

Peter Cartwright:
An Analysis of His Life

Emma Becker

American Civilization
HIST 1700 – 002
Instructor, Ken Hansen
September 1, 2012

Peter Cartwright is a name in American history that has yet to be forgotten. His life was filled with travels throughout the present day western states and thousands were moved by his words and actions. Cartwright lived during the late 18th century and most of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 19th century in the 1800's was when this man came to his fame as an American Methodist revivalist. His well-known attributes to his religion was his missionary work during the Second Great Awakening at the beginning of the 19th century and as a circuit rider travelling across the Grand Prairie.¹ In his later years he moved to Illinois due to his opinions on slavery in the southern states. In 1846 he ran for the United States Congress as a Democrat but was defeated by Abraham Lincoln.¹ His religious beliefs triggered his opinions on all other aspects of his life.

An excerpt of Cartwright remembering Cane Ridge found in the Primary Source Document CD of Selected Chapters From Experience History, Interpreting America's Past, Volume 1 textbook goes on to explain Cartwright's personal experiences from the Second Great Awakening. In comparison to Christian church services in present day, the 19th century movement is not as different as it may appear. Cartwright reminisced in his autobiography about Cane Ridge explaining the religious frenzy that took place among thousands that attended the sacramental meeting. Despite the technological advances of present day Christian faiths, the Second Great Awakening sparked the way Evangelists practice their faiths as well as converting others to their beliefs. Peter Cartwright was an important figure in the missionary movement of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The immediate and lasting consequences of the Cane Ridge Revival lay in the hands of Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist ministers that did not attend Cane Ridge. They thought that the "camp meeting" was full of disorder and they tried to censure the ones that did attend. This

action led to the ministers that attended Cane Ridge to revolt and organize a church of their own. The original denominations were only various Protestant denominations but due to the emphasis on the camp meetings those denominations slowly branched out into the Protestant denominations of Methodists and Baptists. The New Lights was the origin and it started the church discipline on the New Testament. The lasting consequences of this were the confusions that followed after this new church discipline was established.

Cartwright explained the New Lights Origin in a way that can only be understood as disagreeable. The word choice he used to explain how the New Lights originated was understood from a viewpoint of an antagonist. “They established no standard of doctrine; every one was to take the New Testament, read it, and abide his own construction of it. Marshall, M’Namar, Dunlevy, Stone, Huston and others, were the chief leaders in this trash trap.”² As I analyze this excerpt I can only conclude one thing. Cartwright expects his readers to understand that his beliefs on the New Lights Origin were a “trash trap”.

Peter Cartwright’s experiences were what led him to be such an influence on so many people’s lives. He grew up in Kentucky with a family highly dedicated to religion. Through reading the articles I used as references, I began to notice that Cartwright’s life was filled with emotion. His encounter with god and the revival was described as “captivating” and “filled him with guilt”^{1,2}. From my understanding of the excerpts, nothing Peter Cartwright ever did was for fame; his actions came from passion and belief. Another experience that helped to shape his life was his move to Illinois due to his passionate belief of his religion and belief against slavery. A person can believe in those aspects and remain living in the south however taking action, moving his family to another state, just as Cartwright did can only come from passion. The Cane Ridge Revival affected many people’s lives but Cartwright turned a corner in his life after preaching to

attendees, which led to his frontier preaching as a circuit rider¹. His frontier preaching is what he is formally known for.

As he became a founding member of the Illinois Annual Conference in 1824, Cartwright's life in Illinois began. Peter Cartwright United Methodist Church in Pleasant Plains, Illinois has become a heritage landmark of the United Methodist Church. The church began the same year he became a founding member of the Annual Conference in Illinois. It started as a classroom in Cartwright's home and by 1857 it was constructed in Pleasant Plains. According to his autobiography and accounts of his life, he was a dedicated man to the Methodist education. From his circuit riding to erecting a Methodist church, his beliefs never ceased to exist. According to his autobiography, he called himself "God's Plowman", a very fitting name for his life's work.¹

This analysis of Peter Cartwright has led to a better understanding of his life. He was devout in his beliefs both religiously and politically. He was a man of action, as his well-known attributes in his life have shown. His missionary work entailed the Grand Prairie that led to his national fame throughout the regions. His opinions on slavery were so prominent that he moved his family to a northern state where it was illegal and he fought for his beliefs by running for the United States Congress. Because of what this man accomplished in his lifetime he will not be forgotten in American history.

- Peter Cartwright, Important dates
 - Born 1785 in Kentucky
 - 1801 began the Second Great Awakening
 - Became a preacher in 1801
 - Married in 1808
 - Veteran of the war of 1812
 - Cartwright Church began in 1824
 - Ran for United States Congress in 1846

Notes

1. Autobiography of Peter Cartwright
<http://www.cblibrary.org/biography/cartwright.htm>
2. Excerpt: Peter Cartwright remembers Cane Ridge, 1856

Bibliography

Autobiography of Peter Cartwright
<http://www.cblibrary.org/biography/cartwright.htm>

Berry, Stephen R. 2006. "Peter Cartwright, Legendary Frontier Preacher." *Journal Of Southern History* 72, no. 4: 927-928. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 30, 2012).

Excerpt: Peter Cartwright remembers Cane Ridge, 1856