

Reed, James ^[1]

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by Alonzo Thomas Dill, 1994

d. 1777

James Reed, Anglican clergyman and founder of the first tax-supported school in colonial North Carolina, predecessor of the celebrated New Bern Academy ^[2], was born in England. With the encouragement of Governor Arthur Dobbs ^[3], he emigrated to the province in 1753 to succeed the aged Huguenot ^[4], the Reverend John Lapierre ^[5], one of two Church of England ^[6] clergymen then holding regular services in North Carolina.

Reed arrived in New Bern as Christ Church Parish was erecting its first brick church, at Middle and Pollock streets. In December 1754 he held his first service in the completed church. Clergymen of the day were notoriously underpaid, and Reed received a barely adequate annual salary of £133 proclamation money. This, with the provision of a glebe ^[7] and rectory, made the living at Christ Church the best in the province. In 1759, at Dobbs's request, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts ^[8] allowed him a yearly stipend of £50 sterling.

With his marriage to Hannah Stringer, widow of Francis Stringer, and the improvement in his compensation, Reed "laid aside all thoughts of deserting my Charge or ever removing." He preached at eight chapels in Craven County ^[9] and at least one in Carteret County ^[10] and served for a small fee as chaplain of the Assembly. Grown deaf from malaria, he traveled as many as three weeks out of the month. He was known for his solicitude to the poor. During his rectorate, King George II gave to the parish a silver communion service by Mordecai Fox, which remains a prized possession.

Reed's dream of a well-established school was realized when he induced young Thomas Thomlinson ^[11], a native of Cumberland, to emigrate to New Bern. Thomlinson began classes on 7 Jan. 1764. In March the Assembly authorized construction of a schoolhouse and appointed Reed, the two Craven members of the Assembly, and certain borough officials among the trustees. With the arrival of William Tryon ^[12] on 10 Oct. 1764 to succeed Dobbs, the school received the full support of the new governor.

With private contributions, which Reed untiringly sought from the pulpit, the schoolhouse was completed in July 1766. In the fall the Assembly created the Incorporated Society for Promoting and Establishing the Public School in New Bern ^[13] and levied a penny per gallon of rum imported into the Neuse River ^[14] to maintain the school and educate ten poor children to be chosen at intervals. About thirty pupils attended Thomlinson's early classes and later the number grew, with some from as far away as Wilmington. Undoubtedly Reed's personal library of 266 volumes enriched the school's resources.

Reed's pungent letters are valuable for comments on education, religion, and political events. "All America is in a most violent flame," he wrote after Parliament's punitive enactments against Massachusetts in 1774, "and every good man would forbear as much as possible adding the least Fuel to the Fire." The vestry dismissed him in 1775 for refusing to preach on a day of fasting and prayer set aside by the Continental Congress, but he was quickly reinstated and remained unmolested as a passive Loyalist. Late in 1777 he died, "weary of living," he had written, "in this land of perpetual strife and contention." There is no known portrait of Reed. He was interred in the burial ground of Christ Church, New Bern.

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Subjects:

Biographies [29]

Religious Leaders and Clergy [30]

Authors:

Dill, Alonzo T. [31]

Origin - location:

Carteret County [32]

Beaufort [33]

Morehead City [34]

Craven County [35]

New Bern [36]

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1 January 1994 | Dill, Alonzo T.

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