

JOHN HENRY HOBART (1775-1830)

11th Bishop of the Episcopal Church



“He was the first bishop to show the American Church how to run a diocese.” (Addison)

Hobart was born September 14, 1775. His father was a business man. He attended the newly founded Episcopal Academy in Philadelphia, then spent two years at the University of Pennsylvania. As a Junior he entered Princeton and received his BA in 1793 with high honors. Eventually he became a tutor at Princeton and was highly respected by students and others.

Supported by a friendship with Bishop White, and growing in his own interest in the Christian faith, Hobart was ordained deacon by his bishop in 1798. At first he served a small group of churches in Philadelphia, then went to New Brunswick. He married, and in mid 1800 moved to Long Island. Six months later he came to be an assistant at Trinity Church, NY. There he would remain for the rest of his life, as assistant, rector, and bishop.

These movements in two and half years revealed a man of intense energy. He continued to demonstrate this energy all during his time at Trinity. He became secretary of the House of Bishops while a deacon, was elected secretary of the New York Convention and a deputy to General Convention, and became secretary of the General Convention. In 1801, 26 years old, he was made a member of the Board of Trustees of Columbia College, with such luminaries as Alexander Hamilton. During this year he was ordained a priest.

Hobart was important for taking initiatives in both missionary work and education.

Hobart fostered educational interests by forming various societies to promote theological education, continued learning among the clergy, and tracts. He edited *The Churchman's*

Magazine, the only regular publication in the Episcopal Church, for three years. He helped establish the Bible and Common Prayer Book Society in 1809. He also wrote on a broad scale. He authored *A Companion for the Altar* in 1804, a devotional manual. In 1805 he wrote *A Companion for the Festivals and Fasts of the Church*. He engaged in writing many articles on episcopacy, which were collected and published under the titles of *A Collection of Essays on the Subject of Episcopacy*, in 1806, and *An Apology for Apostolic Order and its Advocates*, in 1807. These books inspired vigorous and pointed responses from those of other denominations.

Samuel Provoost, Bishop of New York, died in 1801. He was succeeded by Benjamin Moore, who did little to advance the work of the Church. He was paralyzed in 1811, and Hobart was elected Assistant Bishop at the age of 35. In 1816, Hobart became Diocesan.

Hobart lost no time in making his presence felt and his authority known. In his second year, he had visited 33 parishes, confirmed 1100 persons. When he came into office, New York had only 2 missionaries. At his death, there would be 50. He used the wealth of Trinity Parish and his own powers of persuasion to concentrate his Diocese on the work of planting and extending the work of the Church.

Hobart did more than any other single person to raise the awareness of the Episcopal Church on the American scene. C. C. Tiffany wrote, "The whole tone of public feeling toward the Church changed. It was no longer tolerated as an amply endowed institution too respectable to be disturbed, but too torpid to be feared. It was to become a living factor, dreaded by some, admired by others, but acknowledged and respected by all." He added, "[Hobart] made the Church in New York a living power." (*History*, p. 414)

Hobart, at first opposed to the founding of the General Seminary, became a supporter in later years. (He opposed it because he thought every diocese should have its own school which the bishop could easily control!) He organized a Seminary at Geneva College. Although the seminary was eventually abandoned, the College survived and came to bear his name.

Hobart was a high-churchman in that he believed in the authority of the Church as the instrument of God's grace in the world, and the importance of the Apostolic Order. He wrote, "The Churchman . . . adheres in all essential points to the faith, the ministry, and worship which distinguished the apostolic and primitive Church, particularly to the constitution of the Christian ministry under its three orders of bishops, priests, and deacons." (1819, *The Principles of the Churchman*) He was suspicious of prayer meetings and evangelistic gatherings because they tended to lead to personalism and emotionalism. He opposed the American Bible Society, preferring his own, because he believed that Prayer Books should be distributed along with the Bibles. (And he and Bishop Richard Channing Moore, an ardent evangelist, struggled with each other over this.) Yet, he was quite clear that the Church was the instrument of salvation. He told one of his clergy, "Be sure that in all your preaching the doctrines of the Cross be introduced: no preaching is good for any thing without these."

Hobart's energy was seemingly inexhaustible. But he reached a breaking point in 1823. He took

two years off and traveled in England, France and Italy. (France he found to be “uninteresting.”) He returned with new vigor, but his remaining five years were harder and his strength ebbed. He died in Auburn, NY, while on a visitation.

Hobart was a man of intensity. He was also a man of good humor. Though he could be impulsive, he had tremendous personal skills and inspired many to a new sense of the Church, her mission, and her dignity.