

History in West Caln Township – Part 2

In a series of articles, The West Caln Township Historical Commission is presenting a brief portrayal of history in the Township. The second article is about St. John's Church located in Compass. The time frame of this portrayal is during the Revolutionary War period.

St. John's Episcopal Church was established in 1729. During the Revolution it was under the direction of Rev. Thomas Barton, one of the first West Caln residents to voice his Loyalist sentiments. Barton had studied at Trinity College and came to Philadelphia in 1750. After teaching at the Academy of Philadelphia for four years, he resigned to pursue a vocation in ministry. Eventually he became the rector of St. James in Lancaster and missionary to St. John's. The war left him in an untenable position. He claimed to be bound to America by "interest and affection". On the other hand, his faith, his religion, and his heritage prohibited him from supporting the American war effort. Listed as a proscribed person due to his attempted neutrality, he closed St. John's and left West Caln for New York; the first stop on an alleged trip home to England. Once safe behind British lines, he petitioned the Commonwealth to vacate the ordered forfeiture of his property; he wanted to use the proceeds from the sale of his Pennsylvania lands to establish himself in Ireland. The Executive Council acceded to his wishes but Barton, as it turned out, had been less than honest. Rather than leave America, he accepted an officer's commission as a chaplain in a British regiment. He died in New York in May 1780 – three days before setting sail on his return trip to England.

Recently, the West Caln Historical Society was presented information about the Paxton Boys activity in Lancaster which ended in a massacre of the Conestoga Indians. St. John's Church was also intertwined with the events of this era which is further explained in Jack Brubaker's book Massacre of the Conestogas.