

# Then & Now – Famous Citizen, Proprietor, & Visitor

## Reverend Thomas Prince 1687- 1758



**Town Name** – It may be safe to say that many Princeton residents are not familiar with the character, social standing and even greatness of the Rev. Thomas Prince, whose name the town bears, and who was in many respects a remarkable man.

**Birth & Parents** - Born in Sandwich, Massachusetts, (then in Plymouth County) on May 15, 1687. He was baptized in the Barnstable Church in 1687, the son of Samuel Prince Esquire and Mercy Hinckley, and he was an American clergyman, scholar and historian noted for his historical text *A Chronological History of New England, in the Form of Annals*. His father was a merchant and later a Representative. Thomas was a grandson of Thomas Hinkley, a Governor of Plymouth Colony, and John Prince of Hull, who emigrated to New England about 1633.

**Education** - Thomas was accepted to Harvard College in 1703 at the age of sixteen. In 1705, the year he began his Bachelor of Arts at Harvard, he went to Sandwich to teach school for a small salary. He graduated Harvard College in 1707. For several years after graduation, he traveled extensively abroad visiting, among other places, London, Amsterdam and the Barbados.

**His Travel** - On March 29, 1709, Prince joined the "Berbadoes fleet" with friends John Russell and Ebenezer Mountfort on the ship Thomas and Elizabeth which left from Hull. They reached Barbados in three weeks, remaining there for the summer. The ship then left for London in September, arriving in November, where Thomas toured the city. In January, he came down with smallpox, but recovered. While in London he finished writing his book, *An Supremus Magistratus in proprio Dominio Soli Deo Subsistit*, which was then sent off to Harvard, which might have been a requirement for graduation. They awarded him the degree of Master of Arts.

In March 1710, he boarded the ship Thomas and Elizabeth again, traveling to Madeira and on to Barbados, then back to England. The ship had then burned, which perhaps made him decide to stay in England for a while. In 1711, he preached at Great Yarmouth and then at Norwich, London, and Battsford and Combes in Suffolk where he remained for the next two years. In January 1714, he went to Rotterdam, and returned to Combes to preach for two more years. He wrote to his brother Nathan, who was then at Harvard, that "in about a hundred years the New England people would be powerful enough to withdraw from the realm of Old England, and advance to the dignity of a free and independent nation." He prepared to sail with his friend David Jeffries, but a series of misfortunes delayed him and the ship sailed without him. The ship, and Jeffries, were lost at sea. Thomas' friends in Boston had been told he would be sailing with Jeffries, so they were extremely happy to see him when he arrived in Boston Harbor in July 1717.

**The Old South Church** - His fame as a preacher had preceded him, and he was invited to preach at Hingham, Bristol, Rhode Island, and the Old South Church in Boston. He chose Old South Church to become the colleague of the pastor, Rev. Dr. Sewall.

Once settled into his new position, he made his choice of wife: Judith, the daughter of Judge Sewall. However, she chose, instead, to marry William Cooper. He then turned to Deborah Denny, whom he married on October 30, 1719. Deborah, who was 10 years his junior, had heard him preach at Combes and came with him to the colonies along with other Combes parishioners.

**Plan for the Day** - Mr. Prince wanted a well-regulated household, as is shown by a manuscript found among his papers giving his plan for each day's duties. It is presumed Deborah acquiesced to carrying this outline.



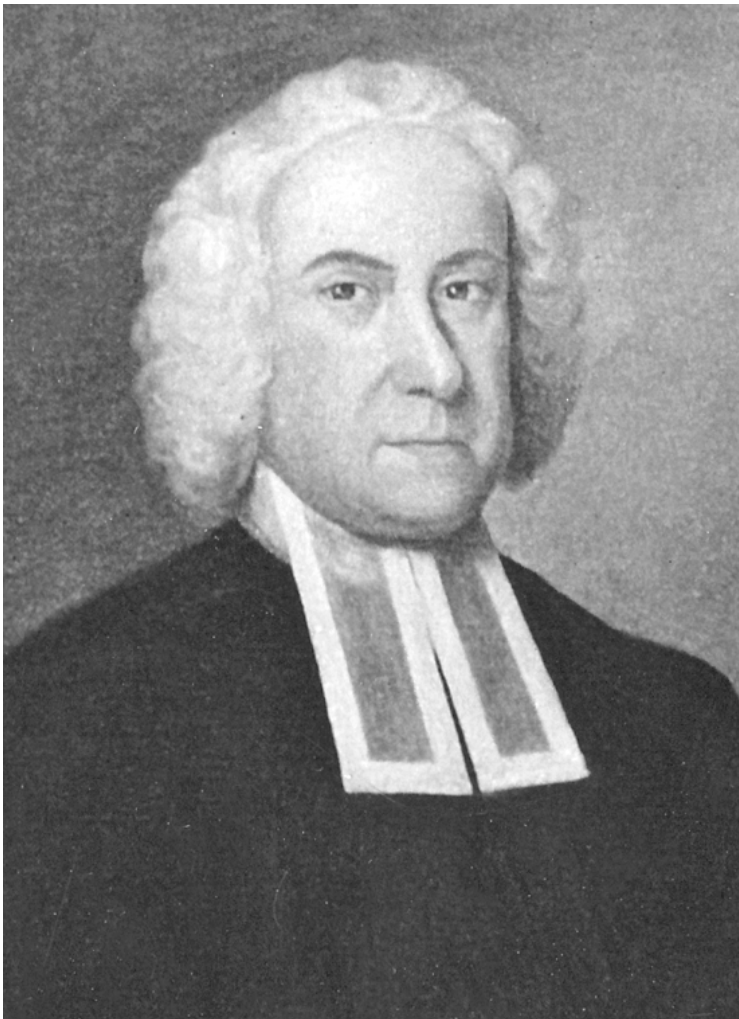
*Mrs. Sarah (Gill) Prince 1728-1771 - Portrait reproduced for Blake's History of Princeton from painting by John Singleton Copley*

October 30, 1719 – “As we begin to keep house my proposed order:

1. At 5 get up and go into my Study.
2. Pray and read in the Orig. Bible till 6 and then call up the family.
3. At 6 1/2 Go to Family Prayers and only the Porringer of Chocolate for Breakfast.
4. At 7 go into my study till 12 1/2 and then do something about the House till I to dinner.
5. Dinner at 1.
6. At 2 Dress and go about till Candle Light, Except Wednesday, after Dinner, do something about the House: Saturday after Dinner visit Dr. Sewall's till 2 1/2 and then Home.
7. At Candle Light and Study to 9 1/2 at 9 1/2 go to Family Prayers and so to Bed:

N. B. I eat no supper.”

**Salary** - The church voted that "Three Pounds five shillings per week be allowed and paid to Mr. Thomas Prince our Rev'd Pastor from the time of his marriage," and that "he



be desired by the Committee to move into one of the ministerial houses of the Church as soon as may be." The salary thus voted was not a meager stipend for the time.

At first, he appears to have occupied the old parsonage which was formerly the residence of Madam Norton and Governor Winthrop house. This house was on the main highway, now Washington Street, opposite School Street. It was destroyed and used for firewood by the British troops during the winter of 1775.

Mr. and Mrs. Prince afterwards occupied another "Ministerial house" built on Milk Street in the rear of the meeting house. It was probably in this latter house that he died. The church appears to have had at different periods three or four parsonages.

*Thomas Prince Circa 1750*

**Family** – They had five children, who arrived close together in the years following his marriage. However, they lost in close succession their youngest child Grace, daughter Deborah, and then their only son Thomas. In 1752, they lost their daughter Mercy, leaving only Sarah. His only surviving child married Moses Gill, who became Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts. Moses Gill, built and lived in a mansion on south side of 83 Worcester Rd. in Princeton.



*Sketch of the Gill Mansion and Princeton Center/Wachusett Mountain on the Left*

**Quality as a Minister** - With a pleasing personality, he was a favorite with young and old, when being in private conversation, which was described both as interesting and instructive. He was a tender and faithful pastor and is said by one to have preached as one that felt "the Divine Excellency and importance of the Word of God, which he preached to others."

During his pastorate there was great religious prosperity. At the time of Whitfield's visit to Boston, he welcomed him and joined and rejoiced in his great work.

**One notable incident** in his pulpit ministrations in 1746 is related. A French fleet consisting of forty ships of war under the Duc D'Aulney sailed from Nova Scotia with designs for the destruction of New England. Meanwhile, a day of fasting and prayer was appointed to be observed in all the churches, if by any means a gracious Providence in His own chosen way might avert the threatened calamity. While Mr. Prince was officiating on this occasion in his own church, and was in the midst of a fervent prayer for divine interposition, though the day up to that time had been perfectly calm, there came a sudden gust of wind, so violent as to cause a loud clattering of the windows. He instantly paused in his prayer, looked around upon his congregation with a countenance illumined with hope, and then proceeded to ask God "that the wind might frustrate the object of our enemies and be the means of saving our country." A tempest ensued in which the greater part of the French fleet was destroyed. The General commanding surrendered, many died of disease, thousands perished in the ocean, and the enterprise was abandoned.

**Literary Ability** - Of his literary abilities much has been written, "his industry was perfectly exhaustive." In early life, he showed a marked inclination to collect and preserve historical material, which found its culmination in the preparation and publication of the New England Chronology by which he is perhaps best known, and "than which there is none more valuable." He shared with the Mathers the reputation of being the most learned man in New England in the Eighteenth Century, but surpassed all the Mathers in the method, accuracy and usefulness of his writings. Dr. Chauncey said of him, "He possessed all the intellectual powers in a degree far beyond what is common. I do not know of anyone that had more learning among us, excepting Dr. Cotton Mather." Others say, "Nothing came from his pen that does not now possess historical value. His occasional papers are all luminous with the spirit and life of the time."

**Publications** - In addition to his ordinary pulpit ministrations he delivered many sermons upon public events, and funeral discourses portraying the life and character of men and women whose memory was worth preserving. It is stated that at least fifty of these public addresses and sermons were printed. Many are found in our libraries to-day.

**Earthquakes and Lightning Rods** - Among other publications Mr. Prince published in 1727 a Sermon entitled "Earthquakes the Works of God and Tokens of His Just Displeasure," of which, in 1755, he issued a reprint with an "appendix concerning the Operation of God in Earthquakes by means of the Electrical Substance." He was opposed to the use of the lightning rod, regarding all such attempts to escape the wrath of the Almighty as questionable devices. His warning against the lightning rod is stated in these words; - "the more points of Iron are erected round the Earth, to draw the Electrical Substance out of the Air, the more the Earth must needs be charged the Reverend Thomas Prince with it. And therefore, it seems worthy of Consideration whether any part of the Earth, being fuller of this terrible Substance, may not be exposed to more shocking Earthquakes. In Boston are more erected than anywhere else in New England; and Boston seems to be more dreadfully Shaken, there is no getting out of the mighty Hand of God. If we still think to avoid it in the Air we cannot in the Earth; yea, it may grow more fatal." (Extract from The Old Farmer and his Almanac, page 301.)

Prof. John Winthrop published a pamphlet taking issue with Mr. Prince and severely criticizing his statement.

**Psalms** - Mr. Prince also prepared a revision of the New England version of the Psalms which was used for the first time by the Old South Church on the Sabbath following his death.

**Rutland Lands** - The first evidence discovered of Mr. Prince's interest in Rutland lands is shown in a conveyance to him by the heirs of Cyprian Stevens, in the year 1727, for £120 current money, of one-half of a share, that is, one sixty-sixth part of the tract known as the Township of Rutland, which originally was twelve miles square, or 92,160 acres. Six miles square had been set off for the town of Rutland with some other concessions or grants. This deed was not recorded until the year 1734. (In examination of old deeds, one finds evidence that often the recording is delayed until someone is ready to go to the shire town, and then perhaps half a dozen deeds will be entered for record the same day from the same locality.)

Mr. Prince was one of the ten signers of a call issued Oct. 4, 1733. This was published in a Boston paper. The meeting was held Nov. 7 in Boston at the Royal Exchange Tavern on King St.

At this meeting thirteen persons were present including Mr. Prince. Among the number were prominent businessmen of Boston, many of them members or attendants at the Old South Church. Such names appear as Penn Townsend, Adam Winthrop, Francis Brinley, John Jeffries, Thomas Fitch and Jonas Clark. Of the eleven and one-half shares represented at the meeting Mr. Prince was credited with three shares (or one-eleventh of the whole) and his share of the tax subsequently levied was 30L. Nothing appears in print or among the few remaining Prince Manuscripts to suggest what led him to purchase so large an interest in this tract of land, as there was no present, or seemingly prospective, value to the larger part of it. But he certainly could not be called a "promoter" in the modern use of the word, as he retained his holdings, and at the time of his death is said to have possessed some three thousand acres all together. There is no evidence that he realized any financial gain from his possessions, nor did his widow or daughter profit much thereby.

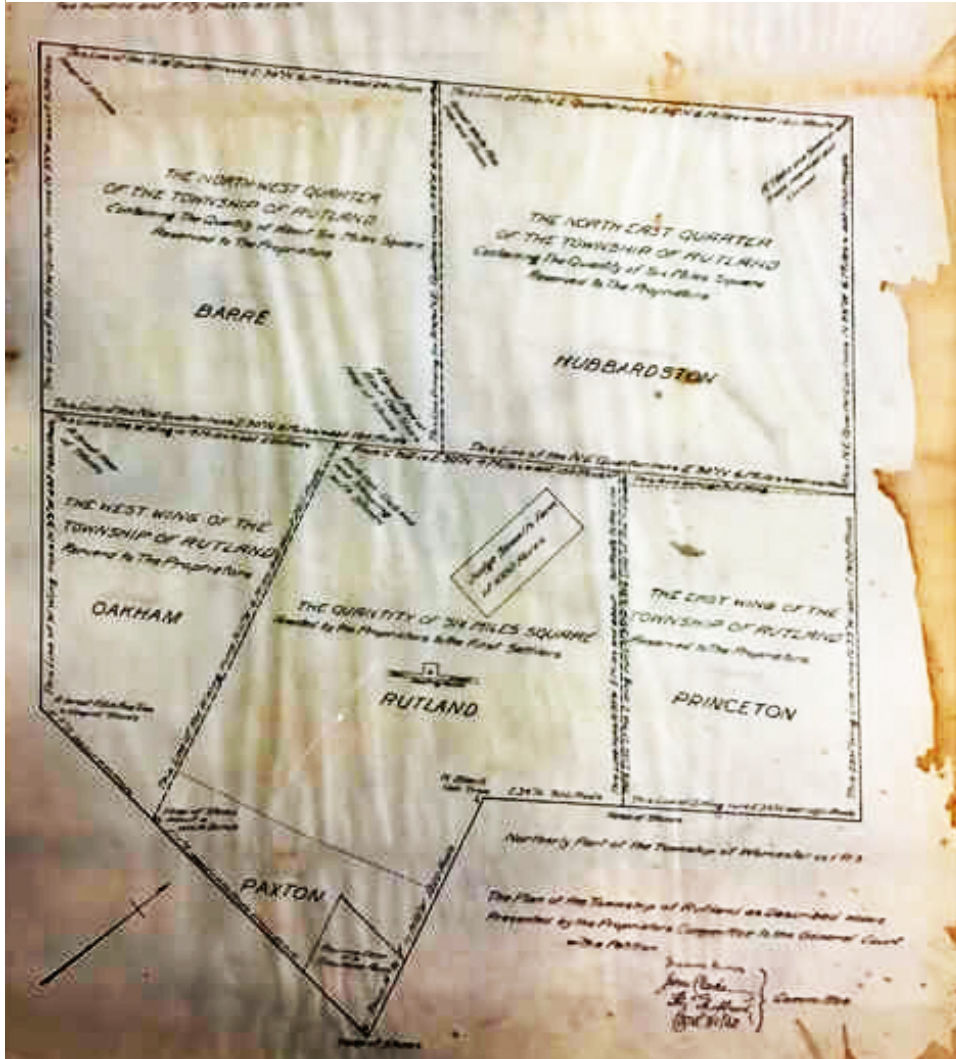
Among his associates Mr. Prince quickly assumed a prominent place, and it was not long before he was engaged in plotting out the divisions of the tract: East and West Wings, North West Quarter, North East Quarter. At least one of these plans bearing the signature of Mr. Prince and the Committee of the Proprietors has been preserved. The original plan of the East Wing long ago disappeared, but fortunately a small copy was found a few years ago among papers at Rutland.

Although, he was not the Clerk of the Proprietors nor their Treasurer, there is evidence that he performed a part, if not the principal part, of the duties of both these officers.

One can trace his probable route as he left his home in Boston for one of his trips to the interior. He would pass perhaps through Cambridge and Waltham to Sudbury where he could greet his brother minister and perhaps be entertained overnight. In the morning

he would follow the old travelled road to Lancaster, at that period a frequently used country road.

*The Below Proprietors Committee Map Was Drawn in 1713 and Presented to the General Court in 1721. Signed by Thomas Prince, Jonas Clarke, The Hubbards, and Corne Naldo.*



At Lancaster he would find another brother in the ministry, a college friend whose entertainment he might prefer to the inn. From Lancaster he would pass through Chocksett, now Sterling, then onto the “Bay Path Trail” (Houghton Rd. today) used by occasional travelers in that direction west. By this time, he would find dwellings few and far between, especially when he reached the area now included in our town. From this point doubtless the road was very rough and as there was no settlement or even occasional houses he had to depend upon his own resources for rest and refreshment. If he desired to survey his own

possessions in Lot A, which included a part of Little Wachusett, the prospect must certainly have been discouraging.

**Gift for Services** - The proprietors recognized the value of Mr. Prince's services and in 1734 voted that 63 acres on the Southerly part of the 72 acres of land in Lot A, not having been set off to any of the proprietor's by reason of the Brokenness of it be granted to the Rev. Thos. Prince “in consideration of the great care and labor, he had taken in conveyancing divisions above named.” In the examination of this work, he must frequently have taken a journey alone or accompanied by a Surveyor or one of the other Proprietors.

**Death** - The last meeting of the Proprietors, attended by Mr. Prince, was held on the August 15, 1758. After a long illness, during which he said he was "weary of this life," Reverend Thomas Prince died in Boston on October 22, 1758 at the aged 71. His wife passed soon thereafter on June 1, 1766. Thus ended Thomas forty years of be the Pastor of the Old South Church.

His last prayer is reported as being a petition "that an open and abundant entrance might be ministered to him into God's heavenly kingdom."

Mr. Prince was buried in a tomb in the Granary Burial Ground, a tomb belonging to the Old South Church, and a marker at this spot now bears his name.

The Town of Princeton became a District in 1759 and was incorporated in 1771 providing its residents with government representation. It was named after Rev. Thomas Prince due to his high standing within the local community and his ownership of part of the land used to form the town, which he was given in 1727 as part of the will of Cyprian Stevens. He also served as was one of the first Proprietors (surveyor and map drawer) of the area. In 1858 a printing company was formed and named after him (the Prince Association).

The above document is compiled by William "Bud" Brooks October 2022 from these resources – much more detail information can be found by exploring the links below:

- Blakes History of Princeton Vol I pages 109-120
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Prince\\_\(historian\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Prince_(historian))
- <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Prince-305>

Please visit [www.princetonmahistory.org](http://www.princetonmahistory.org) to learn more about Princeton's rich history.

We would love to hear from you at, [princetonmahistory@gmail.com](mailto:princetonmahistory@gmail.com)