

## Marsden, Richard <sup>[1]</sup>



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## Marsden, Richard

by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1991

**ca. 1675–1742**

Richard Marsden, Anglican clergyman, had an extraordinary and versatile career which involved crossing the Atlantic a dozen times. A native of Hornsea in Yorkshire, England, he immigrated to Maryland. In May 1700 Marsden was listed as lay reader of St. Michael's Parish in Talbot County; five months later he went to England for ordination. Returning as rector of the parish, he remained until 1706. In that year, he moved to South Carolina. While awaiting ship in North Carolina, destined to be his final home, he performed the Holy Eucharist and baptized forty-five persons on Trinity Sunday. [William Glover](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, governor of North Carolina, later wrote the bishop of London that this was the first time the communion service had ever been held in the colony.

Arriving in Charles Town, S.C., Marsden stated that he had been appointed rector of St. Philip's but that the necessary credentials had been blown overboard while he was at sea. He became so popular with the parishioners that when the Reverend Gideon Johnston arrived in 1708 with a commission as rector from London, they wanted to retain Marsden in his place. The South Carolina authorities, however, supported the legitimate claimant, and Richard Marsden was appointed to Christ Church Parish in Berkeley. In 1709 he left South Carolina for England, where he met the Reverend Samuel Beresford, rector of St. Michael's in Barbados, who was on a visit home to regain his health. Marsden persuaded Beresford to let him supply the parish in his absence. It is not known how long he remained in Barbados. Returning to England, he in some way obtained a living in Leicestershire and two small cures in Warwickshire.

The year 1714 found Marsden teaching school in Chester, Pa., where he complained that most of his pupils were Quakers. After two years he went to England, where he managed to become domestic chaplain to William Henry Bentinck, duke of Portland, and for a time he was steward of the manor of Thwing, an estate owned by the duke in County York. When Portland became governor of Jamaica in 1721, his chaplain accompanied him there. On 2 July 1723 Marsden wrote the bishop of London that he was unwilling to accept a presentation in Jamaica for fear of losing his living in England. During his stay in Jamaica, in addition to his duties in Portland's household, he was locum tenens in St. John's Parish. Unfortunately, his patron died of the fever in Jamaica in 1726 and Marsden had to leave. Facing bankruptcy proceedings in England, he went to New England for a while and then appeared in Virginia without a license. Commissary James Blair wrote to London in 1727 that Marsden seemed to be a "man of figure" and good sense. Late in the same year Governor William Gooch reported that the clergyman had been sent to Lynnhaven Parish in Princess Anne County. This county, on the border of North Carolina, was visited by William Byrd and the other commissioners when the line was being surveyed between the two colonies in 1728. In March of that year Byrd commented that the party had attended church, where Marsden delivered an edifying sermon. Elsewhere he referred to the priest, incorrectly, as "the parson of the parish, a painful apostle from the Society."

By 1729 Marsden had again mismanaged his business affairs and had fled Virginia, four hundred pounds in debt. Arriving in the Cape Fear section of North Carolina, which had only recently been open to settlement, he claimed to have a commission as a roving missionary and an inspector of clergy. Marsden made a business trip to Lisbon before settling down and, in the words of a contemporary, began to traffic as a merchant and offered his services free of charge. This upset the Reverend Jean La Pierre, who had already been assigned to the area by the [Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts](#) <sup>[3]</sup>. On 10 Mar. 1732 Governor [George Burrington](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, who seems to have liked him, said that Marsden was holding services at a place called Onslow, forty miles from his residence.

All of colonial America was considered the see of the bishop of London, and no clergyman was legally permitted to settle in any colony without a license from that prelate. Edmund Gibson, bishop of London, took a dim view of Marsden's appearance in Virginia, and later in North Carolina, without his license. In 1736 the principal inhabitants of the parish of St. James in [Cape Fear River](#) <sup>[5]</sup> petitioned the church authorities in London that their "worthy pastor" be officially assigned to them. Commissary Alexander Garden in Charles Town, no admirer of Marsden, was not impressed by the petition, saying the Cape Fear men would support any person for any cause for a single bowl of punch. As a result of the intercession of many people, including the archbishop of Canterbury, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel held a hearing to consider the petition from St. James's Parish. Testimonials were examined and Marsden, who had gone to England himself, was asked to preach a sermon on a specific text. Trying to mend fences with the bishop, Marsden called on him in London, but Gibson refused to see him. The clergyman then wrote his superior to profess his repentance, saying: "I do with great sincerity and sorrow, confess that I have given your lordship great cause to be offended." He begged the bishop to at least accept a map of North Carolina he had brought with him.

On 19 May 1738 the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel acted in favor of Marsden, appointing him missionary for that part of North Carolina south of the Neuse and authorizing him to reside at his plantation, the Hermitage, on Prince George Creek. However, Marsden, remaining in England until some decision was reached, wrote in 1739 from Peckham, near Alcester in Warwickshire, that the bishop had not given him the necessary license. Acting on the negative report from Commissary Alexander Garden, Bishop Gibson asked the society to revoke Marsden's appointment. He returned to North Carolina and apparently never regained the bishop's favor. Marsden is generally considered to have been the first rector of St. James's Parish.

No portrait of Marsden is known. However, he was described as a full-bodied man, six feet tall, and stoop-shouldered, with a swarthy complexion marked with smallpox. James Murray [6] of North Carolina said he was the best preacher he had heard in America. Marsden's career is best summed up by the words of the Reverend Francis Le Jau, who was with him in South Carolina: "I believe that the itching for trading which he does not understand has been the cause of his misfortunes, for in the main he is a sober man and has an art of pleasing the common people."

Less is known about Marsden's private life. In 1709 his wife died in South Carolina and the children were placed among the neighbors. He is said to have remarried in England and again in Jamaica. A son Thomas left a will probated in New Hanover County [7], N.C., in 1739. He had no issue but mentioned his father, his brother William, and his mother Elizabeth Marsden "of Halifax [8], in ye County of York in England." William Marsden, the brother mentioned in the will, apparently did not settle in North Carolina. The only child of the Reverend Mr. Marsden who left descendants in North Carolina was his daughter Margaret, who married Roger Haynes of Castle Haynes. Margaret Marsden Haynes had a daughter who married General Hugh Waddell [9] and a daughter Margaret who, by her marriage to John Burgwyn, carried the Hermitage property into that family.

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