The Curse of Bath

Reverend George Whitefield delivers the "Curse of Bath."

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Drawings by Mary Gray
Located on a spit of land bounded on three sides by water, the old village of Bath is perhaps the town in eastern North Carolina richest in legend, folklore, and history. An earlier story in *Life on the Pamlico* (summer, 1932) dealt with probably the most famous of the stories associated with Bath: "The Devil's Hoofprints." Other stories concern the notorious adventures of Blackbeard, the pirate, who used Bath as a hideaway. An outdoor drama, given during the summer at Bath, celebrates the adventures of the pirate.

This article deals with yet another story of Bath, the so-called "Curse of Bath." Mrs. Betty Hughes, long-time resident of Bath and lead instructor of English here at the college, is perhaps as knowledgeable as anyone about the old stories surrounding Bath. So we talked to her about the "Curse of Bath."

Mrs. Hughes told us that a famous minister of colonial times, George Whitefield (pronounced Whitchett, not Whitt), supposedly became angered at the town and cursed it. Among other things, Whitefield stated that the town would neither prosper nor grow. Today, many people in Bath believe that Whitefield's curse is true because—at least on the surface—these two aspects of his curse have proven accurate. At any rate, this is just one aspect of the story, which Mrs. Hughes discussed with us.

Who was George Whitefield and how did the situation build up? Just what happened?

George Whitefield was a colonial preacher, who followed the Wesleys in the early days of his ministry. He came to America in 1738; he came into Savannah, Georgia. Before he ever got off the boat, he preached a mighty sermon that inspired the sailors that were on the ship to turn from their ways. He generally

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had that kind of effect on people all up and down the east coast. And that's where he did most of his ministry. He traveled; he made four trips that have been documented through the town of Bath.

And back in those days, in colonial times, Bath was a pretty important place. It had a population of about 250, maybe 300 people at the most, but it was a river port [to which] ships would come in from England loaded down with rocks, ballast rocks, which you can still find in Bath Creek. And they would throw those rocks overboard and then load the ships back up with tar, turpentine and timber and sail back to England. And sometimes as many as 30 or 40 of these ships would come into Bath during the year. And this was the kind of Bath that Whitefield knew.

In town there was a church, the St. Thomas Church, which is still there and which is still used. There were some hotels, a few stores, the various things that would be available in a colonial town, and houses in the town and houses surrounding the town.

He first traveled to Bath in 1739, so he began his travels rather soon after he came to America in 1738. It is documented that he was through Bath in 1747 and 1748; in fact, some people believe he spent the winter [of 1748] in Bath. And he made it his headquarters in the colonies for--how did he call it?--"preaching the gospel in the un-gospelized wilds." And his journals show that whenever he was approaching Bath, he had come in from Edenton. And he had taken, I think it must have been, Bell's Ferry as well as I can find out, across the Albemarle Sound and had come on down the Post Road, or the Colonial Road, that existed from North Wilkin, Edenton, right on through Wilmington and on down into Savannah.

So in this time that he was through Bath, he wrote about hearing the wolves howling in the woods, [Bath] being such a desolate and lonely place. But whenever he got to Bath, he wrote about how cordial the people were to him and what comfortable homes some of the people had.

But when he got into town, he would send to the resident minister and ask him if he could address the congregation. And he was nearly always given permission to do that. Through the winter of 1747-48, from the best records that we could find, he stayed in Bath. He wrote some letters from [Bath] and apparently preached a great many sermons. So he really had a good warm feeling for the town. He came back through Bath again in 1764 and again in 1765. But apparently he never came again after that. On one of these trips, folks--well, folklore--have it that he placed a curse on the town. Now there's a woman at Brevard who says, without any doubt at all, that he did it in 1764.

What does she base her statement on?

She doesn't say. She just says it with a great deal of authority. But I've looked at his journals and I've looked at existing contemporary records of each of these journals, and I can't find any indication that he ever cursed any place. But it's just told by so many different people that he did it, and it's told several different ways.

Let's just say for the sake of argument that he did and look at the terms of his curse.
Edmund Harding, who was sort of a good-will ambassador of Bath, said that the curse went something like this: "May you never prosper; may you never grow." Well, a lot of people think that that is actually what Whitefield said because the population of Bath in colonial times was about 250, and the population of Bath in the town limits right now is not much more than that. If you were to go—I don't know if I should say this or not—but if you were to take a census, a door-to-door census of Main Street in Bath, you would find widow, widow, widow, widow, which doesn't say anything about the growth potential of the community.

And about the business of never prospering. As we said, the town was really important. It was the home of governors, judges, and congressmen and just occupied a big place in colonial life. But the ships began not to come to Bath anymore; they were beginning to go to ports that were easier to get to or to ports where they had better access to other forms of transportation. The county seat, I understand, at one time was at Bath; then it moved out to Washington, a colonial capital or the residence of the governor. Anyway, Bath is not the capital of North Carolina either. Yet it played a very important role, and it was sort of a hub of activities in colonial times.

It is that way even now because there are no major roads that go through Bath. Two-sixty-four, the major artery to the coast, goes through Belhaven, not through Bath. In other words, you have to know the way to go in order to get there.

According to the story, why did he deliver the curse specifically?

The best that I can figure out is that on one of these occasions when he came to Bath, he was all fired up to preach. (He was a very fiery preacher and a very great orator.) But the people in the community apparently had finished their harvest, and they wanted to have the harvest festival. I guess an extension of this type of festival would be the county fair. They wanted to have their harvest festival, and he wanted to conduct a revival. Well, they were interested, I guess, in the more civic function than they were of the church function.

And Whitefield felt that the people of Bath were a Godless people because they didn't want to hear the gospel preached. Actually the story goes two ways. One of them says that he left there; it doesn't say if he crossed the creek or crossed the river or whether he just went out of town. This story is the one about him leaving in a wagon, and another story is that he left in a carriage.

One story is that he took off his shoes and dusted the dust of the town from his shoes as he quoted from the scriptures. One of the scriptures is Matthew 10: 14-20. The same reference is in Mark. I don't know the scripture reference there, but it's approximately the same wording about withdrawing one's blessings from a household. Jesus was talking to His apostles and disciples, and He said that if you go into a house and the people receive you well, give them your blessing and stay with them for as long as you need to perform your ministry; but if they don't receive you well, don't stay in the house and as you leave, withdraw your blessings. So Whitefield just dramatized this apparently if he did it at all. He dusted the dust of the town off his
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shoes. Well, one version of this story says that he had a slave and that he told his slave to take his shoes and dust the dust off. I haven't found any evidence to support the theory that he had a slave though he may have. It was very common. Certainly, he probably had a servant with him because he was a man of means.

Weren't you telling me also about his great skill as an orator?

He was a friend of Benjamin Franklin. This [story] is in Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography. He was listening to Whitefield when he was addressing a large crowd on Market Street in Philadelphia. Franklin names the steps of the building that Whitefield was standing on. I've never been to Philadelphia, so I don't have any notion where he is talking about. At any rate, Whitefield was addressing the crowd. Franklin began to back up by city block by city block; and having a scientific mind as he did, he began to calculate how many people could stand in a city block and how many city blocks he had backed up. So, finally, he came to a point down near the river, where a cart rattled by and he could no longer hear Whitefield's voice. So he counted up the number of blocks and the number of people that could occupy those blocks. And he theorized that Whitefield's voice could easily be heard by 20,000 people. You know that's a mob!

Yes!

Then, somewhere else I read that Whitefield was speaking in Connecticut, and that for miles around people knew he would be speaking there. And on the day that he was supposed to speak in the open fields, the dust rising from the road from all the carts, carriages, wagons,
and people walking made a massive black cloud.

One of the funny things about Whitefield that has been, I guess, confirmed to me two or three different times, perhaps even more than that, is that he had a kind of pessimistic nature or a practicality about him that wasn't pessimistic at all. He also had asthma many, many times. He was left at death's door with asthma, so he carried his coffin around everywhere he went.

He carried his coffin!

Carried his coffin with him. One account says he strapped it to the top of his carriage, and another account says he rode around in a wagon and had it loaded in the back of the wagon. A lady from Brevard tells a famous story, which, I assume, would have happened back in Savannah, which he [Whitefield] called home. Mr. Whitefield was at home, and somebody came to call on him. He had been on the road and had been in the habit of sleeping in his coffin because the accommodations in some of these rural inns were not so good. At any rate, this individual was invited into the hall, or whatever they had, and asked to speak to Mr. Whitefield. The servant apparently went to the door, and Mr. Whitefield rose up in the coffin and said, "Yes!" and frightened the individual somewhat. I've heard this story many times.

You've lived in Bath for how long?

I've lived in Bath since 1964.

Does this story about the curse still have an impact on the Bath people?

People still mention it, yes they do. In fact, it's one of the first things I heard when I went to Bath. I don't imagine I lived in Bath for more than a month or two when somebody said, "Do you know there's a curse on Bath?" I asked them about it. They said, "Yes, a colonial minister put a curse on Bath." They said sometime the water won't even flow through here. Well, I never found any confirmation on that.

I have a theory about it. Sometimes when the wind is out of the west, it pushes all the water out, and sometimes you can walk
as far as half a mile out into the river on dry ground. The wind just about takes all the water out. Bath touches two creeks, Bath Creek and Back Creek, or Adams Creek as it is sometimes referred to on old maps. But I've never really seen anything in writing about there being a curse at all on any particular body of water.

There's not any written confirmation that I have been able to find about the curse. It seems to be an old folklore tradition of the English, sort of like the life that Blackbeard lived. He [supposedly] married a girl whose name was Ormond. There's no proof that her name was Ormond. It is generally believed that Blackbeard did marry someone from Bath and that he did live there for a while. Historical records show that he was in and out of there.

I've heard the same folklore about Bath, that is, the curse. Personally, I wonder if it's because of the curse or purely unrelated reasons why Bath didn't grow. Maybe somewhere along the line somebody remembered or it all could have happened because of the power of suggestion. Who's to say?

Who's to say who is right? I'm still looking. Everytime I have a little bit of extra time and can lay hands on some books by Whitefield or about Whitefield, then I look at them. There's a book called The Prince of Orators that I have just combed with a fine-tooth comb. It's just a fascinating book! It is an early biography, early 19th century, I think. It gives a lot of detail about where Whitefield went and who he had contact with. There's a man up at Duke University who did a good biography of Whitefield. It's called Wayfaring Witness. I think the journals are most fascinating because Whitefield is not modest at all. He always talks about how many he preached to. He must have stood and counted heads each time he preached because he'll tell how many souls he witnessed to or preached to, and then he'll tell how many of them were saved and how many of them came forward. Inevitably he'd talk about how elegantly he preached.

In other words, he does sound like the sort of person who would deliver a curse if he was offended.

I had another theory that I have since dismissed. I thought, well, he did it. He cursed the people everywhere that he went. So it wasn't such a consequential thing for him to mention it in his journals or in his diaries. I feel, however, that the answer may lie in the fact that it was a dark period in Whitefield's life. I cannot remember the years just right off hand in which he did not, apparently, write any letters and did not make any journal entries. He was just in sort of an eclipse that could suggest depression or illness. And certainly when one is depressed or when one is ill, he would be more inclined to be impatient. You see, he grew despondent when he learned that the people weren't interested in what he spent his entire life doing.

Another funny thing about Whitefield that I found from reading is that a lot of local [Bath] people want to claim kin to him. I don't really understand how they are doing it because the best records that I can find say that Whitefield was married to an English woman who was his senior. They had one son whose name was John, and John died before he was a year old. There isn't any indication in
any other biography that I have seen that Whitefield ever had another child. Still we have great-great-granddaughters and great-great-grandsons; you know, the woods are full of them. I guess I've got a theory about that too. He established an orphanage in Savannah called the Bethesda Children's Home, and it still exists. He perhaps adopted some children from the orphanage, or they took his name in some way or another. So the descendants must come in from that direction because I can't think of anybody as pious as Mr. Whitefield who would behave anyway other than a proper way about his marriage.

Do you have anything else you could add about him?

This was back at Christmas one time; it just happened that way. He writes about staying at the inn and speaking to the people at the church the next day and how starved they seemed to be for a preacher to minister to them. One thing a lot of people just assumed about Mr. Whitefield is that he was a member of the Church of England. But he's not. As I said early on, he was a follower of the Wesleys, but he broke with them and sort of went his own way.

He was a Methodist?

Yes.

And then broke away?

Broke away from the Wesleys. I don't remember the theological point of the breaking. But he sort of established his own way of preaching the gospel.

He got in trouble in England. Seems like he got in trouble, if this Bath story is so, everywhere he ever preached because he was just rigid in his concept of what individuals ought to do. It was either his way and anything else was outright sin.

He got mixed up on the date he was supposed to preach in Bath, England. And he showed up on the wrong date and proceeded to preach anyway. The person that was supposed to preach showed up too. It was just a mess. He got all excited, and the other person got all excited. And public apologies had to be made. Pretty soon we find out that Whitefield is coming to America and not too much is said about all of that. But apparently the heads of the church didn't think too strongly about his continuing there. They were glad enough to let him come to America. But he went back to England several times after he made that first trip in 1738.

I often wondered what it must have been like when he came over here. He described his traveling. Sometimes he'd take a ship out of the northern ports through to Savannah and bypassed Bath, Charleston, and all the other places in between.

But he mentions Bath in every account that I have ever seen as a comfortable place to stay and mentions having the people literally eat his words. So I find myself more and more doubting that it is a fact that he placed a curse on Bath.

True or untrue? Each of us will have to make up his or her mind concerning George Whitefield's "Curse of Bath." But one thing is certain: the "Curse of Bath" is another piece in the mosaic that is the heritage of this old and fascinating little town, with its picture-postcard old homes and churches.