

## PETER CARTWRIGHT AND THE EMERGING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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The *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (published 1856) introduces the present-day reader to a simultaneously familiar yet foreign setting in the America it presents. On a surface reading, the place names (e.g., Illinois, Kentucky, Boston, Baltimore) and the characters (e.g., Methodists, Baptists, Mormons) are comfortably within the modern American lexicon. Likewise, the activities Cartwright engaged in (e.g., deliberating in committees, traveling, attending worship services) are recognizable enough. However, a deeper reading of the text begins to peel away this deceptively accessible veneer to reveal that Cartwright's America is significantly different from America in the early twenty-first century. Kentucky and Illinois were considered frontier wilderness, with Kentucky not even becoming a state until two years after Cartwright's parents became settlers in it, and Illinois only having been a state for six years when Cartwright moved his family there. Interstate travel required weeks of horseback riding or walking with few marked roads to follow and uncertain accommodations along the way. Worship services were rarely held in church buildings, conducted instead in people's homes or in large camp meetings that could last for days. While the names may be the same, clearly the substance of life in Cartwright's America was significantly different from life in America today.

If the differences between Cartwright's America and twenty-first century America had to be compressed into a single point, it would be that much of what is now long-established in America was in the process of becoming during Cartwright's lifetime.<sup>1</sup> The concept of political parties was only beginning to take hold. The market economy was just starting to rise above the subsistence economy that had dominated America's colonial life. The questions of wage labor and slave labor still loomed large. Even what manhood and womanhood should entail was in flux. The nation as a whole was searching for its identity following the Revolution, and every aspect of life was swept up in this search. As Cartwright described it, "The Union itself was in its infancy. . . we had just thrown off the yoke of the British

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<sup>1</sup> William G. McLoughlin offers a brief, but insightful outline of the dialectics facing Americans in the post-revolutionary years. This list includes political, economic, geographical, social, religious, and philosophical positions that had to be considered in the new nation. William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 99.

government, just ended a bloody war.”<sup>2</sup> In this early and impressionable stage of the nation’s life, the American people were faced with determining what the nation would look like in its maturity.

That the uncertainties of American identity should find voice in Cartwright’s *Autobiography* is no surprise. Since “American Methodism was the largest, most geographically diverse movement of middling and artisan men and women in the early republic,”<sup>3</sup> the memoirs of a Methodist circuit rider become a likely place for the quest to determine a uniform American identity to be expressed. Given Cartwright’s remarkable and variegated career which allowed him access to national, state, and local aspects of American life, it is even more appropriate that the American identity would find itself under consideration in his memoirs. Whether intending to or not, Cartwright’s autobiographical musings and anecdotes are a rich trove disclosing who Americans thought they were and what they thought they should become.

### **Liberty, Politics & Democracy**

For Cartwright the central feature of the American identity, and the feature to which he was most committed, was liberty. This commitment is clear in the third and fourth sentences of his *Autobiography*: “My father was a soldier in the great struggle for liberty, in the Revolutionary war with Great Britain. He served over two years.”<sup>4</sup> Even though Cartwright was not born until after his father’s military service, his father’s willingness to sacrifice for the nation’s independence impressed him deeply. Liberty was something to be fought for and was worth dying to gain. As his *Autobiography* makes clear, this is a point that he never ceased to remind his listeners of throughout his ministry.

For Cartwright, becoming a Methodist epitomized the liberty America had purchased in the Revolution. When a person became a Methodist, that person declared his or her personal liberty to worship according to his or her conscience. Cartwright raised this point on numerous occasions when dealing with preachers from other denominations that resisted the influence of the Methodists. In one case, speaking to a Presbyterian minister who had forbidden him from forming a Methodist society in a traditionally Presbyterian neighborhood, Cartwright responded, “the people were a free people and lived in a free country, and must and ought to be allowed to do as they pleased.” Later, speaking directly to the people of the neighborhood, Cartwright expressed a similar sentiment, “I then told them my father had fought in the Revolution to gain our freedom and liberty of conscience; that

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 100.

<sup>3</sup> John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Cartwright, 25.

I felt that my Presbyterian brother had no bill of sale on the people.”<sup>5</sup> He then offered an invitation to leave the Presbyterian fellowship and join a Methodist society.

Cartwright’s concern with liberty reflected the national political developments that were occurring over the course of his early ministry. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century Thomas Jefferson’s appeal to form a nation based on the ideal of free yeomen had captured the imagination of the new Americans, convincing them to oust the old hierarchies that Federalism represented. This led to the Jeffersonian Republicans unseating the Federalists from power in Washington. Cartwright and his family fully supported this shift. In 1789, Cartwright’s father had voted for James Monroe (a staunch supporter of Jefferson) for congress, and Cartwright himself named his first son Madison after James Madison, Jefferson’s hand-picked successor to the White House.<sup>6</sup>

However, Jeffersonian Republicanism was only the beginning. Jefferson’s ascendancy to the presidency “had the unforeseen effect of spurring action among ordinary Americans for even wider democracy.”<sup>7</sup> This effect would come into full flower with the election of Andrew Jackson as president in 1828.

This push toward Jacksonian Democracy came on the heels of the Panic of 1819, caused when the Second Bank of the United States, which Jefferson had chartered, called in loans in an attempt to restrict the rampant post-War of 1812 speculation. The result of this action was to bankrupt those who had extended their businesses on credit. This, in turn, impacted a vast number of people who were neither speculators nor belonged to the monied class, but who nonetheless had been drawn into the newly emerging market economy through the growing requirement for purchasing goods on credit. Not only did the panic cause these people financial distress, it also crushed their ability to maintain the republican virtue of “public usefulness”<sup>8</sup> making the panic both a moral and economic struggle. Andrew Jackson, who “waged a blood feud against banks, corporations, and money men whose privileges and schemes (he claimed) made life harder for common people” became a hero for those who faced ruin by no fault of their own.<sup>9</sup>

Jackson also inspired people because of his renown as the commanding general against the British at the successful Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812. This success was certainly not lost on Cartwright, who wrote of the Methodists who went to fight in the war, “A braver set of men never lived...and many of them volunteered and helped to achieve another glorious

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<sup>5</sup> Cartwright, 90-91.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Bray, *Peter Cartwright, Legendary Frontier Preacher* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 83.

<sup>7</sup> Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 178.

<sup>8</sup> Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 32.

<sup>9</sup> Sandage, 40.

victory over the legions of England, and her savage allied thousands... under General Jackson.”<sup>10</sup> More than Jackson’s military record, though, Cartwright respected Jackson because Jackson seemed to embody the very liberty that Cartwright so prized, “General Jackson was certainly a very extraordinary man. He was, no doubt, in his prime of life, a very wicked man, but he always showed a great respect for the Christian religion, and the feelings of religious people, especially the ministers of the Gospel.”<sup>11</sup> This is indeed high praise from Cartwright, who was impressed with both Jackson’s willingness to support the liberty of the nation as well as the liberty of individuals to express their Christian faith. Cartwright’s two anecdotes about Jackson, though almost certainly fabrications,<sup>12</sup> both in which Jackson defended Cartwright’s beliefs and preaching, further secure this point. It is little wonder that, when Cartwright ran for office, he did so under the banner of the Democratic Party.

In spite of Cartwright’s involvement in the Democratic Party, Cartwright had no great love of politics. His two terms in the Illinois state legislature only furthered this dislike, leading him to state that his time as a lawmaker had put him in contact with “the muddy waters of political strife.”<sup>13</sup> However, by his own accounting, he was willing to brave these waters and the dirt in them in order to deal with the most pressing issue of antebellum America, one that was creating two mutually exclusive national identities as partisans lined up for and against it: slavery.

### **Slavery, Reform & Union**

Cartwright was deeply opposed to slavery. When explaining why he moved his family from Kentucky to Illinois, his primary reason was so that, “I would get entirely clear of the evil of slavery.”<sup>14</sup> For Cartwright, evil was the only word that was fit to describe slavery. He opined, “Slavery is certainly a domestic, political and moral evil. . . I will not attempt to enumerate the moral evils that have been produced by slavery; they are legion.”<sup>15</sup> Particularly reprehensible to Cartwright was the idea of reinstating the slave trade “with all its damning, murdering influences. . . [that] stands reprobated by every Christian nation that deserves the name, and has the broad seal of reprobation set on it by God himself.”<sup>16</sup> In a biting sarcasm passage, Cartwright attacked Methodist preachers from the south who had sought to defend the slave trade by claiming that it was a matter of Christian benevolence to bring slaves from the heathen land of Africa to the Christian land of America. In

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<sup>10</sup> Cartwright, 96. Bray also discusses at length the possibility that Cartwright himself served under Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. Bray, 69-71.

<sup>11</sup> Cartwright, 134.

<sup>12</sup> Bray, 84.

<sup>13</sup> Cartwright, 178.

<sup>14</sup> Cartwright, 165.

<sup>15</sup> Cartwright, 93-94.

<sup>16</sup> Cartwright, 238.

this passage he described what he perceived to be the two primary evils that occurred under the slave trade, the separation of families and the slaughter of thousands of Africans in the process of capturing and shipping them to the United States. He concluded caustically, "And let the officers of these slave vessels never forget to tell these savage tribes that there is at least one very popular Church in America that sanctions all these operations, and will justify them; namely, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South."<sup>17</sup>

In sharing these sentiments, Cartwright used similar tactics as those employed by the reformers who sought to stir support for the abolition of slavery by focusing on the violence endemic to slavery in their propaganda to provoke Northern sympathy for the slaves. "To arouse popular opposition to the evil practices they [the antebellum reformers] sought to eradicate, they deemed it necessary to display those practices in all their horror: "civilized" virtue required a shocked spectatorial sympathy in response to pain scenarios both real and willfully imagined."<sup>18</sup> These presentations could be particularly powerful when linked with evangelical religion. Cartwright, as an evangelical and a revivalist would have therefore been uniquely suited to make the anti-slavery appeal as he did. "Evangelical religious practice made popular a style of moral reasoning from sympathy and compassion that was best developed in the revival churches."<sup>19</sup>

While Cartwright may have shared the abolitionists' strategies for arousing sympathy for slaves, he was not as open to participating in the political remedies championed by some abolitionists against slavery. His reason for this was that he opposed any activity that brought disunity into either the nation or the church. As a Democrat, Cartwright had great faith in the ability of people to choose the best way to live provided that the choices were fairly presented to them. When politicians interfered with this process by seeking to mandate what the people should choose, they caused nothing but strife and discord. For Cartwright, this is precisely what political abolitionism had done: "What has all this violent hue and cry about proscriptive abolitionism done? . . . It has riveted the chains of slavery tighter than ever before; it has blocked up the way to reasonable and practicable emancipation; it has engendered prejudice; it has thrown firebrands into legislative halls."<sup>20</sup> In

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<sup>17</sup> Cartwright, 239.

<sup>18</sup> Karen Halttunen, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture" in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 2. (Apr., 1995), 330.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Clark, "'The Sacred Rights of the Weak': Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America" in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 82, No. 2. (Sept., 1995), 476. This attempt to engender the sympathy of others by exposing them to the violence experienced by slaves also connects with the present historiography being developed around slavery. Walter Johnson makes this point in a way that sounds similar to Cartwright's vehement denial that the violence of the slave institution could in any way be connected to the good graces of the Methodist Episcopal Church, "This pervasive violence belies the influential claim that slaveholders were able to extract a sort of unwitting consent from their slaves." Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 206.

<sup>20</sup> Cartwright, 274.

place of political abolitionism, Cartwright pointed his fellow preachers to the use of moral suasion as the only means of ending slavery, “the most successful way to ameliorate the condition of the slaves, and Christianize them, and finally secure their freedom, is to treat their owners kindly and not meddle politically with slavery. Let their owners see and know that your whole mission is the salvation of the slaves as well as their owners.”<sup>21</sup> In an almost prophetic passage, Cartwright proclaimed that if the evil of slavery was only to be met by political adversaries rather than preachers of the gospel that sought to bring salvation, then “this glorious Union will be dissolved, a civil war will follow, death and carnage will ensue, and the only free nation on the earth will be destroyed.”<sup>22</sup>

If the abolitionists could be blamed for inflaming tensions with slaveholders politically, then the slaveholders themselves were guilty of the greater crime of secession. The height of political folly, for Cartwright, was to dissolve a good and righteous union, whether that union was national or denominational. It was the dissolution of the latter kind of union that had personally involved Cartwright. At the 1844 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the issue of slavery was brought to a head over Bishop James O. Andrew’s inheritance of slaves from his wife’s family. This resulted in a line of division that led to the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. This line was agreed to by the vast number of delegates as a peaceable way to bring an end to the decades-long battle that slavery had brought to the denomination. However, Cartwright stood in adamant opposition to this action because he considered it a terrible evil for the denomination to rend itself apart in this way.<sup>23</sup> His reasoning for this was both legal and democratic, “the General Conference had no constitutional right to form this sham line of division that they did, and thereby force thousands of our pious and devoted members south of that line to take their membership in an openly avowed slaveholding Church, or remain forever without Church privileges.”<sup>24</sup> In making this argument, Cartwright joined at least two presidents that likewise believed in the illegality of sundering a political union. Andrew Jackson refused to back down from the nullification battle with South Carolina, claiming that states did not have the right to abrogate federal law.<sup>25</sup> More famously, Abraham Lincoln maintained that

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<sup>21</sup> Cartwright, 275.

<sup>22</sup> Cartwright, 94.

<sup>23</sup> Bray gives an excellent overview of Cartwright’s impassioned attempts to halt this (Bray, 189-190). It is worth noting that Cartwright ultimately would prevail because an insufficient number of the individual annual conferences did not support this separation, thus rendering the legislation at the 1844 General Conference null and void. However, it was a pyrrhic victory, as the Methodist Episcopal Church, South had already been formed by the time of the 1848 General Conference.

<sup>24</sup> Cartwright, 273.

<sup>25</sup> Willentz, 382-383.

the South had no legal right to secede from the Union.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Lincoln created many of his wartime policies around the belief that many southerners, if given the choice, would openly embrace the Union.<sup>27</sup>

### Expansionism, Economics & Family

Given Cartwright's strong sense that securing the Union was fundamental to the American identity, it is not surprising to find that he also was a proponent of expansionism. If the Union was good in itself, then the expansion of the Union would spread that good. This was true for both the national union and the unified Methodist Episcopal Church. His concern for the latter shows up routinely in his *Autobiography* by his inclusion of Annual Conference and General Conference reports discussing the growth of the denomination. While these reports usually take the form of straightforward presentation of statistics or descriptions of widened geographical areas where Methodist preachers were to labor, it is not hard to detect underlying satisfaction in Cartwright at the growth of his beloved denomination.

Cartwright's support for national expansionism, though not an overt topic of his *Autobiography*, is perceptible in his highly positive depictions of both the frontier and the military.<sup>28</sup> It is likely that this support was shaped out of his own experience as the child of some of the earliest settlers in Kentucky. By Cartwright's own recollection, his parents were poor. It may well be that they, as a great many other Americans, saw the vast lands to the west as offering opportunities which were no longer available for them along the Eastern seaboard.

The opportunities in the East had been closed to many Americans by the increasing penetration of long-distance trade and the creation of a new capitalist ethic that was at odds with the household economy that had existed from colonial times.<sup>29</sup> This new ethic required people to participate in an unforgiving credit system that demanded the swift and exact payment of debts, rather than allowing for the perpetual indebtedness that the interdependent household economy had promoted. The pressures brought by this new system were sometimes sufficient to drive people out of the East Coast where trade based on credit was most prevalent. Added to this was the burgeoning population and decreasing availability of cheap, fertile land on

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<sup>26</sup> Although of little consequence, James Buchanan also believed that secession was illegal. James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 248-250, 309.

<sup>27</sup> The Ten Percent Plan is an excellent example of this. According to Eric Foner, "Lincoln seems to have assumed that the South's former Whigs, many of whom, although large slaveholders, had been reluctant secessionists, would accept his lenient terms." Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990), 17.

<sup>28</sup> This support may have also generated personal action by Cartwright. Bray considers the possibility that Cartwright participated in the Black Hawk War in 1832 to claim Indian lands for Illinois settlers. Bray, 140-142.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 44.

the East Coast. This demographic pressure made it even more imperative for the generations of people coming of age in the late eighteenth century and after to head west if they were to establish financially viable, independent households.<sup>30</sup>

The establishment of an independent household in which all the members of a family could be cared for was important to Cartwright. This is particularly noticeable in the one clear break he made with Francis Asbury. Whereas Asbury had unreservedly advocated against preachers getting married because the preachers would be distracted from their work by their wives, Cartwright not only approved of preachers getting married, but also thought it appropriate that they should have children and establish their own permanent places of residence to care for their families. Moreover, Cartwright stood in sympathy with the preachers who had to leave the Methodist itinerancy in order to support their families. He wrote, "Many of our married preachers had been starved into a location, and many more, during their illustrious sacrificing lives, were actually compelled to desist from traveling for want of means to support their families."<sup>31</sup>

It is important to understand that Cartwright was not suggesting that economic realities should take precedence over the calling of God in the preceding statement. Rather, for Cartwright, the issue was one of men being truly manly by taking care of their families. In this regard, Cartwright's attitude was more in keeping with the colonial understanding of manhood in which men secured their manliness and their position as head of household by providing for their families through maintaining sufficient property to support them. "Property bound families together. Its possession sorted out relationships, and its distribution created a situation of inequality between fathers and children."<sup>32</sup> Men held the property, proving their manliness by being able to cultivate the land for the support of their families and, as their children reached adulthood, to parcel out the land so that each child could form an independent household. Cartwright himself had benefitted from this arrangement when his father, having been convinced that "circuit-riding had made his son a man" outfitted him to be independent as a traveling preacher.<sup>33</sup> The desire to continue this provision for his own children was likewise part of what motivated Cartwright to move to Illinois. In addition to wanting to move to a free state, he also listed as one of his motivations for the move, "I believed I could better my temporal circumstances, and procure lands for my children as they grew up."<sup>34</sup>

Even though Cartwright wanted "better temporal circumstances," it is misguided to see Cartwright as a straightforward apologist for consumerism and the rise of the capitalist market. For Cartwright, consumption was only

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<sup>30</sup> Clark, 60-61.

<sup>31</sup> Cartwright, 100.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Bruegel, *Farm, Shop, Landing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 26.

<sup>33</sup> Bray, 52.

<sup>34</sup> Cartwright, 165.



permissible within the boundaries of the values that made men providers for their dependents. Charles Sellers gets this right when he analyzed Cartwright's anecdote about encouraging a tight-fisted father to spend his money on providing better things for his wife and daughters, "This old brother was drawn into the market by more than commodity fetishism or even the utility of store goods. Intrafamilial pressure enforced the communal standards Preacher Cartwright invoked."<sup>35</sup>

Cartwright was also an awkward fit with the rising market because of his overt disdain for fashionable dress and for higher education for preachers. In several passages throughout his *Autobiography*, Cartwright inveighed against both of these evils, intimating that they led people away from Christ by an emphasis on worldliness. In terms of dress he warned, "fashionable frivolities are all contrary to the humble spirit of our Saviour."<sup>36</sup> To elucidate this point, he included several anecdotes about men and women alike who, when brought to conversion at camp meetings, renounced their fashionable attire. Two women removed all their jewelry, calling them idols. One man tore off the ruffles from his shirt. All of them came to believe grace was impeded by their ownership of such things.

Likewise, Cartwright feared that by focusing on the education of preachers rather than on their spiritual preparation for the ministry, the Methodist Episcopal Church would be raising up pastoral leaders who would be held in thrall by the world. He pointed out that these educated preachers would not want to do the work of the circuit rider, but would desire more officious positions in the church where they would "get a greater amount of pay, and get it more certainly too, than a traveling preacher. . . Here is a great temptation to those who are qualified to fill those high offices," explaining, "having quieted their consciences with the flattering unction of obtaining sanctified education. . . their moral sensibilities are blunted."<sup>37</sup> Cartwright portrayed several instances in which educated clergy, who were always sent from the East Coast, struggled to engage in useful ministry on the frontier. In one particularly amusing story, Cartwright described how an East Coast preacher was utterly taken by surprise when a very large frontiersman was converted at a camp meeting. The frontiersman scooped up the East Coast preacher in a bear hug of joy from which the preacher was unable to extricate himself for several minutes as the frontiersman bounded enthusiastically around the room.

Cartwright believed that consumption was only permissible when gauged to a certain standard of manliness and that fashionable clothes and institution-educated preachers were an invitation to idolatry. Yet, at the same time, Cartwright did not dismiss the importance of improving one's lot in the world entirely. Indeed, his overt rejection of consumerism for its own

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<sup>35</sup> Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 155.

<sup>36</sup> Cartwright, 63.

<sup>37</sup> Cartwright, 65.

sake may have helped sharpen his eye for recognizing when consumer goods were lacking. This is especially notable in his observation about the clothing of the Kentucky preachers, “they did not generally receive in a whole year money enough to get them a suit of clothes; and if people, and preachers too, had not dressed in home-spun clothing, and the good sisters had not made and presented their preachers with clothing, they generally must retire from itinerant life, and go to work and clothe themselves.”<sup>38</sup> Here, Cartwright saw the lack of good clothes as sufficient reason for a preacher to stop preaching and get a better paying job. In this regard, Cartwright’s opinions embody the observation made by Michael Zakim, “while commerce served as the source of corruption because it made the pursuit of luxury possible, it was no less an agent of civilization. This was because the absence of material improvement was as much an affront to virtue as it was its guarantor.”<sup>39</sup>

### The Manhood of Preachers

As noted earlier, woven into Cartwright’s statements about the economy are hints of the value that Cartwright placed on manhood. Economically, manhood was defined by a man’s independence and his ability to provide for his family. Manhood was also defined by the ability of a man to hold fast to his purpose in the face of pervasive difficulties. The epitome of this manhood was found in the old-fashioned Methodist circuit rider, a character who Cartwright described at length:

A Methodist preacher, in those days, when he felt that God had called him to preach, instead of hunting up a college or Biblical institute, hunted up a hardy pony of a horse, and some traveling apparatus, and with his library always at hand, namely Bible, Hymn Book, and Discipline, he started, and with a text that never wore out nor grew stale, he cried, “Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world.” In this way he went through storms of wind, hail, snow, and rain; climbed hills and mountains, traversed valleys, plunged through swamps, swam swollen streams, lay out all night, wet, weary, and hungry, held his horse by the bridle all night, or tied him to a limb, slept with his saddle blanket for a bed, his saddle and saddle-bags as a pillow.<sup>40</sup>

The circuit rider is a man because he is able to restrain utterly his passions, channeling them all to the single purpose of preaching the gospel regardless of how insurmountable this task may seem. This is contrasted to the seminary-trained preachers who are, in actuality, giving in to their passion for money and ease by undertaking their studies.

In understanding manhood this way, Cartwright’s frustrations with the seminary-trained preachers could be understood in terms of the generational conflicts that arose over the definition of manhood during the 1830s. Whereas Cartwright represented the late eighteenth century masculine ideal,

<sup>38</sup> Cartwright, 74.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 19.

<sup>40</sup> Cartwright, 164.

which was characterized by “independence, toughness and self-command, while also connoting feeling, sympathy, and humaneness,”<sup>41</sup> the seminary-trained preachers were more akin to the reformers who formed the young men’s reformation societies. These young men reformers “insisted that their vision of manliness had been forged in opposition to the aggressive and acquisitive manliness that had developed during the post-revolutionary generation.”<sup>42</sup> Casting Cartwright’s relationship with the seminary-trained preachers this way helps explain the numerous passages concerning them and the combination of offense and bemusement that he expressed toward them.

If Cartwright could be considered too aggressive by the standards of seminary-trained preachers, other men assumed he would not be aggressive enough because of his role as a Methodist preacher. The men in this second group were termed “rowdies” by Cartwright, and they show up in virtually every anecdote he related in his *Autobiography* concerning camp meetings. The rowdies were local men who had little respect for preachers and who resented having the preachers attempt to enforce a new moral standard that forbade the vices the rowdies likely indulged in as symbols of their manliness (e.g., drinking alcohol). Often the rowdies sought to disrupt the camp meetings through intimidation, violence, vandalism or practical jokes, likely assuming that the preachers were not sufficiently manly to stand against their onslaught.<sup>43</sup>

The contests between Cartwright and the rowdies can be seen in terms of what Amy Greenberg describes as two competing understandings of manhood in Antebellum America: restrained manhood and martial manhood. According to Greenberg, the restrained man derived his “manhood from being morally upright, reliable, and brave,” while the martial man “believed that the masculine qualities of strength, aggression, and even violence, better defined a true man than did the firm and upright manliness of restrained men.”<sup>44</sup> Under these appellations, Cartwright would have been the restrained man while the rowdies would have been martial men.

However, according to Cartwright, the rowdies never gained an upper hand on him in spite of their more aggressive nature.<sup>45</sup> This was due to the fact that Cartwright being restrained in morality did not require him to be a pacifist. Cartwright’s editorial on an incident in which a rowdy at one of his camp meetings challenged him to a fight (which Cartwright managed to avoid by scaring the rowdy off before the fight started) provides an excellent

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<sup>41</sup> Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men & Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 21.

<sup>42</sup> Dorsey, 110.

<sup>43</sup> Notably, had it not been for his dramatic conversion, Cartwright was on his way to being one of these men during his adolescence. Bray, 20-21.

<sup>44</sup> Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12.

<sup>45</sup> Bray gives us a good qualification on this point by demonstrating Cartwright never wrote about a situation in which he was beaten or humiliated. Bray, 44, 81.

example of the ability of the restrained man to take on martial qualities when needed. “It may be asked what I would have done if this fellow had gone with me to the woods. This is hard to answer, for it was a part of my creed to love everybody, but to fear no one; and I did not permit myself to believe any man could whip me till it was tried; and I did not permit myself to premeditate expedients in such cases. I should no doubt have proposed to him to have prayer first, and then followed the openings of Providence.”<sup>46</sup> Cartwright’s manhood was found in restraining any violent impulses for the sake of Christ, to the point of not even thinking about such impulses, but being ready and able to prove physical superiority through martial might. This proves well Greenberg’s caveat, “By calling these men restrained, I do not mean to infer that they were weak, afraid of conflict, or feminized.”<sup>47</sup>

### A Preacher, His Church, and His Nation in Transition

While Cartwright and his fellow preachers may not have been feminized, it is clear that he was concerned that his church was becoming so. Indeed, Cartwright seemed to be aware of the fact that his world was changing during the latter part of his ministry, and he was not pleased with it. In the closing chapters of his *Autobiography*, he showed this by becoming a full-throated croaker, lamenting the declension of the Methodists, including the loss of circuit riding appointments, family devotions, camp meetings and class meetings as regular practices of the Methodists.<sup>48</sup> He also was appalled at the hints of “extravagance” that had begun to be acceptable among the Methodists of his day as well as the laxity that allowed men and women to sit on the same side of the church with each other. His view of these changes can be summed up in his thoughts on having worshiped in a Boston church, which had completely shifted to these new practices. At once he was both resigned to the inevitability of the church adopting these practices yet convinced of the sinfulness of this:

I shall not attempt a labored argument here against these evils, for I suppose, where these practices have become the order of the day, it would be exceedingly hard to overcome the prejudice in favor of them, though I am sure, from every observation I have been able to make, that their tendencies are to formality, and often engender pride, and destroy the spirituality of Divine worship; it gives precedence to the rich, proud, and fashionable part of our hearers, and unavoidably blocks up the way of the poor; and no stumbling-block should be put in the way of one of these little ones that believe in Christ.<sup>49</sup>

What Cartwright observed as failings in the Methodists were, in fact, a sign of things to come throughout the nation as a whole. With the political

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<sup>46</sup> Cartwright, 96.

<sup>47</sup> Greenberg, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Wigger offers an excellent overview of the croakers, their specific complaints about Methodist declension, and the Methodists who took the view opposing theirs. Wigger, 181-190.

<sup>49</sup> Cartwright, 310.

power that the federal government was accruing to regulate life in the nation, the wealth the market was bringing the nation, and the freedom of choice that liberty was fostering throughout the nation, Americans no longer sought the powerful release that evangelical revivals had once offered them. They were content, instead, to participate in more staid religious observances that supported the emerging status quo. Nowhere was this point made more clearly than in Cartwright's failed bid for Congress against Lincoln in 1846. During the campaign Cartwright made much of his piety being superior to Lincoln's.<sup>50</sup> On Election Day, though, the people declared piety to be less important to them than other issues by giving Lincoln a substantial victory.

What Cartwright could never have known was that he had helped create this new identity for Methodists and Americans alike through his ministry. The transitional nature of the time in which Cartwright lived almost guaranteed that the patchwork of values he had sought to propagate as central to the emerging American identity would not last. Borrowing from James McPherson's understanding of negative liberty and positive liberty,<sup>51</sup> it could be argued that Cartwright preached both types of liberty. Cartwright was adamantly in favor of giving people every opportunity that negative liberty allowed, but he would never have accepted the wide-ranging opportunities offered by negative liberty without adding the positive liberty of spiritual disciplines to make the exercise of those opportunities efficacious for salvation. However, Methodists and Americans decided only to appropriate the first half of this message, believing that negative liberty alone was sufficient to attain the betterment they desired. Ironically, by contributing to the numerical success of the Methodist Episcopal Church and to the material well-being of those to whom he ministered,<sup>52</sup> Cartwright unwittingly supported this partial appropriation of his message, setting the stage for the emergence of a kind of identity among both Methodists and Americans he never could have imagined. Thus, when Cartwright concluded his *Autobiography* with the various statistics that marked his ministry, he rightly would have been able to claim not only to have been the spiritual midwife who brought 12,000 people to new birth through the waters of baptism, but to have helped birth a new American identity that adopted the values he had promoted so vigorously, if not the disciplines that were meant to inform those values. One wonders what he would think if he could see this child today.

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<sup>50</sup> Charles L. Walls, Introduction in Cartwright, 8.

<sup>51</sup> McPherson, 866-867.

<sup>52</sup> In this regard, Cartwright showed that he was an excellent proponent of post-Revolutionary American Methodism. John Wigger explains, "Methodism simply appealed to and nurtured the kinds of people most likely to do well in the fluid social environment of the time. It did so by encouraging individual initiative, self-government, optimism, and even geographic mobility – all of which gave American Methodism a decidedly modern cast. Both ideologically and through its organizational structure, Methodism taught people not to fear innovation and ingenuity. In short, Methodists accepted and encouraged the new values necessary for "improvement" in a market-driven society." Wigger, 12.