

ALEXANDER VIETS GRISWOLD (1766-1843)

12th Bishop of the Episcopal Church



Alexander Viets Griswold was born at Simsbury Connecticut to a farming family. His uncle was a Church of England priest and was largely responsible for his education. At age 19, he married and though was ready to attend Yale College, his new responsibilities prevented him from doing so. What education he attained was due to his own diligence, reading by the fire every night after his labors.

In 1794, he was admitted to holy orders and in 1795 was ordained both as deacon and priest by Bishop Seabury. For ten years he served as parish priest for three small congregations in Connecticut: Plymouth, Harwinton, and Litchfield. He supplemented his living by working on farms and teaching in a small school.

In 1804, he accepted the call to be rector of Bristol, Rhode Island. The congregation was smaller than those he had built up in Connecticut, but supported him to the tune of \$600 per year. Here he also administered a school. But the congregation soon grew and the building had to be enlarged, and he was held in great regard by the community. At Bristol, Griswold deepened in his own evangelical Christianity.

In 1804 the second bishop of Massachusetts died (3 months after consecration). In 1810, a Convention in Boston was held and representatives from New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Massachusetts formed a new entity, called the Eastern Diocese. This represented a confederation of dioceses, each of which would continue to hold its own convention and look after its own affairs. But the four could not individually sustain a bishop, and so they worked together as a kind of "holding company." The Eastern Diocese elected Griswold to be their Bishop on May 31.

In 1811, Griswold was consecrated in New York. His character suited him to the leadership of this entity: he was calm, intentional, energetic and flexible. He was able to work with the competing interests and churchmanship of the various elements of the Diocese.

Griswold was intensely opposed to party-spirit. He once said that of the high-church party and the low-church party, he did not know which he disliked more. As a counterbalance to party strife he upheld an equally intense commitment to mission work. He charged his Diocese with their responsibility in expanding and building up the Body of Christ. He oversaw the formation of missionary societies in his own territory as well as helping the Episcopal Church as a whole establish the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society. By 1818, the number of communicants in his Diocese had doubled.

In 1820, Maine became a state and entered the Eastern Diocese.

In the intervening years, the churches in the Eastern Diocese grew and strengthened. In 1832, Vermont was now ready to stand on its own. John Henry Hopkins was elected bishop, but the Convention sent a warm letter of greeting and thanksgiving to Griswold. Others would have followed but for the affection and regard in which they held their bishop. In 1838, the remaining members of the Eastern Diocese voted not to dissolve until Griswold died. New Hampshire and Maine became for all intents and purposes independent, but insisted on remaining under Griswold's Episcopal oversight.

Griswold died in 1843. The churches under his care had increased by a factor of 5. He was a simple man, with warm affections and many friendships. He was reserved, but not stuffy. Above all, he saw himself as a pastor and conducted his episcopacy with a care for all. One Congregationalist wrote: "He is the best representative of an apostle I have ever seen, particularly because he does not know it."