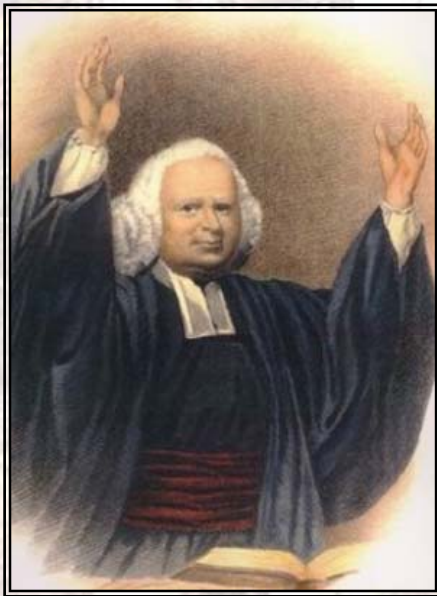


The Rev. George Whitefield, Did He, or Didn't He Preach at Fairfield Church?



The dynamic English preacher George Whitefield was the celebrity clergyman of the American Colonies, equivalent to the status of Billy Graham today. Revival fires that had been ignited in the American Colonies were fanned into flames and united by the preaching of the fiery Whitefield. It is estimated that 80% of the population had seen Whitefield at one time or another.

In August, 1739, Whitefield came to America and preached to throngs in New York and Philadelphia. Here he meets Ben Franklin and develops a long standing relationship with colonial sage. Though Franklin admired the work of Whitefield, he would never come to profess saving faith in the Christ the evangelist proclaimed. After a visit to Georgia, Whitefield tours the Mid-Atlantic colonies starting in April, 1740; during this circuit he preached in West Jersey.

The question of Whitefield's preaching at the New England Town site of Fairfield Church is understandable as Daniel Elmer, the pastor at that time, was an Old Side adherent. Among Presbyterians there was opposition to the passionate "enthusiasm" of *Great Awakening* preachers; those in opposition were deemed of the "Old Side." Those who supported the efforts of preachers like George Whitefield were of the "New Side." Old Side pastors would not allow Whitefield to preach in their pulpits, fearing such emotional preaching would manipulate people into false professions of faith. Claim is made that Whitefield preached at the New Side Greenwich Presbyterian Church, but not at Old Side Fairfield.

Three pieces of evidence give support to Whitefield's having preached at the Fairfield site: the first hand account from Whitefield's Journals, claim of it in Richard Webster's book, *History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, published in 1857, and a 1898 letter from Samuel Williams to the Rev. Allen Brown recounting the testimony of the Honorable Ephraim H. Whitecar, who collected a piece of the oak tree under which Whitefield preached.

Pastor Lawrence C. Roff highlights the account as recorded in Whitefield's Journal:

In the spring of 1740, the dynamic young British preacher, George Whitefield, brought the fires of revival to West Jersey. He recalled the events in his Journal. After preaching at Gloucester, Greenwich, and Piles Grove, he came to "Cohansie, 18 miles from Piles Grove (Pittsgrove?)."

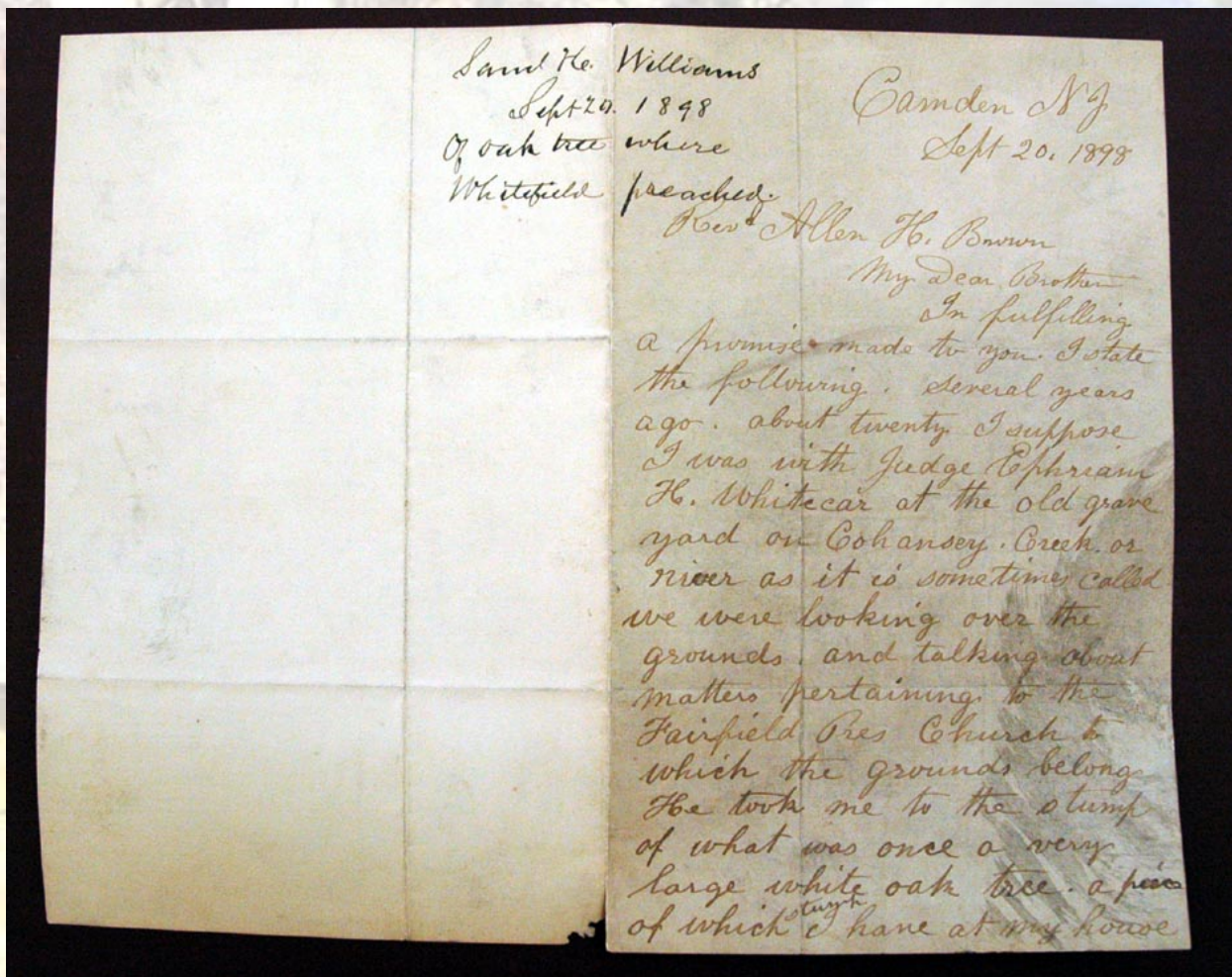
Wednesday, Nov. 19. Had two precious meetings to-day at Cohansie. Preached to some thousands, both morning and afternoon. The Word struck the hearers till the whole congregation was greatly moved, and two cried out in the bitterness of their souls, after a Crucified Saviour. My soul was replenished as with new wine. At this place, Mr. Gilbert Tennent preached some time ago. At his, as well as the people's request, I came hither. Blessed by God, His Gospel spreads more and more! Amen.

The twenty-five year old evangelist had found receptive hearts. There is some question as to whether this is a reference to the Cohansy River or the Cohansy community (Fairfield). If

it is an identification of the River, the likely assumption is that he preached to the Presbyterians down and across the River in Greenwich. It is known that the church took the newer opinions more quickly than did Fairfield. But such a reference to Greenwich as "Cohansie" is entirely out of character for this period of time. The name was used regularly in those days to speak of Fairfield. This is the opinion of Webster, who comments that Gilbert Tennent had indeed preached here the previous summer. Also significant is the fact that Whitefield noted in his Journal, just a few entries before the "Cohansie" visit, that he had visited and preached at Greenwich, calling it by its correct name. Incidentally, this visit (at Greenwich) was not particularly successful. Only a few were present and Whitefield judged it well that he be thus occasionally humbled. *The Fairfield Presbyterians, Puritanism in West Jersey from 1680, Page 7, Lawrence C. Roff*

Richard Webster, a prominent historian of the early Presbyterian Church, gives this incidental statement alluded to in Roff's booklet: "Cohanzy, or Fairfield, seems to have been highly favoured (sic) during Whitefield's stay, while of Greenwich, he says, at one time, none were moved." *History of the Presbyterian Church in America, page 506, Richard Webster*

Perhaps the most fascinating bit of evidence was found in the archives of Princeton Seminary, a letter written by Samuel Williams recounting the testimony of Judge Ephraim H. Whitecar delivered to Rev. Allen Brown along with a chunk of the oak tree under which Whitefield reportedly preached.

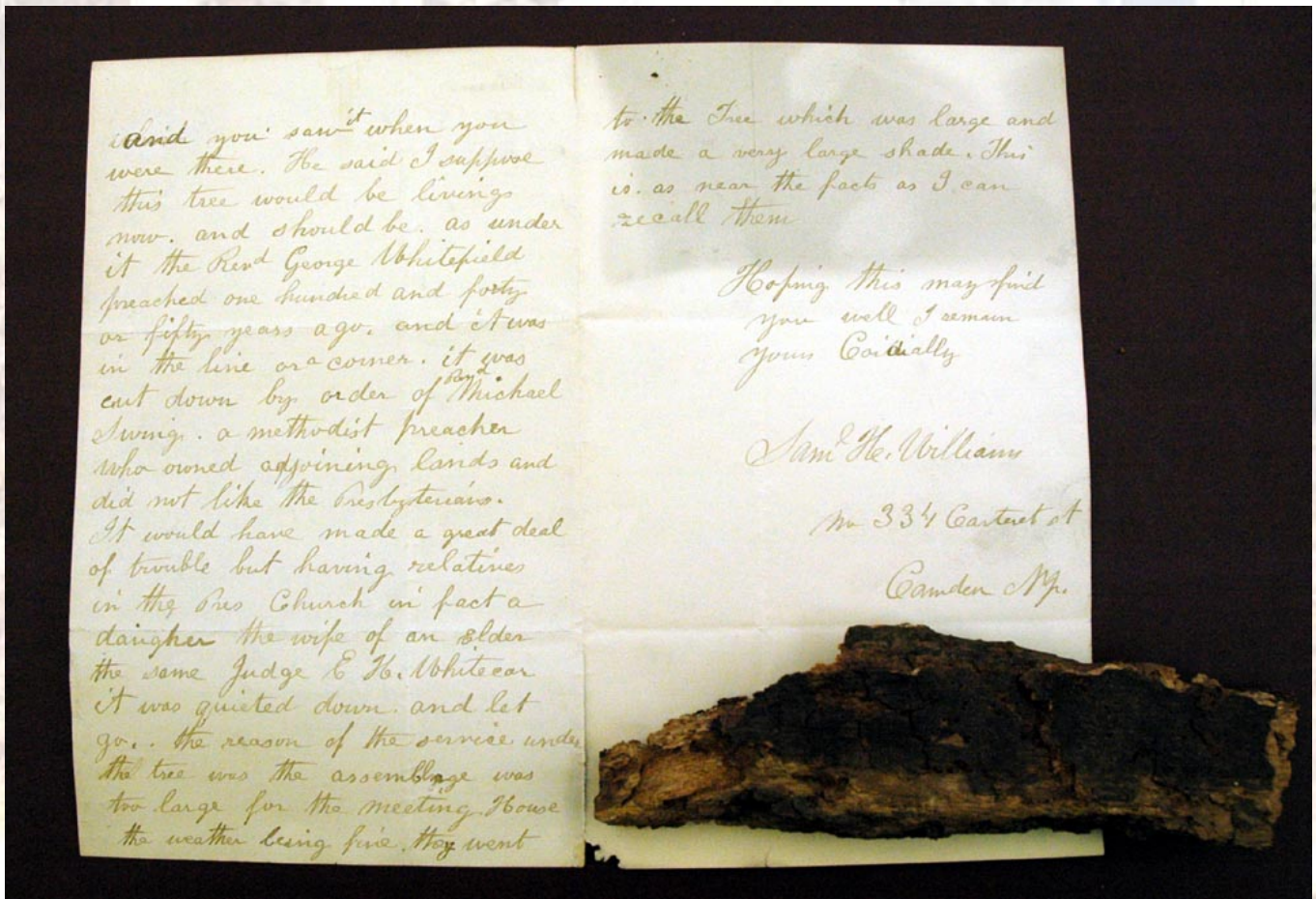


The Whitefield Letter, page 1

Camden, NJ
September 20, 1898

Rev. Allen H. Brown, My Dear Brother,

In fulfilling a promise made to you, I state the following. Several years ago, about twenty I suppose, I was with Judge Ephraim H. Whitecar at the old grave yard on Cohansey Creek or river as it is sometimes called. We were looking over the grounds and talking about matters pertaining to the Fairfield Pres Church to which the grounds belong. He took me to the stump of what was once a very large white oak tree, a piece of which I have at my house. . .



Pages 2 and 3 of the Whitefield Letter along with a piece of the tree.

. . . and you saw it when you were there. He said I suppose this tree would be living now and should be. As under it the Rev. George Whitefield preached one hundred and forty or fifty years ago, and it was in the line or a corner. It was cut down by order of Rev. Michael Irving, a Methodist preacher who owned adjoining lands and did not like the Presbyterians. It would have made a great deal of trouble but having relatives in the Pres. Church in fact a daughter the wife of an Elder the same Judge E. H. Whitecar it was quieted down and let go. The reason of the service under the tree was the assemblage was too large for the meeting House, the weather being fine, they went to the tree which was large and made a very large shade. This is as near the facts as I can recall them.

Hoping this may find you well I remain yours cordially,

Sam H. Williams
No. 334 Carteret St.
Camden NJ



The box in which the piece of oak was delivered, with thanks to the Princeton Seminary Archives.

While it seems likely that the Old Side pastor Daniel Elmer would not have allowed George Whitefield to preach in the Fairfield Church building, it is probable that Elmer didn't object to Whitefield's preached outside on the Fairfield Church grounds at New England Town. The large crowd warranted such a change of venue.

Records show that the Fairfield congregation was divided over Old Side/New Side issues, as was the Philadelphia Synod. The New Side New Brunswick Presbytery withdrew from the synod in 1741. The conflict struck close to home for the Old Side Elmer; his son ferried across the Cohansey to hear the New Side Andrew Hunter preach. With the Fairfield congregation divided, Pastor Elmer worked patiently as a peace maker evidenced by his appeal to the New Brunswick Presbytery for pulpit supply.

When Daniel Elmer died in 1755, the congregation experienced a tearful reunion, a testimony of their pastor's efforts to graciously shepherd Christ's flock at Fairfield. Three years later, the Presbyterian Church at large would heal as the Old and New Sides would repair relationships and unite in 1758 at the urging of New Side Gilbert Tennent who repented of a fiery sermon that sparked acrimony on both sides.