

GURDON SALTONSTALL

Governor of the Colony of Connecticut 1708-1724

Born: March 27, 1666, Haverhill, Massachusetts

College: Graduated Harvard, 1684

Political Party: None

Offices: Governor of the Colony of Connecticut, 1708-1724

Died: September 20, 1724, New London, Connecticut



Named for a maternal grandmother's family, Gurdon Saltonstall was born at the family home in Haverhill, Massachusetts, the son of Nathaniel and Elizabeth (Ward) Saltonstall. His family had been active in Massachusetts politics since his great-grandfather, Sir Richard Saltonstall, served in the Court of Assistants of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s. After Gurdon graduated from Harvard with a B.A. in 1684, he studied for the ministry. He received his M.A. from Harvard in 1687 and became the Congregational minister in New London in 1688. As such, he became the minister of Governor Fitz-John Winthrop, a role which led him to become Winthrop's secretary, agent, and close friend. He thereby gained considerable knowledge of the operation of Connecticut's government. Following Winthrop's death on 27 November 1707, the General Assembly met at a special session in December and elected Saltonstall as governor, even though he had never previously served in a political office.

A committee was sent to New London to advise Saltonstall of his selection and to administer the oath of office, if he accepted the position. Since his official acceptance was not recorded until January 1, 1708, it is not clear whether he began his duties earlier than this date. Because no person could be elected to a Connecticut colonial government position at the spring elections unless his name was on the list of twenty candidates developed the previous fall, a special law was enacted that permitted a previously unlisted candidate for governor to be elected. This allowed Saltonstall to be reelected in May of 1708.

Until this time Connecticut's legislative acts and official proclamations had been printed in Boston. Recognizing the need to distribute proclamations for fast and Thanksgiving days to churches and the session acts of the General Court to towns in a more timely and efficient manner, during the summer of 1708 Saltonstall wrote to Boston seeking a candidate to become Connecticut's first printer. That October the General Court appointed Thomas Short, brother-in-law of Boston printer Bartholomew Green, as first printer for the Colony.

Gurdon Saltonstall was a political and social conservative and a firm believer in established authority. As Governor, he strove to end Connecticut's opposition to some of England's colonial policies and was instrumental in increasing the colony's involvement in military actions against the French and Indians in Queen Anne's War. This provided greater security for residents of Connecticut. In addition, because Connecticut supported the English policies, it was seen as a loyal colony and England's attitude towards the Charter of the Colony of Connecticut was more positive. The Colony of Connecticut then enjoyed better relations with England than it had for several decades. The downside was an enlarged debt.

Saltonstall's belief in authority extended to reforms within the Congregational Church. During his term, the General Assembly approved a meeting of 12 ministers and four citizens at Saybrook to develop standards for the reorganization of the Congregational Church in Connecticut. The decisions made at this meeting, known as the Saybrook Platform, were intended to insure doctrinal purity and uniformity. Pastors were given greater authority over their congregations, and "Associations" of ministers, church elders, and "Consociations", uniting churches at the county level, were created to oversee the individual congregations. The result was a structure closer to Presbyterianism than traditional Congregationalism. Saltonstall, at this meeting, also decided that the fledgling college at Saybrook should be moved to New Haven, where it was later named after its major benefactor, Elihu Yale.

As Gurdon Saltonstall's administration progressed, his insistence on respect for established authority led to conflicts with James Fitch, a populist political leader and land speculator from Norwich. The disputes progressed from the personal level to political

clashes between the two houses of the legislature. An example of the problem occurred after the 1723 death of Nathan Gold, who had been deputy governor since 1708. Both houses wanted a role in determining who would replace him. (A solution was finally achieved when both groups accepted Joseph Talcott of Hartford.) Public criticism of the government grew, and Saltonstall, as a staunch proponent of respect for authority, took the criticism personally. More than once he threatened to resign as governor unless the internal turmoil of the government ceased.

Gurdon Saltonstall married three times. His first marriage was to Jerusha Richards, daughter of James Richards of Hartford. She died on July 25, 1697 in Boston, Massachusetts. Saltonstall then married Elizabeth Rosewell, daughter of William and Catherine (Russell) Rosewell of Charleston. She died on September 12, 1710. Thirdly, he married Mary (Whittingham) Clarke, daughter of William and Mary (Lawrence) Whittingham, and widow of William Clarke of Boston. She survived Gurdon Saltonstall, dying in Boston on January 23, 1730. He had ten children (five by each of his first two wives), of whom seven lived to adulthood.

Gurdon Saltonstall died on September 20, 1724 in New London. New London had provided governors for the Colony of Connecticut for 44 of the previous 67 years, and Saltonstall was buried with an impressive ceremony in the Ancient Cemetery. A special act was passed by the General Assembly that allowed both houses to meet to elect his successor. Joseph Talcott was chosen, a compromise that would have pleased Saltonstall.

Governor Saltonstall has had a street named for him in New Haven and East Haven. Lake Saltonstall, also believed to be named for him, is on the East Haven and Branford border.

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Portrait:

Gurdon Saltonstall's portrait was painted by George F. Wright (1828-1881) from a copy at Yale University. It is 49" x 55" in its frame.