

Thomas Fitch
Governor of the Colony of Connecticut, 1754-1766

Born: 1696, Norwalk, Connecticut

College: Graduated from Yale in 1721

Political Party: No declared political party

Offices: Norwalk Justice of Peace, 1727-1733, 1736-1737

Deputy, Connecticut General Assembly, 1726-1728, 1729-1731, 1772-1773

Assistant, Connecticut General Assembly, 1734-1736; 1740-1750

Deputy Governor, 1750-1754

Chief Justice, Connecticut Superior Court, 1750-1754

Governor, Colony of Connecticut, 1754-1766

Died: July 18, 1774, Norwalk, Connecticut

Governor Thomas Fitch guided the Colony of Connecticut through the turbulent economic and political times before the Revolutionary War but never lived to see the colonies become an independent nation.

Born in Norwalk, Connecticut about 1696¹, Thomas Fitch was the oldest son and the first child of Thomas Fitch and his first wife, Sarah (Boardman) Fitch. He was the fourth-generation "Thomas" in Connecticut, and is sometimes called "Thomas IV" . The Fitches were a wealthy and noble family of Bocking, Essex, England, from which Thomas IV's great-grandfather, Thomas I, emigrated to Connecticut with his mother and two brothers in the 1600's; Thomas I and his brother Joseph were among the founders of Norwalk.

After early schooling in Norwalk, Thomas IV went to Yale to study law. He was there during a period when some Yale professors left the Congregational Church (the established church) for the Episcopalian Church, shocking the Congregational-based society of Connecticut. Even Thomas admitted to sympathizing with some Episcopalian teachings. After graduation he went on to obtain a Master's degree.

In 1724, Thomas Fitch married Hannah Hall, born January 31, 1702 at New Haven, a daughter of Richard Hall and Hannah Miles. Thomas and Hannah Fitch had six boys

and four girls, with two children dying young. The first child, a son born in 1725, was also named Thomas.

In 1726, during a period of "difficulties arising in the town about ye Reverend Mr. Buckingham," the minister of the Norwalk Congregational Church, Thomas Fitch was among those who occasionally substituted until a new minister could be found. He was paid thirty shillings a Sunday for his preaching. Fitch's experience in "supplying the pulpit" (acting as a substitute preacher) of his home church demonstrated that in spite of some earlier Episcopalian leanings, his views were now acceptable to the established Congregational faith. In addition, the experience provided a forum for his considerable oratorical skills.

Thomas Fitch's political career began shortly thereafter, in May of 1726, with his election as a Deputy (representative) from Norwalk to the General Assembly; he was re-elected for the Assembly sessions through 1728 and in 1729-1731. He served as an Assistant from 1734-1736 and from 1740-1750. From 1727-1733 and 1736-1737 he also served as a Justice of the Peace.

Several projects during the late 1730's and in the 1740's earned Fitch the increased regard of his colleagues. He was part of a group that tried to set up a much-needed steel factory in Connecticut. He represented Connecticut in various crucial legal cases, arguing for Connecticut in 1738 in the long-running (1671-1771) Mohegan land case, a dispute between the Mohegans, the heirs of John Mason, and the Connecticut colony. His impressive legal skills prompted Timothy Dwight, an early president of Yale, to call him "probably the most learned lawyer who had ever been an inhabitant of the Colony." He was on military committees and other committees of importance, such as that petitioning the British Crown to reimburse Connecticut troops in the victory of Louisburg (Nova Scotia, 1745), and the committee to represent Connecticut in the Massachusetts-Connecticut border controversy (1750).

Fitch's greatest accomplishment before becoming governor was his 1749 revision of the laws of Connecticut. Revisions had been done in 1702 and in 1715, but by 1742 there were many new laws, and another update was badly needed. Fitch was on a committee that started the task in 1742, but that group did not accomplish much. In 1744, Fitch

was given sole responsibility for the work. He did much of the revising himself but also called on three others to help him -- Ebenezer Silliman, Andrew Burr, and Captain Robert Walker. The General Assembly accepted the completed revision in May, 1749.

The new compilation, 256 pages long, was in great demand. An initial printing of about 150 copies fell far short of the thousand copies needed. Such a large printing was a huge undertaking at a time when paper was handmade, sheet-by-sheet. Connecticut did not yet have a paper mill, and the nearest one was in New York. Hand-turned presses required that each page be typeset by hand and printed one sheet at a time. It was four years later, in late 1753, before the full number of copies was printed.

The law revision behind him, Thomas Fitch's political star began to rise in 1750. In November, Governor Jonathan Law died and the General Assembly elected Roger Wolcott, the Deputy Governor under Law, as Governor and Fitch as Deputy Governor, both to serve until the regular election of May 1751. The pair was re-elected at that time, and Fitch, in accordance with the custom of the time, was also appointed Chief Judge of the Superior Court of Connecticut.

It was unfortunate for Roger Wolcott that one of the first major scandals to shake the government of the Colony of Connecticut began in November of 1752, when a damaged Spanish ship limped into New London harbor with its valuable cargo of gold doubloons and indigo. The cargo was off-loaded and placed in local secured storage, but portions of it still disappeared before the reconstructed ship finally left in January of 1755. Many felt that Governor Wolcott was too lax in prosecuting the thefts and in not providing sufficient protection to the cargo. His perceived poor handling of the situation caused him to lose votes in the 1754 elections, and Thomas Fitch was elected Governor of Connecticut.

The French and Indian War marked the first years of Fitch's administration. This struggle between Britain and France for American lands lasted until the French and their Native American allies surrendered to the British in 1760. Connecticut gave large amounts of money, manpower, and supplies to the conflict, sometimes beyond what it could afford. Tradition states that in 1755 Col. Thomas Fitch V, the governor's son, received the present of a song as a joke from a British surgeon, Dr. Richard

Shuckburgh. Using a popular old marching tune, Shuckburgh is said to have written lyrics making fun of Col. Fitch's troops: "Yankee Doodle went to town, a-riding on a pony..." According to tradition, Col. Fitch is the original "Yankee Doodle". Years later, during the Revolutionary War, colonial troops turned the tables by adopting it as one of their favorite marching songs and playing it in front of the English troops after Burgoyne's defeat at Saratoga.

The conclusion of the war ended the money and manpower drain on Connecticut but found the state greatly in debt, and a depression arose that lasted for several years. King George III came to the throne in 1760, and, with timing that was very bad for the American colonies, decided to recoup the costs of the French and Indian War by increasing taxes. The Sugar Act of 1764 was the first step and was very unpopular in the colonies in general. This act required colonists to buy sugar only from British Caribbean sugar producers, excluding French planters. This allowed British planters to raise their prices, with the Crown getting a share of the increased profits.

Connecticut and the other colonies protested, but the Crown held firm, assuming the complaints would pass. They did not, and the announcement of the Stamp Act in March 1765 only made things worse. It required that anyone buying any type of legal paper, or even paper for printing newspapers and books, had to also buy a certifying stamp from the British, with the money going to the Crown. Since the Crown had limited the number of paper mills that could be built in the colonies, paper was sometimes difficult to get, and people often had to import it from England. The act raised the price of paper and made it even harder to obtain.

News of the forthcoming Stamp Act set off violent protests throughout New England and widened existing political divisions in Connecticut. Western Connecticut had more people and more money, traded easily with New York, and also had more representatives in the General Assembly. It favored the "Old Lights" in the religious controversy of the Great Awakening. It did not favor the Stamp Act but felt that it was best to comply with it for the time being, and Governor Fitch, a Norwalk resident, agreed.

Eastern Connecticut, on the other hand, had fewer people, was underdeveloped, and favored the "New Lights". It resented the continuing efforts of wealthier western

Connecticut merchants to keep major trade away from eastern merchants. The compliant attitude of western Connecticut towards the Stamp Act was the last straw for eastern towns. Eliphalet Dyer and Jonathan Trumbull led a militant group of men from the Norwich area, the "Sons of Liberty" , in discrediting advocates of the Stamp Act and working to place eastern Connecticut men in power. They staged protests and attacked supporters of the Stamp Act, including Governor Fitch, in the newspapers; they hung effigies of key politicians in trees and then burned the effigies.

In their determination to prevent the Stamp Act from becoming law, the Sons of Liberty continued their agitation by leading a mob of over 400 men and capturing Jared Ingersoll, the Royal Stamp Distributor, as he was on his way to Hartford to speak to the General Assembly about resigning. The Sons of Liberty forced him to sign a resignation then and there, took him to Hartford, and made him read the resignation to the General Assembly. At that point, Governor Fitch placed Ingersoll under his personal protection and issued a general proclamation against "turbulent" behavior. The Sons of Liberty responded by visiting Fitch at his home and declaring that he would either let them in to seize and burn the stamped paper there or his house would be burned down.

The Stamp Act was to become law on November 1, 1765. As that day approached, Great Britain took extra measures to ensure compliance, requiring all colonial governors to take an oath to enforce the act or pay a fine of five thousand pounds and be dismissed from office. Governor Fitch delayed taking the oath until two days before the deadline, in a vain hope that the act would be recalled. It was not, and in the presence of witnesses, he signed the Stamp Act on behalf of Connecticut. Jonathan Trumbull, William Pitkin, and a few others were so upset at this that they left the room in disgust just before the act was signed.

The unpopular Stamp Act lasted only a few months, as King George II officially withdrew it on March 19, 1766. An unintended benefit of the act was that eastern Connecticut did something about the paper situation. By December 1766, Christopher Leffingwell of Norwich had started the first paper mill in Connecticut and the *Connecticut Gazette* (New Haven) was being printed on paper from that mill. Eastern Connecticut had control of one Connecticut industry, at least. Then, on the one-year anniversary of the repeal, the feisty Sons of Liberty celebrated by putting up a special "Liberty Pole" and placing a

commemorative announcement in the *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), asking the blessings of heaven on His Royal Majesty for that repeal.

The times were changing, and Fitch was on the wrong side of the emerging political scene. Just before the election of 1766, he published an anonymous pamphlet defending his signing of the Stamp Act, but it was too late. William Pitkin was elected Governor in 1766, with Jonathan Trumbull as Deputy Governor. Trumbull, sympathetic to the views of the Sons of Liberty, assumed the governorship in 1769 and remained in office throughout the Revolutionary War.

Following his 1766 defeat, Thomas Fitch served in the General Assembly. His supporters attempted to have him re-elected as governor in the 1770's but were unsuccessful. In 1769, he served on a committee, and in 1772, was the Deputy from Norwalk to the General Assembly. He retired after that and spent much time reading under an elm tree he had planted in 1749. The tree, which came to be called "King Elm", lasted until about 1900 when it was destroyed by beetles.

Governor Thomas Fitch died on July 18, 1774 and was buried in East Norwalk Historical Cemetery, now the oldest cemetery in Norwalk. The Fitch house was partially burned in the July 11 and 12, 1779 British invasion of Norwalk, so only one wing remained. Fitch's wife, Hannah, having been evacuated from Norwalk at the time of the British raid, probably returned to Norwalk before she died in August 1779², at the age of 78. Fitch descendants lived in the reconstructed house until 1945. In 1956, the structure lay in the path of the Connecticut Turnpike (Interstate 95). Through community efforts the small wing that had survived the British raid was saved and moved out of the path of the road. It is today part of the Mill Hill Historic Park in Norwalk.

Thomas Fitch's family received some of the "Firelands" in the Connecticut Western Reserve in Ohio, lands reserved especially for those who had been burned out by the British in the Revolutionary War. The town of Fitchville, in Huron County, Ohio, was partly built on land that was given to the family of Governor Fitch and so was named for him. Mill Hill Historic Park, Wall Street and East Avenue, Norwalk, (phone 1-203-846-0525) includes the Governor Fitch law office (set on rocks from the original Fitch home's

foundation), the earliest Norwalk cemetery, a schoolhouse, and the Townhouse Museum.

Portrait

A portrait, painted by Joeline Smith, 29" x 34" in its frame, was copied from an ivory miniature owned by Mrs. S. Thurston Ballard of Glenview, Kentucky, a descendant of Governor Fitch. However, due to the uncertainties surrounding the portrait, it has subsequently been removed from the Governors' Portrait Collection in Memorial Hall. Although George Goddard, the State Librarian commissioning the copy, evidently compared the miniature to other known Fitch paintings and photographs and believed that "this portrait does look like the Fitches" , the clothing and hair style of the individual in the miniature are not that of the early to mid-1700's but of the 1830-1840 era, creating doubts as to whether it actually portrays Governor Thomas Fitch.

Footnotes

¹ Various sources give different birthdates, ranging from 1696 to 1700. The epitaph on Fitch' s headstone ends with the sentence: " Having served his generation by the will of God, [he] fell asleep July 18, Anno Domini 1774, in the 78th year of his age."

² *Connecticut Journal and New-Haven Post-Boy*, August 18, 1769.

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