

Reverend John Elder (1706-1792)

Re-united Congregations, Derry and Paxton churches, 1775-1791

Reverend John Elder was born January 26, 1706 in Edinburgh, Scotland, the second son of Robert Elder. Elder studied theology and prepared for the ministry at the University of Edinburgh. While he was involved with his studies, his father and the rest of his family relocated briefly to County Antrim, Ireland, and then, in 1730, immigrated to Pennsylvania, settling in Paxton Township on a tract of land five miles north of Harrisburg.

In Scotland, John Elder completed his studies and was licensed to preach in 1732. A few years later, probably around 1736, he followed his parents to America. Reverend Elder presented his credentials to the Presbytery of New Castle (Delaware), and was sent to the Presbytery of Donegal in October, 1737. He began his ministry in America by accepting a call to Paxton Presbyterian Church after Reverend William Bertram was relieved of his duties to that congregation in 1738.

The early years of Elder's ministry were unsettled due to the "Great Awakening" spreading across the American colonies during the 1730s and 1740s. Reverend Elder supported the theology of the "Old Side" and preached against what he thought was religious fervor and the revival movement in general. The death of Reverend William Bertram in 1746 resulted in the congregations of Derry and Paxton churches splitting over this theological controversy.

At Derry Church, congregants aligned with "New Side" theology invited John Roan to serve as their pastor in 1746. Derry Church's "Old Side" minority left to join the "Old Side" majority Paxton congregation with Elder as pastor. Paxton Church's "New Side" minority formed their own congregation, moved a few miles from Paxton, and invited Derry Church's Reverend John Roan to also serve their newly formed congregation. These divided congregations continued until Reverend Roan's death in 1775. At that point, theological passions had cooled and people returned to the churches they had left 30 years before. Elder became the pastor of the two reunited churches of Derry and Paxton. Reverend Elder continued to serve both reunited congregations until he retired in 1791.

Elder had an interesting and storied secular life outside of his church duties. The French and Indian war (1754-1763) which started largely over territorial disputes set the stage for the American Revolution. During this time, tensions between indigenous people and American colonists increased. This was particularly true in the Pennsylvania frontier. In 1756 several families living just north of Derry Church were burned out of their cabins and killed. Elder was appointed a colonel by the Provincial authorities and took charge of the Paxton Rangers, also known as the "Paxton Boys." Imagine seeing a church pastor preaching with a rifle by his side and the congregants in the pews sitting with their rifles nearby for protection. John Elder was known as the "fighting parson" who advocated for armed resistance to Indian aggression. Tensions between central Pennsylvania colonists and Native Americans reached a climax during the

summer of 1763. There were many raids and murders committed in the Paxtang area by colonists, Indians, and French cohorts. In response, a group of the Paxton Boys led a massacre of the remaining Susquehannock Indians at Conestoga Town and in Lancaster.

Reverend Elder was largely criticized and censured for his role in this event. However, some archival sources claim that he tried to stop this rampage but was unsuccessful. Notable Quakers at that time (Ben Franklin and others) distributed pamphlets describing this event and referred to the Scots-Irish Presbyterians as ignorant bigots and lawless raiders. As a result, John Elder's military pay was suspended and he was relieved of his commission.

In spite of the controversy around the Paxton Boys Massacre, Reverend Elder remained an influential leader in the region throughout his life. During the American Revolution, he was an ardent patriot, preaching many sermons supporting the call for independence.

John Elder was known as a man of virtue and influence and was successful as a minister, a soldier and a farmer. He married twice and fathered 15 children: four with his first wife, Mary Baker, and 11 with his second wife, Mary Simpson. He died July 17, 1792. He is buried in Paxton Church cemetery along with his daughter Grizzel.

Derry Church has a copy of Elder's call to Derry in its Hammond Library, and a copy of his commission as Commander of two companies of foot soldiers in Lancaster County.

A stone farmhouse which Elder built around 1765 still stands in Harrisburg.

A round stained glass window in memory of Reverend Elder is on the south wall of the Chapel above the chancel.