Esquire Francis Choate

1701 – 1777

Chebacco Parish, Ipswich, Massachusetts

Long before the first English settler set foot on its shores, the island in the Essex River estuary off the Chebacco parish of Ipswich had its own history — tended by the Pawtucket people, shaped by tidal rhythms no colonial ordinance could alter. The English named it Hog Island in 1638, when the General Court of Massachusetts Bay ordered that all hogs kept within the colony be confined to islands or fenced enclosures during planting season. Every coastal town with a suitable island obliged, and so the name spread up and down the colonial shores like the ordinance itself — practical, unsentimental, and entirely indifferent to the place it described. By the time Francis Choate was born on Hog Island on September 13, 1701, it had already been shaped by two generations of his family into something productive and enduring: farms, fish flakes for drying cod, a working relationship with the sea that was as much identity as livelihood. His father Thomas, who had inherited the island and land from his father John, had built something substantial enough that neighbors called Thomas "the Governor" — not by any election or appointment, but by presence, and command, and the simple fact that the entire island was his.

When “Governor” Thomas moved to the mainland in 1725 and placed the island and farms in Francis's hands, what passed between them was not opportunity alone but the weight of everything already built. The house that Francis received was a heavy timber-frame structure of white oak, proportioned for both permanence and comfort. The home sat on the eastern slope of the island near the river, with what a later observer described as "an agreeable outlook and an extended prospect of land and sea" — which is a very eighteenth-century way of saying the view was spectacular. When that account was written, more than one hundred and seventy years after the house was first occupied, those white oak posts and braces were still sound, the heavy timbers throughout still undecayed — described as capable of withstanding the winds and storms of yet other centuries. In 1725 the home was simply Francis’s, and the one he would inhabit, improve, and make irrevocably his own for the better part of fifty years. But, before he could do any of that, though, he needed to prove he was equal to his father’s legacy — and Francis was not a man who proved himself by sitting still.

Francis’s first industry was his training as a blacksmith under the tutelage of his brother-in-law Isaac Martin (husband of his sister Rachel), and the trade had shaped him as much as the island had. The job of the blacksmith occupied the center of a colonial community's practical life — making tools for agriculture, ironwork for construction, fittings for vessels. It was a trade that connected every other trade, and a man who mastered it understood, in the most concrete terms possible, how things held together and how they failed. Francis put that understanding to immediate use. Working with his brother Thomas, oversaw the construction of three schooners,

fabricating all the ironwork himself. A detail survives in family memory that is worth pausing on: Francis's work in the shipyard was completed with the help of his slave Caesar. -- With this in mind, it is important to view this in its historical context and to look upon Francis's life through the lens of his story and time, not through the lens of modern sensibilities.-- Francis Thomas and Caesar — three men with tools, producing the material from which ships made. Together they sawed out by hand every plank used in their construction. He was not a man who directed labor from a distance. Though he was never a seafaring man himself, Francis became deeply engaged in maritime commerce, owning and chartering vessels in fishing and the coastal trade, weaving the island economy into the broader commercial and personal network that connected Essex County to Boston and beyond. His household, by the standards of Chebacco parish, was thriving — and it was into this prospering household that he brought Hannah.

On April 13, 1727, Francis married Hannah Perkins of Boston, daughter of Isaac and Mary (Pike) Perkins. He was twenty-six, she was eighteen years old born April 4, 1708, and she came from a lineage that reached into the deepest roots of New England settlement — her ancestor John Perkins had crossed the Atlantic in 1631 aboard the ship Lyon, with Roger Williams among his fellow passengers. Her father Isaac was a sea captain. The match joined a family of island farmers and maritime merchants to one already oriented toward the water, and in that sense it was less a joining of worlds than a recognition that they were already the same world. In colonial New England, that counted as romance. They had been married six months when the earth moved.

On the Sabbath night of October 29, 1727, a great earthquake rolled through the province — a horrid rumbling followed by a violent trembling that rocked houses from Massachusetts to New Hampshire, sent people running into the dark, and left the ground still shaking in aftershocks through the winter and into the following spring. For a young couple newly settled in their island home, it was a stark and disorienting beginning. Earthquakes were a genuine rarity in New England — not the familiar hazard they were further south, but something categorically outside ordinary experience, the kind of event that demanded explanation in a society already inclined to read the natural world as a text written by God. The local historian Joseph Felt recorded that the popular belief was that the quake had been a means used by the Holy Spirit to produce a powerful revival of religion in the Ipswich parishes, and Francis and Hannah, swept into the fervor, joined the church very soon after — receiving full communion on February 18, 1727/28, while the aftershocks were still occurring. Whether the earthquake was the only cause or catalyst to his religious epiphany, the family record doesn't say, what it shows is that they entered at a moment when the religious life of their community had been intensified and unsettled, and that the commitment they made in those months did not diminish. Instead, it deepened, steadily, over the decades that followed, becoming the central architecture of both their lives.

Over the years that followed, Francis rose to serve as Ruling Elder of the church — a position of genuine governing authority within the congregation, distinct from the

ministerial role but no less essential to its functioning. He became known throughout the parish as "Esquire Choate," a title reflecting the convergence of religious standing and civic respect that defined New England's most trusted men. The revival energy stirred by the great earthquake combined with a new perspective of religious shift eventually became something larger — the movement historians call the Great Awakening. Popularized by George Whitefield it encompassed a transatlantic wave of religious ferment that divided congregations throughout the colonies over questions of conversion, emotional experience, and ministerial authority. Francis was not a bystander to those divisions. He was, in the family's own words, a "tower of strength" in the revival movement, and in aligning himself with it he stepped into a conflict that would shape the rest of his life. The congregation at Chebacco eventually split, and when it did, Francis was among those who formed the new church — and who recognized immediately that the new church needed a minister well equipped and versed in the new ideology and implementation.

In January of 1746, Francis Choate and his neighbor James Eveleth put their names to a letter addressed to the Reverend Mr. John Cleaveland, who was then preaching to a number of "separated brethren" in Boston embracing the practices of the Great Awakening. Writing on behalf of themselves and others in the Chebacco parish who had separated from the established church, they urged Cleaveland to come among them — to "come and dispense his Holy Word" to a congregation that had found itself without a minister equal to the revival's spirit. The letter, still preserved, is warm and urgent, the voice of men who believed something important was at stake. God had already inclined Cleaveland's heart toward them once before, they wrote, which had been "no small comfort." Now they were asking again, in earnest — a very sincere job offer written in the language of Providence. Cleaveland came, and what began as a letter of invitation became one of the most enduring bonds of Francis's life. The two men would be joined for the rest of their years — one preaching, the other governing, both sustaining a congregation that had been formed through division and would require years to stabilize.

The same household that held devotional books — among them John Flavel's On Keeping the Heart, which sat alongside his Law and Custom House papers in the same bookcase — also held people in bondage. The first was Ned, brought from Africa as a young man and given to Francis by his father. Sabina was purchased next and entered the household in 1734. Ned was a church member before Francis was, a fact that even Francis later acknowledged with something resembling humility. The two slaves married and raised a family of seven children on Hog Island. Their lives unfolded side by side within a structure that allowed proximity without equality, and the household that Francis governed was shaped by their labor as much as by his own. In his will, Francis made provision for the eventual freedom of Ned and his two sons, Caesar, and Titus — conditioned on financial security sufficient to prevent their becoming a burden on the town — a provision shaped by the assumptions of his time, combining intention with limitation. Ned remained on the island and lived to old age.

Francis did not confine his convictions to church and household. In 1740, as the Massachusetts colony struggled under a chronic shortage of circulating currency, Francis placed his name on a petition supporting the Ipswich Land Bank — a controversial scheme to issue paper notes backed by land rather than gold or silver. It was not a neutral gesture, it was bold, brazen and illegal. The scheme was opposed by the colonial government, but embraced by landowners and tradesmen throughout Essex County. Ultimately it was suppressed by the Parliament, which held its supporters (Francis amongst them) financially liable. Francis's name appears in the Commonwealth archives among those assessed and fined, the financial consequences following him into the 1760s. It was a position taken early and paid for over time, and it was entirely consistent with who he was — a man who understood that principle sometimes cost something, and who paid without apparent regret. That same quality would serve him, his family and community well in the decade to come.

Between 1720 and 1743, eight children were born to Francis and Hannah. Three did not survive to adulthood — the first-born son named Francis died in 1740 at twelve years old, another son Jacob also died young, and a second son who in colonial practice was named Francis - not only to honor the father but the deceased fist son – was born in 1743 alas he did not live to maturity. The five children who did — William, Abraham, Isaac, John, and Hannah — grew into a family that would ultimately scatter in every direction possible in the colonies, as New England families reliably did once the next generation found its footing. William remained in Ipswich and inherited the island farm. Abraham moved to Whitefield in the district of Maine. Isaac settled eventually in Pownal, Vermont. Hannah married Rufus Lathrop and moved to Norwich, Connecticut. John, the youngest surviving son also remained in Ipswich he married twice and died in 1791 without children.

Meanwhile, around 1739, Francis had purchased the mainland farm known as the “John Burnham place” — that was owned by his father “Governor” Thomas and that he had once occupied — Francis then shifted his primary residence off of the island and into Town. He settled his two sons, William and Isaac on Hog Island, ultimately giving them full title in 1769. The following year Isaac sold his half to his brother William for £666 and moved his family 60 miles away to Leicester, Massachusetts.

From there, the family continued west. Isaac’s sons – confusingly named Francis and Isaac, grandsons of the elder Francis Choate—were among those who as part of the Ohio Land Company, pushed beyond New England into the Ohio country. In 1791, at a place called Big Bottom on the Muskingum River, that movement met violence. In what became known as the Big Bottom Massacre, a small settlement of families was attacked and 14 were killed. There were only four survivors including Isaac Choate and his brother Francis. The full account of that event, and of their lives before and after it, can be found within the pages of the Isaac Choate book, on the “Governors” bookshelf.

By the early 1770s, as the contest between the American colonies and the British Crown hardened from grievance into open confrontation, Francis was a man of seventy whose name carried undisputed weight throughout the region. He was an

investor in the Land Bank costing him decades of fines. He had helped build a church from a division and held it together through thirty years of conflict. He had moderated disputes, governed congregations, and raised a family that had spread across four colonies. When Samuel Adams — the son of fellow Land Bank investor Samuel Adams senior, now the most consequential political organizer in Boston — distributed the Boston Pamphlet to Massachusetts towns in 1772, cataloguing British violations of colonial rights and calling on every community to declare where it stood, Ipswich chose Francis Choate to run the meeting. His committee drafted resolves that were direct and unambiguous: colonial rights were being violated, taxation without consent was illegitimate. It may have been a statement of belief, but more than anything it was a statement of open rebellion. On May 4, 1775 — two weeks after Lexington and Concord — and again on October 7, 1776, after independence had been declared Francis presided over the meeting of resolve. What the record shows here is that when the town needed someone to hold the room at its most critical moments, they chose the same man three times — and by then, nobody was surprised.

In the years before his death, illness caused the amputation of his right hand, lost to cancer. The man who had worked iron and sawed oak his entire life could no longer do so. He remained present in his household and his faith, which, given the circumstances, was its own kind of statement. The will he signed in December 1775 was thorough in its particulars — each child accounted for, the freedom provisions for Ned, Caesar, and Titus worked out with legal care, a codicil added in August 1777 adjusting bequests to grandchildren with the same attentiveness he had brought to every other obligation in his life. As death approached, he called his children around him, gave each his blessing, and to his son John — the youngest surviving son, who would record his parents' deaths in his journal — he offered the counsel the family remembered longest: "Don't let the world run away with you, John." It is a short sentence containing a long life's discipline, a warning against the particular erosion that prosperity and ease produce, the slow loosening of one's grip on what actually matters.

The account of his final hours has been told and retold, and may have acquired some polish in the telling. But its essentials carry the ring of truth. As Francis lay dying in October of 1777, John Cleaveland — his pastor, the man his own letter had brought to Chebacco thirty years before — jumped on his horse and rode hard to his bedside. "Burgoyne has surrendered!" he called out as he arrived, breathless, the words tumbling forward before he had fully dismounted. The British General John Burgoyne's defeat at Saratoga was the turning point of the war, the victory that would bring France into the conflict as an American ally and begin the long unraveling of British ambitions in the colonies. Francis could no longer speak. But he raised his hand, and his face, by the account of those present, showed what they recognized as joy. The man who had written the letter, built the church, moderated the meetings, and paid the fines had lived long enough to see it matter.

The probate inventory of Francis’s estate, taken in December 1777 barely two months after his death, records what a lifetime of steady work had produced. There was

land—upland, marsh, woodland, and pasture—spread across familiar local names. There were barns and outbuildings, cattle and sheep, stores of grain and flax, and the tools required to sustain it all: saws, weights, and the practical equipment of a working farm. Among these were smaller details that bring the household into focus—a canoe, a set of fish scales, a Province Law Book, and a handful of silver spoons. Before his death, Francis had given away to his children and grandchildren the majority of his estate, the remained was estimated at roughly £355 - it was not spectacular wealth, but it was complete. Everything necessary to maintain a household, support a family, and continue the work was present and accounted for. The inventory describes the outer structure of Francis's life. What mattered just as much was how that structure was arranged and passed on.

What Hannah was as a woman — her temperament, her voice, her daily presence — the records do not say directly. But the will Francis wrote nearly fifty years into their marriage speaks for him with unusual clarity. To Hannah he left the use of all his household goods, a cow of her own choosing, a horse to ride "to meeting" and to mill, the dwelling house and its gardens, ten cords of wood annually, twenty bushels of Indian corn, ten bushels of barley, wool, flax, and eighteen pounds of money paid quarterly. It is a provision of extraordinary specificity — the accounting of a man who had paid close attention for five decades to what his wife needed to live with dignity and independence. He knew exactly what it took to keep her world running because he had watched her keep it running. She was remembered, in the careful language of the family, as "a woman of sterling qualities," and those who compiled the Choate family history noted that among all their ancestry, none were more distinguished for piety than "Esquire Francis and his good wife Hannah." That joint tribute, offered to two people together rather than to either one alone, captures something true about the life they built — that it was genuinely shared, and that both of them were necessary to it.

He died on October 15, 1777. Hannah followed on October 2, 1778, having survived him by less than a year. Their son John recorded their passing in his journal with a tribute worth preserving in full: "They were eminent for their piety and religion and left their dying testimony to the truth of it. May their posterity imitate their virtues."

The house Thomas built in the early 1720s and Francis and Hannah had made their own still stands on what is now called Choate Island — the older name, Hog Island, having finally given way, in 1887, to the one the family had earned across two centuries of stewardship. The white oak timbers hold. The children Francis raised carried his name and his values outward into a country still finding its shape. The enslaved people he had held and then provisioned for freedom lived their own lives beyond the documents that record them. The church he had helped call into being through a letter written on a January morning in 1746 continued under Cleaveland's ministry for years after his death. None of these things happened because Francis Choate was a famous man or a powerful one. They happened because he was, for seventy-six years, reliably present — in the forge, on the water, in the pew, at the front of the room — in a world that needed people who would show up and stay.

His story sits on the shelf in the Governor's house. Pull it down, and you find a man who held things together — land, family, faith, and community — across seventy-six years of a world in motion. Pull another book, and you will find someone who knew him, or loved him, or buried him and will forever be grateful to him.

Slavery in Ipswich and the Choate Household

Names, Records, and the Lives Behind Them

Slavery in eighteenth-century Ipswich was neither the defining engine of the local economy nor a marginal curiosity. It existed within households, integrated into the daily life of the community and sustained by the same legal, religious, and economic structures that governed everything else. By the mid-eighteenth century, Ipswich counted approximately sixty-two enslaved individuals above the age of sixteen, placing it among the more substantial slaveholding towns in Essex County. A decade later, that number had grown to one hundred. These figures are modest by comparison to Boston, but they are sufficient to describe a community in which slavery was present, visible, and normalized within certain households.

Ipswich did not acquire its enslaved population in isolation. Like other coastal towns in Massachusetts, it was connected—directly and indirectly—to the Atlantic trading system that sustained slavery across the British Empire. Enslaved individuals arrived through Boston and Salem, sometimes directly from Africa, more often through Caribbean intermediaries. By the time Francis Choate was born on Hog Island in 1701, this system had been in place for decades, shaping the economic environment into which he was born.

Within Ipswich, slavery operated at the scale of the household. Most families that participated in the institution held one or two individuals, who lived and worked in close proximity to the household itself. They labored in farming, domestic service, and the mixed coastal economy that defined Essex County. They attended church, were baptized, married, and buried within the same community that held them in bondage. This proximity created a structure in which inclusion and constraint existed side by side, without contradiction in the eyes of those who lived within it.

The Choate household was part of this world. Its involvement began before Francis. In 1714, his father, Thomas Choate, recorded the purchase of an enslaved boy in Boston, marking the earliest known instance of slaveholding within the family. Some years later, Thomas acquired a young man named Ned, newly arrived from Africa, and gave him to his son Francis. Ned remained in the Choate household for the rest of his life.

Sabina—called Binah in some records—entered the household in 1734 through a formal exchange with another member of the extended Choate family. The surviving document reflects the standard legal language of property transfer, conveying her to Francis Choate “for and during the term of her natural life.” Within that framework, Ned and Sabina formed a family on Choate Island. They had seven children—Edward, Titus, Peter, Caesar, Jane, Violet, and Peggy—whose baptisms were recorded in the local church. Ned himself was a

communicant, a detail that reflects the degree to which enslaved individuals could be incorporated into the religious life of the community even while remaining legally unfree.

Their children's lives followed patterns common in New England slavery. They were not raised together into adulthood within a single household, but distributed among related families. Edward went to Leicester with another branch of the Choates. Peter was placed with a relative in Ipswich. Titus and Caesar remained with Francis, continuing the labor structure of the household. Two daughters, Jane and Violet, died young after illness, their deaths briefly recorded, their lives otherwise only faintly visible in the record. They were buried on the island, near the household that had defined their lives.

Caesar, one of Ned and Sabina's sons, worked alongside Francis in the construction of vessels, a detail that illustrates the range of labor performed within the household. It also reflects the nature of work in a place like Chebacco, where farming, fishing, and maritime activity overlapped. Enslaved labor in this context did not operate on a large scale, but it was integrated into the productive life of the household in ways that were practical and continuous.

The Ipswich record makes clear that these experiences were not unusual. Enslaved individuals appear by name in church registers, marriage records, probate inventories, and legal notices. They formed families, entered into marriages, and, in some cases, resisted the conditions imposed upon them. In 1772, a man named Cato Haskell ran away from his master in Ipswich, his escape publicly advertised. A few years earlier, a woman named Jenny Slew brought suit for her freedom and won—one of the earliest such cases in Massachusetts. These records reveal a population that was not invisible, even if it was constrained.

At the same time, the documents record the harsher realities of the institution. Estate inventories assigned monetary values to enslaved individuals, often in direct comparison with livestock and tools. Husbands and wives could be separated, children transferred between households, families divided as property was inherited or exchanged. The structure that allowed for baptism and church membership did not prevent these outcomes. It existed alongside them.

Francis Choate's own records reflect this system without exaggerating its scale. His household depended primarily on landholding, skilled work, and participation in the coastal economy. Enslaved labor supported that structure but did not define it. This distinction matters. It places slavery within its proper context in New England: not absent, not dominant, but embedded in the functioning of certain households.

By the later eighteenth century, attitudes toward slavery in Massachusetts were beginning to shift. Legal challenges, religious arguments, and changing economic conditions contributed to a gradual erosion of the institution. Within Ipswich, one sign of this transition appears in the increasing number of wills that provided for manumission.

Francis Choate's will, signed in December 1775 and proved after his death in 1777, reflects this moment of change. In it, he made provisions for the eventual freedom of Ned, Caesar, and Titus. These provisions were conditional. Each man was required to secure financial backing sufficient to ensure that he would not become a burden on the town. If such security could not be obtained, Francis directed that his executors assume responsibility for their care. The arrangement combined an intention toward freedom with the paternal assumptions of the world in which it was written.

In practice, the outcome was shaped by circumstance as much as by intention. Ned remained on Choate Island for the rest of his life, supported within the household. He lived to an advanced age, dying in 1800. Sabina, whose life entered the record as a transaction, lived long enough to see the effective end of slavery in Massachusetts in the early 1780s. The legal structure that had defined her life for decades disappeared within her lifetime, though the conditions surrounding that change remained complex.

To include this history alongside Francis Choate's story is not to diminish him or to judge him by standards his world did not share. It is to see him clearly—as a man who participated in a system that was ordinary in his time and place, who made provisions at the end of his life that reflected both the limitations and the conscience of his era, and who shared his household and his island with people whose names survive in the records and whose full stories do not.

Hog Island was not a distant holding. It was a small, bounded place, surrounded by water, where families lived in close and constant proximity. Ned was a church member before Francis was. Caesar helped build the schooners. Sabina raised seven children on Hog Island, alongside the Choate family raising their own. Their lives unfolded side by side, within the same narrow world. They were part of that household. They belong in the telling of it.

"Ipswich slaves married and their children seem to have grown up in the families of which they were members. They were assigned seats in the meeting house, were allowed to become communicants and enjoy all the privileges of church members… But they were only chattels. If the whim of the owner decreed, they were sold, and families were scattered."
— Thomas Franklin Waters, historian of Ipswich

The Separation at Chebacco: Theophilus Pickering, the Revival, and the Making of a New Church

The revival energy that moved through Chebacco parish in the early 1740s did not arrive into a vacuum. It arrived into a parish governed by a man constitutionally ill-suited to receive it. The Reverend Theophilus Pickering had occupied the Chebacco pulpit since the death of John Wise in 1725 — a querulous old bachelor from a prominent Salem family, staunch in his opposition to the new revival methods from the moment they appeared. His hostility was not merely theological. It was the resistance of a man who understood precisely what the revival threatened —

The authority of the settled minister, the structure of parish life, and the assumption that spiritual truth flowed from the educated clergy to the people were all called into question. The new preaching unsettled these foundations. It suggested that grace might be experienced directly, that conviction might arise outside formal structures, and that spiritual authority might no longer rest where it had long been assumed to reside.

The confrontation came into the open on a Sunday in March 1744, when Pickering preached that "none knew the actings of faith, but God only" — rightly perceived as a direct attack on New Light principles of conversion and personal assurance. Lieutenant Daniel Gidding questioned his doctrine from the pew, loudly, and the meeting broke up in noisy disagreement. The following day, a group of New Lights came to Pickering's house with a formal list of grievances signed by twenty-six of the sixty-three male members of the church. He stood accused on fourteen occasions of disquietude, among them "not preaching plainly the distinctive doctrines of the Bible, with a want of interest in his ministerial work."

Pickering's response was to identify the ringleaders. He argued with them about his words from the day before, took down the names of three men — Lieutenant Thomas Choate, James Eveleth, and Francis Choate — and that evening wrote to all three threatening to take such measures as would oblige them to answer for their offence at the next Court of General Sessions of the Peace, unless they made satisfactory acknowledgement of their error and gave him sufficient security to respond for all

damages which in consequence of their conduct might accrue to him. The letter was not a pastoral gesture. It was a legal threat from a minister to members of his own congregation.

The New Lights ignored it. At the end of March, Pickering sued them for defamation. They were eventually acquitted with costs, which Pickering later offered to pay — but the damage was irreversible. He had moved a dispute about the condition of men's souls into the Court of General Sessions of the Peace, and the men he had named as defendants were not men who absorbed that lightly. Francis Choate, Thomas Choate, James Eveleth — householders of standing, men whose names carried weight throughout the parish — had been hauled before a civil court by their own minister. Whatever residual hope of reconciliation had existed before the suit was filed did not survive it.

The two years that followed were years of grinding institutional stalemate. Pickering refused church meetings. He blocked every attempt to call a council of churches. He warned the dissatisfied members that it was "of no avail for you to keep tugging and striving with your Pastor." When the Reverend Samuel Wigglesworth of Ipswich's third parish intervened in the fall of 1744 on behalf of the New Lights, meetings were held — but Pickering would allow no votes on the matters that divided them. He had the legal standing and the institutional machinery, and he used both. The dissenters had tried every available channel of orderly resolution. Each had been blocked.

On January 13, 1746, sixteen members of the Chebacco church met at Daniel Gidding's home. Most agreed to separate from Pickering's ministry if he would not leave. Two days later they informed the church of their resolution. A short time after that, they covenanted among themselves to form a new church. It was a reluctant decision, made after four years of seeking accommodation, and even then only fourteen men were willing to go through with it immediately. The new church was not born of enthusiasm. It was born of exhaustion.

It was at precisely this moment — January 1746, the covenant just formed, the new church barely a fact — that Francis Choate and James Eveleth wrote to John

Cleaveland. The letter, dated January 27th, 1745/6, addressed to Cleaveland in Boston where he was then preaching to a circle of Separated Brethren, is the founding document of the Chebacco Second Church. It survives in Cleaveland's papers, still legible in Eveleth's hand, signed by both men.

The letter is a call for Cleaveland to come and settle among them as their minister — to come and dispense his Holy Word to a congregation that had covenanted to form a church but had no one to lead it. It opens in the careful formal language of men who understood they were making an argument as much as an appeal: "Revd. Sr. We the Subscribers whom God in his Providence was pleased to Send us in Behalf of our Selves & Sundry other of our Separated Brethren to Seek to obtain one of Christ's Faithful Servants to Come & Dispense his Holy word to us." They remind Cleaveland that God had already inclined his heart toward them once before, which had been "no Small Comfort" to them, and the account of it to their brethren at home had been "to them Joyfull." Now they write again with earnest desire, asking him to pay them a visit that very week. The practical urgency is unmistakable: they offer to come to him in Boston or to have him come to them, whichever he prefers. As to how long he might stay, they will not presume to say — but they hope it may be "Untill God Shall make you Instrumental of turning many Souls to Christ & Edifying many others yt are in Christ already."

The man they were writing to was twenty-three years old and had no pulpit of his own. John Cleaveland had grown up in Canterbury, Connecticut, in a family whose religious convictions ran well ahead of the established church — his father, uncles, and brothers were all drawn to the separatist impulse that the Great Awakening had stirred through the Connecticut countryside. When he entered Yale in 1739, the revival was already fracturing the college. He attended a Separatist meeting in Canterbury during a vacation home and was expelled for it by Rector Clap — cast out of the institution that was, for a Connecticut minister's son, the only road to an accredited pulpit. Without a degree, most of Connecticut's churches were closed to him. He spent a year in Boston preaching to a scattered congregation with no meetinghouse, harassed by "scoffers" and interrupted

mid-sermon by men with clubs. Massachusetts offered a fresh start, but Boston had not offered him a home.

Chebacco did. The farming community of the North Shore — pious, independent, suspicious of clerical pretension, shaped by the same lay religious traditions that had made his own family receptive to the revival — was very much the world he had come from. When Cleaveland first came to preach to the Separated Brethren in February 1746, he preached five times, and when he took his leave the assembly was, by his own account, watered with tears. He returned in the fall for a longer stay. In early January 1747 he accepted the permanent call, and was ordained the following month, just two months short of his twenty-fifth birthday. He would remain in Chebacco for the rest of his life.

His arrival sharpened rather than resolved the conflict with the old church. Pickering, startled by the community's willingness to proceed without him, withdrew his own offer to leave. In March 1747 he published A Bad Omen to the Churches of New-England, attacking Cleaveland's ordination and the legitimacy of the separation. The new congregation responded in October with A Plain Narrative of the Proceedings which Caused the Separation — a careful, point-by-point account of five years of conflict, framed to show that every effort at orderly resolution had been made and blocked. The "Judicious and Impartial," they wrote, would see who was "most to blame, Mr. Pickering and Adherents, who so evilly entreated us for so many Years together, or we who by this Treatment were drove to this Pass."

Pickering died shortly after the pamphlet appeared. His death galvanized his supporters, who published a counter-narrative in February 1748. The legal conflict continued without him — the established church used its taxing power and its access to the courts to press the dissenters for years. Not until 1752, after six years of petitions, court trials, and General Court investigations, did the old church acquiesce to the legal recognition of Cleaveland's congregation. The new church had won its right to exist. The cost in time, money, and communal fracture had been substantial.

What followed was thirty years of patient institutional building — the less dramatic but perhaps more demanding work of sustaining what the conflict had produced. Cleaveland preached. Francis Choate governed, as ruling elder, attending to the practical life of the congregation: its discipline, its finances, its relationship with the wider community. The two men were bound together not only by shared conviction but by the daily texture of running a church in a small place where everyone knew everyone and old grievances did not fade quickly. Families that had been divided by separation still lived side by side. The former church still taxed and prosecuted. The new institution had to demonstrate, year by year, that it was worth what it had cost.

Over time it did. During the tenure of Reverend Nehemiah Porter, Pickering's successor at the old church, membership there declined steadily — men died, younger members drifted toward Cleaveland's congregation, and the energy that had sustained the old church's resistance slowly exhausted itself. When Porter was dismissed in 1766, the remaining old-church members hired Cleaveland to preach to them as well. By 1775 the remnant of the old church had joined the new under a covenant that reflected the principles Cleaveland and his founding members had held from the beginning. The separation that had torn the parish apart in the 1740s ended not in permanent division but in reunion — on the new church's terms, with the new church's minister, in a building the new church had built.

The arc from the defamation lawsuit of 1742 to the reunification of 1775 is thirty-three years. Francis Choate was named in that lawsuit at forty-one. He was seventy-four when the two congregations finally came together under one roof. He had been present at every stage — as defendant, as signatory, as ruling elder, as the community's most trusted lay figure — and had outlasted the minister who sued him, the institution that prosecuted him, and the division that had defined the parish for a generation.

When he signed his will in December 1775, the witnesses who gathered were members of the Cleaveland household: John Cleaveland himself, his wife Mary, and their children Elizabeth and Nehemiah. The presence of the minister and his family at this moment was not a matter of form. It marked a relationship lived over time—through conflict,

through labor, through years of shared work in a small and divided place. The letter that had once called Cleaveland to Chebacco had asked him to come and “dispense his Holy word” among them. Decades later, he was still doing so—now not from the pulpit alone, but within the household of one of the men who had first called him there, a friendship of the longest kind — and in this case, the record of everything the two men had built together, and what it had taken to build it.

Sidebar: The Land Bank Crisis of 1740–41

Illegal Currency and the First Taste of Revolution

The problem facing Massachusetts in the early eighteenth century was not complicated, but it was stubborn. The colonies had no shortage of productive capacity — farms, fisheries, timber, skilled tradesmen — but they were desperately short of coin. Gold and silver specie, the hard currency of the British Empire and the medium by which ordinary people settled debts, purchased goods, and conducted daily commerce, drained steadily out of the colonies through trade with Britain and rarely returned in sufficient quantities to replace what left. A farmer might have a barn full of grain and a field of livestock and still be unable to pay a straightforward debt, because the transaction required coin and coin was simply not available. Wealth existed in abundance. What was lacking was anything portable and universally accepted that could change hands in a marketplace. Ipswich felt this acutely. It was not Boston, with its concentrated merchant wealth and deep-water port. It was a dispersed agricultural community — farms and small holdings spread across places like Chebacco, where a blacksmith had iron and skill, a fisherman had his catch, and a farmer had his harvest, but none of them had enough specie to conduct business the way the imperial economy required.

The colony tried to adapt. As early as 1727, the General Court recognized the scarcity of coin by allowing the Province tax to be paid in commodities — wheat, rye, Indian corn, fish, beef, and pork among them — "all which species shall be of the growth, produce and manufacture of this Province." It was a practical accommodation, sadly it lasted only as long as the treasury did. By mid-summer of 1731 the Provincial treasury was once again empty, and the appeal that went out to the towns asked communities to provide guidance to their representatives on the "weighty affair of Supplying the province Treasury." Ipswich declined to instruct its representatives — a posture not unlike the town's famous tax revolt of 1687, in which a group of Ipswich men, among them Thomas Choate — father of Francis and John — refused to pay an unauthorized tax imposed by the royal governor, an act of resistance for which Ipswich is still known as the Birthplace of American Independence. The ideology and instinct ran in the family, and it ran deep.

The Land Bank was one attempt to solve the currency problem, and it had the kind of appeal that practical solutions to genuine problems always carry. In September of 1740, a group of Massachusetts men began printing paper notes — fifty thousand pounds worth, in varying denominations — and putting them into circulation in exchange for goods and services. These notes were backed not by gold or silver but by land, by the mortgaged property of the subscribers themselves, to be redeemed over time in produce rather than coin. It was not a radical idea so much as a logical one. In communities where wealth existed but could not be liquidated, paper notes offered a way to put that wealth into circulation without waiting for coin that was never coming.

Among the directors of the Ipswich Land Bank was John Choate — Francis Choate's own brother, and one of the scheme's most prominent and tireless advocates. John Choate was not a peripheral figure in this story. He was a lawyer, a member of the General Court, and a man the town of Ipswich trusted. Also among the Land Bank directors was Samuel Adams - father of the Samuel Adams who would later become the most consequential political agitator of the American Revolution. The elder Adams was no stranger to Ipswich; he was known to John Choate and the town's leading men as a neighbor and fellow believer in the currency fight. The Adams family would be financially ruined by the scheme's collapse. It has been observed, with some understatement, that Samuel Adams Jr. had a long memory which stayed with him as he advanced in age and moved towards the Revolution that followed.

Support spread with remarkable speed. By late July of 1740, upwards of eight hundred subscribers had enrolled, with broad support in the House of Representatives. The subscriptions were, in the main, for small sums — which the opponents of the scheme noted with contempt, observing that the Land Bank's supporters were "people of the common class." They meant it as an insult. In retrospect it reads as an accurate description of exactly why the scheme was so threatening to those in power. As many as five thousand Land Bank supporters reportedly marched in Boston in what amounted to a populist uprising against the merchant class and the royal government's grip on the colonial economy. The contest grew bitter and personal in ways that prefigured, with remarkable precision, the conflicts that would consume the colony later.

In Ipswich, the Land Bank was embraced with particular enthusiasm, and the Choate family was at the center of it. John Choate wrote the town's petition in its favor and signed it first. Francis Choate — his brother, the Ruling Elder of the church and future moderator of the town's revolutionary meetings — signed it alongside him. So did Robert Choate and Thomas Choate Jr., along with Andrew Burley, James Eveleth, and nearly a dozen other town leaders. The Choate name appeared on that petition with a density that left no ambiguity about where the family stood. When Governor Belcher began removing supporters from their offices, John Choate was among the first to resign his commission as Justice of the Peace rather than comply.

The Governor dissolved the Assembly for its sympathies and ordered new elections — then dissolved it again when Ipswich returned John Choate as its choice for Speaker, a selection the Governor rejected with equal sharpness. Andrew Burley, another Ipswich leader, was summoned before the Governor and Council and replied with the kind of cool defiance that deserves to be quoted in full:

"Worthy Sir: As to the complaint Exhibited against me for Receiving and Passing Manufactory Bills Since His Excellency's Proclamation, I freely acknowledge I have Done and am determined so to do at present. I am Sir, Your humble Servant, Andrew Burley. December 31, 1740."

Burley's house still stands on Green Street in Ipswich.

Parliament settled the matter in 1741 with the efficiency of a government that considered the question already closed. The Land Bank was declared illegal, its notes void, and its supporters – the Choates and Adams amongst them, held personally liable for its full obligations — to be paid at penalty rates that amounted to a punishing financial sanction. The consequences were immediate, severe, and deliberately public. Once again men were removed from office or resigned rather than comply. Names were recorded. Fines were assessed and enforced for decades.

A fire — described in the historical record as "fortuitous" — destroyed some of the lists of participants, saving families whose names might otherwise have been added to the rolls. Those whose names survived paid for it, some of them for the rest of their lives. The commissioners were still levying assessments against Ipswich subscribers as late as 1765, a quarter century after the scheme had been abandoned.

The Choate family bore a significant share of that burden. The Commonwealth's archives list Francis Choate, John Choate, Robert Choate, and Thomas Choate Jr. among the Ipswich subscribers assessed for fines ranging from £100 to £500. Four members of the same family, fined across multiple assessments stretching from the 1740s through the 1760s — a collective financial blow that was felt across the larger Choate household for years. Some Ipswich men, like Abraham Knowlton, were identified early and suffered severely. Others, including John Choate and Andrew Burley, survived the crisis and eventually prospered. But the price had been real, paid in full view of the community, and not quickly forgotten.

What the Land Bank left behind was not simply debt. It was a memory, and memories of that particular kind — the memory of having been right, and having been punished for it by a distant authority with no stake in your daily life — have a long half-life. The historian Thomas Franklin Waters observed that the suppression of the Land Bank "compelled men to face the question of whether such legislation as that through which the closure was accomplished could possibly be tolerated by a free people," and suggested that the heated currency conflict likely gave rise to the very idea of the Committees of Correspondence — the network of town communications that would coordinate colonial resistance in the years ahead.

Thirty years later, when Francis Choate stood as moderator of the Ipswich town meeting in December of 1772, the question his community was answering was the same one they had first confronted in 1740: whether Parliament held any legitimate authority to impose financial and legal obligations on people who had no voice in its proceedings, no representative at its table, and no recourse against its decisions. In 1740 that question had been answered with fines and enforcement that dragged on for two decades. In 1772 Ipswich answered it with resolve. In 1775, two weeks after the Revolutionary War Battles of Lexington and Concord, Francis moderated the meeting again. The argument had not changed. Only the stakes had.

> *"What began as an effort of landowners and artisans to use their work products as currency ended as a populist movement opposed by the merchant classes with access to coinage... I think of these events as the largely unexplored precursor events of the American Revolution that followed."*

— Sue Nelson, historian

A Note on John Choate

John Choate — Francis's brother and one of the central figures in this story — does not have his own volume on the Governor's Bookshelf. He was a lawyer, a legislator, a land bank director, and by every account a man of formidable ability who shaped the civic life of Ipswich for decades. His story runs through several of the books on this shelf, most prominently this one and the story of their father Thomas. For readers who find themselves wanting to know more about him, the historical record of Ipswich in the first half of the eighteenth century is, in no small part, a record of John Choate's work within it.

A Note on Dates

The dates in these stories sometimes look odd – for example 1727/28 and they deserve a brief explanation.

England and its colonies used the Julian calendar until 1752, when Parliament adopted the Gregorian calendar — the system still in use today. The two calendars differ in two ways that affect the documents in this collection.

The first difference is the start of the year. Under the Julian calendar, the new year began on March 25th, not January 1st. This means that dates falling between January 1st and March 24th belonged, in the Julian system, to the previous year. A document dated February 10, 1727 in the old calendar is what we would call February 10, 1728. To avoid confusion, careful colonial clerks often wrote dates in this period with a double year — February 10, 1727/28 — acknowledging that the year could be read either way depending on which system the reader used. You will see this notation throughout these records, and it means exactly that: the date falls in the overlap between the two calendars' years.

The second difference is the count of days. By the eighteenth century, the Julian calendar had drifted eleven days behind the Gregorian. When Britain made the switch in 1752, eleven days were simply removed from the calendar — people went to sleep on September 2nd and woke up on September 14th. Events recorded before 1752 in the Julian calendar fall eleven days earlier than their Gregorian equivalents. The Great Earthquake of 1727, recorded in colonial sources as occurring on October 29th, would be November 9th on the Gregorian calendar. The day of the week, however, does not change — October 29th, 1727 Old Style was a Sunday, and November 9th, 1727 New Style is also a Sunday. Thus, a record showing Francis Choate admitted to full communion on February 18, 1727 refers to what we would now call February 18, 1728. The Sabbath night that shook Chebacco was the same night regardless of what the calendar called it.

In this collection, dates are given as the people who lived them recorded them — Old Style, as written in the original documents. Where the double-year notation appears, it has been preserved. Where a conversion to the modern calendar would aid understanding, it is noted in context.

The Night the Ground Moved: The Great Earthquake of 1727

The summer of 1727 had been uncommonly hot in New England — strong winds, heavy rains, violent thunderstorms that split trees and destroyed barns. For people conditioned to read the natural world as a text written by God, the extraordinary weather had spent months demanding interpretation. On the night of Sunday, October 29th, an answer came.[1]

Between ten and eleven o'clock, with the Sabbath nearly over and households gathered or already at rest, the ground began to move. Cotton Mather — Boston's most prominent minister and the most prolific religious writer in New England — recorded the moment with the precision of a man who would spend the following days explaining it to his congregation: the air had never been more calm, the sky never more fair, everything in all imaginable tranquility — and then, without warning, a horrid rumbling like the noise of many coaches driving on paved stones with the utmost rapidity, followed by a most awful trembling of the earth that rocked houses and sent things crashing to the floor. In Newbury, near the epicenter, Henry Sewall was sitting by the fire when his house shook and trembled as if it would have fallen to pieces. He and his family ran outside and found the ground itself trembling beneath them, in great fear, as he wrote, of being swallowed up alive. The earth had opened along fissures and thrown up cartloads of fine sand and ash, mixed with what smelled of sulfur and brimstone.[2][3]

The shock was felt from Maine to Philadelphia. In Guilford, Connecticut, it was violent enough to toll a church bell on its own, throw open the door of the minister's house, and move furniture across the floor. In New Castle, New Hampshire, residents gathered outside and stood listening to the bell in the church tower ringing without any hand upon it, arguing among themselves whether this was a shaken steeple or something else

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[1]Douglas L. Winiarski, Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press / Omohundro Institute, 2017), chapter 2.

[2]Cotton Mather, The Terror of the Lord (Boston, 1727), p. 1; cited in William D. Andrews, "The Literature of the 1727 New England Earthquake," Early American Literature 7, no. 3 (1973): 281-294.

[3]Henry Sewall of Newbury, cited in Memoirs Read Before the Boston Society of Natural History (Boston, 1869); Benjamin Colman on the Newbury fissures cited in Winiarski, Darkness Falls, chapter 2.

entirely. On Nantucket, one of the town's boatbuilders ran to the harbor and put to sea, convinced the island was sinking and that open water was safer than land. Clocks stopped as far away as New York City. Terrible flames of light accompanied the shaking in the atmosphere above Boston, and ships along the coast shuddered at anchor. No one died. That fact impressed itself on contemporaries almost as much as the quake itself.[4]

The earth did not settle. In the weeks and months that followed, the tremors continued — what chroniclers called claps and bursts — recurring through the winter and deep into the spring of 1728. The aftershocks were not trivial: observers in Newbury recorded shocks through January, February, March, April, and May, some nearly equal to the first for terror, shaking houses and sending pewter rattling off dressers. The season of unease lasted nearly seven months. For men and women who had never experienced an earthquake before October 29th, the prolonged trembling was a repeated reminder that the ground beneath their feet was not the fixed and permanent thing they had assumed.[5]

In a world that did not separate natural events from divine purpose, the meaning of all this was not a question that could be deferred. The Boston presses produced nearly thirty publications within months of the initial shock — sermons, treatises, and theological analyses working over the event from every angle. Ministers divided broadly into two camps: those who read the earthquake as judgment, and those who read it as mercy. God was wroth with New England, declared Thomas Prince of Boston's Old South Church — the catalog of provocations included sabbath-breaking, intemperance, swearing, and neglect of family religion. Samuel Wigglesworth of Ipswich's third parish took a different view: the earthquake was not properly a judgment but a warning of the judgment that sins deserve, and the proper response was not terror but reformation.

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[4]Boston Weekly News-Letter, November 6 and 13, 1727; Winiarski, Darkness Falls, chapter 2.

[5]Joshua Coffin, A Sketch of the History of Newbury, Newburyport, and West Newbury, from 1635 to 1845 (Boston, 1845), 198-199.

However they parsed the theology, every minister arrived at the same practical conclusion. The earthquake demanded a response.[6]

That response was immediate and measurable. Churches filled. Days of fasting and prayer were proclaimed across the region. Admissions to communion increased markedly in the months following the earthquake, in some places far exceeding typical annual patterns. In some towns twenty to thirty people joined on a single Sunday. Families came in together. Long-standing sinners who had been under censure stepped forward to confess and reconcile. Mather, speaking to a spontaneous assembly that gathered in Boston the morning after the earthquake, noted with grim pleasure that he saw no one sleeping in the pews.[7]

The church records of Chebacco parish preserve this moment with characteristic quiet precision. In the midst of the list of those admitted to full communion, the parish clerk paused and noted simply: Great Earthquake, Oct. 29, 1727. Then the entries continue. In the months that follow, admissions appear more frequently, and families arrive together — the pattern that scholarship on this period identifies as the signature of earthquake-driven piety across the region. Among those admitted in this interval was Francis Choate, received into full communion on February 18, 1727/28 — in the middle of the prolonged aftershock season, when the January and February tremors were still reminding the people of Chebacco that October 29th had not been a single event but the opening of something that had not yet closed.[8]

Whether the earthquake was what moved Francis Choate to present himself to the church in February 1728, the family record does not say. The local historian Felt recorded simply that the quake had produced a powerful revival of religion in the Ipswich parishes and an urgent demand for reformation. What is clear is the sequence:

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[6]Winiarski, Darkness Falls, chapter 2; Andrews, "Literature of the 1727 Earthquake," 281-294; Thomas Prince, Earthquakes the Works of God and Tokens of His Just Displeasure (Boston, 1727); Samuel Wigglesworth, A Religious Fear of God's Tokens Explained and Urged (Boston, 1728).

[7]Winiarski, Darkness Falls, chapter 2; John Brown, "Appendix," in John Cotton, A Holy Fear of God, and His Judgments (Boston, 1727); New-England Weekly Journal, November 27, 1727.

[8]Chebacco Parish Church Records, church members in full communion, admitted since the ordination of Theoph. Pickering, Oct. 13, Anno Dom. 1725; Winiarski, Darkness Falls, chapter 2.

the ground shook on a Sunday night in October, the tremors continued through the winter, and by February a twenty-six year old farmer and blacksmith on Hog Island had joined the church. He was not alone. He was part of a broader movement within Chebacco and across Essex County—men and women who, in the months after the earthquake, entered the church in greater numbers and with renewed seriousness of purpose. For Francis Choate, that conclusion held for the rest of his life.[9]

[9]Joseph B. Felt, Annals of Salem (Salem, 1827); Waters, Ipswich in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, 459.

Sidebar: Why Ipswich Met in December 1772

The trouble between Great Britain and its American colonies had been accumulating for nearly a decade by the time Ipswich called its December meeting, and it had the quality of a debt coming due rather than a sudden crisis. After the French and Indian War ended in 1763, Parliament turned to the colonies to help retire the empire's considerable wartime debts. What followed was a succession of revenue measures—the Sugar Act, the Stamp Act, the Townshend duties—each one asserting Parliament's authority to tax people who had no voice in its proceedings. The colonists had a name for this arrangement. They called it tyranny, and they were not being dramatic.

The objection was never purely about money. It was constitutional. Colonists understood themselves to be English subjects entitled to English rights, and among the most fundamental of those rights was that a man could not be taxed without his consent, given either in person or through a representative. Parliament had no colonial members. The colonies had no say. The argument was, in the language of the time, simple and difficult to answer—which is precisely why Parliament kept trying.

In November of 1772, a committee in Boston led by Samuel Adams put the argument into formal terms. The document they produced—soon known as the Boston Pamphlet—was not merely a complaint. It was a systematic account of the rights colonists held as men, as Christians, and as subjects of the British Crown, followed by an equally systematic account of how those rights had been violated. Clear, thorough, and deliberately provocative, it was the work of men who had begun to doubt that patience would resolve the matter.

What made it consequential was not the argument itself, but what the committee did with it. Copies were sent to towns across Massachusetts with a request: that each community consider the claims and state its position. It was an act of political organization as much as political philosophy, and it created something new—a network of towns in active correspondence about a shared grievance. The Committees of Correspondence that followed became the connective tissue of what was coming, the means by which separate communities began to act in concert.

Ipswich answered in December of 1772. The meeting was legally called, the pamphlet was read aloud, and the inhabitants debated and voted on resolves affirming their rights and condemning Parliament's actions. They were not declaring independence—that was still years away. They were doing something that, in its own way, required equal resolve: committing themselves publicly, on the record, to a position whose consequences were not yet clear.

Francis Choate served as moderator of the meeting. He governed its proceedings, recognized speakers, and brought its decisions to order. He had taken positions like this before—and paid for them, in the financial losses of the Land Bank and the long strains of the church division. He was seventy-one years old.