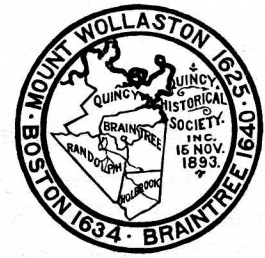


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REVEREND LEMUEL BRIANT AND THE ROOTS OF LIBERAL THEOLOGY IN COLONIAL MASSACHUSETTS

by Catherine Wilson

Lemuel Briant was settled as minister of the First Parish Church of Braintree, now Quincy, on July 29, 1745. Seventy years later, John Adams listed Briant among those who preached Unitarianism long before that doctrine became a significant movement in the Congregational Church. While it is not accurate to label him a Unitarian, it is true that Briant was both a controversial and transitional figure, not only in Braintree, but for all of Colonial Massachusetts.

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Lemuel Briant was born in Scituate, Massachusetts, on February 25, 1721/22, the son of Mary and Thomas Briant. Reared and educated in Scituate he matriculated in Harvard College, from which he received an A.B. degree in 1739. At Harvard, Briant became acquainted with Jonathan Mayhew, his senior by one year, who later became minister of the West Church in

Boston. Both Briant and Mayhew were viewed by contemporary ministers as not only independent but liberal thinkers. Because of their views, both men would be isolated, if not ostracized, by ministerial colleagues in the Congregational Church.

Briant taught school in Plymouth for two years, then returned to Harvard and received his M.A. degree in 1742. Briant preached in Pembroke, Worcester and Middleborough before being called as minister of the North Parish Church in Braintree. Accepting a settlement of one hundred pounds sterling with the promise of an annual salary of half that amount, Briant was ordained on December 11, 1745. He married Abigail Barstow of Scituate and moved into the parsonage located where the Adams Academy Building now stands. The Briants would have two sons, Lemuel, born July 16, 1749, and Joseph, born November 23, 1751.

On June 18, 1749 in Mayhew's West Church, Briant preached a sermon, "The Absurdity and Blasphemy of Depreciating Moral Virtue," that embroiled him in controversy with members of his own church and with neighboring ministers. In the sermon Briant was concerned about the breakdown of moral values and behavior, a breakdown which he believed was facilitated by certain Calvinist doctrines. Briant's carefully worded statement avoided a direct challenge to the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity of humanity, but another paragraph revealed a denial of other doctrines--namely, particular election, original sin, salvation by grace, and the perseverance of the saints.

Briant's published challenge to contemporary theological orthodoxy soon inspired rejoinders. John Porter of Brockton, supported by five other ministers, replied with "The

