

Peter Cartwright, The Kentucky Boy
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Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, Mr. Glover, and members of the Athenaeum, I am honored to present my first paper tonight. I have been told I could present a paper on anything but religion and politics. I do hope you will forgive me tonight if I have come too close to the line as I present a biographical sketch of a man who lived in this area some two hundred years ago and whose life was dominated by both. This is because Peter Cartwright was a pioneer preacher to the Pennyrile and an influential political opponent of Abraham Lincoln for over twenty years. The title of this paper is "Peter Cartwright, The Kentucky Boy."

Although he had just turned five years old, it was a sight he would never forget: on the side of the path -- a body, very pale, almost blue, with no hair -- skull exposed and crusty blood all about the face. Young Peter Cartwright was in a wagon train of two hundred families who joined together for mutual safety along with one hundred rifle totting young men guarding them through the Cumberland Gap (Cartwright, 25)

Cartwright's father, Peter Sr., had fought in the Revolutionary War for over two years and had been given a land grant in the newly opened region of Kentucky. The family sold its poorly performing farm in Virginia and had set out to reach the new and beautiful country of "canes and turkeys," as they called it, we believe around the fall of 1790 (Cartwright, 28, Bray 7-8).

As they passed southward along the Blue Ridge and then west over the mountains they sang songs comparing this crossing to the Israelites crossing the Red Sea into the Promised Land. They would sing how they were crossing into "Kain-tuck," and sometimes they would sing "Canaan" in its place. And just as the Israelites had to deal with the original inhabitants of the

Holy Land -- all those “ites” like the Jebusites and Canaanites -- the settlers had to deal with the Native Americans; or rather, the Native Americans first dealt with the settlers. Indeed, seven of the two hundred families made the fatal mistake of pulling over early to rest and were slaughtered (Cartwright, 27, Bray, 7).

The wagon trail essentially followed what was called “The Warrior’s Path” and “Daniel Boone’s route,” not a road, but a trail worn deep by twenty years of western movement. They passed through the Wilderness Gap and headed up the Wilderness Road -- more than a trace wide enough for pack horses into the settled part of Kentucky, which at the time was Bourbon and Lincoln Counties, much, much larger than they are now (Bray, 7).

The Cartwright family initially settled in Lincoln County and rented a farm. While there, Peter’s mother, Christina, a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, became friends with two early Methodist traveling preachers who would preach to the family in their home (Cartwright, 29).

In the fall of 1793 Peter Sr. determined to move to what was then called the “Green River” country, in the southern part of the state. He settled in Logan County. The homestead was nine miles south of Russellville and one mile north of the Tennessee line near the present town of Adairsville. The home farm extended over some two hundred acres.

Peter Cartwright, Jr. described his boyhood:

We killed our meat out of the woods, wild; and beat our meal and hominy with a pestle and mortar. We stretched a deer skin over a hoop, burned holes in it with the prongs of a fork, sifted our meal, baked our bread..... We ... gathered out of the woods, our own (sassafras) tea. We made our sugar out of the water of the maple-tree, and our molasses too.

There were no newspapers or schools. Sunday was a day set apart for hunting, fishing, horseracing, card-playing, balls, dances, and all kinds of jollity and mirth (Cartwright, 30, Bray 10, 21).

which he had spent the day and evening and felt guilty and condemned. He said it seemed to him that all of a sudden his blood rushed to his head, and his heart palpitated. In a few minutes he turned blind, an awful impression rested on his mind that death had come, and he was unprepared to die. He fell on his knees and began to ask God to have mercy on him (36).

This period of time happened to coincide with what was called “The Mighty Revival of Religion on the Western Frontier.” This was led by a North Carolina Presbyterian minister named James McGready. McGready came to Logan County in the beginning of the fall of 1796 and set alight the famous Kentucky revival that would reach its climax at the Great Cane Ridge Camp meeting in August of 1801. McGready said that what he originally found in Logan County was “universal deadness and stupidity.” He recognized the bane of lawlessness and corruption in Rogues Harbor. His preaching indicted his parishioner’s preoccupation with money and property, their hard bargaining and cheating, their Sabbath breaking, cursing, balls, horseracing, and gambling. In short, his preaching seemed aimed right at Peter Cartwright (Bray, 27).

McGready enlisted the support of his three congregations which were named after the rivers to which they were close: Gaspar River, Red River, and Muddy River. He asked his congregations to sign a covenant promising they would fast and pray each third Saturday for the saving of souls in Logan County and that they would also pray for thirty minutes each Sabbath just after sunrise for the purpose of asking God to renew his work (28).

Peter Cartwright went to one of McGready’s revivals in May 1801. He said at that meeting an impression was made on his mind as though a voice said to him, “Thy sins are all forgiven thee,” divine light flashed all around him, and unspeakable joy sprung up in his soul. He rose to his feet, opened his eyes, and it seemed as if he was in heaven. He sold his racehorse, gave his cards to his mother, and she quickly “consigned them to the hearth fire” (Cartwright 38, Bray 30).

His mother brought him into the Methodist Church and taught him to believe that his duty was to pursue holiness and sanctification -- the deepest faith guiding the best behavior. Peter began helping McGready in the position of what was called an exhorter. At the height of The Kentucky Revival and the huge camp meetings, the regular preachers were often too few and too thinly stretched across the camps, and so *exhorters* would come around and minister to the persons responding to the message. Cartwright began to travel with other ministers in the wilderness around southern Kentucky from camp meeting to camp meeting (Bray 31,34).

Cartwright ultimately became a licensed exhorter in the Methodist church. He attended his first annual conference of the Western Conference in October of 1802, and as he returned, he learned his family was moving (34-35). They were going to sell everything they had and leave Logan County and move to the newly formed Livingston County which encompassed not just modern day Livingston County, but also modern day Caldwell and Lyon counties. The family's new two hundred acre farm was in what is now Caldwell County in the vicinity of present-day Farmersville. If you go today to the current Caldwell County football stadium and sit on the home side, you can look right at the area of Farmersville over the field. In the early 1800s free grants of land were available there by virtue of the Kentucky legislature's acts for those willing to be settlers.

Sadly, for Peter, he had to forfeit his close ties with many of the Logan County Methodists who nurtured his faith. As was required for those in a Methodist class he applied for a letter of transfer from his presiding elder so he could be assigned to a new class when one was found for him. Instead of being assigned to a new class, however, the elder sent Peter a letter informing him he was to travel throughout the new destitute region, hold meetings, and organize classes. In other words, instead of being told to align as a member in a new class, Cartwright was told to become a preacher and establish a new circuit -- although he was just *seventeen* years of age (36).

In 1803 Cartwright did as he was told and formed a plan for the Livingston Circuit. Now Cartwright was no meek preacher. He was known to handle drunken schoolboys who would try to break up his meetings by handily taking them on and sometimes even throwing them into ponds if they got too rowdy. Stories began to spread of the frontier preacher who was powerful both in word and action. He began to desire to become a permanent Methodist circuit riding preacher. Bishop McKendree began to supply him with books to study, and Cartwright would be closely examined on his reading at quarterly conferences. Cartwright was very successful and then assigned different circuits throughout Kentucky. Francis Asbury ordained him a deacon in 1806. Over the course of his life he averaged over a sermon a day and baptized over ten thousand people (37, 42).

But this was no job of prosperity. He very seldom received the salary he was promised by the Conference. At one time he was assigned a circuit just into Ohio, and he became broke and close to broken. He said his horse had gone blind; his saddle was worn out; his bridle reins had been eaten up and replaced at least a dozen times; his clothes had been patched till it was difficult to detect the original, and he had just seventy-five cents in his pocket.

He left Ohio and came back to Kentucky, and when he reached a town named Hopkinsville, he was only thirty miles from home -- yet something made him stay. For he found Hopkinsville, as he said, a "new and dreadfully wicked place" for which he desired to bring about reformation by making it his own home.

Having no money, he alighted at a Hopkinsville tavern kept by a man who knew his father. Peter began to preach to a family who stayed there, and the women of the family were converted and fascinated with Cartwright. Unfortunately, though, some would later say the ladies were more infatuated with Cartwright than they were interested in the gospel (51).

Cartwright's father died in 1809. The young preacher went temporarily to the newly formed Caldwell County to administer the estate, but then returned to Hopkinsville, and with some of his inheritance bought seventy-six acres on the waters of Little River. The place was right on the Hopkinsville-Russellville Road, very convenient for a circuit rider. From 1811 to 1812 he was appointed to a new entity called the Christian circuit which was an extensive territory embracing parts of Logan, Muhlenberg, Butler, Christian and Caldwell counties, and even parts of Montgomery, Dixon, and Stewart counties Tennessee. No doubt many of the Methodist churches in these counties today are the descendants of Cartwright's early work. But on the other hand, Cartwright made some enemies in Hopkinsville of some Presbyterian ministers, who would *never forget* his aggressive preaching against Calvinism (60, 65). Even his reputation among local Methodists was mixed. In an early piece on the history of Hopkinsville Methodists by Judge Joe McCarroll, Cartwright is described as known for "great pugnacity ... He was known ... as the fighting preacher. Perhaps no man in the American pulpit since that day has been so noted for courage and audacity. His piety was not questioned, but his manner was extremely rude and sometimes unfortunate."

Things began to get very interesting between in 1812-1815 when the war broke out, and a regimen of infantry camped near his residence in Christian County. Cartwright was induced to become their chaplain and march all the way to New Orleans. General Jackson told the chaplains, including Cartwright, that they must go to the front ranks of the battle and preach to the soldiers that "No man would die until his time had come and that the soldiers were as safe at the cannon's mouth as anywhere else." Cartwright said he refused to preach anything of the kind because it was a lie, but he promised to preach to the soldiers that the war was a justifiable one and they were engaged in a righteous cause. General Jackson said that would do (69).

It is believed that Cartwright and Jackson became friends in the War, and a well told story is of Jackson later coming to one of Cartwright's meetings. It is perhaps the most famous story of Cartwright's autobiography. He tells it as follows:

Monday evening came; the Church was filled to over-flowing; every seat was crowded, and many had to stand. After singing and prayer ... I then read my text: "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? After reading my text I paused. At that moment I saw General Jackson walking up the aisle; he came to the middle post, and very gracefully leaned against it, and stood, as there were no vacant seats. Just then I felt some one pull my coat in the stand, and turning my head, ... whispering a little loud, said: "General Jackson has come in; General Jackson has come in." I felt a flash of indignation run all over like an electric shock, and facing about to my congregation, and purposely speaking out audibly, I said, "Who is General Jackson ? If he don't get his soul converted, God will damn him as quick as he would a Guinea!"

Some may wonder what was the response of Old Hickory. It is said that

When the next morning (the host pastor) Brother Mac went to Jackson's hotel to apologize for Cartwright's words, so far was the general from "calling out" the preacher that the next time they met he shook his hand warmly (and said): "Mr. Cartwright, you are a man after my own heart. I am very much surprised at Mr. Mac, to think he would suppose that I would be offended at you. No, sir; I told him that I highly approved of your independence; that a minister of Jesus Christ ought to love everybody and fear no man. I told Mr. Mac that if I had a few thousand such independent, fearless officers as you were, and a well-drilled army, I could take old England (Cartwright 133-134, Bray 84).

Now, the extent of Cartwright's and Jackson's relationship is disputed by historians, but Cartwright later claimed that it was he who had been called to Old Hickory's deathbed in 1845 and heard directly from the old warrior's lips that Jackson "died a converted man, in the full hope of a blessed immortality" (Bray, 84).

Cartwright's preaching did not just center on individual salvation. He had no hesitation in speaking out against the social problems of the day, and at the time he was in the minority of those in the establishment in southern Kentucky as to his uncompromising hatred of slavery. He despised slavery so much that in 1824 he moved to Illinois to get clear of slavery's evil and so his children would not marry into slave owning families (Bray, 98).

Many theorize, though, that Cartwright moved to Illinois for another reason, and that was to enter politics. Illinois, you see, did not forbid clergymen from also serving in the legislature as Kentucky did, and in 1828 Cartwright was elected to the lower house of the Illinois general assembly as an anti-slavery Jacksonian Democrat. While in the legislature he pursued the establishment of public schools where he also unabashedly planned to teach students the tenants of Methodism. This angered some of his Baptist constituents who would attack him over it in the newspaper. And it is very much believed some of them hired a local lawyer to write for them under a pseudonym against him (143,148). That lawyer was another Kentuckian who would run against Cartwright in 1832 only to find himself on the losing side. You may have heard of him. His name was Abraham Lincoln. Later Lincoln would say of the 1832 election that it was “the only time I have ever been beaten by the people.”

Others were not pleased with Cartwright’s political career. His fellow Methodist ministers did not think too highly of his foray into politics and began to attack him at conferences. Many of them were already jealous of his speaking ability and of his success in ministry. At conferences they would berate him, call him “the Kentucky boy,” and bring up the rumors still emanating from Hopkinsville. They would talk about how he made the ladies in Hopkinsville perhaps more interested in himself than in the Lord. They also complained that he had acted irresponsibly in a fiduciary capacity when he had been president of the board of trustees of the Hopkinsville meeting house, a church building east of Railroad Street between Market and Broad that he had raised money for and helped build between 1822 and 1823 (110). His opponents began to pursue church legislation to prevent ministers from running for office (135). Cartwright then left the Illinois legislature under pressure.

He left politics for about ten years, focused on his successful ministry, and became a beloved preacher of the prairie. But somehow in 1846 he was lured by his fellow Democrats back into the fray once again, this time to run for the United States Congress from Illinois. His opponent – a familiar one -- the Old Railsplitter and Fellow Kentuckian, a member of the Whig party, Abraham Lincoln.

The congressional campaign of 1846, as traced in the documentary record, seems hardly to have taken place at all. Newspapers noted few instances of Lincoln's speaking appointments, and none of Cartwright's. Nor is there conclusive evidence that the candidates ever appeared jointly. Perhaps this is because on the issues the candidates were mainly agreeable. Both candidates supported the Mexican War and agreed that slavery was an evil that ought to be abolished (207).

This left, as biographer Robert Bray explains, Cartwright with just one issue to push: religion, or his Whig opponent's lack of it. He thought he could make something politically of Lincoln's having been many years back a self-proclaimed "infidel," a free-thinker and skeptic regarding Christianity. What Cartwright meant by "infidel" was that Lincoln had not been evangelized: he had not, that is, undergone an open conviction, conversion, and new birth in Christ. Many of Cartwright's supporters would call Lincoln an infidel on the campaign trail.

In response, Lincoln decided to meet Cartwright on his own ground and attend one of his evangelistic rallies. Carl Sandburg, in *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*, tells the story this way, that at the meeting,

(i)n due time Cartwright said "All who desire to lead a new life, to give their hearts to God, and go to heaven, will stand," and a sprinkling of men, women, and children stood up. Then the preacher exhorted, "All who do not wish to go to hell will stand." All stood up—except Lincoln. Then said Cartwright in his gravest voice, "I observe that many responded to the first invitation to give their hearts to God and go to heaven. And I further observe that all of you save one indicated that you did not desire to go to hell. The sole exception is Mr. Lincoln, who did not respond to either invitation. May I inquire of you, Mr. Lincoln, where are you going?"

And Lincoln slowly rose and slowly spoke. "I came here as a respectful listener. I did not know that I was to be singled out by Brother Cartwright. I believe in treating religious matters with due solemnity. I admit that the questions propounded by Brother Cartwright are of great importance. I did not feel called upon to answer as the rest did. Brother Cartwright asks me directly where I am going. I desire to reply with equal directness: I am going to Congress." (Bray 207-208).

Indeed, he was. Lincoln defeated Cartwright 6,340 votes to 4,829 votes for his only successful federal elected office before 1860. Lincoln served one term in the House.

Later in his life Cartwright would hire Stephen Douglas' firm to represent his daughter in a divorce, but when his favorite grandson faced a murder charge for his killing another man over a dispute about a female, he hired his old rival, Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln's star witness at the trial was Cartwright himself. Apparently, Lincoln and Cartwright buried the hatchet after Lincoln won the trial. The trial became one of the most studied examples of the brilliance of Lincoln's lawyering (247-251).

Advancing in age and after writing his famous autobiography about life as a frontier preacher, Cartwright was invited to come to New York City and give some lectures. This was about the same time as the beginning of the Civil War. One of the places Cartwright was invited to speak was interestingly the Athenaeum. Several of the wealthy New Yorkers were not pleased with the war and were critical of Lincoln hurting their business interests. They wanted someone to speak against the President. Yet, surprisingly to them, Cartwright vigorously defended his old opponent commending Lincoln's *Christian* character by saying,

As the crow flies, I have lived within a score of miles of Abraham Lincoln for a third of a century. Until shortly before he took the oath of office as President of the United States, we had trained in different political camps, he a Whig and I a Democrat. I remained a Democrat until the firing on Fort Sumter. Since then I know no party save that of my undivided country and Abraham Lincoln its President (259).

Cartwright returned home to Illinois. The Conference recognized his long tenure and held what was called a jubilee celebration for him. He served almost to the very end of his life. The Kentucky boy died aged 87 years on September 25, 1872. He was a man whose life stretched from the end of the Revolutionary War to the end of the Civil War, and his legacy remains to this day.

****WORKS CITED****

Almost everything in this paper comes from two sources. Much of this paper is directly from these works. I hope my reading of this paper tonight will turn people to Robert Bray's masterpiece.

Bray, Robert. Peter Cartwright: Legendary Frontier Preacher. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005.

Cartwright, Peter. The Autobiography of Peter Cartwright. Nashville: Abingdon, 1956. (Centennial Edition).