Lexington’s Reverend John Hancock

Richard Kollen
The Rev. John Hancock (1671-1752) came to Lexington from modest beginnings, married, built a house, and raised five children, earning the respect of his parish and the ministers in his association. During his pastorate he acquired the informal title of “Bishop,” perhaps to designate a region-wide status exceeding simply a pastor. While religious and financial disputes between parishioners and their pastors roiled and divided other towns throughout Massachusetts, Hancock’s pragmatic approach kept his Lexington parish calm and growing. Most 18th century clergy enjoyed lifetime tenure, but a settled minister during the first half of the century served on average for twenty-five years. Lexington was most fortunate in settling two consecutive ministers who arrived quite young and each enjoyed long lives, providing lengthy and effective pastorates. Hancock died at eighty-one, after serving fifty-four years and his successor Clarke passed at seventy-four, fifty years after ordination. That Clarke took over a unified pastorate was a blessing for which Bishop Hancock could largely be credited.

Family
Hancock grew up in the Cambridge precinct that later became Newton, not far from where Jonas Clarke (1730-1805) would be born. Nathaniel Hancock and Mary (Prentice) then Susan (Green) produced fifteen children, ten of which survived into adulthood. John was the second surviving son. His father, a shoemaker by trade, had achieved a respectable status as a deacon of the church. While not a member of the gentry and with many mouths to feed, Nathaniel managed to send John to attend Harvard. During his life Nathaniel acquired over three hundred pounds that he divided among children and grandchildren. Upon his father’s death in 1719, John received a relatively small portion—£20.

He finished his undergraduate degree at Harvard in 1689 thirteenth in a class of fourteen, the order traditionally determined by socio-economic status rather than academic achievement. While pursuing his Master’s Degree in Divinity, he taught grammar school in Cambridge, and then preached for periods in Groton and Medford before his settlement in Lexington in 1698 at the age of twenty-seven. Lexington

1 J. William Youngs, Jr. in writes that the title of bishop was given to “several” ministers to designate their importance. But his only example is Hancock. He does note a Rev. Solomon Stoddard of a Connecticut parish was called “Pope Stoddard.” J. William Youngs, Jr., God’s Messengers: Religious Leadership in Colonial New England, 1700-1750. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 68-69.
2 Youngs 29.
3 Lifetime tenure made sense economically for towns. In addition to the yearly salary paid to the minister, a minister’s settlement also included a substantial cash payment. For Hancock it was £80 to be paid over two years.
7 Sibley 3: 436. It appears he was called to Groton, but must have turned it down.
initially paid Rev. Hancock a yearly salary of £40, the same as his predecessor, Rev. Benjamin Estabrook, along with a settlement payment of £80. Also, his salary was to be augmented by the proceeds of quarterly collections. These collections soon ended and his salary was increased to £56. In 1715 the town increased his salary to £85, then £90 the following year.

Upon settling in Lexington, Rev. Hancock married Elizabeth Clark (circa 1681-1760) in 1700, daughter of Rev. Thomas Clark of Chelmsford, whose wife was the daughter of Rev. Edward Bulkley of Concord. Thus, Elizabeth was both the daughter and granddaughter of clergy. John Hancock purchased twenty-five acres of land north of the meetinghouse the following year and built a parsonage soon after. The house’s design can only be speculated, but it almost certainly took a vernacular hall and parlor form. Given his humble beginnings, Hancock could not have had much money at this stage. As with most, his financial circumstances likely improved as he aged. His youngest son Ebenezer (1710-1740) graduated Harvard fifteenth in a class of forty-two in 1728, indicating some socio-economic advance.

Over time John and Elizabeth raised three boys and two girls while expanding their estate to fifty acres. As was common practice with ministers’ daughters, Elizabeth (1704-1785) and Lucy (1713-1768) also married pastors. Elizabeth married Rev. Jonathan Bowman of Dorchester. Lucy, who would become Rev. Jonas Clark’s mother-in-law, married Rev. Nicholas Bowes of Bedford. Two of Rev. Hancock’s sons, John (1702-1744) and Ebenezer became ministers themselves, John in Braintree in 1726 and Ebenezer as co-pastor in Lexington with his father beginning in 1734. When John graduated from Harvard in 1719, he became the first Lexington boy to do so. For a time he served as Harvard’s librarian. A third son, Thomas (1703-1763), apprenticed to a bookseller, Daniel Henchman, and eventually became a wealthy Boston merchant. Why he failed to follow his older and younger brothers to Harvard and a pulpit is unknown. Academic acumen and/or interest likely factored into the decision and finances possibly played a role. Since John and Thomas were born one year apart, the Hancocks would face economic hardship by sending both to Harvard virtually at the same time. Ebenezer was eight years younger than John, and the only family member requiring a yearly tuition payment when he was at college age.

In 1722 Rev. Hancock’s finances received a boost of undetermined value when he received a “portion” of £500 sterling silver from Elizabeth Fawkner’s bequest to the living American Bulkley relatives. Elizabeth Clark was the granddaughter of Edward

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9 Lexington Town Records, April 1, 1715.
13 Hudson II: 266.
Bulkley. Without knowing how many children or grandchildren of Edward, Peter or Gershom Bulkley survived Fawkner’s death, the exact amount of the legacy cannot be ascertained. But even a small amount in sterling carried more value than Massachusetts paper currency.

The eventful 1730s

At sixty-two years old in 1733 Hancock seemed to grow concerned about his advancing age. In a published sermon of his that year in Boston, the title includes a note concerning the addition of material “partly for brevity sake, and partly thro' the infirmity of an old man's memory, some things were omitted in the delivery of this sermon, which are now added in the publication.” Hancock included this self-deprecating aside himself; but it reveals his self-awareness or at least his understanding that his age concerned others. He may have also promoted the age issue because his son was about to graduate with a Masters in Divinity and would be seeking a pulpit.

Son Ebenezer showed great promise as a model student at Harvard, winning both a Hollis and Hopkins scholarship while an undergraduate (1728) and graduate student (1733). The town of Sherburne unanimously called him to settle as their minister in September 1733. Two months later, perhaps after some prodding by John, Lexington offered a settlement. Ebenezer accepted the offer to join his father in a co-pastorate to hopefully lighten his father’s burden as minister. In Ebenezer’s ordination sermon his father stated that the Sherburne call “pushed on his settlement here faster than some desired.” The plan was that he would take over after his father’s death—which most believed to be in the not too distant future. Ebenezer’s settlement money of £300 was deferred until his father died. He and his father were to receive a combined £200 in salary, £130 to Ebenezer alone once his father passed. It should be noted that the 1720 to 1750 time period was a time of hyperinflation in Massachusetts. (Jonas Clarke only received a yearly salary of £80 but with a more stable currency.) In the meantime Ebenezer shared the pulpit with his father and also taught school in Lexington and

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15 The prophet Jeremiah's resolution to get him unto great men, and to speak unto them, considered and applied: in a sermon delivered at the publick lecture in Boston, November 21. 1734. Before His Excellency the governour, and the General Court. By John Hancock, A.M. senior Pastor of the Church of Christ in Lexington. N.B. Partly for brevity sake, and partly thro' the infirmity of an old man's memory, some things were omitted in the delivery of this sermon, which are now added in the publication, tho' they are but few. Printed by S. Kneeland, printer to the Honourable House of Representatives., MDCCXXXIV[1734], found at Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 3778 (filmed).
Bedford. He boarded with his sister Lucy and husband Rev. Nicholas Bowes when teaching in Bedford.¹⁸

The aging Bishop appeared to be setting up his youngest son for life, since he sold the parsonage in 1734 to Ebenezer for £300 with a stipulation that he give up his future inheritance worth £400. It is unclear where the young man would have acquired the money. In addition, an indenture specified that Ebenezer retain one half the house while his parents enjoyed life tenancy until the end of their days. This deal provided for the John and Elizabeth’s declining years. Ebenezer began his co-pastorate in January 1734.¹⁹

Rev. John Hancock continued to consider posterity in 1734; he commissioned John Smibert to paint portraits of he (March) and Elizabeth (May). The two portraits cost £25 each, a tidy sum for a country parson.²⁰ No doubt the cash accrued from Ebenezer’s purchase of the house made the portraits affordable. Unfortunately, Rev. Hancock’s plan to provide for his youngest son could not protect his health. Ebenezer died six years later of throat distemper, while his father ministered on until his death, outliving Ebenezer by thirteen years.²¹ Elizabeth Hancock outlived her son by twenty-one years.

Meanwhile Braintree’s Rev. Hancock and his wife Mary produced a son, the third John Hancock and future governor. His 1737 birth in the Braintree parsonage was followed tragically by his father’s death seven years later. Before his death, as Braintree’s parson, the younger Hancock had the occasion on October 26, 1734 to baptize John Adams.²² Hancock’s passing in 1744 short-circuited the possibility of a third Rev. John Hancock—a hope perhaps harbored by both ordained John Hancock, the patriarch and his son. Thus, within five years the Bishop lost two sons, with Boston’s Thomas the only survivor. Rev. Hancock and Elizabeth extended an invitation to John’s wife and her three children to live in Lexington. Subsequently, the youngest John Hancock lived in the Lexington parsonage as a young boy for several years— not the earliest structure, the one that now stands. Concerned about young John’s future, Rev. Hancock later sent his grandson to his Uncle Thomas in Boston. Childless and without heirs to a growing fortune, Thomas and his wife, Lydia Henchman welcomed him to their new mansion house on Beacon Hill, constructed in the latter part of 1736.²³

It has been presumed until recently that Thomas contributed to a larger parsonage soon after, as the present Lexington structure dates from that time. This fact has led architectural historians to surmise that the parsonage benefitted from the expertise commissioned for the work on Beacon Hill, perhaps imported from England. The two and one half story parsonage stood out in a country town as a grand early Georgian structure, the finest in Lexington at the time. Although logic presumes Thomas’s

¹⁸ Sibley, 8:428.
²¹ “Boston,” Boston Evening-Post, 4 February 1740, 2.
influence, evidence of assistance either in funding or the design elements remains lacking. There is evidence of Ebenezer’s active participation in the building process, since it was legally his house.²⁴ From the town he acquired a £100 advance on his settlement, scheduled to be paid on his father’s death, and appeared to put the money into the new house. Town records note the advance was because Ebenezer’s “being of great charge about his house.” Some of the wood from the building seems to have come from the ministerial lands as a later reference prohibited wood from being removed unless it was unfit for the Hancocks’ use.²⁵

Young John Hancock regularly visited his grandparents at this house, arriving in the Thomas Hancock family chaise. He also took advantage of Lexington’s proximity to his Aunt Lucy and her husband, the Rev. Nicholas Bowes, by visiting his Bedford parsonage on these jaunts into the country. The Bedford visits included time with his cousins, who likely marveled at the finery with which Uncle Thomas and Aunt Lydia outfitted the young man.²⁶

Religious positions

In 1722 Hancock preached the Massachusetts election sermon, an event that inaugurated the beginning of the General Court’s session each year. To be chosen to preach this sermon signaled the apex of professional respect and status, since most clergy passed an entire career without standing in the pulpit for Election Day. This event traditionally coincided with the annual colony-wide convention in Boston of the Massachusetts clergy, thus insuring an attentive and learned audience. Hancock’s sermon was entitled Rulers Should Be Benefactors. In it he observed, “It is the Duty and Excellency of those that are in Authority to be Benefactors.”²⁷ Although he urged civil authorities to use their power for good, he promoted a position that would be later rejected by his famous grandson and his pastoral successor. Hancock refers to government officials as God’s “Lieutenants, his Deputies, his Viceregents” on earth.²⁸ Rulers should be benefactors because to do so would “improve the Power and Authority given them from above.”²⁹ This claim of divine sanction for the king and his minions stands in stark contrast to the contract theory embraced by those of his grandson’s generation, but remained within the tradition of clerical belief at the time. Obedience to rulers was preferable to anarchy, especially when the British government was viewed as fulfilling its responsibilities as beneficent fathers.

But politics seemed far less important for this generation of New England clergy than their ongoing apprehension over the people’s preoccupation with worldly gain over God’s divine grace. Now well into their third generation as a colony, Massachusetts

²⁴ “The 2007 Hancock Clark House Renovation Report,” 6. It is noted here that soon after Ebenezer’s death, Thomas acquired the property.
²⁵ Ibid., 5.
²⁸ Hancock 5.
²⁹ Hancock 3.
Congregationalists no longer possessed the fervent spirituality of their forbears. Always seeking ways to regenerate the ardor of the founders, clergy welcomed the opportunity that appeared when a significant earthquake struck at close to 10:30 PM on an October 29, 1727 Sabbath night—a tremor that shook the northeast region from Maine to Pennsylvania. In Boston the *News-Letter* reported, “It came like a great thunder. The Earth reeled & trembled to a great Degree.” Although no one died, “the Houses Rock’d & Crackl’d as if they were tumbling into Ruins” leading the “affrighted to run into the Streets for Safety.”\(^{30}\) Alarming as it was, this category VII earthquake did not cause as much damage as the article implied.\(^{31}\) It rattled houses, toppling a couple chimneys and fences. But that year natural forces had already wreaked its share of havoc. In August a summer long drought ended with a lightning-filled unusually explosive thunderstorm. Ministers had been interpreting these events as a natural pattern of warnings of God’s displeasure with their parishioners’ moral rectitude. But the earthquake was truly extraordinary, engaging the Boston area’s collective attention in a way a drought and storm could not. On the subsequent days of fasting and prayer ordered by the ministers for people to contemplate their sins, local pastors missed no opportunity to remind their congregations of the connection between the earthquake and their moral failings.

Published sermons proliferated with titles such as *The Voice of the Lord From the Deep Places of the Earth and The Day of Trouble Is Near, the Tokens of it and Due Preparation for It.*\(^{32}\) Since the apocalypse seemed near, the renewal in piety the clergy had hoped for did occur—at least for the short term. Church membership increased in significant numbers throughout the New England colonies, including Lexington. Several aftershocks occurred during the winter and into the spring, enhancing the membership spike. Rev. Hancock admitted a stunning seventy-six new members from December 1727 to June 1728.\(^{33}\) This flurry of admittances seems even more impressive in a town of only about 700 people.\(^{34}\)

But the revival’s effects proved short-lived, leading to the perceived necessity of yet another, more fundamental revival—the Great Awakening. This religious renewal eventually targeted the established churches as the cause of the colony’s spiritual laxity. But in 1740, on this first Boston area tour, leading evangelical minister Rev. George Whitefield met with the approbation of Congregational clergy and Harvard College authorities who discounted his demonstrative style and his informal education. In truth, they welcomed anyone who might revitalize the people’s faith. Thus, local ministers sponsored Whitefield’s sermons throughout eastern New England, hoping his words

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\(^{31}\) United States Geological Survey found at [www.usga.gov](http://www.usga.gov). The website categorized the 1727 earthquake as intensity VII, a level described as “Damage negligible in buildings of good design and construction; slight to moderate in well-built ordinary structures; considerable damage in poorly built or badly designed structures; some chimneys broken.”


\(^{33}\) Transcribed Records, First Parish Church, Lexington, Massachusetts. Found at the Lexington Historical Society.

\(^{34}\) Charles Hudson estimates a population of 681 based on vital records, church and town records. Mary Fuhrer estimates 764 in 1729 using a formula based on tax records.
would spark a renewed piety and enlarge their congregations. At first their patience was rewarded.

Ultimately, however, Whitefield contributed to a more widespread and profound revival than established clergy expected or desired. The agitated ministers who began to follow Whitefield divided Congregational Massachusetts, especially in country towns to Boston’s west. In those locales, revival meetings led to congregants swooning and fainting as part of their conversion experience. Growing clerical animosity toward these theatrics caused most established Congregational ministers to retract their support. To these ministers, later called Old Lights, sermons should be firmly rooted in the intellect, with worship dignified and restrained. The itinerant, uneducated preacher that the revival began to spawn repulsed them.

Further, in 1741 Whitefield himself offended establishment authorities when he published his first New England tour’s journal. In it, he called Harvard and Yale “seminaries of paganism” whose “light is darkness.” To Whitefield these colleges dedicated to training Congregational ministers largely fueled the dangerous rational direction the Massachusetts’ church had been taking. He condemned ministers for no longer requiring a conversion experience for church membership; Rev. Hancock was among those who did not. Further, Whitefield questioned the legitimacy of unconverted ministers, implying that they were frauds hiding their lack of conversion behind worthless educations.

The revival’s emphasis on conversion and emotion over rationality threatened conventional authority. In most New England towns the minister exercised enormous influence over his parishioners’ social, economic, and political lives. But to New Lights the conversion experience was God’s great equalizer, exercising a social leveling effect that placed all converted individuals on the same level regardless of wealth. An unconverted minister might be considered inferior to his parishioners, opening him to challenges. Although Old Light ministers considered the born-again event an important, but not essential, component of ministerial preparation, itinerant ministers believed that it superseded education. Rev. Hancock wrote of his experience in his commonplace book, “Though I cannot tell the exact time when, or the manner how, or the means and instruments by which the work of grace was wrought in me, yet I think I may draw the conclusion, that God has made me his.” This may not have been the sudden, overwhelming experience that would have passed muster if challenged. He was not.

Also at issue was Calvinist doctrine itself. Whitefield and his acolytes accused some established ministers of Arminianism; that is, believing that good behavior on earth improved an individual’s chance at salvation. To an orthodox Calvinist, which the New Light ministers claimed to be, God’s grace, his free gift of salvation, lay outside human control. To believe otherwise was to deny God’s omnipotence. Arminians did not actually espouse good works as enhancing one’s chances as salvation. Instead, they suggested that good behavior served as a preparatory stage for God’s free gift of grace.

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But most Old Light ministers at the time would publically deny the Arminian mantle, which became associated with the Church of England.

While the Great Awakening’s fire burned bright, some parishes opposed their ministers, and on occasion removed him. In others, division within the parish over doctrine led to the creation of a separate church. This happened in neighboring Concord, Massachusetts.\(^{37}\) Doctrinal divisions in a congregation did not disappear even after the revival’s fire had dimmed. Hancock’s son-in-law, Rev. Nicholas Bowes, left his Bedford parish in 1753, likely over a dispute related to conversion and/or Arminianism.\(^ {38}\) A native of Lexington, Rev. Matthew Bridge faced discord over these issues upon his settlement in Framingham, in 1745.\(^ {39}\)

The Great Awakening’s greatest influence came in the years 1740-43 and began to decline thereafter. By the time Whitefield planned his return visit to Boston in 1744, Congregational authorities had aligned against him. Now Whitefield faced opposition from many, but not all, Boston ministers.

Throughout the growing discord caused by the Great Awakening in the 1740s, Lexington remained relatively tranquil, largely due to the moderation and political skills of Rev. John Hancock. He considered himself an “Old Calvinist,” a group taking a middle road between the excesses of the revivalists and the rationality it attacked. Although he did not take issue with many New Lights’ theological precepts, he disagreed with their disdain for education in training the ministry and their embrace of the exuberant preaching style. Earlier, in 1726 Hancock, in an ordination sermon for his son John, underscored his distaste for an uneducated ministry. He argued that “an ignorant unlearned unskillful and injudicious ministry is the bane of the Church.” While the object of his scorn in that sermon were the numerous radical sects that arose during the English Revolution beginning in 1640, he could have turned the words on some of the itinerant preachers of the Great Awakening.\(^ {40}\) But he was too pragmatic to be divisive.

This then was Hancock’s greatest objection to the revival— that it divided churches, setting a parish against itself. Consequently, he eschewed criticizing the Great Awakening publically, preferring instead to work behind the scenes. In 1745 Rev. Hancock chaired a meeting of ten other pastors in his ministers’ association to advise Rev. Nathaniel Appleton concerning a request made by his Cambridge parish to invite Rev. Whitefield to his pulpit. The group unanimously advised against Whitefield’s preaching in Appleton’s church due to Whitefield’s “principles, expressions and conduct.”\(^ {41}\) Although Hancock was no Arminian, he remained open-minded, accepting

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an invitation to outspoken rationalist Jonathan Mayhew’s ordination at the West Congregational Church when most Boston clergy refused. Hancock’s political pragmatism worked. The Lexington church did not split. Instead it added eighty souls during the early parts of the Awakening.\textsuperscript{42}

Braintree’s Rev. John Hancock demonstrated more discernible liberal predilections than his more pragmatic father, taking issue with the Great Awakening more directly and with vigor. When evangelical minister Gilbert Tennent wrote a sermon entitled, \textit{The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry}, Hancock responded in 1743 with \textit{The Dangers of an Unqualified Ministry}. In it he defended the importance of education along with the place of intellect in preparing clergy. Braintree’s Hancock allied with Charles Chauncey of Boston’s First Church, a leading revival opponent. Hancock died in 1744.

\textbf{Personality}

Bishop Hancock’s personality, scholarship and wisdom led to esteem not limited to his Lexington congregation. For his last thirty years, Hancock served as the senior minister in Middlesex County, chairing ordination councils for twenty-one local ministers.\textsuperscript{43} While his authority in town remained unquestioned, he exercised a pragmatic rather than autocratic control. Known as a peacemaker, Bishop Hancock possessed no small measure of practical good sense and he lent this pragmatic approach to other town-wide matters, such as settling a boundary dispute among town residents. Hancock reportedly directed the disputants to bring their deeds and plans with him to the area under dispute. Once he listened thoughtfully to both parties’ cases, he made his decision and directed each to cut stakes. “Now drive the stakes here and pile some stones around it,” he said. “There is your line.” With that the controversy had ended, since in Lexington his word was final.\textsuperscript{44} This was not due simply to his position but to his reputation for fairness and good sense.

By all accounts Hancock exhibited an engaging, friendly demeanor, but he could also be decisive and strong-minded. On one occasion later in his pastorate, the church deacons offered to lend him assistance in performing his duties, ostensibly due to his advancing age. They planned to create the offices of Ruling Elders, a position recognized by Congregational churches. In towns that instituted them, the Ruling Elder’s place stood halfway between minister and parishioner. All parishes appointed deacons who helped with financial aspects. But the Ruling Elders aided in the administration of discipline and functioned as a teacher. Clergy largely resisted the appointment of Ruling Elders where none had existed before, since it surrendered pastoral duties to lay people. For the parish, on the other hand, it served as a thinly veiled attempt broaden church sovereignty. Contentious battles ensued in many towns in the first half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century as pastors resisted this, to their mind, unnecessary infringement on their authority. Some historians

\textsuperscript{43} Hudson, 1: 311. Among them were both his sons and his son-in-law Jonathan Bowman.
\textsuperscript{44} Nathaniel Appleton in funeral oration for Hancock quoted in Sibley 3:434.
interpret this divide to be a symptomatic of the growing concern over ministerial distance. In Lexington, age may have provided a convenient subterfuge.

Hancock handled this challenge with humor (some might consider it bitter sarcasm) and authority. When two deacons, who actually aspired to the new positions themselves, approached Hancock with the proposition of appointing two Ruling Elders to “divide the care of the church,” Hancock thanked them for their thoughtfulness, acknowledging that he was indeed old and feeble and expressed his hope that they themselves would be chosen. When the Bishop asked the deacons what they saw as the Ruling Elders’ duties, they took the bait. They demurred, stating that the duties would be for Hancock to decide, since he has studied the history of the church. “Yes,” he replied, “I have studied ecclesiastical history a good deal, and paid particular attention to church discipline and government.” He then outlined the proposed Elders’ duties as he saw them. On meeting days one Elder would “get my horse out of the barn, saddle him, bring him up to the door and hold the stirrup while I get on. . . . The other may wait at the church door and hold him while I get off.” This, he stated emphatically, “was all the work I would allow the Ruling Elders to do for me.” Needless to say, the positions remained unfilled.

Slave

Despite several increases, Hancock’s salary did not keep up with the constant devaluation of the Massachusetts currency. Thus, he likely complained that his real compensation slipped in value yearly. In April 1728 Lexington allocated £85 for him to purchase a slave. Carlton Staples has inferred that perhaps town leaders hoped that with another hand Rev. Hancock might make his farm more productive, thus alleviating his financial concerns. Hancock’s successor, Rev. Jonas Clarke, paid for day labor, especially when his boys were young and it is likely Hancock may have also. This amounted to another drain on his meager salary. At the time of slave purchase Hancock was fifty-seven years old and his sons had left home.

The bill of sale in Hancock’s handwriting refers to “a certain Negro boy called Jack” and later “Negro Jack.” It was quite common for children to be purchased by New England slaveholders as he/she could more easily be acculturated in accordance with the values and norms of the household. In this case Jack was likely a teenager, as Hancock could not afford to purchase a young slave whose productivity projected years in the

45 Youngs, 96-97.
46 Unattributed quotations are taken from Sibley 3:434-435. The same story is told in Hudson I: 313.
47 Carlton A. Staples, “Two Old Time Ministers,” An Address in Commemoration of the Ordination and Settlement of John Hancock November 2, 1698 Over Cambridge Farms Parish [Now Lexington] in the First Parish Church Lexington Mass Nov. 2, 1898, (Arlington: C.S. Parker & Son, 1900), 7. Further evidence of financial concerns can be found in the town records. They reveal the town gave a £20 gift to Hancock also in 1728, and one several years later. Perhaps, this was done to appease complaints. Inflation took hold in Massachusetts in the 1720s.
48 Jonas Clarke Diary, 2:passim, Lexington Historical Society.
future. According to Staples the boy’s name was Cato.\footnote{Staples 7; “Deed of sale from Isaac Powers (Littleton) to John Hancock (1671-1752) for a Negro boy,” 22 April 1728. Reel 2, Microfilm edition of the Hancock Family Papers, 1728-1885, Massachusetts Historical Society.} It is possible his name was changed upon purchase, although with a teenager this was not common. Staples cites no sources, and neither Cato nor Jack can be found in Lexington vital or church records.

Westborough’s Rev. Ebenezer Parkman also purchased a slave boy in 1728 to solve his ongoing labor problem. The slave died soon after. Young Rev. Parkman mourned him in his diary as “the first death in my family.”\footnote{Harriet Forbes, ed., \textit{The Diary of Ebenezer Parkman}, (Westborough, MA: Westborough Historical Society, 1899), vi.} While certainly still held in bondage, the nature of Massachusetts slavery was necessarily milder in part because its climate limited the number of slaves in rural communities such as Lexington. The largest slave owners such as Benjamin Muzzey and Francis Bowman owned three slaves; most of the few in Lexington who could afford a slave owned one. Without large plantations producing staple crops, no need existed for gang labor with separate living quarters. It is likely males worked on the farm doing similar tasks as their masters and women performed household chores.

With a high white to black ratio, the constant interaction with the owner’s family meant assimilation into white culture happened more fully. African culture, therefore, while certainly surviving in some forms, persisted more subtly in towns such as Lexington than in towns of South Carolina. The opportunity for African culture to be reinforced and passed on could not compare with a plantation’s slave quarters. Jack or Cato would have found a small and dispersed black community in Lexington with the 1735 valuations listing twenty in town.\footnote{Hudson 1: 481} In New England, slaves lived as subordinate members of white households. They usually ate at the same table as the family, although not always at the same time, in the small farmhouses. They slept in the house in some corner or garret. In part, this is simply a practical accommodation to sparse slave populations, but it also reflects the different approach toward slavery New England took.

Slaves were signs of status in New England society and were most often owned by lawyers, doctors, ministers and public officials who needed help on the farm while they attended to professional duties. Many country ministers, such as William Emerson of Concord, purchased slaves in order to maintain a farm and remain free to write sermons and make pastoral visits. Hancock’s successor Rev. Clarke never did. Some ministers, like Clarke’s step father-in-law Rev. Cooke of Menotomy, took a principled stand against it.\footnote{Alice M. Baldwin, \textit{New England Clergy and the American Revolution.} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 128 n25.} But this occurred forty years later.

\textbf{Household}

The Hancock household’s social interactions in his original parsonage would have been quite different than in the pre-Georgian structure built in 1737. The earlier vernacular hall-parlor design afforded less private space. In wealthier homes two rooms on a second floor existed; in most homes, though, the upstairs was a half floor. There was...
no all-male or all-female space as would be available in the more compartmentalized later mansions. The cooking was likely done in the multipurpose hall of the first floor. It was the more work-oriented space with cooking, mending washing and sleeping space for those not permanently living in the household. The parlor had the best bed, best tables and chairs. Anything of value, such as china and silver, was displayed there. Hosts entertained in the parlor. Men might have felt free to converse about public issues there, but gender specific private spaces were less available for women. At the time coffeehouses and taverns were also available to men but not women. Without the later more distinct room arrangements the concept of a woman’s “sphere” was not imaginable. The later Georgian houses offered more gender-specific rooms.

Death

In December 1752, at the age of eighty-two, Reverend Hancock died. In his funeral oration Nathaniel Appleton noted that on his last day on earth Hancock had preached his Sunday sermons, then retired to bed. He later awoke with “a great Pain in his Stomach” and died soon afterwards. Appleton eulogized the Bishop as a man of “Wisdom and Prudence” who put his “facetious Temper and Turn of Wit” to good use. One of his many formidable skills proved to be a facility for “preventing Quarrels and Differences.” For Appleton, who himself would serve sixty-seven years in Cambridge, the loss was personal. Hancock had been a colleague for thirty-five year with whom he shared fellowship and he would truly miss his “pleasant and agreeable Companion.”

54 Quoted in Sibley 3:432-33.