



Rhode Island Roots

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“BEFORE 1709” BAPTISMAL RECORDS OF TRINITY CHURCH,
NEWPORT, R.I.

Nicholas S. Bowen

An excellent source of baptismal records in Newport from 1709 through 1780 can be found in the Trinity Church record book.¹ The baptisms start on 27 March 1709 with the baptism of Peleg Brown and end May 1785 although in the later years the number of baptisms dwindle (e.g., only three in 1783), likely a result of the Revolutionary War. The original records are chronological and in very good condition. The recorder would clearly delineate the beginning of a new year and then write each new month a single time and then the days of the month for each baptism. The majority of the entries contain only the baptized person's name. The recorder was sometimes inconsistent on a single day. For example, on 26 November 1752 there were two records: “Sarah Sylvester Sweet” and “Isabella Harrison of Capt. Peter Harrison.” There are also be annotations for “adult,” “indian,” and “negro.” By the middle of the eighteenth century the church was not simply for affluent white settlers: of the 51 baptisms in the single year between 4 May 1747 and 30 May 1748, nine (18%) were marked “negro,” some no doubt enslaved people. Since Anglicans believed in infant baptism, unlike the more numerous Baptists who did not, genealogists find this information very useful in reconstructing families. They also shine light on the individuals who joined this remarkable church, the first Anglican church on Aquidneck Island, one that had a slight whiff of piracy about its founding.²

James N. Arnold included these records in his *Vital Record of Rhode Island*, volume 10.³ He did not work directly from the original, however, but used the work of Dr. Henry E. Turner. Arnold reformatted Turner's strictly chronological

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1. The Record Book containing baptisms and marriages belongs to Trinity Church but is held at Newport Historical Society.
 2. The story of Trinity Church has been told many times, first by George Champlin Mason, *Annals of Trinity Church, Newport, Rhode Island. 1698–1821* [hereafter *Trinity Annals*] (Philadelphia: Evans Printing, 1890), in John Hattendorf's beautiful *Semper Eadem, A History of Trinity Church in Newport, 1698–2000* [hereafter Hattendorf, *Semper Eadem*], (Newport, R.I.: Trinity Church, 2001). See also Cherry Fletcher Bamberg and Michael Dwyer “Margaret (Ward) (Bradley) Wrightington – Part One: Piracy and Piety in Newport,” *Rhode Island Roots*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (December 2012), 169–183.
 3. James N. Arnold, *Vital Record of Rhode Island 1636–1850* [hereafter Arnold, *RIVR*] (21 vols., Providence, R.I.: Narragansett Historical Publishing Company, 1891–1912), Volume 10. Town and Church, 477–536. For an idea of some of the limitations of Arnold's generally useful *Vital Record*, see William B. Saxbe, Jr., “Alice (____) Briggs, or, Down the Rabbit Hole with James N. Arnold,” *Rhode Island Roots*, Vol. 44, No.1 (March 2018), 17–22.

order under each letter to make it consistent with his style in *Vital Record*, that is, alphabetical by last name and then chronological under the given name. Many records in Arnold's book are dated "before 1709" without any explanation of the source of this data. It may be that he himself did not know but simply repeated something from Turner.

In reviewing the original Trinity record I found a single page prior to the first dated entry that is surely the source of this data. The consistency of handwriting and ink suggest that it was written all at the same time, rather than as the baptisms occurred. It is entitled "A list of persons Baptized by Mr. Honeyman before he went to England last." There are two columns side by side, the left labeled "Grown Persons" with 29 names; and the right column labeled "Children" (under age 14) with 36 names for a total of 65 names. No note is made of date, race, or parental information. George Mason published the names of the 29 "grown persons" and refers to the 35 children (actually 36 in the Trinity book) without printing them.⁴ Of the 29 grown persons the original Trinity Church record book first lists the thirteen males followed by the sixteen women. Even within gender the names are not in alphabetical order. There are four names that may represent a couple (Albro, Brown, Lawton, and Shearmon) and two names where there are three adults (Hicks and Woodell). There are eleven women with no male pairing (Banks, Beer, Bowdish, Bull, Carr, Cutter, Goulden, Head, Pope, Stanton, and Thurber). There are four men with no female pairing (Barker, Davis, Little, and Wilcock).

The children's names are mostly sorted by gender. First, there are 21 males (the one exception is Ann Wrightington after Thomas Wrightington), followed by three of unknown gender (the first names are not listed) then lastly eleven female "infants." Since the church was in start-up mode, many of the children were not newborns (e.g., there are five Brown children listed in positions 2 through 6). It would be incorrect to use Arnold's "infant" as an approximate birthdate since the baptized did not qualify as "grown persons." At the time "infant" simply meant "under 14." It is important to state the now mathematically obvious. Arnold's note of these 35 "child" baptisms as "infant, before 1709" could lead an unwary reader to infer an approximate birthdate of 1709. Some of newly baptized "infants" could have been 13-year-old children in 1704, born as early as 1691, creating a nearly two-decade error. When there are multiple children, they are mostly clustered together, though there are exceptions (Hicks, Bull and Shearmon).

A comparison of Arnold's version with the original reveals some errors of transcription and omissions, as well as a tendency to standardize variant spellings. Whether the mistakes are Arnold's or Turner's, researchers should be aware of the problems.

- There is one transcription error: Arnold reports a Samuel Brock which is not in the Trinity record book, but there is a Sarah Brock (both infants).

4. *Trinity Annals* [note 2], 17.

- Four records in Arnold lack the adult/infant information: The Trinity Record Book has Benjamin and Mary Shearmon as adults and Sarah & Elizabeth Lillibridge as children.
- Arnold has Shearman (three times) and Sherman (two times): The Trinity spellings consistently look like Shearmon.
- Arnold has Broeck (three times): The Trinity spellings consistently look like Brock.
- There are two Eliz Hicks (both infants) in the Trinity book and Arnold only transcribed one.

The title of the page narrows the possible dates. A letter from John Lockyer and wardens William Brinley and Robert Gardner was sent to the Society for Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts on 29 September 1702. That Society was responsible for financial support and choice of ordained ministers. The letter states their church is “not being four years yet compleat since we began to assembly ourselves together” and requests support.⁵ In response to the letter, Reverend James Honeyman was appointed in 1704. Contention, turmoil, party faction erupted. Honeyman returned to England in 1708 to solidify his position but was back in Newport by 19 March 1709.⁶ Given the roundtrip travel time to England and the first baptism in the new format on 27 March 1709, it is likely that the following 65 baptisms took place between 1704 and 1708 conducted according to the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.

At this time the congregation met in a small, rectangular building erected ca. 1701, not the grand church built in 1726 that still stands today. Architectural historian Norman Isham studied this first church, creating a “Suggested Plan” and comparing the design to contemporary churches elsewhere.⁷ Remarkable items from that early church survive. A former ship’s bell, the first church bell on Aquidneck Island, called worshipers to services. Replaced by a larger bell in 1709, the first one has been on display in the tower room for over a century. The altar table, used 1702 to 1837, came back to the church in the early twentieth century and is still in use today. The gilt silver chalice and paten from 1703 that sat on that communion table are treasured artifacts.⁸

5. *Trinity Annals* [note 2], 13–17.

6. Mason dated his arrival from his attendance at a vestry meeting in June 1709 (*Ibid.*, 16–17), but Hattendorf details dramatic events in late March as Honeyman sought to re-establish his authority (Hattendorf, *Semper Eadem* [note 2], 33, 36–39). Pictures of the silver, communion table, and bell appear on these pages. For a reproduction of a splendid portrait of Rev. James Honeyman, see *ibid.*, 46.

7. Norman M. Isham, *Trinity Church in Newport, Rhode Island* (Boston: Trinity Church, 1936), 3–22, plan on 9.

8. Hattendorf, *Semper Eadem* [note 2], 29, 38.

Baptisms before 1709

Grown persons (29 names)

Rob Lawton
 Benj^a Shearman
 Gorsham Wooddel
 John Brown
 Rob^t Hicks
 Sam^{el} Albro
 Sam^{el} Davis
 James Little
 W^m Barker
 Jeremiah Willcock
 Isabell Albro
 Penelope Cutter
 Elizth Brown
 Mary Shearmon
 Elizth Lawton
 Ruth Woodel
 Penelope Steinton
 Mary Carr
 Sarah Pope
 Bethia Beer
 Bethsheba Banks
 Susanah Wooddel
 Katherine Thurbor
 Sarah Bull
 Hannah Bowdish
 Mary Goulden
 Deborah Hicks
 Mary Hicks
 Elizth Head

Children (36 names)

John Carr
 Jeremiah Brown
 John Brown
 Robt Brown

James Brown
 Wm Brown
 John Hicks
 Tho: Wrightinton
 Ann Wrightinton
 Robt Shearmon
 George Shearmon
 Wm Charters
 Peter Brock
 Wm Brock
 Thomas Clinton
 John Barker
 Giles Sylvester
 Wm Barbut
 Wm Fennell
 Robt Lawton
 James Bull
 Rob Hicks

*[the following three are single words
 that start underneath the "ic" in
 Hicks]*

Phillips
 Phillips
 Pick
 Sarah Lillibridge
 Elizth Lillibridge
 Elizth Shearmon
 Sarah Brock
 Hester Barritt
 Eliz Hicks
 Sarah Bull
 Mary Peirce
 Elizth Hicks
 Deborah Hicks
[space that could fit a name]
 and Mary Godfrey by
 M B *[ink splat]*

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