

John Henry Hobart  
Historiographer Report  
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One of the earliest bishops with deep ties to New Jersey and influence with bishops Croes and Doane was John Henry Hobart.

Hobart was born in Philadelphia on September 14, 1775, the son of a well-to-do businessman. He was educated at the newly formed Episcopal Academy, followed by two years at the University of Pennsylvania and two years at Princeton. He graduated with high honors from the latter school in 1793 at the age of 18. Family pressure sent him to work in the office of his brother-in-law, but after a year he fled to Princeton where he was offered a tutorship. His personal magnetism and executive ability made him highly popular with his students. During the four years he remained there he found himself growing devoted to the Church and decided to enter the ministry. He left Princeton in 1798 and was ordained deacon by Bishop William White of Philadelphia, long a friend and adviser.

He was in charge of a group of small churches in and about Philadelphia for less than a year, when he became rector of Christ Church, New Brunswick in 1799. Here he met and married Mary Chandler, daughter of the Rev. Dr. Thomas Bradbury Chandler, an outspoken advocate for the episcopate. Chandler was rector of St. John's, Elizabeth, before and after the Revolution. Hobart moved to Hempstead, Long Island, in May of 1800 and, six months later, to Trinity Church, Wall Street. Four assignments in two years was surely a dizzying pace but it was at Trinity that he found a home for the rest of his life. It is safe to say that Hobart would be classified a TYPE A personality today for he was never content with less than the maximum of varied activity. The work load at Trinity was staggering yet he found time to become secretary of the House of Bishops while he was still a deacon, secretary of the diocesan convention of New York, a deputy to General Convention in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1801, and secretary of the House of deputies for the next two General Conventions. In 1801, at twenty-six years of age, he joined Alexander Hamilton on the Board of Trustees of Columbia College.

Hobart deserves to be listed as a missionary bishop because it was he that taught the American Church how to run a diocese and personally influenced newly ordained priests and newly consecrated bishops to commit to westward expansion into the wilderness. His power of initiative and organizing skill propelled him out of works already in operation to the founding of something new, something the Church badly needed.

The neglect of missionary expansion and Christian education were two interests that would absorb his indefatigable energy and fertile imagination. In 1802 he was chief promoter of the Protestant Episcopal Society for Promoting Religion and Learning in the State of New York. This was followed, in 1806, by the formation of the Protestant Episcopal Theological Society, the purpose of which was the continuing education of the clergy. The only religious newspaper of the time, the Churchman's Magazine, located in

New Haven, Connecticut, was failing, so Hobart moved it to New York City and edited it for three years. In 1809 he led the establishment of the Bible and Common Prayer Book Society of New York, a society that remains active today.

As if these were not enough he was also author of educational works. The backbone that supported all his writing was this: “Evangelical Truth and Apostolic Order,” long the rallying cry of this diocese. It means this: the Evangelical Truth is that the Gospel of salvation was based on the divine merits of a crucified Redeemer; the Apostolic Order is the conviction that the grace of Christ was mediated and “applied to the soul of the believer” through the sacraments of the Church as administered by a priesthood episcopally ordained. Hobart found support only from a small but growing minority in the Church and met opposition everywhere else but, characteristically, he never wavered. Since his opposition came from the evangelical, protestant camp, he was labeled a High Churchman and was the target of newspaper attacks from all quarters. Much of his support came from the Church in New Jersey.

The first two bishops of New York, Provoost and Moore, were rather inadequate for the job. Provoost suffered from an ailment that provoked his hellish and hair-trigger temper and he generally disliked other bishops, particularly Seabury. Moore was rather the opposite – a saintly man – but both were inept leaders. On May 29, 1811, Hobart was consecrated as the Assistant Bishop of New York and, on Moore’s death in 1816, became both rector of Trinity Church and the Diocesan of a diocese of 46,000 square miles. In the second full year of his episcopate he traveled 2,000 miles, visited 33 parishes, and confirmed 1,100 people. Many Episcopalians had never even seen a bishop but that changed with Hobart.

When he took office Hobart could count only two missionaries, yet at his death nineteen years later there were fifty. He had a Canon passed that made it obligatory to contribute to diocesan missions. He covered the entire diocese and included the Oneida Indians in his active ministry. It was this tremendous emphasis on mission work, combined with his outspoken statements of what the Church stood for, that brought about a whole new feeling in the American Church. His emphasis on education led to the establishment of a small seminary in Geneva, New York, now known as Hobart College. He profoundly influenced a new generation of clergy through the General Theological Seminary that he helped establish and where George Washington Doane fell under his spell.

Hobart would defy categorization today because he espoused policies from both the evangelical and catholic wings. He condemned private confession, the invocation of saints, the “horrible doctrine of Transubstantiation,” and refused to use the word ‘sacrifice’ concerning the Holy Eucharist. He placed great stress on the sacraments, ordinances, and ministrations of the Church. This all made it difficult for either the evangelical or the catholic wing to attack anything or everything he said since he held firm to tenets from both parties.

Hobart could be stiff-necked, too. He hated the newly formed American Bible Society and did all in his power to keep his clergy and laity from joining. He condemned extra-

liturgical services such as prayer meetings and evangelistic meetings (as did many bishops in their fear of the Methodists), and he forced the disbanding of the “Clerical Association” that he feared was primarily evangelical. In short, he was opposed to any organization that he could not control for, like most powerful characters with intense convictions, he identified himself with the cause. However, in his best moments, what he really meant was that he could not endorse movements or groups whose actions violated his principles.

The demands Hobart made on his body and mind took their toll. In 1823, when only forty-eight, his health became seriously impaired. As was the habit then, he spent two years in European travel and returned refreshed, although never again the same man. For five years he worked almost as hard as before but in 1803, on a visitation to the western part of the diocese, he died suddenly in Auburn, New York, just two days short of his fifty-fifth birthday.

Hobart was short in stature by modern standards being about 5’5” tall but very muscular. He was near-sighted and wore powerful spectacles and this lack of clear sight forced him to memorize much of what he preached and taught. Although he suffered from intervals of depression most people saw a lively and warm human being. He was intense and self-forgetful in his pursuit of realizing his ideal for the Church. He was fearless and aggressive, resenting any opposition; quick-tempered, impatient, and restlessly active. He was saved by his sense of humor and his willingness to apologize when his impulsiveness led him into any injustice. His death was mourned by the Church.

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