

Zachary Symmes

Zachary Symmes was born in Canterbury on 5th April 1599, spending his early years there. His father, William, was an ordained vicar who had sympathies with the non-conformist movement. William was vicar of Sandwich for most of his ministry. Zachary attended Emanuel College, Cambridge, 1621 to 1625. His first employment was as tutor to children of the patron of his father's church. He was then invited to train for the ministry at St. Antolin's, in the City of London, where he was taught to base services and sermons on the bible. Zachary became rector of Dunstable in 1625. He already had a wife and a young daughter by this time. His salary was £20 pa plus the rent of the house where Priory House now stands. He was rector for nine years, during which time his wife gave birth to seven more children. William Laud, archbishop of Canterbury from 1633 to 1646, was determined to drive out clergy with non-conformist sympathies. Such clergy were likely to lose their living and were in danger of being imprisoned. His diocesan bishop, John Williams of Lincoln, was tolerant of Puritans. It seems that Zachary was already considering emigration to America. Symmes and his family set sail on The Griffin on 1st August 1634. His eldest daughter, Sarah was nine years old, the youngest, Rebecca, was under six months. Conditions on board were very insanitary, many families taking their own livestock with them. The Symmes family were lucky; the voyage took only seven weeks.

The Griffin arrived in Boston on 18th September. Their destination was Charlestown, just across the river. It is estimated that there were 20,000 emigrants to New England in the 1630s. In America, Zachary is more commonly known as Zechariah Symmes. The early settlers in Charlestown had to start from scratch, planning and building a township from nothing. The first three years had been an horrendous experience of failing crops and epidemics. Many early settlers went back across the river to Boston, as the water supply was better. The first stone building in Charlestown was the Great House, which acted both as Church and Town Hall. By 1632 they had their own pastor, who was qualified in law and also the magistrate. The second pastor, Mr. James, was unpopular with the people, so a letter had been sent to England requesting an assistant. This had resulted in Zachary being sent out. Zachary and his family had a house provided for them when they arrived. It was opposite the Great House and had two acres of land as well as a share in a cornfield on the outskirts of the town. There were 72 families in Charlestown, containing about 300 people. 200 years later, there was still a part of Charlestown known as Symmes Corner.

The diet was a mixture of foods brought from England and those that were available locally. Zachary must have been much liked by his new community as he was made a freeman of the town on 6th May 1635. It was decided in the following year that Mr. James should move to another community and that Zachary should be pastor. He continued in that role for 30 years. By 1640 there were almost 1000 people living in Charlestown. Zachary helped to set up a church in nearby Woburn. He attended local Synods. By 1648 he was earning £90 pa, a top salary at that time. One of the teachers in Charlestown, Revd John Harvard, arrived in 1637. He died of consumption in September 1638. He made a death bed bequest which led to the establishment of Harvard University.

Symmes was pastor until he died in February 1671, aged 71. He was buried with honour in the town he served so well. His epitaph said,

A prophet lies beneath this stone;
His words shall live, though he is gone.

He had many descendants, among them captains, lieutenant colonels, businessmen and judges. One, Anna Symmes, married William Henry Harrison who later became the 9th President of the United States of America. He died of pneumonia after only a month in office, the shortest ever Presidency. His grandson, Benjamin Harrison was the 23rd President, serving a full term, from 4th March 1889 till 4th March 1893.

To this day, there is a Dunstable Street in Charlestown. Dunstable Priory is still visited by people from Massachusetts who find it hard to believe that their firebrand preacher, Zachary Symmes, was once a Rector in the Church of England.