

Rev. George Whitefield

Hi KKC Extended Family,

When the Rev. George Bechtel "returns" to the 21st Century to attend the 2026 Kolb-Kulp-Culp Reunion, one of the 18th Century experiences George might share is hearing the English evangelist Rev. George Whitfield preach during his visit to Skippack in 1740.

So, who was George Whitefield? Why is Sight and Sound Films, based in Lancaster, releasing a film featuring him in *A Great Awakening*, starting April 2nd in selected theaters for a limited time near you?! Please see my brief write-up below...

Looking forward to seeing everyone on June 14th!!

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Rev. George Whitefield (1714-1770)

George Whitefield was born in 1714 in Gloucester, England, the youngest son and seventh child of Thomas and Elizabeth Whitefield, owners of the Bell Inn and Bell Hotel on Southgate Street. Unfortunately, his father died when he was two years old and, while growing up, had to help his mother with the inn.

George attended the St. Mary De Crypt School of Gloucester. Even at a young age, he found a bit of the theatrical bug in him and became known for his elocution and memory. He was often selected to recite speeches before the Corporation of Gloucester at their annual visitation to the school. But his mother struggled to run the inn, so he had to leave school for a time to help her. Because of this background, he was used to serving others.

He was not religious at all growing up, in fact, George was known for his wild behavior. But later in his youth, he visited an older brother in Bristol and attended St. Johns Church. There, he had a sense of God's presence over him.

Normally, a man of his lower-class background would not have the means to attend Oxford. However, he was able to attend the university as a servitor, basically a servant to the upper-class noblemen. He was then granted free tuition and able to attend college and pursue a degree, but could not initiate a conversation with any of the students in the upper-class.

Prior to him entering the Pembroke College of Oxford, he had no religious convictions. But once there, he became acquainted with John and Charles Wesley and a group of like-minded men to whom the name "Methodists" were applied on account of their strict "method" of living.

George became a member of their "Holy Club", which started each day at 5:00 a.m. with an hour of prayer, followed by several hours of community service. After this, there was plenty of time to do serve his fellows at the college. John Wesley lent him many books to read, including Henry Scougal's, *The Life of God and the Soul of Man*, written in 17th century, which contrasts real and nominal Christianity. That book led to his spiritual conversion, believing man should be "born again" of the Holy Spirit and should do good works, not to be saved, but because he had

already been graciously and undeservedly saved by God. Thus, he began to pursue a Calvinist theology.

At the age of twenty-two, upon graduation from Oxford, Whitefield was ordained as a deacon by Bishop Benson of Gloucester, on Trinity Sunday, 26 March 1736. He preached his first sermon a week later at his home church in Gloucester. The Church of England did not assign him to a church so he began preaching in parks and fields on his own, reaching out to people who normally did not attend church. Beginning in late 1737, he spent a year in the Georgia colony at the behest of the Wesleys. But once back in England in late 1738, he found the bulk of the clergy were no longer favorable to him, and regarded him with suspicion as an enthusiast and fanatic.

As opportunities to preach within the Church of England diminished, he adopted a system of open-air preaching, resolving to go out after them, "into the highways and hedges." One day, he went to Hanham Mount, near Bristol, England, where standing on a hill, began to preach about Matthew 5:1-3 to the coal miners there. The crowd was estimated to be 23,000 people. He continued to preach there in the open, and over the next two months, hundreds were converted to Christianity.

On 27 April 1739, he began open-air preaching in London. He had gone to Islington to preach for his friend, Vicar Stonehouse. But because he did not have license to preach in London, he was forbidden by church wardens to preach in the pulpit. So, he preached in the court yard to a large group. Two days later, he preached in Moorfields to another "great multitude." Thus began his field preaching, even persuading John Wesley to adopt it.

In 1739, George went on an extensive preaching tour in America. Starting in Philadelphia, he traveled among the colonies from Massachusetts to Georgia. Benjamin Franklin had read about him in the London papers, and published in his *Philadelphia Gazette* that George Whitefield was coming. Franklin even published some of Whitefield's writings and sermons in his newspapers, so the people knew who Whitefield was, a young 25-year-old upstart preacher delivering sermons to thousands of people at a time.

When Whitefield spoke in Philadelphia at the old courthouse at Second and Market Streets, it was estimated his booming voice was heard by 20,000 people. Franklin was skeptical and measured it off. His estimate was that 30,000 could hear him! In Boston, 20,000 heard him and the city's population at the time was only 17,000.

In 1740, George Whitefield visited and preached to the Mennonites in Southeastern Pennsylvania, with several thousand attending. During this visit after preaching in areas like Skippack, he recorded his impressions of their simplicity.

So, Whitefield preached up and down the colonies in what was later known as, "The First Great Awakening." It brought many people into the church across many different denominations. Whitefield was well-traveled across England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, having been seen by a very large portion of the British population. He crossed the Atlantic Ocean thirteen times and visited all of the colonies from Massachusetts to Georgia. So many people had a "Whitefield experience," that it is estimated $\frac{3}{4}$ of the American population saw him in person. He kept a rigorous schedule, giving as many as thirteen sermons a week, at least 18,000 sermons in his career!

In 1769, he returned to the colonies for the seventh time, first traveling to Savannah, Georgia, to check on the Bethesda Orphanage he helped established in 1740. He then traveled up the coast to

Maine, and gave his last sermon in Exeter, New Hampshire, where he climbed atop a barrel to speak. Attendees thought they saw the Holy Spirit appear to descend upon him as he preached for hours. He then traveled to Newburyport, Massachusetts, where he was welcomed and stayed with his close friend, Jonathan Parsons, pastor of the Old South Presbyterian Church. While sleeping that night in the parsonage, he passed away on 30 September 1770, at the age of 56. Both he and Parsons are buried beneath the pulpit of that church.

George Whitefield was probably the biggest celebrity in his day, greater than anyone else would be today in American culture. Historians refer to him as “America’s Spiritual Founding Father.”

Sources:

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