

1-1-2013

# "Without A Few Negroes": George Whitefield, James Habersham, and Bethesda Orphan House In the Story of Legalizing Slavery In Colonial Georgia

Tara Leigh Babb  
*University of South Carolina*

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“WITHOUT A FEW NEGROES”: GEORGE WHITEFIELD, JAMES HABERSHAM,  
AND BETHESDA ORPHAN HOUSE IN THE STORY OF LEGALIZING SLAVERY IN  
COLONIAL GEORGIA

by

Tara Babb

Bachelor of Arts  
The College of William and Mary, 2009

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

Public History

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2013

Accepted by:

Daniel Littlefield, Director of Thesis

R. Blakeslee Gilpin, Committee Reader

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Daniel Littlefield for graciously agreeing to be my thesis director. I appreciate the time you took to read various drafts and the helpful suggestions you made along the way. Thank you to my reader, Professor R. Blakeslee Gilpin (don't worry, I won't call you Dr.), for your help in strengthening my writing. I take special pride in being your first thesis advisee and the only one you will ever have at USC.

Thanks goes to Dr. Emily Brock and Jacob Mach, who provided feedback on an earlier form of this paper in HIST 800. Thank you, Mom (Mary Watson), for reading an earlier draft and in no uncertain terms telling me what was wrong with it. Thank you, Dad (Jim Babb), even though you could not read for content with all the glaring punctuation errors in the version you read.

I also wish to thank several of my professors at The College of William and Mary in Virginia, who have influenced my thinking, made me a better writer, taught me to ask good questions, and encouraged me in my pursuit of graduate education: Dr. Susan Kern, Dr. James P. Whittenburg, Dr. Timothy Barnard, Dr. James Allegro (now at Norfolk State), Dr. David Holmes, and Dr. Michael Blakey.

## ABSTRACT

A 1735 law banned slavery in the English colony of Georgia. The colony's Trustees considered slavery to be incompatible with their aims of using the new colony to provide a subsistence living for England's poor and to provide a buffer between South Carolina and Spanish Florida. In the ensuing years, various parties linked the colony's failure to thrive (and their own failure to succeed within Georgia) to the lack of an enslaved labor force. By 1750, the Board of Trustees relented to pressure and enacted what they considered to be a humane slave code. Evangelist George Whitefield and teacher and merchant James Habersham were both proponents of legalizing slavery in order to support the Bethesda orphan home, which they established near Savannah in 1740. Scholarship about Whitefield, Habersham, and Bethesda have minimized or ignored their significance in Georgia's transition to a slave colony. The previous literature on legalizing slavery in Georgia likewise neglects their role in the Trustees' decision. Most scholarship on the subject focuses on the Malcontents, a faction of colonists who pushed for a change in legislation, particularly regarding slavery, and the Salzburgers, German Protestant refugees who supported the Trustees' decisions regarding slavery both before and after legalization. Evidence shows, however, that Whitefield and Habersham exerted influence within the colony and with the Trustees in England. Like the Malcontents, these two men should be part of the story of the Trustees' move to legalize slavery in colonial Georgia.

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## INTRODUCTION

A Board of Trustees established the colony of Georgia by royal charter in 1733 for several reasons—all of which precluded allowing possessing slaves within the colony. Motivated by social and moral aims, James Oglethorpe and the other Trustees wanted a place for poor English subjects to earn a subsistence living via agricultural production, an option not available to the landless destitute in Britain. This goal merged with yet another objective—to protect income-producing South Carolina and its inhabitants from potential Spanish attack. The success of this experiment was supposed to have turned Georgia into another revenue source for the Crown. Finally, Georgia was to be a safe haven for persecuted European Protestants. A 1735 law expressly forbade slaveholding of any sort within Georgia, but by 1750 the Trustees relented by legalizing slavery at nearly the same time they relinquished the colony to the British government. Part social experiment, part economic endeavor, and part religious refuge for various Protestant groups, Georgia offered multiple reasons for the Trustees' change of mind. Within the diversity of early colonial Georgia, George Whitefield established Bethesda orphan school near Savannah in 1740 with his friend James Habersham. Whitefield, Habersham, and the orphanage played a vital role in Georgia's transition from free to slave colony.

The previous scholarship on Georgia's transition to slavery leaves Whitefield and Habersham out of the story, never mentioning their impact on the Trustees. A group called the Malcontents and the agitator Thomas Stephens appear as the only influencers on behalf of slavery. Salzburger pastor Johann Martin Bolzius appears as the

lone voice in favor of the Trustees' plan to keep slavery out of the colony.<sup>1</sup> Much of the literature on Whitefield himself focuses on his role in the Great Awakening, the widespread Protestant revival of which he was a key player. This tendency is understandable given that Whitefield spent more time away from Georgia than in it. His own press highlighted the conflicts, crowded meetings, and heartfelt conversions that marked his itinerant preaching. Throughout his life, however, Whitefield remained connected to Bethesda and to Habersham. He repeatedly returned to Georgia, where his wife stayed while he traveled. His letters express a concern for the welfare of the orphan house and its inmates, and his journals indicate that even as he preached in the northern colonies and in Britain, the orphanage was never far from his mind, as he mentioned Bethesda in his sermons and repeatedly took collections to aid the institution. Whitefield biographers, often admirers of the evangelist's ministry and commitment to the gospel, often remark on his attitude toward slavery as a blemish in an otherwise clear character.

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<sup>1</sup> Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia, 1730-1775* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 66.

Betty Wood barely mentions Whitefield and totally neglects Bethesda in her book *Slavery in Colonial Georgia, 1730-1775*. She gives a thorough account of the Malcontents, a group of colonists who lobbied for legalizing slavery. She goes into great detail about Thomas Stephens and his actions on both sides of the ocean in support of the Malcontents petitions. She also gives a decent, if optimistic, account of the Salzburgers, a group of German Protestant settlers, including leader Johann Martin Bolzius' stand against legalizing slave ownership. In regards to Bolzius' anti-slavery stance, Wood references "Whitefield's argument...that Africans should be brought to Georgia to expose them to the spiritual benefits of Christianity." Her treatment of Habersham is more thorough but still problematic. Recognizing his rise from schoolmaster to wealthy, slave-owning planter, she neglects to mention his connection to either Whitefield or the orphan school.



Whitefield scholars who study his problematic relationship with slavery neglect to consider his relationship with the colony and the Trustees. They assume that his stance on slavery was academic, rather than practical with potentially far-reaching effects, including the institution's legalization in Georgia.<sup>2</sup>

Some scholarship does recognize Whitefield's connection to slavery, with some works claiming that he experienced a change of heart from a previous stance against the institution. Whitefield was not known for backing down from an argument. If he had ever been against slavery, he would have said so in no uncertain terms. Rather than being a transition, his efforts regarding slavery were two parts of one belief system: free and enslaved people could be spiritual equals in a temporal hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> Whitefield's

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<sup>2</sup> Edward J. Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda: A History of George Whitefield's Home for Boys, 1740-2000* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001). In *Beloved Bethesda*, Georgia historian Edward J. Cashin creditably shows the interconnection of Whitefield, Habersham, Bethesda, and the colony in the orphan school's early days. His singular mention of slavery in relation to Habersham, however, has to do with the man's involvement in a committee to develop recommendations for a slave code. He does not mention either man as a proponent of slavery, influential or otherwise. The omission is disappointing largely because Cashin's institutional history of Bethesda offers a balanced critique rather than an overly laudatory or sentimental view of the institution.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Henry Clark, *George Whitefield, Wayfaring Witness* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 116-117. Stuart Clark Henry does better than most in recognizing the problematic relationship between George Whitefield's Christian benevolence and his stance on slavery. In *George Whitefield: Wayfaring Witness*, Henry posits that Whitefield's efforts to legalize slavery in Georgia may have been a transition from his January 1740 pamphlet admonishing slaveholders who mistreated their slaves. Whitefield's *A Letter to the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina* "took no definitive stand against slavery as an unchristian institution," but that idea "might easily have been inferred." Henry cites *A Letter to the*

connection with and influence on the Bryan family has gained some recognition. During Whitefield's time, the Bryans were a rising planter-elite family on St. Helena Island in South Carolina (not far from Savannah). Although Whitefield's complicated relationship with slavery forms part of this scholarship, his endorsement of legalizing slavery in Georgia is ignored.<sup>4</sup> Both Whitefield and Habersham need to be reinserted into the story of legalized slavery.

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*Inhabitants* and references his connection with slave-free Georgia as reasons why people “would normally have supposed him to be antislavery.” Although raising an interesting idea, Henry does not really substantiate it—he offers no evidence that anyone at the time actually did think that Whitefield was antislavery. In all, his treatment of the evangelist's behavior regarding slavery is minimal: two pages including the digression into speculation regarding Whitefield's “transition” to proslavery.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Gallay, “The Origins of Slaveholders' Paternalism: George Whitefield, the Bryan Family, and the Great Awakening in the South,” *The Journal of Southern History* LIII, no. 3 (August 1987) 391

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2209360>.

Stephen J. Stein, “George Whitefield on Slavery: Some New Evidence,” *Church History* 42, no. 2 (June 1973) 243-256 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3163671> .

Noting the scarcity of scholarship on the Great Awakening in southern colonies (a problem that has not been rectified in the twenty-five years since he published this article), Gallay focuses on Whitefield's influence on the Bryan family of St. Helen's Island in South Carolina. At that time the Bryans were establishing themselves as part of South Carolina's planter elite. They remained friends with both Whitefield and Habersham and were among the orphan home's greatest benefactors. Gallay argues that the South's antebellum paternalism—as expressed in plantation communities—started with the Bryans and other evangelicals in South Carolina and spread to Georgia and beyond. His only mention of Georgia's evolution into a slave colony centers on Whitefield's supposed change to proslavery. Because his research centered on the Bryan family, his dates for Whitefield's activities are a bit vague and at times inaccurate.

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Stephen Stein gives the most complete treatment of Whitefield's complicated relationship to slavery in "George Whitefield on Slavery: Some New Evidence." Stein proposes that Whitefield was the author of a 1743 booklet titled *A Letter to the Negroes Lately Converted to Christ in America*. The piece's full title references people converted at Jonathan Bryan's plantation in South Carolina, where the evangelist conducted meetings for enslaved people not unlike the meetings he conducted elsewhere in his travels.

## SECTION 1

### THE TRUSTEES' PLAN FOR GEORGIA

The colony began when General James Oglethorpe wanted to settle debtors there after he conducted a study of Britain's prisons. Oglethorpe was a well-connected man who had previously found military success against the Turks and won a seat in Parliament in 1722. When he conceived Georgia as a charity colony, he gained the support of men who would become the other Trustees, several of whom sat in Parliament. Colonizing the land between the Savannah and Altamaha Rivers did not take off until Oglethorpe agreed to a slight change in plan. Instead of sending debtors just released from prison, the Trustees wanted to help the "deserving poor"—those with the desire to work but the inability to earn sufficient livings.<sup>5</sup>

The Trustees included men of great wealth and influence, but of varying degrees of commitment to the colony. John Viscount Percival, who became the Earl of Egmont in 1733, showed great interest in the project. He influenced the Trustees' ability to gain Parliamentary funding for Georgia. Later he mediated between the other Trustees and Thomas Stephens, a colonist who came to London in the 1740s to support legalizing

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<sup>5</sup> Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 1-23. Edwin L. Jackson, "James Edward Oglethorpe," in *The New Georgia Encyclopedia* (Georgia Humanities Council: December 2, 2003)

<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?path=/HistoryArchaeology/ColonialEraTrusteePeriod/People-4&id=h-1058>.

slavery in the colony. Egmont's journal gives insight into the Trustees' proceedings beyond their official records. The Trustees originally comprised twenty-one men, but they elected new Trustees to add to or replace the original members. Later Board members may not have held to the opinion of the earlier Trustees that keeping slavery out of Georgia was good for the charity colonists or for the colony as a whole.

With royal charter in hand, the Board of Trustees governed Georgia from afar, with the notable exception of Oglethorpe himself. Not only did he represent the Trustees in Georgia for most of the first ten years, but he was also the colony's military leader and de facto governor. The Trustees in England relied on Oglethorpe to report to them on the state of the colony, but they found his accounts lacking. His year-end reports are surprisingly short, especially when compared to the letters sent by others about the colony's affairs. In the early years, before they had an official secretary within Georgia, they could only assume that Oglethorpe's communications were accurate, even though he had a vested interest in showing the Georgia project in the best light. William Stephens became the colony's secretary in 1737, and his reports were intended to fill the gap left by Oglethorpe's sparse communication.

Whether Oglethorpe's social or military aims took precedence is difficult to tell, especially since they were so intertwined, and the desire to keep slavery out of Georgia supported all the colony's purposes. Socially, the Trustees wanted to aid the poor in earning a "comfortable subsistence." Each man assisted in settling in Georgia would receive a fifty-acre plot, which he could leave to his eldest son. These unfortunates, however, could not increase their landholdings, nor could they claim free title to their property. The Trustees codified a tailmale system in Georgia law, meaning that a son

could inherit his father's land, but landholders could not sell their land to another landowner or leave it to a wife or daughter in a will. Adventurers, those who paid their own way to Georgia, could acquire 500-acre plots. Like the charity settlers, the adventurers could not increase the size of their landholdings. These settlers would all look to Savannah, a planned city, as the center for colonial government.<sup>6</sup>

The Trustees also welcomed Protestant dissenters from various European nations. Settlements such as Darien (highland Scots) and Ebenezer (German Lutherans) sprang up in North Georgia. Oglethorpe wanted multiple, smaller settlements rather than vast plantations belonging to a few wealthy men. Huge plantations would mean settlers living farther apart. Smaller, more closely placed settlements would enable colonists to respond more quickly in the event of an attack from the Spanish in Florida, especially since both England and Spain had laid claim to the land that had become Georgia.<sup>7</sup>

The presence of slaves would further complicate things. First, owning slaves would distract the poor colonists from earning their own livings. The Trustees feared that the ability to own large estates worked by others would turn the Georgia settlers into virtual South Carolinians, indolent and spoiled, rather than the industrious and virtuous citizenry they hoped to foster. Further, the Spanish offered freedom to slaves who escaped British colonies and fought for the Spanish. Ongoing Anglo-Spanish conflict culminated with the onset of the War of Jenkins Ear in 1739, and the threat of slave defection was real. Finally, slave uprisings were a cause for concern. Also in 1739, the

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<sup>6</sup> Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 19-20, 26, 28. *Charter of the Colony*, in *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, ed. Allen D. Candler (Atlanta: Franklin Printing and Publishing Company, 1904) 1:11-26.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson, "James Edward Oglethorpe."

Stono Rebellion in South Carolina underscored the rumors of real and imagined revolts already circulating in the colonies.<sup>8</sup>

Conversely, several parties both within and outside Georgia believed that allowing slavery would increase the colony's chances of success. Georgia was supposed to increase the Crown's wealth. Although established and funded with Parliamentary approval, Georgia required an annual infusion of funds to keep afloat. Those Trustees within Parliament used their influence to acquire an annual payout of £5,000, which was never guaranteed.<sup>9</sup> Donors provided additional funds to support settling and establishing colonists and caring for orphans. If the colony could not even support itself, how could it ever enrich Britain?

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<sup>8</sup> Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 16-17, 46.

<sup>9</sup> Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 26-28, 32, 35.

## SECTION 2

### STRIVING FOR MORE: THE MALCONTENTS

A faction developed within the colony, seeking legislative changes, particularly the legalization of slavery. They wanted more than the bare subsistence Georgia could offer. Land was difficult to clear and supplies were expensive. Colonists could not gain a profit from the sales of their crops. The pro-slavery faction believed that enslaved labor would allow them to farm more land and finally earn better incomes. Beyond English Savannah and Frederica, various settlements of English, highland Scots, lowland Scots, Salzburgers and other Germans, and French-speaking Swiss dotted the landscape in accordance with Oglethorpe's plan. The proslavery faction and the Trustees' supporters came from this diverse population, including both charity settlers and adventurers.<sup>10</sup>

The best known group of instigators is the Malcontents, thus named by colonial secretary William Stephens in his regular reports to the Trustees in London. A small group of adventurers, those who had paid their own way to Georgia, led the Malcontents in their letters and petitions to the Trustees. Lowland Scots Patrick Tailfer, David Douglass, Patrick Houston, and Andrew Grant as well as English merchant Robert Williams were spokesmen for the group. Thomas Stephens, son of colonial secretary

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<sup>10</sup> The Journal of the Trustees, basically minutes of their meetings, repeatedly mention donations received on behalf of the charity colony. See Allen D. Candler, ed., *The Colonial Records of Georgia* (Atlanta: Franklin Printing and Publishing Company, 1904-1916), 1.



William Stephens, came to Georgia as a supporter of the Trustees' policies, but he later came to be their chief antagonist. The problem lay with the Trustees' poor planning. They chose settlers unfamiliar with agricultural work, the colony's main enterprise. Of 1,800 charity settlers in the colony's first decade (1732-1742), only 55 had agricultural experience of any sort. Of 528 adventurers, only 28 were farmers. Lord Egmont admitted that they chose those who had "fall[en] on misfortunes of trade, and even admit none of these, who can get a subsistence, how narrow so ever it may be" rather than the workers necessary for a successful colony.<sup>11</sup>

James Oglethorpe and Trustee secretary Benjamin Martyn had published tracts lauding Georgia's ideal climate and conditions. Unwary colonists may have expected the situation on the ground to match the marketing propaganda, but more likely they expected the situation in Georgia to be more flexible than it was. Early on, the authorities hired slaves from South Carolina to clear ground and to help build Savannah. However, the Trustees and then Parliament passed the 1735 act prohibiting slavery. The law required that anyone who did "import or bring or shall cause to be imported or brought or shall sell or barter or use in any manner or way whatsoever...any black or blacks negroe or negroes" within Georgia be fined £50 for each black person so used. Any black, free or enslaved, so found would become property of the Trustees to sell or dispose of as they saw fit.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wood, *Slavery in Georgia*, 24-43.

<sup>12</sup> Wood, *Slavery in Georgia*, 9-10. *The Act for rendering the Colony of Georgia more Defencible by Prohibiting the Importation and use of Black Slaves or Negroes into the Same* can be read in Candler, *Colonial Records of Georgia*, 1:50-52.

Adventurers such as Patrick Tailfer attempted to change what they saw as an unfair law. Of course, their intention was to earn more than the “comfortable subsistence” deemed sufficient for the charity settlers. Perhaps they wanted to become wealthy like their neighbors to the north, which was contrary to the Trustees’ humanitarian objectives. The Malcontents certainly wanted a bit more autonomy. The landscape not being what was promised, they hoped at least to enlarge their grants to contain more arable land for rice and to gain the right to own a few slaves, which they deemed necessary for working the land. One hundred seventeen people signed a petition requesting that the Trustees change their scheme and at least consider legalizing slavery. Unfortunately for their cause, the Trustees had established a slow-working system of legislation. Although Oglethorpe and bailiffs were in Georgia, only the Board of Trustees could change laws or land grants. Parliament then had to approve any new legislation. When the Malcontents did not get the satisfaction they desired, Tailfer and his cohort published *A True and Historical Narrative of the Colony of Georgia* in 1741 to show that the Georgia situation was much worse than its supporters claimed. Another ten years would pass before the Trustees responded to pressure and changed the laws. Some of the Malcontents, including Patrick Tailfer, could not wait that long. Having nearly exhausted their funds by trying to follow the Trustees’ scheme, they left Georgia in the 1740s. Others remained, able to capitalize on the changes that came at the end of the decade.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wood, *Slavery in Georgia*, 29-30, 39-40.

## SECTION 3

### THE CONTENTED SALZBURGERS

Unlike the Malcontents, one group at least seemed content with their suffering—the Salzburgers. The Salzburgers came to Georgia under the auspices of George II, who encouraged the British populace to support persecuted Protestants throughout Europe. The Salzburgers were Lutherans in a German region that had remained part of the Holy Roman Empire. As such, they should have had time to settle their affairs before leaving their homeland, but an overzealous archbishop decided to persecute them more severely than his predecessors had. With very little, they left Salzburg for a pilgrimage to Georgia via mainland Europe and England. Collections from charitable British people aided them in paying tolls to cross the European continent.<sup>14</sup>

They received a tract in Georgia in 1734, which they named Ebenezer. In many ways, the Salzburgers' early experiences reflected the Georgia situation as a whole. Appearing to give the Salzburgers a choice, the authorities in Georgia showed them the land that they wanted the Germans to take, knowing that it looked good without necessarily being so. Having been used to working hard for very little, they seemed content to face hardships including sickness, death, and land that produced little. Ebenezer's thin soil allowed certain plants to thrive but did not work for crops.

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<sup>14</sup> George Fenwick Jones, *The Salzburger Saga* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 1-13.

Eventually the Salzburgers received permission to move to new land and fared better there.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, the Salzburgers represented what colonizing Georgia should have looked like. They worked their own land without complaint, and although they did not exactly prosper, writings about them indicated that they were industrious and comfortable farmers. They actually had a difficult time in the early years. Their pastor and eventual civic leader, Johann Martin Bolzius, supported the Trustees as his group's authorities. He seems to have found slavery objectionable on moral grounds, but his writings on the topic stress economics and other factors that both Georgians and the Trustees could appreciate. Once the Trustees began considering legalizing slavery, Bolzius disagreed with the plan but still supported the Trustees. They trusted him and asked his opinion on how to make sure that Georgia's version of slavery would be more humane than in other colonies.<sup>16</sup>

Prior to legalization, records indicate numerous instances of slavery within Georgia. A couple of instances were even supported by the authorities. The Trustees allowed the borrowing and hiring of enslaved workers from South Carolina in order to build the planned city of Savannah. James Oglethorpe left Georgia briefly in 1733, and when he returned, he found "the People were grown very mutinous and impatient of Labour and Discipline." He blamed the situation on the ready availability of strong drink and the presence of slaves.<sup>17</sup> Despite his firm belief that it encouraged idleness among the settlers, Oglethorpe permitted a similar use of hired slaves for the establishment of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 14-36.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 42-43, 70, 103-105. Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 61-73.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 16-17.

Ebenezer. Fourteen enslaved sawyers were among the work party that cleared an eight-mile stretch of road from Ebenezer to Abercorn, a Scottish settlement on the Savannah River. The presence of slaves did not induce laziness in the Salzburgers of Ebenezer, who were by all accounts industrious and generally pious. The ill effects from using slaves at Ebenezer included four of them running off, one of whom killed another. If nothing else, this episode surely increased Johann Martin Bolzius' dislike of slavery by adding an element of fear to his concern over the potential of legalizing slavery in Georgia. These permitted episodes provided impetus for Oglethorpe and the other Trustees to explicitly ban Negroes (enslaved or otherwise) from the colony in their 1735 legislation.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Jones, *Salzburger Saga*, 15-17.

## SECTION 4

### GEORGE WHITEFIELD

George Whitefield first came to Georgia in 1738, after the arrival of the Salzburgers and when the Malcontents were gaining momentum. According to the *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, he “visited” the colony seven times total, odd considering ties to Savannah that should have kept him there permanently. Instead, Whitefield became known as an itinerant evangelist, simultaneously ecumenical and exclusive. Almost synonymous with the Great Awakening, the transatlantic revival movement of the second quarter of the eighteenth century, Whitefield never broke ties with the Church of England. In his early years of ministry he maintained friendships with John and Charles Wesley, the former having given him the invitation to go to Georgia in the first place. In his travels, Whitefield also formed working relationships with Congregationalist and Presbyterian ministers. He seemed hostile, however, to any clergy he considered unregenerate, such as Alexander Garden, the Anglican commissary of Charleston.<sup>19</sup>

George Whitefield was anything but a neutral figure. His preaching won him friends and enemies on both sides of the Atlantic. By preaching the need for the new

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<sup>19</sup> Frederick S. Mills Sr., “George Whitefield (1714-1770),” in *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, (Georgia Humanities Council, January 20, 2006). <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?path=/HistoryArchaeology/ColonialEraTrusteePeriod/People-4&id=h-1624>.

birth, he offended clergy who believed that adherence to church doctrine fitted one for heaven. Whitefield's Calvinist tendencies caused some to fear that he promoted a religion that was devotional to the point of not being practical—faith instead of works. Despite finding many churches closed to him, Whitefield found others that were open. When no church was available, Whitefield took to preaching outdoors, sometimes to crowds estimated in the tens of thousands. Benjamin Franklin heard Whitefield preach on such occasions in Philadelphia. Although not personally moved to the new birth, Franklin was moved to give to the orphan house and to strike up a business relationship with the preacher.<sup>20</sup>

Professionally ambitious, Franklin agreed to publish for sale sermons and other documents for the itinerant evangelist. In fact, one of the reasons that Whitefield remains so well-known even today is because of the abundance of printed material he produced. In his own day he earned the epithet “pedlar in divinity” for his extensive use of marketing. His press releases, printed sermons, and published journals served to promote his revival meetings and to encourage godly living among followers even after his departure. Later attributed to Whitefield, a thirty-two page booklet titled *A Letter to the*

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<sup>20</sup> Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda*, 16-19. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Peter Conn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 83-86. Clark, *Wayfaring Witness*, 51, 129.

*Negroes Lately Converted to Christ in America* serves as a defense of slavery and an admonition to Christians to evangelize their slaves.<sup>21</sup>

Ostensibly written for slaves recently receiving the new birth, *A Letter to the Negroes* would have been read more by a population with a higher literacy rate: white slave owners. The author of this work plays a crafty game with ideas of Christian brotherhood and freedom. The front of the book shows two scriptures. First is Ephesians 2:9, “Now therefore ye are no more Strangers and Foreigners, but Fellow-Citizens with the Saints, and of the Household of GOD.” Second is Colossians 3:2, “Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, Bond nor Free: but CHRIST is All, and in all.” The writer fills the first part of the book with reminders of the new believers’ place of full acceptance into the family of God, no different from any other believer. In keeping with Whitefield’s *modus operandi*, the text makes repeated appeals to all who read it to make sure of their calling in Christ, relying not on their own efforts.<sup>22</sup>

The book’s second half, however, appears as an about face from the first pages’ assurances of full equality. “And whereas your Station in the World, is *mean* and *servile*; Care not much for it; *for he that is called in the Lord, being a Servant, is the Lord’s Free-*

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<sup>21</sup> Frank Lambert, “Pedlar in Divinity: George Whitefield and the Great Awakening, 1737-1745,” *The Journal of American History* 77, No. 3 (Dec., 1990), pp. 812-837. Stein, “George Whitefield on Slavery,” 243-256.

<sup>22</sup> *A Letter to the Negroes lately converted to Christ in America. And particularly to those, lately called out of darkness, into God's marvellous light, at Mr. Jonathan Bryan's in South Carolina. Or A welcome to the believing Negroes, into the household of God*, (London: J. Hart, 1743).



*Man*” sounds good, but is followed immediately by “Let me beseech you therefore, my beloved Brethren, to *abide with God, in the same Calling wherein you are called*. It is GOD, that by his all-wise Providence, hath made you *Servants of Men...*” Whoever wrote this book must have been intimately acquainted with Whitefield’s evangelistic efforts on behalf of the enslaved population in the Charleston environs, where the Bryan family had a plantation. Even if Whitefield himself did not write *A Letter to the Negroes*, one of his followers in the southern colonies must have. Though indirect, Whitefield’s influence is certainly clear.<sup>23</sup>

The notion that a slave owner and a slave could be in the same family fits with the argument that antebellum plantation paternalism has roots in the evangelical network of Whitefield and the Bryan brothers. The patriarchal household structure of the early and mid-1700s evolved into the seemingly more benevolent paternalism in the antebellum US South. Both concepts place the father as the head of the household hierarchy. In patriarchy, the father’s position is part of nature; his care for his household is based on duty. This concept of the natural order fits with Whitefield’s Calvinist belief in predestination. Paternalism still positions the father as the head of the household, but with affection rather than duty as the lynchpin. For Whitefield the drive to evangelize was personal, and his concern for the eternal souls of enslaved workers fits with the paternalistic model. Whitefield serves as a transitional figure from duty-bound patriarchy, in which masters assumed slaves naturally sought freedom, to full-blown paternalism, in which masters purported to believe that their slaves were contented parts of plantation families. George Whitefield or whichever of his followers wrote *A Letter to the Negroes*

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<sup>23</sup> *A Letter to the Negroes*, 20-21. Stein, “George Whitefield on Slavery.”

sought to provide temporal peace of mind to slaves while still condoning their exploitation.<sup>24</sup>

Whitefield's precise influence in overturning the slave ban in Georgia is impossible to determine, but that he influenced events in Georgia and other American colonies is indisputable. One could argue that by dint of his controversial nature alone he influenced people, just not always in the ways he might have liked. In fact, at times Whitefield seemed like a thorn in the Trustees' sides. Once again, Lord Egmont's journal is telling. He recorded on January 28, 1740:

Mr. Whitefield wrote to me a letter of complaints... That no care is taken to obey the Trustees orders in Georgia... That if the affairs of Religion were not better regarded, he should be obliged to inform the world how little is to be seen for all the money good people had contributed. NB. This was an impudent paragraph, tending to asperse the Trustees with want of religion, & misapplying the money given them for religious uses, neither of which could be laid justly to their charge..."

He lists twelve of Whitefield's complaints from this one letter. Whatever else he thought of the minister, Egmont found Whitefield to have been a nuisance.<sup>25</sup>

Even so, Whitefield certainly had the Trustees' ears. Whereas other proponents of slavery in Georgia wrote letters and sent petitions, Whitefield did one better: he sent an emissary.

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<sup>24</sup> Galloway, "The Origins of Slaveholders Paternalism," 377-380. Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute, 1998), 257-317.

<sup>25</sup> John Percival, Earl of Egmont, *Journal*, in Vol. 5, , in *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, ed. Allen D. Candler (Atlanta: Franklin-Turner Co., 1908) 5:290-292.

Williams Seward, one of Whitefield's followers, went to England in the summer of 1740 at the evangelist's behest. While still on board ship, Seward wrote to the Trustees regarding certain interests of Whitefield's. Most of the points Egmont records in his journal regard the orphan house, Bethesda. Among Whitefield's concerns is informing the Trustees "That the proper means of establishing the Colony ... [would be] An Allowance of Negroes," offering colonists clear title to land holdings, and independent magistrates. The account repeats a familiar refrain that Georgia was in trouble "while there are many hundred thousand acres of as good or better land in South & North Carolina un-occupied, to be taken on a free clear Title, & a free use of Negroes," prompting many colonists to leave Georgia for colonies with better prospects.<sup>26</sup>

Almost a year later, Whitefield himself was in London. The Trustees prepared for a hearing with the House of Commons regarding the state of the colony of Georgia. Lord Gage requested that George Whitefield attend the meeting as someone who had just recently returned from the colony. Egmont noted that "many exprest their dislike at examining an Enthusiastical Mad Man as they call'd him." Egmont credited Thomas Stephens with instigating the request for Whitefield to appear at the meeting. The son of colonial secretary William Stephens. Thomas Stephens was a tireless promoter of legalized slavery and other reforms within Georgia. Egmont wrote that Stephens wanted Whitefield at the hearing "because he had found that Mr Whifeild [sic] was for allowing Negroes in the Colony, & if examined would declare his opinion that way." Egmont and the other Trustees may have seen Whitefield as another Malcontent, intent on bucking their authority in order to achieve his own goals. Late in 1742, however, Egmont records that Whitefield, again in London, attended one of the Trustees' meetings. In the course of his disputes with the Trustees over orphan policy in Georgia, Whitefield recommended a candidate

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 357-359.

to replace the recently deceased minister in Savannah. Upon Whitefield's suggestion, the Trustees resolved to solicit a reference from the Bishop of Man for the evangelist's chosen candidate. Clearly the Trustees regarded Whitefield's opinions despite their disagreements.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 478-480, 672-674.

## SECTION 5

### BETHESDA ORPHAN HOME

George Whitefield established his orphan house within the context of a struggling colony, complete with strife over governance, economic survival, and the issue of slavery. As a relatively new and constantly struggling colony, Georgia had no proper mechanism for addressing the needs of orphans. In 1733, the settlement year, James Oglethorpe appointed three men to oversee the care of orphans, who were fed and clothed from the public stores. About a year later, bailiffs and magistrates in Georgia disputed over orphan provisions during Oglethorpe's absence.<sup>28</sup>

Whitefield arrived in Savannah in May of 1738 as a twenty-three-year-old deacon within the Church of England. He almost immediately inquired into "the state of their children," meaning orphans and the fatherless, and realized the need for an orphan house.<sup>29</sup> In some ways Whitefield's orphanage mirrored the greater colony. Just like Georgia, Bethesda was to be a self-sufficient charity, yet Bethesda, too, required an influx of outside funds. Whitefield blamed its failure to attain economic viability on the need for enslaved workers. In his journal he recorded a hope that the Georgia orphans could become productive members of the colony if only they could have a "proper place"

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<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Coleman and Milton Ready, *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, volume 20 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982) 20:41, 183-184.

<sup>29</sup> George Whitefield, *Journals* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 156.

for their “maintenance and education.” Writing in his journal in 1740, the same year the orphanage started, he described the condition of three German orphans, “the most pitiful objects, I think, I ever saw...used to exceedingly hard labor, and though supplied with provisions from the trustees, were treated in a manner unbecoming even to heathens.”<sup>30</sup>

Whitefield incorrectly assumed that orphans in Georgia were automatically mistreated and lacked proper training. William Little was two when he lost his father and about three when his mother died. Mrs. Samuel Parker raised him as her own. Richard and Elizabeth Milledge lived with older siblings and were well cared for by the standards of the colony. In 1740, however, Whitefield removed the two Milledge children to the orphan house, but Oglethorpe and the other Trustees ordered Whitefield to return them to their siblings. In a similar instance the same year, he recruited Peter and Charles Tondee for Bethesda. Sixteen-year-old Peter helped build Bethesda, as he and his brother had previously been taken in by carpenter Henry Parker. The next year, the Trustees ordered Whitefield to return the orphans to their home.<sup>31</sup>

Despite this disagreement over whether Whitefield had jurisdiction over all the orphans in Georgia or even in Savannah, he wanted the orphan house to be more than a clearinghouse to ensure that each child was officially provided for. Without the stability that Bethesda could offer, some children might be well cared for, as Little, the Milledges, and the Tondees were, but others might have wound up like the hard-used German children. In taking in the German orphans, Whitefield saw himself as “freeing these

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 156, 395-397.

<sup>31</sup> Coleman and Ready, *Colonial Records of Georgia*, 20:41, 183-184. Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda*, 25, 30, 39.

children from slavery.” One of Bethesda’s hallmarks was the discipline it provided. To some degree, Whitefield patterned his orphanage on an orphan house in the nearby Saltzburger community, which he admired for its piety and “regularity.” Children would reside at Bethesda for varying lengths of time, depending in part on how quickly they could be placed in suitable situations. However long they remained at the orphan home, Whitefield’s scheme was for the children of the deceased poor in Georgia to have a disciplined home where they “are taught to labour for the meat which perisheth, yet they are continually reminded to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness,” something he feared they were not learning when left to the mercies of the local magistrates. In addition to working at the home, the children would receive education in matters both temporal and spiritual. Whitefield’s friend James Habersham, who had come to the colony as a schoolmaster, soon became the virtual headmaster of the new orphan school, which Whitefield had named Bethesda, meaning “house of mercy.”<sup>32</sup>

Whitefield returned to England between deciding to open Bethesda and actually doing so. He received his ordination so that he could return to Savannah as a priest rather than a deacon. Incidentally, this pattern of short sojourns interrupted by frequent travel would mark George Whitefield’s life and ministry until the end. While in London in 1739, Whitefield approached the Trustees and formally requested a 500-acre allotment to be used for the orphan home. Bethesda was to be about ten miles from Savannah in order to spare the children any unwholesome influences of city living. By obtaining the largest

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<sup>32</sup> George Whitefield, *An account of money received and disbursed for the orphan-house in Georgia* (London: T. Cooper, 1741), 2 <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ae=CY106184416&srcht=a&ste=14>; Whitefield, *Journals*, 159, 395-396.

available lot, Whitefield showed his intention of making the orphanage self-sustaining, at least as much as it could be. His 1741 book, *An account of money received and disbursed for the orphan-house in Georgia*, lists 200 hogs and 100 head of cattle among Bethesda's assets. He also mentioned eighty adults affiliated with the school. Some of these people were permanent members of the Bethesda community. Others were "labourers and monthly hired servants," who may have helped to clear the land and build the house and other buildings Whitefield planned for the property.<sup>33</sup>

His *account* also mentions some of the work the children did. In addition to assisting with farm labor, several of the boys apprenticed with tradesmen. Whitefield wrote that he sent a boy to work with a carpenter and one with a bricklayer before he left Savannah the first time. These two seem to have been the Tondee brothers. His claim to have aided them rings hollow to those aware that they had started their apprenticeships before living at the school, but it still would have impressed the orphanage's backers. Additionally, Bethesda's large staff provided new professionals with whom boys could serve apprenticeships. Specifically, one boy worked with the school's surgeon and two with the staff tailor. Another boy learned weaving on Bethesda's loom (Whitefield's records do not mention a weaver, so this last boy may not have served a formal apprenticeship). Whitefield does not mention any apprenticeships for the girls under his care, but he does state that they learned knitting, cleaning, sewing, and other domestic skills. Such training would suit them for domestic employment or to run their own future households.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Whitefield, *Journals*, 395. Whitefield, *An account*, 1-5.

<sup>34</sup> Whitefield, *An account*, 1-2.



Whitefield's obvious intention in writing and publishing the book was to account for the funds that he had received on loan and as gifts for the orphanage. During his frequent absences, Whitefield preached sermons about the orphan home and collected offerings as well as loans for the orphanage. His audiences may have wondered why he constantly asked for funds. Within his optimistic portrayal of Bethesda, Whitefield laments debt on behalf of the orphan school. Despite their industriousness, cultivating sufficient land to support the school was "impracticable without a few Negroes." He may have meant for his published account to justify his soliciting donations, but his comment about the need for Negroes was more than a line excusing the orphanage's ongoing need for funds. Rather, it promoted his sincere belief that legalizing slavery would help the orphan home and the colony. His account also served as a marketing piece for Bethesda.<sup>35</sup>

That the eighty workers at Bethesda in 1741 were not all permanent staff does not negate the school's impact on Savannah's finances. Whitefield did not import his own work crew, so the building of the campus, at least, was a boon to the local economy. For most of 1740, Savannah was "almost wholly supported by the money expended in the building of the orphan house," including more than sixty tradesmen: sawyers, carpenters, bricklayers, plasterers, and other workers. James Habersham would later use his skills as a merchant to further enhance Savannah's financial situation.<sup>36</sup>

Bethesda proper began with the ceremonial laying of the first brick in March of 1740, yet the orphan house as Whitefield's "family" had begun before Whitefield even

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<sup>35</sup> Just a few examples are in Whitefield, *Journals*, 200, 201, 263, 395; *An account*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Whitefield, *An account*, 4. Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda*, 45-46.

returned from his ordination in London. His account books indicate that seventeen were “on board in Mr. Whitefield’s family,” eleven of whose passage he paid out of the orphan home collections. Significantly, the word “family” was his choice, based on the concept of patriarchy that was part of the social fabric of England and its colonies for most of the eighteenth century. A man could be head of his household, including family and servants, just as the king was head of the Commonwealth. Perhaps his father’s death when Whitefield himself was only two motivated him to provide a family for the fatherless. Whitefield experienced patriarchal authority as an Oxford student and Church of England minister. In his mid-twenties, he was a successful and already well-known evangelist and presented himself as the father figure that he wanted people to believe that he was—especially in light of the hundreds of pounds sterling that he had collected from audiences in both Britain and the colonies.<sup>37</sup>

On his way back to Savannah, he conducted the American preaching tour in which he formed a relationship with the skeptical Ben Franklin. He also convinced Philadelphia merchant Robert Bolton to allow his daughters to attend school at the as-yet-unbuilt orphan home. Sixteen-year-old Mary Bolton married James Habersham by the end of the year. Additionally, Whitefield brought Jonathan Barber, a Congregationalist minister, to be the spiritual director of Bethesda. In Whitefield’s absence, James Habersham had filled the roles of spiritual leader and educational guide for the home.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda*, 28. Whitefield, *An account*, 26. Frank Lambert, *James Habersham: Loyalty, Politics, and Commerce in Colonial Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005) 39.

<sup>38</sup> Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda*, 16-18. Lambert, *James Habersham*, 40-42.

## SECTION 6

### JAMES HABERSHAM

James Habersham came to Georgia with Whitefield on his 1738 “visit.” Unlike his mentor, Habersham never formally trained for the ministry. Instead, he had trained as a merchant’s apprentice. Much of his Latin education came from Whitefield on board ship, as Habersham was to be a schoolmaster as well as Whitefield’s assistant in Georgia. Also unlike Whitefield, Habersham remained in Georgia, eventually becoming one of the leading citizens of England’s southernmost mainland colony.<sup>39</sup>

Habersham and Whitefield met in the 1730s through Whitefield’s early preaching in London. When Habersham converted to the Methodist group of the Anglican Church, he did so with zeal, joining Whitefield’s condemnation of what they assumed were unregenerate clergy. James Habersham and George Whitefield maintained a close friendship and cordial working relationship until the evangelist’s death in 1770.<sup>40</sup>

The success of Bethesda as an institution has as much to do with Habersham’s efforts as with Whitefield’s. The minister may have acted the father figure between his long journeys elsewhere, but Habersham had his hands deep in the institution’s day-by-day operations. While Whitefield served the orphan home by collecting money during his

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<sup>39</sup> Lambert, *James Habersham*, 14-23. Whitefield, *Journals*, 104, 110.

<sup>40</sup> Lambert, *James Habersham*, 23-24.

evangelistic trips, Habersham had to deal with creditors while waiting for those funds to come in.

Habersham's early days in Georgia met with mixed response. Although colony secretary William Stephens commended his pre-Bethesda teaching, Habersham fought with other clergy. The Trustees sent William Norris to Savannah to replace Whitefield during his first absence. Habersham condemned Norris's doctrine as false. Habersham's zeal kept him from recognizing the validity of the very clergyman the Trustees had sent. William Stephens feared that factions forming would split the previously tolerant colony on religious lines. Instead, establishing the orphan house on solid footing soon preoccupied Habersham.<sup>41</sup>

While Whitefield obtained the official grant from the Trustees, Habersham selected the lot and began the work of clearing the land. He oversaw the secular needs of the Bethesda community, from food and other supplies to training and apprenticeships for the orphans. In 1740 Habersham married Mary Bolton, one of the teenage girls Whitefield had brought from Philadelphia. Until he stopped overseeing Bethesda in 1744, Habersham had to deal with the lack of necessary goods available in Savannah, his inability to pay for the goods they did receive while waiting for Whitefield's collections to arrive, and the orphanage's failure to sustain itself even with 500 acres and close to 100 able bodies to work the land. Habersham became a proponent of legalizing slavery in Georgia.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 34-35. Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> Trustee meeting minutes, Candler, *Colonial Records of Georgia*, 1:349-350. Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda*, 20-21. Lambert, *James Habersham*, 42, 45-51.

For his part, Habersham was not nearly as vocal as Whitefield in regards to legalizing slavery. He did not petition the Trustees or otherwise join forces with the Malcontents. Instead, he worked hard at making Bethesda self-sufficient, a seemingly impossible task. Despite setbacks, he tried various means to provide for the school's financial means. He and Whitefield originally tried growing and processing cotton, but they stopped when the Trustees told them to cease due to conflict with the Navigation Acts. Habersham then made semi-successful attempts at sericulture and viticulture, both in keeping with the Trustees' plans for the colony. Even with the aid of the unpaid orphans, all the hard work was not sufficient to support the Bethesda community. If nothing else, James Habersham's efforts showed that the Malcontents were right—Georgia could not succeed unless the Trustees changed their plan for the colony.<sup>43</sup>

Part of the colony's difficulties came from their inability to receive large ships from overseas. Everything they imported came from England via Charleston, arriving in Savannah by smaller boats. The extra leg of the trip added further charges, making the cost of buying goods prohibitive for colonists. In 1743 James Habersham began a merchant enterprise, Harris & Habersham, which lasted until 1748. In establishing his firm, Habersham parlayed his earlier training into a financial opportunity for himself that also benefited Bethesda. Originally, part of the business's proceeds went back to the school, and Habersham was able to supply the orphanage's needs better by acting as merchant as well as customer than he had been able to do when relying on others to

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<sup>43</sup> Lambert, *James Habersham*, 45-51.

provide the orphan home's material needs. With the gains from his business, Habersham invested in other merchant businesses and eventually bought a plantation.<sup>44</sup>

Habersham showed by example all the arguments of the Malcontents. First, he tried diligently yet unsuccessfully to support Bethesda according to the Georgia plan. Because of their relationship with the Bryans in nearby Charleston, Habersham and Whitefield acquired a 640-acre plantation in South Carolina. Unlike Bethesda, this plantation did employ enslaved laborers. Whereas Harris & Habersham had initially supported the orphan home, the South Carolina plantation ultimately allowed Bethesda to succeed financially. Although its leaders kept the orphanage in Georgia, the South Carolina plantation endeavor supported the Malcontents' claim that colonists had to flee Georgia in order to succeed.<sup>45</sup>

Due in large part to his financial success and the aid he gave the colony through business, James Habersham grew to be a prominent and respected member of Georgia society. In 1747 he wrote an economic development plan for the colony, which the Trustees took seriously. Habersham did not blame the colony's problems on the Trustees, but rather on various market conditions. How could small-farm Georgia ever compete with the likes of South Carolina, which could produce large quantities for export to a ready market? One of the key considerations of his plan was the need for Georgia to produce high volumes of desirable merchandise at low cost. He suggested that slavery was the best means of obtaining the desired end—a financially viable and stable colony. Recognizing the Trustees' continued stance against permitting slavery, he allowed that

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 51-80.

<sup>45</sup> Gally, *Origins of Slaveholders' Paternalism*, 379-380.

indentured servants might work out, but the previous fifteen years of failure did not offer much hope in that regard. Habersham wrote of his disappointment that yet again the Trustees had refused to legalize “the use of Negroes, and was sorry to hear they had wrote so warmly against [allowing] them.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Lambert, *James Habersham*, 76-79.

## SECTION 7

### THE TRUSTEES RELENT: LEGALIZED SLAVERY

The Trustees' 1750 act to legalize slavery may simply have extended "an official imprimatur to a reality that already existed."<sup>47</sup> Occurrences of extralegal slavery in the 1740s possibly wore down the Trustees' resistance. They lauded Augusta as a flourishing example of what Georgia settlement should look like, yet the Malcontents attributed Augusta's success to the presence of at least one hundred slaves brought across the Savannah River from South Carolina.<sup>48</sup> In January of 1740, colonist Samuel Davison wrote to Lord Egmont that he had "seized 2 Negroes pursuant to the Act against employing them in the Colony, for which he received no reward."<sup>49</sup> Not only were colonists aware of the law regarding slaves, but Egmont's journal does not indicate that either he or Davison was surprised at the apprehension of the two contraband workers. George Whitefield wrote to a friend in 1745, "I find there will be no notice taken of Negroes at all" in Georgia. In the same letter he wrote, "if you think proper...to give me a Negroe, I will venture to keep him..." indicating his own willingness to break the law.

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<sup>47</sup> Karen Bell, "Atlantic Slave Trade to Savannah," in *The New Georgia Encyclopedia* (Georgia Humanities Council, September 19, 2002) <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-686>.

<sup>48</sup> Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 41.

<sup>49</sup> Percival, *Journal*, in *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 5:283-284.



Whether he did procure a slave in Georgia at that time is not known. He wrote this letter from Bethesda, so he presumably had some basis for his belief that the authorities would take “no notice.”<sup>50</sup> The prevalence of using illegal slaves in Georgia is difficult, if not impossible, to determine.

By their May 16, 1749, meeting, the Trustees all but admitted defeat. A year before, colony president William Stephens and his assistants had written a letter that corroborated the reports of Whitefield and the Malcontents. The Trustees recorded in their minutes:

...Abundance of people had applied to them for grants of land in Georgia, and numbers of Negro’s had been introduced into the Province; and that they had taken methods to drive the said Negro’s out of the Province but ineffectually, and that any further attempts to put the Act against Negro’s in execution would in their apprehension dispeople the Colony; and giving reasons why they hoped the Trustees might be induced to permit them in the Province under restrictions and regulations”

Likewise, William Stephens submitted a petition signed by “a great number” of Georgia’s inhabitants, stating the same as the above-mentioned letter. As a direct result, the Trustees wrote:

That it is the opinion of this Board that a petition be presented to his Majesty in council that *The Act for*

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<sup>50</sup> George Whitefield, “Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield”, ed. John W. Christie, *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 32, no. 2 (June 1954): 76-77.

*rendering the Colony of Georgia more defensible by prohibiting the Imporation and Use of black Slaves or Negro's into the same, which was made in the Year of our Lord 1735, be repealed.*

The legislation passed in 1750, which then legalized slavery in the colony of Georgia beginning January 1, 1751.<sup>51</sup>

The Trustees' willingness to consider legalizing slavery began several years before William Stephens's letters in support of the change. In March of 1741, some of the Trustees saw Carolina merchant Mr. Crockat at the Castle Tavern in London, and Egmont recorded Crockat's comments in his journal. Contrary to what some people in Georgia thought, the Trustees were actively interested in their colony. Among Crockat's observations, Egmont wrote:

That the inhabitants of Georgia must have Negroes, not as in Carolina (where they have too many, in so much that they have past a law against introducing more into Charlestown) but at a moderate allowance of 4 to one family of whites...I said Negroes might cut the throats of our people and run to the Spaniards: He replied if Negroes are well used, they never run...He said that where there are Negroes, a white Man despises to work, saying, *what, will you have me a slave & work like a Negroe?* Nevertheless, if

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<sup>51</sup> Candler, *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 1:530-531.

such white man had Negroes of his own, he would work in  
the field with them...

This account takes over three pages in Egmont's printed journal. This excerpt is just a sample of the exchange he recorded, which shows the arguments on both sides of the issue. It also shows the degree to which Egmont engaged with Crockat in discussing the topic, yet he merely reported rather than drawing a final conclusion on the advisability of legalizing slavery at that time.<sup>52</sup>

The slave code enacted in 1751 had some similarities to the laws proposed by the Malcontents years earlier, as all parties in Georgia wanted limited slavery. Early proponents of legalizing slavery in the colony certainly were aware of the dangers of slaves running to the Spanish in St. Augustine. When Oglethorpe defeated the Spanish at the Battle of Bloody Marsh in 1742, that victory lessened the seeming danger of allowing slaves within Georgia. Memory of the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739 remained, however, and all parties recognized the need for limits to the number of slaves allowed. Trustees imposed a ratio—four adult male slaves to every adult male white within Georgia. Additionally, one female slave was required for every four males in order to provide workers for Georgia's attempts at silk cultivation. The law required quarantine for newly arrived Africans as a means to reduce contagious outbreaks. One of the longstanding objections to legalizing slavery had been the need to provide employment for poor whites. As the Malcontents had originally proposed, the Trustees restricted

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<sup>52</sup> Percival, *Journal*, in *Colonial Records of Georgia*, 5:475-478.

enslaved workers to certain types of employment. Only coopers and sawyers could take enslaved apprentices. Otherwise, male slaves were restricted to farm labor.<sup>53</sup>

As they prepared to hand the colony back to the British government at the end of their governance, the Trustees held on to their humanitarian goals for Georgia, even in devising their slave code. The 1750 Repealing Act prohibited whites from “endangering the limb of a Negroe or Black” and from murdering a slave. The act forbade marriage across the color line, mandating punishment for the white participant but not mentioning any retribution for the black participant. Most interestingly, the law condemned anyone who did “not permit or even oblige his or their Negroe...to attend at some time on the Lords Day for instruction in the Christian religion...” For most infractions, the perpetrator was subject to fining and even corporal punishment. In the case of murdering a black person, the culprit was subject to the laws of Great Britain.<sup>54</sup>

In contrast, South Carolina’s 1740 slave code allowed whites convicted of murdering slaves to pay heavy fines rather than face the death penalty. Negroes accused of capital crimes were permitted a trial, but South Carolina justices had a lot of leeway in interpreting the code. A slave who did “willfully and maliciously set fire to, burn or destroy any sack of rice, corn or other grain” was guilty of a felony and could be executed. The South Carolina law required slave owners to give their workers Sundays off and forbade workdays longer than fifteen hours in the summer months, but both these regulations allowed for exceptions. The slave code nowhere suggests that masters should provide religious instruction for their slaves or care for them beyond absolute necessity.

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<sup>53</sup> Candler, *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 1: 56-62.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* See also Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 112-117.

The Georgia Trustees' slave code lasted until 1755, at which point the colony adopted a new code more similar to South Carolina's.<sup>55</sup>

Whether George Whitefield had ever been opposed to slavery is debatable. He certainly spoke out in favor of treating slaves well, relatively speaking, particularly in regards to their spiritual wellbeing. Once the law permitted slavery in Georgia, Bethesda acquired its share of slaves, including children. Whitefield made sure that they all were baptized. Boys learned reading and writing and girls learned needlework. Unfortunately, the orphan school's earliest records no longer exist. Any indication of how Bethesda slaves fared comes from elsewhere, such as Whitefield's personal papers. Whether his intentions regarding slaves succeeded during his frequent absences or after his death in 1770 is not clear.<sup>56</sup>

Whitefield's friend and associate James Habersham remained in Georgia. After his initial success as a merchant, he purchased land and rose in importance in the colony. His 1747 economic development plan put him squarely in the Trustees' sight. In 1749

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<sup>55</sup> 1740 *South Carolina Slave Code*. Acts of the South Carolina General Assembly, 1740 # 670 in *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, ed. David J. McCord (Columbia, SC: A.S. Johnston, 1840) 7:397.

Accessed at <http://www.teachingushistory.org/pdfs/Transcriptionof1740SlaveCodes.pdf>.

Betty Wood, "Slavery in Colonial Georgia," in *The New Georgia Encyclopedia* (Georgia Humanities Council, September 19, 2002) <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?path=/HistoryArchaeology/ColonialEraTrusteePeriod/Topics-4&id=h-685>.

<sup>56</sup> Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda*, 74-75. Whitefield's South Carolina plantation, which he purchased to support Bethesda, would be a helpful point of reference to understand his long-term treatment of slaves. In researching this paper, any references to that plantation were minimal and provided no information on potential sources.

they made him an assistant, one of the colony's magistrates. The next year, he became the colony's secretary. Even after the Trustee period, he received an appointment to Georgia's Council, eventually becoming president. He even acted as governor during royal Governor James Wright's absence in 1771 and 1772. Through the years of legalized slavery, Habersham repeatedly increased his holdings in land and slaves—the two went hand-in-hand. The more acres a man wanted, the more slaves he needed to prove that he could cultivate the land. By the 1770s he had acquired 200 slaves and 10,000 acres on multiple plantations. Despite his status and wealth, he remained committed to respecting his slaves' humanity. Habersham is one of the best examples of early paternalism. Biographers reference his concern for his slaves' physical and spiritual welfare. He saw his slaves as part of his family and chose overseers who would show the same regard for enslaved workers as he did.<sup>57</sup>

When other slave owners did not even bother to pay lip service to the humanitarian ideals of Georgia's first slave code (notwithstanding the apparent contradiction), evangelicals pursued their own version of ideal paternal slaveholding: "The reform of slavery was no longer a goal to be pursued in a public forum but rather was to be conducted privately on plantations and in the churches where the proceedings

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<sup>57</sup> Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 195. Frank Lambert, *James Habersham*, 108-126. Gally, "Origins of Slaveholders' Paternalism," 389. Alan Gally ties Habersham's paternalism with that of the Bryan family in South Carolina and eventually Georgia. He contends that these families' evangelical faith was the source of their paternal view of plantation life and slavery. They were the true adherents to the kinder, gentler slavery that the Trustees enacted in 1750.

might be scrutinized and controlled.”<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, this relatively humanitarian ideal did not prevent slaveholders from seeing black workers as property to be exploited. Habersham’s slaves lived “lives of endless toil” by building the systems of canals, ditches, and dams that made rice cultivation possible. He felt free to dispose of slaves in the usual ways, through bequests and selling.<sup>59</sup>

Ultimately, compound factors and a complex array of actors prompted the Trustees’ decision to finally legalize slavery in Georgia. The previous literature has neglected the roles that James Habersham and George Whitefield played in the process. Through various means, these two men influenced the Trustees. Whitefield, an irritant who enjoyed popular support and remained connected to Georgia throughout his life, was not silent on the subject of the perceived need for legalized slavery in the colony. Certainly the Trustees heard him. Through his travels and publications, he also reached others who may have also influenced the Trustees. James Habersham, by contrast, showed by example how the Georgia plan did not work without amendment. His economic development plan reached the Trustees just a couple years before they considered a slave code for the colony.

Likewise, the Malcontents and Thomas Stephens had an impact through petitions and lobbying. Johann Martin Bolzius and the Salzburgers supported the original plan, so the Trustees sought his opinion when creating the slave code. The Trustees, in all their well-preserved records, never documented exactly why or at what precise point they changed their collective mind about allowing slavery within Georgia’s borders.

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<sup>58</sup> Galloway, “Origins of Slaveholders’ Paternalism,” 389.

<sup>59</sup> Lambert, *James Habersham*, 117.

Therefore, the scholarship needs to include George Whitefield, James Habersham, and Bethesda orphan home, all of whom were inextricably linked with the life of the colony. They did not merely have opinions regarding a need for slavery, but their thoughts on the subject were material in the decision to legalize slavery at the end of the Trustee period.



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