The First Great Awakening
In the middle of the 18th century, a series of evangelical religious revival movements swept across colonial America. Known as the First Great Awakening, the movements were characterized by emotional religious conversions from a state of sin to a "new birth" and by dramatic and powerful preaching, sometimes outdoors, by itinerant preachers in front of crowds of thousands. The First Great Awakening also marked a new effort by European colonialists to reach out to Native Americans and African-Americans. By examining primary documents from the time, this lesson will introduce you to the ideas, practices, and evangelical spirit of the First Great Awakening.

Guiding Questions
What was the First Great Awakening and how did it affect religious belief in colonial America?

Activity 1. Jonathan Edwards
The first activity will introduce you to Jonathan Edwards, a leading preacher of the Great Awakening. We will analyze Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in order to identify major themes of the Great Awakening.

1. Let's read the following paragraphs as an introduction to the First Great Awakening and the role of Jonathan Edwards in that religious movement.

In the middle of the 18th century, colonial America experienced its first major religious revival, a movement that historians would come to call the First Great Awakening. The Awakening was not the work of one man or a single organized group. Its various leaders, in fact, created no single set of doctrines or organizational structure. The Awakening was a more general series of religious evangelical revivals led by itinerant preachers who emphasized personal faith rather than conformity to doctrine. Preachers of the Awakening also taught that the essence of religious experience was a "new birth" inspired by the preaching of the Word of God—that is, a personal spiritual conversion in which the individual rejected his or her sinful past and was "born again" into a life devoted to Christianity. The Great Awakening was also characterized by the emotional enthusiasm of its participants (e.g. weeping, fainting), which stood in contrast to the more staid and formal worship of traditional Anglican and Congregational services.

The evangelical spirit of the mid-eighteenth century that animated the First Great Awakening also swept through parts of Europe. In the Protestant cultures of England, Scotland and Germany, enthusiastic faith rose in response to the rationalism of the time. As explained by historian Christine Leigh Heyrman, "a new Age of Faith rose to counter the currents of the Age of Enlightenment, to reaffirm the view that being truly religious meant trusting the heart rather than the head, prizing feeling more than thinking, and relying on biblical revelation rather than human reason." The First Great Awakening might also be seen as a Christian appropriation of certain aspects of the Enlightenment, such as emphasis on the individual, reliance on experience instead of authority, and mistrust of tradition.

Five of the First Great Awakening's most important preachers were Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Theodore Freylinghuysen, and William and Gilbert Tennent. Because of their central role
The only son in a family of eleven children, Jonathan Edwards succeeded his maternal grandfather as pastor of a church in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1728. In 1737, he published A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God, his account of the extraordinary religious revival that began in his church in Northampton in 1734 and other nearly communities. That revival is considered to be a harbinger of the Great Awakening, which began in earnest a few years later. In 1746, Edwards published his first major treatise, Religious Affections, which both defended the Great Awakening and criticized what he considered to be the movement's excesses. These published accounts are why Edwards is considered to be "the principal intellectual interpreter of, and apologist for, the Awakening"; Edwards supervised a boarding school for Indian boys and completed several major theological works. He is generally considered one of America's most important and most original philosophical theologians. Shortly after being appointed president of Princeton University, Edwards died after contracting smallpox in 1758.

2. Let’s read an excerpt from Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."
   a. As we read, you should keep in mind the following questions (we will discuss after reading):
      i. In what context (at what time and in what place) did Edwards deliver this sermon?
      ii. Who would have represented Edwards' "ideal" audience?
      iii. What message does Edwards convey in this passage?
      iv. What reactions do Edwards' carefully crafted images attempt to evoke?
   b. Also, as we read each paragraph, underline the images that he uses, and underline any words with which you are unfamiliar. After each paragraph we will then discuss what you underlined and will discuss the underlying religious beliefs that he is expressing through those images.
The use may be of awakening to unconverted persons in this congregation. This that you have heard is the case of every one of you that are out of Christ. That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of: there is nothing between you and hell but the air; 'tis only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.

You probably are not sensible of this; you find you are kept out of hell, but don't see the hand of God in it, but look at other things, as the good state of your bodily constitution, your care of your own life, and the means you use for your own preservation. But indeed these things are nothing; if God should withdraw his hand, they would avail no more to keep you from falling, than the thin air to hold up a person that is suspended in it.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock. Were it not that so is the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment; for you are a burden to it; the creation groans with you; the creature is made subject to the bondage of your corruption, not willingly; the sun don't willingly shine upon you to give you light to serve sin and Satan; the earth don't willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts; nor is it willingly a stage for your wickedness to be acted upon; the air don't willingly serve you for breath to maintain the flame of life in your vitals, while you spend your life in the service of God's enemies. God's creatures are good, and were made for men to serve God with, and don't willingly subserve to any other purpose, and groan when they are abused to purposes so directly contrary to their nature and end. And the world would spew you out, were it not for the sovereign hand of him who hath subjected it in hope. There are the black clouds of God's wrath now hanging directly over your heads, full of the dreadful storm, and big with thunder; and were it not for the restraining hand of God it would immediately burst forth upon you. The sovereign pleasure of God for the present stays his rough wind; otherwise it would come with fury, and your destruction would come like a whirlwind, and you would be like the chaff of the summer threshing floor.

The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose. It is true, that judgment against your evil works has not been executed
hitherto; the floods of God's vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the
mean time is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more
wrath; the waters are constantly rising, and waxing more and more mighty; and
there is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, that holds the waters back, that are
unwilling to be stopped, and press hard to go forward. If God should only withdraw
his hand from the flood-gate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of
the fierceness and wrath of God, would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and
would come upon you with omnipotent power; and if your strength were ten
thousand times greater than it is, yea, ten thousand times greater than the strength
of the stoutest, sturdiest devil in hell, it would be nothing to withstand or endure it.

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice
bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere
pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all,
that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus all
you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the
Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again, and made new
creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before
altogether unexperienced light and life, are in the hands of an angry God. However
you may have reformed your life in many things, and may have had religious
affections, and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets, and in
the house of God, it is nothing but his mere pleasure that keeps you from being this
moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction. However unconvicted you may
now be of the truth of what you hear, by and by you will be fully convinced of it.
Those that are gone from being in the like circumstances with you, see that it was so
with them; for destruction came suddenly upon most of them; when they expected
nothing of it, and while they were saying, Peace and safety: now they see, that
those things on which they depended for peace and safety, were nothing but thin
air and empty shadows.

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some
loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath
towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be
cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are
ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous
serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel
did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the
fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the
last night; that you was suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your
eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped
into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There
is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat
here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of
attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a
reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell...
Activity #2: George Whitefield

The second activity will introduce you to George Whitefield, another leading preacher of the Great Awakening. You will learn about how colonial Americans reacted to the preaching of the Great Awakening. To that end, you will analyze a diary account of a colonial farmer who described hearing the news of Whitefield's approach to his Connecticut town.

1. Let’s read some more background on the First Great Awakening:

   One of the most popular evangelists of the Great Awakening, George Whitefield was born the son of innkeepers in Gloucester, England in 1714. George Whitefield (1714-1770) was ordained in the Church of England, with which he was constantly at odds. Whitefield became a sensation throughout England, preaching to huge audiences. In 1738 he made the first of seven visits to the America, where he gained such popular stature that he was compared to George Washington. Whitefield's preaching tour of the colonies, from 1739 to 1741, was the high-water mark of the Great Awakening there. Whitefield's success has been attributed to his resonant voice, theatrical presentation, emotional stimulation, message simplification and clever exploitation of emerging advertising techniques. Some have compared him to modern televangelists. In 1738 he traveled to Georgia, the first of seven trips to America. In 1739, after a year-long return to London where he was ordained as a minister in the Church of England, Whitefield traveled to Philadelphia. His popularity when he left the city was so great that his farewell sermon had to be moved to an open field in order to accommodate the enormous crowd. A sermon in Boston reportedly was attended by 30,000 people, which was more than the entire population of the city at the time. Whitefield was known for his lively and dramatic preaching. In his sermons, Whitefield spoke out against established churches, encouraging colonists to seek a revived form of Puritanism that did not require institutional churches. He also preached about the spirituality of American slaves, encouraging slave owners to acknowledge their slaves' spiritual freedom. He traveled throughout the colonies, from Georgia to New England, winning admirers and adherents, including Benjamin Franklin. After delivering over 18,000 sermons in his lifetime, Whitefield died in 1770 in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

   Although the First Great Awakening lasted no more than a generation in New England, it brought with it lasting changes. It left a legacy of theological disputes and divisions between its supporters, "New Lights," and its opponents, "Old Lights," who criticized the emotional, non-rational aspects of the Awakening. The Awakening also led to the creation of new colleges—including Princeton, Brown, and Rutgers—to train "New Light" ministers. In the 1760s, supporters carried the spirit of the Great Awakening to the southern colonies, beginning a series of revivals there. The Baptist and Methodist churches were among its most important products.

2. We shall read "The Great Awakening Comes to Weathersfield, Connecticut: Nathan Cole's Spiritual Travels," a primary document about a Connecticut farmer's encounter with George Whitefield. You are to use that document to answer the questions below.

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<td>Why do you think average farmers such as Nathaniel Cole halted their livelihood and traveled a great distance to witness George Whitefield speak?</td>
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What message does Cole’s statement, “I saw that my righteousness would not save me; then I was convinced of the doctrine of Election and went right to quarrelling with God about it, because all that I could do would not save me” reveal about Whitefield’s teachings?

After reading this passage, what conclusion can you draw about the religious practices and beliefs of the Great Awakening?
The Great Awakening Comes to Weathersfield, Connecticut: Nathan Cole’s Spiritual Travels

In the 1730s and 1740s many rural folk rejected the enlightened and rational religion that came from the cosmopolitan pulpits and port cities of British North America. Instead, they were attracted to the evangelical religious movement that became known as the Great Awakening. The English Methodist George Whitefield and other itinerant ministers ignited this popular movement with their speaking tours of the colonies. In this account farmer Nathan Cole described hearing the news of Whitefield’s approach to his Connecticut town, as fields emptied and the populace converged: “I saw no man at work in his field, but all seemed to be gone.” Like many others during the Great Awakening, Cole achieved an eventual conversation by focusing not on intellectual issues but on emotional experience. Cole took away an egalitarian message about the spiritual equality of all before God, a message that confronted established authorities.

Now it pleased God to send Mr. Whitefield into this land; and my hearing of his preaching at Philadelphia, like one of the Old apostles, and many thousands flocking to hear him preach the Gospel, and great numbers were converted to Christ; I felt the Spirit of God drawing me by conviction, longed to see and hear him, and wished he would come this way. And I soon heard he was come to New York and the Jerseys and great multitudes flocking after him under great concern for their Souls and many converted which brought on my concern more and more hoping soon to see him but next I heard he was at Long Island, then at Boston, and next at Northampton.

Then one morning all on a Sudden, about 8 or 9 o’clock there came a messenger and said Mr. Whitefield preached at Hartford and Weathersfield yesterday and is to preach at Middletown this morning [October 23, 1740] at ten of the Clock. I was in my field at Work. I dropt my tool that I had in my hand and ran home and run through my house and bade my wife get ready quick to go and hear Mr. Whitefield preach at Middletown, and run to my pasture for my horse with all my might fearing that I should be too late to hear him. I brought my horse home and soon mounted and took my wife up and went forward as fast as I thought the horse could bear, and when my horse began to be out of breath, I would get down and put my wife on the Saddle and bid her ride as fast as she could and not Stop or Slack for me except I bad her, and so I would run until I was much out of breath, and then mount my horse again, and so I did several times to favour my horse, we improved every moment to get along as if we were fleeing for our lives, all the while fearing we should be too late to hear the Sermon, for we had twelve miles to ride double in little more than an hour and we went round by the upper housen parish.

And when we came within about half a mile of the road that comes down from Hartford Weathersfield and Stepney to Middletown; on high land I saw before me a Cloud or fogg rising. I first thought it came from the great river [Connecticut River], but as I came nearer the Road, I heard a noise something like a low rumbling thunder and presently found it was the noise of horses feet coming down the road and this Cloud was a Cloud of dust made by the Horses feet. It arose some Rods into the air over the tops of the hills and trees and when I came
within about 20 rods of the Road, I could see men and horses Sliping along in the Cloud like shadows, and as I drew nearer it seemed like a steady stream of horses and their riders, scarcely a horse more than his length behind another, all of a lather and foam with sweat, their breath rolling out of their nostrils in the cloud of dust every jump; every horse seemed to go with all his might to carry his rider to hear news from heaven for the saving of Souls. It made me tremble to see the Sight, how the world was in a Struggle, I found a vacance between two horses to Slip in my horse; and my wife said law our cloaths will be all spoiled see how they look, for they were so covered with dust, that they looked almost all of a colour coats, hats, and shirts and horses.

We went down in the Stream; I heard no man speak a word all the way three miles but every one pressing forward in great haste and when we got to the old meeting house there was a great multitude; it was said to be 3 or 4000 of people assembled together, we got off from our horses and shook off the dust, and the ministers were then coming to the meeting house. I turned and looked towards the great river and saw the ferry boats running swift forward and forward bringing over loads of people; the oars rowed nimble and quick, every thing men horses and boats seemed to be struggling for life; the land and banks over the river looked black with people and horses all along the 12 miles. I saw no man at work in his field, but all seemed to be gone.

When I saw Mr. Whitefield come upon the Scaffold he looked almost angelical, a young, slim slender youth before some thousands of people with a bold undaunted countenance, and my hearing how God was with him every where as he came along it solumnized my mind, and put me into a trembling fear before he began to preach; for he looked as if he was Cloathed with authority from the Great God, and a sweet solemn solemnity sat upon his brow. And my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound; by Gods blessing my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me; then I was convinced of the doctrine of Election and went right to quarrelling with God about it, because all that I could do would not save me; and he had decreed from Eternity who should be saved and who not.


Assessment:

Having completed this lesson, you will be asked to write a 3-paragraph essay that discusses and analyzes the ideas, beliefs, and practices of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield and that discusses the impact that the Great Awakening had on individuals like Nathaniel Cole. Your essay should draw information from the two primary documents used in this lesson: "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and "The Great Awakening Comes to Weathersfield, Connecticut."

In your mini-essay, be sure to identify and explain the significance of the following:

First Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield