

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Robert F. Sayre, PhD

## **Nathan Cole** (1711-1783)

From *The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole*

A farmer and carpenter from Kensington in central Connecticut (now a part of the town of Berlin), Nathan Cole was among the thousands of people aroused by the Great Awakening. On October 23, 1740, he went to nearby Middletown to hear George Whitefield preach, and his life was never the same. Before, as he says, he had been an Arminian, a believer that people's own moral choices rather than God's grace determine their salvation. This belief, named for Jacobs Arminius (1560-1609), a Dutch theologian, was considered a heresy by orthodox Calvinists because it downplayed the ultimate power of God, but it had been a comfort to an economically prosperous and independent people.

Cole's description of the crowds rushing to hear Whitefield could be a description of the end of the world. For Cole it was, indeed, the end of his old complacency, for he immediately became tormented by his sense of sin and his dependence on God's omnipotence. He wept, sobbed, and was tempted by Satan to commit suicide. In 1748 his wife also went through a conversion crisis. Yet from these experiences he became sufficiently dissatisfied with what he thought was the continued looseness and hypocrisy of the Congregational establishment that he refused to pay his "rates," the tax that all citizens owed to the church. (The Congregational Church was then a state church.) He and his fellow Separatists set up their own fellowship that met in people's houses, until they joined other new churches. Meanwhile, their combined piety and disobedience troubled their neighbors.

Cole's "Travels," which he wrote in 1765, thus illustrate a paradox of the Awakening: a fear and abasement before a harsh, omnipotent God, but a new independence from ecclesiastical and civil authority.

The text is from Michael J. Crawford, ed., "The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, 33 (1976): 89-126. Crawford's short introduction and notes, edited here and sometimes transposed into brackets, supply additional information about Cole. Not included here are the source references Crawford supplied for Cole's many biblical citations and paraphrasing's. For a further interpretation of "Spiritual Travels," see the chapter on Cole in Daniel B. Shea, *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968; reprint, Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1988). The original manuscript is in the holdings of the Connecticut Historical Society.

I was born Feb 15<sup>th</sup> 1711 and born again octo 1741---

When I was young I had very early Convictions; but after I grew up I was an Arminian until I was near 30 years of age; I intended to be saved by my own works such as prayers and good deeds.

### Reading

Royal Parks and Gardens of London