

Contending for God and Country:  
The Commanders and Chaplains of the American Revolution  
Part Six: Chaplain Appointments by Congress



The Declaration of Independence by John Trumbull (1818)

On Saturday, July 29, 1775, the Second Continental Congress approved the pay, and thereby, the position of chaplains for the Continental Army as well as a pay slot for one Judge Advocate.<sup>1</sup> On the long list of 19 paid positions, which ranged from 60 dollars a month for the Deputy

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<sup>1</sup> Congress did not assume the responsibility of pay for chaplains in the state militias, for the states were to pay for their own units. However, when state militia units were incorporated into the Continental Army Congress paid the bill—if they could.

Commissary General of Stores and Provisions to six and two-thirds dollars a month for a private soldier, chaplains were listed last:<sup>2</sup>

The Congress resumed the consideration of the report from the Committee of the whole,

Resolved, That the pay of the commissary general of musters be 40 dollars per month.

That the pay of the deputy commissary genl of stores and provisions be 60 dollars ditto.

- Deputy adjutant general, 50 do.
- Deputy muster master general, 40 do.
- Brigade Major, 33 do.
- Commissary of Artillery, 30 do.
- Judge advocate, 20 do.
- Colonel, 50 do.
- Lieutenant colonel, 40 do.
- Major, 33  $\frac{1}{3}$ .
- Captain, 20.
- Lieutenant, 13  $\frac{1}{3}$ .
- Ensign, 10.
- Serjeant, 8.
- Corporal, drummer, and fifer, each 7  $\frac{1}{3}$ .
- Private, 6  $\frac{2}{3}$ .
- Adjutant, 18  $\frac{1}{3}$ .
- Quarter master, 18  $\frac{1}{3}$ .
- Chaplain, 20.

That the pay of the light infantry be the same as that in the Regiment from a captain to a private, and both included.

The pay for a regimental, and later a brigade, chaplain was 20 dollars a month, the same as for William Tudor, the Judge Advocate, and for

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<sup>2</sup> W.C. Ford (ed.) *Library of Congress: Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1779* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1906), p. 220. Gen. Washington served without pay, at his own request, except for the reimbursement of expenses at the end of the war.

infantry captains. The Law and the Gospel in the Army were thus equal in subsistence.

This might signal that chaplains were not considered essential to the Army, much less the nation; but that would be a false conclusion. The Congresses that met from 1774 to 1789 contained an extraordinary number of deeply religious men. Although Congress was not specifically authorized to concern itself with religion, the citizenry did not object to such activities.

Congress appointed chaplains for itself and the Army, sponsored the publication of a Bible, imposed morality on the armed forces through the Articles of War which included the earnest recommendation for “all officers and soldiers diligently to attend divine service.”<sup>3</sup> National days of humiliation, fasting and prayer were proclaimed by Congress at least twice a year throughout the war.

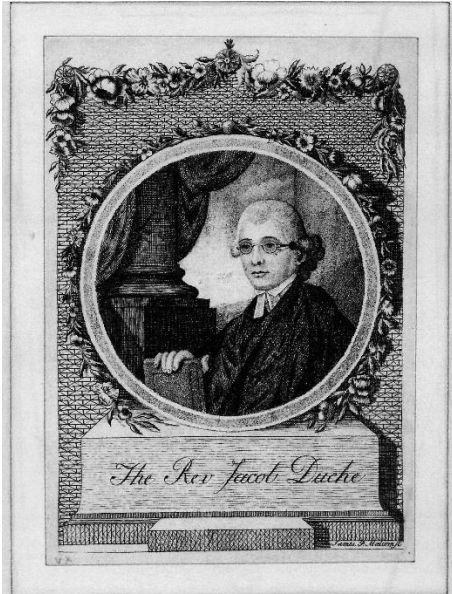
The appointment of chaplains for the military went reasonably well, considering that such appointments were for a longer period of time—usually three years as opposed to two to eight months for militia chaplains. The appointment of chaplains for Congress did not go as smoothly.

The Rev. Jacob Duche, Anglican Rector of Christ Church, Philadelphia, was summoned to the First Continental Congress to lead in opening prayers in September of 1774. Rev. Duche offered a memorable prayer which was recorded and reproduced many times. He also preached to the Pennsylvania soldiers and seemed to be an ardent patriot. On July 9, 1776 he was appointed the first official Chaplain to Congress.

However, after British General William Howe’s forces captured Philadelphia in September of 1777, Rev. Duche was arrested. Somehow Rev. Duche reached a new understanding of wartime politics and was released by the British as a Loyalist. A year later in June, 1778, with France in the war, the British evacuated Philadelphia and took 3,000 Loyalists with them. Rev. Duche, charged with treason by the State of Pennsylvania, felt a strong call to take his ministry to London. Chaplain Duche left and did not return to America until 1792.

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<sup>3</sup> *Revised United States Army Regulations*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1863), Appendix- Articles of War, p. 485.



Rev. Jacob Duche



Rev. John Witherspoon

The chaplain position in Congress was then filled by the Rev. William White, also a Rector of Christ Church, Philadelphia, and by the Rev. George Duffield of the Third Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Congress thus set a precedent that chaplains of different denominations were welcome in Congress.

The next Chaplain to Congress, appointed by John Hancock, was the Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey at Princeton. Witherspoon held the position for 12 years, not only as the Chaplain but also as an official delegate to Congress. Witherspoon served on 100 committees and was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.

Were Continental Army Chaplains Commissioned Officers?

Among the states that sent militia units to the war, there were some that issued warrants for officers rather than commissions. A warrant was an official authorization to perform specific tasks under proper command authority, usually the colonel of a regiment. Other states issued certificates of appointment, especially to senior enlisted soldiers that included sergeants and sergeants-major.

A commission implied officer status not only by rank, but also by responsibility to the commissioning authority and for those under the officer's command. Commissioned officers in the Continental Army were expected to serve for three years or for the duration of the war unless they resigned, were relieved for cause, or honorably discharged.

Chaplains, as a rule, were not given military rank in the Continental Army unless they were appointed to hold a position other than that of a regimental, battalion or brigade chaplain.<sup>4</sup> They were assumed to be officers by their pay schedule which placed them initially on par with captains and later with majors. Although some chaplains took up muskets and fought with their men, chaplains were not expected to command men in battle.

At least one officer's commission from the Continental Congress has survived which may indicate that others, though presently lost, were issued as well. The chaplain named on the commission was the Rev. Hezekiah Smith of Haverhill, Massachusetts.

Smith had reported for duty at Boston in 1775 and was on the first roster of Continental Army chaplains, prepared for General Washington, on January 8, 1776.<sup>5</sup> As chaplain for both Colonel Reed's 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment and Colonel Nixon's 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Smith was, in effect, a brigade chaplain. He

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the Rev. Robert Smith, Anglican Rector of St. Philip's Church in Charleston, SC, served as Chaplain of the 1<sup>st</sup> South Carolina Regiment, then as Chaplain of the Continental Army Hospital there in 1780, and subsequently as Chaplain General of the Southern Department of the Continental Army which made him the highest ranking American chaplain by position in the Revolutionary War. Frederick Lewis Weis, *The Colonial Clergy of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina*, (Boston:1955), p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> Joel Headley, *The Forgotten Heroes of Liberty: The Chaplains and Clergy of the American Revolution*, (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2005), p. 63.

served through the battles for Long Island and the Battle of Saratoga, N.Y. in 1777. In all, he was on duty for four years, from 1776-1780.

Chaplain Smith's commission reads as follows:

### IN CONGRESS

The delegates of the United States to Hezekiah Smith, Gentleman, Greeting.

We, reposing especial trust and confidence in your patriotism, valor, conduct and fidelity, do by these presents, constitute and appoint you to [be] the Chaplain of a Battalion, whereof John Nixon, Esq., is Colonel in the Army of the United States, raised for the defence of American liberty, and for repelling every hostile invasion thereof. You are therefore carefully and diligently to discharge the duty of a Chaplain, by doing and performing all manner of things hereunto belonging.

And we do strictly charge and require all officers and soldiers under your command, to be obedient to your orders as their Chaplain. And you are to observe and follow such orders and direction from time to time, as you shall receive from this or a future Congress of the United States or Committee of Congress, for that purpose appointed, or Commander in Chief of the Army of the United States, or any other your superior officer, according to the rules and discipline of war, in pursuance of the trust reposed in you. This Commission to continue in force until revoked by this or a future Congress. Dated January 1, 1777.

By order of the Congress,

JOHN HANCOCK, President

Attest: CHARLES THOMSON, Secretary<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Reuben A. Guild (ed), *Chaplain Smith and the Baptists; or, Life, Journal, Letters, and Addresses of The Rev. Hezekiah Smith, D.D., of Haverhill, Massachusetts, 1737-1805*, (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publishing Society, 1885), p. 189.



It may be obvious that Congress had not yet considered what the duties of a chaplain might be or what type of orders he might be issuing. In the maze of issues, motions, and resolutions that came before the 59 members of the Second Continental Congress, to include the Declaration of Independence, it is still remarkable that they took time to establish a military chaplaincy for the Continental Army.

For example, the agenda for Congress from Wednesday, July 26 through Saturday, July 29, 1775 included consideration of the following topics: 1) Report of the Committee on the Post Office to set up post offices from Falmouth to Savannah, a distance of 1,875 miles. Benjamin Franklin appointed Postmaster General for one year; 2) Report of the Committee on Establishing a hospital for an army of 20,000 including approved [medical] staffing and pay; 3) Payment of \$50,000 to merchants in Philadelphia and New York to import gunpowder for the Continental Army; 4) Distribution of gunpowder to the army; 5) Address to the People of Ireland explaining the American situation\*; 6) Tobacco colonies urged to search tobacco warehouses for Salt-Petre for gunpowder; 7) Printing of “Methods of Making Salt-Petre” to be distributed by Congress; and 8) Pay schedule for officers and soldiers in the Army- including chaplains.

Congress decided to pay for all of these measures by requesting funds from each colony. The proportion or quota of each colony would be determined according “to the number of Inhabitants,” Virginia and Massachusetts being the most populous.

Payments were to be made before the last day of November in 1779, 1780, 1781, and 1782. Gold and silver were to be received in lieu of Continental bills. Once Continental bills were redeemed, the bills were to be burned—presumably to prevent inflation or counterfeiting or both.<sup>7</sup>

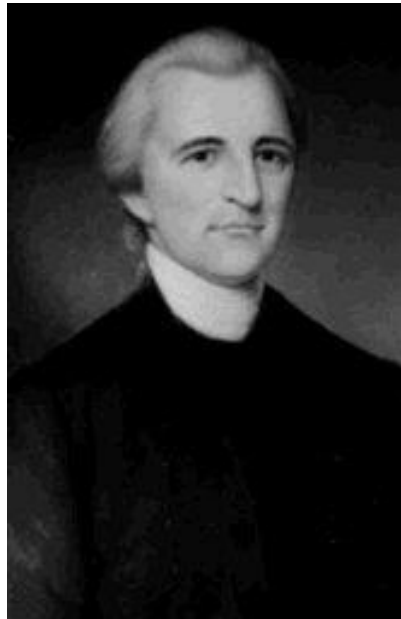
The first chaplains to be covered for pay by Congress were those in the vicinity of Boston—along the siege line. Chaplains in state regiments, such as Chaplain Israel Evans with the 1<sup>st</sup> New York, were included if their regiments were part of the Continental Army establishment. Otherwise

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<sup>7</sup> W.C. Ford (ed.) *Library of Congress: Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1779* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1906), p. 216-223.

state militia regiments were funded by the states, usually in the form of land grants after the war.

It should be noted that the Second Continental Congress rarely had funds in its treasury to support the army or the navy. The 13 states were therefore asked to support both the Continental Army and their own militia units.



The Rev. Israel Evans, Continental Army Chaplain 1775-1783

Israel Evans (1747–1807), a Princeton graduate who had been licensed to preach in 1775 and ordained in 1776 by the First Presbytery of Philadelphia, was appointed chaplain to Colonel Alexander McDougall's 1st New York Regiment in August 1775, chaplain of Col. John Nicolson's New York Regiment in March 1776, and chaplain of the 2d New York Regiment in November 1776. He was named chaplain for Brig. Gen. Enoch Poor's brigade in January 1777 and probably about the same time became chaplain of the 3d New Hampshire Regiment. Evans served until the end of the war, and after the war he was the Presbyterian minister for Concord, N.H., 1789–97. Chaplain Evans and Chaplain John Ellis of Connecticut were the only two Continental Army Chaplains to serve seven and a half years to the end of the American Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Roy J. Honeywell, *Chaplains of the United States Army* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, 1958), p. 58.





\*IN CONGRESS Friday, July 28, 1775 8 am

Address to the People of Ireland

“When that violence shall be removed, and hostilities cease on the part of the aggressors, they shall cease on our part also. For the achievement of this happy event, we confide in the good offices of our fellow subjects beyond the Atlantic. Of their friendly disposition, we do not yet despond, aware, as they must be, that they have nothing more to expect from the same common enemy, than the humble favour [sic] of being last devoured.”

By order of Congress,

JOHN HANCOCK, President