

## An Intricate Dance

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What can we learn about Savannah at the time of Bethesda's founding? And what can we learn about Bethesda itself, the first orphanage in British America, indeed the only orphanage until the 1790s? The stories around the founding of the orphanage are heroic and heart-warming, and with good reason. At the center stands George Whitefield, arguably the greatest preacher of the eighteenth century and the most famous man in the colonies in the years prior to the American Revolution. Wherever he preached the New Birth in Christ – from England and Scotland to Boston and Philadelphia, he never neglected to ask for money for Bethesda and kept that financially draining institution alive.

And then too the founding of Georgia tends to elicit the same kind of heart-warming, heroic tales. We have the King of England creating something that had never existed before: a colony for the worthy poor of England with each man to be given free passage to the colony, 50 to 100 acres of land, and a year's supply of seeds and goods in order to put his family on its feet. It was a grand philanthropic adventure in which James Oglethorpe, the one Trustee to come to Georgia, took the lead. The colony's motto, "Not for Self but for Others", captured that vision. It was to be a place for white men and women of modest means.

When George Whitefield appeared in 1739, six years after the Ship Anne had unloaded its passengers, one would have been justified in thinking that two grand philanthropic visions were about to merge. William Stephens, sent over by the Trustees in London to report back on what was happening, eagerly welcomed the young evangelist. In 1738, the young Whitefield, only 24 years old, was in in

Savannah briefly – 4 months - and gained popularity for backing a crusade to curb “the practice of open Lewdness” that Stephen had found “too common among the Gay Gentry” in the town. If the two visions eventually joined, the process was not so much a stately court minuet conducted according to 18<sup>th</sup>-century etiquette but more like a peasant dance of the late Middle Ages with much pushing and shoving and positioning for the best space. You could get hurt in one of these dances. So who was pushed and who got hurt?

In 1739, Whitefield had gone back to England to raise money and become ordained. On his return, the young man landed at Philadelphia instead of Savannah and began a style of preaching that had never been seen before. He preached outdoors and he spoke without notes. He gave extemporaneous addresses and was a phenomenal success. Benjamin Franklin, who later printed his sermons, calculated that 10,000 people had heard his sermon on the town commons. Whitefield’s voice and theatrical presence were critical to his revivals. The leading British actor David Garrick said, 'Whitefield could move men to tears or make them tremble by his simple intonations in pronouncing the word Mesopotamia. If only I could say the ‘O’ like Mr. Whitefield.’”

But there was more than theatrics. He was preaching the necessity for a New Birth in Christ. You had to have a conversion experience and that experience had to be fundamentally emotional. He pleaded with his listeners to respond to what he termed the delights of divine grace, and the horrors of divine judgement. Faith not works was the path to salvation. He attacked the Anglican clergy not only for being lazy and self-satisfied but for not preaching predestination as an article of faith.

When he came to Charleston on his way to Savannah, he had a blow-up with the Rev. Alexander Garden, the leading religious figure in that colony. Garden accused him of “Enthusiasm and Pride.” Why was he going around denouncing Anglican

clergy? Garden wrote afterwards that Whitefield's sermons contained Truth and Falsehood, Sense and Nonsense."

When Whitefield reached Savannah in the spring of 1739, he preached at a house on Bay Street. We are fortunate to have the account of one convert, Hugh Bryan, a well-established rice planter in South Carolina who came across the river to hear him. "In June last past, (1739) I carried my wife up to Mr. Whitefield's house in Georgia," he wrote a friend, "We arrived on Friday and that evening he expounded on the new birth and asserted that whoever was born of the spirit and united to Jesus Christ would be sensible to a great change. This struck my heart ... I began to see that I was in the very gall of bitterness and bonds of iniquity..." 11. Bryan went into convulsions. Over a period of two days, he converted after being convinced of the hardness of his soul. "I delight no more in worldly goods, but in a life of faith in Jesus Christ ... I am entirely resigned to the will of God." Another person wrote, "Hearing him (Whitefield) preach, gave me a heart wound."

William Stephens, the observer sent by the Trustees to keep an eye on things, was appalled. He was incensed by this new religious doctrine. He heard Whitefield insist that works were of no value in the quest for salvation, that you cannot earn your way into heaven. Stephens despised that doctrine. It was simple for him. Works were good and Savannah needed good works. In his letters to the trustees, Stephens began to complain about the evangelist: "Mr. Whitefield preached on the doctrine of the new birth, and justification by faith," and argued that if we cannot see the Spirit of God working in our hearts, we are in a state of damnation.

There was another reason for the clash. Stephens saw that Whitefield was trying to create an institution independent of the Trustees. The Trustees as well as Stephens thought that Whitefield was working for them. Up to that point they made all the decisions for the colony. But he assumed that he had raised so much money he

could run it as he saw fit. The Trustees suspected that he intended to take the orphans and breed them up to be Methodists. Keep in mind Methodism did not exist yet as a movement. The term referred to John Wesley's approach to religion and of course that approach evolved into the Methodist Church. The leading trustee, Lord Egmont, noted in his journal that he considered Whitefield an enthusiast but he was "willing to excuse the fool" for the time being. 101.

### The Building of the Orphanage

As construction of the orphanage began, the relationship remained tense. James Habersham, the 24-year-old whom Oglethorpe had recruited from a merchant house in London, had stayed behind in 1738 to buy the 500 acres of land, the tract that we are on this evening. He looked for property at a distance from Savannah so that children would not be corrupted by the temptations of the city.

Returning in 1739, George Whitefield began working with the children who were orphans and staying in several houses that he had rented. There were as many as 100 people, children and adults, in Savannah dependent on him. He immediately began to talk to the dozens of children about the New Birth as if he were conducting a revival.

He recorded their reactions in his omnipresent journal. "The power of the Lord came as it were upon all. Most of the children, both boys and girls, cried bitterly." The scene reminded him of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit surged like a mighty rushing wind. The children knelt to pray in every corner, "begging of Jesus to take full possession of their hearts." He described how four or five girls wept uncontrollably for about two hours, pleading for forgiveness and assurance of salvation. He also noted he had hired a Latin instructor to expand the orphanage into a proper university. For him, head and heart went together. 118.

The first bricks were laid for the foundation of the orphanage in March 1740. The construction placed a special burden on his shoulders. Not only did he have to finance the construction but he had to pay the costs of feeding and sheltering dozens of orphans in Savannah waiting for their new home. So in June 1740, he returned to the north to conduct a series of revivals that have become legendary. Benjamin Franklin was a close observer of the evangelist. He printed all his sermons at a profit. The skeptical Franklin expressed amazement at how Whitefield could tell Philadelphians that they were half-beasts and half-devils and yet still have them throw money at him.

In fact, Franklin himself was susceptible. "I happened soon after to attend one of his Sermons, in the Course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a Collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my Pocket a Handful of Copper Money, three or four silver Dollars, and five Pistoles [Spanish coins] in Gold. As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the Coppers. Another Stroke of his Oratory made me ashamed of that, and determin'd me to give the Silver; and he finish'd so admirably, that I emptied my Pocket wholly into the Collector's Dish, Gold and all." That gold is here at Bethesda.

Within those very months, a Black Swan event occurred. It was war, war with Spain, declared in October 1739. And this meant war with Spanish Florida and St. Augustine. In fact, the war had been brewing for some time. Spain claimed the territory that made up Georgia as its own and had every intention of taking it back. In issuing the original charter, George II had presented the colony as a buffer against the Spanish. But that was only part of the story. There was no question that London intended to expand southward into Florida and westward into the lands of

the Creeks and Cherokees. Great Britain was an imperial power and Oglethorpe drank the Kool-Aid. Two Oglethorpes: the philanthropist and the imperialist.

As relations between Spain and Great Britain deteriorated, Oglethorpe returned to London in 1736 to lobby for troops and money for the defense of the colony. Parliament responded and awarded Georgia thousands of pounds sterling for defense and a regiment of the King's troops with Oglethorpe as the commanding general. He returned with a regiment of 500 men and 150 Highlanders, who settled the town of Darien. The newly minted general built a fort at Frederica, created a small town around it to provide skills and supplies, and attracted civilian craftsmen to service his army. And he made the Highlanders into a defensive line on the mainland at today's Darien.

Oglethorpe led his regiment, a Carolina militia, 150 Highlanders, and as many as one thousand Creek Natives in the invasion. He may have been a brilliant leader in terms of creating the Georgia colony but he was a lousy general. St. Augustine was an imposing obstacle. The campaign was an abject failure.

The one actual defeat produced orphans for Bethesda. The Spanish governor had created a community for fugitive slaves from South Carolina, called Fort Mose, three miles above St. Augustine. They were to become farmers and also to serve as a speed bump for the British. Oglethorpe's army overran them with ease. But two weeks later, the Blacks together with Spanish troops and indigenous allies stormed Fort Mose at the crack of dawn. 75 Scotsmen were killed. The father of Lachlan and Ann McIntosh was captured and taken to Spain as a prisoner. Lachlan and Ann went to Bethesda along with other children. Oglethorpe gave up his siege of St. Augustine and made his way back to Frederica. It was humiliating.

The threat of a Spanish invasion led Savannahians to flee for Charleston. Savannah was a town where half of the 142 houses stood empty and lots were grown up with weeds. Whitefield was shocked by the spreading attitude of those who stayed and acted as if they might as well enjoy life. Gambling, horseracing, drinking. He wrote, “that the gay men needed “to be persuaded to part with or marry their concubines ...” Desertions from Savannah increased in fall of 1740. “So many people left that one would have thought the Place must have been entirely forsaken.” All the distress swelled the number of people at Bethesda to 150 people. Made it one of the biggest communities in Georgia.

The more significant consequence was that the town was almost entirely supported by Bethesda during 1740 and 1741. George Whitefield brought in thousands of pounds sterling to pay the tradesmen. A total of 60 craftsmen swarmed the site. Carpenters, bricklayers, sawyers, plasterers, and common workers. Bethesda became the largest civilian employer in Georgia. Georgia had no currency of its own so the inflow of hard currency was a blessing.

Savannah’s magistrates were still on their guard against the independence of Bethesda. When an enlisting officer appeared in Savannah to raise soldiers from among the workers at the orphan house, the craftsmen refused in defiant tone. Stephens recorded: “They answered that they had a place to sleep in with ready money to pay for their work, where they were, which they were not desirous to change for the hazard of being knocked on the Head, and certainty of being continually exposed to bad weather, either heat or heavy rain.” 80. Stephens was convinced that Whitefield had planted that seed in these men.

The Operation of the Orphanage

As early as November 1740, Habersham was able to move most of his extended family to Bethesda. Believe it or not, a delay occurred when a Spanish vessel seized a schooner loaded with 10,000 bricks intended for the chimneys of the house. The residents lived in 4 framed houses, a stable and carriage house on 20 acres of land. The other accomplishment was the road to Savannah. And finally, James Habersham, 27 years old, married Mary Bolton, 16 years old at the instigation of Whitefield.

By January 1742, 49 children were under the care of the Bethesda orphanage: 22 without mother or father; 24 with only 1 parent. 3 paid their own way. Lachlan and Ann had a father but a prisoner in Spain. 23 English, 10 Scots, 4 Dutch, 5 French, and 7 Americans. Habersham and wife, 2 schoolmasters and wives, surgeon, shoemaker and seamstress, laborers and hired servants. 80 persons to care for.

As you know from Mark O'Dell's talk, the Great House at Bethesda was a handsome edifice, the largest building in the colony of Georgia. It was a monument to the energy of George Whitefield. A friendly visitor wrote in 1745 that the three-story house "stands on a rising ground, having a descent on all sides. On the north and south are yards about 120 feet long, planted with orange trees." The property had a lovely garden and orchard, and two enclosures for livestock; "on the east is a water passage to carry you to any part of Georgia or Carolina." Even a skeptical visitor called the garden "one of the best I ever saw in America." 192

Bethesda's daily routine was closer to a reformatory than a house of mercy. A wake-up bell at sunrise. "When the children rise, they sing a short hymn and pray by themselves. Then they go down and wash, and by the time they have done that, the bells call to public worship." They studied a classical curriculum, learned trades, and took meals in a common room where a wholesome diet was provided.



They attended worship service three times daily. The Westminster Shorter Catechism.: What is man's chief end. (To glorify God and to serve him forever.)

But the war hung over the rigorous schedule of devotions and study. When Spain invaded Georgia in 1742, (5,000 troops sent to St. Simons Island), Habersham hastily arranged for Bethesda's evacuation and sent the residents to Hugh Bryan's plantation in South Carolina. 171.

Although frequently away on conducting his revivals, Whitefield wrote personally to many the residents of Bethesda, including some of the orphans. His counsel to these youths did not smooth the hard edges of his doctrines. To Rebecca Bolton, sister of Habersham's wife, he confessed that his sole purpose in bringing her to Beth was that she might be "brought to Jesus." His letter went on, "You may well wonder that God has not sent you to hell long ago." (Keep in mind Whit thought the same about himself.). Mollie A. had confided to him that she was wrestling to maintain her passion for Christ, and he prayed that God would humble her by the experience. "You may now see what a poor wretch you are, how proud, how earthly, how sensual, how devilish, and yet, stupendous Love! Jesus Christ will still receive you." 150.

The adversarial relationship between Bethesda and the magistrates of Savannah continued unabated. The Rev. Jonathan Barber, a Presbyterian minister, joined the staff as the chaplain. Criticized for this Calvinism, Whitefield defended Barber and note that "Satan rages furiously against this Institution in this Province." Away from Savannah, "We live in love." Habersham shared that feeling: theirs was a holy place in the midst of a hostile world. When a new minister came to Savannah to be its priest, Habersham and Barber went into town and confronted Christopher Orton with pointed questions. They then announced that they had concluded he

was not a real Christian. Stephen Williams had the two arrested and placed in jail for 24 hours.

The enemies of Bethesda in Savannah used the controversy that his fund-raising stirred up. In 1743, *The Boston Evening Post* printed a letter that said that the main house was dilapidated, cows ranged about the property, and there was filth on the floors. And neighbors said Whit was enticing orphans to that place to starve. Was he stealing money? Whitfield published an independent audit. 5,000 pounds duly accounted for. How many orphans were there? Most did not stay long. In 1740, 46 entered. 11 stayed a year or less; 11 two years; and only 9 remained in 1745. Children learned employable skills or returned to their families.

#### Scene IV – The Reconciliation

By the late 1740s, Bethesda had proved its staying power and its usefulness to the colony. Even the magistrates had to admit as much. George Whitefield continued to raise money in England and Scotland and in British North America for the orphanage. He did so until his death in 1770.

The unfortunate side of this warming relationship was his embrace of slavery as a way to supply the orphanage with its food and labor at a low cost. That embrace was ironic. In 1739, when he was descending through Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina on his way to Savannah, he wrote a passionate letter addressed to all slaveholders. “God has a Quarrel with you for your Abuse of and Cruelty to the poor Negroes.” He excoriated the slave masters for mercilessly beating their laborers, and for failing to provide basic food and clothing for them. He also suggested that white southerners were keeping the gospel of Christianity from the slaves for fear that salvation would make them restless for freedom.

## Bethesda and Slavery

His Letter: Kidd: "As I lately passed through your Provinces ... I was sensibl[y] touched with a Fellow-feeling of the Miseries of the poor Negroes," Whitefield wrote. "God has a Quarrel with you for your Abuse of and Cruelty to the poor Negroes." He excoriated the slave masters for mercilessly beating their laborers, and for failing to provide basic food and clothing for them. He also suggested that white southerners were keeping the gospel of Christianity from the slaves for fear that salvation would make them restless for freedom.

He writes "my blood has frequently almost run cold within me, to consider how many of your Slaves had neither convenient Food to eat or proper Raiment to put on, notwithstanding most of the Comforts you enjoy were solely owing to their indefatigable Labours." Whitefield believes the prayers of the slaves will be heard and "The blood of them spilt for these many Years in your respective Provinces, will ascend up to Heaven against you."

Whitefield soon warmed to slavery. In 1741, upon realizing the difficulties of maintaining the institution and its lands, Whitefield wrote *An Account of the Orphan House in Georgia* expressing his desire to turn to slave labor. "As for manuring more land than the hired servants and great boys can manage," he admitted, "it is impracticable without a few negroes."

His new interest in slavery became more apparent in a 1747 letter to “a generous benefactor unknown” in which he claimed, “God has put into the hearts of my South Carolina friends, to contribute liberally towards purchasing a plantation and slaves in this province which I purpose to devote to the support of Bethesda... One negroe has been given me- Some more I purpose to purchase this week.” The Bryan family.

‘Had negroes been allowed I should now have had a sufficiency to support a great many orphans.’

"Georgia never can be a flourishing province, unless negroes are employed."

His 1747 letter. James Habersham.

He gave the trustees an ultimatum, threatening, “I cannot promise to... cultivate the plantation in any manner” if the laws prohibiting slavery were not overturned. The trustees were convinced and in 1752, when Georgia became a royal colony, slavery became the law of the land. Upon his death in 1770, Whitefield bequeathed 4,000 acres of land in Georgia and 50 slaves to the Countess of Huntingdon.

Afterwards

Whitefield grew more moderate in his opinions and this applied to Bethesda. He mends his rivalries. (John Wesley)

## Scene II

The wild card in this game was James Oglethorpe, who was losing interest in Savannah, and was not particularly interested in Bethesda. By 1739, he had become a British general with an army on St. Simons and was looking southwards and spoiling for a fight with the Spanish. In fact, you can argue in fact that there were two Oglethorpes in existence during his eleven years in Georgia: Oglethorpe the philanthropist and Oglethorpe the imperialist.

James Oglethorpe belonged to a large group of people in England who wanted to enlarge Britain's holdings in North America and break into Spain's empire in the Caribbean and Latin America for trading purposes – the right to send ships with goods into Spanish-speaking countries like Venezuela or Columbia. The leaders were members of Parliament, government officials, and merchants all too ready to pick up arms and plunge the nation into war. During the 1730s, that long-simmering conflict was heating up, both in Georgia and the Caribbean.

Guess what? We often talk about how Georgia was threatened as a colony by the Spanish in Florida and indeed it was. Spain claimed the territory that made up Georgia as its own and had every intention of taking it back. In issuing his charter in 1732 to Oglethorpe, George II presented the new colony as a buffer against the Spanish purely for defensive purposes. But that was only part of the story. English mapmakers were already showing northern Florida up to the St. Johns river as part of British territory. There was no question that London intended to expand southward into Florida and westward into the lands of the Creeks and Cherokees. Great Britain was an imperial power and Oglethorpe drank the Kool-Aid. He was absorbed by the Spanish threat.

As relations between Spain and Great Britain deteriorated, he returned to London in late 1735 to lobby for troops and money for the defense of the colony.

Parliament responded and awarded Georgia thousands of pounds sterling for defense and a regiment of the King's troops with Oglethorpe as the commanding general. He returned with a regiment of 500 men and 150 Highlanders, who settled the town of Darien. The newly minted general built a fort at Frederica, created a small town around it to provide skills and supplies, and attracted civilian craftsmen to service his army. And he made the Highlanders into a defensive line on the mainland at today's Darien.

In the process, Savannah became a victim of the fears generated by the prospect of war and by Oglethorpe's disinterest. The newly appointed secretary to the Trustees, William Stephens, arrived in 1737 and wrote back that he found the town neglected, "little removed from a downright Bankruptcy." Because of a draught, fewer men were farming; there was little food to eat, and the food supplies in the Trustees store had been exhausted. As far as the general was concerned, Bethesda was scarcely a blip on the screen. The foundation had been laid in March 1740 at the very moment when he was assembling his army for an invasion of Florida and an attack on St. Augustine.

Part of his disgust with Savannah had to do with a petition signed by over one-half of the inhabitants asking for the prohibition on slavery to be lifted. The petition generated a bitter three-year-long dispute that tore the colony apart. The general saw Savannahians as undermining the whole purpose of the Georgia Trust to provide a place for the worthy poor of England. The Highlanders backed Oglethorpe and wrote a counter-petition that included the memorable phrase, "It is shocking to human Nature, that any Race of Mankind and their Posterity should be

sentanc'd to perpetual Slavery; nor in Justice can we think otherwise of it, that they are thrown amongst us to be our Scourge one Day or other for our Sins.”

Oglethorpe led his regiment, 500 men, 600 Carolina militia, 150 Highlanders, and as many as 1000 Creek Natives in the invasion. As fate would have it, he was a brilliant leader in terms of creating the Georgia colony but a lousy general. St. Augustine was an imposing obstacle. The campaign was an abject failure. By early July 1740, he had retreated to Frederica and sat there waiting for a Spanish counter-attack.

Before answering this question, let's step back and follow the timeline for Bethesda's creation. Whitefield had joined John and Charles Wesley and their Oxford Group looking for religious renewal at Oxford University. In 1738, at age 24, he follows John Wesley to Georgia to explore the idea of creating an orphanage. After four months in Savannah, he returned to England to be ordained as a priest and to collect money for his dream of an orphanage. Whitefield returned in 1739, bringing with him James Habersham, a 24-year-old clerk in a merchant firm in London. In March 1740, the first brick was laid. Whitefield then goes on two long preaching tours up the East Coast and raises eventually 3,000 pounds sterling. The orphans that were staying in homes in Savannah came out to the grand House of Mercy or Bethesda at the end of 1740. He raised a total of 5,000 pounds by 1743, a huge sum for that day.

August 17, 1740: To New England, 4-month tour. The Great Awakening. “New Light” congregations. On person wrote, “He always reminded us of the Orphan House at Georgia, and obtained a collection in one place and another of above

£3,000 this currency.” Jonathan Edwards cried when he preached. Returned to Savannah, Dec. 13, 1740

Revolving door approach: As soon as could be placed as servant, apprentice left. Children trained for specific jobs.

The chief architects of the New Savannah were Habersham and Francis Harris. Set the pace. His skills as a merchant. A store and the schooner Savannah. New Neighbors of Germans at Vernonsburgh.