

Epher Whitaker's Lasting Legacy

Although the name Epher Whitaker evokes sentimental nostalgia among long-time residents of Southold, newcomers may stumble over its pronunciation and wonder—what's the big deal? His poetry forgotten, his sectarian philosophy of history sidelined, and his major educational initiative defunct.¹ It's time to consider the lasting legacy of 19th-century minister, Reverend Epher Whitaker (1820-1916).

Before his pastorship (1851–1891), one could argue that Southolders had no common identity; that the town of Southold had no collective memory. Instead, oral histories embedded in family lines dominated conversations about the past across the far-flung hamlets. Whitaker transcended these clannish memories by successfully introducing three components of collective memory, transforming individual families into a cohesive group of founders.² First, he developed and amplified a compelling *origin narrative* of the town by a religious travel company led by John Youngs of Southwold, England.³ Second, he inaugurated a *commemorative ritual* marking the 250th anniversary of Southold's founding which was widely publicized.⁴ Finally, he created and reinforced multiple *venerated landscapes* by collecting money to erect Founder's Monument on the site of the town's first meeting house within the boundaries of its Old Burying Ground.⁵

Although these weren't Reverend Whitaker's only achievements and say nothing of his dedication to the community and common touch, they help explain why he continues to have an impact. He roused the community's pride, elevated it to the national level, and forged an emotionally-powerful collective memory that persists to this day.

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¹ *New Fruits from an Old Field* (1865); *Leaves of All Seasons: Hymns and Other Verses* (1894); the Southold Academy operated as a college preparatory institution under the auspices of the First Presbyterian Church from 1867–1902, then as a business training school from 1907–1937 (Geoffrey K. Fleming, *Southold [Images of America series]* (2004): 89.

² The definition and components of collective memory taken from Marc Howard Ross, *Slavery in the North: Forgetting History and Recovering Memory* (2018).

³ Epher Whitaker, "The Early History of Southold, Long Island," a speech read September 24, 1866 before the New Haven Colony Historical Society, published in *Papers of the New Haven Colony Historical Society* Volume II (1877): 1–31 (available at Hathitrust.org). That narrative, repeated and refined, was integrated in Whitaker's *History of Southold, Long Island: Its First Century* (1881).

⁴ The one-day event (August 27, 1890) was mentioned in numerous newspapers from Massachusetts to California, although regional newspapers provided the most coverage. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (August 28, 1893, page 2) gave a glowing synopsis, "It has been a complete and brilliant success and the town may well feel proud of the record which it made yesterday." Whitaker invited high-profile speakers including President Benjamin Harrison, who sent his regrets.

⁵ "Unveiling the Monument," *The Traveler* (Southold), October 20, 1893 and October 27, 1893. The latter article listed names of contributors to the monument.