

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 45: Camp Meetings & Circuit Riders: Frontier Revivals

Camp Meetings and Circuit Riders: Did You Know?

Little Known Facts about Camp Meetings and Circuit Riders

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In most early camp meetings, the focal point of the gathering was receiving Communion.

The circuit rider often oversaw the preparations of the site for the camp meeting. A site previously used could be "reclaimed" in a single day, and he would direct volunteers in clearing away fallen branches and making any needed repairs to the plank seats. Preparing a new site, however, might take three or four days.

The banner year for camp meetings was 1811, when from 10 to 33 percent of the entire American population attended at least one.

Many camp meetings lasted six days or even nine days. Eventually, four days became the fixed number, with meetings beginning on Friday afternoon or evening and continuing until Monday noon. One proverb said, "The good people go to camp meetings Friday, backsliders Saturday, rowdies Saturday night, and gentlemen and lady sinners Sunday."

Many people at the early camp meetings displayed unusual physical manifestations: fainting, rolling, laughing, running, singing, dancing, and jerking—a spasmodic twitching of the entire body, where they hopped with head, limbs, and trunk shaking "as if they must ... fly asunder."

At some camp meetings, watchmen carrying long white sticks patrolled the meeting grounds each evening to stop any sexual mischief. Enemies of camp meetings sneered that "more souls were begot than saved."

Drinking was such a problem at camp meetings that some states prohibited sale of intoxicating beverages within a one- or two-mile radius of a meeting.

Experience taught circuit riders that "Christians enjoy those meetings most which cost them the greatest sacrifice." A fifty-mile journey was "a pretty sure pledge of a profitable meeting."

An observer describing the preaching of James McGready, an early leader of camp meetings, said, "Father McGready would so describe Heaven, that you would almost see its glories ... and he would so array hell and its horrors before the wicked, that they would tremble and quake, imagining a lake of fire and brimstone yawning to overwhelm them."

The "Great Revival" of the early 1800s began with an emphasis on Christian unity, with many denominations participating together. By 1810, the revival had resulted in at least two distinct splinters from the Presbyterian Church: The Christian Church and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

Defending camp meetings, James B. Finley said, "Much may be said about camp meetings, but, take them all in all, for practical exhibition of religion, for unbounded hospitality to strangers, for unfeigned and fervent spirituality, give me a country camp meeting against the world."

Methodist Francis Asbury (1745–1816) became one of the best known circuit riders in America. Letters addressed “Bishop Asbury, United States of America” were promptly delivered. Plagued by illness all his life, he continued to visit circuits even when he had to be tied to the saddle to remain upright.

The early American Methodists asked four questions about each candidate offering himself for the circuit riding ministry:

1. Is this man truly converted?
2. Does he know and keep our rules?
3. Can he preach acceptably?
4. Has he a horse?

Methodist circuit riders were also book distributors. Their commission on sales provided some of them with the only cash they ever saw. This helped spread Bibles, hymnbooks, and other religious literature throughout the frontier.

Peter Cartwright, long-time circuit rider in Illinois, was twice elected to the Illinois legislature. His one defeat was in the congressional race of 1846, when he lost to a lanky opponent by the name of Abraham Lincoln.

Beef or venison jerky was the circuit rider’s staple food because it would not spoil easily.

Riding a circuit was demanding on those who undertook this grueling ministry—half died before reaching age 33. Yet many ministers thrived on the rigors of the circuit. Peter Cartwright likely held the record for endurance: he enjoyed 71 years as an itinerant.

A circuit rider was expected to take good care of his horse. The First Discipline of the Methodist church said, “Be merciful to your Beast. Not only ride moderately, but see with your own eyes that your horse is rubbed and fed.”

When Francis Asbury came to the colonies in 1771, there were only 600 American Methodists. When he died 45 years later, there were 200,000 American Methodists. The number had grown from 1 in 5,000 to 1 in 40 of the total population of the country, largely because of camp meetings and circuit riders.

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Christianity on the Early American Frontier: From the Editor - Religion Untamed

Like a wild frontier camp meeting, this issue was not easily tamed. Formally, it's about camp meetings and circuit riders, which means it's mostly about Methodism, which means it's mostly about frontier Christianity from 1800 to 1840. Mostly.

Though camp meetings flourished as a Methodist institution, they captured America's imagination first after the Kentucky revivals of 1800–1801—primarily Presbyterian-sponsored affairs.

Though the Methodists exploded in numbers during this era, so did the Baptists and Disciples of Christ.

Though orthodox Christianity flourished, so did Mormonism, spiritualism, and Transcendentalism, among other religious experiments.

Though camp meetings were frontier institutions, they also made their way to the populated East.

In short, it's hard to capture the spiritual ferment that shook early America.

Such a phenomenon, of course, was not without its detractors. Speaking of camp meetings, historian Philip Schaff wrote in 1849, "There is a stamping and bouncing, jumping and falling, crying and howling, groaning and sighing, all praying in confusion, a rude singing of the most vulgar street songs, so that it must be loathing to an educated man, and fill the serious Christian with painful emotions."

On the other hand, with the benefit of 150 years of hindsight, Notre Dame historian Nathan Hatch can claim that early Methodism was "the most powerful religious movement in American history, its growth a central feature in the emergence of the United States as a republic."

We've included descriptions of wild excess and stories of lives transformed for Christ, because in early America, Christianity was both extraordinarily affective and effective. It was a time when religion roamed the American wilderness untamed.

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Revival at Cane Ridge

What exactly happened at the most important camp meeting in American history?

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Friday, August 6, 1801—wagons and carriages bounced along narrow Kentucky roads, kicking up dust and excitement as hundreds of men, women, and children pressed toward Cane Ridge, a church about 20 miles east of Lexington. They hungered to partake in what everyone felt was sure to be an extraordinary “Communion.”

By Saturday, things were extraordinary, and the news electrified this most populous region of the state; people poured in by the thousands. One traveler wrote a Baltimore friend that he was on his way to the “greatest meeting of its kind ever known” and that “religion has got to such a height here that people attend from a great distance; on this occasion I doubt not but there will be 10,000 people.”

He underestimated, but his miscalculation is understandable. Communion (annual three-to-five-day meetings climaxed with the Lord’s Supper) gathered people in the dozens, maybe the hundreds. At this Cane Ridge Communion, though, sometimes 20,000 people swirled about the grounds—watching, praying, preaching, weeping, groaning, falling. Though some stood at the edges and mocked, most left marveling at the wondrous hand of God.

The Cane Ridge Communion quickly became one of the best-reported events in American history, and according to Vanderbilt historian Paul Conkin, “arguably ... the most important religious gathering in all of American history.” It ignited the explosion of evangelical religion, which soon reached into nearly every corner of American life. For decades the prayer of camp meetings and revivals across the land was “Lord, make it like Cane Ridge.”

What was it about Cane Ridge that gripped the imagination? Exactly what happened there in the first summer of the new century?

Egyptian Darkness

Five years earlier, few would have predicted the Cane Ridge revival. Since the American Revolution, Christianity had been on the decline, especially on the frontier. Sporadic, scattered revivals—in Virginia in 1787–88, for example—dotted the landscape, but they were short-lived. Religious indifference seemed to be spreading.

On a trip to Tennessee in 1794, Methodist bishop Francis Asbury wrote anxiously about frontier settlers, “When I reflect that not one in a hundred came here to get religion, but rather to get plenty of good land, I think it will be well if some or many do not eventually lose their souls.”

Andrew Fulton, a Presbyterian missionary from Scotland, discovered in Nashville and in “all the newly formed towns in this western colony, there are few religious people.” The minutes of the frontier Transylvania Presbytery reveal deep concern about the “prevalence of vice & infidelity, the great apparent declension of true vital religion in too many places.”

Rampant alcoholism and avaricious land-grabbing were matched by the increasing popularity of both

universalism (the doctrine that all will be saved) and deism (the belief that God is uninvolved in the world). Methodist James Smith, traveling near Lexington in the autumn of 1795 feared that "the universalists, joining with the Deists, had given Christianity a deadly stab hereabouts."

Hyperbole, perhaps. Still, during the six years preceding 1800, the Methodist Church—most popular among the expanding middle and lower classes—declined in national membership from 67,643 to 61,351. In the 1790s the population of frontier Kentucky tripled, but the already meager Methodist membership decreased.

Churches and pastors did not merely wring their hands; they clasped them in prayer—at prayer meetings, at worship, and at national conventions. In 1798 the Presbyterian General Assembly asked that a day be set aside for fasting, humiliation, and prayer to redeem the frontier from "Egyptian darkness."

Church discipline was thrown into high gear. Church minute books record those excluded from fellowship for alcoholism, profanity, mistreatment of slaves, and sexual immorality. Some congregations were so exacting, they decimated their ranks. No matter, they said; sinning had to be stopped in order that God might again bless.

Divine Flame

All this anxiety, prayer, and discipline, though, were grounded in hope. None was sure when or where it would begin, but many were convinced that God would begin his work of revival. James Smith, after traveling through Kentucky, wrote, "I trust he [God] will yet bring good out of this evil, and that the glory of scriptural religion, [though] obscure for the present, will shine forth hereafter with redoubled luster."

The "glory of scriptural religion" began to "shine forth" in Kentucky when James McGready arrived in Logan County in 1798 to pastor three small congregations: the Red River, Gaspar River, and Muddy River churches. He brought with him from North Carolina a well-deserved reputation for fiery preaching. He was a large, imposing man with piercing eyes and a voice coarse and tremulous. Barton Stone, pastor of the Cane Ridge Church, said of McGready after hearing him preach, "My mind was chained by him, and followed him closely in his rounds of heaven, earth, and hell with feelings indescribable."

McGready's preaching so stirred his congregations that when the Red River church sponsored its annual Communion in June 1800, the spiritual climate was charged. Local ministers were invited to participate, as were Presbyterian William McGee and his Methodist brother John, whose preaching had been exciting churches in Tennessee.

Friday, Saturday, and Sunday passed quietly and reverently—as these Presbyterian Communion services were wont to go. On Monday, though, as one local minister preached, a woman who had long sought assurance for her salvation began shouting and singing. The preacher concluded his sermon, and all the ministers left the church—except for the McGee brothers. Presbyterian William sat on the floor near the pulpit and began weeping. Soon the congregation was weeping, seeking full security for salvation.

Methodist John rose to preach; a witness said he exhorted people to let "the Lord God omnipotent reign in their hearts, and to submit to him." People began to cry and shout.

Then the woman who had first started shouting let out a shrill of anguish. Methodist John McGee, seemingly entranced, made his way to comfort her. Someone (probably his Presbyterian brother) reminded him this was a Presbyterian church; the congregation would not condone emotionalism! Later John recalled, "I turned to go back and was near falling; the power of God was strong upon me. I turned again and, losing sight of the fear of man, I went through the house shouting and exhorting with all possible ecstasy and energy, and the floor was soon covered with the slain"—people were falling in ecstasy.

The News Spreads

McGready and the other ministers, convinced this was the work of God, laid plans for another sacramental service, to be held at the Gaspar River Church the following month. McGready took pains to circulate the news, but a media campaign was hardly necessary. Speaking of the hundreds who flocked to Gaspar River, one minister said, "The news of the strange operations which had transpired at the previous meeting had run throughout the country in every direction, carrying a high degree of excitement to the minds of almost every character."

More people began arriving than could be accommodated by the host church's families, but most came prepared to encamp. (Though large outdoor meetings had a long history, this was probably the first "camp meeting"—though the term was not coined for another two years.)

Friday and most of Saturday passed in a solemn manner, but on Saturday night, just after the last sermon was finished, two women began talking excitedly about how God had entered them, and soon, wrote McGready, "Sinners [were] lying powerless in every part of the house, praying and crying for mercy." All night long, ministers attended to distressed and desperate penitents.

Sunday morning's sermon also evoked groans and cries, and at night, with the pulpit illuminated by flaming torches, William McGee exhorted with all the energy and oratory he could muster. "Towards the close of the sermon, the cries of the distressed arose almost as loud as his voice," McGready wrote. "After the congregation was dismissed the solemnity increased. ... No person seemed to wish to go home—hunger and sleep seemed to affect nobody—eternal things were the vast concern."

In the succeeding months, camp meeting revivals spread through Kentucky and Tennessee: at Muddy River, Mr. Craighead's church, Clay-lick, Little Muddy Creek, Montgomery's Meetinghouse, and Hopewell. Each seemed more dramatic than the last. As 1800 drew to a close, John McGee reported that at Desha's Creek, "Many thousands of people attended. The mighty power and mercy of God was manifested. The people fell before the Word, like corn before a storm of wind, and many rose from the dust with divine glory shining in their countenances."

"The excitement created by these reports," recalled Methodist James B. Finley, "was of the most intense and astonishing character." The movement was marked by "some peculiarities" he admitted, and then added, "The nearest approximation to it ... was the revival on the day of Pentecost."

Revival Comes to Cane Ridge

Presbyterian Barton W. Stone, pastor of the Concord and Cane Ridge churches, traveled to witness one of these revivals for himself. He returned in that spring of 1801 overwhelmed.

"The scene to me was new and passing strange. ... Many, very many fell down, as men slain in battle, and continued for hours together in an apparently breathless and motionless state—sometimes for a few moments reviving, and exhibiting symptoms of life by a deep groan, or piercing shriek, or by a prayer for mercy most fervently uttered. ... With astonishment did I hear men, women, and children declaring the wonderful works of God."

When he described his experiences to the Cane Ridge Church, the congregation was "affected with awful solemnity, and many returned home weeping." That evening, when he spoke at the Concord church, two little girls fell in a faint. After a brief revival ensued at Concord, Stone scheduled a Communion at Cane Ridge the first weekend in August.

The Cane Ridge meeting house sat on the gentle slopes of a large hill covered with bamboo—the cane that gave the ridge its name—and scattered clumps of trees. The simple meeting house could hold 500 (standing room), but the congregation had recently erected a large tent, perhaps to accommodate the anticipated crowds.

But as Friday, August 6 ensued, it was clear no one had adequately anticipated the numbers. The Cane Ridge families opened their homes to the neighboring families who customarily attended the annual Cane Ridge Communion. Wealthier families might take in three or four such families; still, children and even adults had to sleep on the floor or in barns. A dozen people might sleep in a single room in a small cabin. Some thoughtful farmers left fields unpastured or left hay uncut in order to feed visitors' horses. But as the visitors grew from hundreds into thousands, local hospitality was swamped. Many visitors had to find lodging miles away, though some came prepared to camp.

Friday evening it rained, which held back the crowds, but still the meetinghouse was packed. Barton Stone, as host pastor, probably gave the opening welcome, followed by a sermon by Matthew Houston, a colleague. The air was thick with expectancy, but nothing extraordinary occurred, though some lingered all night in prayer.

Sabotaged Saturday

At a typical Communion, Saturday was mostly devoted to fasting and small-group prayer as people solemnly prepared themselves for Sunday's Communion. The growing mob, which now numbered in the thousands, sabotaged the routine.

The Saturday morning services had been quiet—the proverbial lull before a storm. But by afternoon, the preaching was continual, from both the meetinghouse and the tent. One wild, young minister, Richard McNemar, proclaimed in ecstasy a "true new gospel," an expression that startled some ministers but fascinated the crowds. Excitement mounted, and amid smoke and sweat, the camp erupted in noise: the cries and shouts of the penitent, the crying of babies, the shrieking of children, and the neighing of horses.

Then the tumultuous bodily "exercises" began. Along with the shouting and crying, some began falling. Some experienced only weakened knees or a light head (including Governor James Garrard). Others fell but remained conscious or talkative; a few fell into a deep coma, displaying the symptoms of a grand mal seizure or a type of hysteria. Though only a minority fell, some parts of the grounds were strewn like a battlefield.

Some were attended to where they fell; others were carried to a convenient place, where people would gather around them to pray and sing hymns. "If they [the fallen] speak," one reported, "what they say is attended to, being very solemn and affecting—many are struck under such exhortations."

Then something even more strange occurred, later to be called "the jerks." One witness described those afflicted: "Their heads would jerk back suddenly, frequently causing them to yelp, or make some other involuntary noise. ... Sometimes the head would fly every way so quickly that their features could not be recognized. I have seen their heads fly back and forward so quickly that the hair of females would be made to crack like a carriage whip, but not very loud."

As dark descended, camp fires cast large shadows against the trees; candles, lamps, and torches illumined the camp as hundreds moved to and fro, "like Gideon's army"; preachers shouted sermons from the tent as people exhorted from the ground; some chanted hymns, others ecstatic hosannas—and always the mournful wailing for sin. "The noise was like the roar of Niagara," wrote a participant. "The vast sea of human beings seemed to be agitated as if by a storm."

The most extravagant exercises were mocked at this and later revivals, even though they were restricted

to a relative few. Still, by Saturday evening, even the ministers were troubled by the tumult. None were opposed to the exercises per se, but some, like John Lyle, believed it wrong for preachers to coax such emotionalism by hysterical preaching. Lyle was especially puzzled by Barton Stone, the host pastor. He was not a wild preacher, like some, but he did nothing to restrain the wilder preachers.

The distress and confusion were so widespread even the young enthusiast McNemar was worried. Lyle, McNemar, and Matthew Houston started preaching unscheduled nighttime sermons from the tent, which helped calm the crowds. But they didn't lower the level of spiritual anxiety.

Confusion Reigns

Early Sunday morning, relative calm reigned, though some had been up most of the night. The central purpose of the gathering—the Communion—took place as scheduled in the meetinghouse. The minister of a nearby congregation preached the traditional sermon outside, and then those with Communion tokens went inside for the sacrament. The tables, set up in the shape of a cross in the aisles, could probably accommodate 100 at a time. Over the ensuing hours, hundreds were served. Lyle wrote that he had "clearer views of divine things than ... before" as he partook, and that he felt "uncommonly tender" as he spoke.

Still, it must have been a distracted Communion for the Presbyterians, for outside the tumult began again. Some Methodists resented their exclusion from the meetinghouse and the tent. So William Burke, one of Methodism's most powerful and esteemed preachers, planted himself on a fallen tree, fifteen feet above ground, and began Methodist services. His opening prayers and hymns alone gained him a huge audience.

Burke's was but one of four centers of activity, including the tent, the meetinghouse, and an assembly of blacks that met apart. In addition, dozens of informal prayer groups clustered at camp sites. Although only ministers preached prepared sermons, literally hundreds of people became spontaneous exhorters, excitedly giving spiritual advice or tearful warnings. Almost anyone—women, small children, slaves, the shy, the illiterate—could exhort with great effect.

One 7-year-old girl mounted a man's shoulders and spoke wondrous words until she was completely fatigued. When she lay her head on his as if to sleep, someone in the audience suggested "the poor thing" had better be laid down to rest. The girl roused and said, "Don't call me poor, for Christ is my brother, God my father, and I have a kingdom to inherit, and therefore do not call me poor, for I am rich in the blood of the Lamb!"

Exhortations increased, the moaning more intense. Hymn singing, which affected people most deeply, became even louder. Unrestrained exercises resumed. Preachers could hardly be heard. Confusion reigned:

"Sinners dropping down on every hand, shrieking, groaning, crying for mercy, convoluted," one witness said, "professors [believers] praying, agonizing, fainting, falling down in distress for sinners, or in raptures of joy! Some singing, some shouting, clapping their hands, hugging and even kissing, laughing; others talking to the distressed, to one another, or to opposers of the work, and all this at once."

Fatigued ministers were in constant demand to attend the slain, to pray with the distressed, and to calm the hysterical. As dark descended and the night grew late, the cacophony continued and then began to trail off. Still, some stayed up all night, grabbing sleep whenever they could, arising later for more prayer and exhortation and singing.

Beyond Calculation

By Monday, food and supplies were running short, and appointments had to be kept, forcing many families to cut short their stay. But the momentum could not be stopped. Arrivals, some coming from

great distances after hearing of the revival, continued to flood the grounds. Ministers who had gone home to preach at their churches on Sunday returned to minister to the many people in distress.

For four more days, the singing, praying, preaching, and falling continued, slowly dribbling to a stop on Thursday.

Few could comprehend, let alone describe, what had happened. Barton Stone said, "A particular description of this meeting would fill a large volume, and then the half would not be told."

Nor could anyone get a handle on the numbers. Estimates of attendance ran between 10,000 and 25,000; estimates of the slain from 1,000 to 3,000; estimates of those who took Communion from 800 to 3,000; estimates of conversions, from 1,000 to 3,000.

This much is clear. Religion suddenly became the talk of the region and nation. Traveling to Lexington a year later, one man reported that he heard "little else than the great revival of religion." Such was the continued enthusiasm, he said he "felt much anxiety lest I should fall down when amongst them"!

Face to Face

In many ways, Cane Ridge was a very human affair. At times, emotional excess reigned, and the revival split denominations and gave birth to not a few sects. It's also clear, as historians have shown, that powerful social and cultural forces played a large role at Cane Ridge.

Yet the Christian historian cannot help but see something else at work. What appeared at Cane Ridge looks startlingly like the events of the Great Awakening of the 1740s, and of the revivals in medieval Europe, and of the day of Pentecost in first-century Jerusalem. All were moments when people fell and whirled and praised and groaned, when faith and culture and passion were tossed together in a wild, messy, and unimaginable way—when people, at least momentarily, no longer saw God through a glass darkly but face to face.

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Piercing Screams and Heavenly Smiles

An eyewitness account of signs and wonders at early camp meetings.

Barton W. Stone

Over his lifetime, Barton Stone witnessed the many bodily "exercises" of frontier revivals. In his 1847 autobiography, he described the forms that religious ecstasy took. A condensed excerpt:

Falling

The falling exercise was very common among all classes, the saints and sinners of every age and every grade, from the philosopher to the clown. The subject of this exercise would, generally, with a piercing scream, fall like a log on the floor, earth, or mud, and appear as dead.

At a meeting, two gay young ladies, sisters, both fell, with a shriek of distress, and lay for more than an hour apparently in a lifeless state. At length they began to exhibit symptoms of life, by crying fervently for mercy, and then relapsed into the same death-like state, with an awful gloom on their countenances. After awhile, the gloom on the face of one was succeeded by a heavenly smile, and she cried out, "Precious Jesus!" and rose up and spoke of the love of God.

The Jerks

Sometimes the subject of the jerks would be affected in some one member of the body, and sometimes in the whole system. When the head alone was affected, it would be jerked backward and forward, or from side to side, so quickly that the features of the face could not be distinguished. When the whole system was affected, I have seen the person stand in one place, and jerk backward and forward in quick succession, their head nearly touching the floor behind and before.

Dancing

The dancing exercise generally began with the jerks, then the jerks would cease. The smile of heaven shone on the countenance of the subject, and assimilated to angels appeared the whole person. Sometimes the motion was quick and sometimes slow. Thus they continued to move forward and backward in the same track or alley till nature seemed exhausted, and they would fall prostrate on the floor or earth.

Barking

The barking exercise (as opposers contemptuously called it) was nothing but the jerks. A person affected with the jerks would often make a grunt, or bark, if you please, from the suddenness of the jerk.

Laughing

It was a loud, hearty laughter, but one [that] excited laughter in none else. The subject appeared rapturously solemn, and his laughter excited solemnity in saints and sinners. It is truly indescribable.

Running

The running exercise was nothing more than that persons [who,] feeling something of these bodily agitations, through fear, attempted to run away and thus escape from them. But it commonly happened that they ran not far before they fell or became so greatly agitated that they could proceed no farther.

Singing

The singing exercise is more unaccountable than anything else I ever saw. The subject in a very happy state of mind would sing most melodiously, not from the mouth or nose, but entirely in the breast, the sounds issuing thence. Such music silenced everything, and attracted the attention of all. It was most heavenly. None could ever be tired of hearing it.

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A Bird's-Eye View of a Camp Meeting

the Editors

By the late 1830s, camp meetings had become formalized—as the very existence of this printing shows. Sing Sing, now Ossining, New York (just north of New York City, on the Hudson River) was a major Methodist camp-meeting site in the early 1800s. This commemorative, which was given to participants afterward, reveals a great deal about camp meetings of this period.

This meeting was well planned by a large general committee, and was both a spiritual and social occasion—note the list of New York participants (the Joseph Smith named is not the one of Mormon fame). Between the morning, afternoon, and evening preaching times, men talked politics, women shared recipes, and young people courted.

At the same time, camp meetings were a segregated affair. Tents here are arranged by church, city, and region. During the meetings, men and women sat on different aisles; if there were African-Americans in attendance, they would have met separately. In addition, the benches around the stand—an area called “the pen”—were set off by a rail and reserved for mourners, those seeking salvation.

The police committee is also noted. They watched for thieves and vandals, and they enforced the camp-meeting rules. The rules came from years of experience and attempted to foil sexual escapades and anything else that would detract from things spiritual.

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Wrestling with God and Man

Dramatic accounts from the frontier's most popular autobiography.

Peter Cartwright

A Soul's Solemn Struggle

Peter Cartwright (1785–1872) was famous for his camp-meeting exploits even before he wrote his 1857 Autobiography—but afterward, even more so. In it he recounts his long and flamboyant ministry on the frontier. Whether in person or in print, he was a magnificent storyteller.

His Autobiography tells us not only about Cartwright, but also about his era. For example, his lengthy, anguished conversion was not untypical; it illustrates how spiritual matters were of grave concern in his day. An excerpt:

Camp-meeting conversion. In 1801, Presbyterians of southern Kentucky organized a "Communion." "To this meeting I repaired," wrote Peter Cartwright, "a guilty, wretched sinner." But before it was through, "unspeakable joy sprung up in my soul."

Gloomy thoughts of wretchedness

In 1801, when I was in my sixteenth year, my father, my eldest half-brother, and [I] attended a wedding about five miles from home, where there was a great deal of drinking and dancing, which was very common at marriages in those days. I drank little or nothing; my delight was in dancing. After a late hour in the night, we mounted our horses and started for home. I was riding my racehorse.

A few minutes after we had put up the horses and were sitting by the fire, I began to reflect on the manner in which I had spent the day and evening. I felt guilty and condemned. I rose and walked the floor. My mother was in bed. It seemed to me, all of a sudden, my blood rushed to my head, my heart palpitated, in a few minutes I turned blind; an awful impression rested on my mind that death had come, and I was unprepared to die. I fell on my knees and began to ask God to have mercy on me.

My mother sprang from her bed, and was soon on her knees by my side, praying for me, and exhorting me to look to Christ for mercy, and then and there I promised the Lord that if he would spare me, I would seek and serve him. My mother prayed for me a long time. At length we lay down, but there was little sleep for me.

Next morning I rose feeling wretched beyond expression. I tried to read in the Testament and retired many times to secret prayer through the day but found no relief. I gave up my racehorse to my father and requested him to sell him. I went and brought my pack of cards and gave them to Mother, who threw them into the fire, and they were consumed. I fasted, watched, and prayed, and engaged in regular reading of the Testament. I was so distressed and miserable that I was incapable of any regular business.

My father was greatly distressed on my account, thinking I must die and he would lose his only son. He bade me retire altogether from business and take care of myself.

Soon it was noised abroad that I was distracted, and many of my associates in wickedness came to see me, to try and divert my mind from those gloomy thoughts of my wretchedness, but all in vain. I exhorted them to desist from the course of wickedness which we had been guilty of together.

The class-leader and local preacher were sent for. They tried to point me to the bleeding Lamb; they prayed for me most fervently. Still I found no comfort, and although I had never believed in the doctrine of unconditional election and reprobation, I was sorely tempted to believe I was a reprobate and doomed and lost eternally, without any chance of salvation.

Flashes of light

At length one day, I retired to the horse-lot and was walking and wringing my hands in great anguish, trying to pray, on the borders of utter despair. It appeared to me that I heard a voice from heaven, saying, "Peter, look at me." A feeling of relief flashed over me as quick as an electric shock.

It gave me hopeful feeling, and some encouragement to seek mercy, but still my load of guilt remained. I repaired to the house, and told my mother what had happened to me in the horse-lot. Instantly she seemed to understand it and told me the Lord had done this to encourage me to hope for mercy, and exhorted me to take encouragement and seek on, and God would bless me with the pardon of my sins at another time.

Some days after this, I retired to a cave on my father's farm to pray in secret. My soul was in an agony; I wept, I prayed, and said, "Now, Lord, if there is mercy for me, let me find it," and it really seemed to me that I could almost lay hold of the Savior, and realize a reconciled God.

All of a sudden, such a fear of the Devil fell upon me that it really appeared to me that he was surely personally there, to seize and drag me down to hell, soul and body, and such a horror fell on me that I sprang to my feet and ran to my mother at the house. My mother told me this was a device of Satan to prevent me from finding the blessing then. Three months rolled away, and still I did not find the blessing of the pardon of my sins.

In the spring, Mr. McGready, a minister of the Presbyterian church, who had a congregation and meetinghouse about three miles north of my father's house, appointed a sacramental meeting in this congregation. As there was a great waking up among the churches from the revival that had broken out, many flocked to [such meetings]. The church would not hold the tenth part of the congregation. Accordingly the officers of the church erected a stand in a contiguous shady grove and prepared seats for a large congregation.

The people crowded to this meeting from far and near. They came in their large wagons, with victuals mostly prepared. The women slept in the wagons, and the men under them. Many stayed on the ground night and day for a number of nights and days together. Others were provided for among the neighbors around. The power of God was wonderfully displayed; scores of sinners fell under the preaching, like men slain in mighty battle; Christians shouted aloud for joy.

To this meeting I repaired—a guilty, wretched sinner. On the Saturday evening, I went with weeping multitudes and bowed before the stand and earnestly prayed for mercy. In the midst of a solemn struggle of soul, an impression was made on my mind, as though a voice said to me, "Thy sins are all forgiven thee." Divine light flashed all round me, unspeakable joy sprung up in my soul.

I rose to my feet, opened my eyes, and it really seemed as if I was in heaven—the trees, the leaves on them, and everything, I really thought, were praising God. My mother raised the shout, my Christian friends crowded around me and joined me in praising God. And though I have been since then, in many

instances, unfaithful, yet I have never, for one moment, doubted that the Lord did, then and there, forgive my sins and give me religion.

Driving Off the Mormons

Cartwright was the prototype of the rough, battling circuit rider, as this excerpt shows. It also shows the frontier as a religious free market, where dynamic leaders and groups—Baptists, Shakers, Mormons, among others—competed fiercely for souls.

"It fell to my lot to become acquainted with Joe Smith personally," Cartwright says, speaking of the Mormon founder. He then recounts their meeting.

Great debate

I found him to be a very illiterate and impudent desperado in morals, but, at the same time, he had a vast fund of low cunning.

In the first place, he made his onset on me by flattery, and he laid on the soft sodder thick and fast. He expressed great and almost unbounded pleasure in the high privilege of becoming acquainted with me, one of whom he had heard so many great and good things. And he had no doubt I was one among God's noblest creatures, an honest man.

He believed that among all the churches in the world the Methodist was the nearest right, and that, as far as they went, they were right. But they had stopped short by not claiming the gift of tongues, of prophecy, and of miracles, and then quoted a batch of Scripture to prove his positions correct.

Upon the whole, he did pretty well for clumsy Joe. I gave him rope, as the sailors say, and, indeed, I seemed to lay this plattering unction pleurably to my soul.

"Indeed," said Joe, "if the Methodists would only advance a step or two further, they would take the world. And if you would come in and go with us, we could sweep not only the Methodist church, but all others, and you would be looked up to as one of the Lord's greatest prophets. You would be honored by countless thousands, and have of the good things of this world all that heart could wish."

I then began to inquire into some of the tenets of the Latter-Day Saints. He explained. I criticized his explanations till, unfortunately, we got into high debate.

The next pass he made at me was to move upon my fears. He said that in all ages of the world, the good and right way was evil spoken of, and that it was an awful thing to fight against God.

"Now," said he, "if you will go with me to Nauvoo, I will show you many living witnesses that will testify that they were, by the saints, cured of blindness, lameness, deafness, dumbness, and all the diseases that human flesh is heir to. And I will show you," said he, "that we have the gift of tongues, and can speak in unknown languages, and that the saints can drink any deadly poison, and it will not hurt them." [He] closed by saying, "The idle stories you hear about us are nothing but sheer persecution."

"This is my camp meeting"

I then gave him the following history of an encounter I had at a camp meeting in Morgan County, some time before, with some of his Mormons, and assured him I could prove all I said by thousands that were present.

The camp meeting was numerously attended, and we had a good and gracious work of religion going on among the people. On Saturday there came some 20 or 30 Mormons to the meeting. During the intermission after the 11:00 sermon, they collected in one corner of the encampment and began to sing, and they sang well. As fast as the people rose from their dinners, they drew up to hear the singing, until a large company surrounded them.

At length (according, I have no doubt, to a preconcerted plan) an old lady Mormon began to shout, and after shouting a while, she swooned away and fell into the arms of her husband. The old man proclaimed that his wife had gone into a trance, and that when she came to, she would speak in an unknown tongue and he would interpret. This proclamation produced considerable excitement, and the multitude crowded thick around. Presently the old lady arose and began to speak in an unknown tongue, sure enough.

Just then my attention was called to the matter. I saw in one moment that the whole maneuver was intended to bring the Mormons into notice and break up the good of our meeting.

I advanced instantly toward the crowd and asked the people to give way and let me in to this old lady, who was then being held in the arms of her husband. I came right up to them and took hold of her arm, and ordered her peremptorily to hush that gibberish, that I would have no more of it, that it was presumptuous and blasphemous nonsense. I stopped very suddenly her unknown tongue.

She opened her eyes, took me by the hand, and said, "My dear friend, I have a message directly from God to you."

I stopped her short and said, "I will have none of your message. If God can speak through no better medium than an old, hypocritical, lying woman, I will hear nothing of it!"

Her husband, who was to be the interpreter of her message, flew into a mighty rage, and said, "Sir, this is my wife, and I will defend her at the risk of my life!"

I replied, "Sir, this is my camp meeting, and I will maintain the good order of it at the risk of my life. If this is your wife, take her off from here, and clear yourselves in five minutes, or I will have you under guard."

The old lady slipped out and was off quickly. The old man stayed a little and began to pour a tirade of abuse on me. I stopped him short and said, "Not another word of abuse from you, sir. I have no doubt you are an old thief, and if your back was examined, no doubt you carry the marks of the cowhide for your villainy."

And sure enough, as if I had spoken by inspiration, he, in some of the old states, had been lashed to the whipping post for stealing. To cap the climax, a young gentleman stepped up and said he had no doubt all I said of this old man was true, and much more, for he had caught him stealing corn out of his father's crib.

By this time, such was the old man's excitement that great drops of sweat ran down his face, and he called out, "Don't crowd me, gentlemen; it is mighty warm."

Said I, "Open the way, gentlemen, and let him out." When the way was opened, I cried, "Now start, and don't show your face here again, nor one of the Mormons. If you do, you will get Lynch's law."

They all disappeared, and our meeting went on prosperously; a great many were converted to God.

Wrath boiled over

My friend Joe Smith became very restive before I got through with my narrative. And when I closed, his wrath boiled over, and he cursed me in the name of his God and said, "I will show you, sir, that I will raise up a government in these United States which will overturn the present government, and I will raise up a new religion that will overturn every other form of religion in this country!"

"Yes," said I, "Uncle Joe; but my Bible tells me 'the bloody and deceitful man shall not live out half his days,' and I expect the Lord will send the Devil after you some of these days and take you out of the way."

"No, sir," said he; "I shall live and prosper, while you will die in your sins."

"Well, sir," said I, "if you live and prosper, you must quit your stealing and abominable whoredoms!"

Thus we parted, to meet no more on earth; for in a few years after this, an outraged and deeply injured people took the law into their own hands and killed him, and drove the Mormons from the state.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Holy, 'Knock-'Em-Down' Preachers

In 1802, 26-year-old Jacob Young began a new Methodist preaching circuit along the Green River, a vast and growing region of central Kentucky. Knowing he could count on little help from his supervising elder (a millwright who divided his time between his craft and itinerant preaching), Young devised his own strategy for evangelizing the region:

"I concluded to travel five miles, as nearly as I could guess, then stop, reconnoiter the neighborhood, and find some kind person who would let me preach in his log cabin, and so on till I had performed the entire round."

Near the end of one dreary day, Young came upon a solitary cabin in the woods. He spotted a woman in the doorway and asked for lodging, but the woman refused. Desperate, Young exclaimed, "I am a Methodist preacher, sent by Bishop Asbury to try to form a circuit."

"This information appeared to electrify her," recalled Young. "Her countenance changed, and her eyes fairly sparkled. She stood for some time without speaking, and then exclaimed, 'La, me! Has a Methodist preacher come at last?'"

The family were North Carolina Methodists recently migrated to Kentucky. Their home soon became a regular preaching appointment on Young's circuit.

This eager reception of a Methodist circuit rider was repeated over and over again in the late 1700s and early 1800s, so much so that Methodism experienced remarkable growth.

Early circuit riders were a different kind of clergy than had ever been seen in America, serving a rapidly expanding and spiritually hungry nation. They pursued their calling with remarkable zeal, forever changing the style and tone of American religion.

What was a circuit rider's life like? And what was their collective impact?

Virtual Miracle

Along with the Baptists, the Methodists were among the fastest growing churches in post-Revolutionary America. Between 1770 and 1820, American Methodists achieved a virtual miracle of growth, rising from fewer than 1,000 members to more than 250,000. In 1775, fewer than one out of every 800 Americans was a Methodist; by 1812, Methodists numbered one out of every 36 Americans. At mid-century, American Methodism was almost ten times the size of the Congregationalists, America's largest denomination in 1776.

Key to the Methodist success was a dedicated contingent of itinerant preachers, or circuit riders. In this era, most Americans lived on widely scattered farms or in tiny, often remote villages. In 1795, 95 percent of Americans lived in places with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants; by 1830 this proportion was still 91 percent. Itinerant ministry provided preaching, the sacraments, and church structure to communities that would not otherwise have been able to attract or afford a minister.

In 1790, the Methodist preacher Freeborn Garrettson noted that in New York, thousands “in the back settlements, who were not able to give an hundred [pounds] a year to a minister ... may now hear a sermon at least once in two weeks; sometimes oftener”—thanks to the presence of Methodist circuit riders.

In many areas, the pace of settlement simply outran the resources of the older denominations. In 1770, the territories that would eventually become Georgia, Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee contained only about 40,000 people of European or African descent. By 1810, the combined population of these same regions was over 1 million. In many of these rapidly growing regions, the Methodists held the only religious services for miles around.

The Methodist Difference

In contrast to the mobility of the Methodist itinerants, New England clergy traditionally held lifetime tenure in a single parish. Of the 550 graduates of Yale College who entered the Congregationalist ministry between 1702 and 1794, a remarkable 71 percent ministered for their entire career in only one church. In colonial New England, both pastor and people saw ordination as a long-term commitment to a single congregation. Nothing could have been more foreign to the Methodist concept of an itinerant ministry.

Educationally and socially, the early Methodist preachers were cut from the same fabric as the farm and artisan families who made up the bulk of their audiences. Unlike their college-educated Congregationalist, and Presbyterian counterparts, the early circuit riders began ministry with a natural social affinity with their listeners.

The typical circuit rider was a young, single man who hailed from an artisan background, who himself had already moved several times from one village or town to the next, but whose life had been abruptly transformed by a dramatic conversion experience. Before turning to preaching, Bishop Francis Asbury (Methodism’s most influential early leader) had been a blacksmith, and most of the other preachers had been carpenters, shoemakers, hatters, tanners, millers, shopkeepers, school teachers, sailors, and so on.

In many cases, the only real distinction between a Methodist preacher and his audience was which side of the pulpit each was on. Almost none of the first- or second-generation itinerants had anything more than a common school education. Up to 1800, even a full-time itinerant’s salary was limited to a paltry \$64 a year. In that year, it was increased to \$80 a year for an unmarried preacher. By comparison, the average annual income of a Congregationalist minister in 1800 was \$400.

Ministry on the Move

A typical Methodist itinerant was responsible for a predominantly rural circuit, 200 to 500 miles in circumference. He was expected to complete this circuit every two to six weeks, with the standard being a four weeks’ circuit. His partner, if he had one, usually did not travel with him, but either followed or preceded him on the circuit. Hence, on a four weeks’ circuit, the people could expect preaching about every two weeks, but only rarely from a circuit rider on a Sunday.

On rural circuits, the itinerants made preaching appointments for nearly every day of the week, sometimes both morning and evening, with only a few days per month allotted for rest, reflection, and letter writing. Circuit riders were urged to preach at 5:00 a.m. in the summer and 6:00 a.m. in the winter.

The itinerants usually met and examined the classes (weekly small-group gatherings of one or two dozen people) at each appointment—all of which could take three to four hours a day, apart from traveling. Quarterly meetings, held at a centralized location, added variety to this routine, and beginning in the early 1800s, camp meetings often replaced one of the quarterly meetings.

Boiling Hot Religion

Early Methodist sermons emphasized the practical, the immediate, and the dramatic. "People love the preacher who makes them feel," observed Methodist preacher Thomas Ware. The typical circuit rider preached from a basic set of Scripture texts embellished with anecdotes and analogies from everyday life. The few expository skills he used were largely gleaned from the sermons of colleagues. But he also learned to preach with what the itinerant Henry Smith referred to as an irresistible "holy 'knock-'em-down' power."

Nothing would have been more anathema to Methodist itinerants than the dispassionate reading of a prepared sermon. They preached extemporaneously, without notes or manuscript. As Bishop Asbury once urged one of his preachers, "Feel for the power; feel for the power, brother."

Circuit riders were both familiar and frightening, homespun heralds of a gospel that was attuned to everyday life yet unsettling in its larger implications. This approach led one contemporary to call early Methodism "a boiling hot religion."

The preaching of John A. Granade is an extreme but telling example. Born in North Carolina about the time of the American Revolution, as a young man Granade became "perfectly reckless," rambling through Kentucky and the Cumberland country (an Appalachian region in Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee) before settling in South Carolina to teach school. Distressed over his spiritual condition, Granade made his way to Tennessee, where for two years he was plagued by "voices" and "tormenting whispers."

Day and night, through snow and rain, during the winter and spring of 1797–1798, Granade wandered about the woods "howling, praying, and roaring in such a manner that he was generally reputed to be crazy." Throughout the western states he was known as the "wild man."

Finally converted at a camp meeting, Granade immediately channeled his spiritual energy into preaching. "I would sing a song or pray or exhort a few minutes," Granade later recalled, "and the fire would break out among the people, and the slain of the Lord everywhere were many." Crowds began to follow him from place to place, "singing and shouting all along the road." Some claimed Granade had a secret powder that he threw over the people to enchant them, and others believed he worked "some secret trick by which he threw them down." At one meeting, so many people fainted and "lay in such heaps that it was feared they would suffocate."

Baptizing Common Places

American Methodists soon redefined sacred space. By 1785, only 60 Methodist chapels had been purchased or built, but there were more than 800 recognized preaching places. Meetings were held in homes (where the majority of weekday sermons were delivered), courthouses, schoolhouses, the meeting houses of other denominations, barns, or in the open.

While riding the St. Lawrence circuit in 1813, Benjamin Paddock regularly preached in a dry goods store in Potsdam, New York. Likewise, Robert R. Roberts once preached in a tavern in northwestern Pennsylvania, though not without difficulty. Partway through Roberts's discourse, a drunkard in the audience awoke, calling out, "Landlord, give me a grog!" When Roberts protested granting the man's request, the tavern owner replied, "Mr. Roberts, you appear to be doing well; I would thank you to mind your own business, and I will mine."

Grueling Pace

The early circuit riders preached and traveled at a grueling pace. John Brooks, for example, labored so

intensely during his first three years in the itinerancy that he reported, "I lost my health and broke a noble constitution." During one tempestuous revival, Brooks lay "sick in bed," but the people "literally forced me out, and made me preach."

In 1799, itinerant Billy Hibbard rode the Cambridge, New York, circuit, a 500-mile, four-week circuit with up to 63 preaching appointments, in addition to the responsibility of meeting the classes. In one year on the Flanders, New Jersey, circuit, Thomas Smith estimated he traveled 4,200 miles, preached 324 times, exhorted 64 times, and met classes 287 times. Indeed, in many parts of the new nation, Methodist preachers suddenly seemed to be everywhere, leading one New Yorker to exclaim in 1788, "I know not from whence they all come, unless from the clouds."

Circuit riders also frequently had to contend with poor or uncertain lodging. Most often the itinerants stayed with sympathetic families along their routes, though they sometimes lodged at inns or slept in the open.

At the end of one weary day in the North Carolina back country, the itinerant Thomas Ware sought shelter at the isolated cabin of a young couple.

"The man gave me to understand, at once, that I could not stay there," recounted Ware. "I looked at him, and smiling, said, that would depend upon our comparative strength." Unwilling to wrestle the Methodist preacher, the couple relented—and in the morning Ware baptized their children.

Bishop Francis Asbury set the standard for all early Methodist itinerants and left little doubt as to what he expected from his charges. During his 45-year career, Asbury, who never married, rode more than a quarter of a million miles on horseback and crossed the Allegheny Mountains some 60 times. He visited nearly every state once a year. One biographer estimates that Asbury stayed in 10,000 households and preached 17,000 sermons.

Common Heroes

Following Asbury's example, the Methodist circuit riders transformed religious life on the early American frontier.

After devising a strategy for evangelizing central Kentucky, for example, youthful Jacob Young set out. On most days, he managed to find a place to preach. On one occasion, Young preached in a bar room. Several times he found groups already gathered, eagerly awaiting the rumored appearance of a preacher. Wherever possible, Young established weekly class meetings to carry on in his absence.

At a place called Fishing Creek, Young discovered a Methodist society under the leadership of an African-American slave named Jacob. With the assistance of several local women, Jacob preached regularly and had organized a class meeting. Young was impressed with what he saw. Though Jacob was illiterate, Young noted that he "could preach a pretty good sermon," and that "his society [was] in excellent order."

Within three weeks, Young had forged enough appointments for a four weeks' circuit. By the end of the conference year, Young had taken in 301 new members, receiving all of \$30 for his labors.

Once after Jacob had preached, a man began shouting at the top of his voice, "Young Whitefield! Young Whitefield!"—comparing him to the great eighteenth-century evangelist.

Recalled Young, "I thought I was one of the happiest mortals that breathed vital air."

And so were the many families he ministered to—those for whom Methodism became a pillar of their lives.

Christianity on the Early American Frontier: A Gallery of Trendsetters in the Religious Wilderness

Barton Warren Stone
(1772–1844)
The Bible-only man

"The Bible only" was the rallying cry of Barton Warren Stone, a cry that led him to question orthodox doctrine and create a new church whose members would be called merely "Christians."

After his father died, young Barton invested his portion of the estate in education. He studied law in Greensboro, North Carolina, and while there sat under the preaching of Presbyterian evangelist James McGready. After three years, Stone set aside his legal ambitions and took up preaching.

He headed west and became the pastor of two Presbyterian parishes, in Concord and Cane Ridge, Kentucky. He was troubled by the spiritual acedia in his parishes, so when he heard about a revival in southwestern Kentucky, he went there to see what it was about.

He returned home enthused, and within months, a revival had erupted in Stone's parishes; in August of 1801, it reached its climax at Cane Ridge. An estimated 20,000 listened to revival preaching and responded by shouting, dancing, singing, and collapsing: "With a piercing scream," Stone said, people would "fall like a log on the floor, earth, or mud, and appear as dead."

Since many of his Presbyterian colleagues frowned on such emotionalism, Stone and four others formed the independent Springfield Presbytery. But in less than a year, they dissolved it because they believed each congregation should be independent, guided by nothing but the Bible.

When his wife died in 1809, Stone was left with four daughters, the oldest of whom was 8. He put them into the care of friends until he remarried so he could devote his "whole life gratuitously to the churches, scattered far and near."

In 1830 Stone met Alexander Campbell, another Presbyterian-turned-independent who believed in "Bible only" Christianity. "I will not say there are no faults in brother Campbell," wrote Stone, "but that there are fewer, perhaps, in him, than any man I know on earth."

Their friendship and common passion led to a merger in 1832. "We plainly saw that we were on the same foundation," wrote Stone, "in the same spirit, and preached the same gospel." The writings of Stone, published in *The Christian Messenger*, a monthly launched by him in 1826, gave direction to the movement and cemented the merger.

Stone was sharply criticized for his unorthodox views, which included a denial of the Trinity. "The word *Trinity*," he said, "is not found in the Bible." So he refused to accept "that the Son of God was very and eternal God and yet eternally begotten."

Stone's legacy endures in the large number of churches called "Disciples of Christ" or "Church of Christ," who have been committed to a "Bible only" Christianity.

Alexander Campbell
(1788–1866)
"Primitive" Christian

Separated by the Atlantic Ocean, Presbyterian preacher Thomas Campbell and his son Alexander simultaneously came to the same conclusion: the future was not with Presbyterianism.

The plan was for Thomas to sail to America with his Irish family to follow later. But the ship carrying Campbell's family was shipwrecked, and they had to spend a year in Glasgow. There, 19-year-old Alexander answered the call to preach and began studying at the University of Glasgow. He quickly became disgusted with what he perceived to be theological pettiness in Presbyterianism. One Sunday he refused Communion, symbolically breaking with the faith of his father.

When Alexander arrived in Pennsylvania, though, he discovered his father had seceded from the local presbytery! One reason: a perceived lack of scriptural support for infant baptism. Thomas had founded The Christian Association of Washington (County, Pennsylvania). "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak," declared Thomas, "where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."

In 1811, Alexander began pastoring Brush Run Church, a group of Presbyterian refugees. The birth of his first child led him to reconsider his views on infant baptism. He decided that his own infant baptism was invalid, so he sought out a Baptist minister to immerse him. His church then joined the local Baptist association.

Alexander traveled on horseback through the Midwest and South, preaching a simple gospel stripped of "dogma" and "creeds." In 1823 he launched *The Christian Baptist*, a monthly that, said editor Campbell, "shall espouse the cause of no religious sect, excepting that ancient sect 'called Christians first at Antioch.'"

That purist spirit eventually drove a wedge between Campbell and the Baptists, but it created an affinity with Barton Stone and his followers. The two groups merged in 1832 to form a loosely organized group of independent-minded churches committed to primitive Christianity.

A life-long debater, Campbell once sparred with popular atheist Robert Owen, delivering an address on the evidences of Christianity that lasted 12 hours! Later Campbell visited Owen and pleaded with him to accept the Christian faith; Owen wouldn't budge, though Campbell's appeal allegedly moved him to tears.

Perhaps Campbell's most important work was launching and editing *The Millennial Harbinger*. The journal defined and fueled the movement's spectacular growth, from about 22,000 in 1830, when the journal was launched, to over 200,000 in the year of Campbell's death.

Lucy Wright
(1760–1821)
Unmatched Shaker leader

Lucy Wright, the brown-eyed "handsome" daughter of an upscale Massachusetts family, married at 18. Then she and her husband converted to the Shaker sect. Since Shaker codes required celibacy, they dissolved their marriage and Wright took back her maiden name—and eventually became one of the Shakers' greatest leaders.

By the late 1780s, Joseph Meacham, the second successor to founder Mother Ann, had divided the Shakers into male and female orders, in accord with their belief in God as Father-Mother. In 1787, he

named Wright "the first leading character in the female line."

Nine years later, Meacham by-passed his male assistant and appointed Wright as "Elder," so that after Meacham's death, she was able to take the Shaker helm.

But "Mother Lucy," as she was called, inherited trouble: the Shaker communities (eleven of them by the end of the 1700s) were in debt, and many of the younger Shakers were leaving, angry at the hard work and strict moral codes. Other Shakers "apostasized" because they bristled at having a woman leader. Mother Lucy, however, persevered and led Shaker societies into a quarter century of unprecedented growth.

She broke a 12-year hiatus of Shaker evangelism: she sent missionaries to the western frontier in 1804 and spawned seven Shaker communities. Mother Lucy also enlivened Shaker worship, which under Meacham's leadership had become flat. She reintroduced singing and added dancing, hand motions, and worship marches.

According to Wright's first biographer, Calvin Green, Wright emphasized "correct and proper language in speaking." She expected Shakers to "speak properly, and not use clipped, or low, vulgar words, or expressions."

Some male Shakers never accepted a female head. An elder of the Maine Shaker communities once accused Wright's community of drunkenness and doctrinal error: "We have become weary of petticoat government." But in her life, and for decades to come, no Shaker male matched her leadership.

**Lorenzo Dow
(1777–1834)
Scraggly, sickly, and eccentric**

As many people came to see Lorenzo Dow preach as came to hear him preach. Tall and gaunt, with a scraggly beard and long, stringy hair, he often may have looked more like a sideshow at a circus than a preacher at a revival.

Born into a large New England family, Dow was a sickly and melancholic child. When he was 12, he promised God he would go into the ministry if he won a local lottery (worth nine shillings). He won, but then reneged. He said he was "uneasy for some weeks."

In his teenage years, he was tormented by nightmares and became suicidal. One day he pressed a gun against his ribs, but then he thought, ***If you end your life, you are undone forever; but if you omit it [put it off] a few days longer, it may be that something will turn up in your favor.***

That "something" turned out to be his conversion at a Methodist meeting. Within a year, he felt called to preach, but he didn't have an education or experience. Because of his quirks of personality and his asthma, he failed to convince the Methodist bishop to license him to preach, so he struck out on his own. A few years into his ministry, though, Francis Asbury asked him to minister as a Methodist in the Canadian wilderness. Instead, Dow headed to Ireland. There the bedraggled, unshaven, hungry, and often sick Dow circulated among the villages preaching—sometimes getting arrested for doing so.

When he returned to America, the Methodists appointed him to a circuit, but after six months, Dow headed to Georgia. He criss-crossed the frontier, covering up to 150 miles and preaching as many as 20 sermons a week. His public scoldings, strange pronouncements, and scruffy appearance earned him the name "Crazy Dow."

The day after his marriage, he left his wife, Peggy, to make a swing through Mississippi. Later she accompanied him on one of his missionary trips through England, where his revivals helped start England's Primitive Methodist Church.

In his later years, Dow seemed to grow only more eccentric. He bought a farm in Connecticut, preaching less but offending more in his writings. He panned even the Methodists, saying they were tainted

with Roman Catholic popery.

With a friend, he invented and patented an elixir: "This medicine has been found of general utility and efficacy," wrote Dow, "in all disorders called bilious and affections of the liver exceeding common credibility." Still, his preaching saved more people than did his tonic, and he died as the most colorful circuit rider of his time.

Francis Asbury
(1745–1816)
Mr. Circuit Rider

Some today might call him a workaholic. Or maybe just utterly dedicated. English-born Francis Asbury certainly had the numbers: during his 45-year ministry in America, he traveled on horseback or in carriage an estimated 300,000 miles, delivering some 16,500 sermons.

Asbury was born into a working-class Anglican family; he dropped out of school before he was 12 to work as a blacksmith's apprentice. By the time he was 14, he had been "awakened" in the Christian faith. He and his mother attended Methodist meetings, where soon he began to preach; he was appointed a full-time Methodist preacher by the time he was 21. In 1771, at a gathering of Methodist ministers John Wesley asked, "Our brethren in America call aloud for help. Who are willing to go over and help them?" Asbury answered.

In October 1771, Asbury landed in Philadelphia and within days hit the road preaching. He so pushed himself that first winter, he became ill. This was the beginning of a pattern: over the next 45 years, he suffered from colds, coughs, fevers, severe headaches, ulcers, and eventually chronic rheumatism, which forced him off his horse and into a carriage. Yet he continued to preach.

During the Revolutionary War, Asbury remained politically neutral. To avoid signing an oath disclaiming his allegiance to England and to dodge the American draft, he went into hiding for several months. "I am considered by some as an enemy," he wrote, "liable to be seized by violence and abused." By war's end, he had retained his credibility with the victorious Americans and was able to continue his ministry among them.

After the war, John Wesley ordained Englishman Thomas Coke as Wesley's American superintendent. Coke, in turn, ordained Asbury—and within six months returned to England. Thereafter, Asbury held the reins of American Methodism.

Organization was Asbury's gift. He created "districts" of churches, each of which would be served by circuit riders—preachers who traveled from church to church to preach and minister. Asbury pushed for missionary expansion into the Tennessee and Kentucky frontier, though his and other preachers' lives were constantly threatened by illness and Indian attacks.

Though a school dropout, Asbury launched five schools. He also promoted "Sunday schools," in which children were taught reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Asbury hated slavery and once petitioned George Washington to enact antislavery legislation. "My spirit was grieved at the conduct of some Methodists," wrote Asbury, "that hire slaves at public places to the highest bidder, to cut skin, and starve them."

Asbury's preaching, according to biographer Ezra Tipple, was more zeal than art. Tipple wrote that there were occasions when "under the rush of his utterance, people sprang to their feet as if summoned to the judgment bar of God."

Asbury pushed himself to the end. After preaching what was to be his last sermon, he was so weak he had to be carried to his carriage. By then, though, Methodism had grown under his leadership to 200,000 strong.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 45: Camp Meetings & Circuit Riders: Frontier Revivals

Christianity on the Early American Frontier: Christian History Timeline

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American Religion

1771-1799 Preparation

1776 Methodists number 4,921

1784 Baptists number 35,101; Francis Asbury ordained as America's first Methodist bishop

1790s First Methodist awakenings in North, West, and South

1798 James McGready begins revivals in Logan County, Kentucky; Bishop Asbury begins annual circuits from Maine to Georgia and along the Western frontier

1799 McGee brothers inspire revivals in Kentucky

1800-1835 "Second Great Awakening"

1800 Revivals in Gaspar River and Mud River, Kentucky

1801 Cane Ridge, Kentucky, revival under Barton Stone

1802 Revival at Yale under Timothy Dwight; collegiate awakenings throughout East

1804 Shakers send missionaries to frontier

1810 Founding of American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, America's first foreign missions society

1816 American Bible Society formed

1817 American Sunday School Union begun

1825 Charles Finney begins seven years of intense evangelism in the Northeast

1826 American Tract Society and American Home Missionary Society begun

1828 Lane Seminary founded in frontier Cincinnati to provide clergy for the West

1830-1850 Fragmentation

- 1830** Finney's greatest revival, at Rochester, New York; Joseph Smith founds Mormons
- 1833** Founding of Oberlin College, abolitionist stronghold
- 1835** Lyman Beecher's "A Plea for the West" calls for Christian civilization of the West
- 1837** Presbyterian Church split into Old and New School branches over various issues, including revivalism
- 1838** Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Divinity School Address" outlines Transcendentalism
- 1844** YMCA founded; Methodist church splits over slavery
- 1845** Baptists split over slavery
- 1847** Mormon migration to Utah
- 1848** The Fox sisters begin the Spiritist movement, which sweeps America
- 1850** Membership in Protestant denominations soars to 3.5 million
- 1855** Dwight L. Moody converted at age 18; Methodists claim 1,577,014 members, and Baptists 1,105,546 members
- 1857** China opened to missions
- 1857–1858** Prayer Meeting Revival or "Third Great Awakening"—estimated one million converted

U.S. History

1771-1799 Preparation

- 1787** Constitutional Convention
- 1792** Washington reelected unanimously; Kentucky statehood; Whitney's cotton gin invented
- 1794** Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*
- 1796** Tennessee statehood

1800-1835 "Second Great Awakening"

- 1801** Thomas Jefferson becomes third president
- 1803** Louisiana Purchase doubles size of the United States
- 1805–1806** Lewis and Clark expedition explores West
- 1807** First successful steamboat

1812–1814 War with England

1817–1818 Seminole wars

1820 Missouri Compromise

1822 Santa Fe Trail opens

1823 Monroe Doctrine

1825 Erie Canal opens

1830-1850 Fragmentation

1826–1846 Indians removed across the Mississippi

1828 Andrew Jackson elected president; Baltimore and Ohio Railroad begun

1831 The McCormick reaper

1833–1837 Financial panic and recession

1835 The Colt revolver

1836 Samuel F.B. Morse's telegraph; Texas gains independence; Battle of the Alamo

1845 The phrase "manifest destiny" appears

1846–1848 Mexican-American War

1846 Irish potato famine

1848 Gold discovered in California

1852 Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published

1857 Dred Scott decision by the Supreme Court

1859 Darwin's *Origin of Species*; first oil well,

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 45: Camp Meetings & Circuit Riders: Frontier Revivals

Counter-Culture Christianity

A look at the radical utopian communities that sprang up across the early frontier.

Bruce L. Shelley is senior professor of church history at Denver Seminary. He is author of many books, including *All the Saints Adore Thee: Insight from Christian Classics* (Baker, 1994). He is an editorial advisor to *Christian History*.

The age of revivals and circuit riders saw the comet's tail sweep across America and dazzle everyone with visions of glory. Europeans visiting the American wilderness and encountering a revival firsthand were convinced that Americans had gone mad. But the ecstasy was evident far beyond the shouts and jerks of the camp meetings.

In a letter to Thomas Carlyle in the Autumn of 1840, American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson tried to describe New England to his English friend: "We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket."

Revivals were the big story but not the whole story. Revivals whetted the country's appetite for an immediate encounter with God. But here and there a visionary took to creating a Christian community where every detail of daily living could be ordered by God.

In the half-century before the Civil War, about 120 social experiments were founded, and a few dozen became celebrated, though temporary, successes: New York claimed the Oneida community; Ohio had its Zoar; the Shakers were in Kentucky; Brook Farm in Massachusetts; Amana in Iowa; and a black utopia, Nashoba, appeared in Tennessee.

These religious communities agreed to hold their property in common, just as the apostles had apparently done in early Judea. They insisted that God called for a distinctive people reflecting the kingdom of God in all essentials of economic and family life, an earthly model of life in the heavenly kingdom.

Let me illustrate with some of the best-known examples.

Shaking Quakers

Perhaps the best-known of these religious communities today are the Shakers. Antique lovers everywhere treasure the graceful, simple lines of Shaker furniture and crafts. Less well known is the fact that Shakers were first Quakers.

The origins of the movement lie in eighteenth-century England where, under the leadership of Quakers Jane and James Wardley, enthusiasts began meeting to express vexation over their sins. Their outbursts gained them the label "Shaking Quakers." They cried out warnings of Christ's imminent second coming and predicted that cosmic catastrophes would soon fall on the wicked.

In 1770 one of the members, Ann Lee (1736–84), received a revelation that all human depravity was rooted in the sex act. This was Adam and Eve's original sin. Mother Ann, as she was called, was the wife of a blacksmith and mother of four children, all of whom died in infancy. Her revelation made celibacy a hallmark of the Shaker movement. A later Shaker hymn expressed it well:

As lust conceived by the Fall

Hath more or less infected all;
So we believe 'tis only this
That keepeth souls from perfect bliss.

In 1774 Ann Lee led a band of eight from Manchester, England, to New York, where they settled in the wilderness a few miles north of Albany. During the final years of her life, Mother Ann performed miracles and received visions that convinced her followers she was Christ in his "second appearing." Shaker services were marked by dancing, singing, speaking in tongues, bodily contortions, and even "spiritualists" who claimed to communicate with the dead.

In 1787, under the leadership of Joseph Meacham, a convert from the Free Will Baptists, a society was organized at Mount Lebanon. Soon eleven communities in New York and New England had adopted the Shaker way of life. A new period of growth followed the great Kentucky revival in 1805. New communities were soon prospering on the frontier, especially in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky.

The Shakers continued to reject sex, as well as the sacraments and the inspiration of the Bible, but Meacham brought order to the wild worship of the early gatherings. The communities soon gained a reputation for their industry and accumulated wealth. At the height of their influence, Shakers numbered about 6,000 members. Today, only a few believers remain at Sabbathday Lake, Maine, and Canterbury, New Hampshire.

Amana Inspiration

Seven villages nestled in the Iowa farmlands a few miles from bustling Interstate 80 contain quaint two-story, gabled houses and bright gardens of flox and marigolds—vivid reminders of the faith, industry, and pride that once nurtured the Amana community.

The correct name for these villages was the Community of True Inspiration. Many visitors in the woolen mills there today think that Amana is connected somehow with Amish folk, probably because of the similarity of the popular names. But there is no connection beyond their German origins.

The first settlers in the Amana colonies had gathered initially at various places in the German Rhineland before deciding to migrate to America. They were a pietistic fellowship under the leadership of Christian Metz and Barbara Heinemann. When the fellowship first arrived in 1843, they founded a community called Ebenezer near Buffalo, New York. They gradually moved to east-central Iowa, where they established and maintained their cluster of villages. In all about 1,800 persons sought to live out their Inspirationist message, as formulated originally in 1714 by Eberhard Gruber and Johann Rock.

The villages were committed to working out their salvation "through the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ, in self-denial, in the obedience to our faith, and in the demonstration of our faithfulness in the inward and outward service of the Community." Metz provided strong leadership until his death in 1867, when Heinemann became the leader. A prosperous woolens industry provided a secure economic base for the communities.

Succeeding generations found it hard to maintain the simple piety of the founders. Financial problems mounted until a special committee proposed a drastic overhaul of the community. In 1932 spiritual and temporal concerns were separated, and the Amana industries became a joint-stock cooperative. This individual ownership of the industries proved an economic boon and helps to explain the international reputation of Amana refrigerators and microwave ovens.

The religious community, the Amana Church Society, continues today with about 1,200 members. They hold simple meetings in the village chapels, during which they read the writings of their Inspirationist founders.

Not So Harmonious

Another group rooted in this German pietist tradition was called the Rappites. They were named after the Lutheran dissident and millennialist George Rapp (1757–1847). With about 600 followers, Rapp arrived in the United States in 1804. The group chose to settle in Pennsylvania. They called their community Harmony, but their beliefs centered in a strict doctrine of purity and the imminent arrival of the millennium. Members considered themselves the righteous remnant that would be judged pure and holy when the Lord returned to judge all peoples. Rapp ruled the community as a virtual dictator.

In 1815 the group moved to a new Harmony, on the banks of the Wabash in southern Indiana. Ten years later, they moved again, back to Ohio where they established their “permanent” home at Economy, not far from Pittsburgh.

But by this time, members were becoming dissatisfied with Rapp’s authoritarian leadership. In 1832, after an internal rebellion, about one-third of the community defected. Rapp and the community survived, though weakened. Rapp died 15 years later, and the community dissolved completely in 1905.

Forced Idealism

In 1817, after years of religious harassment, Joseph Bimeler led about 300 Quaker-like pietists from Germany to their American home in Zoar, Ohio. They became known as the Zoar Separatists. They hoped to live a simple life of devotion to God. Poverty, however, rather than ideals, forced the community to adopt a policy of common ownership of property. Economic relief came to Zoar only when the regional economy improved as a result of westward expansion of the nation.

Like several other groups, notably the Shakers, the Zoarites adopted the practice of celibacy. When the community was forced to come to terms with human nature and allow children, they raised their young communally; they wanted to elevate devotion to the community over that given to biological families.

Bimeler, the community leader, just like Rapp, held a privileged position within the village and chose early on to marry and live in an elegant home. When he died in 1853, the community survived for a time, but devotion to families remained a source of conflicts within the community until it finally dissolved in 1898.

Charismatic Leaders

The panorama of these early American utopian experiments can be painted in much wider strokes. The history might include, for example, the Mormons, who emerged in New York, Ohio, and Illinois in the 1830s and 1840s. They shared many of the traits of communitarians: for a time they shared property; they fervently expected Christ’s second coming; they had their own “special revelation.” They also had a charismatic leader in Joseph Smith (1805–44).

In that, they give us a clue as to what might unite all these diverse experiments. Though each community had a unique origin and personality, each was the lengthened shadow of some charismatic leader or self-conscious innovator. The leader’s vision of utopia created the community, and his or her firm will imposed order. And in most cases, when the charismatic leader passed on, the community drifted toward death.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 45: Camp Meetings & Circuit Riders: Frontier Revivals

Rejecting the Negro Pew

As revival religion blossomed, so did the independent black church.

Wesley Roberts

The African Methodist Episcopal and other black churches were born partly as a result of revival preaching, partly because of white segregation. Christian History asked Wesley Roberts to give us a glimpse into the beginning of the African-American church, especially the role played by Methodist Richard Allen. Dr. Roberts is pastor of Peoples Baptist Church in Boston, Massachusetts (the oldest African-American church in New England), and member of our advisory board.

"Negro Pews"

The 1740s Great Awakening, with its enthusiastic preaching and emotional meetings, resulted in a great harvest of black converts, most of whom were slaves. The informal services of the Baptists and, later, the Methodists attracted the most blacks—as did early Methodism's antislavery stance. By 1786, blacks made up about 10 percent of the Methodist church.

Although whites and blacks often worshiped together in the 1700s, blacks enjoyed no real freedom or equality—in the North or South. Segregated seating was typical; the area reserved for blacks was usually called the "Negro Pew" or the "African Corner."

Such discrimination motivated blacks, where possible, to organize their own churches, though white leaders actively opposed that. On the eve of the American Revolution, the first black congregations appeared.

The First Black Church?

Historians debate the date and place of the first black Baptist congregation in America, but it seems it was established in South Carolina between 1773 and 1775 by a slave named George Liele.

Liele was converted during the revivals that followed the Great Awakening. Licensed as an "exhorter," he traveled up and down the Savannah River preaching to other slaves. At the Galpin plantation, near Silver Bluff, he and a white itinerant preacher named Elder Palmer ministered to a group of some thirty slaves. A church made up of both slaves and free blacks was soon established, and slave preacher David George was put in charge.

Three types of black Baptist churches developed: 1) the racially mixed church, 2) the separate black church under white leadership, and 3) the separate black church under black leadership. Blacks much preferred the separate, all-black churches, and in these churches slaves constituted the largest group.

Whites, however, regarded unsupervised black meetings as a security risk. Many slaves were permitted to attend only churches pastored by white ministers. Black ministers were often harassed until it was unmistakably clear they posed no threat to the community. Knowing they were watched by whites, black preachers were careful how they taught and conducted their services.

Many slaves, therefore, also held secret religious meetings on their plantations. Here they shouted and sang and encouraged one another without the intimidating presence of whites.

Any independence enjoyed by the black congregations quickly diminished after the aborted slave uprisings of the early 1800s. Whites began imposing increasingly severe restrictions on black religious activities. For example, a black person in Georgia who wanted to preach had to obtain a license from a local court of law and be certified by three white ministers. An Alabama law of 1832 required that five "respectable slave holders" attend any service at which blacks preached.

In spite of such restrictions, the number of black Baptists in the South continued to grow. Nearly all of the independent congregations in the South were Baptist.

Pulled from Their Knees

Racial segregation and discrimination were also the main impetus for Northern blacks' forming their own denominations, and black Methodists were the first to do so. It happened in Philadelphia, at the initiative of Richard Allen.

Allen was born into slavery in Philadelphia in 1760. At age 17, he was converted and began preaching on his plantation and at local Methodist churches. His owner, who was one of his early converts, was so impressed with Allen that he allowed him to purchase his freedom.

In 1781, Allen began traveling the Methodist preaching circuits in Delaware and surrounding states. Prominent Methodist leaders, like Francis Asbury, took care to see Allen had places to preach. In 1786, Allen returned to Philadelphia and joined St. George's Methodist Church. His leadership at prayer services attracted dozens of blacks into the church, and with them came increased racial tension.

White leaders told blacks they could no longer sit where they were accustomed to but must use the chairs around the walls. Though segregated seating was widespread, it had not been known at St. George's.

During one service in 1787, a group of blacks sat in some new pews that, unbeknownst to them, had been reserved for whites. As these blacks knelt in prayer, they were pulled from their knees and told to sit in their own area. After prayer, the black group got up and walked out. Allen enacted a plan he had been formulating for some time: to establish an independent church.

Allen did not want to leave Methodism or the local Conference, but he longed for a place where blacks could worship as they saw fit. The local Methodist leaders resisted Allen and his associate, Absalom Jones, threatening them with expulsion from the Methodist Conference. But Allen and Jones persisted, and in 1794, Allen purchased an old frame building, formerly a blacksmith's shop, and opened it for worship as the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Bishop Francis Asbury dedicated the building and later ordained Allen as a deacon in 1799.

Blacks in Baltimore, Wilmington, Attleboro, and Salem followed Allen's example and soon established independent African Methodist churches.

In Philadelphia, over the next 15 years, the white Methodist leaders tried to keep Allen's congregation and property under its jurisdiction. But on the first day of 1816, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court determined the church belonged to Allen and his associates.

Things happened quickly after that. In April, delegates from several black Methodist churches convened in Philadelphia and drew up an "Ecclesiastical Compact" that united them in the independent African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). Allen was ordained an elder and consecrated as bishop.

This first black denomination grew rapidly in the North. The South was a different story: when AME layman Denmark Vesey was executed in 1822 for plotting a slave insurrection, AME activity south of Baltimore ceased and wasn't resumed until after the Civil War.

Dignity and Freedom

Baptists in the South and the AME in the North are only two parts of a multifaceted story of African-American Christianity. But they give a flavor of the obstacles blacks faced and the courage they displayed in opening their own churches. Black churches provided blacks with a sense of dignity and personal freedom—and one of the most hospitable settings for the creation of an African-American culture.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 45: Camp Meetings & Circuit Riders: Frontier Revivals

All Sins Swept Away

A slave describes her delayed but dramatic conversion.

Jarena Lee (1783–c.1850) was one of the outstanding preachers in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She was a servant in Philadelphia when her conversion began:

I inquired of the head cook of the house respecting the rules of the Methodists, as I knew she belonged to that society, who told me what they were—on which account I replied that I should not be able to abide by such strict rules not even one year. However, I told her that I would go with her and hear what they had to say.

The man who was to speak in the afternoon of that day was the Reverend Richard Allen, since bishop of the African Episcopal Methodists in America. During the labors of this man that afternoon, I had come to the conclusion that this is the people to which my heart unites. And it so happened that, as soon as the service closed, he invited such as felt a desire to flee the wrath to come, to unite on trial with them—I embraced the opportunity.

Jarena Lee's Life was transformed after hearing a sermon by the then-unknown Richard Allen.

Three weeks from that day, my soul was gloriously converted to God under preaching, at the very outset of the sermon. The text was barely pronounced, which was "I perceive thy heart is not right in the sight of God" [Acts 8:21], when there appeared to **my** view, in the center of the heart, **one** sin, and this was **malice**—against one particular individual who had strove deeply to injure me, which I resented.

At this discovery I said, "**Lord**, I forgive **every** creature."

That instant it appeared to me as if a garment, which had entirely enveloped my whole person even to my fingers' ends, split at the crown of my head and was stripped away from me, passing like a shadow from my sight—when the glory of God seemed to cover me in its stead. That moment, though hundreds were present, I did leap to my feet and declare that God, for Christ's sake, had pardoned the sins of my soul. Great was the ecstasy of my mind, for I felt that not only the sin of malice was pardoned, but all other sins were swept away together.

That day was the first when my heart had believed and my tongue had made confession unto salvation. The first words uttered, a part of that song which shall fill eternity with its sound, was "Glory to God!" For a few moments, I had power to exhort sinners and to tell of the wonders and of the goodness of him who had clothed me with **his** salvation.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 45: Camp Meetings & Circuit Riders: Frontier Revivals

Focus on the Frontier Family

How Methodists strengthened the Christian home—and changed it.

Gregory Schneider is a professor in the department of behavioral science at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California. He is author of *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Indiana, 1993).

Sallie Norris Hobart was worried. She and her husband, Calvin, had just moved into a raw frontier neighborhood on the Illinois prairie, and she did not see how her family was going to hold on to their religious life. There were rough and worldly families among their neighbors, and she feared her children, if deprived of religious privileges, might fall in with their drinking, dancing, gambling, and brawling.

Then came Levin Green, a Methodist preacher. He could barely read, and he murdered the King's English, but, as Sallie's son Chauncey remembered, "To him, God, eternity, death, the resurrection, the judgment, heaven and hell, were vivid and solemn realities. ... He spoke as if these were actually present, being seen and felt by him."

Green was the first of a series of Methodist preachers who, along with several additional religious families, helped create a flourishing religious community in the Hobarts' neighborhood. Young Chauncey Hobart felt a close relation to all these people, and he came to expect that he too would, sooner or later, experience religion and thus "find all that these so joyfully narrated." Sallie Hobart at age 89 was still testifying in love feasts how God answered her prayers in sending Levin Green to minister to her family's needs.

On the frontier, the Methodists excelled in building families-in-communities. These communities were woven together by family prayer, neighborhood prayer meetings, class meetings, quarterly meetings, love feasts, and camp meetings. These rituals reinforced the faith of frontier families and, in turn, changed the nature of those families.

Families that Pray Together

Leading the family in prayer was a duty enforced upon all Methodist heads of families. It was also a ritual faithful itinerant preachers led when they visited homes.

Circuit preachers would visit the various households in their memberships and use family prayer to attend especially to the "rising generation," as the Methodist Discipline told them to do. William Fee remembered George Washington Maley, an early Ohio circuit rider, as a particularly impressive children's pastor. "The whole family where he visited would often be bathed in tears. He appeared to understand the character and the peculiarities of every child. He prayed for all, and we thought he prayed for everything."

Family prayer yielded a harvest of Christian converts. David Sullins, a Tennessee preacher, recalled that the first convert from his parents' "family altar" was his father. His mother, during one sleepless night, had told her husband, "Nathan, we can never bring up the children right without family prayers."

"Well, ... what are we to do, Becky? I can't pray."

Mother Sullins insisted her reluctant husband could and should pray. She induced him to do his duty by promising to take turns leading. Nathan Sullins had joined the church some time before as a "seeker on

probation," but when it came to his turn to pray in his family, it seemed like God had sought him out. "Father dropped on his knees and, stammering and choking, began. Soon, under a crushing sense of sin and helplessness, he began to confess and cry for pardoning mercy. Mother prayed and cried, and the Comforter came, and light broke in, and father was converted at family prayers."

Thirteen children were reared around that family altar, and later, all the grandchildren and great-grandchildren "old enough to know and love Jesus" were Christians.

Times of "Profound Feeling"

Among Methodists, the "class meeting" worked hand in hand with the prayer meeting to nurture frontier faith. James B. Finley's story illustrates how.

He was in despair over his spiritual condition when he allowed his wife to persuade him to attend a Methodist prayer meeting at a nearby home in their Kentucky neighborhood. After some songs and prayers, the leader of the meeting rose and announced their "class meeting." All non-members were to retire, except those who had not already "enjoyed this privilege" two or three times. Finley was one of the exceptions, and he stayed to get what benefit he could.

What he experienced at the class meeting amazed him. His Presbyterian prejudices had led him to expect incoherent ranting. Instead he witnessed a customary Methodist class meeting: The leader related a part of his own Christian experience and then inquired into the spiritual states of the others present.

"I never heard more plain, simple, scriptural common sense, yet eloquent views of Christian experience in my life," wrote Finley. "It was a time of profound and powerful feeling." When the leader inquired into Finley's spiritual condition, he could reply only in tears and sighs. His sorrowing speechlessness evoked much sympathy and many prayers for his salvation.

At Heaven's Gate

The larger Methodist gatherings, which families often attended together, also supported the individual family.

Love feasts, where people shared a Communion-like meal and prayer, involved larger numbers, sometimes hundreds. Quarterly meetings, where Methodist business and preaching and prayer were mixed, were the precursors of the legendary frontier camp meetings.

These less frequent but larger gatherings were also family events. People generally came and camped as families. Furthermore, as William Fee observed, "In those days parents took their children to camp meeting, that they might be converted." James Finley portrayed one campground covered with parents and children "clasped in each other's arms, rejoicing together, that the 'dead was alive and the lost found.'"

More subtle and far-reaching was the "family feeling" that such gatherings generated. Finley described his first class meeting as a time of "profound and powerful feeling." As they met in one another's homes and camped together, they shared Christian experience, and believers came to feel a strong bond of unity. Indiana circuit rider Allen Wiley felt that to meet as a class in "a good brother's house" was to worship "at heaven's gate, the next thing to heaven itself."

Believers likened their fellowship not only to heaven, but also to family. "These little families of love," declared Bishops Asbury and Coke, "mutually weep and rejoice, and in everything sympathize with each other, as genuine friends."

The Methodists proclaimed that in their evangelical community one loved and was loved as a member of a family. Everybody belonged to the evangelical "family of God," and their images of heaven and home symbolized a new fellowship that they wished to make the norm for all people.

Changing the Rules

These Methodist rituals had a profound if subtle effect on the Methodist family itself. In practice, Methodism set itself against many of the hierarchical rules that still guided the early republic. According to those traditional rules, family unity was based on the sovereignty of the husband over his wife, children, and servants—all of whom were taken to be, in some sense, his property. Evangelical experience and fellowship began shaping a different basis of family unity: mutual affection based on a common religious experience.

Early American Methodists dotted their literature with righteous, even gleeful, stories of how children defied parents, and wives defied husbands, in order to get religion. Eventually most of them converted their recalcitrant relations.

For example: One woman was converted at a camp meeting and was loudly praising God in front of the congregation when her husband seized her, dragged her to the rear of the encampment, and started to abuse her for disgracing his family. Unable to restrain him, the believers on the scene sent for local preacher James Jones, a large and capable man.

He commanded the infuriated husband to get down on his knees and pray. When the husband defied him, he wrestled the man to the ground, sat on him, and repeated his command to pray.

"I will not pray," said the man, "if I go to hell the next moment."

"But you must pray or you cannot arise from this place," promised the preacher.

The preacher called on the wife and other believers to pray for the man, and, as they did, he felt the man's resisting muscles begin to relax. The man himself began to weep and cry out to God for mercy to his soul. Soon he was converted, and then, as the witness to these events put it, "There stood that rejoicing wife and that conquered husband rejoicing and praising God together."

The point of such stories was that God's law and love took precedence over human legal sovereignty and ownership. In believers' eyes, neither the preacher nor the wife conquered the husband. Rather, God's grace gave him victory over himself. In the end, each woman, man, and child had to meet and deal with the sovereign God individually, regardless of station in life.

Thus the frontier family was reconstituted. Family unity was no longer based on hierarchical rules but upon a common experience of divine love, and upon sanctified affection one for another.

The Great Spirit Descends

A stirring camp meeting among Native Americans.

James B. Finley

Circuit rider James B. Finley (1781–1856) had a successful ministry with the Wyandot Indians of Ohio. In this excerpt from his Sketches of Western Methodism (1854), he glowingly describes an 1828 camp meeting he held among them. His mission ended when the U.S. government coerced the tribe to sell their land and move west.

Single-Minded Devotion

The Indians came with their camping apparatus, to the number of one hundred and fifty. A place was assigned them for pitching their tents, so that they might all be as near together as possible. The Indians being more expert in pitching tents than the whites, they, of course, were ready at an earlier hour to engage in religious exercises.

It is characteristic of the Indian to devote exclusive attention, for the time being, to whatever pursuit or employment he may take in hand. If it be fishing, or hunting, or sugar making, or corn planting, nothing else is allowed to interfere in the time allotted to these things. So in regard to religion. The time devoted to God was the most sacred.

Soon the Christian chiefs, and queens, and all, were formed into a circle, and the voice of praise and prayer made the forest arches ring. After singing one of their Christian songs, only as Indians can sing, they fell simultaneously upon their knees and lifted up their faces toward heaven, as if they expected to see the Great Spirit descend in blessings from the parted skies. One of their number would lead in prayer, and when the Indian words *tamentare* and *homendezue* would escape the suppliant's lips, a deep amen would be uttered in concert by all the circle.

Tears, Groans, and Shouts

The Indian has strong faith, and when he makes preparation for a sacrifice to the Great Spirit, he expects with the utmost confidence that it will be accepted. So was it in this instance; for while they were praying the Spirit came down upon them, and the power of God was manifested in the awakening and conversion of souls.

As the shaking of the leaves in the tops of the mulberry trees was an indication to the prophet of the presence of God, so the excitement of the multitude engaged in prayer, as indicated by the tears and groans and shouts, was a sign that the Great Spirit was at work upon the hearts of these sons and daughters of the forest, and presently the tents of the whites were forsaken, and many might have been seen mingling with their red brethren and sisters in the exercises of the hour.

The interest continued to increase and spread as the meeting progressed, till Saturday night, when the whole encampment was in a flame of religious excitement. There seemed to be no need of preaching or exhortation, the Lord having taken his own work into his own hands. All that the preachers and people had to do was to follow the leadings of the Spirit, and the hours passed away in singing and prayer, interrupted only—if, indeed, it may be called an interruption—by the loud cries for mercy, which rose

from the burdened hearts of the kneeling penitents, or the louder shouts of praise to God for delivering grace, which rose up on the night air and re-echoed among the trees from the converted.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 45: Camp Meetings & Circuit Riders: Frontier Revivals

Christianity on the Early American Frontier: Christian History Interview - Revivals That Changed a Nation

Frontier faith captured the heart of the common person—and molded America's character.

a conversation with Nathan O. Hatch

Many history textbooks practically ignore the spiritual ferment of the early 1800s. Yet recent historical research reveals that religious enthusiasm was widespread and that it had a profound effect on our nation. To better understand this era, Christian History talked with Nathan O. Hatch, professor of history and vice-president of advanced studies at the University of Notre Dame. He is author of the award-winning *The Democratization of American Christianity (Yale, 1989).*

Early America was a time of tremendous religious energy. How significant was this era?

The American population grows spectacularly in the early republic. But the growth of the churches far surpasses it.

Between the American Revolution and 1845, the United States grew from 2.5 million to 20 million—about eight-fold. But the number of clergy per capita tripled, from 1:1,500 to 1:500. Methodists and Baptists grew from a few thousand to 1.5 million each. By the Civil War, America was essentially an “evangelical nation.”

Why the spiritual ferment at this time?

Coming out of the American Revolution, there is a tremendous political upsurge, a revolt against traditional authority. Common people asked, “Why should we defer to our ‘betters?’” There’s a revolt against the clergy, who have been to college, who read their sermons, who are “gentlemen,” who don’t work with their hands.

The democratic ferment sweeping the land helps empower popular religion. You see the rise of all kinds of groups led by common people, men and women without college education, who speak the common idiom. Someone like Lorenzo Dow, who became a phenomenal character in the early republic, was untutored and unlearned and made no bones about that. It was almost a badge of honor not to be educated.

In addition, during this period, people are no longer interested in high-toned and formal religion; instead, they’re looking for something more expressive. Methodism especially introduces the supernatural into everyday life by respecting emotional expressions of faith. You see the prevalence of dreams, visions, ecstasy, swooning, dancing, the jerks, the barks—this is boiling-hot religion.

What role did the frontier play in all this?

During the era, the frontier is undergoing tremendous population surges. For instance, from 1776 to 1790, Kentucky grew from having almost no European-descended settlers to a population of 75,000. Not since the seventeenth century had such a high proportion of the white population lived in newly settled communities.

Whether it's the Maine frontier or the New England hill country or Tennessee or Ohio, fresh communities are springing up, where traditional denominations—Presbyterian, Congregational, Anglican—don't play much of a role. It's a religious free market. The Methodists and Baptists and itinerant revivalists offer a grassroots, non-traditional Christianity that appeals to the people pouring into these places.

How did these non-traditional preachers do it?

Their sermons are extemporaneous, not written, and they're in the language the people speak. The same is true of the singing; hymns have more of a folk feeling—this is the beginning of gospel hymns.

One lesser-known factor is the effective use of print. The early republic was the great age of the decentralization of the press. Paper and printing presses had become cheap. Almost anyone could crank out printed material, but the evangelicals were the shrewdest at using this technology.

The Methodists were geniuses at using print—tracts, pamphlets, Bibles, newspapers. Revival preachers and sect leaders were communication entrepreneurs who used the popular press to command their audience. They published hundreds of thousands of tracts and papers.

What caused the unusual bodily manifestations in the early revivals?

Where you get unrestrained popular religion you often get "enthusiasm." It's as if there's a paradigm shift.

Lorenzo Dow was preaching in the Chesapeake region, and a woman started screaming and fell into religious ecstasy. He suddenly cried out, "God is here. He is with that woman!" If that had happened in a Presbyterian or Congregational church, the pastor would have called the woman deranged. For revival preachers, this was evidence of the divine presence. You have a new, utterly different sense of how God works.

I think this is one reason why the Methodists and Baptists are so successful in converting African-Americans. Presbyterians and Anglicans were always trying to control religious impulses through formal services. The Methodists and Baptists allowed blacks, among others, to experience religion more on their own terms.

Wasn't religious ecstasy known to occur during the First Great Awakening? How novel were these bodily manifestations?

Congregationalist minister William Bentley kept an extensive diary of the revivals occurring in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1800. He notes the eruption of religious ecstasy in his night meetings, and African-Americans, sailors, and women are preaching and exhorting. He said it hadn't been like that "since Mother Hutchinson's time." He's talking about the enthusiasm of Anne Hutchinson in the seventeenth century.

So there's a tradition of religious ecstasy that continued through Edwards's and Whitefield's revivals and in outcroppings in the Revolutionary period.

But at the turn of the century, particularly with the Methodists, there's a quantum leap of religious ecstasy: more of it and more dramatic. Before, it was controlled, and churches frowned upon it and in some ways suppressed it. In the 1800s' religious free market, there's nothing to suppress it.

As a historian and Christian, how do you see God at work in all this?

There were people whose conversions completely turned their lives around. They go from living for

themselves—some of them dissolute and mean-spirited, unconcerned about others—to becoming model citizens or even Methodist exhorters and itinerants. To put it in Pauline language, you see the fruit of the Spirit manifested in them.

As Jonathan Edwards noted some 60 years earlier, religious ecstasy—trembling, groaning, crying out, panting, fainting—may be signs of God’s power, but you don’t know. In the 1800s, you see these same expressions in the early Mormons and Shakers. Ecstasy is no guarantee of orthodoxy or that Christian fruit will result.

And ecstasy did lead to excess. In New York, they talk about the “burned-over district.” The fire of the Spirit revived many lives there. But the expression also points to the many people who had high religious emotion that didn’t stick, leaving them spiritually burned out.

Ecstasy is no guarantee of orthodoxy or that Christian fruit will result.
—Nathan O. Hatch

How did these revivals affect our nation?

Popular religion became tied to American popular culture, and that connection has not gone away. The intellectual elite of our nation may not have much sympathy with religion, but the common person still does. In modern America, evangelical religion is still vital.

The religion of the sawdust trail also had a profound effect on American politics. One historian has shown that American politicians learned a great deal from revival preachers—how to simplify issues into either/or choices, how to turn political concerns into moral causes, how to develop political “crusades.” Much of Jacksonian politics had the flavor of Methodist revivalism. For better or worse, that made American politics more populist, so that we no longer get sophisticated political discussion, as we did during the era of the founding fathers.

What has been the effect of camp-meeting religion on American Christianity?

The expectation of revival remains deeply embedded within American evangelicalism. We think of Christianity in conversionist terms, which is very different from the Christianity of Europe or the British Isles. There religion is more connected to the institutional church; they want their children nourished in the church; they see the institutional church as a guardian of society’s values.

In America, we downplay the importance of tradition and ecclesiastical institutions. The evangelical churches are not interested in guarding society’s values as much as in converting them.

Furthermore, the church is somewhat incidental to the conversion process. We instead look to revivalists—the Whitefields, Moodys, Sundays, Grahams, Palaus—and to parachurch organizations to make the most evangelistic progress.

Finally, instead of getting our cues from the history and the traditions of the church, we try to start over. We would just as soon do away with history; history has taken a bad turn; it has nothing to teach us; we’ve got to get back to the New Testament and start all over again. In secular terms, this is very Jeffersonian. It’s very much part of popular culture, and it’s very much a part of early and modern evangelicalism.

Many Christians today are praying for a national revival. From your reading of history, how likely is that?

I would answer in two ways.

First, God has always used human means to accomplish his ends. At this point in our history, I'd have to say that the human context is not well prepared for a national revival. In the First and Second Great Awakenings, there was a national consensus of Christian belief. Today, we live in a much more pluralistic society; in some sectors there is little or no Christian memory.

In addition, in both of those awakenings, Christian leaders were at the avant garde of communication and popular culture, and there were fewer competitors. When Whitefield came, it was like an appearance of Billy Graham, Garth Brooks, and Bill Clinton all rolled into one. Today there are an astounding number of voices in the market competing for one's allegiance.

Think of contemporary cable television. You may have a Christian channel, but right next to that you have MTV, and next to that, the pornographic channel. So it's a much more segmented society in which religion is just one competitor for people's souls.

On the other hand, as a Christian historian, it's clear that the Spirit of God has moved in powerful and unpredictable ways. I would never rule out the possibility that there could be a massive turning to God and fresh, exciting growth in the church.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 45: Camp Meetings & Circuit Riders: Frontier Revivals

Christianity on the Early American Frontier: Recommended Resources

Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., is professor of history at the University of California, Irvine. His most recent book is Archibald Grimke: Portrait of a Black Independent (LSU, 1993).

American revivalism between 1780 and 1840 has attracted great attention from historians. A good place to begin further reading is with an overview. Two of the most valuable are Bernard Weisberg's *They Gathered at the River: The Story of the Great Revivalists and Their Impact upon Religion in America* (Little, Brown, 1958) and William G. McLoughlin's *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change, 1607–1977* (Chicago, 1978).

Frontier Religion

In terms of revivalism's frontier phase, and the spectacular camp meeting, pioneer historian William Warren Sweet's four-volume *Religion on the American Frontier* remains essential. Each volume contains a lengthy introduction and representative documents: *The Baptists* (1931), *The Presbyterians* (1936), *The Congregationalists* (1939), and *The Methodists* (1946; all reprinted by Cooper Square, 1964).

More focused reading should begin with John Boles's *The Great Revival, 1787–1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* (Kentucky, 1972), a detailed examination of revivalism on the Southern frontier. The classic study of the camp meeting is Charles Johnson's *The Frontier Camp Meeting: Religion's Harvest Time* (Southern Methodist, 1955). It may be supplemented by Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800–1845* (Tennessee, 1974), and especially by Paul K. Conkin's superb *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Wisconsin, 1990).

Larger Dimensions

In recent years, scholars have been looking at transatlantic dimensions of American revivalism: see Richard Carwardine's *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790–1865* (Greenwood, 1978), and especially *Holy Friars: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton, 1989), in which Leigh Eric Schmidt shows that American frontier camp meetings have their roots in Communion gatherings of Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Another dimension to early revivalism is the role of African-Americans: see Mechal Sobel's *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Greenwood, 1979) and Albert J. Raboteau's essential *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford, 1978).

The influence of revivalism on the Methodist church has been traced by Russell E. Richey in *Early American Methodism* (Indiana, 1991). How revivalistic Methodism helped transform values and ideals, especially in the South, is described in A. Gregory Schneider's *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Indiana, 1993).

For its impact on both black and white Southerners, see Donald G. Mathews's *Religion in the Old*

South (Chicago, 1977). Nathan Hatch has shown how revivalism reinforced democratic tendencies in churches and in society in ***The Democratization of American Christianity*** (Yale, 1989).

Accounts from the Times

No one interested in the frontier revival should miss ***The Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*** (Abingdon, 1956) or Edward Eggleston's lively 1873 novel, ***The Circuit Rider: A Tale of the Heroic Age*** (Kentucky, 1970). A rare early African-American document, the 1810 ***Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, An African***, has been republished, with a valuable introduction by Graham Hodges, in ***Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White*** (Madison House, 1993).

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