

Bishop John Croes, a Biography

November 19, 1990 marked the 175th anniversary of the consecration of the Reverend John Croes, Sr., as the first bishop of the Diocese of New Jersey. The following is a biography of Bishop Croes that I prepared for the anniversary year.

John Croes was the third child of Jacob and Charlotte Reigart (also found as Reger) Croes. His father, Jacob, was born in Polish Prussia in May of 1724. The family name was originally spelled Kruitiz but, during their sojourn in Holland, the Dutch spelled it Croes and pronounced it CROOSE. Charlotte Christiana Reigart was born in 1736 in German Upper Saxony. Various writers report that Jacob and Charlotte were on the same boat that came to America, while others have Jacob landing in 1752 and Charlotte and her family in 1750.

Jacob and Charlotte were married in 1758 in Elizabeth-Town, New Jersey. John was born June 1, 1762, in Elizabeth-Town and, with his family, moved to Newark about 1773 where they soon affiliated with Trinity Church. Again, writers give conflicting reports about what Jacob and Charlotte did for a living: some have Jacob as a saddler and Charlotte a baker in her own shop; and others report that Jacob was the baker. Regardless of his trade, Jacob gave John the choice of either learning his father's trade or earning his own education. Because he had a strong inclination to pursue education, John chose the latter alternative but the War of Independence intervened. He was but sixteen when he entered the revolutionary army as a private. His son, Robert B. Croes, wrote that John could read but not write. A drummer gave him lessons in writing using the leather drumhead as parchment and a piece of charcoal for a pen. The relationship between student and teacher lasted for many years. Croes was a member of Captain Craig's Company of Colonel Philip Van Courtland's Essex Regiment of State Troops where he worked up to the rank of orderly sergeant. Transferred to Captain Nathaniel Camp's Company of State Troops, he served as orderly sergeant and quartermaster. Later he joined the Years Men Company whose duty it was to guard the River and Sound from Newark to Amboy. He then became recruiting sergeant at Newark in January of 1780. He served first under Captain Robert Neill and then Lt. Mintarn. He ended his military career under the command of Captain Gillam. The violence and danger of the war were no strangers to Croes for he engaged in several hazardous volunteer expeditions in the Northern part of the State

John Croes returned home in 1782 to pursue his studies with the Rev. Alexander McWhorter in that gentleman's Academy in Newark. Later that year, three of his friends from the Academy, Alexander C. McWhorter, Zadock Squier, and Ashbel Green left to study at the College of New Jersey (Princeton College). Their letters to him painted a glowing picture of the College and urged him to join them there. They went so far as to find him employment since money was still a stumbling block to his attending college. Although it was his heart's desire to follow his friends to Prince-Town, he was unable to do so due, in part, to a lack of funds. It became apparent to his friends that John was contemplating marriage to the sister of another close friend. His position as teacher at the Academy evidently gave him sufficient security to propose marriage to Martha Crane and on May 21, 1785, the two were joined in marriage.

In that same year, or in 1786, he became principal of the Academy, which position he filled with distinction until 1789. All the while he held the position of principal, he studied with a view to preparing for the ministry. He resigned his principalship in 1789 and announced himself a candidate for Holy Orders. According to the tenth Rule of the New Jersey Convention of 1785, no person could be recommended for Holy Orders unless a church or churches requested his services as a pastor. In order to fulfill the need of a call to a church as well as a search for health (a problem that would dog him all his life), Croes began a walking and horseback tour of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. Dr. McWhorter, his pastor Uzal Ogden—himself elected the first Bishop of New Jersey although never receiving General Convention's consent for consecration—gave him letters of introduction and recommendation, as did Judge Elisha Boudinot and Judge Abraham Ogden.

His walk began on or about July 17, 17889, and there are two towns where it is known that he made contact with the local church. The first was St. Mary's, Burlington, where he stayed with Joshua M. Wallace and his family, and the second was at Trinity Church, Swedesborough. It appears that Wallace gave Croes another letter of recommendation to a church situated midway between Philadelphia and Lancaster but it is not known whether or not he made that trip after his stop at Swedesborough. What is clear is that he stopped at Swedesborough, found them interested but already committed to an agreement with another gentleman, and that he was sufficiently encouraged that he ended his trip, returning home by the first of September.

On September 12, 1789, the Church at Swedesborough, having received no word from the other gentleman, was now in a position to talk further with Croes. He made the visit to Swedesborough and immediately began to act as Lay Reader. A month later, in November, he visited Bishop White in Philadelphia when the Bishop agreed to be his tutor in reading theology for ordination. On January 24, 1790, the church made a formal call for him to become their regularly established minister as soon as he should obtain ordination in the Protestant Episcopal Church. One month later, on February 28, 1790, he was made deacon by the venerable Bishop White in St. Peter's Church, Philadelphia, and he was soon made rector of Trinity Church, Swedesborough. He was advanced to the priesthood on March 4, 1792.

Croes' family, now including three children, joined him in Swedesborough where five additional children were born for a total of five sons and three daughters. Two of their children succumbed to scarlet fever, Charlotte, their first child, and Charles, their fifth child, and both rest in the churchyard in Swedesborough. Two of their sons, John, Jr., and Robert Brown, followed their father into the priesthood of the Church.

Croes was a tall man, over six feet in height, who wore his hair short and kept his face always clean-shaven. It was his habit to wear pants of black broadcloth over which was an old-time broad swallow-tail coat. His was a severe countenance, tending toward the grim, though he was of courtly politeness and a man of great dignity. One of his idiosyncrasies was his strenuous opposition to the ordination of any man who was physically imperfect and he would quote Leviticus 21:17-23 to support his belief that only the unblemished should minister in the sanctuary. His severity of demeanor, reverent and patriarchal, was evident in the sanctuary where he wore a surplice for all but preaching during which he wore a black silk gown. While preaching he wore black silk gloves be-

cause it was his opinion that displaying handsome white hands and a ringed finger was an act of vanity.

Croes served Swedesborough and the environs for twelve years, finishing its construction and ministering to a congregation whose rites of the Swedish Church were transferred to those of the Episcopal Church. While he served his parish well, he also served his diocese with skill and determination. He was treasurer for 20 years, until his election as Bishop in 1815, often a member of the Standing Committee, and many times presiding officer of the Annual Convention. He was active at the national level and served the General Convention from 1795 until his death.

In August of 1800, he received the simultaneous call to be rector of Christ Church, New Brunswick, and to the pastorate of St. Peter's Church in Spotswood. These calls were yoked with an invitation to be principal of the Grammar School of Queen's College, now Rutgers. By autumn of 1801, after a year of negotiations and a series of letters, Croes accepted the triple responsibility.

While Croes taught the Grammar School of Queen's College, it became a large one and enjoyed an excellent and extensive reputation. This was especially noteworthy since Queen's College, to all intents and purposes, had been dead for eleven years. Scholars from neighboring states were attracted to the school by Croes' growing reputation as a classical instructor. The success of the Grammar School encouraged the College's revival in 1807 at about the same time as ill health and growing parochial duties led him to resign the principalship in 1808. He served as a trustee from 1809 to 1816 and in 1811 was granted a Doctor of Divinity degree by Queen's College. In 1811, he began teaching grammar and geography in the Academy for Young Ladies established by Miss Sophia Hay and continued for some years to teach in this widely known Academy.

In 1814 death took the third of his children, his son, William, who had just completed his studies leading to the practice of law. William died on March 30, 1814 in his 23rd year.

Dr. Croes' reputation was spreading far and wide as evidenced by calls to parishes in New Jersey, Connecticut, and other states. He also received invitations to take charge of literary institutions in Connecticut, New Hampshire, and New York but he turned a deaf ear on all such calls preferring to remain in his home state.

On June 8, 1815, the Diocese of Connecticut elected John Croes to be their Bishop and the laborious process of working out the details of the proposed relationship began. The Diocese of New Jersey, providentially, had changed, the month before, the date of its annual convention and, rather than wait over a year for the next convention, decided to have a second convention in 1815 on the last Wednesday of August. News of Connecticut's election electrified the Church in New Jersey and many of the clergy and laity decided that the time had come for New Jersey to have its own bishop. On August 30, 1815, brushing aside the usual motions to change the dates and places of future conventions, the Rev. Lewis P. Bayard, rector of Trinity Church, Newark, resolved that the convention go into the election of a bishop and, after considerable debate, it was decided in the affirmative. John Croes was elected Bishop on the first ballot and, after prayer and thought, he chose the state of his birth as the place to exercise his Episcopate even though Connecticut offered him stronger inducements.

On Sunday, November 19, 1815, the venerable Bishop White, assisted by Bishops Hobart of New York and Kemp of Maryland, consecrated John Croes as a Bishop in the Church. He returned to his Diocese immediately following the consecration.

The growth of the Church under Croes was continuous and steady although there were many difficulties to overcome. Among these were prejudices against the Church due to her original dependence on the Church of England, the generally impoverished state of the people, the discouraging condition of parishes now on their own that previously had relied on the S.P.G., the truly decrepit condition of most church buildings, and the critical shortage of clergy. Yet Bishop Croes persevered, never appeared to yield to despondency, and lavished praise on each small gain. Imbued with the missionary spirit, Croes shepherded, exhorted, cajoled, praised, and yoked himself with the scattered flock. He urged his clergy to give the expected two Sundays per year to vacant parishes in the vicinity plus the unexpected several weekdays to these destitute congregations. When he began his episcopate, there were 8 clergymen and 7 churches with stated services; when death ended his episcopate there were 21 clergy and 31 churches with stated services. There were also some 900 communicants to be found in the Diocese.

Progress was painfully slow as clergy came and went with bewildering and discouraging rapidity. Church buildings crumbled as the lack of clergy caused some parishes to remain empty for fifty and sixty years. Yet, imperceptibly long-closed church doors swung open, long-silent pulpits gave voice, and long-forgotten sacraments nourished the faithful. Old churches were restored and beautified while new ones were built, often from the stones of neighboring fields. "All this is a lasting memorial of the arduous and successful work done by Bishop Croes, under the most discouraging circumstances, during his exercise of the episcopate in those early days and in that hour of small things."

It is difficult for us to imagine the energy Croes expended on the toil of building up a weak parish as well as on the even weaker Diocese. While financial conditions would not permit him the luxury of resigning the rectorship of Christ Church, New Brunswick, he traveled the length and breadth of New Jersey on horseback or in a gig or sulky in all kinds of weather to tend to the needs of the Church he served as bishop. Little wonder that each year would find him incapacitated, for a time, with one illness or another.

His indomitable spirit for the cause of the spread of the Gospel is evidenced by his efforts to establish a Missionary Society Fund in New Jersey for the purpose of funding clergy visits to those parts of the state destitute of clergymen and his strong support of a General Fund to send missionaries to the frontiers of America. Not only did he urge support of these two funds in his destitute Diocese but also the fund to support the new General Theological Seminary which he helped organize and the fund to support the Bishop of the Diocese. These four funds taxed the resources of the Church and they grew with painful slowness.

The summer and autumn of 1831 saw the Bishop slip from the condition of failing health to that of serious impairment. He persisted in the performance of his episcopal functions although this drained his already weakened reserves. In the spring of 1832, his health began to decline more rapidly and, on July 30, 1832, at the age of 71, he ceased from his earthly labors.

The Rev. Alfred B. Baker, a respected priest of the Diocese, wrote the following on the 100th anniversary of Croes' consecration:

He was the founder of our Diocesan succession, the originator of a Diocesan tradition and policy, the first to put in effect the provisions of a body of Church laws which had recently been formed. He was the first to make trial of the adaptedness of the episcopate to the needs of our people, the first to show how a bishop should behave himself among communities which were generally prejudiced against him as being an aristocratic and pompous official of a state bound Church. The new bishop had no trodden paths to guide him, he had to make his own pathway through a trackless forest, and make it a safe and wise course for others to follow. Great is our obligation to him for his pioneer work, his wisdom in laying the foundations of the Church, his firm but conciliatory advocacy of its principles, and the favor he secured for them by the purity, simplicity and devotion of his life.

Bishop Croes, first Bishop of the Diocese of New Jersey, was buried beneath the chancel of Christ Church, which he had loved so dearly and had served so faithfully for so long.

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October 26, 1990