

**THE CENTRAL CHRISTIAN ADVOCATE AND THE QUEST
FOR A HEARTLAND IDENTITY IN AMERICAN METHODISM,
1852-1900**

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In the nineteenth century, a new heartland in the American landscape established a new nexus for the political and religious destiny of the young nation. During the first few decades of the early American republic, the Northeast—principally New York, Philadelphia, and Boston—had been the center of activity for framers of the federal government as well as denominational and pan-evangelical organizations. By mid-century, however, the national discourse addressed the likelihood that the West, especially the middle Mississippi Valley region of Illinois, Missouri, and Iowa, was the new seat of American destiny. The federal government created designs for integrating the East and the West through commerce, transportation, and information. Evangelical denominations did likewise, often setting the framework for this integration. Particularly integral was the transfer of information through the print media that had proliferated during the first half of the nineteenth century. Evangelicals sought to create a “common world of experience,” and they promoted that common world through print. Methodists were especially adept at this endeavor. As early as 1789, they had established the mechanism through which they would distribute religious literature when they founded the Book Concern in New York City.¹

The development of regional print cultures soon followed. These regional cultures challenged the authority of the national culture that was so firmly situated in the Northeast. This was especially evident in the dialectic between the West and the East. The establishment of western publishing

¹Donald G. Matthews, “The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830: An Hypothesis,” *American Quarterly* 21.1 (Spring, 1969): 23-43; Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 2004), 33; David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004); Richard Kluger, *Seizing Destiny: How American Grew from Sea to Shining Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 181-231, 270-399; Jon Kukla, *A Wilderness So Immense: The Louisiana Purchase and the Destiny of America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 164-202, 701-743; Gaylord P. Albaugh, *History and Annotated Bibliography of American Religious Periodicals and Newspapers Established from 1730 through 1830* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1994), I:xi-xiv; William Warren Sweet, *Methodism in American History* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1933), 184; Wesley Norton, *Religious Newspapers in the Old Northwest to 1860, A History, Bibliography, and Record of Opinion* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1977); and James Penn Pilkington, *The Methodist Publishing House: A History, vol. I: Beginnings to 1870* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1968), 82-83, 141-143.

sought regional autonomy and contested the authority of evangelicalism in the Northeast through the politics of print culture. These subversive acts made possible the formation of what Michael Warner has called “counter-publics,” discursive communities that define themselves as distinct from a general or dominant culture. One such counterpublic became entrenched in the West by the 1820s, and its efflorescence continued until the Civil War. Instead of defining regional culture against the national culture, western literature redefined national culture through its own regional prism, giving rise to the development of the idea of America’s heartland.²

This essay shows how residents in the middle Mississippi Valley came to embrace their home region as the new seat of religious power by the mid-nineteenth century, creating a new geographic and ideological center in American religion. I illustrate this process by analyzing the evolution of the *Central Christian Advocate* and its rise as a Methodist publication. The very name of the newspaper indicates that the conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the West consciously constructed a new center of American religion, one that would last for the next 150 years. It was an intentional goal of Methodists in the West to claim a nexus that was distant from the Northeast in more ways than just geography. The geographic separation allowed for cultural distinctions that western conferences wanted to celebrate. By claiming differences with and distance from northeastern superiors, the western conferences hoped to legitimize their power within the denomination. The agents from patron conferences in Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and Arkansas who participated in the founding of the *Central Christian Advocate* did so out of a mental geography of the American religious landscape constructed around them as the nucleus. This essay demonstrates how members of patron conferences in the middle Mississippi Valley believed that the *Central Christian Advocate* represented their regional and cultural identity and served as a means of legitimizing that identity to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In telling this narrative, I explain what the name “Central” implies for the relocation of evangelical authority within the American religious landscape. Far from being the peripheral hinterland that eastern evangelicals had constructed in their minds, the Mississippi Valley became the American heartland to evangelicals living in the region.

The *Central Christian Advocate* began in December, 1847, as the *Lebanon Journal* at McKendree College. The paper later changed its name to the

² Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 117-119. See also Robert Cooley Angell’s discussion of “struggle groups” *The Integration of American Society: A Study of Groups and Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1941). On the relationship between western regional and national cultures and literary histories, see David Donald and Frederick A. Palmer, “Toward a Western Literature, 1820-1860,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 35 (December, 1948): 413-428; Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, “The Story of the American Midwest: An Introduction,” *The Identity of the American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*, ed. Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001): 1-26, 8-9; and Terry A. Barnhart, “‘A Common Feeling’: Regional Identity and Historical Consciousness in the Old Northwest, 1820-1860,” *Michigan Historical Review* 29.1 (Spring, 2003): 39-70.

Illinois Advocate and Journal better to reflect that the weekly represented all Methodists within the state and not just those affiliated with the college. The *Lebanon Journal* and its subsequent manifestation as the *Illinois Advocate and Journal* quickly became the preferred periodical of Methodists in Illinois. One letter to the editor of the *Western Christian Advocate* in Cincinnati, Ohio, wrote that he had received notice about the proceedings of the Illinois Conference's annual meeting from the *Lebanon Journal*, not the *Western Christian Advocate*.³

In 1852, the General Conference had finally commenced its newspaper intended for Illinois, the *Northwestern Christian Advocate* published out of Chicago. Chicago was a logistical outpost for sending Methodist print across Illinois and into Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. The General Conference had desired to begin printing in Chicago much earlier, but the economic recession in the wake of the Panic of 1837 and the North-South division of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1844 caused financial limitations that delayed the endeavor. By 1852, the Church was prepared to expend resources for developing print institutions in the northwestern prairies and Mississippi Valley. The General Conference elected to establish a publishing committee in Chicago, chosen by the Illinois, Iowa, Rock River, Michigan, Northwest Indiana, and Wisconsin annual conferences. The General Conference granted autonomy to the Chicago committee, saying that its powers "shall be similar to that of the Book Committee at New-York and Cincinnati, so far as it may be applicable to the establishment."⁴ Although the General Conference granted to the northwestern conferences an autonomous publication committee, the national conference selected the name for the periodical printed in Chicago. Initially Henry W. Reed of the Iowa Conference suggested the name *Prairie Christian Advocate*, but that motion failed. Instead, the General Conference approved the title *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, using the regional label as an indicator of Chicago's location with respect to the Atlantic coast and the authoritative center of Methodist publishing in New York.

By contrast, the General Conference made decisions that limited the autonomy of printing and distribution operations in St. Louis. The General Conference appointed the Book Agents at Cincinnati to establish and direct a book depository and periodical in St. Louis, "provided that in the judgment of the agents such depository and periodical can be established and sustained with safety to the interests of the Book Concern."⁵ Founding a book depository in St. Louis would be an advantageous enterprise for the western conferences, especially in light of the new mission of the Book Concern. St. Louis was an important outpost along the Mississippi River. By the 1830s, the city

³ Joseph Calvin Evers, *The History of the Southern Illinois Conference [of] the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: Parthenon, 1964), 122; and "Illinois Conference," *Western Christian Advocate*, October 4, 1848. The Illinois Conference would not print its minutes and journal of the annual conference until later that year or the first of the next year.

⁴ *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church held in Boston, Mass., 1852* (New York: Carrolton & Phillips, 1852), 100.

⁵ *Journal of the General Conference* (1852), 72.

had become part of the transportation web that connected with New York and Philadelphia to the East, New Orleans to the South, and Santa Fe further West. A warehouse for the distribution of books into the West provided more timely shipping of literature. The decision to establish two book depositories was part of a general shift in Methodist printing enterprises to bolster the sale of religious books. The appointment of Thomas Carlton as director of the Methodist Book Concern initiated this shift in priorities within the literary organ of the denomination. Printing and distributing books had always been a vital component in the spread of Methodism. Traveling ministers were put in charge of selling books and getting subscriptions to periodicals. In the latter half of the 1840s, book publishing had stagnated. It was in this vacuum that newspapers grew in importance. Carlton's leadership shifted the focus back to books and away from newspapers. Therefore, more book depositories in the West were necessary for efficient book distribution.⁶

The instituting of an independent weekly newspaper captured most of the attention in the early annual meetings of the Methodist conferences in the Mississippi Valley. Methodists in Illinois took advantage of the General Conference's decision to promote their *Illinois Christian Advocate* as the paper for the Mississippi Valley. In its first annual session of 1852 as a separate body of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Southern Illinois Conference made the establishment of a book depository in St. Louis, Missouri, and a weekly newspaper top priorities. They partnered with the Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, and Arkansas conferences to meet the "conditional provision . . . made by the last General Conference" in order to have such institutions and for the legitimacy of those institutions to be recognized by the General Conference.⁷ "Official" Methodist papers were unsavory to the ministers within the Southern Illinois Conference who believed newspapers from New York and Cincinnati could not adequately nor accurately reflect the cultural values of southern Illinois. Therefore, Methodists in the Southern Illinois Conference claimed "we . . . MUST have a paper in our midst adapted to our wants."⁸ The Committee on the new *Central Christian Advocate* acknowledged the cultural distinction between Methodists in Illinois and those in New York or any part of the Northeast and averred that the *Central Christian Advocate* would cater to those distinctions in its audience's favor.

The *Central Christian Advocate* served as a message board connecting disparate conferences and districts in the region and providing readers with geographically appropriate news. The first page contained correspon-

⁶ James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri, 1764-1980*, 3rd ed. (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1998), 86, 131, 135; Minnie Organ, "History of the Newspaper Press of Missouri," *Missouri Historical Review* 4.2 (1910): 111-133; Pilkington, 347, 359.

⁷ *Minutes of the Southern Illinois Conference at its First Session*. (St. Louis, MO: Central Christian Advocate Office, 1852), 23, The United Methodist Church General Commission on Archives and History, Illinois Great Rivers (Southern) Conference, Stack 1: Shelf 2: Item 65 (1:2:65), Holman Library (Holman), McKendree University, Lebanon, Illinois.

⁸ *Minutes of the Southern Illinois Annual Conference at its Second Session* (St. Louis: Central Christian Advocate Office, 1853), 20, Holman, 1:2:65. Emphasis in original.

dence and letters to the editor from various local authors. A group like the Lebanon, Illinois, District Sunday School Committee could publish their biennial minutes and encourage other districts in the Midwest to do the same so that “we might have flourishing Sunday Schools in seven-eighths of our school houses throughout the country.”⁹ Annual conferences informed one another of their quarterly meeting dates, adding to the cooperation between these governing bodies. Revival correspondence kept the audience abreast of the good work taking place within the region. The paper gave preference to news from southern Illinois. The recurring “Salem Correspondence” from R. J. Nall and the “Egyptian Correspondence” and “Letter from Carbondale” gave southern Illinoisans opportunity to express themselves in a public forum. Articles like “Facts Relative to Methodism in Southern Illinois” and “Methodism in Southern Illinois,” both by R. G. Akers, allowed for the Southern Illinois Conference publicly to advocate its cause before its contemporaries. The inclusion of news from southern Illinois further confirmed the tight relationship between the newspaper and the patron conference that had supported it from the beginning. It is no wonder that the Southern Illinois Conference held a strong sense of obligation concerning the *Central Christian Advocate’s* success. Readers throughout the Mississippi Valley took an interest in the content of the *Central Christian Advocate* and contributed to its public discussion of religion and reform. While the early years of the *Central Christian Advocate* saw a majority of articles coming from Illinois, particularly southern Illinois, Missourians and Iowans also became important contributors.¹⁰

For the *Central Christian Advocate* to continue to cater to the reading interests of the Methodists in the Mississippi Valley, the periodical needed the financial patronage of those Methodists. Patronage was a major factor in the presence of religious newspapers in the nineteenth century. The *Central Christian Advocate* began in southern Illinois, and therefore the Southern Illinois Conference expressed a sense of ownership concerning the periodical. Conference members also conveyed a sense of responsibility for the success and integrity of the paper. The simultaneous development of the Mississippi Valley as a mature region and of the *Central Christian Advocate*

⁹ “Sunday School Cause,” *Central Christian Advocate*, January 6, 1858.

¹⁰ “Special Notices,” *Central Christian Advocate*, January 20, 1858; “Revival Correspondence,” *Central Christian Advocate*, April 7, 1858; “Salem Correspondence,” *Central Christian Advocate*, January 6, 1858; “Salem Correspondence,” *Central Christian Advocate*, May 5, 1858; “Salem Correspondence,” *Central Christian Advocate*, June 23, 1858; “Salem Correspondence,” *Central Christian Advocate*, August 18, 1858; “Salem Correspondence,” *The Central Christian Advocate*, September 22, 1858; “Salem Correspondence,” *Central Christian Advocate*, October 6, 1858; “Egyptian Correspondence,” *Central Christian Advocate*, July 14, 1858; “Letter from Carbondale,” *Central Christian Advocate*, July 28, 1858; “Facts Relative to Methodism in Southern Illinois,” *Central Christian Advocate*, January 30, 1861; and “Methodism in Southern Illinois,” *Central Christian Advocate*, February 27, 1861. For another study on religious periodicals as message boards or forums for discussion, see Gilbert Anthony Williams, *The Christian Recorder, Newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church: History of a Forum for Ideas, 1854-1902* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1996).

as an independent publication serving Methodist churches in the valley is especially noteworthy, as both entities matured together. The symbiotic relationship that existed between the region and its paper is important to understanding how vital the success of that paper was, to the legitimacy of the region within the landscape of American Methodism in particular, and American culture in general.

Not only had this weekly newspaper to serve the people in Illinois, Iowa, Missouri and Arkansas; it also had to be supported by its audience and not by the General Conference. Financial losses for regional publications were the responsibility of the patron conferences. In 1853, the Southern Illinois Conference recognized this issue and solicited patronage from the Conference: "Inasmuch as we greatly need such a paper, and as we DISTINCTLY understand that the agents will have nothing to do with it, we feel it is our duty as a Conference, to rally to its undivided support."¹¹ This statement acknowledged that the responsibility for the success of this newspaper depended in large part on the patronage and diligence of the Southern Illinois Conference and its neighboring conferences. Having little or no support from the General Conference, they pressed forward with their plans to publish a newspaper that best reflected their regional identity and lifestyle and the role of Methodism in influencing that lifestyle. For this reason, the Lebanon District in southern Illinois vowed to raise one thousand dollars to support the paper. One reader wrote to the editor: "There is a general feeling in this district in favor of the continuance of the Central."¹² The Southern Illinois Conference was not alone in stressing the need for regional patronage. The Illinois Annual Conference projected that its members could raise three thousand subscriptions within three months, and secure more than five thousand within the conference year.¹³ The Iowa Annual Conference resolved that its members would "use proper diligence to place in each family of our congregations one or more of our periodicals" with "special effort on behalf of the Central C. Advocate."¹⁴

Within time, a symbiotic relationship between the *Central Christian Advocate* and its patron conferences existed, such that "the continuance of that paper is inseparably [*sic*] connected with the prosperity of its patron conferences."¹⁵ The members of the Southern Illinois Conference thought it was their duty to sustain the *Central Christian Advocate*, declaring it worthy of their patronage and making its success the "full determination" of the Conference.¹⁶ Methodists in the Mississippi Valley gained a sense of iden-

¹¹ Minutes of the Second Annual Session of the Southern Illinois Conference (1853), 20.

¹² "About the Central," *Central Christian Advocate*, January 4, 1855.

¹³ *Minutes of the 29th Session of the Illinois Annual Conference in Winchester, Illinois, on Wednesday October 13, 1852*, 38.

¹⁴ *Minutes of the Iowa Annual Conference 15th Session at Fairfield, Iowa, on September 8, 1858*, 19.

¹⁵ *Minutes of the Southern Illinois Annual Conference at its Sixth Session* (Alton, IL: Courier Steam Book and Job Printing House, 1857), 21, Holman, 1:2:65.

¹⁶ Minutes of the Second Annual Session of the Southern Illinois Conference (1853), 20.

tification with and ownership of the paper they patronized. This allowed them to find a market niche. Competition between newspapers in the region made the mutual identification of the audience and the paper important.¹⁷ It was incumbent upon all Methodists within the region to be readers of one of the periodicals published by the denomination. For example, the Southern Illinois Conference stated that “every pastor in the Conference see to it that each family of his charge be solicited to take some of our Church papers.”¹⁸ It became even more imperative that readers in the valley subscribe to the paper commenced and sustained by their neighbors.

In some cases, members of the higher echelons in the Methodist Episcopal Church took an interest in preserving regional periodicals. Bishop Thomas Morris rallied to the support of the *Central Christian Advocate*. He argued that in most families, “it is generally the case that the youngest . . . becomes the favorite with the parents and the central point of attraction with all the older children.” However, “the Central at St. Louis is the youngest of our large family of Christian Advocates, and why should it not receive the most favor during its minority?” For Morris, the paper served as a means of consolidating the regional community and effecting the reunion of the nation after the Civil War. “We needed it before the war began,” he told readers, “we have needed it more since, and when the war is over and we come to reorganize and rebuild, we shall find it more necessary than ever before.”¹⁹ Living and working in St. Louis throughout the Civil War, Morris had an intimate knowledge of the middle Mississippi Valley and the needs and wants of its residents. This particular station afforded him the right and privilege of standing up for the *Central Christian Advocate*.

The sense of ownership that the subscribing and patron conferences possessed solidified their notions of regional and cultural distinctiveness within Methodism. The success or failure of the newspaper epitomized the success or failure of independent regional endeavors. The *Central Christian Advocate* became not only an advocate for the legitimacy of Methodism in the West; it also became an advocate for the legitimacy of the West in Methodism. An entire region, its maturation, and its independence relied, in part, on the staying power of the *Central Christian Advocate*. As such, the patron conferences identified with and took ownership of the *Central Christian Advocate*. For example, the Southern Illinois Conference resolved in 1860 to “adopt the Central as *our* paper.”²⁰ With this resolution, ownership was more firmly

¹⁷ Brown, 147; David Paul Nord, 92-107; Wayne A. Wiegand, “Theoretical Foundations for Analyzing Print Culture as Agency and Practice in a Diverse Modern America,” *Print Culture in a Diverse America*, ed. James P. Danky and Wayne A. Wiegand (Urbana: U Illinois P, 1998), 1-13.

¹⁸ *Minutes of the Forty-Seventh Session of the Southern Illinois Conference* (St. Louis: Press of Perrin & Smith, 1898), 45, Holman, 1:2:68.

¹⁹ “Bishop Morris on the Central,” *Central Christian Advocate*, February 19, 1862.

²⁰ *Minutes of the Southern Illinois Annual Conference held at Bunker Hill, Macoupin County, Ills.* (St. Louis, MO: Democrat Book and Job Office, 1860), 35, Holman, 1:2:65. Emphasis in the original.

established. That sense of ownership prompted the promotion of increased subscriptions. An article in January, 1855, entitled "Our Paper" proclaimed, "It is the feeling we would have every man, woman, and child possess, in these conferences." It continued, "Particularly would we have the preachers feel that the Central belongs to them—that it is *our* paper, in the largest sense."²¹ Another article by a reader in Mason, Illinois, encouraged fellow readers to "come up promptly and cheerfully to support of our own home Journal."²² Full patronage from all Methodists in the Mississippi Valley region was important to the survival of the *Central Christian Advocate* and to the growing legitimacy of the region's independent institutions.

Financial troubles threatened the life of the *Central Christian Advocate* and potentially undermined the autonomy of the region. The claims by readers in soliciting subscriptions underscored that the *Central Christian Advocate* was struggling to remain solvent. The editor had begun to incur debts to keep the *Central Christian Advocate* alive. Some within the region blamed their neighbors for the lack of subscriptions. For example, a postmaster at an undisclosed location blamed the Methodist preachers in his hometown for not soliciting subscriptions.²³ In other instances, Methodists in the Mississippi Valley pointed the accusing finger eastward. Peter Cartwright accused the book agents in Cincinnati to whom the committee in St. Louis reported. He claimed that the Cincinnati agents had not promoted the *Central Christian Advocate*, and in fact they had impeded the success of both the paper and the book depository in St. Louis.²⁴ The potential collapse of the *Central Christian Advocate* caused emotional duress for some readers. One reader from Hannibal, Missouri, wrote that he had read in the *Northwestern Christian Advocate* during the fall of 1854 that the *Central Christian Advocate* would soon cease publication. The reader said that his response to this news caused much distress. "I felt an indescribable pang run through my heart," he wrote. "For a whole day I fretted myself about the loss of this young and promising member of the advocate family." In mourning, he almost tied "crape string" to his office door, but declined "for fear that someone would think that I was dead myself." The reader concluded that he was elated when he received a December issue of the *Central Christian Advocate*.²⁵ This reader's response to the potential failure of the *Central Christian Advocate* reflects the prevailing mood among those invested in the patronage of this periodical. Frustrated that their regional periodical was failing, Methodists in the Mississippi Valley feared that the end of the *Central Christian Advocate* would signal to Methodists in the East that the West was indeed incompetent and in need of eastern institutions.

Methodists in the Mississippi Valley eventually turned to their eastern leaders in the General Conference for financial support to bail out the *Central*

²¹ "Our Paper," *Central Christian Advocate*, January 4, 1855. Emphasis in the original.

²² "The Central Our Paper," *Central Christian Advocate*, March 1, 1855.

²³ "Read This," *Central Christian Advocate*, March 15, 1855.

²⁴ "C.C. Advocate – Book Depository," *Central Christian Advocate*, August 9, 1855.

²⁵ "About the Central," *Central Christian Advocate*, January 4, 1855.

Christian Advocate and their patron conferences. Methodists in Illinois had sent Peter Cartwright to the Methodist Book Concern in Cincinnati to discuss these endeavors with the agents as early as 1853.²⁶ While the regional newspaper was an independent creation of the western conferences, these conferences sought the support of the General Conference to ensure success. When the General Conference and the book agents declined their support, then the Southern Illinois Conference pressed forward with the endeavor independently, stressing the necessity of rallying their “undivided support.”²⁷ At any available opportunity, the Southern Illinois Conference would continue to ask for the support and assistance from the General Conference. In 1855, the Southern Illinois Conference resolved that delegates to the next General Conference in 1856 would petition the General Conference to “adopt The Central Christian Advocate as a church paper” and to liquidate its past liabilities.²⁸ This support was vital to the financial success of the newspaper. Moreover, support from the General Conference required the bishops in the East to recognize the legitimacy of the regional newspaper and of the region. The continued petitioning made by the Southern Illinois Conference was a means of advocating their rightful place in the religious landscape and in receiving recognition for its accomplishments.

The western conferences and the *Central Christian Advocate* began to receive that recognition in 1856 when the General Conference adopted the paper into the family of Advocates. The Southern Illinois Conference delegation to the General Conference had achieved half of their goals. Following the general assembly in 1860, the Southern Illinois Conference passed a resolution endorsing the General Conference’s appointment of Dr. Charles Elliott as the editor of the *Central Christian Advocate*.²⁹ By taking such actions, the General Conference had recognized the newspaper’s legitimacy and moved to intervene on the paper’s behalf. The Southern Illinois Conference met with exceeding gratitude and enthusiasm the resolutions made by the General Conference on behalf of the future of the paper. The Committee on Periodicals of the Southern Illinois Conference happily reported, “As a Conference, we are pleased with the action of our late General Conference in reference to the ‘Central.’ We are glad that the child of Providence, adopted in 1860, is now to appear in the habiliments of manhood; and, as a chaste daughter in the family of Advocates, is destined to become the parent of Advocates in the great South-West.”³⁰ Such a statement underscored that the *Central Christian Advocate*’s success was symbolic of the region’s maturation.

²⁶ Minutes of the First Annual Session of the Southern Illinois Conference (1852), 24. Cartwright would have gladly supported the paper of which his son-in-law, W.D.R. Trotter, was the editor. See Evers, 122.

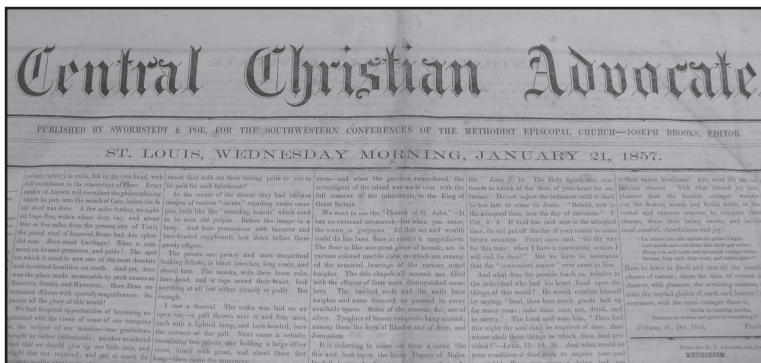
²⁷ Minutes of the Second Annual Session of the Southern Illinois Conference (1853), 20.

²⁸ *Minutes of the Southern Illinois Conference at its Fourth Annual Session* (Alton, IL: Alton Courier Steam Press Print, 1855), 21, Holman, 1:2:65.

²⁹ Evers, 122; and Minutes of the Southern Illinois Conference (1860), 35.

³⁰ *Minutes of the Southern Illinois Conference at its Thirteenth Annual Session* (Cincinnati: The Methodist Book Concern, 1864), 33, Holman, 1:2:65.

tion. One reader from Springfield, Illinois, expressed hope that the maturity of the *Central Christian Advocate* would make it “the best religious paper in the Mississippi Valley.”³¹ Methodists in the region conveyed a sense of anxiety and optimism about the *Central Christian Advocate* and its potential for the valley. What had long been the acme of their aspirations was now a reality for the financial backers of the *Central Christian Advocate*.



One of the first issues in the first series of the *Central Christian Advocate* printed as an official paper of the Methodist Episcopal Church. (Courtesy of United Library, Evanston, Illinois).

These new successes would not come without obstacles, however, most of which the patron conferences would have to negotiate in-house. Limitations lay in waiting along the way. These obstacles threatened the success of the *Central Christian Advocate* and in turn threatened the legitimacy of the regional distinctiveness of the West. Ironically, the obstacles would come from both the Northeast and from the valley region itself. The sources of the limitations and obstacles reflected the struggle between the General Conference, whose powerful figures were in the Northeast and the western conferences, concerning where the paper’s authority rested. The actions of the General Conference had stymied the autonomy of the Methodists in West. The 1860 General Conference meeting decided that the independent, regional committee concerning the *Central Christian Advocate* “should be abolished and all the interests of the Western Book Concern [should be] concentrated in the hands of the Book Agents and a Book Committee chosen from all parts of the Western field.”³² Control over the *Central Christian Advocate*’s fate now rested in the hands of the Methodist leader who the General Conference appointed. Those who had vested interest in the paper’s success were its sole governance. Instead the entire denomination held power.

Methodists in the middle Mississippi Valley who had been invested in

³¹ “The Central,” *Central Christian Advocate*, February 8, 1855.

³² *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1860), 241.

the life of the *Central Christian Advocate* from its inception were disappointed in the failure of the General Conference and Western Book Agents to appreciate the paper's worth. As before, they used the terminology of the family to explain the politics of prejudice and print. An editorial in 1862 called the western agents the "foster-mother" who "shows toward the adopted one [the *Central Christian Advocate*] the coldness of a jealous step-mother, who has but little patience to bear with the infirmities of her adopted child, or to allow it an equal share of sympathy with the *favored* children of the family." By this, the article meant readers "throughout the patronizing conferences of the Central, that for some reason or other, the Book Agents at Cincinnati are not disposed with that cordiality of feeling toward the Central, which we had a right to expect from them." Whereas the agents had made strides to increase the size, readership, and respectability of the *Western Christian Advocate* and the *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, they declined to do so for the *Central Christian Advocate*. "Being much inferior in size to its sister Advocates," the editorial continued, "is it surprising that its friends were defeated in their expectations and efforts to bring up the subscription list to the desired point?" Instead, the agents elected to decrease the size of the *Central Christian Advocate*, giving it less space for material while still costing the same as its larger and fuller neighboring *Advocates*. Methodists in the middle Mississippi Valley received the news of this decision "as a clap of thunder, and its stunning effect has caused our hopes to sink." They were convinced that the agents wished the *Central Christian Advocate* to fail. Further evidence to substantiate this suspicion was the fact that the agents distributed a letter sent to all ministers in the West "appealing to them most earnestly to make a strenuous effort in support of the Western and Northwestern Advocates, and Ladies' Repository, BUT NOT A WORD OF EXHORTATION OR ENCOURAGEMENT AS TO THE CENTRAL." The editorial concluded that it was the responsibility of the patron conferences to ensure the survival of the paper in the face of "the tide of official prerogatives" and "lines of favoritism" that privileged the *Western Christian Advocate* and *Northwestern Christian Advocate*.³³

The 1864 Session of the General Conference proved to be advantageous for the *Central Christian Advocate*. The patron conferences feared that General Conference would discontinue the *Central Christian Advocate* if it proved to be more a liability than an asset. To prevent this dissolution, the Southern Illinois Conference made every effort to increase subscription to the *Central Christian Advocate* within its bounds. In addition, the Southern Illinois Conference recommended the book agents not to discontinue the newspaper until such action could be voted on by the General Conference in 1864.³⁴ The *Central Christian Advocate* finally received the approval of the General Conference, preserving its place as a Methodist publication

³³ "The Central Christian Advocate," *Central Christian Advocate*, January 22, 1862. Emphasis in the original.

³⁴ Minutes of the Southern Illinois Conference (1861), 32.

for the West. In this session, the General Conference resolved to “enlarge the ‘Central Christian Advocate’ so as to make it equal to the Western or Northwestern Advocate” and to refund its editor, Charles Elliott, of all the debts incurred in maintaining the *Central Christian Advocate*.³⁵ By enlarging the *Central Christian Advocate*, subscriptions would increase revenue. In addition, it is significant that the expansion would have allowed the *Central Christian Advocate* to be an equal to the *Western Christian Advocate* and the *Northwestern Christian Advocate*. By striving for equity, the General Conference had recognized the legitimacy of the *Central Christian Advocate*. Moreover, the actions assuaged the fears of Westerners.

The aggrandizement of the *Central Christian Advocate* proved detrimental to its earlier commitment to shaping and reflecting the regional culture of the Mississippi Valley. As the *Central Christian Advocate* expanded, its circulation reached further west, and the material in the paper reflected the geographic expansion of its readership. For example, in 1865, the editor’s announcement to the audience solicited news from “Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, Iowa, Illinois, and all the way down the Mississippi valley to New Orleans. Send them on.”³⁶ The inclusion of news from further west and south was a centrifugal propulsion away from the original audience. The Methodists who had long been in support of the weekly now feared that their controlling stock was rapidly leaving their hands. That loss of power translated into the diminished quantity of articles from Illinois, Missouri, and Iowa. The original purpose of the paper was to reflect and to cater to the regional culture that gave its subscribers their sense of identity within Methodism, within America, and within the religious landscape.³⁷ For this reason, the Southern Illinois Conference often declared the *Central Christian Advocate* to be “the best of Christian weeklies.”³⁸ When the paper began to publish news less tailored than previously to the wants and needs of the region, readers opted to create new periodicals again focused on their localities and region. By 1889, the Committee on Periodicals in the Southern Illinois Conference declared, “We, however, venture to suggest that if a larger portion of the *Central Christian Advocate* were given to local news, and general church work within the bounds of its patron Conferences, it would preclude the necessity of *Home Conference News*, *District Advocates*,

³⁵ *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1864), 160.

³⁶ “Friends of the Central!” *Central Christian Advocate*, October 18, 1865.

³⁷ Minutes of the Southern Illinois Annual Conference at its Second Session (1853), 20, Holman, 1:2:65.

³⁸ Minutes of the Thirtieth Session of the Southern Illinois Conference (1881), 110-11, Holman, 1:2:67.

or other independent publications.”³⁹ The *Home Conference News* circulated throughout the Southern Illinois Conference, “filling a place with regard to our Conference interests that cannot be filled by any other.”⁴⁰ The Committee on *Home Conference News* claimed to fulfill a market niche. Ironically, the language they employed was similar to the description of the *Central Christian Advocate* at its inception. Just as the *Christian Advocate* from New York did not have palatable news for Methodists in the West, so now the *Central Christian Advocate* was beginning to lose its influence in the West.⁴¹ This new interest in auxiliary newspapers was evidence of the lack of interest in the content that the *Central Christian Advocate* provided to its readers. The weekly had become another “official” paper, publishing national news while omitting necessary regional news. More focused papers began to appear to serve the needs of the audience.

As printing and distributing religious newspapers continued to become more affordable, conferences wishing to print their own *Home Conference News*, *District Advocates*, or daily newspapers could feasibly do so. Dividing a region into more localized, more specified zones like conferences or districts, the effort to print papers more suited to news for certain areas suggests the failure of the regional newspaper to meet the needs of the region adequately. The presence of these localized papers suggests that these conferences had sufficient amounts of news that necessitated supplemental newspapers. In addition, it is probable that the *Central Christian Advocate* was not publishing the local news that these conferences desired. Instead the *Central Christian Advocate* began to publish news from all over the country, especially from the expanding West. Whereas in 1858, correspondence from patron conferences appeared on the front page, by 1877 those letters were relegated to the seventh page.⁴² Instead, a weekly letter from New York City appeared on the first page. In the May 2, 1877, issue of the *Central Christian Advocate*, there was no report from the Southern Illinois Conference in the “Home Conference” column.⁴³ The absence of news from the originating

³⁹ *Minutes of the Thirty-Eighth Session of the Southern Illinois Conference* (St. Louis: Slawson Printing Company, 1889), 34, Holman, 1:2:67. To be sure, committees and committee chairs did not always agree with previous or subsequent committees. The 1891 report of the Committee on Periodicals commended the *Home Conference News* for its excellent work. See *Minutes of the Fortieth Session of the Southern Illinois Conference* (Bloomington, IL: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., 1891), 42, Holman, 1:2:68. Even as early as 1871, the Southern Illinois Conference declined to concur with the resolution by the Illinois State Methodist Convention to publish a daily Methodist paper. See *Minutes of the Southern Illinois Conference* (1871), 62, Holman, 1:2:66. Such an interest in a daily paper would suggest that sizeable number of Methodists were dissatisfied with the *Central's* performance. Nevertheless, members of the Southern Illinois Conference were still pleased.

⁴⁰ *Minutes of the Thirty-Eighth Session of the Southern Illinois Conference* (1889), 35.

⁴¹ The *Home Conference News* did encourage subscription to the *Central Christian Advocate* and claimed not to detract from its position of authority in the region. Instead, it hoped to supplement the paper by providing open communication between ministers. See *Minutes of the Thirty-Eighth Session of the Southern Illinois Conference* (1889), 35.

⁴² *Central Christian Advocate*, January 31, 1877.

⁴³ “Home Conference,” *Central Christian Advocate*, May 2, 1877.

conference evinced a new trend in the presentation of the *Central Christian Advocate*. To be sure, there were still occasions for articles of regional news or of national news with a regional interpretation appearing in the *Central Christian Advocate*. But geographically-specific articles were few, in contrast to previous years. The newspaper that had originally been founded as a regional auxiliary to the national newspaper with a northeastern emphasis had itself become a paper focusing on national news and regions farther from its point of origin.

As a result of this shift in the focus of the *Central Christian Advocate*, subscriptions declined. The Southern Illinois Conference reported in 1880 that only eight percent of the Methodists in Southern Illinois subscribed to any *Advocate*. To this statistic the Committee on Periodicals responded: "This indicates a great neglect, and suggests the possibility of an alarming ignorance throughout the church respecting the character and extent of our church work."⁴⁴ The members of the Southern Illinois Conference were concerned about the apparent ignorance of their parishioners because it explained the ineffectiveness of Methodism in the region stemming from lethargy and apathy.⁴⁵ More than ever, the success of Methodism in the West depended on the dissemination of information by the *Central Christian Advocate*. Much was at stake. If the *Central Christian Advocate* failed to inform people in the West of Methodist work in the region, then that work could not be supported and would falter. The recognition that the West had received from the General Conference could potentially diminish. Therefore, it was important that the *Central Christian Advocate* effectively advocate the case and cause of western Methodism to salvage the region's reputation. What had originally been a dream of the Southern Illinois Conference and its neighbors, in establishing and promulgating the regional distinction and validity of the West, had now become a conveniently convenient means for the General Conference to publish news in the West.

In 1900, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church relocated the *Central Christian Advocate* to Kansas City, Missouri. The Committee on the Book Concern reported that the *Central Christian Advocate* would be consolidated with the *Omaha Christian Advocate* and the *Rocky Mountain Christian Advocate*. The decision was not without opposition. Three days after the initial proposal, representatives from the Vandalia District in the Southern Illinois Conference issued a protest. This physical move of the publishing venue followed the geographic shift in the content of the paper's pages over the previous decades. It was also an indication that the national Methodist body still had more authority than the local or regional bodies. The Southern Illinois Conference, that conference which had founded the *Central Christian Advocate* as the *Lebanon Journal*

⁴⁴ *Minutes and Journal of the Twenty-Ninth Session of the Southern Illinois Conference* (St. Louis: C. R. Barns, 1880), 37, Holman, 1:2:66.

⁴⁵ *Minutes of the Forty-Eighth Session of the Southern Illinois Conference* (Cincinnati: Western Methodist Book Concern Press, 1899), 56, Holman, 1:2:68.

in 1848, made no comment about the relocation. Instead, the 1900 General Conference Periodicals Committee simply resolved to “bestir ourselves” in selling religious periodicals in the area under its charge.⁴⁶

The sentiments that the founding of the *Central Christian Advocate* had brought to the forefront were profound. Some western Methodists had developed a new sense of themselves and of the geography around them. They had staked a claim to the new center of America, of the American religious landscape, and of religion in America. Self-admittedly, the Southern Illinois Conference knew its location was in the “West” or in the “South-West.”⁴⁷ Methodists in the Mississippi Valley had the sense that they were establishing their region as a new center. Dissenting from their eastern superiors, the western conferences named their regional publication the *Central Christian Advocate* intentionally to advocate the centrality of the region and of the values in that region. Unlike the other periodicals founded by the Methodist Episcopal Church, the *Central Christian Advocate* did not receive its name from the General Conference. Whereas the General Conference had given regional labels to each periodical, it allowed the original patron conferences to name the newspaper established in St. Louis. When the General Conference approved of the establishment of a book depository and newspaper in St. Louis in 1852, it stated that the paper was “to be denominated by such title as they may select.” As such, the Methodists in the Mississippi Valley chose the title *Central Christian Advocate*.

The choice of the title *Central Christian Advocate* reflected the patron conferences’ understanding of the paper’s location in the West and in the nation as a whole. During the Civil War, the Committee on Periodicals in the Southern Illinois Conference stated, “its central location in the great South-West argues *much* to every *thinking* mind the necessity of its continuance.”⁴⁸ The centrality that the Committee discussed was twofold: the centrality within the region, and the centrality within the nation. The *Central Christian Advocate* was printed in and distributed from St. Louis, Missouri. The strategic geographic placement allowed for the paper to travel in all directions, reaching a large audience. Secondly, the ongoing population boom in the West made the region a land of opportunity for religious traditions wishing to stake their claim on the geography and the populace. The *Central Christian Advocate*’s location at the southwestern corner of the Midwest was important for the distribution of this vehicle promoting Methodism in the region. The growth of Methodism in a region experiencing tremendous population growth was important to the advance of the Protestant enterprise. Embodying decades of discourse about the importance of the West to the

⁴⁶ *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church held in Chicago, Illinois, May 2-29, 1900* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1900), 126, 157, 182, 290, 439; *Minutes of the Forty-Ninth Session of the Southern Illinois Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church held at Edwardsville, Ill., September 26-October 1, 1900*, 56, Holman 1:2:68.

⁴⁷ Minutes of the Second Annual Session of the Southern Illinois Conference (1853), 20.

⁴⁸ Minutes of the Eleventh Annual Session of the Southern Illinois Conference (1862), 36. Emphasis in the original.

future Protestant empire, Methodists in the Mississippi Valley chose to name their periodical the *Central Christian Advocate*. The region that the *Central Christian Advocate* represented became a vital means of achieving denominational goals. It had become the heartland of America.