

Chapter 15. The Charismatic Rev. George Whitefield. 1742-1743

THE COLONIAL GEORGIANS

Bethesda Orphanage was located on the Savannah River a short distance from Savannah. James Habersham and Rev. George Whitefield first kept orphans in a small house in Savannah. Habersham acted as the school teacher while Whitefield sought funding and searched for the place to establish an official orphanage. To do this, he traveled to England during 1738 and 1739. Whitefield was a dissenter of the Church of England, so his appeal fell on deaf ears as the leading pulpits declined monetary aid. But he was successful in acquiring an associate, William Seward, formerly a London stockbroker who had accumulated a fortune of 7,000 pounds. Seward accompanied Whitefield to Georgia.

When they returned, additional teachers were employed. Mr. Simms and Mr. Peryam joined as instructors to the school. Habersham, who had helped from the onset, accompanied Whitefield and Seward on an evangelical expedition to Pennsylvania. Whitefield was anxious to provide an orphanage at Savannah, and threw himself into the project. He returned to England to advance to the priesthood as well as secure a land grant of five hundred acres and contributions for the orphanage. 30 May 1739 Mr. Whitefield purchased some ironwork from Pennsylvania and wrote Georgia for timber to be cut for the construction of the Orphan House, also for a church at Ebenezer.

"This day Mr. George Whitefield wrote to the Trustees from onboard the *Minerva* in his passage to England, that he had received our letter of June 11th and our orders to the Magistrate of Savannah relating to the Orphan House, which had it not been erected, there would be this time scarce an inhabitant left in Savannah....that all he proposed by setting up a cotton manufacturing was to weave cloth only for their own use...I feared as many do that we are misinformed about the affairs of the poor deserted Georgia. That he had resigned the parsonage of Savannah...That he was coming over for a few months and would return again to America. That Georgia will never flourish till established by religious people."¹ Construction started about 1740, on a site near Savannah, and the orphanage quickly filled up with children. Whitefield was strict, believing that children would stay out of trouble if they were kept busy in their chores. From early morning until bedtime, the orphans were busy with their prayers, catechism, schooling, and farm chores.

By March of 1740 there were 40 orphans and by December of 1741 the number of orphans had increased to sixty-eight; but the staff of servants, officers and laborers totalled over a hundred persons. On 19 August, Whitefield went to Boston to canvass New England, and was successful in collecting 700 pounds in money and provisions for the orphanage. Then Seward was sent to England to preach the new Methodist doctrine and while in Gloucestershire was wounded in the head by a stone thrown by one of his hearers. He died.² That meant that there was no one left to represent the cause in England, nor workers to help manage the orphanage, so while in New England Whitefield found a Presbyterian minister, Rev. Jonathan Barber, to help with the work. During the Spanish invasion of 1742, Habersham removed all the children from the orphanage plantation to the estate of Mr. Hugh Bryan in South Carolina.

Life in the orphanage was strict, and aptly described in 1741 by a young Bostonian who had visited the orphanage and observed the lifestyle: "...When the children arise, they sing a short hymn, pray by themselves, go down to wash; and, by the time they have done that, the bell calls to public worship, when a portion of Scripture is read and expounded, a psalm sung, and the exercises begin and end with a prayer. Then they breakfast, and afterwards some go to the trades, and the rest to their prayers and school. At noon they all dine in the same room, and have

¹ Journal of the Earl of Egmont, dated 2 February 1741:

² Colonial Records of Georgia, Vol. V, pp. 402

comfortable and wholesome diet provided. A hymn is sung before and after dinner. Then, in about half an hour, to school again; and between whiles find time enough for recreation. A little after sunset, the bell calls to public duty again, which is performed in the same manner as in the morning. After that they sup, and are attended to bed by one of their masters, who then prays with them, as they often do privately.”³

However, the Trustees felt that the discipline was too strict, while Mr. Barber was accused of being too severe with the children.⁴ The complaints finally reached the magistrate’s ears in Savannah, and Barber was summoned before them to answer for cruelty. Rev. Thomas Bosomworth (pastor in Savannah in 1742) wrote the Trustees a bitter denunciation of the teachers, complaining that there were only fourteen orphans from Georgia, with the others gathered from all parts of the world, and that the youths spent too much time in prayer. Whitefield felt that idle minds were the devil’s playground, and stuck to the discipline. Since Whitefield had departed from the Church of England and was preaching a new religion (Methodism), complaints to the Trustees charged that the purpose of such an institution was to “establish a school or seminary to breed up those in his sect”⁵ Although Whitefield was accused of operating a school for dissenters, the Bethesda Orphanage thrived.

In March of 1747 Whitefield purchased a plantation in South Carolina of 640 acres, which was to be cultivated with slave labor. This plantation proved profitable in subsidizing the orphanage. Whitefield was in favor of using Negro laborers in the colony, and wrote the Trustees a strong letter telling of his experiences.

William Stephens made an interesting comparison of Rev. Mr. Whitefield and Rev. Norris as preachers: “Mr. Whitefield being a Man of peculiar Eloquence in the Pulpit, had captivated his Hearers very much; and withal after reading the second Lesson, was wont generally to expound on the whole Chapter extempore, with great Volubility; to make room for which, he laid aside the Use of the first Lesson, and Psalms, which undoubtably carry in them the Highest Spirit of Devotion: On the contrary, Mr. Norris did not assume Confidence Enough, in that Manner off-hand, to be an Expositor of Whole Chapters at a Time in the Bible; but contented Himself with going through the Whole Office appointed For Prayer, Mornings & Evenings constantly with great decency, and was punctual in catechizing the Children, Baptizing of Infants, visiting the Sick....”⁶ Apparently Stephens was of the “High Church”, and felt that Norris deserved to be treated with respect. Whitefield’s charismatic charm collected funds from English contemporaries, as well as from Georgia residents. Whitefield spent years traveling and attempting to raise funds to keep the orphanage in operation, traveling back and forth to England to obtain patrons. One of his major supporters was Lady Huntington, an English widow who devoted funds and her personal interest to the success of the project. A full-size portrait of her was displayed inside the orphanage (now the property of Savannah Historical Society) and legend has it that her ghost was frequently seen at Bethesda.

Rev. Whitefield was also involved in trying to get a church building in Savannah, and impatiently wrote the Trustees to appropriate money for the building. But Oglethorpe and Stephens ignored his demands. It was not until 1740 that Oglethorpe appropriated 150 pounds to begin the construction of a parish house which would be 60 feet long and 20 feet wide. Another 150 pounds was sent by the Trustees, but Whitefield’s enthusiasm overwhelmed the project with grandiose plans. The work was abandoned at the end of the year, with only a pile of building

³ Whitefield’s Work by Stevens, Vol. I, 352-353

⁴ Colonial Records of Georgia, Vol. V, pp. 359

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Journal of William Stephens 1737-1740

materials remaining. The 150 pounds sent by the Trustees now came under scrutiny, as they demanded an accounting of the money. With all of Whitefield's zeal and enthusiasm, he did not fare well in the political arena of the colony, and the realization of a church did not materialize until 1750. Rev. Mr. Whitefield continued his travels to and from the colony, occasionally appearing with fresh donations for the school.