At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War Philadelphia's joint Episcopal parish of Christ Church and St. Peter's had the luxury of a clerical staff of four. Richard Peters served as rector, but would retire before the end of 1775 due to age and infirmities. The senior assistant minister was Jacob Duché, appointed in 1759. There were two relatively new assistants, Thomas Coombe and William White, who were appointed together in 1772. These three assistants had a great deal in common in addition to their ages and profession. Their fathers, Thomas Coombe, Esq., Jacob Duché, Sr., and Colonel Thomas White were all associated with what has come to be called the proprietary gentry. While they did not represent the wealthiest Philadelphians, their families were relatively well-to-do. All were educated at the College and Academy of Philadelphia under the direction of the Reverend William Smith, D.D., and ordained priests in the Church of England by the Bishop of
London. At their ordination they took the prescribed Oath of the King’s Sovereignty which added a clear political obligation to their oath to God. But although all of these assistants represented the Church of England, their reactions to the war were very different.

White quietly accepted the American position, eventually became chaplain to the Congress, and, after the war, a leader in a new elite built on the ruins of the old proprietary gentry. He served as the first Bishop of the Diocese of Pennsylvania in the new Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States. Duché, despite serving as the first congressional chaplain, and offering the first prayer in Congress in 1774, eventually wavered as American fortunes turned bleak in 1777. He wrote a notorious letter to Washington urging the general to use his influence to rescind the Declaration of Independence and restore the empire. Having thereby established himself as an apostate to the American cause, he fled to England until nearly a decade after the war. Thomas Coombe, the last of the three, at first appeared to be at least a lukewarm patriot, but as Congress approached the separation of the colonies from England, he seems to have recalled his subscription to the Oath of the King’s Sovereignty which he had taken at his ordination as both deacon and priest. He was also influenced by a deep affection for England developed during the four years he spent there during his quest for holy orders. Not the least of his considerations, in choosing to remain loyal to Great Britain, was his simultaneous development of important and lasting contacts with very prominent Englishmen such as the Marquis of Rockingham and the Earl of Carlisle. Coombe left Philadelphia in 1778. He never developed the homesickness of Duché, and never returned to Pennsylvania, dying in London in 1822. Unlike most future Loyalists, he does not seem to have reacted to the actions of American Whigs, but rather had developed his loyalism years before the war.

Thomas Coombe was born in Philadelphia on October 12, 1747, the son of Thomas Coombe, Esq. and Sarah Rutter Coombe. The senior Coombe, about whom little is known, has been described both as a shopkeeper and a gentleman of wealth and position. The father held a number of positions under the Penn proprietors including the Office for Enrolling the Names of Passengers, Receiver of Duties imposed by Act of Assembly on the Importation of Slaves, Health Officer of the Port of Philadelphia, and Collector of the Duties on Tonnage, in all of which he served at the pleasure of the proprietor. He was also a vestryman of Christ Church and St. Peter’s, and a friend of Benjamin Franklin with whom he seems to have shared an interest in science. Thus the younger Thomas Coombe was acquainted, through his father, with Benjamin Franklin, and was a distant cousin of Benjamin Rush. This would place him close to important men and events.

After receiving his Master of Arts from the College and Academy in 1768 — his bachelor’s degree had come two years earlier — Coombe left for England to obtain Holy Orders. He went with a strong letter of recommendation from the Philadelphia Anglican clergy which indicated that upon ordination he could “be provided for several ways.” In England he lived at various times in London with his
cousin Benjamin Rush who was completing his medical studies, and with Benjamin Franklin. He impressed both men. Rush recalled later that they had been companions "in many of my visits and walks in the city" and commented that "[m]y relation and friend possessed taste and memory," and spent a considerable amount of time with "learned company, more especially of the clergy." Franklin assessed his young guest as an "agreeable young man." After Coombe had received his Holy Orders, he officiated at the two 1770 weddings which were of importance to Franklin. The young man became a friend, but with a certain amount of the arrogance of youth told his father that he felt Franklin was a very cautious man, but "opens himself to me as freely as he does to any man."

Coombe therefore had a very close association for an extended period with the most well-known Americans of his day, with a cousin who was about to become a leading American patriot, and both of whom would sign the Declaration of Independence. Despite this, the four years he spent in England (1768-1772) fixed his future course as more English than American. In those years his clerical training stressed loyalty to the monarchy and the institutions which upheld it. Twice, at the time he was ordained a deacon and again when he was elevated to the priesthood, he took the Oath of the King's Sovereignty. At the same time he became acquainted with the English political system and the critical role that the patronage of important personages played in making it function. With a certain amount of youthful idealism, he often deprecated the system while at the same time learning how it might be made to work to his advantage. As a result he began, early in his residence in London, to cultivate men of stature who might one day be of great use to him. In a similar vein, while he spoke fondly of his home in Pennsylvania and all of its charms, he simultaneously reflected on the fact that he could make a career for himself in the mother country. His four years there would not only provide him training and certification for a clerical career, but also the motivation and the rationale for the decisions which would result in a future spent more in England than in America.

Over a year before his ordination, Coombe summed up his activities in soliciting the friendship of important personages when he wrote to his father that "I have formed Connections here which will be of Service to me as long as I live, & which will contribute in some degree to my Independency." Rather early in his English stay he paid his respects to the Pennsylvania proprietors, spending three days at the Penn estate, during which time he was offered a local curacy. He rejected this offer as he had higher ambitions than a country church. Franklin supported him fully and strongly advised him against taking such a lowly post. In the same letter Coombe also reported that he was "intimately acquainted with the Rector of his Majesty's Parish Church. . . . He intends to give me a good word with the Bp. [of London] from his own knowledge of me. . . ." Coombe's patience paid off, for in 1771 the Marquis of Rockingham appointed him as one of his chaplains. This was an honorary position which entailed no duties, but gave to Coombe the right to hold more than one benefice. He also made contacts in the highest literary and artistic circles including Benjamin West, whom he had once known in America and who was now
Thomas Coombe, Loyalist

beginning to make his reputation in London. Coombe also knew Edward Gibbon and Oliver Goldsmith, whom he described with poor foresight as having "Oddities [which] must forever keeping him from rising high in the World." Years later, Coombe wrote a long poem, "The Peasant of Auburn" which he acknowledged was modeled on Goldsmith's "Deserted Village."8

Although Coombe was currying favor with important personages, he nevertheless continued to condemn the system which made such actions necessary. He seems to have rather quickly grasped that positions under the system prevalent at the time did not come through competence but through favor. "There is hardly a Post of Profit in this Kingdom, however trifling, which is not either sold to the officer, or bestowed upon a tool of the M______y." Two years later he added that, "The Crown Livings, which are the best, are given only to Tools and Sycophants, & given upon Terms unbecoming Honest Men to accept."19 Here he made a comparison of the very great difference in the manner of treatment of American and English clergymen. The Americans, Coombe argued, were paid for the services they performed. However, their fortunate English counterparts were given "Livings" by great men. These "Livings" did not require that the clergyman live nearby and perform any duties, but rather permitted him to appoint a curate to do parish duties while he himself lived elsewhere. Coombe was quite sarcastic in describing the nobles who were the source of such appointments, referring to most of them as vicious men. Only on rare occasions, when the individual who had the power of appointment attended services, could a man "Preach himself" into a "Living."20 He was distressed that men would seek "Honors & Preferments" by "Methods frequently the most dishonorable."21 All of this seems to be the musings of a still idealistic youth. Coombe's actions after he left America permanently in 1778 were definitely not reflected in these statements, when he shamelessly enjoyed honors and preferments from the Earl of Carlisle, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Crown, among others.

While Coombe was writing these critical comments on the English system of patronage and preferments, he conducted a running debate in his correspondence on the merits of returning to America or remaining in England to pursue a clerical career. His family and friends were in Pennsylvania, and less than a year before he returned to Philadelphia, he wrote "[h]appiness consists in opinion merely, & and I am very sure that I should enjoy more true Felicity, with a decent Competency [emphasis in text] in my Native land, than I should do here, were I the annual receiv-
er of thousands."22

On October 17, 1771, only a few months after this letter was written, Coombe received his license to perform "Ministerial Offices in the Province of Pennsylvania" from Richard Terrick, Bishop of London, a license which was probably too broad for his liking. Had the bishop licensed him to a particular church, and Coombe most definitely wanted an appointment in Philadelphia's Christ Church and St. Peter's, he would have received what amounted to tenure in office. "A Curate, who is licensed to any particular Church by his Diocesan, cannot be disposed, even by the Rector of the same Church; and Security you know . . . adds very much to the Pleasure
Job security obviously appealed to him, as did the possibilities for advancement even if he received a call to his preferred church. Coombe wondered if he would ever rise higher than assistant minister, for Duché was the logical successor to the aged Richard Peters, and Duché was only a few years older than Coombe. The rector’s position at Christ Church and St. Peter’s seemed remote, causing him to comment to his father “that I think the place of an assistant-minister in the Philada. churches, is but poor security for a life subject to casualties.” Unspoken, but undoubtedly present was the logical sequel to this question: could my career develop better in England?

In his concern for a position in Philadelphia’s joint churches, Coombe became critical of two of the clerics who had been extremely supportive of his career, William Smith and Richard Peters. These two men, together with Duché, had written a strong letter of recommendation to the Bishop of London when Coombe was preparing to sail for England to obtain Holy Orders. Yet while privately critical of Peters, Coombe did not hesitate to appeal to him for the assistant minister’s position. At the same time he told his father: “I am not the least concerned at his neglect of me, tho perhaps a little mortified by my having stooped to write to a Gentleman, whom I own I do not highly esteem.” Earlier, he had made a very sarcastic remark about Smith, under whom he had studied for nearly a decade at the College and Academy of Philadelphia: “I hope Dr. Smith is not dead, for I cannot spare Time to write a funeral Elegy at Present. Please remember me to him.” Ironically, while Coombe wrote this about Smith, the latter would shortly write a letter to the Bishop of London which stated that “[w]e wish for the return of Mr. Coombe [emphasis in text], who will certainly be provided for in our Churches in this city.”

Coombe seemed to be developing a strong loyalty to his own interests, rather than to individuals, unless of course, they might be temporarily useful to him.

While Coombe was exhibiting a great deal of apprehension, and not a little ill temper, about an assistant minister’s position in Philadelphia, he continued weighing the advantages of making his career in England. In frequent letters to his family, and to his cousin Benjamin Rush, who had returned to Philadelphia to practice medicine, and even to William Smith, he remarked that he could have a better life in England than in America. To his favorite sister Sally, about a year after his arrival in England, he wrote: “I am highly pleased both with the Country itself, and the Treatment I have met with in it.” Later in the same letter he acknowledged daily prayers for both America and England (“Gratitude constrains me to implore Heaven’s choicest Blessings upon the People of this Land.”), and warned that “Patriotism is a Vice, when it so attaches us to our own Country, as to make us disregard less of the interests of another.” To Rush he made the comment: “I think I could tell Life’s Tale as comfortably on this side of the water as the other. Friends I have very many, & no Enemies whom I am acquainted with. Would this, think you be my Case in Philadelphia?” In the same vein, he told William Smith “that were there no America, I could reconcile myself to living in old England,” although he did complain of the climate. He also informed his father that “[i]n very many Respects, I am happier here...
than I can reasonably expect to be in America . . . ,” and also said “every Friend I have on this side of the Water” strongly recommended that he cast his lot with England.27

A far more formidable figure cast his vote in favor of Coombe making his career in England, and he did so early in the young man’s stay in that country. Franklin, who spent many years in England, was a long-time friend of the family. He boarded young Thomas for part of his stay in the mother country. As early as October 1769, he suggested that Coombe should not return to America for at least seven years, and only two months later gave what Coombe called his “invariable Advice . . . not to think of returning.” When Coombe did return to Philadelphia in 1772 he carried a letter to Franklin’s son William, the royal Governor of New Jersey, which not only introduced him, but added: “I wish him a good Settlement in his Native Country, but I think he would better have found his Interest in remaining here.” And on hearing of Coombe’s safe arrival in Philadelphia, Franklin wrote to congratulate him on a safe voyage and wish him well “if you chuse to continue at Philadelphia.”28 Franklin’s early assessment of Coombe’s undoubted Anglophilia would be affirmed within six years of the last of his admonitions given above. The elder statesman was a shrewd judge of character. Coombe himself had also given a clue to the future when he told his sister that while Franklin’s motto was “Where there is Liberty, that is my Native Country,” Coombe’s would have to be “Where my Family and Friends are, that is my Native Country.”29 By 1778, Coombe decided that they lived in England.

In the last few years of Coombe’s stay in England, and paralleling his debates with himself as to whether or not he should return to Philadelphia, a personal matter developed which may have temporarily indicated to him the merits of returning to America. This was his transatlantic courtship of two Philadelphia women — Patty Ord and a Miss Geddes. In his correspondence with his cousin Benjamin Rush, he referred to enclosed letters to be delivered to each of the young ladies, but with the admonition that they were not to be told of the letter to the other.30 He informed Rush that he missed Miss Ord and that he loved her,31 and finally divulged to his family that he had been writing to the two young women whom his favorite sister Sally evidently knew. Sally had written him about spending an afternoon with Patty Ord, and he indicated his affection for that young lady with the comment: “I can only say, my Dear, that, if your Disposition in anyway resembles your Brother’s, the more Afternoon’s you spend with her, the more you would desire to spend.”32 However, to Rush’s eventual surprise, within a year of Coombe’s return to Philadelphia, he was married “not to Miss Ord, but to a Miss Badger, an amiable young Lady with a most sweet Temper.”33 Coombe seems to have had as much difficulty deciding whom to marry as to where he should establish his professional career. Also, as in the case of his carping about Smith and Peters behind their backs, his behavior indicated a lack of constancy.

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One surprising aspect of Coombe’s stay in England was his lack of interest in any politics other than that of the church and his potential for advancement in a cler-
ical career. During his sojourn in London, major controversies surrounding the implementation of the Townshend Acts, especially the one on tea, the rioting in Boston which culminated in the Boston Massacre, and the effects of American boycotts of English goods affected him but little. He explained to his sister Sally that “I never meddle in Politics not only from Principle, but from want of Inclination.”

When his cousin Rush sent him some Philadelphia newspapers, he commented that evidently “the Rage for Politics is not yet exhausted,” and added that he was happy that he was out of the country so as to avoid the “Strife & Discord.” At the time of the First Continental Congress, he did send a copy of Thomas Jefferson’s *Summary View of the Rights of British America* to Franklin in London. He also enclosed a copy of the Suffolk Resolves which he described as being “firm to a noble degree, and the sentiments of Congress upon them, no less so.” Unfortunately for a man who professed to have so little inclination for politics, events soon became such as to make it impossible to ignore or avoid them.

Shortly after Coombe returned to Philadelphia in the spring of 1772, the situation at Christ Church and St. Peter’s finally offered the opportunity for employing two assistant ministers. Richard Peters was well advanced in years, and in June reported to the vestry of the joint churches that it was no longer possible for Jacob Duché and himself to perform their duties properly. He was ill enough not to be able to take his accustomed role for some time. Coombe and William White were then put forward as they “were both born and educated in this city, both of excellent moral characters, and known abilities; both in full orders and licensed by the bishop of London for this province.” The vestry agreed to appoint the pair if money could be found, for there was barely enough to sustain Peters and Duché. Coombe expressed his delight at being considered for the post of assistant minister, although it must not be forgotten that he had expressed some dislike for both the Rev. Mr. Peters and for the position. Salary negotiations then began. Coombe wrote to Peters that he wanted “to avoid the appearance of covetousness, and everything that may look like driving a bargain,” but he was unwilling “to involve myself and my connections in poverty.” The vestry was unsure as to whether sufficient funds were available, but Peters solved the impasse by proposing to give each man £100 from his own funds in addition to anything supplied by the vestry. With that generous promise, Coombe was voted the goodly salary of £200 and White one of £150 per year. Unlike his colleague, White had left his salary to the vestry’s discretion, but by mentioning £150 in passing he received that figure. Five days later Peters, William Smith, and Duché officially informed the Bishop of London that Coombe and White, “lately ordained & licensed by your lordship . . . were last week finally settled as Assistant Ministers in Christ Church and St. Peter’s in this City.”

Coombe’s nineteenth-century biographer Hildeburn suggested that in the five years after Coombe was hired, he acquired a “brilliant reputation as a preacher.” But John Adams, in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress, thought otherwise. Adams wrote in his diary on September 4, 1774, that “Mr. Coombs [sic] is celebrated here as a fine Speaker. He is sprightly, has a great deal of Action, speaks dis-
tinctly. But I confess, I am not charmed with his oratory. His style was indifferent, his Method confused.” A month later, Adams heard Coombe preach again and was somewhat more generous. “Coombs is indeed a good Speaker, but not an original, but a copy of Duche.” It was at this time that Coombe had several of his sermons published. They were dedicated to his old English benefactor, the Marquis of Rockingham.

With the coming of war in April 1775, the clergy of the Church of England in the colonies were put in an exceedingly delicate position. As colonial representatives of the state church they could easily be suspected of a lack of sympathy for the colonial position by the Continental Congress and its supporters. Worse, if those in Pennsylvania were associated with the proprietary gentry, their futures were at risk. Yet if they came down on the side of those Americans resisting the crown, their position in England would be compromised. When Congress requested a day of fasting and prayer on July 20, 1775, the Philadelphia clergy, as their brethren elsewhere, were placed in a position in which they had to take some action. They decided to open the churches on the appointed day, for the reasons they explained to the Bishop of London in a long letter on June 30. The six Episcopal clergymen resident in Philadelphia — Richard Peters, William Smith, Jacob Duche, Thomas Coombe, William Stringer, and William White — advised their diocesan that they had misgivings about “the very Existence of our Church in America.” They stressed that to this point they had thought “it our Duty to keep our Pulpits wholly clear from everything bordering on this Contest,” and to “pursue that Line of Reason and Moderation which became our Characters.” They now felt their congregations expected them to give advice, and that failure to do so could easily result in “our Principles [being] misrepresented, and even our religious Usefulness destroyed among our People.” Conversely, this same action might well “be interpreted to our Disadvantage in the Parent Country.” They then indicated their rationale for participating in the events of July 20. Pointing out that the clergy had long preached to local military associations in times of stress, there was precedent for doing so again, “professing the most steady Loyalty to his Majesty, together with an earnest Desire of reestablishing our former harmony with the Mother Country.” While the bishop was informed that his clergy would not take the lead in political matters, they did stress that they had no intention of injuring American rights. They clearly stated that they considered their fellow Americans “entitled, as well as their Brethren in England, to the right of granting their own Money [emphasis in text]; and every attempt to deprive them of this Right, will either be found abortive in the end, or attended with Evils which would outweigh all the Benefit to be obtained by it.”

Thomas Coombe preached on July 20, and his sermon was printed. On the title page of this pamphlet Coombe made clear that he was a Chaplain to the Marquis of Rockingham, but covered himself by dedicating the sermon “[t]o that illustrious citizen and philosopher, Benjamin Franklin of America.” Coombe then argued that the “men of Britain” who had benefited so greatly from the colonies now demanded more, and had “sacrilegiously lifted the sword against the constitution” as well as their
fellow countrymen. This justified Americans who “asked but for peace, liberty, and safety” to fight in defense of their rights. But there is also a caveat. Coombe dwelt excessively on the loss of Christian virtues by his fellow countrymen, a condition which might well result in their punishment by being defeated.45

Later in 1775, Richard Peters, burdened by age and infirmities, resigned as rector of the two churches. The vestry recommended that Jacob Duché be elected in his place. Coombe joined with his fellow clergymen in advising the Bishop of London of the election.46 The active clergy in Christ Church and St. Peter’s were now Duché, Coombe, and White, but with the coming of independence the following year, the first two would find themselves in serious troubles with the local Whig authorities.

Coombe’s crisis came with the congressional resolution for independence. To this point it had been possible to resist Britain, even militarily, under the pretense of seeking to redress grievances. Prominent Philadelphians, like Joseph Galloway, friend of Franklin, Speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, and member of Congress; the sons of Chief Justice William Allen, Andrew, John, and William; among many others, had supported the American cause, but they would not renounce their allegiance to the crown. After the Declaration of Independence they waited for the first opportunity to enter the British lines. This came late in 1776 when Sir William Howe pursued Washington’s beaten army across New Jersey.47 Coombe’s July 1775, Fast Day Sermon was probably the most advanced point in his support of the American cause. After that he seems to have weighed more his oath to the king, his predilections for things English, and his future economic security. A month before independence, Charles Willson Peale attended services at Christ Church and was appalled when the minister prayed for the king. In fact he wrote that he “hiss’d the Minister.” The editor of the selected papers of Peale is of the opinion that the minister referred to was Coombe.48

In the late summer of 1777, as the British army approached Philadelphia after the Battle of the Brandywine, Congress requested the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania to secure a number of persons, mostly Quakers, who were deemed to be ill-disposed to the American cause and to remove them from any possibility of juncture with the British. The Council enlarged the list considerably, adding Coombe’s name among a number of others. It did, however, allow the arresting officers the option of permitting a number of those named who were marked with an “x” to remain in their homes if they would promise in writing “to refrain from doing anything injurious to the United Free States of North America” or contacting the approaching British forces.49 As Coombe refused to give the required assurances, he was ordered committed with those who refused to take any action to convince the authorities of their neutrality.50

Jacob Duché and the vestry of Christ Church and St. Peter’s then appealed to the Supreme Executive Council on September 9 to grant Coombe a hearing, arguing that “the removal of a Minister upon a general charge, without suffering him to know his accusers, or being heard in his own defense, cannot but be deem’d an
Infringement of Religious as well as Civil Liberty.” The Council responded on the same day, rejecting the churches’ plea on the grounds that “Mr. Coombe’s case is wholly political.” Therefore he would be sent away, and “that his connection with their congregations could be no argument in his behalf.” At this point William White and Colonel John Cadwallader interceded on Coombe’s behalf, and reached an understanding with the authorities that the minister was to be released on parole on the condition that he would go first to Virginia and then to the Dutch island of St. Eustatia in the West Indies. The parole was granted on September 10, 1777.

Coombe never left Philadelphia as promised because the British occupied the city before he could depart. William White did leave ahead of the British, and Jacob Duché, after his ill-considered letter to Washington, left in December. As a result Coombe was the only Episcopal minister available to Christ Church. Two months after the British arrived, Coombe had an opportunity to send a letter through the lines to White in which he declined to convey any information of a political nature. However, he did assure his colleague “that my affection for you has suffered no diminution [sic] by absence, or the difference of our political opinions.” [emphasis added] Coombe then added that he wished “we could have seen things thro’ the same perspective; but since it is otherwise, let us cherish, by our example, sentiments of liberality & candor, & let not public dissensions have the power to obliterate friendships begun in early youth, which have grown up with us to manhood. . . . [o]ur disagreements on subjects of public concern, however it may furnish me with an occasion for sorrow, can never lessen my regard for you.” Here was finally an unambiguous statement that Coombe had chosen the path of loyalty to the crown.

When the British evacuated Philadelphia on June 18, 1778, White returned to the city with the American forces and joined with Coombe in holding services in Christ Church. Coombe was shortly thereafter called before the American authorities and again given the chance of either abjuring his allegiance to the British monarchy and taking the Pennsylvania Test Oath or leaving the country. He chose the latter course.

On July 7, 1778, Coombe wrote a long, sad letter of resignation as the assistant minister to the vestry of Christ Church. He said that he had “examined the Subject in every point of view that I was capable of placing it,” and had read books and conferred with men whose opinion he respected. These deliberations left him with the conclusion that he could not possibly take the oath to the new government without seriously violating both his conscience and his prior oaths to the king’s sovereignty. He could not consider the Pennsylvania oath lawful so long as the English monarch had not released the American colonies from their prior obligations to the crown. He could not consider the Pennsylvania oath lawful so long as the English monarch had not released the American colonies from their prior obligations to the crown. Had George III accepted the Declaration of Independence, then he would have had no scruples about taking an oath of loyalty to Pennsylvania. Since this was obviously not yet the case, he felt it would have been “the most criminal duplicity” to take the state oath. He concluded that “since the Sovereign still keeps up his claim of right upon this country, & every inhabitant is called upon by the late test law to renounce all allegiance to him, I had only to choose between my duty & my interest.” It is
noteworthy, in light of his clearly stated fondness for England, that he opposes the terms “duty” and “interest.” In fact his interests in England would be very well served throughout the rest of his life by his doing his duty to the sovereign. To further those interests he abandoned his congregation, his friends, his family, and a young and pregnant wife who later died giving birth to twins.\footnote{5}

The Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania gave Coombe permission to go to New York to prepare to sail for England.\footnote{6} In late September 1778, he was in New York, ready to leave. Among his fellow passengers on the trip were Andrew Allen and Phineas Bond, two fellow Philadelphia Loyalists. He requested that his family write to him at the Foundling Hospital, London, but they were to be sure to send the letters “under cover” through Samuel Shoemaker, another Philadelphia Loyalist, resident in New York.\footnote{7} Coombe had made his choice.

Thomas Coombe’s career did not end until 1822, when he died in London. His adherence to his oath of allegiance to the monarchy and remembrance of his youthful abilities to call attention to himself while in England gave him a good life with some honors. His interests were well served by his loyalty. For a number of years he enjoyed the patronage of the Earl of Carlisle, becoming his secretary when the earl was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. As a reward he was given a “living” to the rectory of Donough Henry in northern Ireland. Trinity College, Dublin, awarded him a Doctor of Divinity degree. Coombe’s acceptance of this “living” is most interesting, since as a young man he had once deprecated the practice. Later, he found no problem in hiring a curate for his charge while he lived in London. In 1794 he became Chaplain in Ordinary to the king, evidently an honorary position, as was his 1800 appointment to a Prebend Stall at Canterbury. Both positions entailed little or no work. At various times he was minister to the Curzon Street Chapel, London; Vicar of Tenterden, Kent; and rector of the United Churches of St. Michael’s, Queenhithe and Trinity the Less, London. He seems to have been quite popular, and was considered an eloquent preacher.\footnote{8}

In 1784 Coombe wrote what seems to have been a final letter to his cousin, Benjamin Rush. He made only a brief reference to the recently concluded war when he told Rush: “You will expect a word from me on public ground. It shall be but one, and is comprised in the wish (a Christian wish) that they who have ceased to shed each other’s blood may cease to be enemies.” He added that he had tasted “Prosperity & Adversity with the latter predominating.” Still, he did not seem to have considered coming back to Philadelphia, although little prevented him from doing so. The king had recognized the independence of the United States, the necessary factor that Coombe had stressed in his letter of resignation to the vestry of Christ Church. He had not taken nearly as much of a political role as had Duché, who did return despite his letter to Washington and his perceived apostasy to the American cause. One could conclude that Franklin had been right two decades earlier when he advised the young man to make his mark in England. Coombe seemed comfortable there. As he had written his sister Sally during his youth, “home is where my friends are,” and by 1784 his friends were in England,\footnote{9} and in reasonably
high places as well. Eventually his American-born children joined him, and he married an Englishwoman and raised a second family.

In the late 1780s Coombe was able, as a direct result of his friendship with influential persons in England, to render his family a last major service. A few months after independence was declared in 1776, Thomas Coombe, Esq. bought a farm of approximately 144 acres on Chestnut Hill, in Springfield Township, Philadelphia County. With the arrival of the British army in September 1777, the senior Coombe and his family had fled to its protection in Philadelphia because they were strongly suspected of loyalism. Unfortunately for the family, while Washington's Continental Army remained at Whitemarsh, Chestnut Hill was occupied in strength by British forces to prevent American raids around the vicinity of Philadelphia. At night the British troops illuminated their positions with large bonfires fueled by any flammable materials at hand, such as rail fences, etc. They also supplemented the coarse diet of a British soldier by availing themselves of farm animals such as cows, chickens, and hogs. The younger Coombe filed an appeal for damages of £300 with the Royal Claims Commission established by Parliament to compensate Loyalists for the loss of property. He claimed his father was unable to file for himself because he suffered from "hysteric fits" as a result of the destruction of his property. In 1789, long after the time limit for claims had expired, Coombe, in London, presented another claim for his father, an earlier one having produced an award of £150, later reduced to £100. Coombe explained in long letters to his father and to Sally that after receiving a rejection of his last claim because it was late, he had a friend present his application to the Earl of Mornington, one of the Lords of the Treasury. The happy result (for the elder Coombe and his family) was a special act of Parliament which gave his father an annuity of £200 per annum retroactive to 1788. Since the elder Coombe lived until 1799, he was more than adequately compensated for his wartime losses.

Of the three assistant ministers of Philadelphia's Christ and St. Peter's Churches at the beginning of the Revolution, only Thomas Coombe remained consistently true to the Oath of the King's Sovereignty which he had taken at the times of his ordinations to the deaconate and the priesthood of the Church of England. His colleagues, Jacob Duché and William White, followed other paths. White accepted the American Whig viewpoint, took the Pennsylvania Test Oaths that Coombe had rejected, and became chaplain to the Continental Congress in place of Duché. Later he served as the first Bishop of the Diocese of Pennsylvania of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States, and a leader of the new non-Quaker elite which emerged in Philadelphia during the Federal period. Jacob Duché played both sides in search of a winner, earning little respect from either. He did return to Philadelphia from his English exile in the early 1790s, and is considered to be one of the first Americans to accept the doctrines of Emanuel Swedenborg. Like his politics, his religion shifted significantly over time.

Coombe was a Loyalist long before the term came into common usage, and he conforms in most respects to historians' concept as to just what made the great
majority of northern Anglican clergymen remain loyal to Britain. He was certainly an Anglophile who cultivated important personages in England, in essence building up credits for his future advancement. Through his father he was connected to Pennsylvania's proprietary gentry with the promise of future emoluments which went with that connection. This nicely complemented the "credits" which he had amassed in England during his four-year sojourn there during his quest for ordination. As was required of all candidates for Holy Orders, he had been ordained in England, first as a deacon and then as a priest. In both ceremonies he had, on his knees, taken the Oath of the King's Sovereignty. This tied together religious and political commitments of the first order. All of these factors seemed to indicate to Coombe that his future would be better assured within the bounds of the empire than it would be within an independent republic whose future was far from clear.70

But Coombe never used any argument for his choice of position other than the one given to his vestry in 1778. He made it a matter of conscience and nothing more. However, there remains a reasonable doubt that this was the whole motivation for leaving his family, friends, and congregation. His father had been a lesser member of the proprietary faction (as had the fathers of White and Duché). Had there been no Revolution, he might have enjoyed the growing patronage bestowed by the Penn family. But the proprietary system collapsed early in the Revolution. Also, Coombe had expressed doubts about his ability to rise in the church because of the presence of the slightly older Duché. While Duché may have removed himself from future preferments by his letter to Washington, White emerged as an even more formidable obstacle. After all, White openly accepted the American position, took the Pennsylvania Test Oath, was Robert Morris's brother-in-law, and was well regarded by Congress.

Coombe had only been back in Philadelphia for six years after spending four in England. In any assessment of his future prospects for furthering his "interests" in either America or England, those in the former must have seemed far less attractive than those in the latter. Coombe had learned in his youth how the English patronage system worked in both church and state, and had established solid contacts with men who had helped him in the past and might be expected to do likewise in the future. Surely he remembered Franklin's constant admonitions to make his career in the mother country. Finally, a further strong indication that his "interests" were far more important to him than his religious oaths came with the treaty of peace in 1783. This removed the basic reason for his actions, given in his letter of resignation in 1778. The king had renounced his claim to America, thus freeing Coombe, if conscience was the only thing that mattered, from his ordination oaths. Duché, with far more reasons for not returning, did so, but there is no indication in the Coombe correspondence that he ever considered such a step. In fact, by 1783 he was rapidly building a new life in the old mother country. Franklin had been right. Thomas Coombe was, and always had been, an Englishman at heart.
Notes
1. This term has been applied to those generally wealthy individuals who clustered around the Penn family and were the beneficiaries of proprietary patronage. The upper echelons of this group held the most important positions in the proprietary government — lieutenant governor, provincial councillors, and members of the Superior Court. Others filled the Philadelphia Corporation's offices such as mayor, recorder, aldermen, and common councillors, which positions were also controlled by the proprietor. They also controlled the College of Philadelphia through seats on its Board of Trustees. While they served at the pleasure of the proprietor, their positions basically gave them lifetime security. This non-elective status and control of the patronage for offices below those mentioned above were the sources of their very considerable power. Many of them were Anglican, including the Coombe, Duché, and White families. They tended to join the same social organizations such as the Mount Regale Fishing Company, Society of the Sons of St. Tammany, Jockey Club, American Philosophical Society, Hand-in-Hand Fire Company, and the Dancing Assembly. During the Revolution the continuation of their source of power was conditional on British success in maintaining royal control of the colonies. This thesis of a proprietary gentry or elite in Pennsylvania is supported by the following, especially on the pages cited: Gary J. Kornblith and John M. Murrin, "The Making and Unmaking of an American Ruling Class," in Alfred E. Young, ed., Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism (DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), 28, 29-30, 41, 42; Stephen James Brobeck, "Changes in the Composition and Structure of Philadelphia Elite Groups, 1756-1790" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation University of Pennsylvania, 1973), 49-50, 54-55, 77, 212-213, 244-245; Brobeck, "Revolutionary Change in Colonial Philadelphia: The Brief Life of the Proprietary Gentry," William and Mary Quarterly: 3rd ser., 33(1976), 410, 412, 413, 426-427, 431; and G. B. Warden, "The Proprietary Group in Pennsylvania, 1754-1764," William and Mary Quarterly. 3rd ser., 21(1964), 368, 374-375.
2. David L. Holmes, "The Episcopal Church and the American Revolution," Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 47 (1978), 288-289. This article collects the various oaths and prayers for the king from the Book of Common Prayer in its Appendix, 288-291.
5. Charles R. Hildeburn, ed., "Thomas Coombe," The Inscriptions in St. Peter's Churchyard, Philadelphia, compiled and arranged by the Reverend William White Bronson (Camden, N.J., Sinnickson Chew, 1879), 551; for the purposes of this paper we will refer to the elder Coombe as Thomas Coombe, Esq. and the subject of this paper simply as Thomas Coombe.
11. Benjamin Franklin to Deborah Franklin,


13. Coombe was ordained deacon on February 15, 1769 and priest on December 21, 1771, "An Index to the Letters of Orders and Licenses Granted by the Lords Bishop of London from the Year 1746 to the Year 1774"; Fulham Papers: American, Lambeth Palace Library, 39:5.

14. Thomas Coombe to Thomas Coombe, Esq., London, October 8, 1770, Coombe Family Papers, HSP.

15. Thomas Coombe to Thomas Coombe Esq., London, January 4, 1769, Coombe Family Papers, HSP.

16. Ibid.


20. Thomas Coombe to Thomas Coombe, Esq., London, June 6, 1770, Coombe Family Papers, HSP.

21. Thomas Coombe to Thomas Coombe, Esq., London, November 7, 1770, Coombe Family Papers, HSP.

22. Thomas Coombe to Thomas Coombe, Esq., London, July 3, 1771, Coombe Family Papers, HSP.


29. Thomas Coombe to Sally Coombe, London, April 23, 1770, Coombe Family Papers, HSP.


31. Thomas Coombe to Benjamin Rush, January 3, 1770, Rush MSS, 33:46, HSP.

32. Thomas Coombe to Sally Coombe, London, June 22, 1771, Coombe Family Papers, HSP.


34. Ibid.

35. Thomas Coombe to Benjamin Rush, London, October 6, 1770, Rush MSS, 33:37, HSP.


37. June 19, 1772, Archives of Old Christ
Church, Philadelphia, Minutes of the Vestry, Series I, Volume 2, March 23, 1761-April 12, 1784, Microfilm, reel 1, 248, HSP; Benjamin Dorr, *A Historical Account of Christ Church, Philadelphia...*, (Philadelphia, R. S. H. George, 1841), 167. It should be noted that the Rev. Dorr was rector of Christ Church and the great bulk of his text are verbatim copies of the vestry minutes cited above.

38. Archives of Christ Church: Minutes of the Vestry, July 3, 1772, 250, HSP.


45. Thomas Coombe, *A Sermon Preached before the Congregation of Christ Church and St. Peter’s, On Thursday, July 20, 1775* (Philadelphia, John Dunlap, 1775), 3-4, 5-6, 14.


53. Thomas Coombe to William White, Philadelphia, November 29, 1777, White Papers, Archives of the Episcopal Church, Austin, TX, I:1-16.


56. Thomas Coombe to the Vestry of Christ Church, Philadelphia, July 7, 1778, Coombe Family Papers, HSP.


59. Thomas Coombe to Sally Coombe, New York, September 25, 1778, Coombe Family Papers, HSP.


62. Material supported by notes 27-29.

63. "Articles of Agreement between Thos. Coombe, Sr. & Michael Schlatter, October 10, 1776," Coombe Family Papers, HSP. When the farm was broken up for sale in smaller parcels after the elder Coombe's death in 1799, the deed showed part of its boundaries lying on Rex Lane and the Willow Grove Road, clearly identifiable streets in the Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia. See "Deed Book of Montgomery County," 22:45, Historical Society of Montgomery County.

64. A friend, Mr. Solomon Bush claimed to have warned him that he was going to be seized by the Americans. Bush also claimed that while a member of the legislature, he had striken Thomas Coombe, Esq. and "two or three Gentlemen of his friends" out of a Proscription List then being drawn up by the state. This, he said, saved the Coombe estate from confiscation. American Loyalists: Transcripts, 51:529.


67. Ibid., 51:519.

68. Thomas Coombe to Thomas Coombe, Esq., London, July 28, 1790 and Thomas Coombe to Sally Coombe, London, December 30, 1790, Coombe Family Papers, HSP.


70. Wallace Brown, *The Good Americans* (New York, William Morrow and Company, 1969), 45, 66-67, 80; William Nelson, *The American Tory* (Oxford, At the Clarendon Press, 1961), 3, 4; Esmond Wright, "Men With Two Countries," in *Development of a Revolutionary Mentality* (Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, 1972), 154; Robert McClure Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 209; Edgar Legare Pennington, "The Anglican Clergy of Pennsylvania in the American Revolution," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 63(1939), 403. While all of these authors stress the general reasons for the loyalty of Anglicans, and especially the Anglican clergy, there are a few exceptions although they do not negate the general observations of Brown, Calhoun, Nelson, et al. In Pennsylvania the clergy of the Church of England outside of the City of Philadelphia were missionaries for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (S.P.G.) and the Society paid their salaries. This greatly helped to inspire loyalty to Great Britain. At the joint parish of Christ Church and St. Peter's in Philadelphia, the clergy were paid by the vestry and so were not beholden to an English society for their income. This permitted more flexibility on the part of Coombe, Duché, and White. Also recently, Ousterhout, *A State Divided*, 1, 5, argues that the phrase "disaffection with" rather than "loyalty to" best describes the opposition to the state's patriots. She feels that Whig coercion produced "disaffected" Pennsylvanians. Coombe was certainly coerced by the local Whig authorities to take the Pennsylvania Test Oath. This pressure may have reinforced his loyalty to Britain, but that loyalty was not created by it because it had long been present. However, the case of Thomas Coombe does not question the Ousterhout thesis, but rather points to a single exception to it.