and women in both the spiritual and physical world and, set the stage for a woman to serve as leader of the sect.

Lee’s second revelation was in regards to celibacy. She asked that converts “forsake the marriage of the flesh, or you cannot be married to the lamb, nor have any share in the resurrection of Christ.”¹⁰ This led to the establishment of the basic structure of the Shaker family in which men and women lived together as Brother and Sister as members of the “holy family” in service of Christ. Following the death of Ann Lee in

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⁷ Dubbed the “Shaking Quakers” for their “uninhibited gesticulations and fits of ecstasy” by a local Manchester newspaper, the group, led by James and Jane Wardley, were dissenting reform faction of the established Anglican church unlawfully disrupted Anglican services by denouncing the inequalities in the established church and offered salvation to all souls. See Stein, 3.
⁸ Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee, and the Elders with her, collected from Living Witnesses, in Union with the Church, 1816.
⁹ Deborah Burns, 24-25.
¹⁰ Ibid.
1783, the Shaker elders asked new converts to enter into a covenant of “joint interest and union” and adopt the “Act of Sharing” in which they promised to be celibate, and dissolve traditional familial ties of marriage and children. All goods and property would be shared equally among the members of the community. Members would live, work, and be fed equally. Under tenets of celibacy and the dual nature of God, Shaker men and women would live together on earth separately but equally. As is evident by the Shakers, gender segregation among the various denominations remained rooted in theology, even if those theologies were very different.

ORDERING SHAKER LIFE: RITUALS AND SEGREGATION

In the late 1780s and 90s following the death of Lee, Father Joseph Meacham and the other remaining Shaker elders organized the scattered members of the sect into communal families or societies in an effort to keep the sexes separate and ensure the productivity of the self-sufficient community. In a bold move supported by the collection and distribution of the Testimonies, Meacham appointed Lucy Wright to serve along side him as Mother of the central ministry at New Lebanon Springs. The appointment of Wright as the spiritual leader of the sect underscores the unique gender ideology of the Shakers and stands as a stark departure from the responsibilities typical of Protestant women in America during this period. In addition, each society had its own government

12 Filled with “persecution, miracles, and divine protection” and little documentary evidence, historian Stephen Stein argues that the story of Ann Lee blurs the line between fact and myth. Stein argues the Testimonies was written as a political work, designed to reorganize the faith’s members in the first quarter of the nineteenth century and reinforce the strict segregation of the sexes needed to keep the sect isolated and in working order. In addition, Lucy Wright following Meacham’s death in 1796 would serve as sole spiritual leader of the sect for more than two decades. Stein, 8, 26, 38, 72, 76.
body, led by two elders and two eldresses who reported of rules and regulations back to
the central ministry at New Lebanon.

The structure and order of Shaker society was accomplished through numerous
prescribed rituals and regulations. During this period, Father Meacham formalized and
structured the worship service of the Shakers, so that dances, movements between the
sexes, and chants were strictly choreographed. Published in 1821, almost thirty years
after Joseph Meacham’s death, *The Millennial Laws* were the culmination of regulations
imposed by Meacham and the patriarchal Shaker leadership during the late eighteenth
century.\(^\text{13}\) These regulations depended on a strict segregation of the sexes that kept
Brothers and Sisters separate not only during worship but also at every point of the day.\(^\text{14}\)

From the moment they woke up until they went to bed, when and what they ate, to
how they worked, worshiped and interacted with members of the opposite sex, Shakers
followed a strict order designed to reinforce their ethic of labor and suppress sexual
urges. Under this system, Brothers and Sisters served in traditional gender roles.
Brothers worked in the fields or machine shops and were responsible for hard, manual
labor such as construction and farming, and manufacturing. The Sisters assumed the
domestic tasks of cooking, cleaning, and sewing that kept them restricted to the family
dwellings or laundry. Under this strict communalism and chastity, the Shaker family
produced almost everything it needed.

\(^{13}\) Stein, 97. See *Millennial Laws, or Gospel Statutes and Ordinances adapted to the Day of Christ’s
Second Appearing. Given and established in the Church for the protection thereof by Father Joseph
Meacham and Mother Lucy Wright The presiding Ministry and by their Successors The Ministry and
Elders. Recorded at New Lebanon Aug 7th 1821. Revised and re-established by the Ministry and Elders

\(^{14}\) Deborah Burns states: “The essential religious tenets of Shakerism were enacted through a routine of
minutely prescribed rituals designed to put Believers in relation to their spiritual aims all day.” Burns, 16.
The equality of men and women was realized not only through a rejection of traditional gender roles, such as motherhood, but also through an emphasis on the equal importance of responsibility. While women’s leadership roles increased over time from the patriarchal control in the last quarter of the eighteenth century to the era of Wright and First Born Daughter at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the primary notion of gender in the Shaker community remained one of separate but equal.

SHAKER ARCHITECTURE AT PLEASANT HILL

Architecture was strategically and creatively utilized by the Shakers to physically separate the sexes. The village of Pleasant Hill, set in the rolling hills of blue-grass country in Kentucky, represents the culmination of Shaker segregation, spiritualism, and architectural design. Founded in 1805 following Mother Wright’s missions to the Ohio River Valley, the Society of Shakers at Pleasant Hill was established at the high point of the American Shaker movement. With a large collection of dwellings, workshops, and service buildings and a population of about 500 at its peak in the 1820s, Pleasant Hill was one of the largest of the twenty-one Shaker communities across the country. Situated on 3,000 acres, the buildings of Pleasant Hill are gracefully arranged along a scenic tree-lined street with picket fences that create a picturesque effect today as a living history museum.

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15 The industrious Shakers were adept at innovations in engineering and manufacturing that increased the efficiency and quality of production. The resulting excess of finely crafted Shaker furniture, garden seeds, and female made handy-crafts, such as brooms and candles, were popular with outsiders and sold well for a profit. For an overview of Shaker industry, see Stein, 98; Deborah Burns, 61; Paul Rocheleau, Shaker Built: The Form and Function of Shaker Architecture (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994), 15.

16 The village today looks much like it did to William Byrd, a descendant of William Byrd of Westover, who had the unique opportunity of living in the community beginning in June 1826. See Byrd quoted in Stein, 1, 16-17.
The 1820 meetinghouse served as both the physical and spiritual center for the family of Pleasant Hill as it did in every other Shaker society. It was the only building in the village painted white, a color closely associated by the Shakers with the divine. While the meetinghouse at Pleasant Hill does not have the classical proportions and aesthetics of the work of the Moses Johnson, widely considered as the first Shaker architect, or the expansive engineered arch of the rebuilt meetinghouse at New Lebanon Springs, the simple two-story frame house of worship followed traditional Shaker guidelines of order and decorum (Fig. 14).\(^\text{17}\) Influenced by the architecture of the Quakers, the symmetrical five-bay façade was outfitted with a pair of front doors on one of the long walls, an exterior reflection of the strict segregation of the sexes inside. Once the Brothers and Sisters had entered the meetinghouse through their designated entrances, they would sit facing one another on moveable benches placed in rows on either side of the room. They would then form two columns in the open space in the center of the room and prepare for ritual devotions. In typical fashion, a fixed bench encircled the walls and provided out-of-the-way seating for visitors, like Watson, Bell, and Longfellow.

The meetinghouse at Pleasant Hill reflects the growing influence of Shaker leaders and their expanded freedoms as they distanced themselves from the everyday

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\(^{17}\) In 1785, James Whitaker, one of the original nine founding members, and Joseph Meacham, a converted Baptist minister deemed to share Lee's gift of prophecy, invited all Believers to New Lebanon for a Christmas celebration and initiated plans for the construction of a family meetinghouse. Heavily influenced by the architecture of the Society of Friends, Meacham and Whitaker called upon the talents of carpenter Moses Johnson, considered the first and most notable Shaker architect, to build the structure they envisioned. The first Shaker meetinghouse at New Lebanon Springs combined the Quaker features of an open floor plan and two front entrances with Johnson's fine craftsmanship and traditional New England timber framing. The simple and clean utilitarian structure that resulted became the design standard for other Shaker houses of worship. James Whitaker enforced the first formal segregation of the sexes at the dedication of the meetinghouse in 1787, writing that: "Ye shall come in and go out of this house in reverence and Godly fear. All men shall come in and go out the west doors, and women the east doors." Amy Stechler Burns, *The Shakers Hands to Work Hearts to God: The History and Visions of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing from 1774 to the Present* (New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1999), 35 and Rocheleau, 75-79.
Believer at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Breaking with the strict order for gender segregation, individual apartments were provided for the four-person ministry on the second floor. Here the two elders and eldresses shared a sitting space together where they could freely discuss the business of the day. A small square, stairway window opened into the meeting hall, providing the ministry with an omniscient view of the congregation. There they went unnoticed, and could watch out for indecent behavior between the segregated sexes worshiping below.\(^{18}\)

In contrast to the plain meetinghouse, the Centre Family Dwelling is the largest and grandest structure at Pleasant Hill, which William Byrd noted “overshadowed the existing buildings” though it was still under construction when he arrived in 1826. The Centre Family Dwelling, like many large-scale Shaker residences built during this period, was intended to reflect in its proportions and material both the spiritual and monetary strength of the society. At the conclusion of Sunday services at Pleasant Hill, Brothers and Sisters exited the meetinghouse through their respective doors and proceeded directly down two limestone paths that that crossed the street and led to the steps of the Centre Family Dwelling and its pair of doors (Fig. 15). The procession left no opportunity for comingling or conversation between the sexes.

Historian Paul Rocheleau describes the mastery of the architecture at Pleasant Hill: “The sexes were always together, in a large communal family living under one roof—and always apart . . . Shaker men and women circled each other in their homes, workshops, and meetinghouses in a never ending, side-by-side dance, always joined and always separate.”\(^{19}\) Pairs of doors, generally reserved for the meetinghouse in the Quaker

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\(^{18}\) Rocheleau, 155.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 70-71.
tradition, were used throughout the Dwelling House and provided the sexes with separate access to the kitchen and second-floor meeting room. Set of doors as well as dual staircases were common features of Shaker architecture and are found throughout the many of the dwellings and workshops at Pleasant Hill. The repetition, uniformity, and simplicity of these forms reinforced the Shaker notion of the separate but equal status of its Brothers and Sisters.

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS ON THE SHAKERS

In contrast to the Anglicans and Episcopalians, gender segregation was a fundamental component in Shaker communities not only in worship but also in every aspect of life. This was a result of a theology of gender that combined celibacy with the dual nature of God. The Shakers reinforced this theology through formalized rituals, a unique family structure, strict segregation of the sexes, the built environment, and total isolation from the society at large. For the United Society of Believers, the practice of gender segregation served to break down traditional gender barriers and establish equality between the sexes. It was this all-encompassing ideology that sustained a universal application of the practice in Shaker communities from the late eighteenth century through the present day. The failure of the Shakers to modify their ideology of celibacy and segregation in the face of the changing society led to a loss of membership in the mid-nineteenth century and ultimately, the decline of the sect.

ROOTS OF METHODIST THEOLOGY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF JOHN WESLEY
While the isolated Shakers made a small but notable impact on the American landscape, the Methodists played a prominent role in mainstream society that would influence the traditional application of Pauline gender segregation. Like the other denominations that sparked the great awakening in America, the Methodists saw their faith as the religion for everyman.

Frustrated by the ritualistic formalism and elitism of the Church of England in the late 1730s and 1740s, Methodism's founder John Wesley believed that every person had the right to Biblical instruction and salvation. His theology combined the idea of an individual's conversion experience with an emphasis on discipline and an inquisitive study of Scripture that focused on spiritual self-improvement and Christian charity. As a student at Oxford University and leader of the campus Holy Club, Wesley was profoundly influenced by the liturgy of the primitive church, specifically the Apostolic Constitutions, which he considered, along with the Bible and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, to be the purest source of Christian order and reason. The Reverend John Wesley never intended to found a separate denomination. Instead, he saw Methodism as a reform movement within the Church of England that could renew the uninspired and authoritarian religion and make it relevant to all classes of modern society. Wesley wrote down the principles of Methodism in 1739, which were later compiled and published in the *Methodist Discipline*.

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21 Tucker, 27, 224.
JOHN WESLEY'S ATTITUDE TOWARD WOMEN

Methodism took its name from its disciplined approach to the study of Scripture. John Wesley felt that the Anglican Church in England could best be reformed if it returned to the principles of the early Christian texts. This included Paul’s rules for women in I Corinthians. In addition to his scholarship of Scripture, however, the role women in the church had always been of personal significance to John Wesley. His mother had a profound influence on his spiritual development, and he kept the company of a number of women in the Methodist church. The profundity of his relationships with women led him to believe that the female sex had a unique tendency toward piety and righteousness beyond the traditional notions of familial morality. Though he started his ministry by strictly adhering to the Pauline decree that women remain silent in the church, he eventually encouraged women to speak out and take leadership positions in segregated “classes” in the church and faith-based charity work.

Wesley rationalized this departure from Paul’s principles by arguing that women were most influential in separate but equal roles. This ideology in combination with early Protestant notions of gender would serve as the inspiration for women like Beecher and Stowe in the creation of the cult of domesticity and the expansion of the role of Protestant women in America in the nineteenth century. Interestingly enough, the one Pauline principle that Wesley was adamant on was the segregation of the sexes, because

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as Wesley stated in 1768 in a letter to George Merryweather, “The matter is short: all things in divine worship must ‘be done decently and in order’.”24 This is fitting with his emphasis on the *Apostolic Traditions*, which provided one of the earliest interpretations of gender segregation in conjunction with Paul’s verse on “order and decency.” Wesley’s particular gender ideology is made clear in his instructions for the seating of the sexes in church. Despite his relatively liberal attitude toward women, Methodism’s founder was insistent on the application of traditional gender segregation.

**WESLEY SEATS THE SEXES**

After hearing of a lapse in the segregation of the sexes “at the Preaching-house” in Manchester, England, a frustrated John Wesley sent a letter to John Valton on April 9, 1781 that stated: “My Dear Brother,—As I have Made a beginning, as the men and women are already separated . . . I beg that Brother Brocklehurst and you will resolutely continue that separation. This is a Methodist rule, not grounded on caprice, but on plain, solid reason.” John Wesley’s letter to Valton reflects the marginalization of the practice in the Anglican Church in England, and the theologian’s anger over its disregard in Manchester. Wesley promised the severest of consequences for the congregation if they continued to violate the rule. “By admitting the contrary practice, by jumbling men and women together,” Wesley exclaimed, “you would shut me out of the house; for if I should come into a Methodist preaching house when this is the case, I must immediately go out again.”25

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24 Ibid.
John Wesley’s response to the Brethren at Manchester reflects his sincere concern that the Church of England had replaced primitive Pauline order and decorum with authoritarian pomp and ranked hierarchy, which was visibly on display in the seating of high-box pews of the period with the parish’s most prominent families. Echoing Christopher Wren’s thoughts on church building and concerns with pew rents almost a century earlier, Wesley offered a revised set of building guidelines for the Anglican Church. He felt these guidelines would reform and reinforce the Christian ideal of equality. According to the 1770 Methodist Large Minutes, Methodist chapels would be built in a “plain and decent” fashion and filled with simple backless pews that could not be bought or sold but remain free to all classes of people who sought the word of God.26 By removing purchasable box pews from the church, Wesley sought to ensure traditional gender segregation on the congregation.

Finding her to have an “extraordinary call,” John Wesley praised Sister Mary Bishop, director of two schools for girls in Bath and Keynsham, for her leadership role in the establishment of a new Methodist congregation and the construction of a new preaching house. In a letter dated November 5, 1770, he stated: “I am glad you had such success in your labour of love . . . I hope the building is begun and will be finished as soon as possible.” Less than a month later, Wesley responded to a question regarding the layout of the church interior and in doing so provided specific instructions for segregating the sexes. On November 27 he wrote to Miss Bishop from London, exclaiming:

“My Dear Sister,—Let them remember to make the aisles on the side of the room, and to place the forms in the middle crossways, with a rail running across from the pulpit downward, to part the men from the women. And I particularly desire there may be no pews and no backs to the forms.”27

26 Tucker, 240-44. See 1770 Methodist Large Minutes.
27 LJW, vol. 5, 209.
A letter to Zachariah Yewdall dated March 21, 1784 hints that John Wesley understood the difficulties faced by church leaders in keeping the sexes separate, and upon observing various congregational attempts to segregate the sexes, determined the rail to be the architectural device best suited to the purpose. From Worcester, Wesley asked Yewdall to install a rail down the center of the new preaching-house, as “We have found this the only effectual way of separating the men from the women.” He continued: “This must be done, whoever is pleased or displeased. Blessed is the man who endureth temptation!”28 With disciplined self-control and Christian reason, order would outweigh any external feelings of lust or concerns of rank. Wesley’s insistence on the practice of gender segregation is important in understanding the persistence of the practice in America.

METHODISM IN AMERICA: FROM THE CIRCUIT RIDERS TO THE CHRISTMAS CONFERENCE

With Methodist chapters established in Baltimore, New York, and Philadelphia as early as the 1760s, John Wesley sent the Reverend Francis Asbury to coordinate a large-scale mission to evangelize the Mid-Atlantic region in 1771. Asbury successfully adapted Wesley’s style of itinerant preaching to the American colonies by dispatching young ministers and lay preachers on horseback along circuit routes throughout the region.29 With their saddlebags loaded with copies of the Bible, hymnals, and Wesley’s Discipline, the circuit riders preached the Methodist message of equality and free will with relentless

29 Williams, America’s Religions, 125 and Tucker, 37.
energy and fiery oratory, often in open-air spaces to any one who would listen, regardless of race, class, or gender.\textsuperscript{30}

Wesley’s decision to remain loyal to England and the Anglican Church led to the ultimate split between the Methodists in England and America. “With his scruples . . . at an end,” John Wesley acknowledged, in a letter dated September 10, 1784, that the “Brethren in North America” were at liberty to break ties with the Church of England, and he appointed “Dr. Coke and Mr. Francis Asbury to be joint superintendents,” of Methodism in America.\textsuperscript{31} Three months later on December 27, 1784, in what would become known as the Christmas Conference, Asbury, Coke, and 60 additional Methodist ministers gathered for the annual conference at Lovely Lane Church in Baltimore. It was there that the Methodist Episcopal Church in America was established as an independent denomination free of any state-sponsored control.\textsuperscript{32} Despite their formal spilt from Wesley and the Church of England, the American Methodist Church and its leaders remained closely connected to the theology of its founder.

Unlike the elite American Episcopal Church, which was also established as an independent denomination during this period, Methodism in America appealed to the common man and woman, who sought out economic stability and Christian fellowship following the Revolution. With its charismatic preachers and appeal for emotionalism, the Methodist Church, like the Baptists in the previous decades, amassed an enormous following the Revolution to become one of the fastest growing religions in American

\textsuperscript{32} Williams, \textit{America’s Religions}, 125.
history. Historian Rhys Isaac reflects on the Methodists in Virginia, stating: "The emotional release of the meetings was in sharp contrast to the ordered decorum of the services in the parish churches were the squires ruled." By 1820, Methodist membership exceeded more than a quarter million, more than a quarter of which were African American. By the mid-nineteenth century, politicians and church officials had dubbed Methodism the most American of the Protestant denominations. By balancing the tenets of their faith and doctrine of equality with the socio-economic realities of a young, growing nation, the Methodist Church built a diverse membership of rich and poor, young and old, male and female, and black and white.

EARLY METHODIST ARCHITECTURE IN AMERICA

In keeping with the itinerant tradition of the circuit ministry, there were very few Methodist preaching-houses built in the first decades of the mission in America, as the scattered members typically met in private residences, outbuildings, or outdoors. Following the first successful Camp Meeting at Cane Ridge in Kentucky in 1801, the quarterly, open-air revival became a wildly popular component of Methodism, providing a space for large numbers of followers to gather together and share conversion experiences. Despite the outdoor location of the camp, lithographs and travel narratives from the nineteenth century sometimes depict the segregation of the sexes in the arrangement of worshipers seated on benches around a central preaching podium.

33 Heyrman, 22; Lyerly, 25; Tucker, 4.
34 Isaac, 261.
35 Nathan Hatch argues that evangelical groups, including the Baptists and Methodists, "did more to Christianize American society than anything before or since." Hatch, 3.
36 The application of gender segregation in Camp Meetings varied from location to location. See Fredrika Bremer, America of the Fifties: Letters of Fredrika Bremer, ed. Adolph B. Benson (New York: The
The earliest structures used for Methodist worship did not typically include features specifically suited to gender segregation. Simple, windowless log cabins with dirt floors were assembled for Methodist worship in the Mid-Atlantic region as early as the 1760s and remained commonplace in parts of Appalachia and the western frontier through the nineteenth century. It was not uncommon for early Methodist congregations to occupy the former church building of other denominations (which were then typically remodeled at the beginning of the nineteenth century).\textsuperscript{37} Two early, surviving examples of Methodist church architecture, Adams Methodist Episcopal Church in Gloucester County, New Jersey and Barrat's Chapel in Kent County, Delaware more closely resemble the vernacular meetinghouses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with little attention paid toward designing for segregation. Built circa 1793 of locally quarried stone, Adams Methodist Church is a simple, one story structure, measuring 26'9" by 30'2". The one room house of worship follows a traditional meetinghouse plan with the pulpit located along the longer south wall. A pulpit window marks the location of the pulpit (Fig. 16). A single entrance flanked by two windows is located opposite the pulpit on the north façade. There were no separate entrances for men and women in this small Methodist preaching-house. If gender segregation was indeed enforced at Adams Church, the members were most likely sorted once they were inside.\textsuperscript{38}

Built in 1780, Barratt's Methodist Chapel outside of Frederica in Delaware is one of the oldest extant Methodist churches in America and served as the location for the

\textsuperscript{37} See Historic St. George's United Methodist Church; available from http://www.historicstgeorges.org.

organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in November 1784. A substantial, two-
story brick structure, Barratt’s Chapel has a unique design that hints at the upcoming
reorientation of the church interior at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Instead of
the typical arrangement in which the gable roof frames the shorter end walls, the gable
end walls are longer, measuring approximately 48 in length, while the short walls
measure 42 feet (Fig. 17). Laid in Flemish bond, there are two façade walls. One is the
longer gabled west wall, the other the shorter south wall. In the late eighteenth century,
each entrance wall had a single doorway, flanked by two windows. It is unclear how
these entrances were used and if they were designated by sex. The chapel’s original
eighteenth-century interior was most likely little more than a brick shell with dirt floors
and wooden benches.39

THE 1790 ORDER FOR PROPER DIVISIONS AND SEPARATE ENTRANCES

It was not long, however, after the Methodist Episcopal Church split from the Methodist
Church in England, that Methodist churches in America were built according to Wesley’s
guidelines and incorporated features that would facilitate the segregation of the sexes.
Bishops Asbury and Coke had already reaffirmed Wesley’s position on the Biblical basis
for the primitive practice of gender segregation, stating in their notes of the Discipline:
“A general mixture of the sexes in places of divine worship is obviously improper.”40

Then on December 1, 1790 at the annual conference of the Methodist Episcopal
Church in Baltimore, the council of the Bishop and Delegated Elders addressed the

39 Lounsbury, Notes on Barratt’s Chapel, Frederica, Delaware. See HABS.
question: “As we think it primitive, prudent, and decent, that men and women should sit a-part in public congregation, what can be done to promote it amongst our people?” In the meeting’s Minutes, it was recorded that “proper divisions be made in our houses; and, where it is practicable, let separate doors be made for the men and women, both black and white; and let all the Preachers keep special order at every meeting.” With the 1790 instructions for separate entrances, the leaders of the Methodist Church in America officially ordered the practice of gender segregation in the denomination’s churches. In addition to traditional Wesleyan gender segregation, the Methodist Church in America made a point to include an additional form of segregation, that of race.

Specific architectural features would physically enforce the segregation. The comprehensive design typically included a pair of front entrances (which could be used to separate men and women, as well as blacks and whites), dual aisles, and a dividing rail that ran down the center row of seats. Preachers were then expected to enforce the segregation measures among members of their congregation.

Though no longer standing, Lovely Lane Meetinghouse was one of the earliest churches built in America with the reoriented floorplan that placed a pair of front doors on one of the short gable end walls (Fig. 18). Built in 1774 almost two decades before the official Methodist order for separate entrances, Lovely Lane was home to the Christmas Conference of 1784. The small chapel was built in a “plain and decent” fashion that reflected Wesley’s design influence. The pair of doors not only provided separate entrances for men and women, but also served as an external expression of the segregation of the sexes that took place inside.

41 Ibid. See Minutes; Taken at a Council of the Bishop and Delegated Elders of the Methodist Episcopal Church: Held at Baltimore in the State of Maryland, December 1, 1790 (Baltimore: Printed by W. Goddard and J. Angell, 1790), 7.
Churches resembling Lovely Lane would become commonplace in the American landscape as many of the Protestant denominations across the country began to reorient and remodel their churches and meetinghouses according to evangelical ideals of public worship at the turn of the century. These churches reflected both the influence of Wesley and the 1790 order for separate entrances by Methodist leaders in America.

For example, Barratt’s Chapel was reoriented in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Its renovated interior included the installation of a tall pulpit and eventually a preaching rostrum on the east wall, a three-sided gallery, and the replacement of backless benches with sloped-back benches. Between 1840 and 1860, the two windows on the west entrance wall were converted into a pair of front entrances, which opened into a partitioned vestibule. Another common feature for sorting worshipers, the spilt-entry vestibule had stairs that led directly to the upper gallery. This space reflects the increased promotion of racial segregation, as it, according to some observers, allowed black worshippers concealed access to the seats in the gallery without entering the main sanctuary or interacting with white members. With the pulpit located on the east wall, three distinct doorways on the opposite west gable end wall, and a three-sided gallery, the reconfigured Barratt’s church provided separate entrances and proper divisions for men and women, both black and white, that would have met the Methodist Episcopal Church’s standards for segregation.

Methodist church building boomed in America in the first decades of the nineteenth century as the church’s membership increased. Paired front entrances used by the Methodists for the purpose of gender segregation were well suited to the Protestant architecture and popular Greek Revival style of the 1820s and 30s, selected by national
and religious leaders as the symbol of the early republic. Though not universal, these doors would become a common design feature of many Protestant churches during this period. For churches built with a single front entrance, it was not uncommon for the interior to contain a spilt-entry vestibule.42

During the period of reorientation, many Methodist church interiors were also reseated with rows of slip pews. Gone were the box pews or, as was the case at Barratt’s Chapel, the dirt floors and benches of the eighteenth century. In many Methodist churches, the new arrangement included additional interior devices for segregating churchgoers, such as dual aisles and a rail to divide the sexes. At the beginning of the nineteenth century at Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church in Wilmington, Delaware, a four-foot-high partition divided the sanctuary as was recommended by Wesley to keep the sexes segregated. Here men and women would enter the churchyard through separate gates, enter the chapel through separate doors, and take their seats on opposite sides of the partition. This was all in an effort to prevent members of the opposite sex from seeing and interacting with one another during the service.43

The size, scale, and decoration of Methodist churches across the country varied considerably according to the wealth and regional location of the congregation. Located in St. George, South Carolina, Appleby’s Methodist Church is typical of the frame vernacular, Greek Revival “preaching-houses” built by rural southern congregations as late as the 1840s and 50s (Fig. 19). The chapel’s simple façade is accented by a closed gable end and is outfitted with a pair of front doors, one of which was most likely

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42 Lounsbury. A survey of single and paired door churches from the first half of the nineteenth century would be useful in understanding the pattern and connection of entrances and vestibules to the sorting and seating of churchgoers.

assigned to the men while the other was most likely assigned to the women. A center aisle divides two rows of slip pews in the church interior. Though there is no documentary evidence for the practice of gender segregation, however, stories passed down by the generations speculate that following this arrangement the “gentlemen” were seated in the northern row of pews while “ladies and courting couples” sat in the southern row. The seating of “courting couples” suggests that individual congregations defined Pauline order and decency according to their own values.

So far this section has traced the development of Methodist architecture in America, from the outdoor settings of the itinerant period to the earliest structures used for Methodist worship to the reoriented evangelical churches of the early nineteenth century. As the Church leadership began to organize and build for the quickly growing denomination, they incorporated Wesley’s ideology of gender segregation in the architecture. With the 1790 order for separate entrances, the Methodist Church instituted a design feature that with the spilt-entry vestibule would become closely associated with Protestant church architecture in early nineteenth-century.

While the study of early Methodist architecture reveals the concrete manifestations of gender segregation in church building, travel narratives from this period offer descriptive evidence for the actual segregation of the sexes. These accounts confirm the application of the practice of gender segregation in the Methodist Church in America well into the nineteenth century. Some documents reveal the existence of the

practice in some rural evangelical congregations as late as the twentieth century. In addition to Henry Caswall and Andrew Bell’s descriptions of gender segregation in Methodist churches, Englishman Henry Bradshaw Fearon commented on the segregation of the sexes and the congregation’s concern for the female members during a visit to a Methodist church in Philadelphia in 1818. He arrived late to a packed house for the night services of the white congregation at Ebenezer Church, and only gained admission when the “doors” opened briefly following the sermon and the preacher exited the building. He took a seat with the men, describing this scene in *Sketches of America*:

> the male part of the audience groaned, the female shrieked; a man sitting next to me shouted . . . The women, however, forming a compact column at the most distant corner of the church, continued their shrieking with but little abate. Feeling disposed to get a nearer sight of the being who sent forth such terrifying yells, I endeavored to approach them, but was stopped by several of the brethren, who would not allow of a near approach toward the holy sisterhood.

An entry from the journal of Christiana Holmes Tilson suggests that the practice of gender segregation extended beyond the formally built Methodist churches on the east coast to the rural outposts of the western frontier. In the second decade of the nineteenth century, Tilson documented her first impression of the rudimentary log “preaching house” on the Illinois frontier. She found the seating arrangements particularly jarring, noting: “Around the fire sat the mothers with their babies, while the ‘young’uns’ huddled

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45 Reminiscing about her childhood in the mid-twentieth century, Nannie Belle Goghill recalled that prior to the church’s renovation in the 1920s, Tabernacle United Methodist Church retained “a strip right down the center of the long pews” that kept courting or married couples separate. Tucker, 245-46. See Michael Cartwright, ed., *History of Tabernacle United Methodist Church: 1784-1984*, booklet (Henderson, NC: Tabernacle United Methodist Church History Committee, 1984), 129.

46 Henry Bradshaw Fearon, *Sketches of America: A narrative of a journey of five thousand miles through the eastern and western states of America; contained in eight reports addressed to the thirty-nine English families by whom the author was deputed, in June 1817, to ascertain whether any, and what part of the United States would be suitable for their residence. With remarks on Mr. Birkbeck’s "Notes" and "Letters,“ 3d ed. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1819), 161-165.
down on the floor beside them. In the circle where we were put there seemed to be a mixture of all ages, though but of one sex; the lords of creation with their big boys occupying the back seat.⁴⁷ In this simple and functional log cabin in the far-reaching regions of the denomination, gender segregation persisted. The effect of the women with newborns in their laps, seated on the floor, while the men and their sons took the benches, upset Tilson’s New England Congregationalist sensibilities.

Therefore, travel narratives confirm a connection between the architectural use of pairs of front doors in early Methodist church and the actual segregation of the sexes. This practice persisted in spite of socio-economic pressures and external circumstances that influenced its application. The next sections will look at how the practice of gender segregation changed over time as Methodist membership grew, church building increased, and the denomination faced divisive issues of race.

ECONOMIC PRESSURE AND THE PROBLEM OF PEW RENTS

At the Christmas Conference in 1784, Methodist leaders underscored Wesley’s 1770 building guidelines by issuing a warning against a parishioner-paid-for church. It was advised that churches be built “plain and decent: but not more expensively than is absolutely avoidable. Otherwise the Necessity of raising money will make Rich Men Necessary . . . But if so we must be dependant on them, yea, and be governed by them.”⁴⁸ The comments were most likely a direct jab at the Episcopal Church and its status in America as the denomination of the elite. The leadership’s concern over parishioner

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⁴⁷ Heyrman, 143. See Christiana Tilson, A Woman’s Story of Pioneer Illinois (Chicago, 1919), 79-80.
funding foreshadowed the growing dependence of the Methodist Church on pew rents and the expanding influence of individual congregations in the matters of the church.

In 1808, the Reverend Jesse Lee visited a Methodist church in Newport, Rhode Island. The church had not been refitted with Wesleyan slip pews and free seats, and was filled with box pews reflective of earlier Anglican and Congregational tradition. In the "large square pews," Lee noted "people set with their faces, and others with their backs towards the preacher; and these pews are sold to purchases." In the rented pews "Male and female sit together" of which Lee stated: "Is not this a violation of Methodist rules."49 Because funding was often scarce, it was not uncommon to find Methodist churches in New England copying the pew rental system of their still established Congregational neighbors in the first decade of the nineteenth-century.

Fearing that a move toward pew rents would compromise the Methodist Church's pledge of equality by benefiting only the privileged few, the leadership again addressed the importance of free seats at the Annual Conference in 1816. In order to reinforce their concern to local Methodist congregations, the following was added to the Discipline in 1820; churches would be built "plain and decent" and "with free seats."50 However, as J. S. Inskip argued in his 1856 book, Methodism Explained and Defended, many congregations did not take the order as law but as recommendation only.51 In the Methodist Church in America, Wesley's call for primitive gender segregation and social equality eventually came face to face with economic imperatives.

THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH DIVIDES OVER RACE

The American institution of slavery directly violated the first of three fundamental Christian principles outlined in the Methodist Discipline.\textsuperscript{52} These state that believers shall do no harm "by avoiding evil of every kind," specifically materialism, drinking, gambling, lying, and the buying and selling of slaves.\textsuperscript{53} To this end, Methodist ministers preached anti-slavery sermons in the early years of the Methodist mission in America, and attempts were made in 1784 at the Christmas Conference to purge the church's register of slaveholders.

Following the War of Independence, however, Methodists were one of many Protestant groups seeking the support of the southern elite. In need of the financial support of this demographic, the Methodist leadership chose to sacrifice some of its original objectives of equality and conform to the changing social conditions of the new nation. First, the Methodist Church eased restrictions on the ownership of slaves. Many southern evangelical ministers preached a form Christian benevolence and stewardship that encouraged slave obedience and provided a Biblical justification for the institution of slavery. As a result the Methodist Church became increasingly divided over the issue of slavery, as did the nation. By the 1830s', slave-holding bishops had been ordained in the south. In 1845, the pro-slavery Methodist Episcopal Church, South, spilt from the Methodist Church whose members remained committed to abolition.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} This section only briefly addresses the topic of slavery and race as it relates to the Methodist Church and its application of gender segregation. Race in the Methodist Church and Christianity in America and is obviously a much more complex issue and the combination of gender and racial segregation could be further developed with additional research.
\textsuperscript{54} Heyrman, 24; Lyerly, 47; Tucker, xii; Williams, \textit{America's Religions}, 181.
Preoccupations with race especially in the south had consequences for gender. In her book *Southern Cross*, Christine Heyrman argues that: “To become powerful in the South, evangelicals conceded two crucial factors, their attitudes of equality in regards to race and gender.”  

Early Methodist concepts of equality defined separate spheres for men and women. This fit with both Wesley’s theology as well as antebellum notions of the cult of domesticity. The idea of public and private spheres for men and women especially appealed to the pious patriarchs of the south who defined the family by the man as the authoritative head of household, the woman as the domestic and spiritual mother, and the slave as property. Heyrman continues: “These ever more rigid teachings on gender roles, along with their changing messages about familial order and the prerogatives of age, transformed the early Baptist and Methodist movements into the evangelical culture that later generations of Americans would identify as epitomizing ‘family values’.”  

This new notion of morality based on the structure of the evangelical family resulted in new requirements for the sorting, seating, and segregation of men and women, blacks and white, young and old in the church.

**GENDER AND RACIAL SEGREGATION IN THE SEATING OF METHODIST CHURCHES**

How were changes in Methodist theology regarding race manifested in the actual building of churches and seating of members? During the early decades of the Methodist mission, blacks and whites freely congregated together in the spirit of Wesley’s doctrine of equality, a liberating departure from the social and racial hierarchies that were dividing

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55 Heyrman, 24.
56 Ibid., 160.
the nation. For example in 1776, Wesley missionary Thomas Rankin preached at chapel in Virginia, noting it "was full of white and black, and many were without that could not get in . . . Look wherever we would, we saw nothing but . . . faces bathed in tears." By the late eighteenth century, however, blacks became increasingly segregated from white congregants, reinforced by the 1790 order for separate entrances for "men and women, black and white."

Historian Lyerly explains that, in the first half of the nineteenth century, in Methodist churches blacks were generally sorted either spatially or temporally. Encouraged by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1846 "to attend public worship at the churches with the whites," blacks were provided free seats and assigned to "separate sittings" in the back of the church or placed in upper galleries, a feature common to many of the Protestant churches. In some instances, blacks listened to services from an outside overhang, while whites sat inside the church. Features common to early-nineteenth-century Protestant church architecture facilitated segregation by gender and race. Stairs in the vestibule most likely provided blacks with an entrance to separate seats in the gallery. Paired entrances were probably used for sorting white and black churchgoers in addition to men and women. The issue of who used which

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59 For example, Moreau de St. Mery noted that there were separate pew areas for slaves and free blacks in a Richmond church. Lyerly, 51. See *Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey* [1793-1798], eds. Kenneth Roberts and Anna M. Roberts (Garden City: NY: Doubleday & Company, 1947), 48.
60 Lyerly, 51-52.
entrance when would have been less problematic for the Methodist churches that spilt the times of worship for the separate races.

Many congregations removed blacks from white congregations by offering them special services in the church at alternate times. St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia for example offered late night services for blacks on Sundays.\textsuperscript{63} Henry Boehm noted that his church held black love feasts a couple of hours before white love feasts.\textsuperscript{64} As the racial tensions in the Methodist Episcopal Church escalated in the years leading up to the Civil War, blacks were allowed to build their own preaching-houses and worship together under the condition that a white person or minister be present. Under this act of discrimination, black churchgoers were visually, physically, and psychologically removed from white Methodist churches.

Circa 1835 Andrew Reed reflected on “the African Church” in the farmland outside of Lexington, Virginia. The building, hidden in a “hollow” from the view of passersby was described by Reed as “a poor-log house, built by the hands of the negroes . . . perhaps, 20 by 25; with boarding and rails breast-high, run around three sides, so as to form galleries. To this is added a lean-to, to take the overplus . . . three small openings besides the door, and the chinks in the building, to admit light and air.”\textsuperscript{65} Two of the four speakers at the pulpit were white, which Reed noted complied with the state law that required the presence of a white person anytime blacks gathered together for worship. He stood in the doorway and watched the service unfold without any seeming attitude of

\textsuperscript{63} Historic St. George’s United Methodist Church.
\textsuperscript{64} Lyerly, 51-52. See Henry Boehm Journal, Drew University Library, Madison, NJ.
\textsuperscript{65} Reed, 4-5.
prejudice. Inside the crudely designed "African" preaching house, Reed observed:

"The building was quite full, the women and men were arranged on opposite sides."

The Methodist message of equality appealed to blacks and the rituals of Methodism provided opportunities where blacks could gather to "affirm their sense of self-worth and humanity and openly challenge the racist ideology of their oppressors." Soon blacks made up a quarter of Methodist membership in America.

As early as the late eighteenth century blacks formed their own congregations in the north with black ministers despite laws that required a white person to be present anytime blacks congregated for worship. Following the Civil War, independents congregations within Methodist, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church would take root in the South. Despite their separation from the overarching Methodist Church, black churches, like the one described by Reed described, often carried out the practice of gender segregation, and pairs of front doors as well as other devices for gender segregation can be found in African evangelical architecture as late as the last half of the nineteenth century. Built circa 1888, The First African Baptist Church stands on South Carolina’s Daufuskie Island as a late nineteenth-century example of Greek Revival architecture. The frame vernacular church has a simple portico facade with double doors and in the interior, a rail that runs down the center row of the slip pews to separate the sexes (Fig. 20).

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66 Tucker, 241.
67 Lyerly, 47.
THE CENTENTARY METHODIST CHURCH ‘CIRCULAR’

The previous discussion has shown the persistence of gender segregation through racial and socio-economic pressures because of the strong ideology of Methodism’s founder John Wesley and the changing notions of order. However, eventually due to the need to provide for an expanding membership, pew rentals won out over gender segregation as the predominate factor for seating the congregation. The church records of Centenary Methodist Church in Richmond provide detailed insights into the adoption of pew rents. In an effort to house its growing congregation, the Board of Trustees purchased a lot in 1842 on E. Grace Street for the purpose of building a new church in the trendy Gothic style. At a meeting on June 6, 1842, the Board of Trustees of Centenary Church, with the Reverend George W. Nolley presiding, proposed “that is will be expedient to sell as many of the Pews of Centenary Church, as will be necessary to raise a sufficient sum to pay for the finishing of the Church.” On April 18, 1843, it was resolved to sell “44 Pews in the middle of the Church” with rates and taxes varying according to the location from the pulpit. In addition, “the long pews to the right hand of the pulpit were set apart as free seats for the use of the elderly female.” Shortly thereafter, the Board felt it was necessary to publicly address their decision to sell the seats in the church as the new house of worship was originally intended to be “a free Church.”

In a published ‘Circular,’ the Board of Trustees explained to Centenary’s congregation that “by this partial adoptions of the Pew System the following advantages will under the blessings of Providence be enjoyed and secured . . . which though new among the Methodists of Richmond has long been tested in the Northern and Eastern

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68 Centenary Methodist Church, City of Richmond, Trustee’s Book, 1839-1863, negative photostat, Church Records Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
Conferences as well as by the Wesleyan Methodists in England ... 1. Parents could sit with children, families, and friends, 2nd, seats would never be overcrowded, as each would have an assigned seat, and 3rd, extend the gospel to those who rejected Methodism because the could not “procure a seat of their own.”69 The ‘Circular’ then provided guidelines for the selling, bidding, and altering of pew rentals.

The commitment of Centenary Church to gender segregation and other traditional ordered seating is unclear. By the account in the ‘Circular,’ seating in the church would only partially be determined by a system of pew rents. Did that mean a segregation of the sexes would be applied to the seats not for sale? Beyond lists of pew holders, Centenary’s church records offer no further indication as to how the remaining members of the congregation were sorted and seated. In any event, a resolution was adopted to provide that the pews go on sale on May 31, 1843, with the public having two full days to “inspect the Church” and select their seats. On June 12, 1843, the decision to reserve a pew “For the use of elderly females” was rejected by a vote of 3 to 5.70

The seating of parishioners at Centenary Methodist Church symbolizes the widespread adoption of pew rentals by Methodist churches in the mid-nineteenth century, and the ultimate erosion of traditional Wesleyan gender segregation. At the Annual Conference in 1852, the Methodist leadership conceded their claim to free seats in the face of multiple litigations by preachers who advocated pew rentals.71 During this meeting, the merits of both gender segregation and pew rents were discussed. It was argued that if the center partitions that divided the sexes were removed it would lead to “disorder” in the church. However, it was agreed that allowing families to sit together

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69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Tucker, 245. See JGC/MEC (1852).
“in the name of democracy” would be more beneficial in garnering and maintaining a steady Methodist membership.72

For a religion dependent on its ability to adapt to the social and economic situations of the time, pew rentals became integral to the financial success of Methodism in mid-nineteenth century America. Gender segregation would become less relevant to Methodist congregations with the adoption of pew rents in the mid-nineteenth century and the ultimate widespread installation of free seats in the later part of the century.

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72 In 1860, a group of Methodists in New York spilt from the Methodist Episcopal Church and formed the Free Methodist Church. Determined to maintain the Christian principle to preach the gospel to every individual, they denounced slavery and offered a free seat to all people, regardless of race, age, or gender. By the late-nineteenth century, free seats would become more commonplace in the nation’s Protestant churches. Tucker, 245-46. See B.T. Roberts, “Free Churches,” The Earnest Christian and Golden Rule, 3 (May 1862), 133-36; W. P. Strickland, The Genius and Mission of Methodism (Boston, 1851), 110-21.
CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The roots of gender segregation can be traced to traditional theological and gender ideologies, which were derived from St. Paul’s I Corinthians 15:40 and incorporated into the Protestant notion of order and decorum. Adherence to the practice of gender segregation varied from denomination to denomination. The persistence of the practice in early American churches was directly related to a denomination’s adherence to this theology. A denomination’s particular interpretation of the practice of gender segregation was often manifested in the architectural design of its churches and spatial arrangements of its members. While there was no visual evidence of gender segregation in the architecture of the Anglicans, the practice could easily be “read” in both Shaker and Methodist architecture. Features specifically designed for the segregation of the sexes, such as pairs of entrance doors provided an external indication of the segregation that took place inside.

Gender segregation was one of a number of forms of segregation and social stratification that existed in the Protestant churches of early America. The manipulation of space, and the seating and sorting of churchgoers resulted in real effects on the lives of men and women in church and reinforced the larger social structure.\(^1\) The documents used in this study shed little light on the effects of the practice of gender segregation on

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women. In the case of the Anglican/Episcopal tradition, for example, the evidence suggests that the increase emphasis on social status overshadowed concerns of gender.

Historian Kathleen Brown argues, however, that social status and gender were not mutually exclusive and the two forms of segregation worked together to hierarchically order the society at large. The sorting and seating of churchgoers by gender, race, age, and status worked to properly order the church in a hierarchical fashion that fit with the perceived notions of social order and decency at the time. In turn, this created unique relationships of power between the various social groups.

The fidelity to the religious ideal of gender segregation varied in part to changing social and economic circumstances from the period of political transformation before and after the Revolution. For the Anglicans in colonial Virginia, the observance of gender segregation was often inconsistent. In the hierarchal-based plantation society of the time, the enforcement or non-enforcement of gender segregation by parish vestries depended on the will of the gentry and their desire for family pews. This emphasis on social status transferred to the Episcopal Church in early-republican America. Directly following the

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2 Brown.

3 Areas of further research: A more comprehensive survey of Protestant churches and pairs of doors from the 1820s and 30s coupled with documentary research could provide more evidence of the pattern of segregation in churches. To what extent did the architectural devices used to segregate the sexes come to facilitate the segregation of blacks and whites? By identifying the spatial relationships that exited between the races, we could gain deeper understanding of the power relationships that existed between blacks and whites, and men and women in early Protestant churches. Further research could shed light on the ways certain denominations defined order and decency, or familial morality. For the Anglican/Episcopal tradition, order was emphasized by social rank, which was defined through respectability and wealth. We saw this in the seating of elite women in the Anglican churches of colonial Virginia, who displayed their status through their privileged location in a family pew. The American Methodists, with its emphasis on equality, focused less on class and defined order more in terms of a familial morality based on the notion of separate spheres for men and women. Gendered spaces, the process of seating, and other rituals were a key component of reinforcing order and decency. Even when the formal practice of gender segregation falls out of use in the nineteenth century, concern for order and decency in the spatial relationship of the sexes seems to have continued particularly among adolescents. Further research could examine evidence of the separation of young men and women as a reflection of period attitudes of Protestant morality.
establishment of the church in 1784 as an independent denomination free of state-sponsorship, the practice of gender segregation declined under the system of pew rents. For the isolated Shaker sect, the practice was universal and supported by a unique religious culture of gender. For the Methodists, despite facing similar economic and social pressures of the Episcopal Church in the early republican and antebellum periods, the practice of gender segregation persisted into the mid-nineteenth century due to a strong adherence to the passionate ideology of its founder John Wesley. The Methodist notion of equality-defined as separate spheres for men and women and free seats in a faith that saw itself as the religion of everyman-meant the denomination held out against the pressure for pew rentals longer.

Ultimately, the practice of gender segregation struggled to exist with the financial requirements of independent non-state supported churches in the post-colonial period. With the shift from colonial rule to a free American society, the power to order and seat the church changed. This created new relationships of power between church leaders and the congregation whose members paid for their seats in the church. Thus undermining the practicality of segregating congregations by gender in many American Protestant churches.
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Figure 4. Poppyhead bench ends from St. Mary the Virgin, the Wiggenhalls, Norfolk. Richard Foster, Discovering English Churches, 173.
Figure 5. William Hogarth’s lithograph satire, “The Sleeping Congregation,” depicts a clergyman inappropriately gazing at the sleeping woman in the adjacent pew. http://libweb5.princeton.edu/Visual_Materials/gallery/hogarth/hogarth2.html.

Figure 6. The interior layout of St. Martin-in-the-Fields (designed by James Gibbs) reflected the new Protestant liturgy. Published by Ackermann, 1809. Addleshaw, Plate III.
Figure 7. Christ Church in Lancaster County stands as a classic example of colonial Anglican architecture in Virginia. Neblett, *Christ Church: Lancaster County, Virginia Historic Structure Report*, 135.

Figure 8. Seating plan for Stratton Major Parish Church (1760-68), King and Queen County, VA. Drawing by Dell Upton. *Holy Things*, 187.
Figure 9. The First Congregational Church (1830) in Meridan, Connecticut is typical of American Protestant architecture in the first half of the nineteenth century.  

Figure 10. Paired doors at St. James’ Episcopal Church, Accomac, Virginia.  
Personal photo.
Figure 11. Hungar’s Episcopal Church, Northampton County, Virginia.

Figure 12. Interior of St. James’ Episcopal Church, Accomac, Virginia.
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Figure 13. Lithograph of Shaker worship and dancing rituals. Amy Burns, *The Shakers Hands to Work Hearts to God*, 56.

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Figure 16. View of pulpit window, Adams Methodist Church, Gloucester County, New Jersey. HABS, http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query.
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Figure 20. First African Baptist Church, Daufuskie Island, South Carolina.
Photo by Travis Fulk.
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