

LaPierre, John ^[1]

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by W. Keats Sparrow, 1991

2 Feb. 1681–ca. 1755

John LaPierre, French [Huguenot](#) ^[2], [Anglican](#) ^[3] clergyman, and early educator, was born Jean de la Pierre in LaSalle, Cévenneu, France, the son of Charles de la Pierre and his first wife, Jeanne Roque. Following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, his father, a "gentleman," emerged as a militant Huguenot leader as he assumed the duties of the Protestant clergy who had been imprisoned or executed. Facing similar persecution, Charles de la Pierre abandoned his homeland around 1700 and moved his family to England, where he became a minister at The Little Savoy in London.

On 8 Aug. 1701, John LaPierre enrolled as a pensioner at [Trinity College](#) ^[4], University of Dublin, Ireland, where on 5 Feb. 1706 he was awarded an A.B. and later, according to contemporary statements, an A.M. On 23 Feb. 1707, he was ordained as a [Church of England](#) ^[5] priest by Henry Compton, the bishop of London, at Fulham Palace; and on 6 May of that year the vicar general to the archbishop of Dublin licensed him as a schoolmaster within the city of Dublin. On 1 Dec. 1707, he was made a deacon at St. Paul's Cathedral, London.

The next year LaPierre was sent by Bishop Compton, under the auspices of the [Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts](#) ^[6], to South Carolina, where he became the friend and confidant of Governor [Nathaniel Johnson](#) ^[6]. For twenty years he served the French parish of St. Denis at Orange Quarter and the Santee church "till the death of the old settlers who did not understand the English tongue." Meanwhile, he assisted at the English parish of St. Thomas at Charles Town, where in 1712–13 and again in 1728 he officiated at the French Protestant Church. He also conducted a school at Shrewberry.

In 1728 he moved to "Cape Fear, alias New Hanover," in North Carolina, as its first minister and helped found St. Philip's Church, Brunswick, and St. James's Church, Wilmington. From here his work as a missionary for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel spread northwards, including, beginning in 1734, the New River Colony (later St. John's Parish) in the new county of Onslow.

Because the New Hanover colonists failed to pay him sufficiently, he was "forced to work in the field" at his plantation, Sandy Bay, a short distance upriver from Brunswick, next to [Roger Moore](#) ^[7]'s plantation. On 9 Oct. 1733 he wrote from [Cape Fear](#) ^[8] to the bishop of London: "There is a certain Colony in this Province that requires my help upon promise of subscribing towards my maintenance with whom I will, with your Lordship's good will, comply upon any reasonable terms sooner than to see the country destitute of the light of the gospel." Evidently obtaining the bishop's approval, he moved the following year (1734–35) to Craven Parish, which had been established by act of the [Assembly](#) ^[9] in 1715 and which in 1741 was designated Christ Church Parish in [Craven County](#) ^[10]. In 1740 he transferred his Cape Fear properties to John Fonville, Jr., a fellow countryman of this parish, in exchange for 360 acres on the Neuse Road at Batchelder (now Bachelor) Creek, about ten miles west of New Bern. He also purchased from [William Norwood](#) ^[11] a half-acre lot (number 357) on Jones Street in New Bern, where he reputedly had a home. Here until his death he lived "in great poverty" while ministering to a wide territory.

The Reverend George Whitefield (1714–70), eminent English evangelist, paid the first of his three visits to "Newborn Town" on Christmas Eve, 1739. On Christmas morning he took the "Holy Sacrament" from LaPierre at the courthouse and preached there during the afternoon. At New Bern Whitefield was "grieved" to learn that the minister had encouraged dancing and had "countenanced a dancing-master, by suffering his own son to be one of his learners." He wrote LaPierre a letter of protest in the conviction that "such a proceeding must be of dreadful consequence to *any*, especially a *new settled*, province."

LaPierre conducted services and provided educational instruction in New Bern and elsewhere throughout the area. At intervals the colonial Assembly appropriated compensation for sermons he preached to the legislators at New Bern, including £50 for his 1739 "claims" and £4 in 1749 for "several services."

Although not listed as a regular rector of Christ Episcopal Church, New Bern, perhaps because of incomplete records, he was heavily involved in its religious and educational affairs. Very likely because of his influence, sentiment was stimulated for the construction of a brick church, completed about 1750. Its foundations have been outlined in recent years at the corner of the site where the third brick church edifice now stands. Owing partly to his influence and partly to the vestrymen's request to English authorities that a new rector be assigned to the parish, in 1752 the church received from King George II a handsome gift of a huge 1717 Bible, a large 1752 *Book of Common Prayer*, and a five-piece silver communion service still in use.

Before the arrival in late 1753 of the Reverend [James Reed](#) ^[12], the first commissioned rector of Christ Church Parish, a

number of chapels had been established in the region, eight of them within the extensive parish boundaries. Credited chiefly to LaPierre, they include a Palatine church or High German chapel on Trent River, which developed into Grace Episcopal Church at Trenton; a chapel at Jasper, later for some years St. Thomas's Church; a Bay River chapel; Maule's Run and Swift Creek Chapel, which became St. Paul's Church in Vanceboro; Grace Chapel, from which came St. John's Church near Grifton; and Atkins Bank Chapel, afterwards reorganized as St. Mary's Church at Kinston. Altogether, he was instrumental in organizing more than twenty churches.

When he visited the regional chapels, he was often away as long as three weeks at a time, preaching and conducting the services for marriages, baptisms, and last rites. It is likely that he also acted as a teacher to "the vast number . . . of children to be instructed" throughout the region. His grandfatherly figure must have been a familiar and welcome sight to the many—young and old—who were touched by his ministry, instruction, and example.

After forty-eight years of active service in the Carolinas, LaPierre grew infirm. Royal Governor [Arthur Dobbs](#) ^[13] wrote that "by reason of his foreign Dialect and his age," he was of little aid to the people. Yet the *Virginia Gazette* ^[14] reported in late 1752 that the septuagenarian missionary had recently attended counterfeiters in the New Bern jail and later on the gallows. The last mention of him in the Assembly minutes is in January 1755 when £20 was voted for him and £10 for Reed.

LaPierre and his wife, Susanna, who was blind, had at least five children, including a son and three daughters. Jeanne, a daughter, was born in February 1706 in St. James's Parish, before the LaPierres left England. Susannah, another daughter, married John Riggs, to whom she deeded sixteen acres at Batchelder Creek in 1745. Prior to 1740, Martha, a third daughter, married Benjamin Fordham, Sr., of Craven County, a planter, a colonial soldier, and from 1746 to 1755 an officer in the North Carolina Assembly. Many North Carolinians are descended from LaPierre through the Fordhams.

LaPierre was probably buried in Christ Church Cemetery or in the Fordham-Bryan Cemetery in the 1100 block of Queen Street in New Bern, where Benjamin and Martha Fordham were buried. In 1968 descendants erected a marker in the Fordham-Bryan Cemetery to memorialize the Fordhams and LaPierre. During the same year a state historical highway marker was dedicated to LaPierre at Brunswick; and in 1976 a plaque was placed in the Christ Church Parish House, New Bern, dedicating an area of the edifice to LaPierre. A tablet in the Huguenot Church, Charleston, memorializes his ministry there.

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Additional Resources:

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