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| **The First Great Awakening**Christine Leigh Heyrman Department of History, University of Delaware ©National Humanities CenterWhat historians call “the first Great Awakening” can best be described as a revitalization of religious piety that swept through the American colonies between the 1730s and the 1770s. That revival was part of a much broader movement, an evangelical upsurge taking place simultaneously on the other side of the Atlantic, most notably in England, Scotland, and Germany. In all these Protestant cultures during the middle decades of the eighteenth century, a new Age of Faith rose to counter the currents of the Age of Enlightenment, to reaffirm the view that being truly religious meant trusting the heart rather than the head, prizing feeling more than thinking, and relying on biblical revelation rather than human reason.The earliest manifestations of the American phase of this phenomenon—the beginnings of the First Great Awakening—appeared among Presbyterians in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Led by the Tennent family—Reverend William Tennent, a Scots-Irish immigrant, and his four sons, all clergymen—the Presbyterians not only initiated religious revivals in those colonies during the 1730s but also established a seminary to train clergymen whose fervid, heartfelt preaching would bring sinners to experience evangelical conversion. Originally known as “the Log College,” it is better known today as Princeton University.Religious enthusiasm quickly spread from the Presbyterians of the Middle Colonies to the Congregationalists (Puritans) and Baptists of New England. By the 1740s, the clergymen of these churches were conducting revivals throughout that region, using the same strategy that had contributed to the success of the Tennents. In emotionally charged sermons, all the more powerful because they were delivered extemporaneously, preachers like Jonathan Edwards evoked vivid, terrifying images of the utter corruption of human nature and the terrors awaiting the unrepentant in hell. Hence Edwards’s famous description of the sinner as a loathsome spider suspended by a slender thread over a pit of seething brimstone in his best known sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

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| The three most famed evangelical preachers of the Great Awakening, whose portraits do not convey the fiery emotions of their sermons. |
| Gilbert Tennant Jonathan Edwards George Whitefield |
| *Left to right:* **Gilbert Tennent**, courtesy Billy Graham Center Museum; **Jonathan Edwards**, courtesy Forbes Library; **George Whitefield**, *Portraits of Faith* |

These early revivals in the northern colonies inspired some converts to become missionaries to the American South. In the late 1740s, Presbyterian preachers from New York and New Jersey began proselytizing in the Virginia Piedmont; and by the 1750s, some members of a group known as the Separate Baptists moved from New England to central North Carolina and quickly extended their influence to surrounding colonies. By the eve of the American Revolution, their evangelical converts accounted for about ten percent of all southern churchgoers.The First Great Awakening also gained impetus from the wideranging American travels of an English preacher, George Whitefield. Although Whitefield had been ordained as a minister in the Church of England, he later allied with other Anglican clergymen who shared his evangelical bent, most notably John and Charles Wesley. Together they led a movement to reform the Church of England (much as the Puritans had attempted earlier to reform that church) which resulted in the founding of the Methodist Church late in the eighteenth century. During his several trips across the Atlantic after 1739, Whitefield preached everywhere in the American colonies, often drawing audiences so large that he was obliged to preach outdoors. What Whitefield preached was nothing more than what other Calvinists had been proclaiming for centuries—that sinful men and women were totally dependent for salvation on the mercy of a pure, all-powerful God. But Whitefield—and many American preachers who eagerly imitated his style—presented that message in novel ways. Gesturing dramatically, sometimes weeping openly or thundering out threats of hellfire-and-brimstone, they turned the sermon into a gripping theatrical performance.But not all looked on with approval. Throughout the colonies, conservative and moderate clergymen questioned the emotionalism of evangelicals and charged that disorder and discord attended the revivals. They took great exception to “itinerants,” ministers who, like Whitefield, traveled from one community to another, preaching and all too often criticizing the local clergy. And they took still greater exception when some white women and African Americans shed their subordinate social status long enough to exhort religious gatherings. Evangelical preachers and converts rejoined by lambasting their opponents as cold, uninspiring, and lacking in piety and grace. Battles raged within congregations and whole denominations over this challenge to clerical authority as well as the evangelical approach to conversion from “the heart” rather than “the head.”So the first Great Awakening left colonials sharply polarized along religious lines. Anglicans and Quakers gained new members among those who disapproved of the revival’s excesses, while the Baptists (and, in the 1770s, the Methodists) made even more handsome gains from the ranks of radical evangelical converts. The largest single group of churchgoing Americans remained within the Congregationalist and Presbyterian denominations, but they divided internally between advocates and opponents of the Awakening, known respectively as “New Lights” and “Old Lights.” Inevitably, civil governments were drawn into the fray. In colonies where one denomination received state support, other churches lobbied legislatures for disestablishment, an end to the favored status of Congregationalism in Connecticut and Massachusetts and of Anglicanism in the southern colonies. |