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“Owingsville on Fire: The Second Great Awakening and the  
Birth of Small-Town Evangelism”

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In the 1730s, America spiritually awakened. The Enlightenment was firmly entrenched in Europe, and religious colonialists feared that it was pervading American society, so they sought to invoke God back into American proceedings. They succeeded. Right and left, people began to direct their focus from reason and worldly matters to faith and salvation. Church members changed how they worshipped, and the well-established denominations of the day became even more stable. Sermons became more intense, and pastors began to deliver these intense sermons to more churches. Sixty years later, America awakened again. This time, however, not only big-city church members felt His presence. God could now be found by the common folk that populated small communities such as Owingsville, Kentucky. Owingsville, like many other small communities, was revolutionized by the Second Great Awakening. This essay will examine how this revolution occurred. First, the area was transformed by the new denominations and pastors that were introduced at the renowned Cane Ridge revival. Second, commoners that previously could not be a part of traditional churches now sought out welcoming groups that shared their beliefs. Lastly, though some might suggest that the Second Great Awakening came about as a result of the American Revolution, the movement developed independently of this event, largely due to the political and economic conditions of small communities like Owingsville.

As J.A. Richards notes in *A History of Bath County, Kentucky*, Owingsville was established in 1811, though it began developing well beforehand.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it began developing even before the Second Great Awakening commenced in the 1790s. Nevertheless, Owingsville was not well-developed by 1811. There were few established offices, businesses, and most

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<sup>1</sup> J.A. Richards, *A History of Bath County, Kentucky* (Yuma, Ariz.: Published by Southwest Printers, 1961), 41.

importantly, churches in the town.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it was easier for new denominations to come in and establish a foothold in the area. Using the Cane Ridge revival as a springboard, that is exactly what some denominations did.

Most historians agree that less than five percent of Kentuckians were church members by 1801.<sup>3</sup> This number was undoubtedly even lower in Owingsville, an area with less exposure to well-established churches. Considering this, the stakes were high at Cane Ridge. More and more people had become intensely concerned about their salvation and were looking for remedies to this ill.<sup>4</sup> Every church and pastor in attendance had a chance to greatly increase their numbers of followers, though this may not have been their foremost concern.

Both Duane D. Cummins and Anthony L. Dunnivant find that Barton Stone was one of the pastors who seized this opportunity. Stone, one of the founders of the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), came to prominence at Cane Ridge. In *The Disciples: A Struggle for Reformation*, Cummins declares that Stone's ideas of openness and unity among all Christians attracted thousands of audience members.<sup>5</sup> Dunnivant, in his *Cane Ridge in Context: Perspectives on Barton W. Stone and the Revival*, argues that Stone was responsible for the majority of the nearly 1,000 conversions that occurred at Cane Ridge.<sup>6</sup> Stone's ideas were so alluring to the Cane Ridge attendees because most of them had been excluded from church affairs.

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<sup>2</sup> Richards, 42.

<sup>3</sup> Richard L. Harrison, *From Camp Meeting to Church: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Kentucky*. (Lexington, Ky.: Published for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) by the Christian Board of Publication, 1992), 28; Richards, 378.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Conkin, *Cane Ridge, America's Pentecost* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 69.

<sup>5</sup> Duane D. Cummins, *The Disciples: A Struggle for Reformation* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2009), 32.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony L. Dunnivant, *Cane Ridge in Context: Perspectives on Barton W. Stone and the Revival* (Nashville, Tenn.: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1992), 51.

One might argue that Stone's messages were not so powerful as to conduce most audience members to join the Disciples of Christ, instead deeming Stone a mere figurehead for a church that was willing to accept those who had never been previously accepted. This viewpoint undermines the power of Stone's messages and does not explain why other pastors were not as successful as he was. Moreover, it suggests that the beliefs of these new denominations were not compelling.

One can see why a commoner would choose to join a new denomination over an established one when comparing the records of the Baptist Church of Christ in Barton, KY against the records of Owingsville's own Springfield Presbyterian Church. The Baptist Church of Christ arose out of the Second Great Awakening while the Presbyterian Church had existed in America for over one hundred years. According to a December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1817 record of Springfield Presbyterian Church, "Any request is hereby dismissed to join or connect with some other...Church."<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the Barton Baptist Church of Christ proclaimed that "any sister church member...receiveth greeting of the same order."<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that this comes from a February 22, 1801 record, so it is not as if the Baptist Church of Christ altered its beliefs to attract more members at Cane Ridge. A commoner would much rather be welcomed as a Christian rather than discriminated as a member of a specific church and would enjoy the ability to explore several churches.

There are other reasons why denominations like the Baptist Church of Christ would be appealing to commoners. As outlined in the Barton Baptist Church of Christ's "Articles of

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<sup>7</sup> Springfield Presbyterian Church. *Springfield Presbyterian Church Records*. (Owingsville, Ky. December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1817).

<sup>8</sup> Barton Baptist Church of Christ. *Barton Baptist Church of Christ Records*. (Barton, Ky. February 22, 1801)

Faith,” the church proscribed to both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>9</sup> Commoners would recognize that the church was not only following the portions of the Bible that suited its needs, as other churches did. Also, according to these same “Articles of Faith,” sinners could be redeemed.<sup>10</sup> This arguably brought in more members than any of the church’s other beliefs, since everyone wants to have a chance at reaching heaven, most especially poor and downtrodden commoners who are only living for the afterlife. With these attractive principles, it is no wonder that only twenty-five years after Cane Ridge, at least eight Kentucky counties had a Baptist Church of Christ.<sup>11</sup> It is also no wonder that some historians find that “The Great [Cane Ridge] Revival was...a stumbling block to the orderly Presbyterians.”<sup>12</sup>

One can assume that the Baptist Church of Christ was also more aware of the nature of small-town worshippers than the Presbyterian Church. In *From Camp Meeting to Church: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Kentucky*, Richard L. Harrison refers to late-18<sup>th</sup> century Kentuckians as “a population that hungered for meaning and spiritual nourishment, but lived without...organized religious life.”<sup>13</sup> Richards similarly notes that, prior to the establishment of churches in Owingsville, “the worshippers assembled in the forest.... The preacher with a log or a stump for a pulpit and the heavens for his sounding board would exhort and dispense the Word of Life and Salvation.”<sup>14</sup> The Second Great Awakening had already taken hold in Owingsville and similar communities before churches began moving in, so the churches

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<sup>9</sup> Barton Baptist Church of Christ. “Articles of Faith” *Barton Baptist Church of Christ Records*. (Barton, Ky.)

<sup>10</sup> “Articles of Faith.”

<sup>11</sup> *Church letters, 1808-1853*.

<sup>12</sup> Cummins, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Harrison, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Richards, 373.

needed to adapt to the commoners rather than vice-versa. This meant discovering what made these worshippers unique.

One unique quality of Owingsville worshippers was that they were spiritually taught by their mothers and fathers rather than churches and ministers.<sup>15</sup> Like churches and ministers, parents sought to help their children discover what was right and wrong, but parents did not draft a rigid creed that the children had to abide by. Furthermore, most parents did not ostracize their children for adopting beliefs that did not coincide with their own. This is precisely what made Stone so popular at Cane Ridge. Just as their parents did, he assured commoners that they would not be cast out over trivial spiritual differences. Churches like the Springfield Presbyterian Church, however, were not so assuring and thus not so successful.

Another exclusive characteristic of Owingsville worshippers was their spiritual passion. In Stone's account of his travels in eastern Kentucky, he remarks that this passion was "something surpassing any thing [I] had known in nature."<sup>16</sup> Worshippers were falling, dancing, barking, laughing, and singing in the name of God, and, as Stone notes, this was something to be admired, not ridiculed.<sup>17</sup> Churches needed to be aware of this fiery passion and not restrict it. Unfortunately, the formality and orderliness of many churches of this era would not allow for such passion. Stone finds that at Cane Ridge, where this passion was likely at its peak, a Presbyterian minister "labored hard to regulate the people according to his standard of propriety."<sup>18</sup> By attempting to regulate the commoners' natural fervor, churches like the Presbyterian Church alienated themselves from potential church members.

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<sup>15</sup> Harrison, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Hoke S. Dickinson, Barton Warren Stone, and John Rogers, *The Cane Ridge Reader* (Paris, Ky: Cane Ridge Preservation Project, 1972), 42.

<sup>17</sup> Dickinson, Stone, and Rogers, 39.

<sup>18</sup> Dickinson, Stone, and Rogers. 43.

The churches that Owingsville worshippers did seek to join were those that invited them in and looked to serve their spiritual needs. As Richards notes, these worshippers accepted churches that honored their ancestors, especially the mothers and fathers that taught them spiritually and those who sought God in the woods before churches came along.<sup>19</sup> These churches were like Stone's church, where one could believe independently and still be a part of the Body of God. Churches of this kind included the Elkhorn Baptist and Salem Baptist Associations, both of which constructed churches in Owingsville in 1802 and doubled membership totals across the state.<sup>20</sup>

In not only Owingsville but all of Kentucky, the Second Great Awakening benefitted both commoners and churches. Commoners could now seek groups that accepted and shared their beliefs, and churches could grow because of the exponential increase in membership. The Second Great Awakening's impact is perhaps most illuminated by the differences in membership totals in 1801 and 1830. In 1801, only one in twenty Kentuckians was a church member. By 1830, that ratio had been reduced to one in seven.<sup>21</sup>

One might conclude that the Second Great Awakening largely came about due to the American Revolution. The United States had earned its independence only ten years before the Second Great Awakening began, so one may assume Americans were spiritually awakened by this victory and that it was momentous enough to sustain the Awakening for over fifty years. Though the gravity of the War of Independence is undeniable, in the 1780s and 1790s, the primary concern for the people of Owingsville and other commoners was to achieve their own political and economic independence.

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<sup>19</sup> Richards, 391.

<sup>20</sup> Richards, 379.

<sup>21</sup> Richards, 380.

The American Revolution inspired a desire for political change not only at the national level but at the state and local levels, especially in Kentucky and throughout the western frontier. According to Ellen Eslinger, author of *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism*, prior to the revolution, counties were governed by gentry, who often ruled for their own benefit rather than for the good of the community. After the revolution had ended, more and more people desired to translate the democratic principles outlined in the Declaration of Independence to their own local governments.<sup>22</sup> The desire for personal autonomy is what drove many people to the western frontier in the first place. It represented an opportunity to govern one's self rather than be ruled by "men of fortune."<sup>23</sup> Despite their desires for democracy, many Kentuckians continued to be governed by gentry in the years following the revolution.

Along with this desire for political independence, many Kentuckians possessed a desire for economic independence. In Kentucky, self-sufficiency was portrayed as the ideal. Most men dreamed of being able to live off their own land and maybe even own enough land to build a nearby house for a grown child.<sup>24</sup> The problem was that most men were not wealthy enough to afford significant acreage. In addition, there was no political system in place that helped men become the autonomous landowners they desired to be. Even when men conquered these hurdles, others soon presented themselves. Cultivating one's own land required a great deal of labor, almost too much for one family to perform. Crops were frequently infested by crows and

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<sup>22</sup> Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 107-108.

<sup>23</sup> Eslinger, 115.

<sup>24</sup> Eslinger, 59.



squirrels. Surveying errors led to land disputes. Because of these problems, as Eslinger points out, very few settlers had realized their dreams by the Second Great Awakening.<sup>25</sup>

As can be seen, though the American Revolution brought independence on the national level, very few Kentuckians were themselves independent. In fact, the war barely affected them at all. They remained under gentry rule and were unable to achieve economic independence. That said, the war could not have been the reason citizens of Owingsville and other small Kentucky communities were spiritually awakened in the 1790s. Instead, it was the desire to get out of the political and economic conditions they seemingly could not escape.

In the 1790s, everything began to change. What was a period of religious stagnation transformed into a period of zealous worship. Preachers of existing denominations that were unable to inspire people to join their churches and come to God were supplanted by up-and-coming fiery evangelists. This transformation came about because the fervor of these ministers and their churches coincided with the fervor of the commoners.<sup>26</sup>

This combination is exemplified by an account from Eslinger's book. At a small camp meeting, a helpless Presbyterian minister had just concluded his message, and no one was moved. Then, John McGee, a Methodist minister, "came forward and without hesitation, entered on the most heart-stirring exhortation, encouraging the wounded of the day never to cease striving...until they had obtained peace in their souls." McGee then proceeded to lead the audience in singing a hymn, and two elderly ladies stood up and began to shout praises to God.

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<sup>25</sup> Eslinger, 61-64.

<sup>26</sup> Harrison, 30.

Soon, the entire congregation was singing and shouting, with some even falling to the floor in praise.<sup>27</sup> The passion Stone spoke of had been released.

Commoners that were experiencing political and economic problems now had a new way to counteract these problems. As Richards notes, these commoners were able to praise in the forest just as passionately as they could in the church, but the church presented its own advantages, the most notable of which was a sturdy building to gather in.<sup>28</sup> The dangers of travelling to the forest, as well as those of the forest itself, were now eliminated. People were more secure in a church than in the wilderness, where animals, weather, and careless hunters all presented a threat.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the worshippers could be less isolated. They no longer would represent a solitary group but part of a larger collection of people. As church members, commoners could openly praise God, and they now could share their praise with peers who were going through similar problems. Moreover, they had pastors who were willing to accept them and encourage them to put their troubles behind. Suddenly, the worries of the current life were replaced by hopes for the next. People knew that no matter what trials they underwent on Earth, they soon would be in heaven with God and their newly-found church brethren.

It is worth reiterating the impact that the Second Great Awakening had on all fronts. It shaped how Owingsville and other small communities developed and led to the construction of hundreds of new churches all over the state. It helped new denominations like Barton Stone's Disciples of Christ establish a foothold in the state in addition to helping ministers like Stone himself come to prominence. It did not force Owingsville and Kentucky commoners to worship less passionately, instead offering a new and preferable way to express this passion through

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<sup>27</sup> John Rankin, "Autobiography of John Rankin Sr." (typescript). In Eslinger, 195-196.

<sup>28</sup> Richards, 374.

<sup>29</sup> Eslinger, 188.

churches. These churches could enjoy the benefits of the exponential increase in membership while their members could now focus on the pleasures that awaited them in the afterlife rather than the misfortunes that bound them on Earth. Based on these wide-ranging impacts, it is clear that the Second Great Awakening was both a revelation and a revolution for small communities like Owingsville, Kentucky.

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