

Reverend John Roan (1717-1775)

Pastor of New Side Congregations, Derry and Paxton churches: 1746-1775

In the mid 1740s, Presbyterian congregations throughout the American colonies found themselves torn apart by the emotional revivalism associated with the “Great Awakening.” Presbyterians were divided by very different views of their mission in the New World and were characterized as “Old Side” and “New Side” congregants. When the two sides eventually reunited, Protestant denominations multiplied and there would be more tolerance for subtle differences in expressions of faith and the emergence of a more secular view of this New World.

John Roan was born in April 1717 in Grenshaw, Ireland. He trained to be a weaver but began studying for the ministry early in life. He emigrated to America in 1739 along with his brother, Andrew, and studied at the Log College (a humble and controversial seminary school) in Neshaminy, Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The Log College was led by [Reverend William Tennent](#), one of the founders of the American Great Awakening.

In 1744, after finishing his religious education, Roan was sent to the Virginia Colony, but his preaching created conflict. He was accused of blasphemy against the Anglican Church and he fled the colony before the charges were dismissed.

He was licensed to preach by the New Castle Presbytery (Delaware) (New Side) in 1744. He then relocated to Pennsylvania, and was assigned to the Donegal Presbytery where he was directed to serve congregants living along the Susquehanna River. His talent and vigor attracted New Side leaning Presbyterians.

In the end, both Paxton and Derry experienced a schism due to his presence. The New Side majority of Derry invited Reverend Roan to serve as their pastor in 1745. As more dissension occurred within the congregation, Derry Church members who adhered to Old Side theology joined the Paxton congregation already being served by Reverend John Elder. The Paxton Church congregation also experienced a split. Paxton Church’s Old Side majority remained with Elder and the New Side minority left to form their own congregation a few miles from Paxton Church. The New Side Paxton Church invited Roan to be their pastor.

A similar division occurred at Mount Joy (now Donegal) Presbyterian Church. A New Side minority formed their own congregation (Swatara) and also invited Roan to serve as pastor. Roan served all three of these New Side congregations (Paxton, Derry and Donegal). Synod records indicate that “points of difficulty” were frequent with Roan. By the end of his ministry, all three New Side congregations were deeply in debt. These divided church congregations continued for 30 years until Roan’s death in 1775.

While John Roan was pastor to the New Side congregations (1746-1775), John Elder was pastor to the Old Side congregations of Derry and Paxton. These two men were on opposite sides of this religious split and were not always friendly with each other. However, when

John Roan died in 1775, John Elder wrote the following inscription on Roan's tombstone in Derry cemetery:

Beneath this stone are deposited the remains of an able, faithful, courageous and successful minister of Jesus Christ, The Reverend John Roan, pastor of Paxton, Derry and Mount Joy congregations from the year 1745, when he exchanged a militant for a triumphant life in the 59th year of his age.

A stained glass window dedicated to Reverend John Roan can be found in the Chapel.