

Robert Dennis, John Gillman, Benjamin Hull, and John Smith, accepted the agreement put forth between Carteret, Pierce, Tappen, and Pike (Whitehead 1846:184). By the end of the month, on the 30th of May, Robert Dennis, John Smith, and Benjamin Hull were announced as associates, and gave their township the name Piscataway.

Like its western neighbor Woodbridge, to receive a charter for corporation, a minimum of sixty families were required to occupy the settlement. Home or town lots were to contain ten to twenty acres, but could have extensions, and every purchaser was given a right to both upland and meadowland (Pomfret 1964:10-11). The town immediately began a process of devising land to prospective townsmen. The associated land transactions went unrecorded, and townsmen neglected to have their land officially surveyed by the proprietary government and pay quit rent for their parcels. Though freely engaged in the first of the aforementioned articles, townsmen apparently ignored the fifth, which made them subject to quit rent payment. The absence of survey documents to record the quantity of land upon which inhabitants were required to pay quit rent gave the governor a cause for alarm, as the proprietors who owned and devised land in the colony stood to lose on their investment. In response, on April 4, 1670, Governor Philip Carteret drafted a letter to his Surveyor General Robert Vanquellin in which he exclaimed:

For the Piscataway Men their dividing of their meadows and land without order will signify nothing for I am about to patent their land to particular persons which will be glad to have it upon the same conditions they might have had it, and to turne them out of the country; and then lett them go into England; and dispute it in law with the Lords proprietors who hath the greatest interest. I have not more at present but that I am Sir Yr Assured Friend Philip Carteret (Whitehead 1880:62).

By 1672, to encourage settlers to record their land ownership and pay quit rent, the East Jersey Proprietors refused to recognize deeds issued after July 28 of that year (Pomfret 1964:33). Those that did not apply for land patents from and pay quit rent to the proprietors could have their land forfeited and sold to others. In December of 1672, the proprietors wrote to the Governor ordering that unpaid quit rent arrears since 1670 be paid by 1676 at a rate of one half penny per year, per acre (Whitehead 1800: 106). Many complied, at least in terms of requesting survey warrants from the Governor. Between 1677 and 1679, forty men received land surveys (Monnette 1931:352; East Jersey

Proprietors 1677). Matters became more complicated when in January 1680, upon his death, Governor Philip Carteret's trustees auctioned East Jersey. Twelve, primarily Quaker proprietors led by William Penn purchased the province in 1682. Still, settlement remained slow as most of the proprietors lost money advancing their interests in the province, despite attempts to promote settlement through literature and transatlantic voyages and quit rent collection (Pomfret 1964:41-42; Scott 1846). Much of the settlement retardation was due to the proprietors unwavering demand for quit rent payment and their refusal to grant freeman status to individuals who did not pay their quit rent. To help reconcile matters, attempts were made to amicably settle land claims made under the "Nicolls" land patents, which, individuals who purchased land under Nicolls patents claimed, were not subject to quit rent payments. This included all the land in the Elizabethtown Patent, within which Piscataway was situated.

In April of 1685, the Board of Proprietors, which operated in Perth Amboy, unlike previous proprietors who resided in Europe, was established to aid in the settlement of lands in the province and to collect quit rents (Pomfret 1964:46-47). In Piscataway, the board demanded that the "Old Settlers" of the town waive all rights under patents granted by Governor Nicolls, who sold the Elizabethtown Patent, in order to secure grants of 100-200 acres (Board of the Proprietors of East Jersey 1949:40). Others who petitioned the Board for land were forced to waive rights under the Nicolls patents as a prerequisite for receiving land. Land prices were set at £10 per 100 acres with a quit rent of six pence per 100 acres. Land was leased at two pence per acre. The standard for "Old Settlers" land, or those who settled under Governor Carteret's rule, was set at six pence per 100 acres. Each "Old Settler" was granted the right to two 100-acre lots. The town of Piscataway, however, refused to pay the full amount owed until 1693 (Pomfret 1964:49).

The Board established a system for land distribution and insisted on establishing tight rather than dispersed settlement. It seems that a quasi open-field settlement with dispersed farm, meadow, and wood lots was likely the town plan sought, and that which characterized English towns where land was in short supply. Such a system had already been transplanted in Quaker villages in New England. This settlement system was marked by nucleated villages centered around a town green or commons with meadow and upland tracts radiating from the village edge (Garvan 1951:42-61; Greven, Jr. 1970:42-43; Garrison 1991: 18-19). In Piscataway, the centrally located commons was intended not for shared farming, as in a traditional open-field settlement, though other commons were, but rather for community services, such as a parade grounds, burying place, meeting house, and a locale for town buildings.

Settlement and the Town Commons

From its founding in 1666 until 1677 when the first land grants in the town were officially surveyed and recorded by Governor Carteret, settlement in Piscataway was slow. The location of the Piscataway village was likely dictated by a settlement or at least the presence of a mill prior to its 1666 founding. The exact date of the initial settlement is not known, nor the identities of the original settlers. The mill was located near Silver Lake, south of Woodbridge Avenue. Documents relating to the associated watercourse, formerly known as Old Mill Brook in 1677, indicate that indeed the mill had been present for some time and was considered "old" by the new settlers (East Jersey Proprietors 1677:87). In 1677, only a modest number, at least thirty-nine, made the village their home (Monnette 1931: 351-355; East Jersey Proprietors 1677). Many of the families emigrated from New Hampshire. Those and others included: Samuel Atkins,¹ Samuel Bacon, Richard Bishop, Nicholas Bonham, Robert Dennis, Daniel Denton, Samuel Doty, Captain Francis Drake,² Benajah Dunham, Hugh Dunn, Edward and John Fitz Randolph,³ Israel Foulsham,⁴ Rehoboth Gannet, Charles and John Gilman, James Godfrey, Jabez and Daniel Hendricks, Robert Higgins, Hopewell, Samuel, and Benjamin Hull,⁵ George Jewel, William Jones, John Langstaff, Daniel Lepinton, Jeffery Maning, John Martin, Sr. and Jr., Nicholas Mundy, William Smally, Sr., John Smally, Sr., John Smally, Jr., John and Richard Smith, William Sutton, Michael Symon, and Andrew Wooden (Higgins 1918: 37, 39; East Jersey Proprietors 1677; Board of the Proprietors of East Jersey 1949: 40, 108, 115, 121, 203).

Examination of house lot deeds resurveyed under Governor Philip Carteret by his Surveyor General Robert Vanquellin, but initially conveyed and planned by the town, indicated that the early settlement as it existed in 1677, just 11 years after its founding, consisted of a grid of lots encompassing a central common (Figures 5a and 5b). The lots

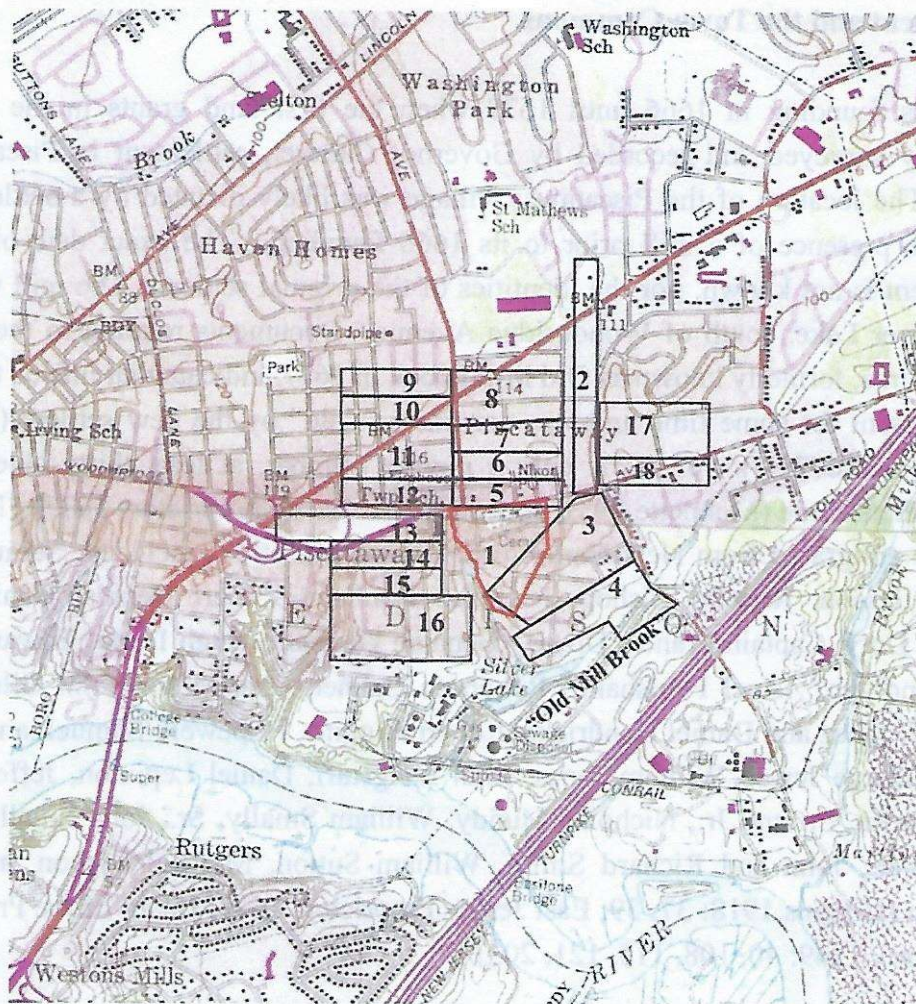
¹ In East Jersey Proprietors, Liber 3, Folio 110, William Jones sold John Smally, Jr. a 10-acre house lot on February 26, 1674, which was given to him by Samuel Atkins. Samuel Atkins appears to have received the lot from his father.

² License to keep an ordinary, Captain Francis Drake, July 15, 1673 (East Jersey Proprietors, Liber C, Folio 92).

³ John Fitz Randolph referred to as John Fitzrandel in deed from William Jones to John Smally, Jr. (East Jersey Proprietors, Liber 3, Folio 110). Rendall Brook may have come from the bastardization of the name Fitz Randolph, as John Fitz Randolph's house lot bounded the west side of the brook.

⁴ Elizabeth Fitz Randolph's house lot bounds the north side of John Gilman's upland lot, formerly Israel Foulsham (East Jersey Proprietors, Carteret's Conveyances, Liber 2, Part 2, Folio 85, March 3, 1677).

⁵ License to keep an ordinary, Benjamin Hull, September 2, 1678 (East Jersey Proprietors, Liber 3, Folio 149).



East Jersey Proprietors 1696, Liber F, Folio 413-414

1. Training Ground Commons 2. Commons (Possibly for Farming)

East Jersey Proprietors, 1677 Carteret's Conveyances: Liber 2, Part 2: Pages 71-87

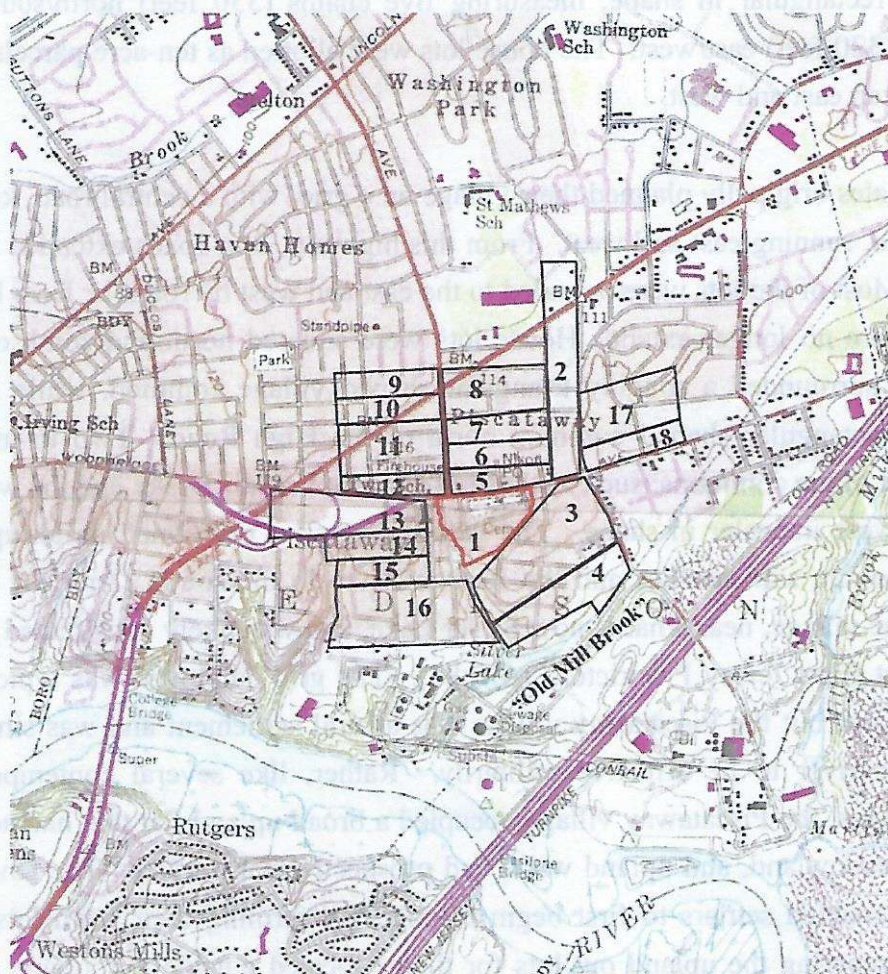
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|--|---|
| 3. Captain Francis Drake (Two House Lots-25 acres) | 11. John Smally, Jr. (Two House Lots-20 acres) |
| 4. Mary Higgins (From Richard) (16 acres) | One 10 acre house lot formerly William Jones |
| 5. Benjamin Hull (10 acres) | 12. John Smally, Sr. (10 acres) |
| 6. Hopewell Hull (10 acres) | 13. John Martin, Jr. (15 acres) |
| 7. Hugh Dunn (11 acres) | 14. John Martin, Sr. (10 acres) |
| 8. John Gillman (Two House Lots-19 acres) | 15. Nicholas Bonham (12 acres) |
| 9. Michael Symon (10 acres) | 16. Eliza Fitz Randolph (Two House Lots-30 acres) |
| 10. George Jewel (10 acres) | Formerly John Fitz Randolph |

Figure 5a: 1677 House lots surrounding the commons. Uncorrected lot angles and sizes.

(Source: 1955 7.5' Quadrangle: Plainfield, N.J. (Photorevised 1981); 1954 7.5' Quadrangle: New Brunswick, N.J. (Photorevised 1981))



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Figure 5b: 1677 House lots surrounding the commons. Corrected property angles.
 (Source: 1955 7.5' Quadrangle: Plainfield, N.J. (Photorevised 1981); 1954 7.5' Quadrangle: New Brunswick, N.J. (Photorevised 1981))



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were generally rectangular in shape, measuring five chains (330 feet) north/south by twenty chains (1320 feet) east/west. The house lots were allotted as ten-acre parcels, and their long sides ran east and west.

The town associates originally planned their village on a grid, with a central road, known as the High Road, running east and west. From this highway, four roads extended north and two south. Most of the lots were bounded to the east and west by roads or farm lanes, many of which are no longer extant. House lots were situated north and south of the High Road and surrounded a roughly triangular shaped village common, while some abutted a long rectangular shaped common north of the High Road. Two town lots located southeast of the commons, such as those of Captain Francis Drake and the widow Mary Higgins, were irregular in shape. The village lots were positioned on an upland landform overlooking salt marshes and the Raritan River to the south. An "old mill" stood south of the village, near what is now Silver Lake, and was likely constructed prior to this settlement (East Jersey Proprietors 1677:81). The grid employed was typical of military town plans, but the Piscataway village was a rural settlement and was situated too far from the river to be effective militarily. Rather, like several contemporary Connecticut villages, the Piscataway village occupied a broad upland flat that had access to salt marsh, meadowland, and upland wood and prospective farm tracts. The ten-acre rectangular lots enabled settlers to first begin manageably farming their town lots and then spread to preparing the upland out lots for tillage located outside the village core. The centrally located commons was similar to the placement of common lands in seventeenth-century New England towns. In addition to the two commons mentioned, other town lands, such as an ox pasture near Bottle Meadow, were present (East Jersey Proprietors 1677:76).

It is probable that during settlement planning, the associates of the town set out to designate a central town commons where community activities, arms stockpiling, and militia training could be conducted. For these purposes, the location of Captain Francis Drake's house lot immediately southeast of the commons seems well sited. Unlike most New England town commons, this common land does not appear to have been used for shared agricultural purposes, or at least documents suggest that agriculture was not its primary function (Wilkie 2007). Exact acreage of the training ground commons is unclear, though it would have been larger than its current size of 7.49 acres today. Its original size was likely closer to 10 or 15 acres. In the late-seventeenth century, the

training ground commons bounded Rendall Brook⁶ (now culverted and possibly moved) to the west, the High Road to the north, and Francis Drake's land to the east and southeast (East Jersey Proprietors 1695a). By the early-eighteenth-century, the western and southern portion of the commons appears to have been encroached upon or even sold.

Not having officially purchased the land for the commons from the East Jersey Proprietors, the townsmen began using the commons for militia purposes soon after settlement began. On November 11, 1695, after the town formally petitioned the Board of the Proprietors of East Jersey for three tracts to be used as commonage, it received a warrant for survey (East Jersey Proprietors 1695a). The survey was completed just two years after the town acknowledged the Board's right to collect quite rent and quite rent arrears, and its ability to re-claim and sell land not purchased from the Board (Pomfret 1964:49). One of the commons included in the survey was the training ground commons discussed herein. The second parcel was rectangular in shape and was located northeast of the first, east of Benjamin Hull's house lot and highway, north of the High Road, and west of a highway (see Figures 5a and 5b). It consisted of 22.83 acres. The third tract, a three-acre rectangular lot, was bounded south and north by land formerly owned by Hugh Dunn and John Gillman. The exact location of this lot is not known, though it was probably situated near Mill Brook and the Bottle Meadow (East Jersey Proprietors 1677:76). This common was likely used as an ox pasture by townsmen. Also on November 11, 1695, the Board required the surveyor general to lay out the streets, highways, burial place, and other public places for and of the town of Piscataway (East Jersey Proprietors 1695b). In October 1696, the proprietors granted a patent to George Drake, Benjamin Hull, Thomas Higgins, and Edward Slater, selectmen of Piscataway, for the three tracts (East Jersey Proprietors 1696). The patent specified that the first tract mentioned was to be appropriated for use as a burying place and for exercising the Town Company, and the others for use as highways and commons. In return, the town was to pay one penny sterling for the land every year on the twenty-fifth day of March. The following year, on November 2, 1697, the board approved a petition by the selectmen of Piscataway to receive a patent for a small piece of meadow land near the town landing (south of the first mentioned tract) to be sold for 40 shillings per acre (Board of the Proprietors of East Jersey 1949:224).

⁶ Rendall appears to be a bastardization of the name Randolph or Fitz Randolph. John Fitz Randolph owned land west of Rendall Brook prior to 1677 (East Jersey Proprietors 1677:85; Monnette 1930:88)

Town minutes, which exist from 1683 to 1966, suggest that during the 17th and early-18th century, the commons, intended for use as a burial and training ground, appears to have contained a community burial ground, town and meeting house, stocks, gaol (prison), and pound (Brush et al. 1964). It is also possible that the town's magazine or munitions repository, of which Major Giles and Lieutenant Doty were appointed to view on January 1, 1683, may have been located in the commons with the other buildings (Brush et al. 1964:3). The pound referenced in documents may have either been intended to enclose stray livestock or to imprison criminals. While the location of the burial ground is known, as it remains extant today fronting the south side of Woodbridge Avenue (formerly the High Road) on the east and west side of St. James Church, the location of other buildings within the commons are less certain. It is probable, however that the stocks and other town buildings fronted the road. In fact, writing in 1944, Reverend W. E. Phillips (1944:4), indicated that Oscar Martin, then 90, informed him that his grandfather identified a stone foundation believed to be that of the town house within the Piscataway burial ground, 60 feet south of the road in the northwest corner of the Skewis burial lot.⁷ The presence of an early building at this location, as well as the likely placement of the stocks near the road to humiliate and punish law offenders, suggests that the town structures were oriented along the main thoroughfare, while the southern portion of the commons was used as a training ground, and possibly as grazing land for village inhabitants' livestock.

On January 18, 1685, the town selectmen ordered that a meeting or town house be built measuring twenty-feet wide by thirty-feet long, with ten feet between joints (Brush et al. 1964:8). John Gilman, Hopewell Hull, John Fitz Randolph, John Martin, Sr., and Edward Slater were to oversee the construction of this building, which was to be used for town meetings, courts, and religious services. That same month, John Fitz Randolph, Isaac Smally, Hopewell Hull, George Drake, and Edward Slater were appointed to lay out the town landing near John Martin's mill south of the training ground commons. Later that year, on September 17, the townsmen agreed that all the town inhabitants were to pay nine pence; the amount to be used toward purchasing nails to build the town house (Brush et al. 1964:9). Construction of the town house was slow. On January 1, 1689, Edward Slater, George Drake, and Isaac Smally were chosen to confront Hopewell Hull about completing construction of the building. The men were also charged with selecting and hiring workmen to finish the construction if Hull refused to complete his obligation

⁷ An examination of head stones in the burial ground by the author failed to locate the Skewis lot.

to the town (Brush et al. 1964:13). Still, on January 2, 1692, selectmen George Drake, Benjamin Hull, Isaac Smally, Thomas Fitz Randolph, and Edward Slater were ordered to see that construction of the town house be finished and to have the stocks and pound repaired (Brush et al. 1964:17). Overseeing repairs to these buildings, and other town property, was a continuous effort by the selectmen. Achieving this goal, however, proved difficult.

The majority of the repairs ordered for town property were made to the white oak and chestnut fences around the burial place. This was done in 1689, 1694, 1705, 1711, 1719, and 1727 (Brush et al. 1964:14, 19, 23, 25, 30, 35). In 1703, the town agreed that the town house, then only in use for roughly eleven years, was to have its doors, windows, and clapboard repaired (Brush et al. 1964:39). John Smally and Joseph Fitz Randolph oversaw the work. Two years later, the selectmen voted to have the stocks, burying place, pound, and town house repaired (Brush et al. 1964:23). Work to the town house consisted of hanging the glazed doors (doors with windows). By March 1712, the town ordered the building of a gaol or prison (Brush 1964:26). It is unclear if the new prison was a secondary structure to the original pound, or if the prison simply replaced the stocks.

In the early-18th century, after the Board of East Jersey Proprietors relinquished its land holding in the colony to the Crown of England in 1702, the culmination of great upheaval by countrymen who refused to pay quit rent, the commons witnessed a significant change. This change came with the construction of a new church. Impetus for the church resulted from Queen Anne's instructions to Lord Cornbury, then the first Governor of New York and New Jersey under the Crown, to exercise the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Lord Bishop of London (Gifford 1944:3). In 1704, the Queen granted a charter to the Wardens and congregation in Piscataway for the formation of St. James Church. Initial church services by Baptists, Quakers, and Anglicans were likely held in the town house, which by the second decade of the 18th century, was in a state of disrepair. Writing in 1711, Reverend Thomas Halliday exclaimed,

"Piscataqua makes a greater congregation than Amboy, and there are some pious and well disposed people among them. Some come from good distances to the meeting, but there is nothing among us like the face of the Church of England, no surplice, no bible, no Communion tables, an old broken House insufficient to keep us from injuries of the weather and

where the Anabaptists swarm in the place and do sometimes preach and we cannot hinder, for the house belongs to the Town" (Gifford 1944:12).

On December 24, 1714, the parish of St. James in Piscataway was officially organized. The vestry was composed of James Barron, Thomas Wetherell, Robert Webster, Charles Clover, Hopewell Hull, Jr., Henry Langstaff, Samuel Walker, John Jennings, William Olden, and Samuel Royce. Barron set out to build a timber church with a "decent Communion table and pulpit" for £100, which was erected in 1724 (Phillips 1944:6). The church stood in the town commons. Fronted by the High Road, the burial ground flanked its east and west sides. Training ground was situated behind the church. The Baptist congregation followed, erecting the First Baptist Church one mile west of the village in 1731 (Drake et al. 1889:57).

Still used by the Baptists for a short time after the St. James Church was erected, it is probable the town house fell into a state of disrepair and was dismantled by the third or fourth quarter of the 18th century (Phillips 1944:5). In fact, town meeting locations appeared to remain static until 1776/77, with the exception of a meeting held at the home of Malachiah Fitz Randolph on April 27, 1762 (Brush 1964:58). With the British presence in and occupation of Piscataway during the Revolutionary War, meeting locations and other town and religious functions were greatly altered.

In response to the British occupation and the sentiment of townsmen, St. James Church Rector Abraham Breach wrote:

In these circumstances, I thought it advisable to shut the church for the present, than to violate the Declaration I subscribed before the Bishop at my ordination, the oath of allegiance I then took, and the natural feelings of my own mind. My churches were accordingly shut from the 7th of July to the 8th of December [1776]; since which time I have officiated altogether at New Brunswick, the church at Piscataqua being at present occupied as a barrack for part of the forty-second regiment. The farmers in this neighborhood seem to have been antagonistic to the British (Phillips 1944:8).

British use of the church as a barrack and hospital continued from Dec. 1, 1776 to June 23, 1777 (Gifford 1944:15).

During the British occupation, a skirmish developed east of the church between the local militia and both the 42nd and Royal Highland Regiments. The latter two were pushed back and constructed a redoubt between the church and the road. Writing in 1944, Reverend Phillips stated that grapeshot were still found in the rectory garden. During the skirmish roughly thirty British troops were killed. Afterward, their bodies were buried in the town burial ground, forming an earthwork east of the church. In 1910, evidence of the earthworks was destroyed when the terrain within the burial ground was leveled (Phillips 1944:8-9).

The St. James Church and burial ground did not go unscathed during the Revolutionary War, though the church escaped the blaze of British arson that devastatingly swept through the town. This was due in large part to the congregation's association with the Church of England, and the loyalty it had to the Crown. Much of the damage in the commons was likely superficial, including dismantled fences, possibly for use as firewood and in redoubt construction, and damage to the church when it was converted into a barrack. Together the town claimed that the British engaged in damage to the church valued at over £97, and ruined 525 cedar fence rails, 106 posts, and two gates around the burial ground at a cost of over £12 (Revolutionary War Damage Claim 1782:200).

During the British occupation, church services were held elsewhere. Town minutes also indicate an interruption in the location of town meetings. This was largely due to an assembly act passed on September 24, 1777, which empowered townsmen to elect town officers in precincts that had previously been neglected (Brush 1964:69). The act was likely in response to the disruption caused by the war and the necessity to conduct town business. From thence, town meetings were held at Quibbletown on October 17, 1777, at the port village of Raritan Landing on March 9, 1779, and from thence at the homes of various selectmen until at least 1802 (Brush 1964:69-88). The relocation of town meetings from the village to other locations also coincided with the closure of the St. James Church during the Revolutionary War, suggesting that meetings had actually been held and conducted within the church prior to the war.