

Reverend James Chandler

By Christine Comiskey

James Chandler was born in Andover, MA, in 1706, the third of twelve children born to Thomas and Mary (Stevens) Chandler. James graduated from Harvard in 1728 and on October 18, 1732, he was ordained as the first minister of the newly-formed church in Rowley West Parish at the age of twenty-six. On December 14, 1736, in the midst of a deadly epidemic, James married Mary Hale, daughter of Reverend Moses Hale, first minister of Byfield Parish Church, and his wife, Mary (Moody). James and Mary never had any children.

Reverend Chandler's house and farm were located just west of the first rustic meeting house on the corner of what is now Pillsbury Lane and East Main Street. He raised crops and some livestock and was considered an expert fruit-grower. Records of the Essex North Association show that he introduced and cultivated some of the best apples as well as many medicinal plants. Parishioners often came to him for advice in agricultural matters.

Like many other ministers of that time, Reverend Chandler was a slave-owner. Sabina and her daughter, Phillis, worked for the Chandlers for many years and were provided for in his will.

Reverend Chandler was a Calvinist who believed in the doctrine of "predestination." Itinerant preachers often visited the parish to preach new ideas, but Reverend Chandler refused to hear them. He was very concerned that his flock might be tempted to stray, and spent a great deal of time visiting and talking to church members as a result. Nonetheless, some chose to believe the new ideas being spread about. In 1754, the first split in our church occurred when a group withdrew and became known as the "Anabaptists." This group eventually founded the First Baptist Church of Georgetown.

Reverend Chandler was described as "a man dignified in deportment, pleasant and affable, strictly exemplary in his life and conversation, highly esteemed by his people and respected abroad." He was one of the founders of the Essex North Association, which held its first meeting at his house on September 8, 1761.

After fifty-two years in the ministry, Reverend Chandler's health began to fail. For the next five years, supply ministers preached at the Old South Church more often than he did.

When Reverend Chandler wrote his will in 1787, he left his house and farm to the church with details regarding its care, along with the care of his wife and servant. This included keeping the buildings and fences in good repair and supplying his wife with firewood. There were also specific instructions on the planting, harvesting, and storing of crops, and even the spreading of the manure! (The church sold the property a few years after his death. The house was destroyed by fire in 1825.) He also left ten Pounds to the Church and Parish to begin a Social Library, and to purchase "books of practical religion & Godliness" for the library. Reverend Chandler also wrote in his will: "I do on this solemn occasion, humbly commend my immortal soul into the hands of God who gave it rendering thanks to him for the many undeserved blessings which he hath been pleased to bestow on me in the course of a long life in this world, and begging his mercy through Jesus Christ unto eternal life."

After fifty-six years of faithful service to our Church and community, Reverend James Chandler passed away on April 19, 1789 at the age of 83. He is buried in Georgetown's Union Cemetery.

The epitaph on his grave reads:

*Beneath the honors of this tomb
We've plac'd our Pastor's dear remains
To rest in silence here
Till the last trumpet shall be blown
By the eternal's high command
To bid the world draw near
Then will he wake to sweet surprise
And join the saints above the skies
To sing and triumph there.*



Grave of Rev. James Chandler in Union Cemetery