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William Gibson

Huntington Library Quarterly, Volume 85, Number 3, Autumn 2022, pp. 539-546 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hlq.2022.a903742>



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# NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

## A Bishop for Virginia in 1672 Revisited

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William Gibson

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**ABSTRACT** This note revisits a 2009 essay by William Gibson on a proposal to appoint an Anglican bishop for Virginia in 1672. The essay indicated how advanced the planning for the project was and gave information from an archival source of a meeting of five bishops to plan the funding and powers of the bishop. What was not clear was why the project failed. This note, using manuscripts from the Huntington Library, uses letters written in the mid-eighteenth century to explain the reasons for the failure of the project. Principal among these was the distraction of one of the major proposers of the plan, Alexander Murray, by Irish entanglements. **KEYWORDS:** Edmund Gibson; Gloster Ridley; Alexander Murray; Orlando Bridgeman; religion in seventeenth-century Virginia

❧ **HISTORIANS HAVE KNOWN** for many years that there had been an attempt in 1672 to appoint a bishop for Virginia, but it has not been entirely clear why the venture failed. In 1902, Arthur Cross proposed that the failure of the 1672 scheme was largely a consequence of the fall of the Cabal ministry and the departure of the Lord Keeper Orlando Bridgeman, who had supported the project, from office.<sup>1</sup> Cross referred to a source of information for the 1672 attempt as “some papers in the late Duke of Bedford’s office.” Phillip Haffenden later argued that the initiative came close to success but failed at the last minute for political reasons.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Edward Bond has suggested that, of the five attempts to establish a Virginia bishopric, the one in 1672 came closest to fruition.<sup>3</sup> What had not been known until 2009 was how

1. Arthur Lyon Cross, *The Anglican Episcopate and the American Colonies* (New York, 1902), 90.

2. Phillip Haffenden, “The Anglican Church in Restoration Colonial Policy,” in *Seventeenth-Century America: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. James Morton Smith (Williamsburg, Va., 1959), 179.

3. *Spreading the Gospel in Colonial Virginia: Preaching Religion and Community*, ed. Edward L. Bond (Williamsburg, Va., 2005), 17.

far advanced the project had become when it was abandoned. But the precise reasons for the abandonment have not been established. The fall of Bridgeman and the Cabal ministry is plausible but only speculation.

The degree of commitment of the Church of England to the project was ascertained in 2009. At that time, I published an article in *Archives*, the journal of the British Records Association, based on the discovery of a fragmentary document in Bishop Seth Ward of Salisbury's papers, held at the Wiltshire and Swindon Archives.<sup>4</sup> That single folio was a record of a meeting between Bishop Seth Ward of Salisbury; Humphrey Henchman, bishop of London; Walter Blandford, bishop of Worcester; John Dolben, bishop of Rochester; and John Pearson, bishop of Chester, on April 22, 1672. The manuscript appears to be Bishop Ward's scribbled contemporaneous notes of the meeting regarding the appointment of a bishop for America. From the manuscript notes it was possible to reconstruct the direction of thought regarding the arrangements, authority, and possible funding of the bishop for Virginia. The document shows a considerable level of detail in the planning behind the establishment of a colonial episcopate. Almost certainly, this working party of bishops was drawing up the basis of the draft patent for the appointment of a bishop for Virginia.<sup>5</sup> The document also shows that, rather than ecclesiastical inactivity in terms of establishing a bishop in Virginia after 1662, there was considerable interest and momentum in the project before the appointment of Bishop Compton to the diocese of London. However, in the absence of other evidence, it was not possible to do other than speculate why the meeting of the bishops in April 1672, and their detailed planning, came to nothing. In 2009, I suggested that the Cabal government, and that of the Earl of Danby, found the possibility of managing religious and foreign policy between Protestant Holland and Catholic France problematic enough, without raising the complex issue of seeking to establish an episcopate in North America. It was also clear that the episode coincided with the fall of Orlando Bridgeman as Lord Keeper, and he was a known supporter of the appointment of an American bishop. Consequently, while the Church seemed willing on the issue of a bishop for America, the state was weak.

However, after publishing the article in *Archives*, I discovered letters in the Gibson Papers at the Huntington Library that provide an explanation for the failure of the venture in 1672. The two manuscripts date from 1746, when Bishop Edmund Gibson of London inquired of Gloster Ridley what had become of the attempt of 1672.

4. William Gibson, "A Bishop for Virginia in 1672: A Fragment from Bishop Ward's Papers," *Archives: The Journal of the British Records Association* 34, no. 120 (2009): 36–41, <https://doi.org/10.3828/archives.2009.4>. The document is in the Wiltshire and Swindon Archives, Chippenham, England, D1/21/1/4.

5. This patent is well known and is in the Library of All Souls College, Oxford. The patent has been transcribed in various publications, including *Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church*, vol. 1, *Virginia*, ed. William Stevens Perry (Hartford, Conn., 1870), 538; and Henry Wilder Foote, *Annals of King's Chapel: From the Puritan Age of New England to the Present Day*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1896), 2:229–30.

Ridley was a clergyman who had served as chaplain to the East India Company, a descendant of Bishop Nicholas Ridley, the owner of estates in Barbados and India, and conversant with colonial matters.<sup>6</sup> Ridley was curate to William Berriman at Weston Longueville. Berriman was an orthodox polemical clergyman who achieved some prominence in the 1730s. By the time he contacted Ridley, Bishop Gibson had fallen from favor with the government, having defended the Church against what he saw as the parliamentary assaults by Robert Walpole. When he wrote to Ridley, Gibson was clearly one of the Church's most doughty champions. That he would reach out to Ridley is telling. Moreover, Ridley was a scholar whose own immediate family had been colonial merchants under Charles II in London.<sup>7</sup> This may explain why Gibson turned to Ridley for information about the events of 1672.

Gibson's biographer, Norman Sykes, made clear that in the mid-eighteenth century, the appointment of a bishop for America was a significant preoccupation for Gibson. Sykes indicated that, from the 1720s onward, Gibson was a strong advocate of a scheme for appointing two suffragan bishops for America and the West Indies.<sup>8</sup> He had asked Thomas Bray of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) about the 1672 attempt to appoint a bishop as early as 1723. Under Walpole, an attempt to appoint a bishop in America failed, but in 1740 Gibson preached the annual sermon before the SPG that revived interest in the project.<sup>9</sup> By 1745, Archbishop Potter of Canterbury and Gibson pushed forward with the idea, but the Jacobite rebellion of that year prevented it from gaining government support.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, as the Huntington letters show, Gibson remained interested in the issue a year later.

A significant feature of the discovery of the papers in the Huntington Library is that they include a reference, by Gloster Ridley, to papers sent by Alexander Murray to Mr. Thornton "with the Earl of Bedford."<sup>11</sup> This may be the origin of Cross's reference to papers in the Bedford office. Equally, after Gibson's death, Archbishop Thomas Secker of Canterbury, another episcopal enthusiast for the creation of a colonial episcopate in America, pursued the possibility using, according to Cross,

6. ZRI/53, Gloster Ridley & family papers, Ridley (Blagdon) Papers, Northumberland Archives, Ashington, England.

7. John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 1 (London, 1812), 641.

8. Norman Sykes, *Edmund Gibson, Bishop of London, 1669–1748: A Study in Politics & Religion in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1926), 367–68. Gibson was also an advocate of other aspects of Church reform; see "Bishop Edmund Gibson's Proposals for Church Reform," ed. Stephen Taylor, in *From Cranmer to Davidson: A Church of England Miscellany*, ed. Taylor, Church of England Record Society 7 (Woodbridge, U.K., 1999), 188–202.

9. For consideration of Anglican policy in North America, see Stephen Taylor, "Whigs, Bishops and America: The Politics of Church Reform in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England," *Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993): 331–56; and Peter M. Doll, *Revolution, Religion, and National Identity: Imperial Anglicanism in British North America, 1745–1795* (Madison, N.J., 2000).

10. Sykes, *Edmund Gibson*, 367–74.

11. In 1672 Bedford was an earl, but in 1694 he was elevated to a dukedom.

“some papers of Bishop Gibson.”<sup>12</sup> It is likely that the papers in the Gibson collection in the Huntington Library are the papers Secker referred to in his campaign to establish an American episcopate. The papers in the Huntington Library consist of a letter from Gloster Ridley to Edmund Gibson in March 1746, responding to Gibson’s inquiry regarding the failure of the 1672 attempt. With it are Ridley’s transcriptions of letters from Alexander Murray that provide the basis of Ridley’s explanation for the failure of 1672.<sup>13</sup>

What light do the Huntington papers shed on the failure of the Virginia bishopric venture of 1672? Using Murray’s correspondence, Ridley explained that the 1672 proposal had been largely Murray’s idea, born from his pre-Restoration association with Charles II and his desire to be appointed to the bishopric. The proposal was referred to Orlando Bridgeman, who presumably commissioned the five bishops to develop the detailed arrangements for the bishopric. But when Bridgeman was dismissed and Murray sought alternative preferment in Ireland following the death of his relative Sir Robert Murray, the proposal ran out of steam. It seems possible that Murray regarded the move to Ireland as a temporary measure. However, as the correspondence shows, he became mired in his attempt to use the estate of Captain William Ross as a benefaction for the rebuilding of St. Paul’s Cathedral and was never to return to America.

This is the most likely explanation for the failure of the Virginia bishopric, and it suggests that the idea for a colonial bishop was not one that the state put much thought into. It was largely the pipe dream of one ambitious man, Alexander Murray. So we must temper our view of the proposal; it was not the case that the Church was willing but the state was weak, although the meeting of the five bishops suggests that there was some considerable commitment from the Church. It was more that the source of the idea was Murray, who became distracted and abandoned the idea.

These documents also say something about the contingent nature of politics under Charles II. This was an era in which personal interest and ambition, claims to royalist loyalty, and ecclesiastical commitment to an Anglican establishment in America were all dependent on personal motives. The key ingredient in 1672 was Murray’s ambition, and without it, the proposal collapsed. This was undoubtedly due to the specific circumstances of 1672: the king was distracted by the Treaty of Dover with France, Parliament was determined to overturn the Declaration of Indulgence of 1672, and the Church’s attention was absorbed by the prospect of the first Test Act,

12. Cross, *Anglican Episcopate and the American Colonies*, 188n2. See also Robert G. Ingram, *Religion, Reform and Modernity in the Eighteenth Century: Thomas Secker and the Church of England* (Woodbridge, U.K., 2007), 211–61.

13. Very little is known of Dr. Alexander Murray, other than that he had been in exile with Charles II and therefore had some call on the king’s patronage and attention. He had clearly been present in Virginia in 1670 and knew some of those who were locally campaigning for an Anglican bishop. See James B. Bell, *A War of Religion: Dissenters, Anglicans, and the American Revolution* (Basingstoke, U.K., 2008), 263.

which would enshrine its monopoly on public office. In a period of less heightened tension, Murray's turn away from the project might not have sunk it, but in 1672, the capacity of the three other state institutions to manage the project was insufficient. So, Virginia went without a bishop in 1672.

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WILLIAM GIBSON is Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford Brookes University. He has published widely on the Church in Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and his most recent works are *Samuel Wesley and the Crisis of Tory Piety, 1685–1720* (2021), *Sex and the Church in the Long Eighteenth Century* (2017), co-written with Joanne Begiato, *James II and the Trial of the Seven Bishops* (2009), *A Brief History of Britain*, vol. 3, *The Making of the Nation, 1660–1851* (2011), and, as co-editor, *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon, 1689–1901* (2012). He is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society and of the Royal Society of Arts.

Appendix: Transcriptions of Gibson Mss, Huntington Library

[Gloster Ridley to Edmund Gibson, March 25, 1746, bound volume, item 15, Edmund Gibson Papers, 1672–1767, Huntington Library]

Poplar

My Lord

I have enclosed the extracts which your Lordship desired to see, from which I think it will appear.

That Dr Alexander Murray, having attended King Charles II in his troubles and exile; and after the Restoration, at the persuasion of the Bishop of London,<sup>14</sup> having spent above seven years in Virginia,<sup>15</sup> returned to England to solicit the establishment of the Church in America, and to procure preferment for himself.

That in October 1672 a Representation of the Condition of the Church in America was made to the King in Council; that it was then declared that the settlement of it should be by a Bishop, according to the Church of England; that Dr Murray was nominated by the King as the intended Bishop; and that it was referred to the Lord Keeper (Bridgeman) to consider and represent what was necessary for the establishment of it.<sup>16</sup>

That changes at Court, the Death of Sir Robert Murray, and expectations of good preferment in Ireland made Dr Murray less pressing afterwards in this cause of the American Church. The Lord Keeper, if I mistake not, resigned the seals in the latter end of the year 1672; and (none of the Cabal appearing concerned in it, or for it) probably the affair miscarried for want of the Lord Keeper's Report or Assistance.<sup>17</sup>

Earnestly praying that your Lordship may have health to go through, and a happy life to see the good success of your Christian endeavours for the establishment of the American churches, I humbly beg your Lordship's blessing, and am, My Lord, your lordship's most dutiful son and servant,

Gloster Ridley.

14. Humphrey Henchman, bishop of London from 1663 to 1674, and one of the bishops who met with Seth Ward in 1672.

15. Where he was incumbent of Ware, Virginia.

16. Sir Orlando Bridgeman, a lawyer and judge, was appointed Lord Keeper of the Great Seal in 1667 and resigned in 1672.

17. The Cabal government was led by Clifford, Arlington, Buckingham, Ashley-Cooper, and Lauderdale, whose names have often been assumed to form the acronym CABAL.

[Bound volume, item 16]

No 1 Extract of a Letter Signed Alexander Murray directed to Mr Thornton with the Earl of Bedford and dated Oct. 25, 1672.<sup>18</sup>

This day my Lord of Canterbury<sup>19</sup> and my Lord Keeper, and my Lord of London moved and recommended the condition of the Church in America, on the continent of Virginia, to the King's Majesty, who has been graciously pleased to approve of their motions; and to encourage the settlement of that Church; and to this effect referred to my Lord Keeper, what is farther to be done concerning it: and to present the same for confirmation. This we hope tho' the motion be slow, we labour not in vain: I only pray to keep this to yourself, for I know no certain event.

No 2 Extract of another letter, signed and directed as above, dated Aug. 5 1672.

Since my last to you it hath pleased God to comfort me inclining the King's heart and my Lord of Canterbury to think on me, and in respect, as these times are, my business of America cannot conveniently be settled, the King has been graciously pleased to give me a letter of recommendation to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland<sup>20</sup> for some preferment there.

No 3 Extract of another letter signed Alexander Murray (the name differently spelled but in the same hand) inclosed in one to Mr Thornton, addressed to his Grace of Canterbury, dated Dublin Jan: 23 1696.

May it please your Grace

There is none that shall or can more severely censor this presumption in troubling your Grace than myself, I being altogether a stranger both by name and person but that some services I have formerly done to the King's Majesty and to the Church and the many disappointments I have met with and more especially the Trust of a pious use for St Paul's committed to me by the King Ch. 2 of blessed memory: under which, both it, and I, being aged and impoverished, are sinking: and least the omission of not acquainting your Grace therewith (if anything happen amiss) should be imputed to my neglect therefore I humbly address myself begging your Grace's favour and help.

This estate was left in the year 1674 by one Capt Wm Ross to be at the King's appointment for a pious use: I prevailed with the widow to recommend it for the rebuilding of St Paul's: and after many years disputes at law, a Decree was obtained by consent of all parties for the said: and being willing to add all my expenses of time and other charges I procured a decree for Dr Stillingfleet<sup>21</sup> to be administrator: who after he

18. William Russell was fifth Earl of Bedford from 1641. John Thornton was tutor to the Russell family, including William, fourth Earl and first Duke of Bedford. He was a frequent correspondent of Lady [Rachel] Russell; see *Letters of Rachel, Lady Russell*, vol. 1 (London, 1853).

19. Gilbert Sheldon, archbishop of Canterbury from 1663 to 1677.

20. The Earl of Essex had been appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in May 1672.

21. Edward Stillingfleet had been appointed dean of St. Paul's, London in 1678, which post he held until he became bishop of Worcester in 1689.



was sworn, was discouraged, and voluntarily resigned it in my behalf; the contests at law and other disappointment hath much impaired the estate, being at first valued to thirty thousand pounds: for which my self and friends have given security and bonds to the value of one hundred thousand pounds upon several obligations. It is possible ten thousand pounds may yet be recovered, the other two thirds belonging to the widow and other relations.

I was sent into Ireland An. 1673 with ample letters from the King's Majesty: from the Bishop [*sic*] of Canterbury and Bishop of London and several other persons of Honour, for some good preferment for some former services: and more especially to put me in some better capacity for the service of the Church in America, for which the King's Majesty with the consent of Sir Orlando Bridgeman the Lord Keeper and the Bishop of Canterbury and Bishop of London with many others whom the King's Majesty did nominate and so recommended the same to the Bishop of Canterbury's management and promotion: and especially for having attended his majesty in all the troubles in Scotland before Worcester<sup>22</sup> and after being in exile abroad until the Restoration. And after that at the persuasion of the Bishop of London having ventured into America and stayed there upwards of seven years: whereby upon the account and report of the case of the Church there given at my return to the Bishop of Canterbury and Bishop of London, the King's Majesty by their lordship's advice was pleased to declare the settlement thereof by a Bishop, according to the Church of England: and did publickly in Council desire the Bishops of Canterbury and London to promote the same, nominating me to that Trust. But the sudden death of a kinsman, Sir Robert Murray, constrained me at that time to decline it, I expecting by his Majesty's assurance and the Bishops of Canterbury and London their favour to be put in a better capacity by a preferment in Ireland: where it happened that the first vacancy was the Deanery of Killala, which the Earl of Essex proposed as a mark of the King's Majesty's favour: which altho' it was but titular I could not decline, and notwithstanding many promises and several grants of better preferment, whereof I have several unquestionable evidences to shew; yet these 23 years I have been constrained to submit, with the loss of better concerns, which I had acquired in America, still hoping to have returned thither in a better condition.

A little below he adds

About 4 or 5 years agoe recommending my case and that of the pious use to his Grace the Bishop of Canterbury and to the Bishop of London, upon the vacancy of the Bishoprick of Killalaw; at the desire of the Duke of Bedford and the Earl of Bath, and the aforesaid Bishops assisting, it pleased his Majesty to nominate me; but soon after the King going to Flanders, and my Lord Sydney returning from Ireland, interposed for his chaplain and gave me a disappointment. My age is now 67 years.

22. The battle of Worcester in September 1651 was an attempt by Charles II to regain the throne, which ended in a royalist defeat and further exile in Europe.

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