



Bookshelf

2017

[Introduction to] Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England

Douglas L. Winiarski
University of Richmond, dwiniars@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/bookshelf>



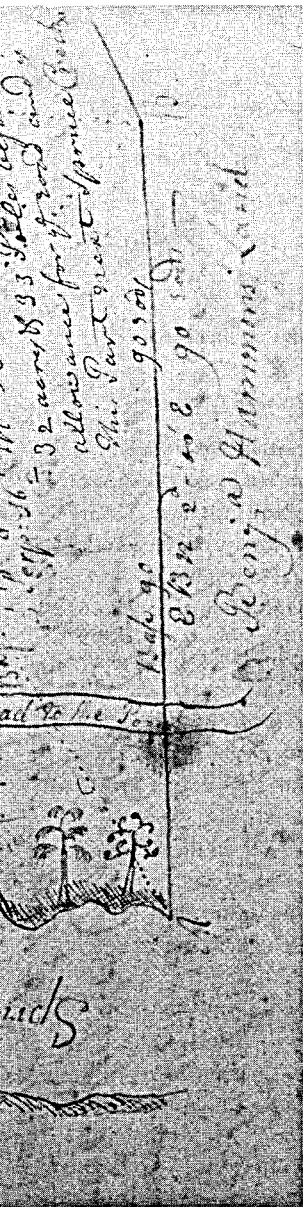
Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Winiarski, Douglas L. *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

NOTE: This PDF preview of [Introduction to] *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England* includes only the preface and/or introduction. To purchase the full text, please click [here](#).

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bookshelf by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.



DARKNESS FALLS ON THE LAND OF LIGHT

Experiencing Religious
Awakenings in Eighteenth-
Century New England

DOUGLAS L. WINIARSKI

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
VIRGINIA 23173

Published for the Omohundro Institute of
Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia,
by the University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill



Introduction

Deep in thought, Hannah Corey stood alone among the gravestones of the Sturbridge, Massachusetts, burial ground, gazing across the common at the Congregational meetinghouse. She and her husband, John, had affiliated with the church in the west parish of Roxbury by owning the covenant shortly after their marriage in 1741. Two years later, they moved to the recently settled frontier of central New England and proceeded to join the Sturbridge church in full communion. They had presented each of their four children for baptism shortly after their births. Now, during the fall of 1748, Corey faced serious—even supernatural—misgivings about her place within the sole, tax-supported religious institution in town.¹

Corey had arrived early that afternoon for Caleb Rice's weekday lecture. As she sat in the empty pews awaiting the Sturbridge minister and her neighbors, the words of Jesus's stern rebuke to the moneychangers in Luke 19:46 suddenly darted into her mind: "My house is the house of prayer but ye have made it a den of thieves." Corey had a strong intimation that this was no ordinary meditation, daydream, or idle musing. Instead, she interpreted the scrip-

1. Testimony of Hannah Corey, Apr. 5, 1749, Sturbridge, Mass., Separatist Congregational Church Records, 1745-1762, CL (available online at NEHH); Robert J. Dunkle and Ann S. Lainhart, transcr., *The Records of the Churches of Boston and the First Church, Second Parish, and Third Parish of Roxbury, Including Baptisms, Marriages, Deaths, Admissions, and Dismissals* (Boston, 2001), CD-ROM, s.v. "John Corey"; *Vital Records of Roxbury, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849*, 2 vols. (Salem, Mass., 1925), I, 76, II, 88; *Vital Records of Sturbridge, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850* (Boston, 1906), 39-40; Sturbridge, Mass., Congregational Church Records, 1736-1895, 37, 39, 61, MS copy, microfilm no. 863530, GSU. Previous studies of the Sturbridge schism include C. C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800: Strict Congregationalists and Separate Baptists in the Great Awakening* (Middletown, Conn., 1987), 101-103; William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), I, 457-460; Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill, 1630-1783* (New York, 1972), 231-236; and John L. Brooke, *The Heart of the Commonwealth: Society and Political Culture in Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1713-1861* (Amherst, Mass., 1989), 76-78.

tural words as an oracular communication from the Holy Spirit. It was the third revelation she had received that day. Two other biblical passages had impressed themselves on her mind as she walked along the road to the meeting-house. Amos 3:3 and 2 Corinthians 6:17 spoke directly to her reservations regarding the fitness of the Sturbridge church. "Can two walk together, Except they be agreed"? "Come out from amongst them." The words thundered in her ears. Could she continue to walk with her neighbors in Christian fellowship? Was God commanding her to leave the church? With mounting concern, Corey confronted the troubling possibility that she had been worshipping for years in a den of thieves. "I thought," she later recalled, "I had rather ly down among the Graves then go into the meeting house." So she fled to the adjacent burial ground to collect herself and contemplate the meaning of God's powerfully intrusive messages.²

Corey eventually quelled her fears and returned to her pew, but, as she listened to Rice's sermon, she was overcome by a queer feeling. The entire meetinghouse "Seemed to be a dark place," she remembered. The minister, deacons, and congregation "lookt Strangely as if they ware all going Blindfold to destruction." Shaken by the peculiar turn of events, Corey and her husband abandoned their pew and retreated to the home of a neighbor named Isaac Newell. There, they gathered in prayer with a small group of disillusioned men and women who had just renounced their membership in the Sturbridge church. The dissenting faction included the town's first deacon, Daniel Fisk, his outspoken brother Henry, and perhaps a dozen former church members and discontented parishioners from several neighboring towns.³

One year earlier, the separatists had unilaterally dissolved all ties with Rice's church and, unsanctioned by any ecclesiastical or political authorities, embodied themselves into what would come to be called a Separate or "Strict" Congregational church. Henry Fisk defended their audacious action in a short narrative entitled "The Testimony of a People Inhabitting the Wilderness." During the fall of 1740, he explained, the famed touring evangelist George Whitefield passed through central Massachusetts and sparked an "extreordinary outpowering of the Spirit of God." Eleven people joined the Sturbridge church the following year, a figure twice the annual average. In a long passage laced with biblical allusions, Fisk described the awakened Sturbridge congregants as newborn babes who yearned for the "Sincere milk" of the preached

2. Testimony of Hannah Corey, Apr. 5, 1749, Sturbridge Separatist Congregational Church Records.

3. *Ibid.*; Henry Fisk, "The Testimony of a People Inhabitting the Wilderness," n.d. [January-February 1753], no. 397, *IBP*.

word. But when Rice closed his pulpit to the lively itinerant preachers who crisscrossed the region in emulation of Whitefield, his parishioners rebelled. Too many townspeople “ware for more order,” Fisk complained, and thus had “lost there Spiritual life.” Conflict smoldered during the next several years, as Sturbridge became “like a velley of dry Bones.” The dissenters were forced to “forsake all” by withdrawing from communion. On September 5, 1748, they called John Blunt, a Connecticut layman with no formal education and no license from any association of Congregational ministers, to serve as the pastor of their illegal church.⁴

“Come and witness for the Holy Ghost,” Fisk boldly proclaimed in a letter inviting leaders of the Separate Congregational movement from across New England to attend Blunt’s ordination. “Our Lord and yours is doing a marvelous work” in Sturbridge. The wonders to which he alluded included a battery of charismatic practices modeled on the earliest Christian churches and the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit that were poured out on the day of Pentecost. The Separates welcomed “unlearned” itinerants and urged them to share their preaching gifts with the assembly. Worship exercises featured a cacophony of noise, as members of the upstart congregation fell to the ground in distress, cried out in joy, sang hymns at the top of their voices, or prayed aloud for the conversion of their neighbors. Women spoke freely during their meetings, and they traveled abroad encouraging people in other towns to embrace the separatist cause. Some members believed that Blunt possessed miraculous healing powers. And, no sooner had they organized themselves into a dissenting church than Ebenezer Moulton arrived from the neighboring town of Brimfield with a new gift: adult, or believers’, baptism. The logic of the Separates’ zealous quest to purify the corrupt churches of New England’s Congregational establishment had propelled them beyond the boundaries of the puritan tradition altogether.⁵

Hannah Corey initially hesitated to join the Separates, yet she had always been uncomfortable worshipping in the Sturbridge meetinghouse. At the time she was promoted to full membership in 1745, she knew her “Soul was one with Christ” but not in union with Rice and his parishioners. Still, she

4. Fisk, “Testimony of a People Inhabiting the Wilderness,” n.d. [January–February 1753], no. 397, *IBP*; *GWJ*, 475; Sturbridge Congregational Church Records, 60.

5. Henry Fisk to the Canterbury, Conn., Separate Church, Sept. 5, 1748, no. 50, JTC; Testimonies of Sarah Blanchard and Sarah Martin, Apr. 5, 1749, Sturbridge Separatist Congregational Church Records; Solomon Paine, council minutes, Aug. 26, 1752, no. 94, JTC; Fisk, “Testimony of a People Inhabiting the Wilderness,” n.d. [January–February 1753], no. 397, *IBP*; William G. McLoughlin, ed., *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 3 vols. (Providence, R.I., 1979), I, 90–91.

worried about the propriety of withdrawing from communion, given the dissenters' reputation for making noisy disturbances in town. The prayer meeting at Newell's house erased all her doubts. Corey's reservations vanished, and she felt a "Sweet oneness of Soul" with the Separates. Comforting biblical verses poured into her head. "I knew what them words ment" in Hebrews 4:12, she wrote, "the voyce of the Lord is quick and powerfull, Sharper then a two edged Sword deviding the Soul and Spirit the joynts and marrow." Through personal revelations like these, she had learned to discern God's voice speaking directly to her and had "Evidenc Sealed to my Soul" that the dissenters' cause was a righteous one. Corey understood with perfect certainty that she had "passed from death to life" because, in the words of 1 John 3:14, she loved the Separate brethren. "I Se myself One in the Lord and one with them," Corey concluded, "and I cannot go without them." Less than three months later, the Coreys renounced the baptismal rites they had received as infants and were immersed by Moulton in the Quinebaug River alongside thirteen other Separates.⁶

Submitted at a disciplinary hearing during the spring of 1749, Hannah Corey's written account of her decision to abandon the Sturbridge Congregational church resonated with other testimonies presented by the dissenting faction. Their statements deployed biblical metaphors of light and darkness to differentiate their breakaway congregation from Rice's established church. On a previous Sabbath, Newell's sister Sarah Martin "went home as darck as eygept" after taking part in the Lord's Supper in the Sturbridge meetinghouse. The powerful emotions that Stephen Blanchard experienced during the meetings in Newell's home pierced his heart like a "light Shining in a dark plase." Corey's husband elected to worship among the dissenters "according to what Light god had given me." The Sturbridge Separates castigated their former brethren and sisters for perishing in "ignorance and Darkness" or "Labouring under Darkness."⁷

Even as the separatist controversy raged in Sturbridge during the fall of 1748, two other town residents, Moses and Ruth Holbrook, presented Rice with a pair of very different written statements. These brief autobiographical relations, as they were called, demonstrated the qualifications of potential candidates for full church membership. Whereas John and Hannah Corey

6. Testimony of Hannah Corey, Apr. 5, 1749, Sturbridge Separatist Congregational Church Records; Henry Fisk, "Testimony from the Brethren in Sturbridge," 1753, no. 396, *IBP*; McLoughlin, ed., *Diary of Isaac Backus*, I, 58–59.

7. Testimonies of Stephen Blanchard, John Corey, Sarah Martin, David Morse, and Jerusha Morse, Apr. 5, 1749, Sturbridge Separatist Congregational Church Records; Fisk, "Testimony of a People Inhabiting the Wilderness," n.d. [January–February 1753], no. 397, *IBP*.

criticized Rice's parishioners for languishing in spiritual darkness, the Holbrooks proudly proclaimed that they had been "born in the land of lite" and "livead under the preaching of the gospel." The Coreys embraced the warm fellowship of the Sturbridge Separates; the Holbrooks accentuated their pious upbringing within the Congregational establishment by parents who had devoted them to God's service in baptism as infants. Both couples scanned the natural world for wondrous manifestations of God's will, but they interpreted the same providential events in diametrically opposite ways. John Corey imagined that a powerful thunderstorm during the summer of 1748 was the voice of God commanding him to join the dissenters. This same meteorological event had awakened Ruth Holbrook's desire to close with Rice's established church.⁸

The two sets of testimonies diverged in other respects. The Coreys confidently declared that they worshipped among the small remnant of God's elect saints. The Holbrooks, by contrast, adopted a more cautious tone in their church admission relations. Both spouses lamented their inherent sinfulness and cited specific sins, including youthful disobedience, Sabbath breaking, and vain company keeping. Alluding to the terrifying words of 1 Corinthians 11:29, the Holbrooks even feared that they might eat and drink their own damnation by participating in the Lord's Supper unworthily. They begged for the prayers of the Sturbridge church and pledged to "walk acording to the profession" they had made. Except for a few minor details, the Holbrooks' relations were nearly identical in their content, style, and even physical appearance. Both documents were written by the same individual—probably Moses. Mirroring relations from dozens of churches in eastern and central Massachusetts, the Holbrooks' patterned discourse reinforced their willingness to submit to ecclesiastical institutions and communal expectations. The Coreys wrote as inspired individuals whose revelatory experiences impelled them to reject the authority of their minister and neighbors.⁹

Hannah and John Corey had not always condemned New England's Congregational establishment. They would have submitted relations nearly identical to those of the Holbrooks when they joined the Sturbridge church three years earlier. There was little to distinguish them from Moses and Ruth Holbrook in terms of wealth, social status, or family background. Both couples hailed from aspiring yeoman clans and had migrated to the new settlements of Worcester County in search of inexpensive land. Like most of their Stur-

8. Appendix B, Sturbridge, Mass., First Church, 12–13. For the full texts of Moses and Ruth Holbrook's relations, see George H. Haynes, *Historical Sketch of the First Congregational Church, Sturbridge, Massachusetts* (Worcester, Mass., 1910), 38–39; and Appendix C.

9. Appendix B, Sturbridge, Mass., First Church, 12–13.

Hannah Corey

Whereas I am desired to give my reasons for
Separating from you, one time as I was coming to
Lecture the words came to me in Cor. (come out from
amongst you, and then these words in answer. Can
two walk together Except they be agreed, So I went to
the meetinghouse, and when I came in there was no body
as I set these these words, came to me my house is a house
of prayer but ye have made it a den of thieves, then sudden
fear come over me so I got up and went out and walkt
over the burying place and I thought I had rather lay down
among the grave then go into the meetinghouse, but when
I se Mr. Rice coming I went in, but it seemt to be a dark place
minister deacon and people lookt strangely as if they were
all going blindfold to destruction, and thro my body was hee,
my soul was with the separate praising God ^{as} I was dismy
at the meeting house I went to Brother Hewitt, where my soul was
sweetly rejoynt, the Lord alone be praised for it was he alone
who brought me out and not any creature.

altho when I joynt Mr. Rice, Chh. I knew my soul was one
with Christ but ~~not~~ not with them, yet altho I was not
free of some degree of rising against some outward action
or noise, yet they awoke upon the sweet oneness of
soul I felt toward, them. I knew what thunders words meant
that is, the voyce of the Lord is quick and powerfull, shreer
er then a two edged sword dividing the soul and spirit the
joynt and marrow, I was given to know the voyce of the Lord
and to love to hear not onely his comforting but his searching
and quickning voyce. and to love his children and had that
Evidene sealed to my soul I know that I am passid from death
to life because I love y^e Brethren, when I gave my self to
the Lord and to his people the Lord owned me in it and I
my self one in the Lord and one with them and I can not
go without them.

Apr 5 1749

Hannah Corey

FIGURE 1 Testimony of Hannah Corey (front and back). April 5, 1749.
Courtesy, Congregational Library and Archives, Boston

I desire to bless god that I was born
 in the land of ~~bits~~ ^{bits} and ^{lived} under the preaching
 of the gospel all my days and that I received
 of such parents that gave me up to god in baptism
 in my infancy but I have rebelled against
 god and my parents in living in all most all
 manner of sin in Sabbath breaking and Company
 Keeping and in disobeying my parents & good Counsel
 and in Instructions that they gave me in telling of me
 it was my duty to ^{scap} to god in prayer and keep
 his commands that ^{tell} me that I must renew
 my baptismal Covenant I being young thought
 time enough but it has pleased all my toy god to a
 waking me by ^{thunder} many ^{times} which is terribly
^{but I have been} ^{in my life} ^{in my duty} ^{for he that}
 eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh
 damnation to him self not discerning the lords body
 is very discouraging to me and then a nother place came
 in to my mind which is discouraging to me of ^{Sabbath} ^{5th}
 I and I hope dont a low my self in the omission of any
 none duty nor in the commission of any none sin and
 desire your prayers for me and your acceptance of
 me that I may walk according to the profession that
 I have maid ^{of my life} ^{in my duty} ^{for he that}

FIGURE 2 Relation of Ruth Holbrook. November 20, 1748.

Courtesy, Congregational Library and Archives, Boston

bridge neighbors, they lived in modest one-room houses furnished with a limited range of material goods. Diaries compiled by another Sturbridge resident who affiliated with Rice's church a decade later reveal an insular mental world shaped by the seasonal rhythms of the environment, the annual round of agricultural labor, the family life-course, and, only occasionally, local or regional politics. Born during the second decade of the eighteenth century, the Coreys and Holbrooks came of age, married, and started families during an intensive period of religious renewal and conflict, and both appear to have embraced the "pourful preaching" innovations that marked an era that later historians

have called the Great Awakening in New England or, on a wider scale, the Protestant Evangelical Awakening.¹⁰

How did it come to pass that two families of roughly equal social status, who settled in the same town and once worshipped side by side in the same meetinghouse, came to view New England's dominant, established religious institution as a place of both gospel light and Egyptian darkness? Although they shared a worldview derived from their Reformed theological heritage, the Holbrooks and Coreys by 1750 were unwilling to sit together in the same building. They no longer spoke in a common religious idiom. The narratives they composed to support their respective decisions to affiliate and separate from the Sturbridge church disclosed a startling breach in what had once been an orderly, broadly inclusive religious culture.

■ *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light* examines the breakdown of New England Congregationalism and the rise of American evangelicalism during the eighteenth century. It is not a story of resurgent puritan piety but a tale of insurgent religious radicalism. The "New England Way"—the distinctive ecclesiastical system that shaped the Congregational tradition during the century following the puritan Great Migration of the 1630s—did not collapse under the weight of secularizing impulses, as Perry Miller and an earlier generation of social historians assumed. Nor was it plagued by the moribund formalism often denigrated by scholars of early evangelicalism.¹¹ Instead, a vibrant Con-

10. *Ibid.*, 13; Sturbridge Congregational Church Records, 61; Holly V. Izard, "Another Place in Time: The Material and Social Worlds of Sturbridge, Massachusetts, from Settlement to 1850" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1996), 82–119; Moses Weld, diaries, 1759–1773, Mss 663, NEHGS.

11. Key formulations of Perry Miller's declension thesis may be found in his *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), bks. III–IV (quote, 3); "Errand into the Wilderness," in Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), 1–15; and "Declension in a Bible Commonwealth," in Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 14–49. Christine Leigh Heyrman provides a summary and critique of the "communal breakdown" model of early New England social history in her *Commerce and Culture: The Maritime Communities of Colonial Massachusetts, 1690–1750* (New York, 1984), 13–20 (quote, 16). Although most scholars of New England puritanism have modified or abandoned Miller's thesis, negative judgments regarding the "laxity" and "formality" of "nominal" Congregationalists continue to anchor the introductory chapters of most general works on the Great Awakening, including Edwin Scott Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (New York, 1957), 13–15 ("laxity," 14); Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England*, 3–4; J. M. Bumsted and John E. van de Wetering, *What Must I Do to Be Saved? The Great Awakening in Colonial America* (Hinsdale, Ill., 1976), 54–70; W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge, 1992), 273–286; Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys*, A History of Evangelicalism: People, Movements, and Ideas in the English-Speaking World, I (Downers Grove, Ill., 2003), 27–49; and John Howard Smith, *The First Great Awakening: Redefining Reli-*

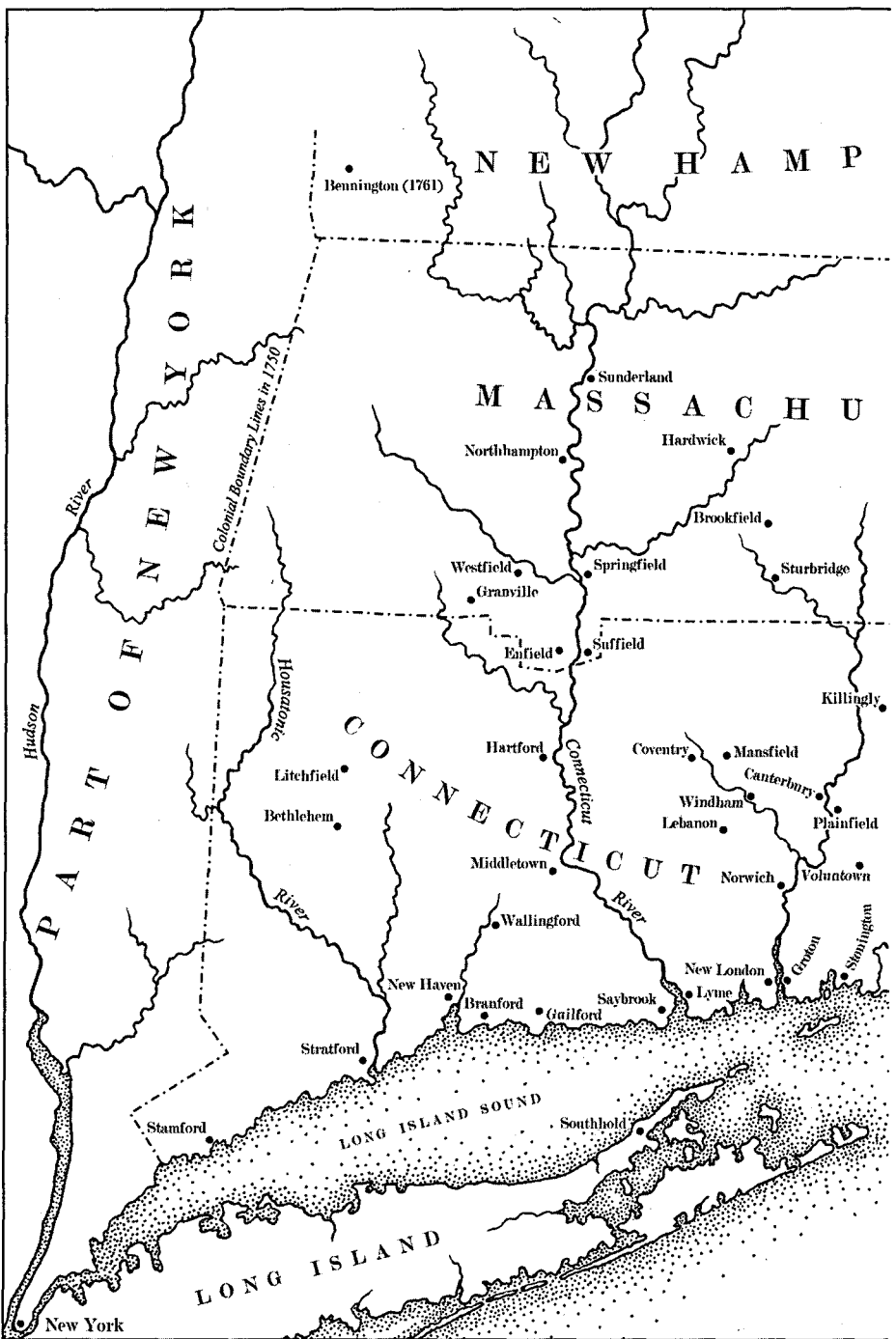
gregational establishment was buried under an avalanche of innovative and incendiary religious beliefs and practices during the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Acrimonious theological debate and sectarian schism had roiled the New England colonies a century earlier; and the region had witnessed previous “stirs,” “harvests,” and “awakenings.”¹² But the surging religious fervor that engulfed New England in the wake of George Whitefield’s 1740 preaching tour was unlike anything anyone had ever seen. It marked a dramatic break with the past. The primary agents inciting change were, not prominent ministers and theologians such as Jonathan Edwards, but unassuming men and women like Hannah and John Corey, whose burgeoning fascination with the drama of conversion and the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit drove them out of the churches of the Congregational standing order.

The pages that follow build on pioneering works of popular religion in early America and a wide range of studies that examine the complex relationship between religion and society in provincial New England. Whereas earlier scholars have treated the Whitefieldian revivals of the 1740s as a coda to the history of seventeenth-century puritanism, I characterize New England’s era of great awakenings as the historical fulcrum on which the “shared culture” of David Hall’s “world of wonders” tilted decisively toward Jon Butler’s robust antebellum “spiritual hothouse.”¹³

gion in British America, 1725–1775 (Madison, N.J., 2015), 39–63 (“formality,” “nominal,” 53). For the pejorative language of “nominal” Christians, see Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America’s Spiritual Founding Father* (New Haven, Conn., 2014), 119, 123, 130.

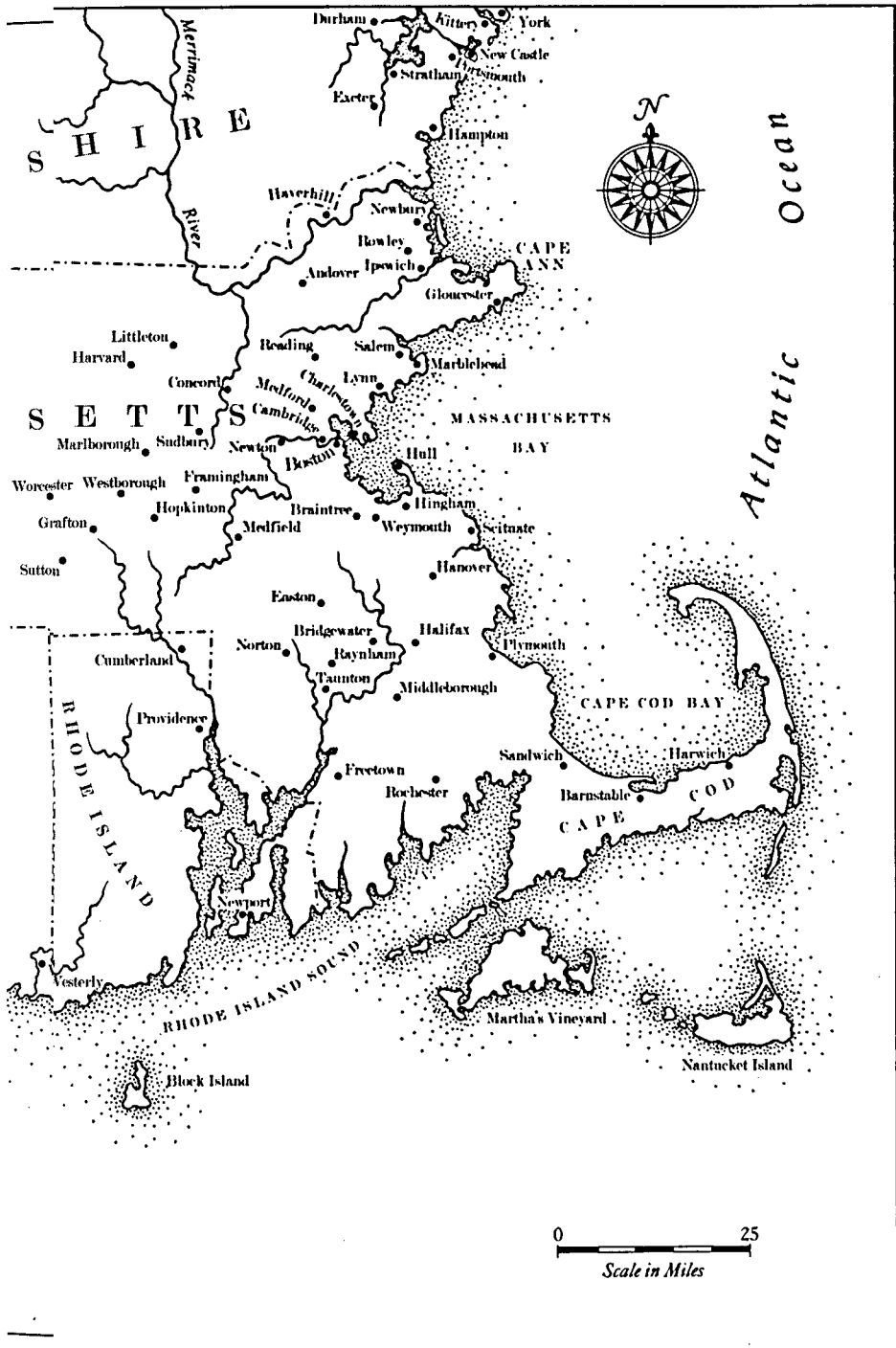
12. Douglas Winiarski, “Colonial Awakenings Prior to 1730,” in Michael McClymond, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religious Revivals in America, I, A–Z* (Westport, Conn., 2007), 121–126. On sectarian dissent in seventeenth-century New England, see Philip F. Gura, *A Glimpse of Zion’s Glory: Puritan Radicalism in New England, 1620–1660* (Middletown, Conn., 1984); David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World: Heresy to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985); Carla Gardina Pestana, *Quakers and Baptists in Colonial Massachusetts* (Cambridge, 1991); and Michael P. Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636–1641* (Princeton, N.J., 2002).

13. David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York, 1989), 71; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 2. Earlier studies that have played a formative role in the development of this project include Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton, N.J., 1969); Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982); John Corrigan, *The Prism of Piety: Catholic Congregational Clergy at the Beginning of the Enlightenment*, Religion in America (New York, 1991); Gerald F. Moran and Maris A. Vinovskis, eds., *Religion, Family, and the Life Course: Explorations in the Social History of Early America* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1992); Richard P. Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly: The Reformation of Manners in Orthodox New England, 1679–1749* (University Park, Pa., 1994); Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994); James F. Cooper, Jr., *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts*,



MAP 1 New England in 1750. Drawn by Mark Cook

Kittery and York are located in the Colony of Massachusetts, now part of Maine.



S H I R E

S E T T S

MASSACHUSETTS

BAY

Ocean
Atlantic

RHODE ISLAND

RHODE ISLAND SOUND

CAPE COD BAY

CAPE COD

0 25

Scale in Miles

Like many colleagues who have turned to the study of lived religion, I seek to connect religious belief to practice, while situating both in a thick cultural context. Although historians of religion in provincial New England have long been accustomed to sorting ministers and their congregants into theological parties, temperaments, or ideal types, I place greater emphasis on the development of these categories over the course of the eighteenth century. Micro-historical case studies and aggregate data on church affiliation practices for thousands of individuals and families reveal ordinary people living through one of the most tumultuous periods in American religious history and emerging on the other side transformed.¹⁴

Much of the argument turns on the shifting religious experiences of lay men and women. Religious studies theorists frequently maintain that all experiences are mediated by or, to be more precise, constructed through language. Examining the religious lives of provincial New Englanders demands paying close attention to the changing vocabularies, grammars, tropes, idioms, and story frameworks they inscribed in their diaries, letters, devotional writings, and other personal papers as well as the practices that invested these

Religion in America (New York, 1999); Erik R. Seeman, *Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New England*, *Early America: History, Context, Culture* (Baltimore, 1999); and Mark Valeri, *Heavenly Merchandize: How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America* (Princeton, N.J., 2010). David D. Hall traces important historiographical trends in "On Common Ground: The Coherence of American Puritan Studies," *WMQ*, XLIV (1987), 193–229; "Narrating Puritanism," in Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart, eds., *New Directions in American Religious History* (New York, 1997), 51–83; and "Between the Times': Popular Religion in Eighteenth-Century British North America," in Michael V. Kennedy and William G. Shade, eds., *The World Turned Upside-Down: The State of Eighteenth-Century American Studies at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century* (Bethlehem, Pa., 2001), 142–163.

14. Theoretical contributions to the study of "lived religion" include Robert A. Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, N.J., 1997), 3–21; and Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, 3d ed. (New Haven, Conn., 2010), xxxvii–xlxiii. On the turn to religious practices, see Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, eds., *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965* (Baltimore, 2006). My allusion to "thick description" derives from Clifford Geertz's classic "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 3–30. I have also been influenced by older methodological debates involving the social history of ideas, especially the essays by Quentin Skinner collected in James Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Princeton, N.J., 1988). Previous studies that sort provincial New Englanders into ideal types include Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 3; Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (Chicago, 1977), 12–14; and Richard Rabinowitz, *The Spiritual Self in Everyday Life: The Transformation of Personal Religious Experience in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Boston, 1989), xxviii–xxx.

discursive conventions with power and meaning. Throughout the colonial era, language drawn from the Reformed tradition provided the dominant idiom through which most people narrated both ordinary and extraordinary events in their lives. But the decade that culminated in the Sturbridge church schism witnessed a dramatic rupture in the ways that people such as the Holbrooks and the Coreys created meaningful worlds. New Englanders turned to vivid metaphors of darkness and light to describe the volatile situation. The title of this book seeks to capture the turmoil and creativity that prevailed in "post-Puritan" New England.¹⁵

I devote considerable attention to recovering the distinctive vocabularies that New Englanders themselves developed to articulate their rapidly changing religious culture. Many terms familiar to students of this period are anachronistic, pejorative, or misleading. As contemporary observers were quick to acknowledge, for example, provincial lay men and women did experience a "great awakening" during the 1740s; yet the meaning of events they alternately called a "great Revival of Religion" or "great Religious Commotions" remained bitterly contested.¹⁶ The very concept of "a Revival of Religion"—a singular

15. I borrow the phrase "post-puritan" from Charles L. Cohen, "The Post-Puritan Paradigm of Early American Religious History," *WMQ*, LIV (1997), 696. For theoretical discussions of language and religious experience, see Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985), 216–227; Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993), 27–54; Robert H. Sharf, "Experience," in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago, 1998), 94–116; and Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), 54–79. Previous studies of religion in early America that adopt similar interpretive approaches include John Owen King III, *The Iron of Melancholy: Structures of Spiritual Conversion in America from the Puritan Conscience to Victorian Neurosis* (Middletown, Conn., 1983), 7–8; Michael J. Crawford, *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England's Revival Tradition in Its British Context*, Religion in America (New York, 1991), 4–6; and Rodger M. Payne, *The Self and the Sacred: Conversion and Autobiography in Early American Protestantism* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1998), 1–12.

16. George Leon Walker, [ed.], *Diary of Rev. Daniel Wadsworth . . . , 1737–1747* (Hartford, Conn., 1894), 71; Ivory Hovey, Sr., and Anne Hovey, Jr., Mar. 29, 1742, Hovey Family Papers, 1734–1901, PHM; Charles Lane Hanson, ed., *A Journal for the Years 1739–1803 by Samuel Lane of Stratham, New Hampshire* (Concord, N.H., 1937), 30. This study does not engage the historiographical debates that have developed in response to Jon Butler's landmark essay "Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction," *JAH*, LXIX (1982), 305–325, as well as his elaborations in "Whitefield in America: A Two Hundred Fiftieth Commemoration," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, CXIII (1989), 515–526; *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 164–193; and *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 196–204. Subsequent studies that have challenged or modified Butler's thesis include Crawford, *Seasons of Grace*; Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*, Library of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1991); Timothy D. Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham, N.C., 1994); Juster, *Disorderly Women*; Frank Lambert, "Pedlar in Divinity": *George Whitefield and the*

and dramatic outpouring of the “*Work of the Spirit of GOD*” that was propagated from place to place seemingly under its own miraculous power—was less than a decade old at the time of Whitefield’s first New England tour. Although seventeenth-century puritan divines had developed a coherent morphology of conversion, their provincial descendants struggled to categorize the rapid and often dramatically embodied experiences that Whitefield called the “new birth.” As a result, many ministers and lay people began referring to the subjects of such experiences as “sudden,” “new,” or “young Converts.” Later in the decade, Separate Congregationalists invented the expressions “*Half-membership*” and the “half way Covenant” to condemn innovations in baptismal practices that dated back nearly a century. Charles Chauncy and other clergymen resurrected the phrase “NEW-LIGHT” from the Antinomian controversy and the Quaker insurgencies of the seventeenth century to condemn what they considered to be religious disorders and excesses. Yale College president Ezra Stiles began referring to “Old Light” churches long after the revivals had subsided.¹⁷

Diaries, letters, and other eighteenth-century texts provide occasional glimpses of a new language of religious experience at the moment of creation. People learned to speak of “converting, as they call it” and how they “got thro’, as they phrase it.” They were “Mightily Comforted (and as the Term now is) have Received Light,” or they “fell into what is called a Trance.” Even

Transatlantic Revivals, 1737–1770 (Princeton, N.J., 1994); Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening”* (Princeton, N.J., 1999); and Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven, Conn., 2007). For broader historiographical trends, see Allen C. Guelzo, “God’s Designs: The Literature of the Colonial Revivals of Religion, 1735–1760,” in Stout and Hart, eds., *New Directions in American Religious History*, 141–172; Philip Goff, “Revivals and Revolution: Historiographic Turns since Alan Heimert’s *Religion and the American Mind*,” *Church History*, LXVII (1998), 695–721; Christopher Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999), 495–498; and Grasso, “A ‘Great Awakening?’” *Reviews in American History*, XXXVII (2009), 13–21.

17. Ross W. Beales, Jr., “‘Our Hearts Are Traitors to Themselves’: Jonathan Mayhew and the Great Awakening,” *Bulletin of the CL*, XXVII, no. 3 (1976), 8; Timothy Pickering, *The Rev. Mr. Pickering’s Letters to the Rev. N. Rogers and Mr. D. Rogers of Ipswich . . .* (Boston, 1742), 3; *GWJ*, 455; William Stevens Perry, ed., *Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church* (Hartford, Conn., 1873), III, 368; EWD, 237; Winiarski, “A Journal of a Foe Days at York’: The Great Awakening on the Northern New England Frontier,” *Maine History*, XLII (2004), 70; Ebenezer Devotion, *An Answer of the Pastor and Brethren of the Third Church in Windham, to Twelve Articles, Exhibited by Several of Its Separating Members, as Reasons of Their Separation . . .* (N[ew] London, Conn., 1747), 1; North Stonington, Conn., Congregational Church Records, 1727–1887, 116, microfilm no. 317, CSL; Charles Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New-England . . .* (Boston, 1743), vi; Franklin Bowditch Dexter, ed., *Extracts from the Itineraries and Other Miscellanies of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D., 1755–1794 . . .* (New Haven, Conn., 1916), 251.

Jonathan Edwards coined phrases for the “visible conversions (if I may so call them)” that he witnessed during the 1740s. Throughout this work, I employ words, phrases, and metaphors familiar to eighteenth-century clergymen and laypeople, such as a “holy walk, and conversation,” “professors,” “opposers,” “Whitfeldarians,” and the like.¹⁸

The last term, “Whitfeldarians,” comes closest to naming those eighteenth-century Protestants whom contemporary historians have identified as evangelicals. Although this study is a regional contribution to the popular history of early evangelicalism, I seek to defamiliarize the category both to avoid the persistent “dissenter bias” that has dominated previous scholarship on religion in early America and to restore a greater sense of historical contingency to a movement that was still in its infancy in eighteenth-century New England.¹⁹ With perhaps the notable exception of Cotton Mather, Congregational ministers rarely included the adjective “Evangelical” in their weekly sermons or theological works before 1740. Provincial lay men and women never used it at all. And neither group used the term in its nominal form to identify a distinctive group of people or a specific religious subculture. By the time that Hannah Adams of Medfield, Massachusetts, published the definitive edition of her *Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations* in 1817, New Englanders had become accustomed to talking about the “diversity of sentiment among Christians” in terms of specific denominations, theological schools—including “Whitefieldites”—and even homegrown sectarian movements; but no entry in her celebrated early reference work yet bore the heading “Evangelical.”²⁰

For these reasons, I have bracketed *evangelicalism* for most of the pages

18. Francis L. Hawks and William Stevens Perry, eds., *Documentary History of the Protestant Episcopal Church, in the United States of America*, 2 vols. (New York, 1863–1864), I, 174; *South Carolina Gazette* (Charleston), Feb. 27–Mar. 6, 1742; Benjamin Throop, “Secret Interviews,” 1741–1784, [4], CHS; DDR, Feb. 1, 1742; Jonathan Edwards to Thomas Prince, Dec. 12, 1743, in *WJE*, XVI, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 120; Joseph Baxter, sermon fragment, n.d. [circa 1722–1743], Baxter-Adams Family Papers, 1669–1889, box 2, folder 19, MHS; Jonathan Edwards, “The Subjects of a First Work of Grace May Need a New Conversion,” in *WJE*, XXII, *Sermons and Discourses, 1739–1742*, ed. Harry S. Stout and Nathan O. Hatch, with Kyle P. Farley (New Haven, Conn., 2003), 202; Andrew Crowell to Nathaniel and Daniel Rogers, Sept. 23, 1742, case 8, box 22, SGC I; Nathan Cole, “An Appeal to the Bible,” Nathan Cole Papers, 1722–1780, I, 6, CHS.

19. John K. Nelson, *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690–1776* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2001), 9.

20. Hannah Adams, *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations: Jewish, Heathen, Mahometan, Christian, Ancient and Modern*, intro. Thomas A. Tweed, *Classics in Religious Studies*, no. 8 (Atlanta, Ga., 1992), 320, 371. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “evangelical,” suggests that the nominal form of the term emerged among English Methodists during the 1790s.

that follow. Defining this word for a period in which it remained largely inoperative would run many of the same risks of “misplaced essentializing” that have often hindered seventeenth-century puritan studies.²¹ David Bebbington’s frequently cited quadrilateral definition—conversionism, biblicism, activism, and crucicentrism—masks far more than it illuminates the popular religious cultures of the eighteenth-century British Atlantic. In New England, Whitefield’s fascination with conversion as an instantaneous event was quite unlike the more traditional seventeenth-century puritan morphology of conversion, which ministers and lay people often conceptualized as a lifelong pilgrimage through the wilderness of this world. Although provincial Congregationalists were steeped in the scriptures, during the Whitefieldian revivals and the decades that followed new converts such as Hannah Corey learned to think of the Bible as a detextualized voice that pierced their minds with supernatural force. W. R. Ward’s hexagonal model of “top-drawer evangelicalism” bears little resemblance to the religious experiences described by lay men and women in eighteenth-century New England. Emphasizing lay experience and ecclesiastical innovations, Susan Juster’s fourfold definition is much closer to the argument advanced in this study, but it nonetheless tends to reify a nascent religious temperament that came out of the religious revivals of the 1740s and remained constantly in motion throughout the eighteenth century.²²

The “people called *New Lights*” diverged from their puritan ancestors in two specific ways: their preoccupation with Whitefield’s definition of the new birth and their fascination with biblical impulses. These critical factors set many Whitefieldarians on a course to embrace increasingly radical beliefs and practices, including the bodily presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit,

21. Michael P. Winship, “Were There Any Puritans in New England?” *NEQ*, LXXIV (2001), 132.

22. D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), 1–17; W. R. Ward, *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History, 1670–1789* (Cambridge, 2006), 2–4; Juster, *Disorderly Women*, viii. Bebbington’s definition has been cited in a wide range of studies, from general surveys and essay collections to specialized monographs. See, for example, Mark A. Noll, Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700–1990*, Religion in America (New York, 1994), 6; Noll, *Rise of Evangelicalism*, 15–21; and Jonathan D. Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness: The Public Christianity of the Post-Revolutionary New England Clergy*, Religion in America (New York, 2001), 146. A notable exception to this trend is Kidd’s *Great Awakening*, which provides an important corrective to Bebbington’s definition (xiv) and anticipates some of the issues that I address in this book. Catherine A. Brekus also adopts Bebbington’s scheme, but her argument in *Sarah Osborn’s World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven, Conn., 2013) forthrightly acknowledges that the “new kind of faith that we now call evangelicalism” was a “loose coalition of leaders, ideas, and practices” that developed during the mid-eighteenth century and “took decades to come together” (5, 11).

continued revelation, dramatic visionary phenomena, and a strident desire to break fellowship with their kin and neighbors and worship with like-minded men and women who claimed similar experiences. Only the radicalism of the Whitefieldian revivals accounts for the unexpected splintering of the Congregational standing order that occurred during the middle decades of the eighteenth century, as religious institutions that once commanded the allegiance of more than 80 percent of the population in many New England towns devolved into a fractious spiritual marketplace of competing denominations and sects.²³ Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, scholars have been working to recover these so-called radical evangelicals from the periphery.²⁴ I place them in the eye of the tempests that engulfed and eventually tore apart New England's Congregational culture. In 1750, to be a Whitefieldian was to be a religious radical.

Darkness Falls on the Land of Light is organized chronologically into five parts. Drawing on an exceptional collection of church admission relations from the town of Haverhill, Massachusetts, Part 1 examines the widely shared religious vocabulary through which church membership candidates during the period between 1680 and 1740 pledged to “walk answerably” to their doctrinal professions in the hope that a vengeful deity would not pour out affliction on their bodies, families, and communities. Provincial New Englanders inhabited a world punctuated by sudden deaths, infant mortality, natural disasters, epidemic diseases, and imperial warfare. Their devotional writings and practices directly addressed these temporal woes. Lay men and women might have worried about the salvation of their sinful souls—especially during the latter stages of life or in times of mortal danger—but they prayed just as fervently for good health, productive crops, pious children, safe journeys, and material blessings. The multiple demands of a “Godly Walk” entailed spiri-

23. Dean Dudley, *History and Genealogy of the Bangs Family in America* (Montrose, Mass., 1896), 8. I share Roger Finke and Roger Stark's interest in employing “economic concepts . . . to analyze the success and failure of religious bodies,” although I find their measurement techniques for the colonial era—and New England in particular—to be significantly flawed. For a more detailed critique and statement of the quantitative methodologies employed in this study, see Appendix A. Finke and Stark outline their “market-oriented” approach in *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, 2d ed. (New Brunswick, N.J., 2005), 8–12 (quotations, 9).

24. G. A. Rawlyk, *The Canada Fire: Radical Evangelicalism in British North America, 1775–1812* (Kingston, Ont., 1994), xvii. See also Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); Clarke Garrett, *Origins of the Shakers: From the Old World to the New World* (Baltimore, 1988); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); and Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Jesus Is Female: Moravians and the Challenge of Radical Religion in Early America*, *Early American Studies* (Philadelphia, 2007).

tualizing everyday occurrences, meditating in secret, baptizing children in a timely fashion, and raising them in church fellowship. As with Anglican congregations elsewhere in England and British North America, the “practical Protestantism” that pervaded New England during a period once dismissed as its “Glacial Age” was tolerant, inclusive, steady, and comforting.²⁵

The next three parts of the book explore the breakdown of New England’s pervasive Congregational culture during a “Time of Great Awakenings.” Framed by Nathan Cole’s famous account of George Whitefield’s 1740 visit to Middletown, Connecticut, Part 2 reconstructs the theological and rhetorical strategies through which the popular Anglican evangelist labored to persuade his audiences to repudiate the ideal of the godly walk. In its place, many New Englanders championed Whitefield’s “doctrine of the new birth,” the instantaneous descent and implantation of God’s Holy Spirit. Circulating initially within epistolary networks and later through newspapers and magazines, heady reports of dramatic preaching performances, protracted religious meetings, and other innovative “Measures to Promote religion” convinced many “New Converts” that they were witnessing an unprecedented outpouring of the Holy Spirit, or what people began to call a singular “*Revival of Religion*.”²⁶ Diaries, letters, sermon notes, church membership demographics, prayer bills, and even gravestone iconography registered an abrupt shift in lay piety, as New England lurched unexpectedly into what many believed was a new religious world.

Renewed emphasis on the theological doctrine of the Holy Spirit as an indwelling vital principle proved to be a perplexing issue for many Congregationalists. Part 3 tells the story of one man’s struggle to discern its presence in the body of a young Boston revival convert named Martha Robinson. Neigh-

25. Appendix B, Boston, First Church, 10; John Barnard, *The Peaceful End of the Perfect and Upright Man: A Sermon, Occasioned by the Death of Mr. John Atwood ...* (Boston, 1714), 28; Clifford Kenyon Shipton, “The New England Clergy of the ‘Glacial Age,’” CSM, *Publications, Transactions, 1933-1937*, XXXII (Boston, 1937), 53. I borrow the helpful phrase “practical Protestantism” from T. J. Tomlin, *A Divinity for All Persuasions: Almanacs and Early American Religious Life*, Religion in America (New York, 2014), 158. For comparisons with Anglicanism, see John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England, 1646-1689* (New Haven, Conn., 1991), 279-330; W. M. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1996), 1-19; Nelson, *Blessed Company*, 1-10; Louis P. Nelson, *The Beauty of Holiness: Anglicanism and Architecture in Colonial South Carolina* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2008), 142, 222-224; and Lauren F. Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith: Anglican Religious Practice in the Elite Households of Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New Haven, Conn., 2010), 1-5, 19-26.

26. Benjamin Bradstreet, *Godly Sorrow Described, and the Blessing Annexed Consider’d* (Boston, 1742), title page; *GWJ*, 478; *NGD*, 194; Thomas Foxcroft to Jonathan Dickinson, Dec. 16, 1741, Charles Roberts Autograph Letter Collection, Haverford College Library, Haverford, Pa.; Thomas Prince, *It Being Earnestly Desired ...* (Boston, 1743).

bors feared that Robinson was possessed by the Devil, but Hartford magistrate Joseph Pitkin found through a close inspection of physical signs and verbal utterances that her body had been alternately conscripted by Satan and the Holy Spirit. His surprising discovery positions the phenomenon of ecstatic spirit possession at the heart of the Whitefieldian new birth experience. During the revivals of the 1740s, New Englanders learned to associate the descent of the Holy Spirit with exercised bodies, impulsive biblical texts, and unusual visionary phenomena. The charismatic elements of this emerging conversion paradigm impelled many revival participants to engage in dramatic acts of ecclesiastical disobedience. The most notable of these events, the infamous New London bonfires of 1743, anchors the discussion in Part 4. Inspired by powerful native-born itinerants such as the incendiary James Davenport, Spirit-possessed radicals railed against the opponents of the revivals, branded their ministers and neighbors unconverted hypocrites, and embraced new gifts of preaching and worship. In time, the voices of scripture that dropped into their heads and sounded in their ears compelled them to break communion with the churches of the Congregational establishment altogether.

During the next several decades, ministers across New England struggled and frequently failed to corral the unruly religious experiences of their inspired parishioners. Part 5 recounts the strife that plagued not only well-established churches, such as Edwards's Northampton, Massachusetts, congregation, but also upstart separatist groups led by ardent revival proponents like the Separate Baptist minister Isaac Backus. Thrust into a dizzying and unstable religious marketplace, godly walkers and perfectionist seekers, Anglican conformists and "Nothingarians" trafficked in and out of the churches of the standing order at a startling rate. By 1780, religious insurgents had fomented what C. C. Goen once called a "permanent shattering" of the Congregational establishment. Not until the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century would New Englanders finally come to terms with the pluralistic religious culture that arose during the decades following the revivals of the 1740s. The Epilogue sketches in broad strokes this final transformation of the New England way, as it unfolded during the lives of four generations of the Lane family of Hampton and Stratham, New Hampshire.²⁷

The middle decades of the eighteenth century were the dark night of the collective New England soul, as ordinary people groped toward a radically restructured religious order. The outcome of that struggle—the travail of New

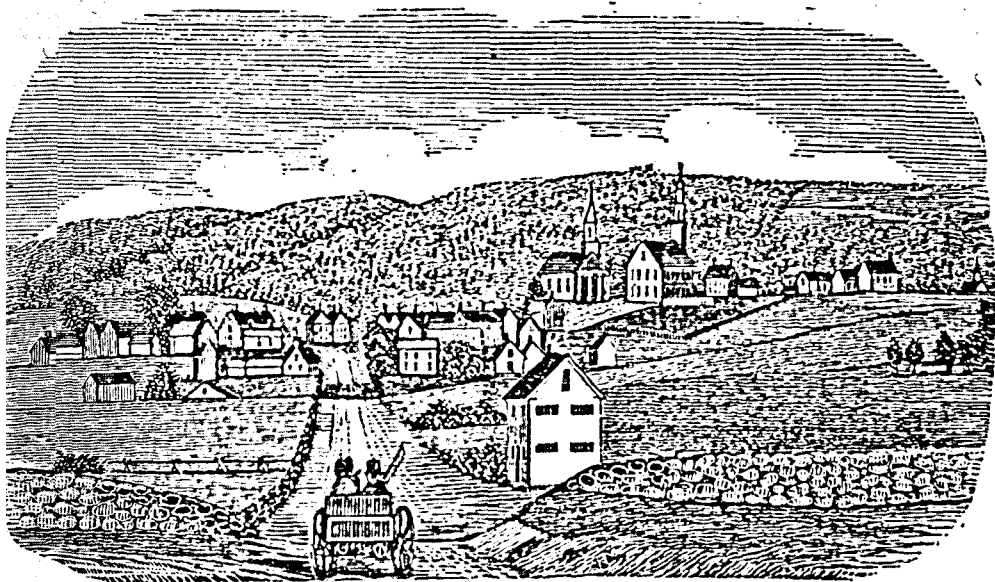
27. Dexter, ed., *Extracts from the Itineraries and Other Miscellanies of Ezra Stiles*, 105; Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England*, xxvii.

England Congregationalism—transformed the once-puritan churches from inclusive communities of interlocking parishes and families into exclusive networks of gifted spiritual seekers. Then, as now, religion empowered men and women to question structures of authority. It also tore at the fabric of society.

■ In 1839, the amateur artist and popular historian John Warner Barber published a capsule history of Sturbridge in his celebratory *Historical Collections of Massachusetts*. The accompanying woodcut illustration depicting neatly walled fields and orderly buildings heralded the demographic permanence, economic prosperity, and political stability of the new nation. Atop a small rise at the center of the village, the twin spires of the Congregational and Baptist churches testified to the hegemony of the multid denominational Protestant order that had originated from the legal disestablishment of religion in Massachusetts a few years earlier. Barber's profile of Sturbridge highlighted the contributions of hardy pioneers like Daniel and Henry Fisk, who hewed a peaceable kingdom from the trackless wilderness. Although Barber acknowledged that some of the townspeople had "received *new light*" during the 1740s and separated to form the Sturbridge Baptist church, his laudatory account of the first century of the town's history subsumed religious conflict within a gazetteer of facts and figures on topography, population, farm acreage, and industrial production. One among dozens of local histories written during the decades before the Civil War, Barber's *Historical Collections* presented a vision of colonial history that merged seamlessly with evolving American values of civic engagement, religious pluralism, and participatory democracy.²⁸

The troubled middle decades of the eighteenth century reveal a very different etiology of New England's iconic white villages, for the religious crisis that began with George Whitefield's 1740 preaching tour only intensified and deepened during the years that followed. On May 26, 1748, one month after Hannah and John Corey withdrew from communion in the Sturbridge church, angry townspeople descended on the Separates' meeting, laid hold of two dissenters from neighboring villages, and in a "hostile manner drew them out of

28. John Warner Barber, *Historical Collections, Being a General Collection of Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, etc., Relating to the History and Antiquities of Every Town in Massachusetts, with Geographical Descriptions* (Worcester, Mass., 1839), 607–608. On the construction of New England regional identity, see David D. Hall and Alan Taylor, "Reassessing the Local History of New England," in Roger Parks, ed., *New England: A Bibliography of Its History*, *Bibliographies of New England History*, VII (Hanover, N.H., 1989), xix–xxx; William H. Truettner and Roger B. Stein, eds., *Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory* (New Haven, Conn., 1999); and Joseph A. Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2001).



View of the central village in Sturbridge.

FIGURE 3 "View of the Central Village in Sturbridge." From John Warner Barber, *Massachusetts Historical Collections, Being a General Collection of Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, Etc., Relating to the History and Antiquities of Every Town in Massachusetts, with Geographical Descriptions* (Worcester, Mass., 1839), 608. Courtesy, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia

town." The next year, a mob attacked another member of the separatist faction when he attempted to preach in a nearby town. In 1750, magistrates incarcerated John Corey and four other members of the reorganized Separate Baptist church after they refused to pay their ministerial taxes. Constables confiscated personal possessions from nearly every Baptist householder in Sturbridge to pay the salary of Congregational minister Caleb Rice. The distraught goods ranged from swine, heifers, steers, and oxen to saddles, kettles, pewter, warming pans, spinning wheels, and looking glasses. During a period of relative isolation in which most Sturbridge families owned little more than their land and buildings, the seizure of livestock, draft animals, tools, and material amenities had a devastating impact on the dissenters' struggle to wrest a meager competency from the stony uplands of central Massachusetts.²⁹

29. Fisk, "Testimony of a People Inhabiting the Wilderness," n.d. [January–February 1753] no. 397, *IBP*, Fisk, "Testimony from the Brethren in Sturbridge," 1753, no. 396, Fisk et al. to the Sturbridge selectmen, May 5, 1749, no. 314, Anonymous, "Sturbridge Sufferings," Feb.

Sturbridge was wracked by a flood of recriminations, acrimonious town meetings, and protracted lawsuits during the 1750s. The rancor left scars that lingered well into the nineteenth century. "We verbally in a publick manner testified we profest a free Gosple," Henry Fisk bitterly recalled in words drawn from Psalm 120:7, "But we may only Say as David when I Speak for peace Lo they are for war." Only a handful of the Baptist dissenters ever reconciled with Rice's church. The rest remained socially and economically out of step with their Congregational neighbors for decades. Perhaps the best index of their persistent outsider status might be found among the gravestones of the Sturbridge burial ground. In 1749, Hannah Corey longed to lie down with the dead in a small clearing adjacent to the Congregational meetinghouse. A century later, however, this same site stood at the civic, economic, and religious heart of a quintessential New England village. Of the fifty-nine men and women who initially affiliated with the Separate Baptists, only three were buried in the Sturbridge town cemetery. Hannah and John Corey were not among them. They were likely interred in family plots or atop Fisk Hill, near the original site of the Baptist meetinghouse. Other alienated dissenters, embittered by years of maltreatment, departed for new settlements on the northern frontier.³⁰

Late in the eighteenth century, Isaac Backus paused in his *Church History of New-England* to consider the state of religious affairs during the decades leading up to the Whitefieldian revivals of the 1740s. He entitled his chapter "A Review of Past Darkness." Backus's historical narrative would have found a sympathetic audience among the Coreys and other dissenters. But the Holbrooks and their neighbors who retained their membership in the Sturbridge Congregational church would not have agreed. For them, indeed, for a majority of the families that migrated to New England's near frontier during the 1730s, the towns of eastern Massachusetts constituted a thriving religious culture. They called it the "Gospel Land of Light."³¹

12, 1750, no. 326, Jonathan Perry, "Perry's Sufferings," Feb. 26, 1750, no. 326.5; Isaac Backus, *A Church History of New-England, Extending from 1690 to 1784* . . . , 2 vols. (Providence, R.I., 1784), II, 192.

30. Fisk, "Testimony of a People Inhabitting the Wilderness," n.d. [January–February 1753], no. 397, *IBP*; John L. Brooke, "For Honour and Civil Worship to Any Worthy Person': Burial, Baptism, and Community on the Massachusetts Near Frontier, 1730–1790," in Robert Blair St. George, ed., *Material Life in America, 1600–1860* (Boston, 1988), 472–475.

31. Backus, *Church History of New-England*, II, 127; Appendix B, Sturbridge, Mass., First Church, 24. I borrow the phrase "near frontier" from Brooke, "For Honour and Civil Worship," in St. George, ed., *Material Life in America*, 463.