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DAVID BRAINERD

*The Making Of  
An American Evangelical Icon*

JOHN A. GRIGG



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# **The Lives of David Brainerd**

The Making of an American  
Evangelical Icon

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS  
2009

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further  
Oxford University's objective of excellence  
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Oxford New York

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Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi

New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece

Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.

198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Grigg, John A.

The lives of David Brainerd : the making of an American evangelical icon / John A. Grigg.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-537237-3

1. Brainerd, David, 1718–1747. 2. Missionaries—East (U.S.)—Biography.

3. Mohegan Indians—Missions. 4. Delaware Indians—Missions. I. Title.

E99.M83B734 2009

266'.51092—dc22 2009000871

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

*To my parents, Barry Charles Grigg and Deidre Grigg,  
and in memory of David Charles Grigg (1964–2008)*

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## Acknowledgments

Since there is no single repository for David Brainerd's documents, my research for this book has enabled me to meet a number of wonderful folks at archives in the United States and Scotland. I would like to specifically thank Will Garrison and the staff of the Mission House in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, who were kind enough to provide me with access to the leaf from David Brainerd's journal in their possession as did Sylvie Merian and her staff at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City. The Reverend Evans Sealand went to great lengths to make available to me eighteenth-century records of the Congregational Church in Connecticut. Martha Smalley at the Yale Divinity School Library was particularly gracious in allowing me to transcribe David Brainerd's manuscript sermon the day before the manuscript collection was closed for remodeling. Diana Yount and Jeffrey Brigham provided access to the papers of Jonathan Edwards held in the Trask Library at the Andover-Newton Theological Seminary. Danelle Moon and the staff at the Yale Archives allowed me to peruse the early records of Yale College, and Bette Dybick did the same with respect to the town records of Haddam, Connecticut. James Lewis, formerly at the New Jersey Historical Society, was most accommodating to my requests. I would also like to thank the archivists, assistants, and other staff members at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, New-York Historical Society, Rare Book Department of the Library of Congress, Peabody-Essex Library, Yale Divinity School Library, Rare Books and Special Collections at the Princeton Library, Princeton Theological Seminary Library, Connecticut State Library, Connecticut Historical Society, National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh University Special Collections, Spencer Library at the University of Kansas, New College Library



at the Edinburgh Divinity School, National Library of Scotland, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, American Antiquarian Society, Moravian Archives, and Presbyterian Historical Society. My thanks also to the staffs in the town clerks' offices at Durham and East Haddam, Connecticut. I also appreciate the efforts of Patrick Frazier and Cindy Jungenberg, who provided a translation of one of the Moravian documents.

I never ceased to be amazed at the ability of interlibrary loan (ILL) offices to track down almost anything a historian might need, and I express my gratitude to the ILL offices at the University of Kansas and Johnson County Community College and particularly to Gerry Randall at Hampden-Sydney College and John Schneiderman at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

A somewhat different version of chapter 4 first appeared at *History Compass* while an extended analysis of Brainerd's ordination sermon was published by the *New England Quarterly*. Thanks to both publications for permission to use the material here. Thanks also to Elizabeth Malloy of the Haddam Historical Society for the photo of the Brainerd home site, Stan Sherer for the photo of Brainerd's grave, and Marv Barton for the maps.

My thanks to the participants in the Early Modern Seminar at the University of Kansas for comments on an earlier version of chapter 3, to Dr. Ray Hiner for his helpful suggestions when this book was in its dissertation incarnation, and to the members of FLEA—the Fall Line Early Americanists—for comments on a much earlier version of chapter 1. My sincere appreciation also to Doug Winiarski for his comments on another version of chapter 1 as well as further input along the way, which helped me to conceptualize Brainerd's place in the revivals of the 1740s.

As I grappled with the best way to analyze Brainerd's life, I received invaluable encouragement and input from David Silverman, Jim Rohrer, Dan Richter, Mendy Gladden, Fredrika Teute, and Caleb Maskell. I also appreciate the support and encouragement of my colleagues, first at Hampden-Sydney College and then at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. The former institution provided funds for research while the latter provided funds for various tasks associated with finishing the manuscript for publication.

My thanks also to everyone at Oxford, especially Theo Calderara, Paul Hobson, Merryl Sloane, and Justin Tackett for all their support and wisdom. I am also grateful for the input from two anonymous readers at Oxford, whose suggestions helped me to produce a greatly improved final version. Appreciation also to Mary Brooks for the indexing.

My final and most important thanks go to Peter Mancall, advisor and mentor extraordinaire. He was co-leader of my first-ever grad school seminar and has continued to provide support and encouragement along the way. I remember standing at the door to his office when I first told him I was thinking of writing my dissertation on a guy he probably hadn't heard about called David Brainerd. The enthusiasm was immediate, infectious, and continual. (I learned later, to my chagrin, that Peter had mentioned Brainerd several times in his first book,

which I at the time had not read.) He also made suggestions on the final format and has, thus, been involved in the whole process.

Despite all this input, any mistakes are my responsibility.

Last, in the spirit of no man being an island, my thanks to some folks who had little, if anything, to do with the book, but who kept me sane and grounded as a person during this project: the Straw Dogs from KU—the best part of grad school; my friends from two church homes, the Vineyard Fellowships in Overland Park and Omaha; and the Upstream Brewery crowd in Omaha.

I started making revisions for the final version in the fall of 2007 and finished in the summer of 2008. Along the way, I found time to watch some college sports, and my final thanks—completely unrelated to the book—go to Mark Mangino, Bill Self, Mario Chalmers, and the rest of the Jayhawks, for the greatest year ever.

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**The Lives of David Brainerd**

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## Introduction

David Brainerd is one of the more ubiquitous figures in American colonial history. Scenarios from his life appear in academic works that focus on religion, literary studies, missions, colonial expansion, and theology.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, such studies cast Brainerd in one of two roles. In the first, he serves as an example of the conflict and division caused by religious revival in 1740s Connecticut. Responding to some of the more radical preachers, Brainerd challenges the conservative establishment, which reacts by expelling him from Yale, thus putting an end to his goal of becoming a typical Connecticut minister. In his second role, Brainerd has already been expelled from Yale. With his dreams in tatters, he is now compelled to serve as a missionary among Native Americans. Although diligent and self-sacrificial, Brainerd the missionary is generally ineffective, achieving little more than an early death. Since most scholars utilize Brainerd as an example of a broader argument, presenting such snapshots of his life makes a great deal of sense. However, these vignettes have two tendencies which obscure a more complete understanding of Brainerd. First, Brainerd's life is often irrevocably bifurcated between events that precede the expulsion and those that follow it, and second, he is understood only within the context either of the Great Awakening or of Indian missions. Because of this, the bulk of his life, the first twenty years or so, is erased, effectively cutting Brainerd loose from the culture in which he grew up. Any sense of continuity, of heritage, disappears and Brainerd becomes a fragmented abstraction, an example of discrete aspects of colonial America.

It is a central theme of this book that David Brainerd can be properly understood only by reconnecting these fragments into an integrated account and by



restoring the abstraction to its proper context. To be sure, there are difficulties attending such an effort. The principal surviving autobiographical sources themselves tend to abstract and fragment Brainerd's life. All three of these sources were written—or constructed—to make a specific point, and so they lack any real context or depth. Brainerd moves across the pages of these accounts almost unencumbered by external events and without any real explanation of his decisions.<sup>2</sup>

Given the limitations of these sources, it is pertinent to ask whether it is actually possible to reconstitute Brainerd's life beyond the outlines that emerge from the autobiographical accounts. The answer to this is a qualified yes. Some of the context of Brainerd's life can be gleaned from a handful of letters, official records, and other accounts which have survived. More important, a greater understanding of David Brainerd can be developed by making use of the increasingly nuanced interpretation of colonial America that is emerging from more recent scholarship. In particular, insight into Brainerd's life is enhanced by the work of those scholars who have developed multifaceted interpretations of the period in contrast to earlier either-or dichotomies.

One example of this is scholarship on the religious revivals of the 1740s, which are collectively referred to as the Great Awakening. In traditional interpretations, New Lights promoted the revivals and Old Lights opposed them. This paradigm was replaced by a tripartite interpretation of the revivals, which divided the pro-revival forces into moderate revivalists and radicals. In this model, the conflict between moderate revivalists and radicals was often more intense than that between pro- and anti-revival forces.<sup>3</sup> More recently, even this tripartite model has proven inadequate as scholars have demonstrated that many pro-revival ministers swerved, or at least appeared to swerve, across the moderate-radical line as circumstances and experiences changed. Gilbert Tennent tore up the tranquility of the Yale campus with his revival sermons before the excesses of lay preachers moved him to a more moderate position. Even Jonathan Edwards, doyen of the moderate wing, preached at meetings where enthusiasm was on full display, but he then abandoned such meetings to become one of the most prolific defenders of the moderate awakening and an articulate critic of enthusiastic excess.<sup>4</sup>

Even analysis of such well-known ministers does not provide a full explanation of all the strands of the revivals. Historians have demonstrated that responses were far more individualistic than previously recognized. Ministers such as John Cleaveland and Daniel Rogers forged their own models of pastoral work as they grappled to find a place in New England society. Many laypeople refused to conform to their expected role and crafted their own experiences of Christianity, which borrowed from a number of sources and incorporated various aspects of their heritage.<sup>5</sup> David Brainerd was another individual who emerged from the religious upheavals of the 1740s seeking to combine distinct subcultures, in his case the traditional stability of Connecticut culture with the radicalism of the revivals. One of the arguments of this book is that Brainerd's work as a missionary was not a separate part of his life but flowed from his efforts to blend these two subcultures.

Brainerd's life among the Indians can be understood within the multifaceted model of Christian missions being developed by a number of scholars. David Silverman, Jane T. Merritt, and Rachel Wheeler are among the scholars who have produced studies that run counter to an either-or dichotomy of missions.<sup>6</sup> By reading Brainerd's writings alongside such scholarship, a more complex man emerges. While never escaping completely the cultural and racial stereotypes with which he grew up, Brainerd did develop substantial sympathy for his Indian charges. Moreover, as a solo missionary for most of his adult life, living in the midst of Indian culture, he could not help being changed himself.<sup>7</sup> And, it is important to note, the changes which Brainerd brought about, and those which he experienced, occurred over a period of less than four years. We are left to wonder what else would have happened had he survived even another ten years.

Of course, much of what makes Brainerd such a recognizable figure in colonial America is the extraordinary legend that developed after his death. Given the theological and ministerial luminaries who were his contemporaries or near-contemporaries—Joseph Bellamy, James Davenport, Jonathan Dickinson, Gilbert Tennent, Samuel Hopkins, Nathaniel Emmons, and others—it is remarkable that Brainerd is probably the second most recognizable American religious figure of the eighteenth century, behind only Jonathan Edwards. This reputation is owed, in the first instance, to Edwards's own *Life of Brainerd*. However, the legend was continued and expanded by new versions of Brainerd's life, especially that written by John Wesley, as well as by references to the inspiration his life has offered in the diaries, letters, and promotional literature of missionaries, mission organizations, ministers, and lay Christians from the eighteenth century to the present day. Many of those who have used Brainerd's life as an example did so in order to advance personal and/or corporate agendas. As such, Brainerd was first fragmented anew, abstracted again, and finally often used as little more than a starting point to create an argument out of whole cloth.

Because of the profound impact of this legacy, the work which follows is in two broad parts. The first part, chapters 1–3, chronicles Brainerd's life. Although the chapters generally flow in chronological order, at times I have collected certain events under one heading and slightly out of order, to make Brainerd's decisions and actions easier to follow. Chapter 1 begins with the events of the Great Awakening at Yale and then traces Brainerd's life from his birth in 1718 to his arrival at Easthampton on Long Island in 1743. It was during this period that the two major strands of Brainerd's life which informed his later decisions were woven together. Chapter 2 tells of his brief work at Easthampton, his ministry at Kaunaumeeek, New York, and the first year of his work in the Delaware Valley. In addition to the details of Brainerd's activities, I seek to explain his final decision to forgo the traditional work of a minister in favor of the greater freedom available to him in the work among the Indians. This chapter also examines the important influence that his growing role as a revival minister among the Presbyterian churches of the middle colonies had on his work with the Indians. The third chapter examines Brainerd's life from his arrival in New Jersey in 1745 to his death in Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1747. Since this was the period

during which he witnessed numbers of Indian conversions, this chapter also examines cultural reasons for these conversions and the way in which his growing congregation began to affect Brainerd's attitudes both toward Indians and toward other colonists.

There are some issues which I do not explore in great detail. In some cases, this is because my focus is on the way in which Brainerd interacted with the society in which he lived. Thus, for example, I eschew any detailed examination of Brainerd's well-documented melancholy.<sup>8</sup> In other cases, the limitation of the sources makes in-depth interpretation of some of Brainerd's attitudes impossible; in particular, little more than a cursory conclusion about his attitude toward issues of gender can be made.

The second section of the book, chapters 4–6, examines various aspects of Brainerd's legacy. Because of the importance of Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley themselves, and because of the impact of their versions of Brainerd's life, I devote a separate chapter to each man. Although I pay some attention to the editorial work of the two men, since it has been treated in detail elsewhere, I am more concerned with why each of them published their versions of Brainerd's life when they did.<sup>9</sup> The final chapter consists of several thumbnail sketches of Brainerd's legacy at certain points: the birth of modern Protestant missions in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the development of missions in the United States in the antebellum period; the student mission movement roughly in the period 1880–1914. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of Brainerd's ongoing impact on evangelical Protestantism in the United States since 1945.

Brainerd's life has offered inspiration to Christians for over 250 years. This study endeavors to demonstrate that it can also offer insight to historians.

# 1

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## A Child of Two Worlds

It is only about thirty miles from New Haven, Connecticut, to the small town of Haddam nestled on the banks of the Connecticut River. But in the early 1740s, the cultural separation between the two was far greater than any geographical distance. Haddam was typical of many of the smaller towns located along the great river. Most of the people lived on family farms, although they were perhaps not quite as prosperous as those who lived in most other settlements in the Connecticut Valley. The town was home to a few artisans and some men who enhanced their wealth with commercial activity. It was a peaceful, stable community, not a place given to embracing practitioners of new beliefs, particularly those that might disrupt the unity of the town. In contrast, New Haven, home to Yale College, had become a place notorious for disruptions to the social order. Many of the students were determined to embrace a radical expression of their Christian faith. College authorities, used to dealing with a lack of dedication to the gospel, were now faced with a student body that declared those same authorities to be the ones not sufficiently dedicated to God.

In the late summer of 1741, as twenty-three-year-old David Brainerd returned to Yale to start his junior year, the relatively short journey from his hometown of Haddam must have seemed like a road connecting two very different worlds. In Haddam, he was but one younger son of a respected family in a town with a number of such men—a town that seemed little changed since its founding eighty years earlier. In New Haven, he was part of a small coterie of men who believed they were in the vanguard of ushering in a new and greater work of God. In the coming months and years, those two cultures would work

together in Brainerd as he fashioned a life, and ministry, that was neither one nor the other but a hybrid of the two.

## Yale Radical

Perhaps the response of conservative church leaders to the goings-on in New Haven during commencement in 1741 was best captured by Daniel Wadsworth (1704–1747), a Yale trustee and pastor of the First Church in Hartford. “Much Confusion this day at New-Haven,” he wrote, “and at night the most strange management and a pretence of religion that ever I saw.” Indeed, there was confusion for many during that week and in the tumultuous period both preceding and following it. But for those whom Wadsworth would have perceived as the perpetrators of this confusion, men like Joseph Bellamy (1719–1790), James Davenport (1716–1757), Benjamin Pomeroy (1704–1784), Jedidiah Mills (1697–1776), and Eleazar Wheelock (1711–1779), there was no confusion. In fact, supporters of the revival sweeping the colony saw the world with crystal clarity. True religion was awakening, false teachers were being exposed, and tumult was to be expected when God was at work. Had not Christ himself warned his disciples: “think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword”?<sup>1</sup>

The men who spearheaded the revivals believed not only that they were doing God’s work, but that the awakening of religion was itself an answer to the concerns of many ministers in the British Atlantic world in the decades prior to 1740. For years, Protestant clergy had decried what they saw as a decline in true religion. As early as 1700, Samuel Willard (1640–1707) had cautioned that, while there was a “*Form of Godliness* among us,” there was “too much of a general denying of the power of it.” Believing that earlier efforts to effect a civil transformation of society had failed, many ministers began to stress the need for revival—the sovereign pouring out of God’s grace and spirit on a people. More and more clergy urged their audiences to move beyond intellectual assent to the Christian faith and to experience conversion as a personal, life-changing event. In New Jersey, Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764) warned readers that, while they had “often heard [their] Danger describ’d,” they were “not awaken’d yet.” For many ministers, the fault lay not so much with the people as with the clergy, who were failing to provide the right kind of preaching. Solomon Stoddard (1643–1729) had declared that “there is a great deal of Preaching that doth not much Promote [conversion], but is an hindrance to it.” While only God could bring revival, ministers had a responsibility to conduct what historian Michael Crawford has described as a “conversionist, evangelical, Gospel ministry.” In 1717, Solomon Stoddard had declared that the duty of ministers included making sure that “a good number of the People [were] Savingly Converted.” Likewise, William Williams insisted that ministers were not just to take care of those already part of the church but also to be “Labourers in God’s Harvest” and “not to Loyer.”<sup>2</sup>

By the 1720s, those in the British Atlantic world anxiously awaiting revival began to hear reports which suggested that God’s spirit was moving. In Teschen

in Upper Silesia, the preaching of Johann Steinmetz attracted huge crowds every Sunday. From Teschen, preachers spread revival through Silesia—where, decades earlier, children had conducted open-air prayer meetings seeking a restoration of Protestant freedoms—then into the Habsburg lands of Bohemia and Moravia. In 1731, when the Prussians offered a home to Salzburg Protestants expelled by the Habsburgs, many continental Protestants construed this as a miraculous rescue brought about by the hand of God. The event was widely reported in Protestant literature as a sign that God was imparting his spirit to the world in new ways. Many such reports were initially spread by the pietists headquartered in Halle, and pietism itself became a powerful influence on revival-oriented ministers throughout the Protestant world. The teachings of pietist leaders such as August Francke and Philipp Jakob Spener were widely read. Their emphasis on personal conversion, an experiential knowledge of God, and the importance of private meetings between pastors and laity influenced pro-revivalists in England, Scotland, and Wales. Pietist writings also crossed the Atlantic—Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards were two of the New England clergy influenced by pietist teachings.<sup>3</sup>

Occasionally, ministers too crossed the Atlantic. The preaching of East Friesland émigré Theodorus Frelinghuysen (c. 1692–c. 1747) sparked local revivals in New Jersey in the 1720s. Combining strong Calvinism with pietist practice, Frelinghuysen also exuded the appeal to the heart that was central to the growing evangelicalism. In addition, he was willing both to itinerate and to challenge the spirituality of other ministers. Significant numbers of people in New Jersey were converted under Frelinghuysen's ministry, and he became close friends with the Tennent family of preachers. The Tennents began preaching the new birth conversion in various parts of the colony in the 1730s, and a series of moderate local revivals took place in Gilbert Tennent's church at New Brunswick and William Tennent's at Freehold. At roughly the same time, revival broke out in Jonathan Edwards's church in Northampton, Massachusetts, and spread up and down the Connecticut Valley. Although such local awakenings were not uncommon, Edwards transformed the way people interpreted them when he connected events in Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey and argued that they were part of a single event brought about by the sovereignty of God. Edwards's account *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* became a key document in inspiring revivalists in England, Scotland, Wales, and some of the German states.<sup>4</sup>

Although the American events quickly dissipated, there were glimmers of hope as word came of new revivals in Wales in 1735; in Bern, Switzerland, in 1735 and 1736; and among Polish speakers in parts of Prussia in 1736. Excitement among revivalists grew as accounts of the ministry of George Whitefield (1714–1770) began to spread. Whitefield had experienced a dramatic conversion and emphasized the need for this spiritual transformation in his preaching. Beginning in 1737, he drew large crowds to churches throughout England. After a three-month sojourn in Georgia, he returned to England and, in February 1739, gave his first outdoor sermon, believing that this “field preaching” would

both draw large crowds and give him greater independence in the conduct of his ministry. Revival supporters in Britain and America eagerly devoured reports of Whitefield's ministry.<sup>5</sup>

More than likely, David Brainerd was one of those who read accounts of Whitefield's success. At about the time Whitefield was laying plans to begin field preaching, Brainerd was in the midst of his own conversion experience. Brainerd's description of his conversion was compiled some years later and, although presumably accurate in its general outline, is a constructed narrative, encompassing certain tropes and concepts common to the religious culture of which Brainerd was a part. Brainerd identified Solomon Stoddard's *A Guide to Christ* as "in the hand of God... the happy means of my conversion."<sup>6</sup> By the time Brainerd wrote his narrative in the early 1740s, Stoddard, who had died more than a decade earlier, was respected by the majority of New England clergy, and it seems likely that Brainerd's account follows the Stoddardean model because that model was considered acceptable across a great deal of the evangelical spectrum.<sup>7</sup> Stoddard spent most of his life as a pastor at Northampton, Massachusetts, was a prolific author, and played a crucial role in the development of ideas on conversion and church government in New England in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. He taught that conversion was preceded by a period of spiritual preparation that involved misery, humiliation, and repentance. Conversion itself was not a gradual progression but a single moment, rooted in an experiential conviction of sin and a very real fear of hell, when God swept away the sinners' fears and sins and brought them new life.<sup>8</sup>

Stoddard believed, "God leads men through the whole course of preparation, partly by fear, and partly by hope." Both were important, for to have one without the other was to be like a ship "in danger" of being "broken to pieces." A person undergoing preparation was "subject to many affrightments, and discouraging temptations." For Stoddard, the explanation of how much preparation and knowledge were necessary for conversion was deceptively simple. For true conversion, one must "know so much as is sufficient to bring them off from trusting in their own righteousness and their own strength." This was because, as Stoddard noted elsewhere, God was "wont to shew them that righteousness don't answer the law."<sup>9</sup> As people went through their preparations, they could expect moments of false confidence, which were rooted in their own righteousness and not in God's. In one sense, preparation was to teach sinners that their own works counted for nothing. Once they firmly grasped this, conversion would follow. The Stoddardean model was one where most of the process of salvation was located in the struggles of preparation while conversion was a single moment, almost lost in the preceding details.

In keeping with Stoddard's teaching, Brainerd began the story of his conversion with what he described as "The Beginning of Thorough Conviction" when, in a moment of terror, God gave him "such a sense of my amazing danger & the wrath of God & hell, as it were, under my feet." In Brainerd's Stoddardean world, this moment of terror had the desired effect. He had such a "view of my sin and vileness" that he was "much dejected & kept much alone & wondered

how people could be so chearfull and unconcerned.” He even “grudged the birds and beasts their happyness.” The narrative was further punctuated by regular moments of holy terror. At one point, he recalled, “the Lord gave to me such a sense of my sin and danger that I feared the ground would cleave under my feet & become my grave.”<sup>10</sup> In addition, Brainerd noted the moments of false confidence or false conversion against which Stoddard had warned. At times, he was “greatly encouraged and imagined that God loved me and was in some measure pleased with me and thought I should be fully reconciled to God,” only to realize that this was “founded upon meer presumption.” Further in keeping with Stoddard’s model, he recognized that there was “no necessary connection between my prayers and the bestowment of divine mercy.” And he remembered that when he “felt any melting of heart, I hoped now the work was at most done,” only to be disappointed that it was “only the moving of the passion.”<sup>11</sup>

However, there was another narrative embedded within this orthodox account of conversion. Interlaced with the conservative Stoddardean model were recollections of moments infused with emotionalism, enthusiasm, and esoteric expression. These were usually a result of Brainerd’s inability, in his own mind, to cross over from death to life. On occasion, Solomon Stoddard was a target of Brainerd’s frustrations, since he did not “tell me anything that I could do that would bring me to Christ.” Furthermore, Brainerd wondered why, if Stoddard himself had found Christ, “he could not tell me the way.” He conceded, in a marginal note, that at the time he had these thoughts, he had not yet been “effectually and experimentally taught, that there could be no means prescribed whereby a natural man could obtain that which is supernatural.” More often, though, Brainerd’s anger was directed at God. Thus, at one time, he believed God guilty of “cruelty and injustice & thought he delighted to oppress and crush poor mortals. I thought if God was once in my place as much afraid of hell as I was he would never make souls to damn ’em.” On another occasion, he secretly wished for “another God equal in power with whom I might joyn and fight against the living God.” Brainerd “longed to pull the eternal God out of his throne and stamp him under my feet.” Sometimes, his anger was even more creative. He thought:

Adam was a fool for being scared by that sword [of the angel of God]; & me thought if I could get there, I’d venture the sword to do its work if I could but suddenly leap and catch hold of the outside twigs of the tree of life before it pierced me through, or I contrived whether I could not evade the blow of it by means of some good defensive instrument and such other fruitless contrivances.<sup>12</sup>

One of the key moments in Brainerd’s narrative came when he experienced a vision of a beautiful house against which he had been heaping rubbish and dirt. For Brainerd, the application was obvious, that he had “been heaping my devotions before God—fasting and praying and pretending and indeed really thinking that at sometimes I was aiming at his glory, when I never once intended his honour and glory but only my own happiness.” The vision was a watershed in his



conversion experience. He previously believed his efforts to be well intentioned but imperfect. Now, he came to see them as completely selfish with no intent to glorify God—the crux of the preparation period. Less than three days after this revelation, he experienced God as “a glorious divine being” and was now satisfied that “he should be God over all forever and ever.”<sup>13</sup>

The Sunday following this vision, the entire conversion process reached its culmination. That day, as he attempted to pray, “‘unspeakable glory’ seemed to open to the view and apprehension of my soul” and “a new inward apprehension or view that I had of God; such as I never had before.” For Brainerd, it was clear that God had “brought me to a hearty desire to exalt him,” and he “continued in this state of inward joy, peace and yet astonishment till near dark.” The way of salvation had “opened to me with such infinite wisdom, suitableness and excellency that I wondered I should ever think of any other way of salvation.” “This happy season,” he wrote, “was Lord’s Day 12 of July as I remember, 1739.”<sup>14</sup> Brainerd had prepared himself for, and then experienced, conversion. In the Stoddardean tradition, it was chronologically specific, memorable, and definitive. But, while orthodox in its trajectory, it was also shot through with esoteric events and emotional aspects that would be associated with the more extreme wing of the coming revival.

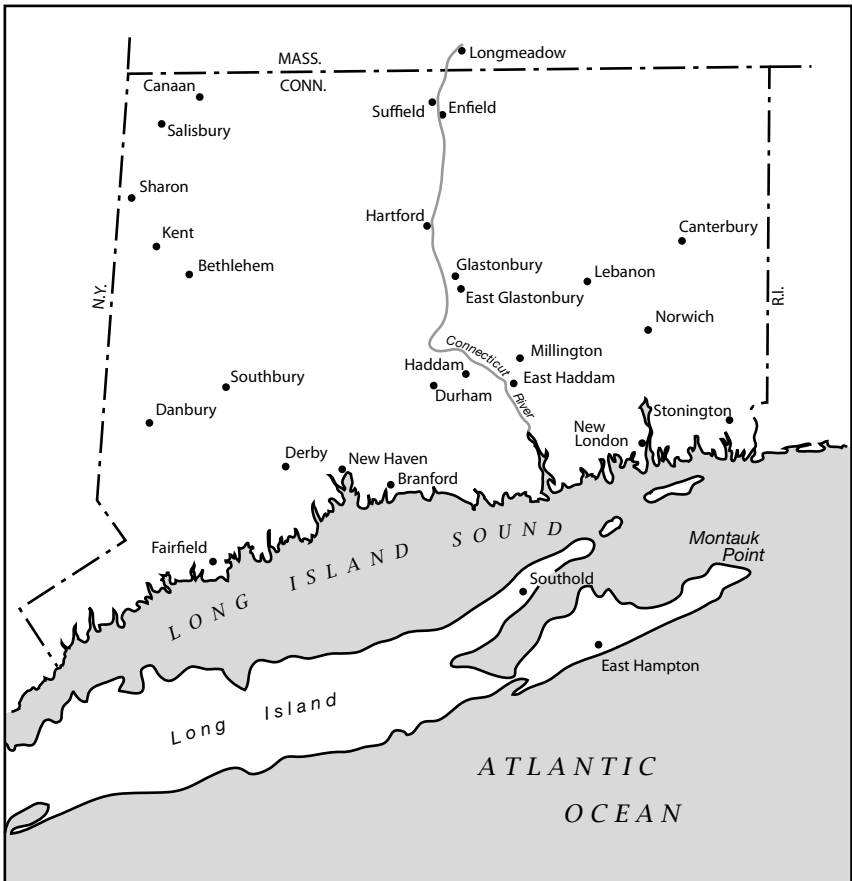
In the light of this experience, it is perhaps not surprising that, when he entered Yale a scant six weeks later, he did so with less excitement than when he had begun the process almost eighteen months earlier. Brainerd feared that his time at Yale would prevent him from leading “a life of strict religion in the midst of so many temptations.” Although he may have remembered his concerns to be greater than they were at the time, there were at least some grounds for unease. In the first part of the eighteenth century, students at both Harvard and Yale suffered from a general lack of discipline and commitment in their studies. Jonathan Edwards had complained of the poor attitude and conduct of most of the students during his time at Yale while cases of drunkenness and thievery were not uncommon. As Yale historian Richard Warch observed, “the need for discipline was a dreary constant in Yale’s existence.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition to anxiety over the behavior of his fellow students, Brainerd was also in an awkward social situation. At twenty-one, he was four or five years older than the average freshman. Others may have been even younger: Jonathan Edwards was a month or so shy of his thirteenth birthday when he started his studies at New Haven in 1716 while Joseph Bellamy—a future confidant of Brainerd—was only twelve when he entered Yale in 1731. To make matters worse for Brainerd, the college hierarchy placed freshmen at the bottom of the pack. One can imagine his chagrin, and possibly even resentment, at having to clean the shoes of a senior who was a year younger than himself or having to ask permission from a seventeen-year-old sophomore before ascending a staircase. He hinted at such humiliations once in his memoirs when he noted being “much exposed on account of my freshmanhip.”<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, the daily schedule did include plenty of opportunity for Brainerd to cultivate his solitary habits with ninety minutes of free time after

lunch and another two hours after dinner.<sup>17</sup> In his account of his first two years at the college, Brainerd made repeated distinctions between true spirituality and his college training. It was during his solitary times that he often “enjoyed a sweet refreshing visit,” an experience of the power of God. His first few months at Yale were enjoyable as “sundry passages of God’s Word opened to my soul with divine clearness, power and sweetness,” and he “enjoyed considerable sweetness in religion,” but his earlier fears were realized during his second semester, when “ambition in my studies greatly wronged the activity and vigor of my spiritual life.”<sup>18</sup>

Brainerd’s struggles to come to grips with life as a student were further complicated by two serious bouts with illness which required him to spend considerable time in Haddam recuperating. In January 1740, having contracted



Connecticut in the mid-eighteenth century. Map by Marvin J. Barton; adapted from Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, frontispiece: by Saml. H. Bryant, drawn from a map by Bernard Romans. Connecticut and Adjacent Parts, Amsterdam, 1777, and by Covens, Mortier & Covens, Jr.

a “distemper” and with measles spreading through the college, Brainerd went home. However, after two days in Haddam, he was “taken with the measles” and did not return to New Haven until the spring. Once again, “by reasons of hard and close studies,” he had “little time for spiritual duties.” Later in the spring and into the summer of that year, he “enjoyed more comfort in religion.” His second illness-enforced absence from college came in the fall of 1740. Although Brainerd put it down to “too close application to my studies,” he also remembered that he “had spit blood more than once,” clearly marking the onset of the tuberculosis that would ultimately claim his life seven years later.<sup>19</sup>

At about the same time that Brainerd was going home to recuperate from his illness, George Whitefield was landing in Rhode Island. He had traveled throughout New York and New Jersey the previous year, but this was his first visit to New England. He spent several days in October 1740 at Yale, where he was introduced to the rector, Thomas Clap (1703–1767), who had been in office for less than a year but who, at least at this time, held an open mind toward Whitefield and his ministry. While Clap was a disciplinarian and a most orthodox member of the Connecticut establishment, during his own college days at Harvard, he had undergone his conversion experience and had been part of a group known as the “praying students.” Furthermore, Clap was aware that Yale’s charge was to operate as a “school of the prophets,” entrusted with training young men who could become able preachers of the gospel. If Whitefield offered hope that this vision could be renewed, he should be welcomed in New Haven. Whitefield’s first impression of the school was that there was “no remarkable concern among [the students] concerning religion.” However, following his preaching, Whitefield noted, “[t]here were sweet meltings Discernible,” and he “observed an especial Presence of God in the Assembly,” although there was no full-blown revival as a result of his visit. Yale senior Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803), who “highly approved” of Whitefield, remembered that the meetings at which Whitefield spoke “were crowded and remarkably attentive.”<sup>20</sup>

Although Brainerd missed hearing Whitefield speak, he was encouraged by the news of Whitefield’s time in New England, and Brainerd felt his “soul was refreshed and seemed knit to him.”<sup>21</sup> Brainerd returned to college during the first week of November 1740, fearful that he might be “getting away from God” at the place which had “proved so hurtful to my spiritual interest.” However, his trepidation was alleviated somewhat when Yale granted him “liberty to board out of college at a private house,” namely, the home of Isaac Dickerman (1677–1758). Although not necessarily the college’s preferred option since it lost a degree of control over its students, lack of sufficient campus housing meant the administration had little choice but to allow some of its students to live off campus. Permitting Brainerd and others to live with Dickerman did not present much of a risk since Dickerman was a reliable member of the establishment (at least in 1740), having been regularly elected deputy to the Connecticut Assembly as well as serving in a number of town offices.<sup>22</sup>

From the time of his return to Yale through most of January 1741, Brainerd found that, in general he “felt much of the power of religion almost daily.” He also

seemed to commit himself irrevocably to some kind of intellectual career when he sold most of the land he had inherited or purchased from his family to John Camp of Durham for £600, seemingly closing the door to a return to the life of a farmer. The funds would have been more than enough to see him through his remaining years at Yale.<sup>23</sup> That winter, revival seemed to be at Yale's door; Samuel Hopkins recalled that "people in general appeared to be in some measure awakened."<sup>24</sup> At the end of January, Brainerd, however, struggled with growing "more cold and indolent in matters of religion by means of my old temptation, viz. ambition in my studies." Through the month of February, he felt things had become worse as he enjoyed neither time with God nor his studies. By late February, he had recovered somewhat and his spirits were lifted even further when a visit from fellow student David Youngs (1719–1752) led to an evening spent with "great satisfaction in Christian conversation and in relating what God had done for us respectively." The pair also "consulted to do something if possible for the interest of religion," and they considered setting up private meetings for groups of three or four students, but before they could bring their plans to fruition, "a great and general concern soon after spread itself over the college."<sup>25</sup>

Although Whitefield's visit the previous fall had indeed brought "sweet meltings," by all accounts it was the arrival of Gilbert Tennent in March 1741 which brought forth the full manifestations of revival. Tennent had begun his New England itineration the previous December with Whitefield's encouragement, and he preached a total of seventeen times in New Haven during March. Tennent informed Whitefield that "the Concern was general in both College and Town." Samuel Hopkins remembered that a "remarkable awakening had been produced" in New Haven because of Tennent, and the "members of the college appeared to be universally awakened." It also seems that it was Tennent's preaching, whether intentionally or not, which opened the door to actions by the students which challenged the college authorities.<sup>26</sup>

Tennent was obviously a charismatic speaker, and his insistence on making clear demarcations between converted and unconverted ministers had already drawn a great deal of attention. In his (in)famous sermon *Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*, Tennent had warned that "the Ministry of natural Men is dangerous, both in respect of the Doctrines, and Practice of Piety." Furthermore, such men were "poor Guides" to anyone seeking salvation since they "call it Melancholy, or Madness, or dawb those that are under [conviction], with untemper'd Mortar." Like Tennent, Brainerd had demonstrated a willingness to make judgments about the spiritual condition of his peers. On one occasion, after partaking of communion at college, he had "felt alone in the world like a stranger and pilgrim," since he believed that most of his fellow students lived "without God."<sup>27</sup>

Tennent's message also spoke to Brainerd's growing skepticism over the value of a liberal education, since Tennent believed that education that was not infused with the power of God was pointless. In *Danger*, Tennent declared that, since "publick academies [were] so much corrupted and abused," the solution was to "encourage private Schools, or Seminaries of Learning." To such private

schools, “pious and experienced Youths, who have a good natural Capacity, and great Desires after the Ministerial Work” could be found and recruited. To a young man like David Brainerd who, apparently, hungered after an experiential ministry but was lukewarm about the practices at Yale, such an idea would have been very attractive. These kinds of unofficial schools proliferated throughout New England and the middle colonies in the decades following the revivals.<sup>28</sup>

Among those especially fired up by Tennent’s preaching were Brainerd, David Youngs, and a third like-minded student—Samuel Buell (1716–1798). On the surface, the three were drawn together by their mutual dedication to spreading revival. Samuel Hopkins later recalled that all three were among a “small number” who had been truly converted before arriving in New Haven and that they exhibited “extraordinary zeal.” However, it also seems likely that they were drawn together because of age. Both Youngs and Buell had entered Yale at an age above the average; in 1741, when Brainerd was twenty-three, Youngs was twenty-two and Buell twenty-five. Perhaps first drawn together by frustration over being made subordinate to seniors younger and less devout than themselves, the three gradually developed a common religious cause.<sup>29</sup>

Hopkins remembered that Brainerd and his friends had “concern for members of the college” and that without “regard to the distinctions of higher and lower classes they visited every room in college, and discoursed freely and with the greatest plainness with each one.” Indeed, it was following one of Brainerd’s visits to him that Hopkins began to question his own salvation. During this visit, Brainerd had “observed that he believed it impossible for a person to be converted and to be a real Christian without feeling his heart, at sometimes at least, sensibly and greatly affected with the character of Christ, and strongly going out after him; or to that purpose.” This “struck conviction into my mind,” wrote Hopkins, and convinced him that he was not truly converted.<sup>30</sup>

In April, New York clergyman Ebenezer Pemberton (1704–1777) preached at the college. A friend of Gilbert Tennent, he had been the first northern minister to open his pulpit to Whitefield and apparently came to New Haven at the direct invitation of the students. In his sermon published as *The Knowledge [sic] of Christ Recommended*, Pemberton conceded that conversion required an intellectual understanding of Christ and the doctrines of salvation. But he also insisted that salvation required a knowledge that was “not produc’d by the powers of human reason or the common methods of education or instruction.” In a warning to his student audience, Pemberton noted that “men are apt highly to value themselves upon the account of their human knowledge and to look down with contempt upon others whom they esteem ignorant and unlearn’d.” However, Pemberton went on, without “an experimental knowledge of Christ,” such knowledge was “but specious ignorance, and is esteem’d by God no better than foolishness.”<sup>31</sup>

If much of the exegesis in Pemberton’s sermon was challenging, his application, directed in particular to those who were “candidates for the service of the sacred ministry,” was revolutionary. Pemberton was aware that “Arts and Sciences, may advance your credit among men” and that the “study of other