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Christ Episcopal Church, Stratford,
The First Anglican Church in Connecticut

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We all have come to think of colonial Connecticut in terms of its established church, the Congregational Church. Certainly this is true. All of the earliest churches in Connecticut were Congregational and the church was an arm of government until the new state constitution in 1822.

It was in Stratford that the first inroad of another Protestant church was felt. Many of the families that married into the Welles family were involved in petitioning in support of this Anglican church. Many questions and quandaries about Welles descendants are thus answered in the records of the earliest Episcopal church in Connecticut, Christ Episcopal Church in Stratford, and in the records of its sister, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, established in the Ripton parish neighborhood of Stratford that is today the town of Shelton.

A newspaper article titled "Two Hundredth Anniversary of Christ Church, Stratford, Appropriately Observed – Tablet to Dr. Johnson" provides details of the years-long process of petition that brought about the church's establishment.²

One significant player in the story was the colony of New York, where England's governance meant that the early Dutch Reformed Church had been replaced by the Anglican church. The other significant player was the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, an organization in London, England, established by King William III.

The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel first tried to get a minister in New York City to visit Connecticut, but he demurred about the distance to travel. However, Col. Caleb

¹ John Warner Barber, *Connecticut Historical Collections* (New Haven: Durrie & Peck and J.W. Barber, revised 1846), p. 406.

² *Bridgeport Telegram*, 25 and 26 April 1907, as bound into volume 4 of Christ Church records, page numbers not provided; Family History Library film 5799.

Heathcote, a vestryman in Trinity Church in New York City, suggested the minister at Rye in Westchester County, New York, who only had to cross the Byram River. This minister, the Rev. George Muirson, took on the task. Together with Col. Heathcote, the Rev. Muirson visited Stratford on 2 September 1706. He preached sermons at noon and in the afternoon and baptized twenty-four people. Within six months, the Rev. Muirson had made two more visits to Stratford and had established a vestry on 1 April 1707. This event marked the official beginning of the church at Stratford.

Immediately the church fathers petitioned the Bishop of London for a minister. This petition was signed by nineteen people, namely Richard Blackleach, Daniel Shelton, Jonah Pitman, Samuel Gaskill, William Smith, Timothy Titherton, Thomas Edwards, Daniel Burnett, Thomas Brooks, Samuel Henery, Isaac Snell, William Rawlinson, John Peat, Samuel Hawley, John Skidmore, Archibald Dunlap, Isaac Beint, Richard Blackleach, Jr., and Isaac Stiles. The petition wasn't granted, but the Rev. Muirson continued his visits and the parishioners continued their petitions for many more years.

This excerpt from our book tells a bit about the church building:

Daniel Shelton was among the petitioners to create a village in the north of Stratford on 29 April 1717 (Stratford Hist. (1989) 74). As Mr. Daniel Shilton [sic] of Stratford, he was appointed Lieutenant of the trainband of the village in the northern part of Stratford on 9 May 1717 (Col. Recs. 6:10), incidently also the date when the legislature approved the petition to create Ripton parish in that area (Col. Recs. 6:8). On 10 October 1717, the General Court also suspended the county rates for Ripton for four years provided the heads of household paid that amount to Daniel Shelton and Benjamin Curtiss to establish a permanent building for Ripton parish (Col. Recs. 6:29). However, the legislature received complaints from residents of Ripton that Daniel was not using the money to establish the church and it ordered him on 17 May 1723 to do so by June 1723 (Col. Recs. 6:37). Ripton Parish ordained its first minister, the Rev. Jedidiah Mills, in February 1724 (Barber's Conn. Hist. 383).

Daniel's reticence to use the funds for establishing the Congregational Church in Ripton may have been due to his interest in mainstream Anglican worship. He had been among the Stratford people petitioning the Bishop of London for a church in 1707 (Robert E. Hull). The minister for the Episcopal Church in Stratford, Rev. Samuel Johnson, arrived from England 5 November 1723 and services in the first Anglican church building in Connecticut were held in Stratford on Christmas Day 1724 (Stratford Hist. (1989) 77), before Daniel's death, although St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Ripton [now the town of Shelton] was not founded until 1740 (Barber's Conn. Hist. 383).