

William White (Ca.1735-1804,) First and Fourth Bishop of Pennsylvania. Bishop for a New Country



William White was born in Philadelphia and attended Philadelphia College (later the University of Pennsylvania) from where he obtained his degrees, including Doctor of Divinity. He was ordained in the Chapel Royal of St. James Palace London in 1770, and consecrated bishop in 1781 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of Bath and Wells and the Bishop of Peterborough.

While serving as the first and fourth presiding bishop of Pennsylvania, White was rector of both St. Peter's and Christ's Church for 57 years. He also served as Chaplain of the Continental Congress from 1777-1789, and later as chaplain to the Senate. He was the only Episcopal priest in Pennsylvania to side with the revolutionary cause.

Bishop White founded the Episcopal Academy in 1785, and the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, later known as the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, in 1820. He served as president of the latter school for the next 16 years. Bishop White also participated in prison ministry in Philadelphia, becoming the first president of the Philadelphia Society for the Alleviation of Miseries of Public Prisons. He was a trustee of the University of Pennsylvania

Bishop White was the brother-in-law of Robert Morris, signer of the Declaration of Independence.



Top: Bishop White's portrait in enamel on copper, ca. 1830.

Center: Christ Church, Philadelphia, where he is buried.

Below: Bishop White serves Communion wearing rochet and stole. *Left:* Portraits of Bishop White by Gilbert Stuart and Charles Wilson Peale.

A Charitable Work

Bishop William White and a number of other clergymen and concerned citizens founded the Magdalen Society in 1800 to rescue and reform “fallen women.” It was the first organization of its kind in the United States. A later focus was the prevention of delinquency. Today, as the White-Williams Scholars, it awards monthly stipends to high-achieving, low-income public high school students. In 2011 it merged with Philadelphia Futures.



Right: Bishop White's house at 309 Walnut Street, Philadelphia. Built in 1797, it was home to the bishop and many of his 25 grandchildren. Site chosen because equidistant from the two churches he served. It is a tourist attraction.



Left: Bishop White's "throne" was an oversized Windsor chair made for him in the 1780's. It is preserved at Christ Church. From a photograph by Louis W. Meehan in *Christ Church, Philadelphia: the nation's church in a changing city*, by Deborah Mathias Gough, 1995.

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Bishop White on George Washington

On August 15, 185 Bishop White wrote to Colonel Mercer of Fredericksburg, VA, who had inquired about the first President's religious practice.

"...truth requires me to say that General Washington never received the communion in the churches of which I am the parochial minister. Mrs. Washington was an habitual communicant ..."

However, Washington did attend Christ Church regularly.

"Having lived in days in which there existed prejudices in our land against the name, and much more against the office, of a bishop; and when it was doubtful whether any person in that character would be tolerated in the community; I now contemplate nine of our number, conducting the duties of their office without interruption."

Bishop William White, *Memoirs of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America*.



Bishop White's Study. An engraving from the painting by Sartain in the *Memoirs of Bishop*

White, 1839.