

William White

First presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church

... Be it enacted by the King's most excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal and Commons in this present parliament assembled ... it shall and may be lawful to and for the Archbishop of Canterbury, or the Archbishop of York, for the time being, together with such other Bishops as they shall call to their assistance, to consecrate persons being subjects or citizens of countries out of his Majesty's dominions, Bishops for the purposes aforesaid, without the king's licence for their election ... and without requiring them to take the oaths of allegiance and supremacy, and oath of due obedience to the Archbishop for the time being.

—British Parliament, Consecration of Bishops Abroad Act of 1786

On February 4, 1787, the archbishop of Canterbury called to his assistance in the chapel at Lambeth Palace the archbishop of York, the bishop of Bath and Wells, and the bishop of Peterborough to ordain William White as the first bishop of Pennsylvania and Samuel Provoost as the first bishop of New York.



William White was born in Philadelphia in 1747, a member of a prominent and wealthy family. He was educated at the College (now University) of Pennsylvania, but like all clergy of his time was ordained in England, returning to Pennsylvania in 1772. There he became an assistant priest and later rector of the Church of Christ and Saint Peter in Philadelphia — two separate congregations in the same parish — and continued to serve both as rector after becoming bishop.

White was chaplain of the Continental Congress from 1777 to 1789. His colleague Bishop Provoost was the first chaplain of the U.S. Senate, but after one year White succeeded him in that role, serving for about 10 years.

Like the United States itself, the U.S.-based Episcopal Church began its independent life in Philadelphia, and Christ Church was the site of its first General Convention. White was elected president of the meeting, which drew representatives from seven of the 13 original United States and was contentious on the subjects of bishops, the apostolic succession, the governance of the church and the creation of a Book of Common Prayer for use in the USA.

White, who held moderate views, was a talented reconciler and a practical organizer, and helped bring together the sparring factions. He drafted the constitution of the new Episcopal Church, basing it on what scholars could determine of the Christian church in its early centuries.

“The power of electing a superior order of ministers ought to be in the clergy and laity together, they being both interested in the choice,” wrote White. “The primitive churches were generally supplied by popular elections; even in the city of Rome, the privilege of electing the bishop continued with the people to the 10th or 11th century, and near those times there are resolves of councils, that none should be promoted to ecclesiastical dignities, but by election of the clergy and people.”

White proposed a state-based church organization, which was eventually adopted and survives in the diocesan structure used by the church today. His proposals resulted in the formation of the House of Deputies and established the triennial meetings of General Convention that still supply the basic governing configuration of the Episcopal Church.

Bishops White and Provoost — along with Samuel Seabury, ordained first U.S. Episcopal bishop and first bishop of Connecticut in Aberdeen in 1784, and James Madison, ordained first bishop of Virginia in London in 1790 — formed the first House of Bishops. By ancient custom and church law, three bishops are required to ordain a new bishop, and the Episcopal Church now had a quorum. There was no further need to resort to bishops of either Scotland or England to assure a succession of clergy in the U.S.

White was elected the church's first presiding bishop in 1789 and, serving for just 67 days, was succeeded by Seabury. White was re-elected in 1795 as the fourth presiding bishop and held the office for the rest of his life.

During his long ministry, White became a much-loved figure in Philadelphia because of his many charities, which included a dispensary that provided medicines for the poor, institutions for the deaf and the blind, and one of the first prison ministries in the United States. He served as a trustee of the University of Pennsylvania for many years. In the late 1790s, he was one of the few prominent Philadelphians who stayed in the city to help the sick during a devastating epidemic of yellow fever, cementing his reputation for faith and compassion.

White's Philadelphia home, built half-way between his two congregations, is now part of Independence National Park, which also includes other landmarks such as Independence Hall and the home of Benjamin Franklin.

White is commemorated on the Episcopal Church's calendar each year on July 17, the date of his death in 1836 at age 89.

O Lord, who in a time of turmoil and confusion raised up your servant William White, and endowed him with wisdom, patience, and a reconciling temper, that he might lead your church into ways of stability and peace: Hear our prayer, and give us wise and faithful leaders, that through their ministry your people may be blessed and your will be done; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

—Holy Women, Holy Men