Chronology

This section of the project attempts to contextualize the six narratives with an overview of early American evangelical history. Although the period I describe extends well outside of the range of dates typically cited as the peak of the first Great Awakening (the 1730s and 1740s), I have considered the Great Awakening to be the philosophical nexus of these works, each of which was completed between 1727 and 1758. In this section, I focus on the social uses to which these narratives were placed within the context of Puritan doctrine.

First Soundings: The Seventeenth Century

If, in the words of Jonathan Edwards, the December 1733 Northampton awakenings struck the community “almost like a flash of lightning upon the hearts of young people,” the warning peals of thunder sounded from the distant 17th century (Edwards, “Narrative” 11). Long before the modern evangelicalism of the 1730s and ’40s split the ranks of the New England clergy into Old Lights and New Lights, the conversion narrative, which I will demonstrate to be the central document of early American evangelicalism, emerged as a major—and controversial—force in American protestant theology.

Although my argument will follow a trajectory that climaxes in what I will term “The Great Awakening,” it should be noted from the outset that modern scholars have reasonably challenged the notion that any monolithic “Awakening” ever existed. Jon Butler, in “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction,” points out that 18th century revivalism is best described as a series of isolated, local, and politically moderate events that hardly deserve such a commanding title: “[T]he term ‘the Great Awakening,’” Butler writes, “[…] distorts the character of eighteenth-century American religious life and misinterprets its relationship to prerevolutionary American society and politics” (322-324).
Butler cites the scattered nature of the revivals, both chronologically and geographically, as well as the failure of revivalism to create any true change in the hierarchical structures of the church as evidence that no magnificently transformative cultural event took place (322-324). Like Butler, I will argue that the democratic potential of evangelical revivalism was highly limited; unlike Butler, however, I have not rejected the term “the Great Awakening.” I must specify now, then, that in speaking of the Awakening I refer, in a somewhat colloquial but nevertheless not uncommon way, specifically to the Calvinist revival movements engendered in New England during the 1730s and 1740s, which even Butler admits cannot be “seriously” disputed (309). I have chosen to use this terminology not to naively subscribe to its monolithic implications, but to attempt to complicate a useful, if flawed, historical concept by examining the various forms of the document I take to be at its heart: the conversion narrative.

In seeking the progenitor of the American conversion narrative, Patricia Caldwell traces oral “relations”—which she characterizes as consisting of two steps, repentance and conversion—back at least as far as 1630, the year in which Roger Clap recollected that he had joined the church at Dorchester (Massachusetts) amidst a number of “prospective members” who apparently described their own conversion experiences during the process of admission (64-69). When Clap recounted this practice in his memoir, he suggested one purpose of these narratives when he indicated that “[t]hey helped and encouraged those who heard them ‘to try their own hearts’ and deeply affected their emotions” (Caldwell 70-71). Caldwell, although hesitant to trust Clap’s memory, grants his words some credence and rightly likens the practice he describes to “prophesying—that practice of spontaneous exhortation by laymen, following the regular sermon, which was widely used in reformed churches” (71). Within the same decade, Anne Hutchinson’s trial for antinomianism cast the practice of prophesying in a suspicious light
(Caldwell 71); thus, even in its earliest stages, the American evangelical conversion narrative flirted with controversy.

The brand of prophesying of which Anne Hutchinson was accused in 1637 officially consisted of “disturbing the peace of the commonwealth, slandering the ministers, and holding private meetings” (Withington 226). Yet the suspicion underlying these charges was that Hutchinson subscribed to Antinomianism, “an old heresy which technically means opposition to the law” and which “embodies the view that since men can be set free from sin by grace alone, obedience to the law is irrelevant to salvation” (Withington 226). In sum, Hutchinson seemed to believe that man’s acts on earth had no relation to his spiritual state: as she articulated during the trial (perhaps, as some historians have suggested, thoughtlessly), she believed that only “immediate revelation” could establish salvation (Withington 233-235). Hutchinson seemed to espouse a radical vision of the “free grace,” itself “the cornerstone of Puritan piety” (Shea 105). Withington and Schwartz, interpreting the trial as a political attempt to remove an ideological insurgent, describe the impact of this credo as follows: “Her belief in direct, immediate revelation threatened the Puritan reliance on the Word and on the church as the means of propagating the Word” (229). In other words, by suggesting that one need not follow church doctrine in order to be saved, Hutchinson encouraged a view of grace that threatened to render the church superfluous. It is little wonder, then, that colonial authorities (among them Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop) saw fit to clamp down upon Hutchinson’s influence, and subsequently upon anything that too closely resembled her practices (Withington 226).

Yet even if Anne Hutchinson seemed to push the covenant of grace beyond its limits, thus shedding suspicion upon proselytizing, she hardly inspired a reactionary turn toward the covenant of works. Antinomianism might undermine the church’s authority, but full adherence
to a covenant of works represented an Arminian rejection of the doctrine of election. If anything, the Antinomian controversy signaled the necessity of compromise between the conflicting doctrines of Arminianism and Antinomianism. John Winthrop himself seemed aware of the need for mediation when he wrote his spiritual autobiography, “Christian Experience,” during the winter prior to the Hutchinson trial (Shea 102). Daniel Shea, Jr., notes that Winthrop’s account traverses “the range of emphases which comprised Puritan orthodoxy,” treading “first near the border which separated the impious doctrine of works from the legitimate search for evidences of salvation” and subsequently “appear[ing] as a bright embodiment of the doctrine of free grace, to be distinguished from the irrational intensity and lurid illuminism of the Antinomian” (Shea 108-109). As an early predecessor to the autobiographical expressions which make up the bulk of this study, “Christian Experience” demonstrated the inherent tensions in an evangelical narrative which seeks proof positive of election in the “evidences” of one’s life (Shea 109). What Shea identifies in Winthrop’s narrative as the “strain of incompatible terminologies” is a “strain” which appears throughout the genre of Puritan self expression (109).

The inherent tendency of the Puritan conversion narrative to anchor itself firmly between these two controversial extremes likely explains, at least in part, how it enjoyed continued popularity while prophesying, its close cousin, fell into disfavor. Even as Hutchinson’s trial convened in Boston, New England pastorates continued to use the conversion narrative in the same vein as the Dorchester ministry. From 1637 through 1645, Thomas Shepard recorded the “Confessions” of 51 individuals seeking admission to the church, a practice which he upheld despite protestations from British observers that it was ecclesiastically improper to demand a “confession” of the state of a person’s soul (Caldwell 27, 68). This scrutiny on the part of British Presbyterians is a matter of some confusion among historians, as similar conversion narratives
were used in Britain; but Caldwell identifies the “the particular issue of admissions” as the “sticking point” (82). It may be that the narratives were used as a limitation to church admission; perhaps they allowed instead for an expanded membership; quite possibly they were used to satisfy the psychological need for “assurance” of salvation (Caldwell 86-87). The true reasons for the conversion narrative’s use as an entrance examination are likely both inscrutable and multitudinous. Regardless of its origins, and despite persistent controversy, the tradition continued for several decades.

The practice of requiring conversion narratives for church membership withstood early attacks, but its import in Puritan practice began to decline during the latter half of the seventeenth century (Goen 12). The Halfway Covenant, passed in 1662, allowed unconfessed members who had been baptized as children to have their own children baptized, despite the fact that they were not full members of the church; as a result, fewer people felt compelled to offer their own confessions and enter wholly into the religious community (Goen 13-14). Then, during the Reform Synod of 1679, Solomon Stoddard managed to assert that “’a personal and public profession of […] faith and repentance’” rather than the more mystically phrased “’relation of the work of God’s Spirit upon [the] heart[]’” was required before communion would be extended to any member of the church (Goen 15). Stoddard later interpreted this phrase to mean that “visible sainthood had nothing to do with inward grace and conversion”; he very influentially admitted all potential members as full members, thus further reducing the role of the conversion narrative in church membership (Goen 15). Although Stoddard fully believed in the import of conversion, he perhaps unintentionally implied that works were at least as important as grace in establishing salvation (Goen 16).
As the role of good works in salvation rose in import, so too did the role of the church, the official director of those good works; the radical evangelicalism which thundered during the Antinomian controversy began to recede into the distant memory. Concurrent with this shift in church doctrine was the movement toward “professionaliz[ation]” of the clergy, which was occurring in response not only to “major crises” (like the Antinomian incident of the 1630s) but also to “petty squabbles” over such mundane issues as salary (Harper 560). Ministers like Increase Mather seemed more focused on their studies than on congregational interaction; this “clericalist conception of the ministry” dominated the congregations of New England during the early eighteenth century (Harper 560-561). Thus the burden (and agency) of salvation was shifting both doctrinally and practically from congregation to clergy. It was with this ecclesiastical atmosphere that the first subject of our study, Cotton Mather, would contend.

Lightning Strikes: The Evangelical Event

Cotton Mather

While Increase Mather was a strong proponent of the studious clerical model, his son Cotton sought out the active involvement in congregational life enjoyed by his grandfather Richard (Harper 559-561). Rather than spending his hours preparing sermons, Cotton Mather engaged in a “systematic program of visitation,” thereby focusing his efforts on interaction with his congregation (Harper 561-562). Far from “jealously guarding” his “pastoral prerogatives,” Mather initiated a “remarkable attempt” to extend typical pastoral duties to laypersons (Harper 562); not coincidentally, his congregation welcomed many new members while others in Boston
saw their ranks reduced (Harper 562). Notably, of these new members, “fully half of those baptized in the church during Mather’s forty-three-year ministry were ultimately able to give a ‘relation’ of their own conversion and enter into full communion” (Harper 562). Cotton Mather had managed to break the pattern of declining favor of evangelical notions of grace, and he did so in tandem with resurrecting the conversion narrative as a central component of religious experience.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Mather recorded his own conversion experience in the pages of his autobiography, *Paterna*. Mather began his autobiography for his son, Increase (known as “Cresy”), but after Increase lost favor in the eyes of his father and was eventually himself lost at sea, he readdressed, modified, and extended it for his younger son, Samuel (Bosco xiii-xxviii). Although *Paterna* was not published until Bosco’s 1976 edition, there is evidence (not the least of which being that Mather carefully--but ineffectively--concealed any hints of his identity) that Mather intended for *Paterna* to function as an instruction for others in addition to his sons (Bosco iii, xvi, xxxviii-xxxix). In Daniel Shea’s reading, this “instruction” amounted to an endorsement of the doctrine of good works, and indeed Mather himself had written in 1697 that “‘A Workless Faith is a Worthless Faith’” (Shea 179-180). In accord with this doctrine, the “evidences of divine favor” that Mather outlines in his autobiography “are intended to stimulate the reader to those acts which God has promised to favor” (Shea 171). In sum, Cotton Mather walked the line between the two extremes of personal faith and clerically supported works in his autobiographical writing as well as in his profession.

Although Cotton Mather can hardly himself be considered an instrumental figure in the Great Awakening, it is clear that he represented, and indeed promoted, a renewed openness to the coming evangelicalism. *Paterna*, the written artifact of this approach, was likely completed in
1727, the year prior to Cotton Mather’s death (Bosco xxviii). Mather’s repopularization of the
grace-based conversion narrative developed in tandem with his vigorous push, both in his
clerical work and in his autobiography, for a privileging of works-based faith. This signaled a
return to moderation when recent ministers, such as his father Increase, had emphasized the
clerical role over the congregational. This shift perhaps explains Cotton Mather’s success as a
minister: although he insisted on the need for clerical guidance, he returned some agency to the
hands of the common man. The coming generation of New Light pastors would use Mather’s
techniques to control and promote revivalism (Harper 563); little wonder, then, that Mather’s
later work has been said to show strains of “the fervent, affective religion of Jonathan Edwards
and the Great Awakening” (Hall 217).

Samuel and Joseph Moody: The Narratives of Patience Boston and Joseph Quasson

As Cotton Mather was completing his autobiography in Boston, pastors Samuel and
Joseph Moody were creating another type of conversion narrative in York County,
Massachusetts (now Maine) (Williams “Behold” 835). Samuel Moody has been described as “a
passionate and widely respected frontier evangelist who would later support the Great
Awakening and earn the admiring friendship of such prominent revivalists as George Whitefield
and Jonathan Edwards” (Cohen Toward 70); these sympathies were evident in his innovative use
of the criminal conversion narrative. While Mather’s autobiography described the conversion
experience of a man who enjoyed extensive social influence, the Moodys, rather than crafting
their own narratives, adapted the words of society’s least treasured members: condemned
criminals.
Mather, of course, had himself published execution speeches, which were used primarily to frighten readers who witnessed the dying spiritual struggles of people whose “sins” included many which mirrored their own (“such as lying, cursing, or Sabbath-breaking”) (Williams “Introduction” 4-5). Yet the documents Mather published in his collection of criminal narratives, Pillars of Salt, hardly possessed the autobiographical texture of the extended narratives of Joseph Quasson and Patience Boston, nor did they focus so narrowly on the spiritual experiences of their subjects. “[A]s the ministers turned more and more to evangelicalism to return religious experience to a personal level,” however, “the criminal narrative genre became less concerned with the excitement of terror and more concerned with the process of conversion” (Williams “Behold” 831). The narratives of Joseph Quasson and Patience Boston, as Daniel Williams points out, illustrate this hybrid of the criminal and conversion narrative genres during the incipient stages of the Great Awakening.

If Mather’s Paterna espoused something resembling the covenant of works in its obsession with the “signs” of salvation, the Moodys’ documents go one step further, “as close as any generation of Puritan ministers ever did to a covenant of works” (Williams “Behold” 832). The ministers certainly directed the criminals in their confessions, specifying for them the steps to salvation and perhaps even how they should speak of it (Williams “Behold” 833); yet in publishing the resulting narratives, they extended these directions to their readership. In short, “ministers sought to establish a pattern of repentance and redemption whose steps were marked clearly enough for everyone to follow” (Williams “Behold” 835-836). The pattern so closely resembled the covenant of works, in fact, that Boston’s first-person narrative concluded with the oddly defensive statement, “How are we condemned by the Covenant of Works, and relieved by the Covenant of Grace” (Boston 136). Nevertheless, whether formulaic or not, these narratives
privileged the criminals’ experiences of conversion over their fears of dying, and purportedly did so in their own words (in Boston’s case, the narrative was said to have been “taken from her Mouth”) (Boston 119).

In the practice of advising the criminal with step-by-step instructions for salvation (advice which was subsequently passed on to the audience through the narrative), the Moodys stepped slightly closer than Mather to the covenant of works. In the content of the narrative, which explicitly promoted the covenant of grace, however, they safely maintained the balance between works and grace while further promoting the rising evangelicalism hinted at by Mather’s autobiography. Published in 1726 (Quasson) and 1738 (Boston), these narratives (particularly Boston’s, with its excruciating detail of her troubled life) set the stage for the fervent revivalism of the Great Awakening, and did so in the words not of an accomplished clergyman but of an outcast layperson.

Sarah Pierpont Edwards, David Brainerd, and Jonathan Edwards

If Samuel and Joseph Moody planted the seeds of fervent evangelicalism, Jonathan Edwards harvested the spoils. Edwards can clearly be considered a leading luminary in the first Great Awakening (although George Whitefield, who arrived in America in 1740 and conducted a highly successful itinerant tour, deserves much of the credit for the movement’s success) (Goen 1, 48-49). Edwards, who documented the 1734-1735 awakenings of his own parish in “A Narrative of Many Surprising Conversions in Northampton and Vicinity,” was responsible for “the historical documentation and theological defense which have sustained [revivalism] as an ongoing tradition” (Goen 1). The documentation that Edwards created consists, as we might
expect, of a number of conversion narratives, the successors of the prototypes we have discussed to this point. Edwards, it seemed, was personally invested in reviving the tradition of oral conversion narratives; although he did not achieve this goal within his parish, he did manage to “[make] conversion narratives an important part of his theological dissection of the conversion experience” (Payne 23-24).

Edwards claimed in his “Narrative of Many Surprising Conversions,” “There is no one thing that I know of that God has made such a means of promoting his work amongst us, as the news of others’ conversion; in the awakening sinners, and engaging them earnestly to seek the same blessing, and in the quickening of the saints” (40). Yet if he saw conversion narratives as a means of eliciting grace in others, he also saw them as a “propagandistic tools to defend both the awakening and the sometimes excessive physical and emotional forms that conversion took” (Payne 24). Edwards’s New Light evangelicalism was indeed an object of Old Light clerical suspicion. Although Old Light and New Light clergy may have had similar, moderate Calvinist leanings at the beginning of the 1740s, Old Lights essentially came to “[see] the Awakening first and foremost as a frontal assault on New England’s clerical establishment,” an “assault” whose force originated in the idea that the evangelical convert, like Anne Hutchinson’s Antinomian, did not require the aid of the church to experience the “flash of lightning” of conversion (Harper 558; Edwards “Narrative” 11). If Edwards fell into the trap of too fervently denying the role of Works in salvation (and thus overemphasizing the role of grace), it was because he, like Mather and the Moodys before him, was attempting to guard against charges of Arminianism (Goen 4-10).

In the familiar attempt to balance between Arminianism and Antinomianism, works and grace, Edwards turned to his wife, Sarah Pierpont, and good friend, David Brainerd, as examples
of successful conversions. Sarah Edwards underwent her own conversion experience during a period of her husband’s absence in 1742, purportedly after feeling intense jealousy when she discovered that the congregation might prefer the sermons of visiting ministers to those of her husband (Goen 69). When Edwards returned, she related the “ecstatic rapture” she felt when she triumphed over these feelings, and he asked her to transcribe the experience (Goen 69). Edwards rewrote Sarah’s narrative, removing all mentions of her sex and reworking it in the third person, and used it as the crown jewel of Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival (Goen 69-70). This rewriting, however, was a “relative failure”: “Edwards sought to discover the transcendent in the mundane, the universal within the particular,” but created instead a “redaction” of what was originally an inspiring account (Payne 25). With David Brainerd’s narrative, however, Edwards was relatively more successful. Brainerd, who became a missionary after being dismissed from Yale (an injustice which, it has been suggested, inspired John Dickinson to found Princeton), was possibly engaged to Edwards’ daughter Jerusha at the time of his death from tuberculosis (Pettit 55, 68-71). Brainerd was “persuaded (with difficulty) not entirely to suppress all his private writings,” and his diary was thus turned over to Edwards, who reworked it as The Life of David Brainerd (Edwards, Brainerd 96). Although Edwards edited Brainerd’s diary to downplay his persistent depression, he allowed much of it to remain intact, and the result “became an evangelical devotional classic and was Edwards’s most popular and most reprinted work” (Pettit 22, Payne 26). The more the original speaker’s voice seemed accessible in the narrative, apparently, the greater was the narrative’s effect in defending Edwards’ brand of evangelicalism.

Yet Edwards seemed to find these narratives insufficient defense of the Awakenings, and he followed them with an account of his own conversion experience because, according to Daniel Shea, “a narrative told in the first person, as Sarah’s had been originally [and Brainerd’s,
although mediated, still was], was immensely more valuable to his cause than even the best job of evangelistic reporting” (188). As Shea points out, the most striking characteristic of this narrative was “its exclusive attention to the work of grace in the soul” (183). Payne speculates that this shift in focus may have been too great for the contemporary audience; he suggests that the resulting work diverged unacceptably from the model Edwards had previously established and was thus left unpublished until 1765 (it was written sometime between 1739 and 1758, when Edwards died) (Payne 27; Edwards “Personal” 441). In sum, Edward’s defense of evangelicalism was perhaps too evangelical—or too Antinomian—to pass muster. In the 1740s, itinerant preacher and peerless controversialist James Davenport made two highly emotional tours of New England, in which he “denounced publicly” ministers whom he judged unconverted (not coincidentally, Connecticut outlawed itinerant preaching between his two visits) (Goen 51, 60). Davenport “unleashed the demons of hysteria and fanaticism which no retraction could recall, and furnished the antirevival arsenal with more ammunition than even Jonathan Edwards could repulse” (Goen 61); as a result, New England’s protestants became hopelessly divided before 1742 came to a close (Goen 64).

In 1750 Edwards was cast out of the pulpit for refusing communion to anyone who would not profess faith, a practice which his congregation found unacceptable (Pettit 14). This end was somehow appropriate:

“True to the very goals that Edwards promoted, the dissolution of his ministry prompted a more direct relationship between the devout [individual] and the divine [grace], demoting the minister’s role as absolute mediator. Ironically, Edwards was cast out by the
Edwards, having convinced his parishioners of evangelicalism’s righteousness, conceded his right to continue in the long tradition of ministerial mediation. By promoting a brand of evangelicalism that focused on the individual, he rendered his own moderate views (that authority is divided between the minister and the layperson) something of an anachronism.

The Watershed: A Continuing Legacy

As implied by the title “the First Great Awakening,” the evangelical movement of the 1730s and 1740s was hardly the final sounding of revivalism in America, nor was it the end of the conversion narrative. Although a Baptist disagreement over the place of the conversion narrative in ecclesiastical life arose during the 1760s, many churches soon returned to the requirement of a profession for church membership (Payne 27-28); thus the balancing act between congregationally based and clergy-centered religion continued. Evangelicalism, broadly conceived, had an even stronger afterlife: “By the middle of the nineteenth century, evangelical Protestants predominated—ecclesiastically, politically, and culturally—in virtually all areas of the country” (Payne 2). Modern evangelicals, it often seems, would like to do the same today, but it is worth mentioning that our contemporary notions of evangelicalism, although clearly rooted in 17th and 18th century traditions such as the conversion narrative, are quite different from—and yet perhaps as difficult to pin down as—their early modern
predecessors. Little more need be said than that to justify consideration of the origins of American evangelicalism, and this survey has aimed to be one small step in that process.