

A Paradise of Reason

William Bentley and Enlightenment
Christianity in the Early Republic

J. RIXEY RUFFIN

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Introduction

The meetinghouse of the East Church of Salem, Massachusetts, was a small rectangular building with a tunnel-shaped roof running to a steeple on one end from whose top perched a rooster wind vane, still broken from a storm. Inside and beneath, a center aisle bisected a grid of box pews that otherwise covered the floor. Visitors and servants worshiped from the gallery that hung along one wall above diamond-shaped windows that let in what little sunlight brightened the room.¹ The focus of all this attention, of course, was the pulpit, reached by a short series of steps, to which William Bentley rose twice each Sabbath during the summer of 1783 to explain to the parishioners that nearly everything they had heard preached from that spot during the previous half century was wrong.

The man who had been preaching those things for that fifty years was there too, listening as the young candidate for the position of assistant pastor systematically tore down nearly all that he had built up. The Reverend James Diman had been a Calvinist. William Bentley was not. Bentley was offering to Salem's East a new version of Christianity, one of a benevolent deity and salvation through moral living, one that contrasted sharply with Diman's arbitrary God and salvation through conversions. The congregation liked what it heard, went on to offer Bentley the position, and in 1785 forced the senior pastor into retirement. And so two years after the end of the Revolutionary War, the East Church won its own independence.

Bentley's idea—called Arminianism—was new to this particular congregation, but it was hardly new to Christianity. Bentley was in fact operating within a tradition that reached back at least to the Italian humanism of the Renaissance and then forward through the Dutch Remonstrants (of whom Jacobus Arminius was one), English latitudinarians, Scottish moralists, and a generation of Arminians preceding Bentley in New England, together constituting a religious liberalism for centuries winding contrapuntally to Augustinian, Calvinist, and Edwardsian piety. Indeed, a Christianity such as his had become, by the late eighteenth century, the preferred brand of Christianity for numerous cosmopolitan churches in eastern Massachusetts.² But at the same time, Bentley was not like the others. Though he was an Arminian on questions of salvation, he was a rationalist on what were then the more provocative and divisive questions facing eighteenth-century Christians, namely questions about the attributes of God and the limits of God's power to act in the world. Unlike deists, Bentley believed in the God of the Bible, the Judeo-Christian God who has a will and a personality and a hope for humanity, and, further unlike deists, he believed in the essential Christian narrative of creation, declension, and redemption. But more important, unlike the other Arminians, he also believed that God has chosen, since the resurrection of Jesus, to stand back from the natural realm and watch, without interference, the unfolding of the Christian message and the slow march to the promised paradise. Bentley's God may have interfered in biblical times, but no longer. This theology—one that may be called "Christian naturalism"—promised to offer to New Englanders an opportunity for them to keep their faiths in both Christianity and in reason. At least so thought its one American practitioner.

His adoption of Christian naturalism set his career, indeed his life, on a course unusual for a New England Congregationalist pastor. Arminianism set him at odds with his church's senior pastor, but Christian naturalism set him at odds with other Arminians. He was soon linked by print with the circle of English Rational Dissenters that spun around Joseph Priestley, and from this association moved gradually during the 1790s into the political opposition. When in 1800, his townspeople were also ready to embrace Jeffersonian Republicanism, it was Bentley who guided them to it, working in print as well as from the pulpit to raise to power those men in whose hands he thought liberty most secure, those who would best ensure the freedom of conscience and expression so essential to a moral republic.

Hardly five feet tall and weighing in at two hundred pounds, he cut an unusual and dynamic figure, driven by what one friend called "that mercurial stimulant which seems to move you." Bentley "marched well," he said, "tho' stately."³ Headstrong, snobbish, and imperious, Bentley does indeed march

stately through these pages, but though anchored in the experiences of one man, this is less biography than a study of ideas and of their context and their consequences.⁴

Of ideas he had plenty, and he was a meticulous keeper of them, leaving account books, commonplace books, correspondence, and a diary of some twenty-three hundred published pages. Most important, though, are his sermons. Written out, numbered, and dated, there are twelve hundred sermons collected from 1783 to 1799—he typically preached two different sermons each Sunday, one in the morning and another at an afternoon service—at which point he began preaching from rough outlines, most of which do not survive. His is one of the largest extant collections of manuscript sermons of one minister from that period, all the more remarkable considering their unique message—and messenger. Placed in the context of his town—a picture of which emerges from close analysis of a variety of documents—the records of his life demonstrate how theology, with its epistemological, ontological, and scriptural underpinnings, interacted with social realities to form new ideological imperatives about political power and economic station in commercial New England.

To write about eighteenth-century New England religion, to write even about only late-century eastern Massachusetts Congregationalism, is to work within a tremendous body of literature. Historians have written broadly, extensively, and insightfully on a broad range of subtopics, as even a truncated list of works will attest. Some historians, for starters, have approached the field through biography.⁵ Others have looked more broadly at the Arminian and the evangelical strands at midcentury, unpacking as they went their myriad social consequences.⁶ Some historians have worked to uncover the tensions within and between establishment and dissent, showing in the process the complex ideological implications of sectarianism and those who resisted it.⁷ Some have drawn out the meaning of deism for New Englanders.⁸ Some have tried to connect religious thought with political and social ideologies such as republicanism and classical economic liberalism.⁹ Some have found new manifestations of the dynamics of power in pulpit rhetoric and the politics of language.¹⁰ Some have looked more explicitly at religious debate as part of the new public sphere of the eighteenth century.¹¹ Some have tried to examine New England's religiosity, especially its liberal Christianity, against the backdrop of the broader Enlightenment.¹² Some historians have narrowed in on the social consequences of liberal Christianity's relationship with mercantile congregants.¹³ And still others yet have woven the meaning of Bentley's place and time into their larger overviews of the American religious experience.¹⁴

The work in hand is indebted to all of these lines of inquiry; it borrows from each and, I hope, contributes to each in turn. That it can occupy a niche of its own is ascribable largely to the singularity of its subject. William Bentley was a Christian liberal who was also a rationalist; a man who was called to an established Congregationalist church but then eagerly disestablished it; a man who was a supernaturalist in his interpretation of the biblical past but a naturalist in his views of the present; a man who began as a member of what historian Henry May called the “moderate” Enlightenment but who ended as a member of its “revolutionary” strand. Studying William Bentley forces us to see New England not as a continuum or even a cross-cutting of several continuums, but rather as a kaleidoscope of factors all coming together to create an array of options for a new free people.

Given all these options, it must be added, Salemites did not choose his. Christian naturalism all but died when Bentley did, and although he did help create a successful new political party in Salem, it cannot fairly be said that the party would end up as what he had hoped to create. But his ideas and his experiences—and those of his congregation and townspeople, too—are important anyway, for several reasons. For one, his takeover of the East Church is a singular and vivid example of Americans’ growing religious autonomy in the wake of the Revolution. His factionalized self in the 1780s, for another, helps us understand that factionalized decade and to see how liberalism and republicanism could coexist within a citizenry and indeed within one person. Moreover, his move to Jeffersonian Republicanism in the 1790s, initiated by his participation in an imagined community of transatlantic Christian rationalism and hastened by growing social and personal hostilities, can serve as a microhistory for the larger forces polarizing Americans in the beginning of the first party system. Then, his uncomfortable union with sectarians after 1800 animates the religious framework of New England Jeffersonianism and oppositional politics in general. William Bentley was not the region and time’s only religious radical. New England in the early Republic was a time and place of great religious experimentation, even boldness, with the experimenters bringing to republicanism their attendant ideologies of denominational discontent, populist neo-antinomianism, and evangelical agrarianism, but Bentley’s radicalism, a rational libertarian radicalism, was unique in intention and outcome even among these.

Bentley did not “mix” religion with politics. His religion was *infused* with politics, and his politics with religion. In the 1780s, those politics were of the economic and social kind and were, in a word, liberal; in the 1790s, they were of the partisan kind and were republican. But he worked at both religion and politics because, by the mid-1790s, he saw that both, when rightly understood,

had the potential to liberate the human condition. Others would share with him one half or the other of his conclusions but not the two in combination. Christian naturalism, it seems, was too intellectually elitist for the poor and too socially radical for the rich. He had religious allies who were political opponents and political allies who were religious opponents, and in the end he was odd man out, embraced by neither as both came together in the idea that an intervening God rewards wealth and smiles on America.

Finally, he is important because he alone confronted the epistemological and ontological demands of the later Enlightenment while still defining himself as a Christian. Seemingly picayune doctrines and obtuse inquiries mattered. Philosophical questions of ontology (naturalism versus supernaturalism) and epistemology (rationalism versus empiricism), and religious questions of providence (special versus general), soteriology (salvation through conversion versus salvation through morality), and Christology (Arianism versus Socinianism) all made a difference. Questions of biblical interpretation mattered, too: literal understandings of a text redounded to consequences different from those of allegorical understandings, and individuals who thought a text entirely false felt one way if it was a falsehood born of mistranslation and another if it was a falsehood born of an outright lie. Distinctions like these mattered to Bentley and to the people around him. They mattered not least because they lay at the heart of what was perhaps the most fundamental religious question of all in the eighteenth century: namely, what had to be retained in the faith to call it Christianity at all. Bentley's very cross-cuttings, in the issues listed here and in others, present a singular opportunity to explore that question.

This study takes those distinctions and connects them to the real lives of believers, to their griefs and joys, their resentments and charities, their rebellions and communions, their economic choices and political visions. It triangulates among the liberals, the evangelicals, and the one Christian naturalist in an effort to unravel the ideological consequences of religious faith in the early Republic, to understand the implications of theology for party politics and, more important, for politics writ large: the struggles for power between governors and the governed, the ministry and the laity, men and women, slaves and masters, and, perhaps most fundamental, the mind and the heart.

This book is about reason as much as it is about revelation, but not about the core figures of the American Enlightenment, the pantheon that was Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, David Rittenhouse, Benjamin Rush, and others. William Bentley was on the periphery of their clique, but not in it. (Franklin once found himself unable to decipher a Russian book on comets he had been given, so he passed it along to Salem's Andrew Oliver, who, equally at

a loss, gave it to Bentley. Oliver had heard that Bentley had “made no small proficiency in acquiring the knowledge of the Russian tongue.”¹⁵ But it is his peripherality which is instructive. Only an individual such as Bentley who demanded both empirical reliability *and* some form of Christianity can show us how, in short, the Enlightenment’s will to rationalism interacted with inherited orthodoxies. Deists, after all, were not ministers. As much and as deeply as men such as Franklin, Jefferson, and Paine thought about reason and faith, they were not obligated by profession to confront and then reconcile the contradictory imperatives therein or to accept the full personal and social implications of their decisions. They never had to explain Scripture, lead souls to heaven, console the grief-stricken, or foster a community of believers. Bentley *was* so obligated, and thus it is his conclusions rather than theirs which shed so much light on the exchanges between the Enlightenment and the Christian tradition.

What this study provides is the mechanism whereby those exchanges were spread by print and by voice, and in circles beyond those of the Founding Fathers and their scientific friends. At heart, it is a study of the Enlightenment as a dynamic presence, as a force moving geographically, in books and in speeches, across the Atlantic and out to the common people of America; as a force moving chronologically, from the moderate to the revolutionary stages; and as a force moving conceptually, barging its way into the domain of inherited faith. It is a uniquely close look at how conflicting ontological and epistemological demands were negotiated in the late eighteenth century, at how Christianity and rational thought were combined and compromised, used and manipulated, disseminated and politicized; at how the merchants and artisans, sailors and goodwives of Salem’s East Church heard, sang, recited, embraced, and rejected the Enlightenment. This is, in short, a book about how the Enlightenment—the later Enlightenment, in its critical painful stage—was understood and lived.

Bentley’s time—his motives, his expectations—was one that would not come again. William Channing and the rest of the early-nineteenth-century liberals would try to balance faith and reason, too, but only as part of what historian Henry May called the “didactic” Enlightenment. They had little interest in the critical, bold, public, dangerous spirit of the Enlightenment. Indeed, Bentley possessed more of such spirit than many liberal Christians who followed him even a century later. Not until Darwin would the outlines of the ontological debates set during Bentley’s generation be altered. Bentley’s era was not the last of the systematic attempts to have both reason and faith, but it was the last to be convinced that the solution would make both stronger. It was a time, indeed the final one, when it still seemed possible to have it all.

Ideas become ideologies only in a social context. For reasons secular as well as sacred, Salem provides a remarkable laboratory for seeing exactly that transformation. Salem was a port, a commercial community twelve miles northeast of Boston. It filled a small peninsula that jutted eastward into a harbor tucked under Cape Ann, bounded north and south by small rivers flowing into that harbor. The peninsula was roughly rectangular, stretching for a mile and a half east to west but only a half-mile north to south. At its eastern end, the shore pinched and then widened into a large oval patch, and a second, smaller pasture bulged into the North River. But most of the homes and shops were on the main peninsula, through which Main Street ran like a backbone along the town's east-west axis with alleys branching off both north and south like so many ribs. It was in 1783 the sixth-largest town in the new nation, with a population (a year or two later) of nearly seven thousand.¹⁶ It was also one of the nation's busiest. "This place," one visitor had recently noted, "has a rich and animated appearance," and with peace came expectations of trade unhindered by navigation acts, blockades, or privateering—expectations, that is, of new markets, new goods, and new levels of prosperity. Longboat oarsmen ferried crews to and from shore, tall masts swayed with the waves, and sloops wended their way among anchored vessels, tacking this way and that to the harbor islands and beyond. The kinetic energy was everywhere visible and pleasing to the eye for those who saw in such bustle the promise of the new republic. "The ships and edifices which appear intermingled," marveled the visitor, the Marquis de Chastellux, "form a very beautiful picture."¹⁷

Salem was one of the more important ports in New England, and its mariners and captains among the best and most successful in America. In fact, in the spring of 1783, the season of Bentley's arrival, it was Salem's John Derby who brought to New England the news of the preliminary cease-fire between the British and the Americans. Derby had been in Nantes when the delegates signed the peace preliminaries and had soon thereafter made his way westward across the Atlantic. Upon his landing, local printer Samuel Hall set the type and ran the broadsides, and from Salem the news spread that the Revolutionary War was over.¹⁸ Commerce, politics, war, and news: these were the forces that infused secular life in Salem and lent to the town the vibrancy and importance it would enjoy in the first three decades after independence.

But if these were men and women attuned to the lures of commerce and the machinations of power, they were also full participants in New England's rich religious traditions. A Massachusetts town second in size only to Boston, Salem had fewer but a wider array of congregations than did its larger neighbor, and it was one of only two towns outside Boston in 1783 to have abolished any of its parish lines, giving Salemites an unusual mix of churches and the

freedom to attend them. Bentley's East Church was located, as the name suggests, in the eastern half of the Salem peninsula, and it was the only Congregational church there. But the western half was home to *four* Congregational churches, two holding to Arminian views of salvation and two with evangelical views.

The First Church, one of the Arminian ones, was ministered to by John Prince, son of a Boston hatter and holder of a freshly minted master's degree from Harvard. Prince had always shown a bent for tinkering, and his early apprenticeships to a pewterer and tinsmith must have been pleasant ones for a man who would acquire modest renown in England and America for his scientific instruments and inventions. He spent much of his time either in his workshop surrounded by gears and lenses or in his parlor demonstrating, like the central figure in Joseph Wright of Derby's famous painting, the mysteries of the air pump, but on Sundays he took to the pulpit to thank the Creator for a world in which gears meshed, lenses focused, and pumps pumped just so.¹⁹ His pulpit was the most prestigious in town, for the First was the parent of the others as well as the earliest gathered and covenanted church in New England.²⁰ Roger Williams had preached there before being driven from the colony, as had Hugh Peter before he left for England, where his Cromwellian sympathies led to his body being quartered and his head perched like a gargoyle atop London Bridge. Then came John Higginson, who guided his church through the years of the witch trials (in which he did not directly participate, the accusations taking place in the separate parish of Salem Village); his passing, when it came at the turn of the eighteenth century when he was ninety-two, was among the last of those who had arrived in the heady days before 1630, the last of those very few who had witnessed the entirety of the Puritan experiment.

The eighteenth century brought to the First both increased wealth to its members and increased Christian liberalism to its pulpit. By the century's second decade, the town's merchants, most of whom attended First Church, owned about five times as much shipping as did their peers in the next-largest New England town, Newbury.²¹ Two more generations followed, each enjoying the silk clothes, liveried coaches, and Georgian mansions that to John Adams were "the most elegant and grand that I have seen in any of the maritime towns."²² They had less affluent neighbors, to be sure—Appleton the cabinetmaker, Chase the shoemaker, Gale the barber, men who lived with their families above the shops or in back rooms—but there was no mistaking the tenor of the neighborhood. It reeked of money—old, connected, Anglo money. And it reeked of fish. For what had brought them such wealth was the codfish, dried, salted, and sent to Iberia and the West Indies in return for olives, oils, cloth, sugar, and molasses, and in a gesture part whimsy, part reverence,

Benjamin Pickman had directed carpenters to attach a gilded carving of a cod to each riser of his mansion's staircase.

Down the century the First had engaged a series of prominent and ever more Arminian ministers, and John Prince would step fully into the role. (His predecessor, Asa Dunbar, had served for only three years before resigning, later dying too soon to see the wedding of his daughter Cynthia to John Thoreau or the birth of their son—his grandson—Henry David Thoreau.)²³ Prince had received his call in 1779, was there when William Bentley arrived in town in 1783, and would continue to serve that congregation through and beyond Bentley's tenure at the East.

In theology and social temperament, the North Church was exactly like the First, only more so. Its founding members had amicably left the First in 1772 over the choice of who should succeed their ailing minister Thomas Barnard Sr. The majority had liked Dunbar, but others had preferred Barnard's son Thomas Barnard Jr. and so formed their own church so that they could extend a call. Thomas Barnard Jr. was still at the North in 1783 and well suited for his placement. He was, for one, literally at home in Salem, having moved there as a boy when his father accepted the ministry of the First. In fact, his uncle, grandfather, and great-grandfather had all been ministers in Essex County, and his social rank as an incoming freshman at Harvard, sixteenth out of forty-three, had reflected the school's respect for his family and its expectations for his future.²⁴ Four of his parishioners had been classmates in Cambridge, and because his church, the North, had been founded specifically to accommodate him, he continued to enjoy what a jealous colleague called the "uncommon attachment and affection" of his parishioners.²⁵ He appeared to one visitor "a man acquainted with letters," but his writings reflect neither incisiveness nor profundity, absences that garnered little condemnation because such men were expected to converse in breadth more than depth on the ideas of the day.²⁶ He, like John Prince at the First, was competent and intelligent, but neither seemed inclined to controversy. At thirty-five and thirty-one years of age, respectively, Barnard and Prince were young enough to look forward to long ministries and old enough to be suspicious of the latest innovations. Neither would be joining Bentley in his theological or political explorations.

The western half of town also hosted two evangelical churches as well as the two Arminian ones. The ideas that came from these pulpits were very different from those expressed at Prince's and Barnard's. What had been paradoxical and problematic for the seventeenth-century predestinarian—namely, the conversion moment—became for the evangelical of the eighteenth the central goal of existence. Only a soul convinced of its need for grace would in fact receive that grace, only a being whose natural pride had been sufficiently

broken to admit its own alienation from God would be so reconciled and thus born anew, cleansed by Christ's love. The conversion moment was the sine qua non of evangelicalism, the core and essence of evangelical religiosity, for it and only it made a Christian out of a sinner. Only the converted were real Christians, and only they would join Christ in the hereafter. Evangelicals considered themselves the true saints, the "invisible" but real and eternal church, and with them alone was God well pleased. Thus when the Awakening washed over New England in the 1740s, the awakened abandoned their parish churches and established new ones where only converted ministers might preach and only converted congregants might worship, while those who stayed behind renewed their commitment to the parish system and condemned the arrogance of the evangelicals, who by God were not going to get *any* of the communion silver, much less half. But the evangelicals hardly cared. They had new demands upon them now, and to effect conversion experiences among those still slumbering became their new calling.

In 1783, the larger of the two evangelical congregations was the Tabernacle, a group that had grown from its formation in 1736 to become the largest congregation in Salem.²⁷ The First Church had divided that year over accusations that Reverend Samuel Fiske had forged an entry into the church record book. Fiske was driven out, but he took his supporters with him.²⁸ There was nothing apparently theological about the schism, but George Whitefield's visit a few years later gave the rivalry a theological component. Whitefield, the century's greatest evangelical, had come through Salem on his first tour of the colonies. A crowd several thousand strong crammed Salem's common that day in 1740. Some showed up, no doubt, from mere curiosity, but plenty more had come off the ships and in from the countryside to join the revival about which they had heard so much, to receive that infusion of the Holy Spirit that graced the worthy and prepared followers of the young evangelist. Whitefield was pleased. "The Lord manifested forth his glory," he wrote about his day in Salem, and "in every part of the congregation might be seen persons under great concern."²⁹ But that would be the high point of Whitefield's experiences in Salem. Five days later, on his way back to Boston, he preached from the pulpit of the anti-Fiske group, but his auditors there were less receptive than their neighbors had been on the common. These listeners considered alleged moments of conversion only so much derangement and delusion, and besides, the flailing and shouting was decidedly not the stuff of genteel worship. Whitefield no doubt expended himself as much there as elsewhere but, as he recalled, "saw no such power all the day as when I preached here a few days ago."³⁰

The social influence wielded by the anti-evangelical elites made Salem a daunting place for the evangelicals who followed Whitefield's lead. Gilbert

Tennent preached there but left little impression on church members, and there is no evidence that James Davenport even bothered going to Salem.³¹ And subsequent sowers of seeds would find Salem's soil rocky indeed. Fully thirty-three Salemites subscribed in 1743 to Charles Chauncy's anti-revivalist treatise; the town was noticeably absent from a 1744 collection of reports about evangelical successes; and in 1745, when Whitefield went on his second tour through Essex County, he avoided Salem altogether, keeping instead to the friendlier towns and parishes that surrounded it.³² Only at Fiske's church did the seeds begin to take root until, in 1746, the evangelical interest was large enough to call an itinerant preacher, even against the wishes of Fiske himself. When Fiske directed the constable to pull Daniel Leavitt from the pulpit, the evangelicals marched to an apple orchard and ordained him there, a scene described by a member of Salem's gentility as "a perfect Rabble Rout" but more accurately was a bit of guerrilla theater quite in line with the evangelical critique of a complacent ministry and corrosive parish system.³³ The unconverted members of the original Fiske faction then resumed their memberships at the church they had left a decade earlier while the converted members, now a majority, forced Fiske out. Salem's evangelicals—originally a faction of a faction—finally had a church of their own.

The Tabernacle's minister in 1783 was Nathaniel Whitaker, a graduate of the College of New Jersey, a friend of Eleazar Wheelock's and a traveling companion to Sampson Occum. On both sides of the Atlantic, that is, Whitaker had preached up that rush of the Spirit into a heart sufficiently aware of its need for regeneration in Christ. With Whitaker in Salem, Whitefield could finally return to the town he had avoided for thirty years, in fact preaching one of his very last sermons from the pulpit of the Tabernacle, his death in 1770 coming not long thereafter in nearby Newburyport.³⁴ Whatever Whitefield saw in Whitaker, others saw as well, to judge from the fact that twenty-eight new members joined the church during his first full year alone, more than in any one year of the church's history up to then, and an additional seventy-two joined before 1783, which was more than double the number of new members at the First in that period.³⁵

The other evangelical congregation was the South Church, formed in 1774 from a schism within the Tabernacle. For if he had established friendships in the highest ranks of transatlantic evangelicalism, Whitaker had also earned a reputation for vanity, hostility, and pettiness, characteristics that were surely not unknown among New England's clergy but that he demonstrated with particularly little provocation. And worse, much worse, Whitaker was a Presbyterian. Most New England churches used a congregational polity, one that gave to each congregation the right to choose its pastor, draw up its covenant, set its rules

for membership, and discipline its members, all free from the interference of such ecclesiastical overseers as presbyteries and dioceses. But as a native of the middle colonies, Whitaker had none of the qualms of New Englanders about such bodies. Rather, he thought that the punitive power of the session and synod was just the thing to beat back the Arminian heresies with which he was newly surrounded and for which he blamed Congregationalism itself. The congregation had agreed to create them, surely thinking that this was the end of his Presbyterian hopes. But when Whitaker did not relent and when, after the meetinghouse burned down in 1774, he modeled and named its replacement after Whitefield's Tabernacle in London, a boxy and steeple-less tent pinnaced in the center—a protest in wood against the classic meetinghouse shape of the Congregationalists—a dozen members left to form the South Church, the fourth of the four Congregational churches in the western half of Salem and the second of the evangelical ones.

The South Church congregants then called one Daniel Hopkins to their pulpit. While at Yale, Daniel had adopted wholesale the subtle and sophisticated arguments that his brother, theologian Samuel Hopkins, had molded from the teachings of Jonathan Edwards. God's sovereignty, Samuel Hopkins argued, is not just absolute, but so absolute that sin exists only because God wills it; regeneration, therefore, is not just unconditional, but so unconditional that trying to please God may in itself be sinful; the glorification of God, finally, is not just righteous, but so righteous that believers should happily accept damnation to further that end. Arminians may have thought the Hopkinsian scheme nonsense, but twenty-one Salemites had seen fit to join the South since its origins.³⁶ Daniel Hopkins was still there in 1783, and he would continue to serve its members into the second decade of the nineteenth century. The Tabernacle, for its part, would rid themselves of Whitaker in 1784.

This then was a stew of theological differences crammed into the western half of town, one with which William Bentley would have to contend from his post over in the east. And contend he would, for each of these factions naturally claimed that theirs was the correct interpretation of Scripture, of the Puritan legacy, and of the requirements for salvation. Although the disputations and pamphlet wars had waned during the imperial crisis and war years, the return of peace in 1783 would bring their return as well. Indeed, there are few better times to analyze the social consequences of faiths than those very years after 1783. Newly freed from monarchy, the men and women of postwar Salem were poised to embrace the spirit of autonomy in ways spiritual as well as temporal. The language of revolution had been truly heard, and the people of Salem were about to exercise their hard-gained rights to happiness and security and the destiny of their choosing.

Salem had impressed the traveling marquis by its wealth and energy, and rightly so. But a quick glance such as his could hardly reveal what Salem meant to the people who lived and worked there. Salem was a launching point for farm boys who had tramped east and an entrepôt for people, things, and ideas migrating west; it was a trading floor for merchants and a shop floor for artisans; it was the first touch of land for grateful young seamen and the last port of call for weary old ones. Above all, it offered a place—and in 1783, a time—for a new beginning. Perched both on the edge of a continent largely unexplored and on the edge of a world order even more mysterious, the people of Salem now looked to the future with as much excitement and anxiety as they had for generations looked out to sea.

In 1783, a new social order was beckoning. *Everyone* wanted something from the Revolution. Merchants expected to return to commerce, since access to fishing grounds in Canadian waters had been part of the treaty, and they as yet did not know that Parliament would block Americans from the British West Indies. Workers and artisans expected access into the more fluid social structure, since privateering had suggested that mobility was more possible than ever, and if money still imposed its own hierarchy, it was not one as relentlessly exclusionist as were the prewar systems of patronage and hereditary privilege. Slaves and freedmen looked to reap the benefits of the ubiquitous rhetoric of liberty and were prepared to take matters into their own hands were they denied. Salem's women, who had contributed to the resistance before 1775 and had suffered along with the men afterward, were hoping for tangible benefits of liberty as well. And the people, the *demos*, wanted the political rights inherent in the republican government just gained.

The Revolution had opened the way for self-actualization in the religious arena as much as in the political. Not that formal theology was less significant than in previous generations. Quite the contrary. Christian thought in all forms remained as important and as divisive in the early Republic as it had been in the colonial period. The fact that church membership in Salem hovered around 15–20 percent is less indicative of irreligiosity or indifference than it might appear, since the members of any one church, those who had in some way experienced a conversion, were far fewer than the pew proprietors, who were likewise a subset of the weekly congregants. Far more than a fifth of the town's adults, that is, sat in the pews each Sunday.³⁷ And their commitments to the importance of what they heard there remained strong as well. First Church member John Gardner, for one, believed in the importance of attending meeting. Gardner was captain of a militia unit, son-in-law of Richard Derby Sr., and a merchant in his own right, a man whose many obligations might well try his

commitment to his church, but in fact he kept a sermon diary in which he recorded on each Sabbath between 1771 and 1779 the two verses from which Asa Dunbar had preached that day. Dunbar impressed Gardner greatly, once giving a sermon Gardner could “with great propriety say was one of the best I ever heard in my life (without prejuditch I hope),” and on another presenting “a verry noble discourse worthy the purrusall of every rational creature.” Weekly sermons, he knew, remained powerful and effective vehicles for moral instruction, and he was not speaking loosely when he wrote that one of Dunbar’s might well serve to “regulate future life and conversation.”³⁸ Not everyone held sermons as highly as did Gardner, but he was not the only Salemite to take seriously the messages that came from the pulpits of the town. The two church schisms in the 1770s themselves suggest that Salemites had hardly become less concerned over polity and their spiritual health. In fact, many people in 1783 believed that religion had never been *more* important, since faith and the behavior it shapes would help ensure, or not, the success of the political experiment they were beginning. Behavior depended on morality, morality on theology, and theology on a combination of ontology, epistemology, and scriptural interpretation. At the end of the war and the beginning of peace, that is, Christianity in all its component parts remained as integral and as necessary to public life as it had at any time in New England’s past. As New Englanders set off on their second great errand, this time in self-governance, they, like their ancestors before them, turned first and foremost to the churches for guidance, and a young minister like William Bentley, rising to the pulpit in Salem for the first time that Sunday in early May, the very first month of the nation’s uncontested existence, had to know that his congregants no less than their ancestors were counting on him to lead them down the right path.

What, finally, makes Bentley such an important object of study is that his solo journeys along the frontier of faith—and the political lessons he picked up on the way—allow a new look at just how theology was used in the early Republic by all believers of all strands of Protestantism. Bentley provides a deeper understanding of religious discourse in this period, an opportunity to probe for the real implications of diverging theologies, for a detailed analysis of how power was wielded and received and of how freedom was granted and withheld by those who claimed prerogative over determining public morality. Bentley arrived at his new home in the middle of two great struggles. One was to make meaning of the American Revolution, to codify in law and entrench in practice the potential for freedom inherent in the military victory just obtained. The other was to make meaning of Scripture, to find fruitful and believable truths

somewhere among the conflicting views of God, Christ, heaven, and hell. Following Bentley in Salem for two decades after 1783 lays bare the processes by which those struggles were played out in the later Enlightenment and illuminates the unease with which faith and reason coexisted in public discourse and private lives.

Prologue

Only later would the year of William Bentley's birth be celebrated as the *annus mirabilis*. There was nothing evidently miraculous about 1759 to those living in it, at least not to those colonists in Boston that summer preparing to go to Quebec. They had done this before. Every time the British engaged the French on the plains of Europe and in the shallows of the West Indies, Bostonians raised the men and the money to fight in the woods of North America. Thrice the English Protestants had fought the French Catholics, and after each, negotiators had signed a treaty leaving matters much as before. And now Bostonians were fighting again, a war that had only recently turned in their favor. Victories at Louisbourg, Fort Frontenac, and Fort Duquesne in 1758 had emboldened the colonists to again attack the fortress on the St. Lawrence.

The Bentley family, like most in eighteenth-century Boston, knew well of war. The paterfamilias had left England in 1711 to come to America to fight the French in the second of the colonial wars. He had placed his twelve-year-old son, Thomas, with a North End shipwright before leaving on *that* war's assault on Quebec and arranged to retrieve him upon return. The attack was a disaster, and Thomas, orphaned, served out his apprenticeship in Boston. The North End, where Thomas grew up and learned to build ships, stuck out from the Shawmut peninsula like a lopsided bubble blown through a short straw, its once-smooth edges by then stubbled with piers. The North End was Boston's maritime district, packed with narrow houses

and taverns and the artisans and sailors who peopled them.¹ For sixty years, Thomas Bentley lived there, building the ships that tied up to those wharves with the goods that connected Boston to the rest of the Atlantic world. In February of 1725 he married Susannah Townsend, a shoemaker's daughter, soon pregnant with twin sons. But both Thomas Jr. and James died at four months, so it was Joshua, arriving two years later, who grew up as his father's eldest son and who took up his father's trade. Thomas and Susannah went on to have nine more children, losing four during infancy, another to smallpox, and another at sea. Only three siblings, all sisters, remained alive in 1757 to witness Joshua's marriage to Elizabeth Paine.² Joshua was then thirty, and Elizabeth was eighteen.

The life on which the newlyweds embarked together would be a difficult one. For ship carpenters and the caulkers and finishers who worked beside them in the yards of the North End, the prospects of a living wage were threatened as much by international diplomacy and the transatlantic economy as by illness and weather. Worse, much of the shipbuilding work had relocated to Newbury, up on the Merrimac River, where timber was more readily available and the harbor more easily defended. Some of the shipbuilders who remained were all but indigent, and some acquired a substantial level of comfort. But most, like Joshua, settled with the economic security that a competency brought, though even that was often out of reach.³ He supplemented his days with a small but growing role in civic affairs, serving variously as town assessor, surveyor of boards and shingles, and captain of the North End fire company.⁴ These and others like it were the more humble town offices, filled usually by tradesmen because the gentry often opted to pay the fine for refusing to serve rather than have to bother with the irritants of weighing flour and rounding up hogs. They were positions that Joshua Bentley enjoyed, though, and he sought them out year after year. And during the war, the responsibility to fight fires in the North End excused him from the responsibility to fight the French in Canada, no small benefit given that almost a third of the eligible males in Massachusetts did serve, and more than three hundred Bostonians died in that service.⁵ Thus he was there in the North End in June of 1759 when, as officers drilled militia on the common and quartermasters inventoried ordnance and townspeople listened to fast day sermons in churches across town, Elizabeth gave birth to their son William.⁶

Those who went to Quebec helped win the war. The fight on the Plains of Abraham was a terrific scene, full of the pomp and color of European battles, and the English emerged triumphant. They took Montreal the next year, and in 1763 the Seven Years' War was over. The French were deposed from the North American continent, and the colonists could look forward to what they

expected to be a return to normalcy. But the fighting left behind more widows and orphans just as the end of hostilities terminated the military contracts of the artisans whose taxes supported the indigent.⁷ Boston was in the grip of a downward spiral, and no group was squeezed harder than the maritime artisans and laborers for whom employment was irregular and unreliable as a matter of course. To make matters worse, the British began to enforce old trade laws and enact new ones to help subsidize the increased costs of running the colonial empire, all of which further threatened shipbuilders because their income depended directly on the success of merchants. Joshua emerged from the war years alive but barely making a living; perhaps that is why he and Elizabeth sent young William to live with her parents.

William Paine, Bentley's maternal grandfather, lived just several blocks away from his daughter and son-in-law. Paine was a miller, ostensibly another artisan, but his life was altogether different from Joshua Bentley's. The bubble of the North End bulged out on its west side, curving back in to form a cove between the North End and the rest of Boston. The water side of the cove had a gated dam that trapped the high tides for powering rudimentary grist mills, which in the 1760s were owned by William Paine. He had inherited the business from his father, and with it an income relatively unaffected by the contingencies of war, navigation acts, and overseas markets.⁸ In fact, he did well for himself. Indeed, when William Bentley was still a boy living in his grandfather's large home facing the mill pond, Paine's real estate holdings were the most valuable in the North End. In 1771, for example, there were eight warehouses owned by North Enders; Paine owned three of them, while no one else owned more than one. There were seven slaves in his tax ward; Paine owned two, while no one else owned more than one. There were six mills, of which Paine owned four, and only one man in the North End owned as much wharfage as he did. In addition, he had a pew at the New Brick Church, which he had attended at least since his wife, Mary, had owned the covenant in 1735 and then likely with greater conviction after he and Mary were admitted as full members in 1750.⁹ He was far from the wealthiest man in Boston—he owned neither vessel nor stock-in-trade and had no money out on loan—but he was better off than most artisans. No one knew this better, or resented it more, than his son-in-law Joshua, whose real estate holdings—consisting of only a home, and that perhaps a rental—were assessed at less than one-eighth those of William Paine.¹⁰

In the autumn of 1765, six-year-old William Bentley, still living with his grandfather, began his formal education at the North Writing School, where he practiced his letters under the careful eye of John Tileston. For many of Tileston's students, his was all the formal instruction they would ever receive.

Others, about 13 percent, went on to the North Grammar School, where they would begin a seven-year curriculum in Latin and Greek. With his knack for languages, Bentley was one of the lucky few and began in the following year a course of studies which—if similar to the one at the South Grammar School—led him through Aesop, Eutropius, Ovid, Virgil, Caesar, and Cicero in Latin before the New Testament and the *Iliad* in their original Greek.¹¹ It was a world in which he felt at home, one to which he could escape and mend the splitting of his soul between the worlds of his father and grandfather every day worsened by the events outside his window.

Paine's revolutionary sympathies are not completely clear, since he had no formal role in town politics and being a miller saved him from taking a public stand during the non-importation crises. And at sixty years old in 1770, he was an unlikely participant in the kind of street action about which family stories are told. But at least some level of Loyalty is suggested in the fact that he and Elizabeth continued to attend the New Brick even when Ebenezer Pemberton, a transplanted New York Presbyterian, began preaching a Toryism strong enough to attract Thomas Hutchinson himself. Joshua Bentley, by contrast, left no doubt about where he stood. Indeed, William Bentley's father fits quite neatly the pattern of poor, orthodox, and politicized artisans who served as the shock troops of colonial resistance, ransacking Hutchinson's home in 1765, intimidating importers in 1767, protesting the seizure of John Hancock's sloop *Liberty* in 1768, pelting British soldiers with snow in 1770, and emptying ships of tea in 1773.¹² Joshua had joined neither the Loyal Nine nor the North End Caucus, which met just a block from his home, the tradesmen members of which, like Paul Revere, were skilled in crafts that placed them higher than he in the artisanal hierarchy. But Joshua was there in the movement nonetheless, doing his part in ways that elude the historical record, and it surely was not his first contribution to the coming revolution when he sneaked out on the night of April 18, 1775, and with muffled oars rowed Revere across the Charles River to begin his famous ride.¹³

William Bentley was already at Harvard by then, having entered in 1773 with his grandfather's backing. But he took his isolation with him. He left no records of breaking windows, playing cards, or any of the violations common to students protected by family status and suggestive of fraternal merrymaking. Neither did he form more than one or two lasting friendships with classmates or forge meaningful relationships with either John Winthrop, the Hollis Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy, or Edward Wigglesworth, the Hollis Professor of Divinity.¹⁴ What he *did* like was languages, particularly those of the Old Testament, and he was good at them, so he worked with Stephen Sewall, the Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Other Oriental Languages and

the third of Harvard's three professors. Sewall had established a reputation as one of the most accomplished linguists in the colonies, and Bentley followed him into the arcane world of the Samaritan, Chaldee, and other ancient tongues, spending at least one winter vacation copying Sewall's extensive handwritten notes.¹⁵ He was talented indeed, but these talents hardly helped form a community of intellectual peers or friends; in fact, they just resulted in more time spent alone.

His grandfather had retired by the time war came in 1775, but his father took a position in the Continental Army as clerk at the "Laboratory," a munitions warehouse on Boston Common.¹⁶ Perhaps his appointment was a favor from a neighborhood friend, since he served under artilleryman William Burbeck, a member of Revere's Freemason lodge. It was a position that suited Joshua Bentley well, and he was even able to get work there for William's fourteen-year-old brother, John. Another brother, Joshua Jr., eighteen, was captured by the British and died that same year in a ship prison in Halifax.¹⁷ William Bentley, however, sat out the war. He was in Cambridge when fighting broke out several miles away, but like many of his classmates he took no part. When the half-dozen brick buildings around Harvard Yard were commandeered by American troops in April of 1775 and the school was forced to reconvene in Concord, Bentley went there, too. Though his peers may have "delighted the Concord maidens" who found in the influx of young men a crop of "student lovers," as Samuel Morison imagined, Bentley took the opportunity to perform his first religious service, substituting with "good success" for an ailing pastor in nearby Acton.¹⁸ The British evacuated Boston in March of 1776, the students and faculty returned to Cambridge, and Bentley was able to resume the relatively stable life of the collegian and budding clergyman well out of range of musket balls and grapeshot. Although the war forced Harvard to cancel public commencements, "Gulielmus Bentley" took his place with the rest of the class of 1777.¹⁹

It was standard practice for graduates bound for the ministry to teach school for a few years while they dug deeper into their own theological studies. Bentley's old schoolmaster had taken up at the South Grammar School, and the Boston selectmen chose Bentley to assist him.²⁰ So right out of Harvard, he began to instill the fine points of Latin translation in seventy young students who were likely more enamored by Washington's campaigns in New York than Caesar's in Gaul. Assistant master at the South Grammar School was a position of some regard in town, not least to the merchant elite whose sons were Bentley's charge. The school educated many of Boston's most promising young men—Bentley's classes between 1777 and 1779 included Harrison Gray Otis and other future notables—and as their instructor, Bentley edged closer to

acceptance into a social circle that had included neither his father nor his grandfather.

After two years at the South Grammar, he was named master of his boyhood Latin grammar school, and a year later, in 1780, with a master's degree in hand, he accepted a three-year appointment at Harvard as tutor of Latin, later of Greek.²¹ So with copies of Sophocles, Xenophon, Demosthenes, and Homer taken from libraries of exiled Tories, he returned to Cambridge.²² But his time there provided little of the friendship and mentoring that it might have to another tutor in another time. He never warmed to his fellow tutors, and the three professors had problems of their own: Wigglesworth, a declining interest in divinity among students; Samuel Williams (Winthrop's successor), a pattern of debt that would end in a forgery scandal; and Sewall, the alcoholism that would force his resignation in 1785. Of his students, Bentley admired Tobias Lear, enough to grieve at news of his suicide in 1816, but few others.²³ John Pynchon, the fragile and histrionic son of Salem's most distinguished lawyer, was likely a source of tension for the young tutor, as was Harrison Gray Otis, again under Bentley's care, who resented "the sophisticated jargon of a superstitious synod of pension'd bigots," an indictment that no doubt included his instructor in Greek.²⁴ And Bentley, it seems, resented them in return. "Do not fancy therefore that the tutor's life is pleasant and happy," he copied from one of his readings. "So far from it, it is rather a state of captivity."²⁵ The continued exposure to the spoiled sons of Boston's wealth was reaffirming his sense of social inferiority. The Revolution had challenged the traditional hierarchical social structure along with the claims about nature and God that had propped them up and the social customs that had affirmed them, but change was slow, and Bentley had been born too early to forget, or be allowed to forget, his humble origins. His father had been a ship carpenter, after all, and, though still at the Laboratory in 1780, Joshua ranked near the bottom of those Bostonians with assessable property and was even forced that year to petition the General Court for an increase in salary.²⁶ He was granted the raise, but Joshua's fortunes would never again turn: in 1783, with the end of the war, he would find himself unemployed and without savings, and at fifty-five he would be too old to get much work doing the only thing he knew how to do. Joshua Bentley, it turns out, would live for thirty-six more years, and not for one day was he more than a hair's breadth from abject poverty.

John Pynchon and Harrison Gray Otis thought themselves Bentley's superiors, and no doubt many of his other students thought the same. Bentley already knew the rules of social hierarchy when he entered into his commonplace book a lesson that lay at the core of earlier European novels about the proper places of men: "Let a man in a low station be ever so much injured by a

person of quality," Bentley copied from an old Spanish romance, "he is obliged to put up [with] the affront, and speak away as if he himself was the aggressor."²⁷ But if he was not at the top of the strata, neither was he at the bottom. Instead he was trapped in some ill-defined middle zone, accepted by no group as its own, disdainful of the working life of his father and forced to bear with grace the condescension of those who might admire his ability to read Virgil but did not embrace him as their equal. An alienated intellectual, he hid in his books and cultivated self-worth in pedantry, making friends only with Albert Gallatin, the temporary French instructor, and James Winthrop, the college librarian and eccentric son of the mathematics professor who was denied his father's chair in favor of the debt-plagued Williams, and though it is not quite right to say that the three of them constituted some sort of proto-Republican clique at Harvard, it is not coincidental and not unimportant that Bentley's only friendships were with men who were as much on the periphery of society as he was and who later, with Bentley, would be among the few notable Jeffersonians from or with connections to New England.²⁸

In addition to serving as schoolteachers or Harvard tutors, aspiring ministers also usually spent an apprenticeship disputing theology, drafting sermons, fine-tuning pastoral skills, and, not least important, assimilating into the existing network of ministers. Not Bentley. At least there is no record of his doing so, and it fits his personality to not do so. But he was still able to supply local pulpits in a minister's absence. Not yet ordained, Bentley could neither baptize nor offer Communion, but he could deliver sermons and provide prayers for the congregation. This he had been doing here and there since his undergraduate days, and by 1778 he was preaching in the block house that Charlestown's First Church had been using since its meetinghouse burned during the Battle of Bunker Hill. From 1780 to 1783, he taught Greek to undergraduates on weekdays and filled pulpits throughout the Boston area on Sabbaths: a few months at the church in Cambridge, most of 1781 at "Little Cambridge" (now Brighton), a few Sundays in Marlborough, the winter of 1782 in Deerfield, three months in Woburn, one month at the New South Church in Boston, one month at the Third Church of Roxbury while William Gordon was traveling south to gather material for a history of the Revolution, and six months at the First Church in Beverly, supplying the pulpit left vacant when Joseph Willard resigned to become president of Harvard.²⁹ Still, no call had come from a church by April of 1783 when the Harvard Corporation voted to extend Bentley's tutorship for another three years. So he accepted the offer and even took another part-time job working on the library's catalog.³⁰ He had been there less than a month when the letter arrived inviting him to come to Salem as a candidate for the assistant pastorate of the East Church.

The church had been created in 1717 when the Massachusetts legislature halved the Salem peninsula to provide easterners a closer place of worship.³¹ The venture had gotten off to a promising start when Cotton Mather delivered the sermon at the ordination of its first minister, but Robert Stanton died nine years later and was succeeded by William Jennison, whose eccentricity and health problems led to a dismissal after another nine years, whereupon he left his wife and three children in Salem and spent his remaining years drifting through eastern Massachusetts.³² The church's record was not, then, an enviable one in 1736 when the congregation found itself in need of a third pastor, but neither was that of the man called. James Diman had graduated from Harvard, but he was neither scholarly nor gentlemanly enough to suit the Harvard overseers, who overruled his appointment to a tutorship, or to satisfy Salem's more elite First Church, who had rejected his candidacy. But he had been acceptable to members of the East and was called to its pulpit. There he had remained.

The forty-seven years of his ministry brought profound changes to the religious landscape of New England, apparent not least in the dissolution of the parish in the western half of town. But Diman's church had remained intact and still served the shipyards, warehouses, and workshops of the waterfront. Whatever popularity Diman had enjoyed earlier had by the 1770s worn thin. The tensions had become apparent when he "absented himself on prudence" from Asa Dunbar's ordination as assistant to the First in 1773, or so surmised Ezra Stiles, who knew about the dissension from down in Rhode Island.³³ Diman did agree to participate in the younger Thomas Barnard's ordination over the North Church later that year, but what he delivered to the packed assembly was a thinly disguised swipe at his own congregation, and nobody would have missed the point when Diman told Barnard, in front of the assembled crowd, how fortunate he was that "all his hearers are his friends," for such "is a favour that but few enjoy."³⁴ Matters continued to worsen: parishioners refused to pay parish taxes between 1775 and 1778, and in 1779 they refused his request for a raise to compensate for the inflated currency. When John Prince was called to the First Church in 1779, and Diman again found himself assisting an ordination, he took full advantage of the opportunity to restate his case. This time, he made no effort to hide his animosity. In his public remarks, he informed Prince that parishioners as a body are not to be trusted, cautioning him specifically against "depending too much on the long continuance of their esteem and affection" and warning him that although he might now feel beloved and secure, "many have had the same hopeful prospect that you now have, and have been disappointed." Ministers all too often complained about salaries, but when Diman lamented the poor clergy who were

being “denied that support which was promised them” and spoke of parishioners who gave “hard speeches” against their ministers and “prejudice[d] their children” against them, it was no secret who he had in mind. And when he let loose on lax churchgoers who resent their ministers’ warnings about sin, it was no secret just whose calls for repentance were going unheeded. Diman closed by trying to rally Prince and the other ministers, “however ill we may be treated,” to bring sinners to salvation “at this time of great degeneracy and wickedness,” but he was alone in his crusade. Barnard was getting along swimmingly with his church, Prince’s prospects looked bright, and neither considered the time to be one of degeneracy or wickedness. Such talk was too gloomy for the cosmopolitans, and no doubt Diman was dismayed when, immediately after he finished, Barnard stood up to give the right hand of fellowship and opened with a jolly pun about the “PRINCE of peace.”³⁵ But Diman’s ministry was no joking matter either to him or to the members of the East Church. He refused their formal request that he step down but did agree, in April of 1783, to audit possible assistants.

Bentley was their first choice. He would preach for a few months on a trial basis, and if members liked what they heard, they would extend a call for him to join the church, undergo ordination, and assume the duties of assistant pastor. If not, Bentley would continue teaching at Harvard and preaching around town while the East Church sent another letter to another candidate. It would be an interesting summer for Bentley and his auditors. How would he, born into an artisan’s family, raised by middling-sort grandparents, and educated at an elite institution, be accepted in a town committed to social distinctions in the midst of a revolution that eroded their very assumptions? And how would he fit into the town’s ministerial community, one already wracked by dissent and suspicion? Back in 1778, another ministerial candidate had tried his luck in Salem and come away noting that “the whole town seems to be divided into separate parties and assemblies; as no two clergymen out of the five will exchange with each other.”³⁶ In 1778, it was just the sort of situation for a young man to avoid, but now, five years later, William Bentley needed a pulpit, and he could hardly afford to be so choosy. He accepted.

The invitation, much less the call, was in many respects an unlikely one, given that Bentley’s ideas were so obviously at odds with those of the senior pastor. Perhaps congregants saw in Bentley an antidote to Diman, since he had in spades the energy and commitment to pastoral duties that Diman lacked. Perhaps it was Bentley’s tutorship; the East had long been stuck with Diman while the liberal churches called one prestigious pastor after another, and now, in 1783, easterners flush with privateering success wanted a minister who reflected their new sophistication. Indeed, Bentley’s stint as a Harvard tutor

was a fact significant enough for John Lathrop to mention in his ordination sermon, for William Pynchon to enter into his diary, and for the editors of the *Salem Gazette* to include in their brief notice.³⁷ But easterners knew, too, that Bentley was no Thomas Barnard born into and for the elites, and perhaps there in that knowledge lay his true appeal. For though Bentley was a tutor, he was *their* kind of tutor, raised in a mariners' neighborhood and sympathetic to the needs of seafaring parishioners. Perhaps, that is, they saw a little of themselves in Bentley, a man of his own making still at arm's length from polite society, a man whose story was theirs as well.