

The Story of a Chair

In the Sanctuary of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, Keith, there has stood for more than a hundred years a simple, polished wooden chair. It has, however, been in Keith for nearly 200 years, because it was bought by a Keith resident in 1816, who sold it to the Reverend John Murdoch, Priest of the Episcopal congregation in Keith for 50 years from 1800. He left it to the congregation when he died. It was in 1807, during Murdoch's incumbency, that 'The New Episcopal Chapel' was opened in Keith, so presumably, that was the first church home of the chair, as the present church was not consecrated until 1883.

The Seabury Chair has more than local significance; in fact, it is of historical importance to the Episcopal Church in Scotland. More than that, it is of significance to a whole continent and one of the largest parts of the whole Anglican Communion. Because this is the chair in which the Primus of Scotland, Robert Kilgour, sat to ordain the Episcopate, Samuel Seabury, on an historic day, 14 November 1784.

Samuel Seabury was a graduate of Yale University, where he studied theology, and of Edinburgh University, where he studied medicine. In 1753 in England, he had been ordained Priest by the Bishop of Lincoln and went as a missionary to North America, working in both New Brunswick and New York. America was then a colony of Britain but in 1783, following the War of Independence, the British signed the Treaty of Versailles acknowledging the complete independence of the thirteen colonies that later became the United States of America.

Samuel Seabury had remained loyal to Britain in the war, but in 1783, the Church in America elected him as the first Bishop of Connecticut and, *ipso facto*, the first Bishop of the new American States.

This put him and the American Church in a difficult situation. The only place he could go for Episcopal Ordination was England. But if he went there he could not take the Oath of Allegiance to an English king because he would have been a traitor to America, which no longer acknowledged the English Crown. Moreover, English bishops, by law, could not create a bishop who would not take that oath.

There was one other place to which he could go to be made a bishop. The Episcopal Church in Scotland did not favour swearing an Oath of Allegiance to any king other than the one they believed to be the true King of Scotland, James III, (father of Bonnie Prince Charlie). And the Episcopalians in Scotland were still trying to recover from the draconian Penal Laws, which the British Government had imposed following their part in the Second Jacobite Rising and the subsequent Battle of Culloden in

1745-6. They agreed to ordain Seabury to the Episcopate; the Scottish Primus said, "Send him to Aberdeen"

So Samuel Seabury, Bishop-elect of Connecticut, joined Primus Robert Kilgour, John Skinner (Bishop of Aberdeen) and Bishop Petrie in John Skinner's house in Long Acre, Aberdeen, and knelt before them. They laid their hands on his head in the manner of Church law, which requires three bishops to make a new one. So began the mighty ECUSA—the Episcopal Church of The United States of America. The chair in which Primus Kilgour sat was henceforth known as 'The Seabury Chair'.

On his return to America, Seabury was welcomed warmly by the clergy of the Diocese of Connecticut. He was presented with the following address, which recalled the previous attempts to receive a valid and free Episcopacy from the Church of England and the failure of the attempts:

"But, blessed be God, another door was opened for you in the mysterious economy of His Providence. He had preserved the remains of the old Episcopal Church of Scotland under all the malice and persecutions of its enemies. In the school of adversity, its pious and venerable Bishops had learned to renounce the pomps and grandeur of the world, and were ready to do the work of their heavenly Father. And, wherever the American Church shall be mentioned in the world, may this good deed which they have done for us be spoken of for a memorial of them."

Please remember Bishop Samuel Seabury, the Diocese of Connecticut and the Episcopal Church of the United States of America on this day, 14th November, with great thankfulness.

