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“Newspaper Editors' Attitudes toward the First Great Awakening, 1740-1748”

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The First Great Awakening has long been recognized as a significant event in American religious history and American culture in general. More recently, scholars have examined the effects of the Awakening on colonial print culture. When George Whitefield arrived in Philadelphia for his first colonial preaching tour in October 1739, the eleven weekly newspapers then publishing in the colonies began significant coverage of Whitefield and the entire Awakening. Papers printed almost weekly reports on Whitefield's preaching stops, eyewitness accounts of revival meetings, and stories of shockingly improper ordinations and church separations. They printed letters supporting and denouncing Whitefield and his fellow revivalists, and debated the theological and practical issues raised by the revival. Half of the colonial newspapers significantly increased their coverage of religious news during the revival; between 1735 and 1740, the *American Weekly Mercury*, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, *New York Gazette*, and *South Carolina Gazette* enlarged their coverage of religion by 12.3%, 14.1%, 15.7%, and 14%, respectively. In Boston, between 1740 and 1745, the *Boston Evening Post* and *Boston Gazette* each expanded their religious news coverage by approximately 15%.ⁱ Except for the successful colonial attack on the French fortress in Louisburg, Cape Breton Island, in the summer of 1745, the Awakening received more coverage in the colonial papers than did the War

of Austrian Succession (1740-1748) or the Jacobite Rebellion (1745). As newspaper historian Isaiah Thomas remarked: “The blaze of [Whitefield’s] ministration was extended through the continent, and he became the common topic of conversation from Georgia to New Hampshire. All the newspapers were filled with paragraphs of information respecting him, or with pieces of animated disputation pro or con; and the press groaned with pamphlets written in favor of, or against, his person and ministry” (568n.). No other colonial event had ever received such extensive newspaper coverage as did the Awakening. From 1739 through 1748, colonial newspapers printed almost 1600 Awakening-related items collectively. Such extensive coverage by the papers enabled Whitefield and the revival to become America’s first truly intercolonial phenomenon.

Not only did Whitefield and the Awakening generate an enormous *volume* of newspaper ink, but the controversial nature of the movement produced intense interest. The Awakening was “the first American event to command widespread opinionated comment in the press,” according to scholars Sloan and Williams (124). Papers published letters from clergy and laymen alike praising or denouncing virtually every aspect of the revival. Arguments over Whitefield and his methods, lay preachers, church purity, antinomianism, and religious enthusiasm can be found in every newspaper during the 1740s, especially in the Boston papers, with some print wars lasting several months. Forty-eight percent of all newspaper items on the Awakening during those years were letters, not reports, so public opinion was a significant part of newspaper coverage of the revival.

Not surprisingly, the printers were key players in how the Awakening was presented in the newspapers. Since each printer edited his own newspaper, a printer could decide which revival stories to report, which contributed letters to print, and which controversies to participate

in. Although all the newspapers reported on the events of the revival, differences in reporting did exist, and the printer was often responsible for those differences. This paper will examine the varying attitudes of newspaper printers toward the Awakening during Whitefield's first two colonial preaching tours, which spanned the years 1739-1748, focusing particularly on the differing opinions presented by Samuel Kneeland and Timothy Green of the *Boston Gazette* and Thomas Fleet of the *Boston Evening Post*.

In the south, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina each enjoyed one newspaper. The *Maryland Gazette* began in 1727, but suspended publication in 1734; it was re-established under Jonas Green in 1745 and included minimal coverage of the Awakening. In Virginia, however, William Parks' *Virginia Gazette* praised Whitefield as early as 1737 (Sloan and Williams 109) and printed fourteen news items on Whitefield and the Awakening before Whitefield's December 1739 visit to Williamsburg. It appears from the *Gazette*'s coverage of Whitefield and the Awakening for 1739 that Parks' intention was to keep his readers aware of the progress of the revival throughout the colonies. Unfortunately, although revival activity increased greatly in Virginia during the early 1740s, few copies of the *Virginia Gazette* are extant for the years 1740 through 1744, so it is impossible to determine if Parks maintained his close coverage of the revival.

Lewis Timothy had partnered long-distance with Benjamin Franklin to print the *South Carolina Gazette*; upon Timothy's death in 1738, his widow and son Peter took over the business, and the paper followed the revival and Whitefield closely. In fact, besides Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*, the *South Carolina Gazette* printed more notices of the Awakening than any other paper outside of Boston, and included both positive and negative reporting as well as many contributed letters.

In the middle colonies, coverage of the Awakening varied. New York had two weekly newspapers at the time of Whitefield's arrival in the colonies in 1739, and two more began publishing by the beginning of his second colonial preaching tour in 1744. Yet, even with four newspapers, New York readers enjoyed only 157 articles on the revival during the years 1739 through 1748. Whitefield drew much smaller crowds in New York City than he did in Boston and Philadelphia (Lambert, *Inventing* 118). John Peter Zenger's *New York Weekly Journal* and James Parker's *New York Weekly Post-Boy* published the most items on the Awakening in New York, sixty-four and fifty-five items, respectively. Their coverage included both positive and negative items. William Bradford's *New York Gazette* printed half as many items, focusing primarily on positive news of Whitefield and the Awakening, while the *New York Evening Post* included minimal coverage of the revival.

Philadelphia was second to Boston in the interest its newspaper printers showed in Whitefield and the Awakening, printing less than half of the items printed by Boston papers, but printing more than the newspapers in all other parts of the colonies combined. Like in Boston, Whitefield and the Awakening were supported strongly in Philadelphia, but without the opposition that was also present in Boston. Andrew Bradford's *American Weekly Mercury* and Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* covered the Awakening extensively, including both positive and negative news and commentary. Franklin became close friends with Whitefield and printed many of his journals and sermons. With the exceptions of the *Boston Evening Post* and the *Boston Gazette*, these two Philadelphia papers each printed more articles on the Awakening than did any other newspaper.ⁱⁱ The *Philadelphia Journal* began in 1742 and included limited coverage of the Awakening.

In Boston, the Awakening was heavily reported and just as heavily debated. Boston

newspapers printed 885 Awakening-related items from 1739-1748, more than half the total number of items printed in the colonies during those years.ⁱⁱⁱ John Draper's *Boston Weekly News-Letter* and Ellis Huske's *Boston Weekly Post-Boy* covered the Awakening and Whitefield with a mostly neutral tone, printing 136 items and 88 items, respectively. It was Samuel Kneeland and Timothy Green of the *Boston Gazette* and Thomas Fleet of the *Boston Evening Post* who saturated Boston with coverage of the Awakening, 304 and 345 items, respectively. Kneeland and Green and Fleet not only published many more revival items than did any other printer, they also exhibited the strongest bias toward the Awakening of all colonial printers—a bias which was clearly revealed in their coverage of the movement.

Samuel Kneeland and Timothy Green were cousins and heirs of the Green printing empire in Boston. During the bulk of their partnership, which lasted from 1726 to 1752, they printed almost one-quarter of recorded imprints in Boston each year (Franklin 248). During the Awakening, they printed many works for revivalists such as Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, Jonathan Edwards, and Jonathan Dickinson. Their two newspapers, the *New England Weekly Journal* and the *Boston Gazette*, which merged in 1741 to form the *Boston Gazette, or New England Weekly Journal* (hereafter referred to as the *Boston Gazette*), printed a total of 307 items on the revival in the years 1739 through 1748, only 23 of which were negative. As historian Isaiah Thomas writes of the *Gazette*, “The printers of this paper were great advocates of the reverend George Whitefield, the reverend Mr. Edwards, &c” (245).^{iv}

On the other side of the Awakening print battle in Boston stood Thomas Fleet, a well-regarded printer whose shop produced a wide variety of works, including religious, secular, and even children's texts (Franklin 162). As printer and publisher of the *Boston Evening Post*, Fleet

was known for displaying his wit, and often used it against followers of the Awakening. Consider an example from the September 2, 1745, issue of the *Post*:

THE Subscribers for this Paper, (especially those at a Distance) who are shamefully in Arrear for it, would do well (methinks) to remember those apostolical Injunctions, *Rom. 13. 7, 8. Render therefore to all their dues; --- and, Owe no Man any thing.*--- It is wonderful to observe, that while we hear so much said about a *great Revival of Religion in the Land*; there is yet so little Regard had to *Justice and Common Honesty!* Surely they are *abominable good Works!*

Thomas remarks that Fleet was “a wit, and no bigot; he did not appear to be a great friend to itinerant preachers; and he was not, like the brethren of the type of that day, afraid to attack the highly popular, and greatly distinguished itinerant preacher Whitefield” (251). In fact, Fleet’s *Post* was the only Boston paper that openly attacked Whitefield.^v Before 1742, fifty percent of Fleet’s reporting on the Awakening was negative. From 1742 until 1748, however, eighty-five percent of the *Post*’s items on the revival were negative.

Because of their strong opinions on the Awakening, Fleet’s *Boston Evening Post* and Kneeland and Green’s *Boston Gazette* frequently became embroiled in public paper wars. Often, supporters of the revival would use the *Gazette* to counter negative views expressed in the *Post*, and vice versa. On May 3, 1742, the *Post* published a news report on a dispute in the Rev. John Lowell’s church in Newbury, Massachusetts. According to Fleet’s *Post*, itinerant revivalists Nathaniel Rogers, Daniel Rogers, and Samuel Buell “took Possession” of Lowell’s church while Lowell was away and proceeded to preach to the town’s young people. They attempted to possess the Rev. Christopher Toppan’s church the next day but were “repulsed.” Fleet ended his report with this comment: “These Itinerants aim very much at dividing the Churches, and

disaffecting People to their faithful Pastors, and what wild Scheme they are pursuing next, God only knows.” On May 18, the *Gazette* printed a letter from a contributor from Newbury named John Brown who attempted to clarify and defend the actions of the itinerants. The next week, the *Post* published a letter from Lowell himself, asserting the truth of Fleet’s first report and claiming he had the depositions to prove it. John Brown responded in the *Gazette* on June 29, and Fleet’s *Post* printed a letter and certificate from Newbury contributor Henry Rolfe on July 5 in an effort to prove the improprieties committed by the revivalists.

On occasion, Kneeland and Green and Fleet used their papers to attack each other. On December 3, 1744, Fleet’s *Post* reported that Whitefield had arrived in Boston to preach, but that he and his wife had not attended any sermons except Whitefield’s own. The next day, the *Gazette* attempted to set the record straight:

Mr. Whitefield being forbidden by the Physicians to be abroad in the Evening, has not yet attended the Evening Lectures of the Town; but on the Sabbath heard the Rev. Dr. Colman in the Forenoon and assisted in the Administration of the Sacrament, and in the Afternoon he heard the Rev. Dr. Sewall at the old South [Church]; where on the Friday-Evening before, his Consort attended a Lecture, contrary to the false and abusive Reflections in the Evening Post on that Gentlewoman, as soon as she arrives an harmless Stranger among us.

On December 10, Fleet apologized if indeed Mrs. Whitefield had attended a lecture, but criticized Kneeland and Green for printing that Whitefield had merely “assisted” in administering Communion at Benjamin Colman’s church when, in fact, Whitefield had actually administered the sacrament himself. The same *Post* included a letter from J. S. expressing sorrow at the impropriety of Whitefield administering Communion in another minister’s church.

Kneeland and Green countered the next day in the *Gazette* by printing an excerpt from seventeenth-century non-conformist English pastor Matthew Henry which asserted that a visiting minister should always be allowed to participate in a church service, even if it “may encroach upon a settled Order.” Fleet subsequently printed two additional letters criticizing Whitefield’s actions (Dec. 17 and 24).

The differing coverage of the two papers can be seen best when comparing how the papers reported the same event. When New Light preacher James Davenport embarrassed the revival by leading a New London, Connecticut, crowd in burning books and clothing he considered worldly, coverage of the event by the *Post* and *Gazette* differed markedly. Fleet broke the story in the *Post* on March 14, 1743, with an account of the incident. One week later, the *Post* specified some of the books that had been burned, and in the next issue, the *Post* printed a letter from the Rev. Joseph Crosswell reporting that Davenport had recanted his “strange Opinions,” calling them “Enthusiastical and Delusive.” The *Post* printed another, more detailed account of the incident on April 11. All of these reports appeared on the first or second pages of the *Post*. In contrast, the *Gazette* did not report the book-burning at all. Instead, on April 12, the *Gazette* published a declaration by New Light ministers criticizing Davenport’s actions and affirming the validity of the Awakening despite extremes such as Davenport’s. On May 17, the *Gazette* printed a letter from New Light minister Jonathan Parsons condemning Davenport’s actions and correcting the record of which books were burned. Both of these items were on pages two or three of the *Gazette*.

Similarly, the *Post* and *Gazette* differed in their coverage of the most significant tragedy associated with the Awakening in the colonies. On Monday, September 22, 1740, Whitefield was scheduled to speak at the Rev. Samuel Checkley’s church in southern Boston, but while

crowds waited for Whitefield to arrive, a mass panic broke out and five people were killed. Whitefield records the event in his journal:

The meeting-house being filled, though there was no real danger, on a sudden all the people were in an uproar, and so unaccountably surprised, that some threw themselves out of the windows, others threw themselves out of the gallery, and others trampled upon one another; so that five were actually killed, and others dangerously wounded. (461)

Kneeland and Green treated the incident objectively in their *New England Weekly Journal* (September 23) and *Boston Gazette* (September 29), emphasizing that an “imprudent Person” had caused the panic when he broke a board to make a seat.^{vi} Conversely, Thomas Fleet printed a lengthy and detailed report in the September 29 *Boston Evening Post* which emphasized the horror of the tragedy:

the whole Congregation was immediately thrown into the utmost Confusion and Disorder, and each one being desirous to save themselves, some jump’d from the Galleries into the Pews and Allies below, others threw themselves out at the Windows, and those below pressing hard to get out at the Porch Doors, many (especially Women) were thrown down and trod upon by those that were crowding out, no Regard being had to the terrible Screeches and Outcries of those in Danger of their Lives, or others; so that a great Number were sore wounded and bruised, and many had their Bones broke.

Fleet’s report was reprinted by the *American Weekly Journal* (October 9) and the *New York Weekly Journal* (October 13). The *Boston Gazette* report appeared in the more pro-Awakening *Pennsylvania Gazette* (October 9) and *South Carolina Gazette* (November 6).

One last example of divergent reporting can be found in the *Gazette* and *Post* for February 1745. After Whitefield preached at a separatist meeting in Newbury, Massachusetts, on February 22, 1745, the *Post* reported:

This Day the Rev. Mr. Whitefield, notwithstanding his pretended Zeal against Separations, preach'd twice at the SEPARATIST'S Meeting House in this Town [Newbury], and told the People he would preach to them again the next Day at Eleven o'Clock. (February 25)

The *Gazette* reported:

[Whitefield preached] . . . on Friday twice in the New Meeting House in Newbury, to a Society incorporated on the Advice of an ecclesiastical Council; and yet such was his Tenderness on the Head of Separations, that even to this Society he declared before Preaching, his Disapprobation of rash and unscriptural Separations, and expresly told them the sole Reason of his Preaching in that House was, his being deny'd the other Houses, and his being hindred from preaching in the Field by the Rain, which he otherwise intended.^{vii}

On March 26, Whitefield's friend Benjamin Franklin reprinted in his *Pennsylvania Gazette* the *Boston Gazette*'s sympathetic treatment of the incident. The *Post* report was not reprinted.

Newspaper printers used their role to influence the way their papers presented the First Great Awakening, especially in Boston. In the process, they affected the way their readers experienced the most significant colonial event of the 1740s.

ⁱ These numbers are taken from David A. Copeland's *Colonial American Newspapers: Character and Content*. See Tables 4, 5, and 6 on pages 291-93.

ⁱⁱ The *Boston Weekly News-Letter* printed exactly as many revival notices as did the *American Weekly Mercury*, 136, and the *South Carolina Gazette* printed thirteen more notices than did the *Mercury*.

ⁱⁱⁱ No other colonial city printed even half as many items on the revival during the ten-year period spanning Whitefield's two American preaching tours, 1739-1748. Most of these items were printed by five Boston papers. Gamaliel Rogers and Daniel Fowle began the *Independent Advertiser* in Boston in 1748; the paper printed nine

items on the Awakening in 1748, all but one of which were positive or neutral, but missed the bulk of reporting on the revival.

^{iv} Kneeland and Green also worked with Thomas Prince, Jr., to print the *Christian History*, a magazine devoted to reporting on the progress of the Awakening in America and Great Britain.

^v Thomas 93-100; *ANB* 8: 94-95.

^{vi} The *Boston Weekly News-Letter* (Sept. 25) and the *Boston Gazette* (Sept. 29) reported that when a board was broken to make a seat, someone cried out that the galleries were falling, and panic ensued.

^{vii} This account is from the *New York Weekly Post-Boy* for March 18, 1745. It is taken from the *Boston Gazette* for February 26, an issue of the *Gazette* that is not extant.