

William Tennent
Father of the Great Awakening

By Wendy Wirsch

Before Jonathan Edwards delivered his sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”; before George Whitefield preached to thousands in the open air on our colonial shores, William Tennent, “an old grey-headed disciple and soldier of Jesus Christ,” lit a revival fire that spread west into Ohio and south to North Carolina. This Presbyterian minister fathered the Great Awakening in the Middle Atlantic Colonies.

In 1726 Rev. Tennent and his family settled in the backwoods of Bucks County, Pennsylvania. He started pastoring some small congregations—the first in Bensalem and the second near the forks of the Neshaminy Creek. This second church, Neshaminy, became his “favorite child”. In 1727 William Tennent and this fledgling congregation built a stone sanctuary on a rise in the church graveyard. The Tennent family first resided in a rental property on a busy public road in Northampton Township between Bensalem and Neshaminy. Later—through the generosity of his wealthy cousin, James Logan—he acquired fifty acres in the same township and a house for the family was built on that land.

In the early eighteenth century the American colonies faced a serious problem. Not enough ministers could be found to serve the spiritual needs of a growing population. This problem was acute in the middle colonies. Young men seeking training for the ministry needed to study at an approved school in New England or return to Europe for an education. William Tennent, a graduate of the University of Edinburgh, solved the problem by training young men for the ministry himself. He began in his Northampton home with his four sons. Soon other young men came to him seeking an education.

By 1735 William Tennent resigned from the Bensalem congregation to devote his time and energy to Neshaminy. In that year he moved from his Northampton home to a hundred acre plantation in Warminster to be closer to the church. Near his new home he built a log cabin structure in which he educated the growing number of young men who wanted to study with him. While Rev. Tennent had no name for the school, his critics derisively dubbed it the “Log College.”

Controversy clouded his rough hewn school. William Tennent’s beliefs ran contrary to the theology of many of his colleagues. Most Presbyterian ministers of that period stressed a social covenant of grace and favored a tightly organized church with traditional educational standards for ministers. On the other hand he preached the necessity of personal salvation in Jesus Christ. Man needed to be convicted of his sinful state and repent. It was this “controversial” theology that William Tennent imparted to his students. He ignited a fire in these young revivalists which they carried as far west as Ohio and south into Virginia and North Carolina.

On November 22, 1739 the young itinerant evangelist, George Whitefield, came to the churchyard at Neshaminy to preach to a crowd of 3,000 people. After several hours of ministry Whitefield retired to the plantation home of William and Catherine Tennent. These two men—one an old disciple of Jesus Christ and the other a young upstart—discussed what measures they could take to promote Christ’s Kingdom. In his journal Whitefield described the Log College as a “school of the old prophets.”

By 1742 the aged William Tennent decided to retire from the pastoral ministry, but he continued to teach in his beloved log cabin school. He remained an educator until his death in 1746. After that the Log College closed its doors, but that was not the end. His “college” gave birth to sixty-three schools of higher learning. In 1746 the first of the progeny, the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) opened its doors.

Upon William Tennent’s death the plantation was sold. Reportedly the new owners turned the Log College into a pigsty. Eventually the logs rotted and it was torn down. The stone church built in 1727 fell into disrepair, and in 1792 that building was demolished. However subsequent owners of the plantation continued living in the Tennent home. Today the land that was once the Tennent plantation is now the property of Christ’s Home, a ministry for children and senior citizens. All that remains of William Tennent’s life there is an eighteenth century dwelling house. Research points to the strong probability that this was his home. Time and neglect have taken its toll on this vacant structure.

I am working with members of the Millbrook Society, a regional historical and archaeological group, to restore this important piece of our Presbyterian heritage. We believe that this home—rehabilitated, restored, and opened to the public—will serve to bring the teachings and ministry of William Tennent to a society which knows little about him. The nearby Log College Monument would also be included in our plans. All of this will take a lot of funding, time, and hard work, but we believe it is worth it. At a time when we need to restore the spiritual foundation laid by William Tennent, this home needs our help. If you share our vision and want to assist us, please contact Mr. Ed Price, President of the Millbrook Society, at millbrook@voicenet.com or Wendy Wirsch, 215-343-1599. Together let’s reclaim his plantation home and the spiritual heritage of this Father of the Great Awakening.