"To Have and Enjoy": Seating in Boston's Early Anglican Churches, 1686-1732

Erica Jill McAvoy

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“TO HAVE AND ENJOY”: SEATING IN BOSTON’S EARLY ANGLICAN CHURCHES, 1686-1732

A Thesis Presented
by
ERICA JILL MCAVOY

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
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ABSTRACT

“TO HAVE AND ENJOY”: SEATING IN BOSTON’S EARLY ANGLICAN CHURCHES,
1686-1732

December 2020

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In 1686, Massachusetts Bay Colony lost its charter, and the British government exerted more control over Massachusetts, further enveloping the colony into the folds of the Empire. In the same year, the first Anglican church, King’s Chapel, was established in Massachusetts. With these changes, Boston became more involved in Atlantic trade. During the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the people of Boston began to embrace a more English identity that became evident in the products they were buying, the way they were dressing, and how they worshipped. Just as strict Puritan worship rules waned, new, more English-style methods flourished. Church seating, always regarded with the utmost importance in colonial Massachusetts, began to change as well. What had been a method for arranging the community in a physical representation of the social hierarchy, seating became a matter of
business. Instead of the old simple benches, churches began to use pews, enclosed spaces for families to purchase and sit in together. In the eighteenth century, church seating embodied the process of Anglicization that was occurring in Boston as pews became a display of wealth and status and a symbol of the growing consumer revolution.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather, O. Donald Gohl; a kind and loving soul who always encouraged my love for history.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In 1794, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband John to tell him that the town had decided to sell the seats in the front of the meeting house for pews, and that the seats they used would be among them.¹ John Adams responded “A Pew I should like to have, and a double one too if possible.”² After learning of the price, over forty pounds, he laments that “As every Thing conspires to keep me poor. I may as well give Way as not: So I will even agree to purchase Pratt Pew: But when I can send you Money to pay for it I know not.”³ One hundred years before, someone like John Adams would likely not have purchased a pew. Over the

eighteenth century, though, church seating evolved, and John Adams’ willingness to accept the price of the pew regardless of whether he thought he could afford it embodies the emphasis on the importance of one's place during the worship service that had evolved.

Churches in early Massachusetts embodied the communities that they served. Throughout the colonial period, churches served as a gathering place for religious worship and governmental debate, a means to socialize, and a place to spread information. More importantly, though, they were a source of order. Seventeenth-century churches were a visual representation of the hierarchy of the town, with members of the community seated by order of social standing. Every community’s meeting house had a process for seating the people, though they were not always the same. Most separated the people by sex, then each side was seated in order of taxable wealth and/or political position.

To properly understand the concept of church seating in Massachusetts, one must look to England. In chapter two I refer to Amanda Flather’s work “The Politics of Place: a Study of Church Seating in Essex, c. 1580-1640.” In Flather’s work, she looks at post-Reformation Essex and the implications of church seating in the community. Her focus is to “dissect the history of church seating in Essex in order to explore the impact of social, economic, and cultural change on the location and use of power in local Essex society.” I consult Flather’s first chapter for a general history of church seating in Essex, as she describes in depth the change between pre- and post-Reformation seating habits. Her work dives deep into the

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reasoning behind early changes in church seating, which gives a framework for the process in colonial Massachusetts.

For background on seating in Massachusetts churches in the seventeenth century, I have drawn on the research of Robert J. Dinkin presented in “Seating the Meeting House in Early Massachusetts.” Dinkin provides a concise history of church seating by drawing heavily on the town histories written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as those of Sudbury, Andover, Billerica, and Charlestown. Those histories, in turn, were written based on the records of the local church and town. The records incorporated into Dinkin’s work lay the groundwork for analyzing the early church seating methods, which allowed me to identify changes that took place in the turn of the eighteenth century.

John Murrin and Jeremy Gregory provide useful examples of the ways in which Boston became more Anglicized in the early eighteenth century. Murrin presented his argument in his dissertation Anglicizing an American Colony: the Transformation of Provincial Massachusetts on which I relied for context surrounding the ending of the Puritan way of life in Massachusetts, as well as the shift to regular singing. Murrin’s analysis of the Puritan worship patterns allowed me to better contextualize the Anglican Church records.

Gregory’s article “Refashioning Puritan New England: the Church of England in British North America, c. 1680-1770” covers the emergence of the Anglican Church in New England. He highlights the connections that the Anglican churches in Boston, particularly

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Old North, had with the wider British Empire. This allowed me to compare the use of church pews to other examples of Anglicization in colonial Boston, putting the shift in pew use into context.

The late seventeenth and early eighteenth century saw an increasing Anglicization of colonial Boston, and the process of seating churches followed that trend. In this treatment of church seating, I examine the change of seating methods in early Massachusetts as they adapted the English style pews. King’s Chapel, Old North Church, and the Congregationalist Old South Meeting House serve as my subjects of study. King’s Chapel and Old South existed at the turn of the eighteenth century, and Old North organized in 1722. Their records all show the cost of pews and the changing of the physical spaces in order to allow for more pews.

While much study has been conducted about church seating in Massachusetts, as well as architecture of the colony’s places of worship, much of what has been written consists of studies of specific churches and why people in the community were arranged in certain ways.\(^7\) Indeed, one of the earliest treatments of church seating is Richard Gough’s *History of Myddle* written in 1700.\(^8\) Gough’s work is based on one church and covers the bulk of the

\(^7\) A few examples of these studies of church seating within town histories are: *History of Braintree, Massachusetts (1639-1708): the north precinct of Braintree (1708-1792) and the town of Quincy (1792-1889)* published in 1894 by Charles Francis Adams. (See pages 134-135 for discussion of church seating). Another is *History of the Town of Dorchester, Massachusetts* by Ebenezer Clapp published in 1859. See also *A History of Dedham, Massachusetts* written in 1936 by Frank Smith.

seventeenth century. He outlines how seating changed over that century, where various parishioners sat, and the conflict that materialized because of seating. Other historians such as Abbott Lowell Cummings have examined pews as a peripheral part of a larger study of architectural trends during the period. Furthermore, historians such as Mary Kent Davey Babcock and her treatment of Old North Church, have covered seating patterns within a single church in Massachusetts, but perhaps not examining how that church compared to or fit into any larger themes or patterns.

My work acknowledges that there was a change in patterns and methods of seating people in houses of worship in the early eighteenth century, and seeks to find out why that change occurred. By contextualizing church seating in early eighteenth century Massachusetts, a clear connection emerges between the Anglicization of the colony in the wake of losing its charter, the rise in conspicuous consumption, and the increasing commercialization of pews. In the eighteenth century, church seating embodied the process of Anglicization that was occurring in Boston as pews became a display of wealth and status and a symbol of the growing consumer revolution.

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The history of colonial Massachusetts is interwoven with religion, as much of the people who arrived during the first century of European settlement were Puritans. However, towards the end of the century, Massachusetts Bay Colony lost its charter when the Crown exerted more control over the colony’s government. At that time, trade with the rest of the British Empire opened up and goods were able to flow more freely into the colony. Because of this, the wheels of the consumer revolution began to turn. With the revocation of the Massachusetts Bay Colony charter, the first Anglican church, King’s Chapel, was established, in 1686. Therefore, Massachusetts became more Anglicized in religious customs as well as in culture and consumption in the following decades.

Massachusetts’ religious history in the seventeenth century is predominantly a Puritan one, with people of other beliefs and practices being absorbed into a congregational polity.
This “New England Way” began with John Winthrop’s “City Upon a Hill” experiment in the 1630s and lasted most of the century. By the turn of the eighteenth century, though, ideas about places of worship began to shift to reflect a more general British or anglicized ideal. ¹¹

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Anglicans began worshipping in Massachusetts with the establishment of King’s Chapel in Boston. While congregational and Anglican worship differed, in the early eighteenth century the two churches grew more similar in appearance with congregational churches adapting Anglican seating arrangements and similar exterior architecture that was brought to Massachusetts by English-trained experts. ¹² Historians have argued that this is because of the declining “New England Way” and the “erosion of a seventeenth-century system.” Namely, the end of the puritan “City Upon a Hill” experiment gave way to more diverse worship necessitated by the desire to be relevant, and not a backwater puritan stronghold. ¹³

However, there were also socio-economic reasons for the growing similarities between congregational and Anglican churches that permeated across many facets of life. Bostonians became more entrenched in the coastal commerce in the early eighteenth century than they were in the seventeenth century, which enhanced their direct connection to the Empire, and therefore increased a desire for sophistication and culture.

In the eighteenth century, Boston became increasingly involved in the Atlantic trade, which meant that imports from across the empire were consumed by more and more people.

¹³ Murrin, “Anglicizing an American Colony,” 27.
in the colonies. With this increased involvement in trade, British colonists in Boston became further entrenched in the British identity that was more generally Protestant, not the strict puritanism of the century before. One of the ways the churches grew more like each other was in the way their congregants were seated during the worship service. With the increased consumption of imported goods, members of churches were beginning to treat their place in church as a vehicle for display of personal accomplishment and connection to the rich trade of the eighteenth-century Atlantic. By the first quarter of the eighteenth century, congregational and Anglican churches were offering pews for sale to their congregants. The pews, along with other goods that people of Boston were purchasing, came to reflect the status of those purchasing them. Seating in church was no longer a placement of people according to rank, but a placement of people’s wealth and commercial consumption in their public space.

Attending church was such an integral part of life for seventeenth-century colonists in Massachusetts that general histories of towns cannot be written without mentioning the meeting house. The studies often focused on individual churches and patterns by which church authorities placed the members of the congregation. The practice of seating meetinghouses was the placement of the people in their perceived proper place, the meetinghouse floor reflecting the social makeup of the town itself. As outlined by Robert J. Dinkin, town churches generally appointed a committee to “seat the meeting house.” That committee was usually comprised of selectmen and other town authorities who used

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14 Dinkin, “Seating the Meeting House in Early Massachusetts,” 450.
“monetary worth and age,” as well as gender and political office, to determine where a member of the church should sit. People in small Massachusetts towns relied on the hierarchy of the village to maintain order.

The early methods for seating meeting houses in Massachusetts were similar to those used in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the middle of the sixteenth century, churches in England began to divide the members of the congregation based on their social standing in the community. Amanda Flather argues that an increase in the desire for social order after the Reformation led churches to seat the people of the parish more carefully. She describes churches up until the turn of the sixteenth century as “bustling, often noisy places … people arrived late for Mass or left early. The purpose of worship in pre-Reformation Catholicism was rite and ritual.”

After the English Reformation, church attendance became more regular, and the purpose of attending church changed. No longer did people attend a worship service to receive the Holy Sacrament, but rather to listen to the word of God. It was therefore necessary for members of the congregation to sit instead of standing and roaming in and out of the church. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, wealthy individuals in England were beginning to make monetary contributions in order to build a private pew in the church. These seats were enlarged over time and built to accommodate an entire family. According to Flather, the pews became a means to display wealth, and were built ever larger as the years went on. She

15 Dinkin, “Seating the Meeting House,” 453.
states that “their comfort and luxury knew no bounds. Several had fireplaces and were magnificently furnished and many had separate entrances. One even had a dog kennel.”

Richard Gough’s *The History of Myddle* was written in 1700 and describes the use of church seating as a way to reflect the hierarchy to which the parishioners in that village were expected to hold themselves. Gough was born in 1635 in Shropshire parish, and he witnessed the adaptation of individual seating in the church and the controversy that surrounded it. Myddle seems to mirror Essex’s parish, in that most of the pews were built after the Reformation. Gough said that, though there may have been a few individual pews prior to that point, it was after the Reformation that the interior of the churches began to change. Gough points out that, at first, “formes,” or benches, were installed but there was still space with no seating. Then “afterward Bayliffe Downton built for himself a large wainscot pew att the upper end of this voyd ground, and Thomas Nicolas of Balderton Hall built another nexte to him, and after, all the rest was furnished with formes.”

The change in the interior of the church in Myddle shows a shifting in attitudes of the parishioners. The people of Myddle were no longer content to sit in the forms but instead wanted their own individual worship spot. People who had the monetary resources to bring themselves closer to the pulpit did so, signifying that pews were no longer just a way to position people in their proper hierarchical spot in the community but a commodity that could be purchased as a display of status.

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20 Gough and Hey, *History of Myddle*, 78.
In colonial Boston, like Myddle, motivations for seating arrangements began to change, and so too did the seats themselves. In Boston especially, the impetus behind the placement of people in church turned from social standing to simply monetary contributions. In addition, the meeting houses and Anglican churches began allowing pews, not just benches, to be constructed changing the interior landscape of the church. In the colonial American period, church seating consisted of long, simple, backless wood benches, probably not more than twelve inches wide. Those seats were called benches or forms, not pews. The word “form” simply means that the bench was fixed to a wall or floor. Pews, as they became known in colonial America, were enclosed spaces with wooden walls of varying heights, depending on the church. The walls often had wainscoting and a door that locked (see figure 1). Inside the pew were chairs or perhaps benches, which were often decorated. The size of the pew depended on how much the person who paid for the space was willing to invest.

Throughout the years, the pews were moved, split up, and enlarged depending on the needs of the church. It cost a member of the church much more to have use of a pew than it did to have use of a single seat or even a group of seats.

Seating in church, both in England and in colonial Massachusetts, did not come without conflict, as people sometimes sat in seats to which they were not assigned, resulting in disorder and confusion. There were instances where these disputes were heard in the spiritual court, which demonstrates the seriousness of church seating. In Myddle, Gough writes that a
court case, *Harris v. Wiseman*, resulted in a rule that a person does not retain the right to his pew once he moves from the house with which the pew is associated. Also, another Myddle court case, *Boothby v. Bailey*, decided that “Noe man can Claim a right to a seat without prescription or some other good reason.” A person was only allowed to sit in a seat in church if he had the rights to it.

In New England, church seating was surrounded by conflict as well. Seating in the meeting house was serious business and a way to keep order in the community. It was important to those who were in charge of keeping order, such as church and civil authorities. If a person did not respect the rules in the meeting house, it was possible that they would not respect the rule of law outside the meeting house either. However, seating in church was also important to the average members of the community. Their place in church reflected their place in the community; if they were seated in a place they felt was below their station, it was an affront to their self-importance. In several Massachusetts towns, fines were imposed if a person sat in a seat to which they were not assigned. For example, in Newbury in 1669, after three new benches were built at the meeting house to fit fifty to sixty more people, two men were not happy with their new assigned seats and instead sat where they thought was an appropriate spot. The issue was brought to the civil courts. Salem court records indicate that John Woolcot and Peter Toppan were found guilty of “disorderly going and setting on a seat belonging to others are fined twenty-seven pounds and four shillings.” In Ipswich, two men

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accused of a similar offense were also taken to court for it. Their fine was to pay the cost of the hearing.\textsuperscript{23}

The establishment of King’s Chapel in 1686 meant a permanent institutional presence of Anglicans in Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{24} After that point, worship in Boston’s churches became increasingly English in nature, distancing worship styles from the seventeenth-century puritan model. For the first few years of the church’s existence, members of King’s Chapel sat on long wooden benches with no backs, similar to the congregational churches of the period. By 1694, though, they were building pews.\textsuperscript{25} The first pews in King’s Chapel could be purchased in May 1694 anywhere from seven shillings to five pounds, most sold for £1 3s.\textsuperscript{26} Considering members of the church had each paid anywhere from six shillings to twenty pounds to fund the construction of the church in 1689, just five years before, this was a sizable sum.\textsuperscript{27} Of the nearly 150 people who contributed to the construction of the church, fifty-three purchased pews.\textsuperscript{28} The rest of the donors either had individual seats on benches or did not worship there but wanted to invest in it to spread the influence of the Anglican Church.

\textsuperscript{23} Dinkin, “Seating the Meeting House,” 452.
\textsuperscript{26} Box I.1, Folder 1, Wardens, Vestry, and Meetings, 1686-1729. King’s Chapel (Boston, MA) Records of King’s Chapel (Boston, Mass.), Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.
\textsuperscript{27} Box I.1 Folder 1, First Record Book, 1686-1719, Vol. 16 XT, King’s Chapel Records.
\textsuperscript{28} Box I.1, Folder 1, Wardens, Vestry, and Meetings, 1686-1729. King’s Chapel Records.
It was not long before this method began to take hold in Old South Meeting House, a nearby congregational church. By the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century, Old South began to sell pews as private spots for worship. Like King’s Chapel, the puritan Old South Meeting House realized that the sale of pews provided a steady source of new revenue. Initial pew sales must have been successful because in April of 1721, it voted to enlarge the church’s north side by sixteen feet to accommodate families who wished to buy a pew. It also ended the ten-pound sale price and allowed the overseers the discretion to raise the price up to thirty-five pounds.\(^{29}\) As the church expanded, the need for more revenue grew, and it made more sense for the church to assign a pew to a person of high worth who would contribute more for his pew than it did to designate the space for someone simply because of their high standing in the community.\(^{30}\)

With the status of holding a pew came great responsibility. After a pew was paid for, a member of Old South Meeting House was not relieved of his or her financial obligations. To the contrary, the member was expected to contribute further still to the financial well-being of his or her place of worship and attend worship services regularly. In the same year that the rate for pews were switched from a flat ten pounds to a sliding scale of fees, Old South Meeting House voted that “it is just & reasonable yt such persons as enjoy the privilege of the pews & best seats in the Meeting House, doe contribute agreeably to support the worship

\(^{29}\) Series 3, Church Records, April 21, 1721, Old South Church Records, 1659-2012, RG0028. The Congregational Library & Archives, Boston, MA. Dinkin, “Seating the Meeting House in Early Massachusetts,” 452.

of God there.”

In addition, failure to attend services regularly and to contribute financially to the church could mean the loss of the pew: “that such as claim or pretend to any right in such pews or seats and do not constantly or usually attend on the worship of God there, or doe neglect their duty in contributing as aforesd may not expect ye continuance of such a privilege.”

Similarly, members of King’s Chapel were expected to contribute toward the maintenance of their church. In 1723, it was recorded in the vestry meeting minutes that if a Dr. Lake did not “immediately pay to the church wardens the sum of 5 shillings towards ye repairs of the church yt they dispose of the pew he sits in to such persons as they shall see convenient.”

Although members of King’s Chapel began purchasing pews in 1694, there was a change in 1712 that illustrated the growing wealth of the parish. At this point, the vestry decided that the entire first floor of the church would have uniform pews “built in one form without banisters.” Individual members of the vestry would have to advance the church fifty pounds which would be “repaid them as the pews were disposed of.” The vestry must have been confident enough that the pews would be purchased that they were willing to loan fifty pounds to the church to have them constructed. This was a sizable sum in 1712, considering that only twenty-five years before, there were only sixty-six people in Boston whose total

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31 April 21, 1721, Series 3, Old South Church Records.
32 April 21, 1721, Series 3, Old South Church Records.
33 Box I.1, Folder 1, Wardens, Vestry, and Meetings 1686-1729, King’s Chapel Records.
34 Box I, First Record Book, 1686-1719, Vol. 16 XT, King’s Chapel Records.
value of taxable wealth was over fifty pounds.\textsuperscript{35} Moreover, purchasers of the pews would then have to “build them at their owne charge.”\textsuperscript{36}

In 1717 and 1718, there were further capital improvements made to the King’s Chapel, and one of them was the construction of pews over and above what was built in 1712. The vestry paid eighty pounds for the construction of a new gallery and over seventy-three pounds “for altering the long seats and making pews.”\textsuperscript{37} This demonstrates that the pews constructed with funding from the vestry in 1712 must have all sold, and that only six years later, the demand for individual pews was still strong.

When Old North Church was first organized in 1722, it had several members move from King’s Chapel. It had been decided to build a new Anglican church in the north part of town, Old North, because “our present building [is not] capable to contain the People of the Church.”\textsuperscript{38} Therefore, the vestry at King’s Chapel had to decide whether to refund the purchase price for the pews of those who were moving to Old North. It voted that “gentlemen who are already gone to the North Church shall have a consideration for their pews one half of the first cost. Also that those gentlemen who shall for the future go to the North Church shall have no consideration at all for their pews.”\textsuperscript{39} In other words, once the vote was taken, men who had already decided to attend Old North Church would be given back half the

\textsuperscript{36} Box I, First Record Book, 1686-1719, Vol. 16 XT, King’s Chapel Records.
\textsuperscript{37} Box I.1 Folder 1, First Record Book, 1686-1719, Vol. 16 XT, King’s Chapel Records.
\textsuperscript{38} Mary Kent Davey Babcock, \textit{Christ Church} (Boston: self published by author, 1947), 6.
\textsuperscript{39} Box I.1 Folder 1, King’s Chapel Minutes, 1724–1733.
amount that they had paid for their pew. From that point on, pew holders who went to the Old North would not receive any reimbursement for their pew.

Those gentlemen that did go to the North Church were very much personally invested in it and contributed quite a bit of money towards its establishment. The Old North’s records state that many of them paid fifty pounds, some of them even more, to help build the church. In addition to the members of the congregation, there were others who contributed funds. The list of funders includes the Earl of Thanet, who gave ninety pounds, and the royal governor of South Carolina, Sir Francis Nicholson, and his wife who contributed sixty-nine pounds. The building itself has a direct tie to London, as it was built in the style of St. James’s Church in Piccadilly, London. Designed by Christopher Wren and built in the

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40 Church Records Book #1 ("A"), 1722–1731, Box 7 folder 1, Old North Church (Christ Church in the City of Boston) records, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
41 Old North Church Records Book #1 ("A"), 1722–1731, Box 7 folder 1.
1680s, St. James was brick, had a tower and steeple, and boasted galleries on three out of four sides. Old North, also brick with a large tower and galleries, was built in the latest London architectural style, a symbol of British identity, culture, and sophistication.

Old North’s physical location within the bustling North End of town demonstrated its English interconnectedness as well. It was near the water, among the wharfs and warehouses, mixed in with the very places that supplied the Atlantic trade with its functional necessities. “Close proximity to the wharfs emphasized a number of themes in Christ Church’s design, from the commerce that supplied its superior furnishings, to the communications informing its more English style, to the transatlantic imperial impulses behind the founding of the state church in Boston.”

After making initial contributions towards the construction of the Old North Church, members purchased pews inside it, further investing in the Anglican Church. Gillam Phillips, for example, paid fifty pounds toward the construction of the church, then purchased a pew for thirty. An advertisement in the New England Courant that year states that a “brick dwelling house in King Street…lets for £40 per annum.” For only ten pounds more than a pew in Old North Church, a person could rent a home on the same street as the Massachusetts Town House, or what is today called the Old State House. This demonstrates that a pew was more than a seat; it was a financial and social investment.

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43 Coltrain, "The Structures of Provincialism," 129.
44 Old North Church records book #1 ("A"), 1722–1731, Box 7 folder 1.
45 New England Courant October 23, 1721–October 30, 1721.
Despite their initial contributions, many members of Old North were approached again in subsequent years to further fund the church’s needs. In 1730, the church records indicate that seven men contributed a total of twenty pounds to assist in finishing the interior of the church because the funds previously contributed still were not “sufficient to the finishing of the church but among other things the altar and the pulpit are not yet built.”

Concurrently, the church had also borrowed large sums of money. In 1722, the accounts show sums of between three and twenty pounds being repaid to members of the church. In 1727, sums were even higher. In May of that year, for example, George Monk recorded that he was paid “the sum of fifty-eight pounds seven pence half penny, in part of one hundred & sixteen pounds one shilling and three pence due to me from said church.”

Demand for Anglican churches was also growing outside of Boston in more rural areas of Massachusetts. Murrin explains that after 1713, Anglican chapels rose in Newbury, Braintree, and Marblehead. Given the demand for space at King’s Chapel and the desire to build a new Anglican church in the north part of town, it is reasonable to assume that Boston’s Anglican community was growing. The population of Boston itself grew in the early eighteenth century, so perhaps more and more emigrants were arriving in Boston from other parts of the British Empire searching for an Anglican church. Murrin presents another explanation: Anglican congregations were absorbing members who had left congregational

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46 Account book ("C"), 1722-1729 Box 7 folder 2, Old North Church Records.
47 Account book ("C"), 1722-1729 Box 7 folder 2, Old North Church Records.
48 Account book ("D"), 1724-1730 Box 7 folder 5, Old North Church Records.
49 Murrin, “Anglicizing an American Colony,” 29.
churches because of conflicts. He explains: “Whenever a serious quarrel disrupted a whole puritan congregation, the Anglicans hovered nearby, offering consolation and status to the losers provided they were willing to convert.”\textsuperscript{51}

The congregational churches also illustrated less puritanical approaches to worship during the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Until 1715, most churches did not use “regular singing” (using notes on a page) during hymns. Instead, congregations allowed their members to sing “with whatever combination of time and pitch seemed most inspiring to them at the moment.”\textsuperscript{52} This resulted in a sound that was less than harmonious. Between 1715 and 1740, a group of ministers, led by Rev. John Tufts of Newbury, fought for regular singing to be required at most churches.\textsuperscript{53} While most did adapt this more agreeable form of hymn singing by 1730, there were those of the older generation who thought of this change as too idolatrous, or close to the Anglican Church. The process, as Murrin argues, indicates the evolution into a more Anglican approach to worship. “If singing by note was desirable, why not use choirs? How about organs? Or bass viols? The move towards choirs was comparatively simple, but organs were another matter…Even music seemed to have an Anglican or a heterodox tinge.”\textsuperscript{54}

The use of “rote singing,” the way that most congregational churches sang in the seventeenth century, was not only considered unpleasing, but also uncultured. In 1720, Thomas Symmes published an essay on the virtues of regular singing. He extols its antiquity,

\textsuperscript{51}Murrin, “Anglicizing an American Colony,” 29.  
\textsuperscript{52}Murrin, “Anglicizing an American Colony,” 37.  
\textsuperscript{53}Murrin, “Anglicizing an American Colony,” 37.  
\textsuperscript{54}Murrin, “Anglicizing an American Colony,” 38.
quoting verses in the bible that references singing hymns, and argues that those who oppose it just need to learn how to do it properly, and they will realize that they were incorrect to think Regular Singing should not be used. “Experience has sufficiently shewn, (in scores of instances) that the most vehement opposers of Singing by Note, never fail of being convinced of their mistakes, as soon as they gain a competent knowledge in the rules of singing, with ability to sing a small number of tunes with some exactness.” Symmes makes it very clear that he, being of the mind that Regular Singing is beneficial, is cultured, and those he is trying to convince are not. When he begins to list the reasons why churches should switch to Regular Singing, he says rather condescendingly, “I shall now proceed in the plainest, most easy and popular way I can, (for ‘tis for the sake of common people I write) to shew, that singing by or according to note, is to be preferred to the Usual Way of singing.”

The change to regular singing, while perhaps seen as leaning toward Anglicanism, must have sounded much better to everyone, including congregationalists. Indeed, the preference for regular singing was highlighted in the *New England Courant* in 1722. That year, one man was so angry about a disturbance in church that he wrote an advertisement admonishing those who occupied a pew in a meeting house in the South part of Boston. He stated that

55 Thomas Symmes, “The reasonableness of, regular singing, or, singing by note; in an essay, to revive the true and ancient mode of singing psalm-tunes, according to the pattern in our New-England psalm-books; the knowledge and practice of which is greatly decay’d in most congregations. Writ by a minister of the Gospel. Perused by several ministers in the town and country; and published with the approbation of all who have read it. Boston in N.E., 1720.” Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Boston Public Library. 29 Nov. 2020, 4-5. http://find.gale.com.ezproxy.bpl.org/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=mlin_b_bpublic&tabID=T001&docId=CB126188992&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE November 29, 2020

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“several persons sitting together in a pew….for some time past by their irregular singing, have considerably disturbed that part of the divine service.”57

Though the advertiser, Mr. “John Harmony,” did not approach the people at church, he felt it outrageous enough to pay for an advertisement. His choice to use the name “Harmony” could have meant that he, a paying member of the church who had rights to sit in a pew, was the embodiment of correct behavior and culture; he sang using the notes that were on the page and did not disrupt the service. He, and well-behaving church attendees like him, kept harmony in the church. The behavior of the subject of his complaint was unacceptable, though. By singing irregularly they were disturbing the general order of things, and disregarding their status as a pew holder. Their dissonance permeated beyond their inharmonious notes.

Regular Singing served to sophisticate the worship service. With the loss of Massachusetts Bay Colony’s charter and the evolving Anglicization of Massachusetts in the early eighteenth century, Bostonians were seeking sophistication. The shift from assigned seats on benches to purchasing pews in Boston’s churches was an easy and authentic one. The ability to purchase one’s spot in church gave the worshipper a new good to obtain in a culture now immersed in a consumer revolution, and another way, like Regular Singing, to sophisticate worship.

57 New England Courant, April 9, 1722
The value of exports to and from British North America increased substantially in the first half of the eighteenth century. In 1713 British merchants “shipped over £32,000-worth of exports to the Carolinas. By 1739, exports to these same colonies were worth seven times more than this.”58 Not only were the value of the goods increasing, but the quantity of goods shipped to and from British North America increased. According to Linda Colley, goods that were at first only consumed by the elite were now commonplace: “silk, rice, dyestuffs, coffee, tobacco and, above all, tea and sugar…now became far more abundantly and broadly available.”59 As people purchased imported goods, they soon began treating their place in church as another commodity they could buy. People were wearing silks, drinking the best tea, and sweetening their food with sugar; decorating their lives and their person with ostentatious imports. The British identity of Bostonians, strengthened through Atlantic trade,

59 Colley, Forging the Nation, 69.
was becoming more evident, and it was only a matter of time that it would permeate into the houses of worship, regardless of denomination.

The buying and selling of imported goods was so much a part of Boston’s fabric that newspapers posted advertisements for wares in almost every issue. The *New England Courant*’s June 17-24, 1723 issue peddled “Extraordinary good St. George’s Wine imported last week, lying under Thomas Palmer, Esq. with his warehouse by the dock to be sold…by Thomas Amory, merchant, or John Buttolph, Cooper.”60 In 1721, the *Boston Gazette* had an advertisement for Estes Hatch, a sailmaker, who was selling “good English and German duck, English twine large & small, Hollands, ditto two threads and three, and choice Hambrough Lines.”61 That same year, the *New England Courant* also posted an advertisement for “very good Cheshire and Gloucestershire Cheese to be sold by Gyles Dulake Tidmarth at his warehouse (No. 4) on the Long Wharffe.”62 These advertisements are demonstrated Boston’s connections to the wider Atlantic world, and the physical evidence supplements them. A map of Boston, drawn by Capt. John Bonner in 1722 (Figure 4), shows the many wharves that lined Boston harbor
waiting for ships to arrive with goods. Perhaps Tidmarth’s warehouse at No. 4 Long Wharf can be seen on the map of this bustling seaport.

Both King’s Chapel and Christ Church demonstrated their connection to the wider Atlantic world when allocating pews. It was so common to have men attending church who had sailed into Boston for trading purposes but did not live in Boston that the churches felt it was necessary to construct a pew for their use. At Christ Church, the “Gentlemen of the Bay of Honduras” were given a large pew in a desirable location to use when they were in town. This was in exchange for a donation of indigo that the church then sold for funds used to make capital improvements. In 1714, the vestry at King’s Chapel voted that a pew “be made into one for the use of Masters of Vessels.” While the pew at King’s Chapel seems to have been for more general use, the “Bay Pew” at Old North was a unique situation. In 1726, officials at the church sent a letter to one of the “Baymen,” describing the still remaining projects that were needed to complete the church. A Bayman, Captain William Harris, arranged with others of his trade to have over one hundred and fifty tons of logwood secured

63 The Town of Boston in New England by Capt. John Bonner, 1722. Aetatis Suae 60 Facsimile map by George Smith after map by John Bonner 48 cm x 66 cm, Boston: George G. Smith, 1835. Maps I.b.1.7, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. This is a facsimile of the map engraved and printed by Francis Dewing, Boston, 1722 [i.e.1725].
64 Account book ("D"), 1724-1730, Old North Church (Christ Church in the City of Boston) Records, MHS.
65 First Record Book, 1686-1719, Box I.1 Folder 1, vol. 16 XT, King's Chapel (Boston, Mass.) Records.
and donated to the church. The logwood, containing a lucrative dye at its center, promised a fortune once sold in a waiting European market. Old North, in turn, arranged for ships to be built to transport the material to New England for sale. A more obvious example of an interdependence between the Anglican Church and Atlantic trade would be hard to find. The arrangement was mutually beneficial. The Baymen, who saw themselves as high-status individuals, told their colleagues that the Bay Pew “is one of the best & largest & in the best manner sett out with handsome Common Prayer Books.”

The rise of the consumption of imported goods in colonial Boston was evidence of a rising concern of social status, and the purchasing of pews was an indicator of status in eighteenth-century Boston. Given the amounts spent on pews, they may have been among the most valuable financial investments a person could make. In addition, holding a pew in church gave the owner certain rights. In 1724 the vestry of the Old North Church voted “that no person shall have a vote at any [of the] church meetings unless he has a just title to a pew.” While it is not stated as such, it would seem that, even if a person who purchased a seat, or a group of seats, did not have a pew he could not vote.

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68 Box 7 folder 1, Old North Church Records.
While owning a pew was optimal, paying for a seat but not an entire pew was very common in Old South, King’s Chapel, and Old North Church. In February of 1714, Ruth Barry paid King’s Chapel 10 shillings for a seat. Comparatively, the September before that a pew was going for £7.10 which was paid by John Barros. Perhaps no one purchased more individual seats than a “Mr. Judd” who purchased eleven seats inside King’s Chapel in 1714, at least eight of which were in the gallery. The first eight seats Judd paid for seemed to have been for himself, as the records state that he paid £2.10 “for five seats in the Gallery” on August 30, then “£3.10 “for three seats in the gallery” on September 13. Interestingly, Judd also paid the church for other people’s seats. On October 4, 1714, he paid ten shillings for Richard Buckhurst; on October 18, he paid the same for Mr. Richard Johnson; on November 15 for Mr. Thomas Smith; and on January 17, 1715 for Samuel Peak. There are two possible explanations for why Judd bought multiple seats instead of a pew. He may not have been able to afford it; he paid less for the eleven individual seats he purchased than he would have paid for a pew. More likely, though, there were not any available pews for him to buy. Two years after Judd purchased the seats, the vestry voted to add the north gallery in order to make more room and turn some of the long seats into pews. While purchasing individual seats instead of a whole pew was a cheaper way to attend church, it still showed a level of investment and thus elevated the status of the person who made the purchase. Mr. Judd, though he did not own a pew most likely because of lack of space, still made it clear to others in church that he was willing to invest in the church.

69 First Record Book, 1686-1719, Box I.1 Folder 1, vol. 16 XT. King’s Chapel Records.
There were many ways to pay for a seat or pew, and payment schedules varied. In King’s Chapel in 1724, the records state: “Kenton the Clarke his title good having done sundry jobbs to the church.” This means that because Kenton was the church’s clerk he received the title to his pew without having to pay cash for it. Note everyone paid their yearly payment in a lump sum. The Widow Kent kept the title of her pew for her son and her contribution of fifty-two shillings was paid quarterly.\footnote{Vestry minutes, 1686–1729, Box I.1, Folder 4. King’s Chapel (Boston, Mass.) Records.}

At Old North Church, those who bought pews were given receipts that said how much they paid and that the pew, or a portion of the pew, was theirs. When the church first opened, all of the receipts were hand-written, and all generally had the same text. They stated that the church:

“received of [name] the sum of [amount] in current bills of credit for a pew in Christ Church in the [aisle or gallery] to have and enjoy the same to him and his heirs as long as he or they shall constantly contribute. In default thereof to resign the same to the church wardens for the time being they paying the above sum of [amount] on their refusal to dispose of the said pew to any other person.”\footnote{Pew deeds from Scrapbook #1, 1724–1734, Box 19 folder 12, Old North Church Records.} (See figure 6.)

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{pew_deed.png}
\caption{A pew deed from the Old North Church records at Massachusetts Historical Society. Photograph is author’s own.}
\end{figure}
Old North Church’s pew receipts demonstrate that women purchased pews. On August 18, 1729, a receipt for fifteen pounds was recorded from a Sarah Winkley for a pew on the south side of the church. Twenty-five pounds was paid by Mrs. Anne Cook, Mrs. Elizabeth Cooper, and Mrs. Mary Jeffers for pew number four on the north side. In November 1729, Catherine [Paintr...] paid twenty pounds for a pew in the north gallery. In a seventeenth-century puritan meeting house, men and women were generally separated and placed according to rank. The women of Old North, however, were free to purchase their pew as were other members of the church. They were not placed by the men at the top, but decided on their own where they would like to sit. This more progressive situation of men and women worshipping near each other transferred to congregational churches as demonstrated in a complaint written to the New England Courant about women in church. The complaint, written in 1722, complained about the way women dressed, particularly in church (see page 34).

Pews were inheritable if limited by the need to maintain the annual fees. Once a person paid for his or her pew, they had the rights to it as long as he or she, or their heirs, contributed to the church. Members of both Anglican and congregational churches left pews to their heirs. A receipt from King’s Chapel in 1724 explained that, “John Gibbs [is] entitled to the pew by succession from his father he paying 10 p week quarterly.” Old South Meeting House meeting minutes indicate in 1729 that the pews “may not be accounted an

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72 Pew deeds from Scrapbook #1, 1724–1734, Box 19 folder 12, Old North Church Records.
73 New England Courant, August 20, 1722
74 First Record Book, 1686-1719, Box I.1 Folder 1, vol. 16 XT. King’s Chapel Records.
estate in fee, absolutely, yet it is but equal that they descend to children.” In 1729 the Old
South congregation voted that, if a child inherits the deed to a pew as a minor and cannot
give to the church what would generally be expected from the person who has rights to the
pew, “the seaters may place others with them in such pews until such time as they arrive to
full age, or shall contribute as aforesaid.”

Although Anglican church records do not indicate what legal rights a pew holder was
entitled to, the way they were described in the documents make it seem that the legal status
was the same as the pew holders at Old South. All churches required that a person entitled to
a pew support his or her place of worship financially with a yearly contribution, regardless of
how it was spread out. King’s Chapel, Old North, and Old South all stipulated that when a
pew holder no longer held the pew because of non-payment of contribution or because they
did not leave it to someone upon their death, the pew rights would revert back to the place of
worship and the church would pay back the former pew holder what he or she originally paid
for it. In Old South Meeting House’s case, the money would even be repaid to the executor
of the person’s estate.

Having a pew meant that a member of the church was able to buy his or her way into
worship. While the payments were structured more like rent than a mortgage, occupying a
pew gave a member of the church a physical space to display their buying power. Pew
holders decorated their pews with chairs, seat cushions, and curtains to demonstrate their

75 Series 3, Church Records in the Boston, Mass. Old South Church records, 1659–2012,
RG0028.
76 Series 3, Old South Church Records 1659–2012, RG0028.
ability to buy imported goods. The pews at all three places of worship resembled private property, while still owned by the church.  

In the *New England Weekly Journal*, on January 1, 1733, a pew was posted for sale in the Irish Presbyterian Meetinghouse by a Mr. Quane. While it is likely that the Irish Presbyterian Meetinghouse had similar rules regarding their pews as Old South, Old North, or King’s Chapel, Quane must have felt a certain level of ownership over the pew having taken it upon himself to find its next occupant. What is most remarkable about this advertisement is that Quane describes the interior of the pew as being “well and curiously lined with green cloth serge and very handsome cushions of the same stuff.” It was adorned with the finest imported material, the very same that Bostonians were consuming more and more of. With the vibrant green in his “very handsome pew,” Quane was showing off a certain purchasing power and sense of sophistication and refinement in his pew at church. It also shows that his pew was an object of desire, one not only worthy of the finest decoration, but a fine decoration in and of itself. His pew and its decorations were a symbol of his elevated status.

At the funerals of significant persons or special occasions, pews were decorated with special draperies to demonstrate social status. Old South Church’s Governor’s pew had, at least since 1731, been specially adorned. In 1731 the meeting minutes say that “in Honour to

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77 Box I.1 Folder 1, First Record Book, 1686-1719, Vol. 16 XT. King’s Chapel (Boston, Mass.) Records.
78 *New England Weekly Journal* January 29, 1733
79 *London Gazette*, July 15, 1710–July 18, 1710; Serge was a type of durable wool fabric and was advertised in London quite frequently. It could be considered a luxury item depending on where it was imported from.
His Excellency our Governor there be a… Canopy erected over his pew and the charge born out of the Church stock.” On October 18, 1732, at the funeral procession of Mary Belcher, wife of Governor Jonathan Belcher, “His Excellency’s pew, and the pulpit, were upon this Occasion put into Mourning, and Richly adorned with Escutcheons.” The decoration of the Governor’s pew, and especially for Mary Belcher’s funeral, demonstrates both the nature of pew decorations of the time, and the reverence for people of status.

Where people sat in the church did truly matter and represented a certain status of the individual. The concern with status and its impact on seating was evident when it came to seating individuals who held a certain rank because of military or civil service. In 1724, King’s Chapel had a new member, Paul Mascarene, a major in the British Army stationed in Boston who would later become the Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia. When Mascarene began attending King’s Chapel in 1724, there were no pews that the vestry thought were appropriate for a man of his standing and the church decided that he would sit with a Col. Taylor until a “suitable pew be vacant and agreeable to the Major and his Lady and that they have the preference of the same before anyone whatsoever.”

The connection of seating to a person’s status was not always dictated by birth. A member of the congregation did not have to be placed in a good seat in church by a committee to be able to sit there. He or she could buy their way into a good pew. However, the members of the church still considered only certain pews “suitable” for people of higher

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80 Series 3, Church Records in the Boston, Mass. Old South Church records, 1659-2012, RG0028.
81 The Boston Post October 18, 1736.
82 Vestry minutes, 1686–1729, Box I.1, Folder 4. King’s Chapel (Boston, Mass.) Records.
rank. This might represent a shift in outlook on class in Boston as a whole. James Henretta argues that in the early years of the eighteenth century, the economy was so fluid that there were opportunities for men of lower ranks that there had not been in England. Historian Bernard Bailyn describes the Boston population’s investment in shipping in 1710 as widespread. He states that in the first decade of the eighteenth century, “close to one out of every three adult males in the town of Boston…was part-owner at least of a seagoing vessel.” Interestingly, people who owned vessels often referred to themselves as merchants on the shipping register even though they were listed as having other occupations elsewhere in the same document. Other occupations listed were shipwright, mariner, shopkeeper, cooper, and blacksmith. Bailyn states that the large span of people who owned shares in vessels was due to “deep-seated tendencies toward occupational mobility and a confusing flexibility in occupational roles.” No longer was it just the upper classes who called themselves merchant, but a new class of men who sought to further invest in the maritime trade in addition to their standard occupations. While the frequency of “merchants” appearing in the records indicate a rising dependence on trade, it also indicates a desire for increased status. While these men could have simply listed themselves as a cooper, the title of merchant indicated a higher status, so the opportunity was seized.

85 Bailyn and Bailyn, Massachusetts Shipping, 57.
The opportunities that were available to men who were willing to work hard allowed them to create a place for themselves that may not have been possible in a maritime community in England or even in America in the later part of the century.\textsuperscript{86} This opportunity transfers into church pew ownership. Men were no longer subject to being placed in a seat based on their birth, but could determine themselves where they would be placed in church. They could increase their status by buying a better pew in church, just like they could by calling themselves a merchant.

There were, however, limitations on being able to purchase a pew. Status, whether real or perceived, was accompanied by a set of standards of behavior. Once a pew was purchased, those sitting in it were expected to behave in a dignified manner. If that expected behavior was not exhibited, others in church would notice. The \textit{New England Courant} of August of 1722 dictated certain expected behavior in church. In an article written about excessive pride of apparel, the author bemoans the “obscene” fashion of the time, the hoop petticoat. The author states that the fashion is “scandalous and monstrous” and “worn by all our females (from the best lady to the poorest Kitchen-Wench)…” The worst of all, though, was his experience with this fashion in church. He writes they are not convenient in church “unless every one might have a large pew to themselves: I myself, last Sunday, saw one of them tilted up in a pew, by the hustling of a boy, and whelm’d over the top of a chair, which was not unloos’d without some blushes and confusion.”\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{86} James Henretta, “Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston,” \textit{The William and Mary Quarterly} 22, no. 1 (January 1965), 89.
\textsuperscript{87} \textit{New England Courant}, August 20, 1722
Another fashion he bemoans is the wearing of the “immodest … naked neck.” He suggests that “our Ladies … raise their Petticoats and lower their Stayes but a little more, till they meet in the middle, and then they will have no need of either.”\textsuperscript{88} Although, as the author writes, this fashion was very common, the resulting actions precipitated by the wearing of the skirts and bearing of the necks was inappropriate for church and not up to the standards of acceptable behavior. He even goes as far as to say that it draws the attention of “Wanton Youth…and naturally stirs up in them impure Desires, by which they become Guilty of that Adultery mention’d, Matth. 5-28.”

An interesting part of this article is how the writer views use of fashionable clothing by people who are of a lower class. “Moreover this Pride of Apparel is aggravated with People in poor and low Circumstances are guilty of it: and it is observable that such are too forward to imitate the Rich in Extravagant Costly Fashions.”\textsuperscript{89} He goes on to say that people who dress in high fashion will use nefarious means to procure their clothing, such as going into debt and selling their souls.

There was a rising sense of British identity throughout the Empire, and Bostonians, whether they attended an Anglican or a congregational church, identified with the British way of life. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the extent to which Bostonians purchased goods as a way to display status. Despite the differences in denominational beliefs, congregational and Anglican churches grew more similar, and the purchasing of

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{New England Courant}, August 20, 1722  
\textsuperscript{89} \textit{New England Courant}, August 20, 1722
individual pews, like consumption of other goods, are obvious examples of the growing cohesion.
Worship in Boston in the early eighteenth century was as much a part of the community’s fabric as shipping and trading. Whether a person in eighteenth-century Massachusetts was Anglican, or congregationalist, worship was woven in their lives. The study of church seating, therefore, gives historians a glimpse into a mundane, yet integral aspect of daily colonial life.

Before the eighteenth century, most meeting houses placed members of the community in their pre-determined spot based on their inherited social standing. As the early years of the eighteenth century unfolded, seats on benches gave way to privately owned box pews, ornamented with rich fabrics, cushions and curtains, indicating pride of ownership. Churches and meeting houses were repaired, refurbished, and updated, and those who owned pews held a stake in the place of worship itself.

The first part of the century saw British subjects in Massachusetts grow more connected to their English roots, unifying with the rest of the empire in their trade and
worship style. While this work examines the use of individual church pews and their connection to Englishness, status, and economic freedom, future scholarship might determine whether church seating changed at the other end of the century when colonists, then Americans, began to purposely move away from English customs and goods.

Future research could also focus on the influence of Anglican worship outside of Boston. Were churches more likely to stay with the hierarchical seating system if they were in a rural area? Was a congregational church more likely to change its seating patterns if it was close to an Anglican church?

Men like William Maxwell of Old North Church purchased a place for himself in the center of church; not surprising for a wealthy merchant who had also donated generously to the construction of the building. However, women like Anne Cook, Elizabeth Cooper, and Mary Jeffers also bought places for themselves in church on the ground floor. Unlike the women of earlier generations, they were not confined to the women’s sections of the church. They decided for themselves where they would like to sit.

This shift in church seating reflected an increased British identity and an increased emphasis on status. People in Boston became more anglicized in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, importing goods from all over the world, and buying merchandise to decorate themselves, their homes, and other belongings in the fashions of the day. Purchasing imported goods was a way to show elevated status. Buying one’s place in church was a similar form of self-expression: if a person could choose to buy imported silk, they could also choose to buy themselves a prominent pew in church.
As the eighteenth century progressed, buying status in church became common practice and considered a necessary expense. Just like tea pots, silver, silk, cheese, and wine, people purchased their place in church as a commodity and a vehicle to display their monetary resources. One’s pew was purchased “to have and enjoy.”

90 The phrase “to have and enjoy” appears in Old North Church’s pew deeds in the 1720s. For examples of this, see Box 19, folders 7-13 in Pew Deeds from Scrapbook 1, Old North Church Records.
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