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Legacy

Bolton, MA's First Church of Christ, dedicated in 1928. Bolton's original Congregational church was the site of a dispute between congregants and pastor that had a lasting impact on church governance.

The Congregational Way Assailed: The Reverend Thomas Goss in Revolutionary Massachusetts

ROBERT E. CRAY



Abstract: *Little known today, the Reverend Thomas Goss (1716–1780) attained notoriety in the late eighteenth century when his parishioners' efforts to oust him because of alleged intoxication ignited a showdown over clerical authority in the Congregational Church. At stake was the historical identity of the church. Established in the early seventeenth century as a lay-led gathering of churches, the Congregational Church by the eighteenth century was subjected to both the upheavals of the Great Awakening and a countereffort by a professionally centered ministry to create a more centralized governance structure and to increase ministerial prerogatives and overall denominational authority. Played out in the shadow of rising imperial tensions between Great Britain and the colonies, the Goss affair became a bitter contest over Congregational identity. Ultimately, the episode served to define the character of the Congregational*

Church as a laity-defined denomination in which clerical professionalism and authority faced definite limits. Author Robert E. Cray is a professor of history at Montclair State University in New Jersey.

The first Puritans arrived in Massachusetts Bay in 1630 determined to create a “City upon a Hill,” to cite Governor John Winthrop’s famous 1630 phrase. They aimed to create a godly society, based on the scriptures, in which gathered churches, congregations composed voluntarily of believers, called ministers to the pulpit to preach an austere faith that would inspire others in England to follow their religious path. Not for them the ceremonies and ritualism of the Church of England they had deliberately left behind: Puritans were religious reformers pure and simple.

The Puritans failed in their quest to change the Church of England from afar, but they did create a decentralized church structure, the Congregational Church, in which individual congregations defined their own worship standards. At the same time, the Congregational Church inhabited a prominent place in early Massachusetts communities. While church membership was voluntary, all residents of a town were part of the local Congregational parish and local taxes supported Congregational churches and ministers. Critics learned to keep quiet or suffer banishment or worse. And even when the Massachusetts government begrudgingly acknowledged the presence of other faiths in the latter half of the 1600s, the Congregational Church continued to enjoy the allegiance of most settlers. Baptists, Quakers, and Anglicans constituted small minorities.¹

In the 1730s and 1740s, the first Great Awakening swept the colonies, popularizing a more emotional, personal experience of religious faith and a more dramatic style of preaching that contrasted sharply with the detached, scholarly style of traditional, known as Old Light, Congregationalist ministers who typically read their carefully reasoned sermons to parishioners. In this period, Congregational ministers and worshippers clashed over issues of authority. And the case of one cleric, the Reverend Thomas Goss, became a flashpoint for the simmering conflicts and discontents within and among congregations.

The Reverend Thomas Goss (1716–1780) seemingly epitomized the eighteenth-century-Massachusetts country parson. Harvard educated, as many Congregational clerics were, Goss spent his professional life ministering to his flock in Bolton, Massachusetts, a small Worcester County farming community. Goss was a staunch Old Light minister wedded to tradition and suspicious of the revivals and emotional sermonizing that manifested themselves in the Great Awakening of the 1740s, but without published sermons to promote his views.

What Goss did in the pulpit stayed in the pulpit. That is, until 1769, when parishioners accused him of drunken behavior. Ecclesiastical councils called to arbitrate produced a provincial cause célèbre, as Congregational clergy and lay people manned editorial ramparts to hurl warnings and accusations. Goss's 1771 removal from the pulpit by the town of Bolton heightened the discord among clergy and parishioners and broadened the fray.²

What should have been a local dispute over alcoholic consumption and ministerial department, escalated into a staging ground for an ongoing power struggle between clergy beginning to professionalize and a laity committed to preserving the authority of local congregations. At the center stood Thomas Goss, a "tall, thin man with a stern and forbidding expression and arbitrary manners," whose displays of authority rattled parishioners. Goss rejected votes by church members on proposed and seconded motions, arbitrarily dissolved church meetings, and wielded a ministerial negative, a clerical absolute veto, against approved measures. When allegations about the minister's drinking arose, the congregation divided, and some members plotted their revenge. The clergy likewise divided, with prominent Congregational clerics rallying behind Goss, while lesser-known rural parsons sided with the townsfolk. Larger questions of ministerial prerogatives and lay autonomy furnished the stakes: Could local churches dismiss ministers without sanction of regional clerical associations? Might clergy withhold approval and penalize churches that did so?³

Massachusetts Congregationalists were no strangers to these polity disputes. At the heart stood the faith's identity as a semiautonomous denomination in which individual churches called and dismissed ministers. Yet campaigns to increase ministerial prerogatives and overall denominational authority had materialized by the early eighteenth century. The Reverend John Wise, a champion of local church autonomy, resisted these efforts, publishing a well-received 1717 tract that countered efforts by Cotton Mather and others to graft a more centralized governance structure upon individual Congregational meetings. Even so, a professionally centered ministry, concerned about procedures and protocols, if not outright power and overall authority, had emerged. Town churches found themselves shepherded by leadership-fixated clergy. Played out in the shadow of rising imperial tensions between Great Britain and Massachusetts, the Goss affair became a bitter contest over Congregational identity.⁴

THOMAS GOSS AND HIS FLOCK: MOUNTING TENSIONS

Thomas Goss was born in Brookfield, Massachusetts, on July 16, 1716. His father, Philip Goss, son of a Boston merchant, was a solid, respected citizen who ranked close to the wealthiest ten percent of taxpayers in a 1717

tax list. Thomas Goss arrived at Harvard in 1733 to become a “Scholar of the House” for two years, a post that required him to monitor and report damages to school buildings and grounds. Graduating in 1737, Goss briefly tested the job market, returning to Harvard to receive an MA degree before accepting Bolton’s pulpit in December 15, 1740.⁵

Goss’s induction into his new office was not smooth. Bolton church members withdrew Goss’s appointment after it was discovered that some voters had participated in the appointment process illegally. The church agreed to broaden the search after asking the advice of neighboring ministers. In this instance, the Bolton church welcomed the advice of outside clerics, which suggests that some residents held misgivings about Goss. Nevertheless, Goss obtained the post, plus an increased salary offer, after two other candidates failed to impress.⁶

Challenges nonetheless remained. Goss arrived to find a meetinghouse that had been under construction since 1739 and required eight additional years to complete. Seating protocols still required resolution. Rank-conscious Congregationalists typically apportioned seats on the basis of class and standing: more prosperous and larger landowners sat by the front; the less well-off were stationed toward the rear; and the truly marginal were placed in the gallery. The new seating chart required several votes before a majority vote on March 2, 1742, allowed the wealthiest inhabitants “on down” to “have liberty to choose the pew ground for a pew.” Prominent citizens then determined the seating for the elderly, infirmed, and widowed church members.⁷

Difficulties also materialized between parson and flock. Goss opposed revivals, a fact that did not necessarily brand him a maverick, since many Massachusetts clergy and lay folk frowned upon religious enthusiasm. Indeed, the Marlborough Association, Goss’s regional clerical gathering, had issued a “Remonstrance against the Reverend Whitefield and his Conduct” in 1745. George Whitefield personified the New Light fervor of the Great Awakening, calling upon people to be saved, or “born again” in faith through an emotional conversion experience.⁸ If some Bolton parishioners preferred Whitefield’s brand of faith, they could have vented their annoyance in 1746, when Goss’s request for a larger salary to support a growing family inspired heated discussion. Although the request was ultimately granted and Goss would have netted an additional twenty pounds, he declined the raise, writing:

I return you thanks for it, but considering that it was obtained with some difficulty I now fully and freely discharge you from

any obligation lying on you for payment of the same by virtue of said grant. Asking your prayers that I may so administer to you in holy things as that I may be worthy to receive a competent portion of worldly good things from you and praying that brotherly love may continue, subscribe myself, Your unworthy pastor.⁹

In 1748, the town added thirty-five pounds old tenor (a depreciated paper currency) to Goss's salary, but refused the minister's request for a wood lot in 1756.¹⁰

Goss's handling of church meetings inspired more contention. Such forums addressed polity issues that might include anything from a congregant's suspension and readmission, to the seating of the faithful, to building maintenance. In short, the church's spiritual and physical state came under their purview. Lacking records of these meetings, we necessarily rely on the late 1760s and early 1770s complaints against Goss for clues about Goss's leadership style at those meetings. Indeed, the formal complaints against Goss target his veto of lay resolutions among other issues. Yet if the congregation grew disgruntled with Goss's leadership, could they not also dismiss him? There the answer is less clear-cut, complicated by clerical organizations with decided views of clerical prerogatives.¹¹

The Cambridge Platform of 1648 had provided the Congregational Church with a decentralized polity, in which the laity, not the clergy, hired pastors. Growing lay apathy in church governance, however, had redefined matters. For example, the office of Ruling Elder, an important lay leadership position within each church, often fell vacant by the 1700s, and the clergy began filling that void, crafting a more professional tone while adding to their churchly power.¹² In the eighteenth-century Congregational Church, ministerial associations and ecclesiastical councils embodied the growing trend toward clerical professionalism. Regional associations, for instance, licensed ministerial candidates as part of an effort to enforce standards of education, piety, and preaching. Memories of New Light preachers traipsing across the countryside, invading pulpits and challenging colleagues, had fueled the growth of such bodies.¹³ Ecclesiastical councils were groups called to resolve serious disputes between parsons and congregations: outside clergymen served as judges or moderators between the contending parties, and lent sanction to towns' dismissal of ministers when necessary. That such groups entered into town-parson disputes suggests that lay autonomy within churches was not absolute.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Goss affair of the 1760s and 1770s. Bolton church brethren seized an opportunity to check Goss

when reports of his drinking surfaced. However, both lay-folk and clergy indulged in alcohol. In fact, ordination ceremonies often featured a surfeit of wine or rum, and even Cotton Mather acknowledged rum's usefulness. Drinking itself was not considered a sin: imbibing excessively to the point of inebriation was.¹⁴ Intoxicated ministers faced scrutiny and risked dismissal.

In 1738 Concord, Massachusetts, fired its longtime minister, the Reverend John Whiting, due to drinking, by a vote of eighty-three to eleven. The Reverend Benjamin Strong of Stanwich, Connecticut, first criticized for alcoholic excess in the 1740s, avoided official investigation until the late 1750s, when he confessed to a regional consociation of ministers. He retained his pulpit until 1767. On eastern Long Island, a cultural province of New England, the Reverend Abner Reeve, a Presbyterian, battled alcoholism after his wife's tragic 1747 death. The Suffolk Presbytery removed Reeve from his Nissequogue pulpit, retaining him as a licensed cleric to smaller Long Island communities when he had experienced "saving grace." A public confession after a subsequent relapse did not prevent Reeve's dismissal in 1763.¹⁵

We may never know how frequently or how much Thomas Goss drank. What we do know is that Goss's behavior drew notice, and drinking on a Sacrament Sunday underscored the seriousness of the gossip campaign against him in 1769. Both church members and colleagues pressed Goss on the issue, compelling him to acknowledge imbibing, although he claimed it did not "affect or hurt his reason, speech, or limbs." His unsatisfied accusers demanded a declaration of fault. Goss agreed and publicly stated before the congregation:

Whereas many have manifested an uneasiness with me respecting supposed intemperance on the Lord's day, on which was our last communion; on which I say, I do not pretend there is no foundation of suspicion; but rather think it was mainly and principally owing to some other cause or causes. But let it be what it will I desire to take suitable notice of it, and then be duly humbled under the frown of Providence, and engaged by divine help, to shun all reasonable grounds of jealousy for the time to come.¹⁶

This declaration constituted an ambiguous acknowledgment of fault at best. His phrase, "I do not pretend there is no foundation of suspicion," indicates he did indeed drink, but the "supposed intemperance" primarily the result of "some other cause or causes" invites speculation. Could ill feeling by Goss's congregants over displays of clerical authority be obliquely cited here?

We cannot tell except to note that Goss refused the laity's request for a more detailed acknowledgment.¹⁷

The dispute continued, even spreading beyond Bolton. In June 1769, at a meeting of the Marlborough Association held before Goss's tepid admission to his congregation, the Reverend Israel Loring, the senior pastor, had protested against allowing Goss to preach to his fellow clerics. Apparently Loring believed the accusations. In Bolton, Goss and church members met several times to resolve the divisions. In an attempt to settle the affair, the church agreed to establish a time limit for presenting allegations against the pastor or any church members. The church apparently would be the judge. No allegations appeared. The church extended the deadline, yet nothing was "brought agreeable to the vote of the church." Finally, an allegation surfaced, enabling the church to call an ecclesiastical council of nearby clerics to assemble at Bolton.¹⁸

Calling such a council underscores the situation's seriousness. Clerics and laypersons normally resolved internal disputes themselves; ecclesiastical councils served as a measure of last resort. For instance, when the South Hadley meeting accused their parson, Grindall Rowson, of dishonesty, spiritual laxness, and plagiarized sermons in 1740, two ecclesiastical councils met to decide his fate. Although Rowson escaped his colleagues' wrath, angry congregants forcibly pulled him from the pulpit, which prompted his departure from South Hadley. Jonathan Edwards, among New England's premier theologians, confronted disgruntled congregants as well. The resulting ecclesiastical council—with half the members called by Edwards, half by the laity—sent Edwards packing from his Northampton pulpit in 1751. In Gorham, Maine, then part of Massachusetts, townsfolk called a council in 1757 against the Reverend Solomon Lombard, who, residents reported, "gives us grounds to think him more for the fleece than he is for the flock," a reference to Lombard's business dealings. Despite two ecclesiastical councils and later court suits, Lombard held the pulpit until 1764.¹⁹

1769: THE FIRST COUNCIL MEETS TO ADDRESS THE GOSS AFFAIR

The first ecclesiastical council called to address the Goss affair met in Bolton on September 15, 1769. The evidence of intemperance was convincing enough for the assembled clerics to pressure Goss into a fuller acknowledgement of guilt. Consequently, Goss agreed to "freely and frankly" admit his "sin and faults in the excessive use of spirituous liquors in several instances." But this was no more than a private acknowledgment, perhaps made to his

colleagues. Anti-Goss members of the congregation insisted that the minister repeat the declaration before the entire church.²⁰ Goss declined, claiming his first statement sufficient. Taking this approach perhaps reveals Goss's strong sense of pride: an arrogant, self-assured cleric might balk at a further public apology. Relations between parson and flock grew worse. Several church members asserted that Goss's first apology before the congregation had been interwoven into the sermon, rendering it indistinguishable from the homily. Goss disputed the assertion.²¹

The congregation divided into pro- and anti-Goss factions. Colonel John Whitcomb, the town's General Court representative, led the anti-Goss faction, insisting Goss had lied about the church minutes and accused his flock of "blasphemy or Things bordering upon it." Moreover, when the membership demanded a church meeting, Goss refused, according to Whitcomb. Whitcomb also denounced Goss's ministerial negatives—his veto power over church resolutions—claiming the parson believed that promises to the congregation were conditional. The town then tried to pressure Goss into resigning by withholding part of his stipend in fall 1770. Goss depicted his opponents as untruthful men who employed private meetings to dredge up allegations against him. Goss answered his critics' charge that he had not called a meeting by arguing that previous lengthy sessions he'd chaired had failed to stop church factionalism.²²

Another ecclesiastical council assembled in Bolton in June 1771. Any hope that Whitcomb and his followers held about calling Goss to account disappeared when the council declined to hear anti-Goss witnesses, identifying them as "parties to the dispute." The council judged Goss innocent of the charges, leaving anti-Gossites shocked.²³

Anti-Gossites responded by summoning a town meeting on July 22, 1771, to dismiss the minister. The resolution against Goss, which cited the church brethren's many grievances, won the town's approval, and led to the minister's formal discharge on August 3, 1771. The townsfolk cited Goss's immoral conduct and drunken behavior. When Goss attempted to approach the pulpit the next Sunday, the town constable blocked Goss's path and escorted him from the church.²⁴

When the town of Bolton thus countermanded the ecclesiastical council by taking action the council had failed to, local ministers rushed to support their ousted colleague. Prior misgivings about Goss, even by the Reverend Loring, disappeared. At a meeting at the Reverend Ebenezer Parkman's home on August 20, 1771, local clerics bemoaned the state of affairs, condemned the town's dismissal of Goss, and issued a written declaration denouncing the action. The Reverends Loring and Parkman, joined by their colleagues

Nathan Stone and Peter Whitney, recruited nine other clerics to sign the document. In Bolton, pro-Goss supporters boycotted the town church to worship at the minister's home. By October 15, 1771, several clerics descended on Bolton to issue a statement:

As we cannot but esteem their proceedings irregular, so it appears, to us, that any person who (knowing the measures they have taken) shall either preach the word or dispense the ordinance to them, in their present state, is chargeable with supporting schism.²⁵

These were strong words indeed. The clerics defined schism as “separation from a Christian church without just cause.”²⁶ In effect, the ministers had withdrawn fellowship from the Bolton church members. Clerics who dared officiate in Bolton risked ostracism or worse from their colleagues.

No Congregational minister denied that towns hired and fired clergy—this was a key cornerstone of the Congregational polity—but Goss's colleagues were dismayed at the mode of dismissal employed against him. The July meeting to remove Goss had been called by twenty-six male church members, slightly less than half the fifty-three brethren who composed the male membership. And one had suffered assault along the way, the assailant unknown, and returned home, leaving twenty-five in favor of ousting Goss. This hardly constituted a majority. And custom required that ecclesiastical councils approve decisions of this nature. Although ecclesiastical councils could not compel obedience, just as a Congregational synod could not necessarily enforce theological reforms, they remained the preferred means of resolving such matters. An attempt by yet another ecclesiastical council in the summer of 1772 to resolve the situation failed. A sermon delivered there and later published by the Reverend Zabdiel Adams, a Lunenburg, Massachusetts, cleric and cousin to John Adams, urged the townsfolk to support Goss. The anti-Gossite faction skipped the discourse.²⁷

THE POLITICAL BACKDROP

Deteriorating relations between the British crown and the colony of Massachusetts provided a backdrop to the Goss affair. In Boston, the province's political and intellectual hub, troops had fired on citizens on March 5, 1770, an event that came to be known as the Boston Massacre. Before that, spirited protests over taxes had sent people into the streets. As tensions mounted in the city, rural Massachusetts could no longer feign

indifference to rising tensions between the colony and England. Issues of constitutional rights drew attention as people struggled to define the relationship between Parliament and province. In Bolton, Colonel John Whitcomb and other anti-Gossites subscribed to a new edition of the Reverend John Wise's 1717 tract, *Vindication of the Government of New England Churches*, which was reprinted in 1772. Wise's pamphlet championed a decentralized Congregational Church, opposed to the Reverend Cotton Mather's efforts to impose Presbyterian-style governance in which synods composed of lay folk and clergy would undermine individual churches' autonomy. Most Massachusetts residents appreciated the pamphlet's timely arguments favoring natural law, that is, that notion that certain individual rights were innate and not subject to legislative interference.²⁸

Whitcomb and company found Wise's arguments against church synods especially useful, substituting ecclesiastical councils for synods, since these clerical forums had protested Goss's dismissal. Whitcomb bought twelve of the sixty copies of Wise's pamphlet sold in the town, the largest single number. If Massachusetts citizens worried about growing imperial power, Bolton residents worried about clerical power, wondering whether high-handed Congregational clerics defending Goss were intent on crushing local church rights and basic religious liberties. In contrast, the Reverend Stephen Williams of Longmeadow, Massachusetts, bemoaned the tract's re-publication, fearing it would "bring ye ministry into contempt," concerned perhaps that rehashing decades-old disputes between Wise and Mather would tarnish the clergy's image and weaken its authority among the faithful.²⁹ Whitcomb and other anti-Gossites received additional support from the Reverend Ebenezer Chaplin of Sutton, Massachusetts. A Yale graduate, Chaplin favored laity rights over ministerial prerogatives. In fact, his 1764 town contract permitted his dismissal by a simple majority vote without recourse to an ecclesiastical council. Chaplin had bought thirty-six copies of Wise's pamphlet. He wrote a scathing attack against the sermon defending Goss that Adams had delivered and published in 1772. In his rebuttal to Adams, Chaplin upheld laity rights against interfering outside clergy. Concealing his authorship, he sent the pamphlet to Colonel Whitcomb and Captain Asa Whitcomb, including a note:

I here with send you a small treatise on church government, which I doubt not that you will peruse, knowing you both to be friends to liberty both civil and religious, and also sufferers under the growing power of the clergy... You have liberty to print it if you think proper.

The Whitcombs published the sermon in Boston in 1773.³⁰

When Chaplin's pamphlet, *A Treatise on Church Government*, appeared,

Adams regarded it as a personal affront, responding with *An Answer to a Pamphlet. . . entitled A Treatise on Church Government*, a pamphlet blasting Chaplin's hidden identity and his overtures to the Whitcombs. Adams's pamphlet also gave Goss a forum, in which he conceded his alcoholic transgressions but claimed all subsequent allegations arose from his opponents, the Whitcombs. Adams's pamphlet reaffirmed the necessity of church councils to dismiss ministers. Chaplin responded with *A Second Treatise on Church Government in Three Parts*, employing anti-Goss townsfolk's depositions while reiterating the primacy of laity rights.³¹

Bolton parishioners upped the stakes by asking the Reverend John Walley to assume the pulpit. Walley had been an Ipswich, Massachusetts, cleric until declining health forced his retirement in 1764. Comfortably situated, Walley nonetheless accepted the call to the pulpit. An ecclesiastical council called in June 1773 postponed any action until August. In response, Thomas Goss called his own ecclesiastical council to meet in Bolton during Walley's planned August ordination. Goss recruited such prominent clergymen as Charles Chauncey, Ebenezer Pemberton, and Samuel Cooper, men who outmatched Walley's council of little-known rural clerics. The two councils exchanged notes. Proposed compromises to divide the town into two districts, each with a church, ran into anti-Gossite opposition. Questions of back pay for Goss fared similarly. With agreement impossible, the Reverend Chauncey, an opinionated cleric, reportedly whispered to Bolton's proposed minister: "Walley, do you intend to sit down in this fire? Why it will burn your little Soul."³²

The pro-Goss ministers succeeded in halting Walley's installation, perhaps intimidating their more rustic colleagues. Ministerial prerogatives had seemingly triumphed. However, any joy from that quarter proved short lived: another group of clerics, including Ebenezer Chaplin, assembled in Bolton in August to install John Walley in the pulpit. The outflanked pro-Goss faction would now pay town taxes to support Walley, with Goss reliant on just voluntary contributions.³³

THE CONFLICT SPREADS

The troubles plaguing Bolton church members attracted notice. Boston Congregational ministers meeting in the spring of 1773 for their annual conference issued a twenty-one page document, *Observations Upon the Congregational Plan of Church Government*. The document attempted to clarify the mechanism for choosing and removing ministers. Neither Bolton residents nor Goss were mentioned. Yet the two were on the minds of the

clergy, for at one point the essay asked whether towns could dismiss older pastors without any means of support. The document stated it “contrary to the Spirit and Letter of the Platform, for any Church to exercise the power of dissolving the relation between them and their pastor, unless they act under the direction of neighboring churches regularly called and convened.”³⁴

Not everyone outside Bolton supported Goss. While the *Boston Gazette* reported on September 6, 1773, that “both sides were fixed in temperament,” some questioned the clergy’s efforts to maintain their authority at the laity’s expense. A reviewer dismembered the Massachusetts clergy’s endorsement of Goss, contrasting it to recent events between Britain and the colonies. The Boston ministers’ interpretation of church polity especially roused the writer’s ire:

Will you suffer that most sacred birthright to be sacked by those in your bowels? I hope better things of you, and that, ere this time, you have sent a hue and cry after them. Something must be done. If the churches do not rouse up and protest against it, in less than half a century it will be urged as of great authority; as being a fundamental book of the constitution—this convention pamphlet.³⁵

Such words could not lift the clerical sanctions against the church. Until Walley’s installation, the anti-Gossite faction had a meetinghouse without a shepherd, hence anti-Gossites sought nearby alternatives. On July 8, 1772, the Bolton meeting sent a message to Lancaster, their parent town, asking to receive communion. The Lancaster faithful divided over a response. Unable to reach a consensus, the Lancaster church meeting adjourned until July 21. A majority vote then decided to support the Bolton church’s request. Nevertheless, the town’s pastor, Timothy Harrington, denounced the action, declared his non-concurrence of the vote, and followed it with barbed language aimed at the anti-Gossites: “I hope they will not offer themselves to communion with us, till their society is in a more regular state.” Neither Bolton townspeople nor Lancaster settlers challenged Harrington further.³⁶

NEIGHBORING DISPUTES: STERLING AND TEMPLETON

Bolton church members tried a different approach in nearby Sterling. The Sterling minister, John Mellen, had endorsed his colleagues’ sanctions against Bolton church members, but his ardent championship of singing reforms and trained choirs had eroded his congregational support.

Traditionally, congregations sang without notes, sacrificing melody for noise, and some in Sterling preferred to sing as they had always sung—out of tune. Accordingly, on November 1, 1772, six Bolton church brethren tried to receive communion in Sterling. Mellen halted the service. The visitors decided to depart. Sterling congregants urged the Bolton group to remain, backed by a speedy church vote of approval. Mellen promptly negated the vote and left the meeting.³⁷

Sterling started to resemble Bolton. Minister and church members followed a predictable sequence of events. The church voted against Mellen's right to withhold communion; the minister non-concurred the vote. A clerical council summoned on September 1, 1773, attempted to resolve the imbroglio, allowing both minister and congregants to air their grievances. It recommended that all charges and allegations against Mellen be dropped. The church refused to accept the verdict. Later councils called to calm the crisis fared no better. Mellen's veto, his pro-Goss stance, and championship of church singing rankled church-members, and the Sterling meeting dismissed him in 1774 without calling a council. Another council that year declared Mellen and his followers Sterling's one true church, labeled the anti-Mellenites "outcasts," and deprived them of communion. In response, the town posted an armed guard at the church, compelling Mellen to lead services at home. The clerical boycott of Sterling was not lifted until 1778.³⁸

At least one other community became embroiled in the Goss affair. Despite Walley's installation, lingering animosities simmered in Templeton, Massachusetts, over the affair. The Reverend Ebenezer Sparhawk, a staunch advocate of ministerial prerogatives, felt duty-bound to reject any layperson tainted by schisms or irregular dismissals of ministers. When a Bolton resident, a Mrs. Sampson, arrived in Templeton in 1775, Sparhawk refused her admission to communion, despite a two-thirds majority membership vote in her favor. Sparhawk vetoed the vote and directed the deacons to withhold the sacrament.irate parishioners backed down from the confrontation with their iron-willed pastor, voiding the vote a year and a half later, and in 1780 an ecclesiastical council sustained Sparhawk's stance.³⁹

Clerical-lay relations in northern Worcester County towns suffered immensely. Caught up in the firestorm between Goss and his church, towns found themselves drawn into the ecclesiastical crisis. Town after town suffered through what one nineteenth-century account described as the "most violent and malignant controversy with their ministers," fueled by continual attacks on "private character." Eventually, the affair was "suffered

to pass into oblivion,” as some towns “destroyed or secreted public records dealing with the division.”⁴⁰

AFTERMATH AND REPERCUSSIONS

Late-eighteenth-century New Englanders could not forget so easily. The Reverend Ezra Stiles, who had watched the crisis from afar in Newport, Rhode Island, shuddered over its implications for the Congregational way, fearing towns would emulate Bolton church members and turn out older ministers in favor of younger men who were less costly to maintain. On the other hand, Isaac Backus, a New England Baptist, derided Goss in his denominational history as an alcoholic kept in power by a Congregational clergy intent on overawing the people. In Massachusetts, local churches’ rights to dismiss ministers without sanction of councils gathered acceptance. The American Revolution at least partially made clerical vetoes and overweening ministerial authority politically untenable. By 1800, the principles John Wise had advocated in favor of congregation rights won widespread acceptance. Even the Reverend Sparhawk acknowledged the changing times and recognized limits upon his authority by the dawn of a new century.⁴¹

The Reverend Peter Thacher of Malden, Massachusetts, offered up a last-ditch defense of clerical traditionalism. In a 1783 pamphlet, he decried the ruinous state of the financially embarrassed Massachusetts clergy, attributing it to the Revolution’s empowerment of the people, who could easily turn out ministers: “perhaps for not showing sufficient deference to a proud and haughty great man, they may be blasted in their character, ruined in their fortune, and forced out in the wide world, houseless sons of want and beggary!” He hoped a synod once called could protect clerics from abusive laity.⁴²

James Sullivan, a Massachusetts lawyer and later attorney general and governor, angrily rejected this line of reasoning: his 1784 pamphlet, *Strictures on the Reverend Mr. Thacher’s Pamphlet*, challenged assertions of clerical financial penury and dismissed the need for any synod. Sullivan did acknowledge that the Reverend Thomas Goss, unnamed in Thacher’s piece, had been victimized by men of “good report” but “stinted education.” Still, Bolton settlers truly believed Goss guilty of shortcomings, and when numerous ecclesiastical councils failed to resolve the quagmire, as Sullivan noted, residents had called a council of ministers to install the Reverend Walley.⁴³

As for the Reverend Thomas Goss, he shepherded a small, faithful remnant of his former congregation at his home. His efforts to attain a monetary

settlement from the town failed in the provincial court. When Goss died in 1780, his Latin tombstone inscription, which allegedly none of his critics could read, provided the minister's supporters covert solace. In translation, it read:

A man adorned with piety, hospitality and friendliness, and other virtues public and private; somewhat broken in body but hardly of mind, and endowed with a wonderful fortitude, he was first among the clergy, in these unhappy times, to suffer persecution on account of boldly opposing those who were seeking to ruin the prosperity of the churches, and on account of his heroically struggling to maintain the ecclesiastical polity handed down from our ancestors.⁴⁴

Time gave Goss's supporters an added measure of satisfaction. The dispute between them and the Reverend John Walley's supporters continued, albeit less emotionally, until the Gossites reunited with the church after Walley's resignation in January 1783. Chapin's subsequent fate may have pleased them more: Chapin's church dismissed him in 1795, and Chapin's efforts to collect damages failed in the Court of Common Appeals and later the Massachusetts Supreme Court. In early Republican Massachusetts, clerical advocates of lay rights might find themselves hoisted by their own petard, victims of an empowered laity.⁴⁵

The Congregational Church became very much a church run by the people. Ministers could enjoy parishioners' respect, interpret scriptures in the pulpit, and establish an overall religious tone, but polity matters were less subject to their authority. No threats of veto emanated from parsons at church meetings. If anything, individual clergy served as moderators at these gatherings, their vote but one of many cast. Local churches were free to hire and fire. The nineteenth-century Congregational Church had left behind the church of the Reverend Thomas Goss and with it the emphasis on clerical authority over the laity.⁴⁶

HJM

Notes

1. Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Joseph A. Conforti, *Saints and Strangers: New England in British North America* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

2. Peter Whitney, *History of the County of Worcester* (Worcester, MA: Isaiah Thomas, 1793), 179; Clifford Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates 18 vols.*, (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1933-), 10: 175–185; Daniel H. Calhoun, *Professional Lives in America: Structure and Aspiration, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 97–101; Joseph Nelson Pardee, “Thomas Goss vs. Inhabitants of Bolton,” *Proceeding of the Unitarian Historical Society*, 2, Part I (Boston: Unitarian Historical Society, 1931): 20–30.
3. *History of the Town of Bolton, Massachusetts* (Bolton, MA: Town of Bolton, 1938), 67–68; Henry Martyn Dexter, *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1880), describes the Goss affair as “causing great excitement at the time,” while leaving a “decided impress upon the public mind.”
504. On the ministerial negative see Alf Edgar Jacobson, “The Congregational Clergy in Eighteenth Century New England” (PhD diss., Harvard, 1962), 468–470.
4. Peter Trevellyn Kenneth, “Autonomy: Cuckoo in the Congregationalists’ Nest,” *International Congregational Journal* 3 (August 2004): 85–102; John Wise, *American National Biography*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), by William Pencak, sv; Dale S. Kuehne, *Massachusetts Congregationalist Political Thought, 1760–1790: The Design of Heaven* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 63; Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 62–63; Joseph S. Clark, *Historical Sketch of the Congregational Churches in Massachusetts, 1620–1858* (Boston: Congregational Board of Education, 1858), 118–120. On spirituality during this time and the laity’s willingness to maintain their own notions of faith consult Erik R. Seeman, *Pious Persuasion: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth Century New England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
5. J. H. Temple, *History of North Brookfield, Massachusetts* (North Brookfield, MA: Published by the Town, 1887), 194–195, 604–605; Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 10: 175–176.
6. Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 10: 175–176; *History of the Town of Bolton*, 63–66; Esther K. Whitcomb, *About Bolton* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1988), 98–100.
7. Whitcomb, *About Bolton*, 100. See Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill, 1630–1783* (1952; rept., New York: Norton, 1972), 142–149 for meetinghouse seating disputes and protocols.
8. Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 10: 176; Joseph Allen, *The Worcester Association and its Antecedents* (Boston: Nichols and Noyes, 1868), 46–48. A concise history of the Great Awakening can be found in J.M. Bumsted and John E. Van De Wetering, *What Must I Do to be Saved: The Great Awakening in Colonial America* (Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1976).
9. Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 10:176; *History of the Town of Bolton*, 65–66; Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill*, 222–223.
10. *History of the Town of Bolton*, 65–66; Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill*, 214–220; Stephen Botein, “Income and Ideology: Harvard Trained Clergymen in the

- Eighteenth Century,” *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 13 (1980): 396–413; Richard Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 156–158.
11. Aaron Bancroft, *Sermon Delivered in Worcester*, January 31, 1836 (Worcester, MA: Clarendon Harris, 1836), 7; Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill*, 226.
12. Pardee, “Thomas Goss vs. Inhabitants of Bolton,” 21–22; J. Williams T. Youngs Jr., *God’s Messengers: Religious Leadership in Colonial New England, 1700–1750* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 68; Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 62–64; Clark, *Historical Sketch of the Congregational Churches*, 118–120, 131–135.
13. James W. Schmotter, “The Irony of Clerical Professionalism: New England Congregational Ministers and the Great Awakening,” *American Quarterly*, 31 (1979): 148–155.
14. Shipton, ed., *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, 10: 177; William J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 25–31.
15. Franklin B. Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College*, 6 vols. (New York: Henry Holt, 1885–1912), 1: 434–435, 514; Nathaniel Prime, *History of Long Island from its First Settlement by Europeans to the Year 1845* (New York: Robert Carter, 1845), 228–229; Robert Gross, *Minutemen and Their World* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976), 18; Lemuel Shattuck, *A History of the Town of Concord* (Boston and Concord, MA: Russell, Odiorne and Company and John Stacy, 1835), 165.
16. Quoted in Shipton, ed., *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, 10: 177; Ebenezer Chaplin, *Treatise on Church Government in Three Parts* (Boston: John Boyles, 1773), 4, 38.
17. Quoted in Shipton, ed., *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, 10: 177.
18. Zabdiel Adams, *An Answer to a Pamphlet ... Entitled a Treatise on Church Government* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas, 1773), 18–19; David Harlan, *The Clergy and the Great Awakening in New England* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research, 1980), 102–103; Shipton, ed., *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, 10: 177.
19. Gregory H. Nobles, *Divisions Throughout the Whole: Politics and Society in Hampshire, Massachusetts, 1740–1775* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 52–56; Patricia J. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth Century Northampton* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1979), 176–181; Hugh D. McClellan, *History of Gorham, Maine*, compiled by Katherine B. Lewis (Portland, ME: Smith and Sale, 1903), 178–186; quote is on 182.
20. Shipton, ed., *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, 10: 177
21. *Ibid.*; Chaplin, *Treatise on Church Government*, 4–5; Adams, *An Answer to a Pamphlet*, 8–9.
22. Chaplin, *Treatise on Church Government*, 5–6; Adams, *An Answer to a Pamphlet*, 10–11, 14–15.
23. Shipton, ed., *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, 10: 177–178; Chaplin, *Treatise on Church Government*, 6–7.

24. Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 10: 178; Chaplin, *Treatise on Church Government*, 7; Whitcomb, *About Bolton*, 102.
25. Quoted in Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 10: 179.
26. Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 10: 179.
27. Zabdiel Adams, *The Happiness and Pleasure of Unity in Church Societies Considered* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas, 1772); Adams, *An Answer to a Pamphlet*, 24; Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 10: 179-180, 14: 377-379.
28. John Wise, *Vindication of the Government of New England Churches* (Boston: John Boyles, 1772); Perry Miller, *New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 299-302; Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 63-64; Richard D. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts, The Boston Committee and the Towns, 1772-1774* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 127-128, 172, 174; Dexter, *Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years*, 501-502.
29. Diary of Stephen Williams, October 8, 1772, Longmeadow Public Library, Longmeadow, MA, digital collection 8:89; Wise, *Vindication of the Government of New England Churches*.
30. Dexter, *Sketches of Graduates of Yale College*, 3: 13-16; Wise, *Vindication of Church Government*; Chaplin *Treatise on Church Government in Three Part*, see Appendix for Chapin's statements.
31. Adams, *An Answer to a Pamphlet*, 4-5; Chaplin, *Second Treatise on Church Government in Three Parts* (Boston: John Boyle, 1773), 71-78, for Bolton layfolk depositions.
32. Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 9: 450-460; 10: 181-183; Thomas Franklin Waters, *Ipswich in the Massachusetts Bay Colony*, 2 vols. (Ipswich, MA: Ipswich Historical Society, 1905-1917), 2: 128, 469-476; *Results of an Ecclesiastical Council convened in Bolton, August 3, 1773* (Boston: Thomas and John Fleet, 1773), 2-11, passim. Quote from Charles Chauncey can be found in Charles H. Lippy, *Seasonable Revolutionary: The Mind of Charles Chauncey* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1981), 107.
33. *Results of an Ecclesiastical Council convened in Bolton*, 11; Franklin B. Dexter, ed., *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 3 vols. (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1901), 1: 412; Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 10: 183.
34. *Observations upon the Congregational Plan of Government* (Boston: John Boyle, 1773), 9; Nathaniel Whitaker, *A Confutation of Two Tracts* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas, 1773); Dexter, *Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years*, 505; Clark, *Historical Sketch of the Congregational Churches*, 213.
35. *Boston Gazette*, July 26, 1773; August 20, 1773; September 6, 1773; December 29, 1773; *Boston Evening Post*, December 20, 1773; *Massachusetts Spy*, August 5, 1773; Calhoun, *Professional Lives in America*, 100-102. Quote is from Clark, *Historical Sketch of the Congregational Churches*, 214.
36. Abijah Marvin, *History of the Town of Lancaster* (Lancaster, MA: Published by the Town, 1879), 388-389.

37. Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 9: 40–49; Pardee, “Thomas Goss vs. the Inhabitants of Bolton,” 27–28; Adams, *An Answer to a Pamphlet*, 18.
38. Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 9:45–49.
39. Edwin G. Adams, *Historical Discourse on the First Congregational Church in Templeton* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Company, 1858), 29–33.
40. *Worcester Magazine and Historical Journal*, Vol. 2 (Worcester, MA: William Lincoln and C. C. Baldwin, 1826), 214–215
41. Dexter, ed., *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 167, 374; Dexter, *Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years*, 506–507; Pardee, “Thomas Goss vs. the Inhabitants of Bolton,” 26; Isaac Backus, *Abridgment of the Church History of New England, 1602–1804* (Boston: E. Lincoln, 1804), 203–204; Adams, *Historical Discourse*, 34.
42. Peter Thacher, *Observations upon the Present State of the Clergy* (Boston: Norman and White, 1783), 13.
43. James Sullivan, *Strictures on the Reverend Mr. Thacher's Pamphlet* (Boston: Benjamin Edes and Sons, 1784), 14.
44. Quoted in Whitcomb, *About Bolton*, 106–107.
45. Shipton, ed., *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 9:459–460; Bancroft, *Sermon Delivered in Worcester*, 17.
46. Williston Walker, *History of the Congregational Churches in the United States* (New York: Christian Literature, 1894), 307–308.