

Chapter 1: Origins 1769-1830

First Presbyterian Church, USA, in Cookeville, Tennessee, dates its founding in 1909. That date is deceiving, however, since the church's history is actually much older. Many of the early settlers of Cookeville were Cumberland Presbyterians who moved to the newly formed county seat, hoping to capitalize on opportunities there. Because there was no organized Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Cookeville, they had to travel elsewhere to worship. Many of them headed out just after daylight to ride or walk to White, Overton, or Jackson counties to attend church. The Cumberland Presbyterian Church, from which First Presbyterian Church, USA of Cookeville emerged, was a product of the Second Great Awakening and the famed Cane Ridge Revival movement of 1801. Tennessee and Kentucky midwived the new religious movement that gripped the country at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

As early as 1769 adventurers moved into what is now Putnam County. Known as Long Hunters (because they came to the region from Virginia, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania and stayed as long as three years before returning home), they violated King George III's Proclamation Line of 1763 with impunity. It forbade any settlement beyond the Appalachian mountains for an unspecified time period. Frustrated and impatient, Long Hunters like Squire Boone, brother of the famed Daniel Boone, came to hunt in what is now Putnam County and decided to make it his permanent residence. He established a homestead in current day Dry Valley in 1770.¹

Other Long Hunters were not so fortunate, in the Oak Hill community of Overton County,

¹Alvin B. Wirt, *The Pioneer Times of the Upper Cumberland* (Washington, D.C.: Self-published, N.D.), 2-3.

near the “boils” at the head waters of the Roaring River, Cherokees led by Chief Nettle Carrier resented the intrusion by colonists into Indian Territory. Robert Crockett, Colonel James White, and Colonel James Knox, who were part of a larger contingent of Long Hunters spread out across Middle Tennessee, encountered Nettle Carrier’s war party in June. A bloody fight ensued, resulting in the death of Crockett, who is reputed to be the first white man of English extraction to die in Middle Tennessee.²

Between 1769 and statehood in 1796 thousands of settlers moved into Tennessee, some with good intentions, many of dubious purpose. On the eastern edge of the Cumberland Plateau a band of thieves and murderers known as the “Powell’s Valley Outlaws,” preyed upon travelers along the Walton Road.³ They often disguised themselves as Indians, and ambushed unsuspecting sojourners. One of the most notorious “land pirates” or highwaymen of frontier America, John A. Murrell, operated out of White County along the route between Knoxville and the Natchez Trace. He operated a hideout in or around Lost Creek Cave for years. The worst by far, however, were the “Terrible Harpe Brothers.” Micajah (Big Harpe) and Wiley (Little Harpe) preyed on travelers along the Walton Road, the War Trace, and the Federal Post Road. Their favorite disguise was that of a pair of circuit-riding Methodist ministers out to redeem the

²John Haywood, *The Civil and Political History of Tennessee From Its Earliest Settlement up to the Year 1796*. Reprint. (Nashville, Tennessee: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1891).

³Walton Road, built by William Walton between 1799-1801 traveled west from Fort Southwest Point (now Kingston) to the Cumberland River at Carthage. Highway 70 and the tracks of the Tennessee Central Railway roughly follow the course of the road. It was the main east-west thoroughfare through the Upper Cumberland for over 100 years. See W. Calvin Dickinson, *The Walton Road: A Nineteenth Century Wilderness Highway in Tennessee* (BookSurge Publishing, 2007).

frontier. They plundered, raped and murdered with abandon. Micajah was apprehended and beheaded by a posse in present day Scott County. Captors placed his severed head in the fork of a tree along a road still referred to as “Big Harp [sic] Head Road.” Wiley survived until 1804 when he was arrested, tried, and sentenced to hang for his heinous crimes.⁴

Life remained hard and unforgiving. Violence was commonplace, and often doubled as entertainment as rough and tumble fighters squared off to “kick, bite, gouge and chew,” until someone yielded.⁵ In Huntsville, Alabama, the local paper, *The Democrat* complained bitterly, “We have sometimes felt a secret pleasure in contemplating the moral improvement of the Western States, and have fondly hoped that those scenes of bloodshed which characterized the territories were to be. . . no more forever. *Tennessee has blasted our hopes.*”⁶

Settlements extended along road networks created by Indians, herds of animals, or along water courses. By 1798 a group of Presbyterian ministers, graduates of Princeton Theological Seminary, were convinced that the New Republic had lost its purpose as initiated by Puritans like John Winthrop, who declared his intention to create a new City on a Hill, a New Zion, for all the world to see. Presbyterian divines feared that the infidel doctrine of Deism or worse had taken root on the frontier beyond the mountains. Convinced that settlers who made their way into Tennessee and Kentucky would “go native,” and adopt the culture and attitudes of Native Americans, they determined to save them whether they wanted to be or not. Worse than fear of

⁴*Ibid.*, 12. James L. Penick, Jr. “John A. Murrell: A Legend of the Old Southwest.” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 48:3 (1989): 174-183.

⁵John R. Finger, *Tennessee Frontiers: Three Regions in Transition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 157.

⁶Quoted in Wirt, 14.

settlers engaged in pagan rituals, however, was the possibility that the frontier might fall under the control of Methodists or Baptists.

Informing the Presbyterian ministers in New Jersey was a pastor who knew about the degraded situation first hand. Reverend James Cummings was the first minister to travel into the region and attempt to preach to the heathen. Followed Long Hunters into Tennessee in 1770, he attempted to establish a church in the Watauga Settlement in upper East Tennessee. His errand into the wilderness yielded little fruit. Realizing the task was more than he alone could manage, Cummings urged other ministers to join him in the fight to save settlers from themselves, as they cohabited with Indians, fought, drank profusely, and generally disregarded religion. In 1797 and 1798 a delegation of Presbyterian ministers, led by James McCready, made their way into Tennessee and Kentucky, where they held a series of protracted meetings or communions. For eighteenth century Presbyterians the word “revival” was anathema. Though now commonplace, revivals take place daily across the United States and beyond. To those Presbyterians trying to get a foothold on the frontier, the notion that a person’s faith was so weak that it had to be revived was tantamount to no piety at all. The term “revival” slowly transformed from a pejorative to positive notion by the time of the Civil War.

McCready’s initial foray across the Appalachians proved frustrating. Frontiersmen ignored his pleas, scoffed at his formality, and generally considered him a nuisance. Even so, he established some fledgling congregations at Gasper River, Muddy River and Red River in Logan County, Kentucky. The assembly at Gasper River is considered by many scholars to be the

beginning of the camp revival movement.⁷

After returning to their homes in the more civilized world, they reported their findings. One minister wrote, “Whiskey and peach brandy flowed freely among the flotsam and jetsam, especially on Sunday----boatmen, wagoners, blanketed Indians, leather-jacketed woodsmen, gamblers, and women of dubious reputation shouted [at me] from doorways. According to local lore, the Devil had gotten so old that he couldn’t travel, so he decided to spend his final years in Knoxville.”⁸

The dearth of piety on the frontier encouraged a flurry of faiths to move West and stake their claims in Tennessee. In August 1800, thousands of people descended upon Drake’s Creek in Sumner County for what is considered the first Camp Meeting in U.S. history. Competing directly for the attention of the throng were Methodist minister John McGee of Smith County and Presbyterian minister William Hodge. McGee used the gathering as an opportunity to poach souls. His flare for theatrics proved more entertaining—not necessarily spiritually uplifting—and the assembled multitude abandoned the more stodgy Hodge for the rambunctious Methodist exhorter. Still regarded as the “father of the Camp Meeting,” McGee set the tone for camp revivals that followed. Though Hodge, who was upstaged by McGee, has largely been forgotten he founded Shiloh Presbyterian Church, the oldest Presbyterian Church in Sumner County.

James McCready vowed to return to the frontier after his visits in 1797 and 1798, saying that he would conduct a communion at Cane Ridge, in Logan County, Kentucky, that would last

⁷Paul Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America’s Pentecost* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 16-37.

⁸Finger, 197.

a fortnight. He expected around 2,000 people to attend over the course of two weeks, but somewhere between 20-30,000 people attended. Distinguished Vanderbilt historian Paul Conkin deemed the Cane Ridge communion “America’s Pentecost,” and the most important cultural/religious event of the nineteenth century. Out of that momentous revival came peculiarly American forms of Christianity, shaped in large measure by the privations of life on the frontier. The aftermath of Cane Ridge spawned new forms of religious expression, among them were the Charismatic, Evangelical, Holiness, Pre and Post-Millennial, Perfectionist, Pentecostal, Restoration, and Temperance movements. Also emerging from the shadows of Cane Ridge was the Cumberland Presbyterian Church from which the Cookeville First Presbyterian Church, USA later developed.⁹

The Cane Ridge communion—which was initiated by Presbyterians—quickly got out of control. Many people flooding into the campgrounds at Kentucky had no interest in religion or preachers prattling on about salvation. Rather, the meeting provided an opportunity to intermingle with new people, swap horses, arrange marriages, share stories, gamble, and generally have a good time. Some folks set up stills on the periphery, and soon spirits flowed freely from both the mouths of ministers and crock jars. Preachers competed noisily and boisterously with each other, often standing in the bed of a tethered wagon, beside their competition. Some got into heated confrontations over theological details, forgetting their audience altogether. Crowds milled among the preachers, some ordained, and others who felt compelled to preach even though they could not read a word of scripture. Among these new lay ministers were some who, like the apostles at Pentecost, claimed to be able to speak in tongues,

⁹Conkin, 42-60, 117.

introducing glossolalia to the frontier.

As the revival gained headway more people flocked to Cane Ridge that hot August. The water supply was over a mile from the designated gathering place. People sweated profusely in the summer heat in their homespun linsey woolsey, and heavy frock coats. While preachers shouted until their voices gave out, new people rose up and carried on. Preaching of some description took place during the entire daylight hours and often into the night. As the number of people grew, so did peculiar events. People, caught up in the moment, began to participate in so-called “Spiritual Exercises.” Among them were the “Falling Exercise,” where people simply collapses for no apparent reason. Many newfound believers were convinced that those lying prostrate on the ground had been “slain” by the Lord. A more logical explanation is that they collapsed due to heat stroke or lack of proper hydration. Exercises heightened the emotion of the event, and a whole series emerged over the course of the revival, including the “Barking Exercise,” “the Jerks” the “Laughing Exercise,” the “Running Exercise,” and many more.¹⁰

Recently minted Presbyterian minister and co-founder of the Restoration Movement, Barton W. Stone, did not know what to make of the situation. Though appalled by the emotionalism the revival unleashed, he was genuinely inspired by some of the exercises, such as the Falling Exercise, and the Jerks. He tried to justify exercises, like “treeing the Devil,” (where people surrounded a tree shouting epithets, claiming that they had chased Satan up into the branches and left him stranded) that he considered unjustly criticized by people who did not attend or participate at Cane Ridge. Stone, a man who took his religion seriously, despised the

¹⁰*Ibid.*; James A. Monroe, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003), 124.

carnality indulged in by many. He is often attributed with the apocryphal statement: “More souls were conceived than saved at Cane Ridge, for the bushes about me rattled with fornicators.”¹¹

After Cane Ridge Presbyterians lost substantial ground to denominations that took root more easily on the frontier. In a region where education was minimal, Presbyterian’s insistence upon an educated and ordained clergy, ministering to enlightened congregants, proved almost impossible. Some, like Samuel Doak, embraced the challenge. In 1783, Doak established the first educational institution in the United States west of the Appalachian Mountains, Martin Academy (later Washington College) a “Log College,” in Greeneville, Tennessee.¹² Twelve years later founded Tusculum College in 1795. One prominent Tusculum graduate, Gideon Blackburn, established the first mission to the Cherokee in Tennessee near present day Maryville. Presbyterian minister Samuel Carrick organized a congregation at Knoxville and established Blount College in 1795, now the University of Tennessee.¹³ Men like Doak, Blackburn, Hezekiah Balch, and Thomas Craighead, organized congregations in East and Middle Tennessee against formidable odds.

The high church quality of the Presbyterian Church stood in sharp contrast with the

¹¹John Rogers, ed., *The Biography of Elder Barton Warren Stone, Written by Himself with Additions and Reflections* (Cincinnati, Ohio: J.A. & U.P. James, 1847): 30-42. B.W. McDonnold claimed that the exercises started not at Cane Ridge but at Gideon Blackburn’s church in East Tennessee, as he tried to clean up the image of the frontier revival.

¹²The Log College founded by William Tenant was the first American Presbyterian theological seminary in colonial America. Located in Warminster, Pennsylvania, it operated from 1726 until Tenant’s death in 1746. The predecessor of Princeton University, several of its professors and graduates held important posts at Princeton after its founding in 1746.

¹³Stephen Mansfield and George Grant, *Faithful Volunteers: The History of Religion in Tennessee* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 1997): 30-43.

emotionalism and seemingly impromptu services of the Methodists and Baptists. Some Presbyterians yielded to the competition and loosened their standards in order to attract more worshipers. This tactic of “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em,” led in part to the creation of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1810, as a middle way between high church Presbyterians and the sensationalism of the Evangelicals and Pentecostals. Not everyone approved the trend, however, Reverend Jacob Young complained in 1806, “Jealousies began to operate in the Presbyterian synod of Kentucky. They began to think and say that Presbyterians were all turning Methodists and, indeed, it looked a good deal like it. They preached and prayed like Methodists; shouted and sung like Methodists.”¹⁴ Indeed such a charge convinced some detractors that the Cumberland Presbyterian Church actually sprang from the loins of the Methodists rather than the Presbyterian Church.¹⁵

In fact, Presbyterians who modified their approach to the frontier by embracing the revival movement were referred to by critics in the Kentucky Synod as “Cumberland Presbyterians.” As more Presbyterians compromised a new denomination “grew out of the revival party, the name which the people had already given was neither repudiated nor formally adopted, but it clung to the new organization.”¹⁶ Between 1801 and 1810, as new forms of religious expression emerged, some conservatives called for greater restraint, while others grew

¹⁴Jacob Young, *Autobiography of a Pioneer: Or the Nativity, Experience Travels and Ministerial Labors of Reverend Jacob Young, With Incidents, Observations, and Reflections* (Cincinnati: L. Swormstedt and A. Poe, 1857), 189.

¹⁵Benjamin W. McDonnold, *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: Board of Publication of Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1899), 17.

¹⁶McDonnold, 2.

more theatrical. These changes vexed Presbyterians across the spectrum, creating a division between “New Lights” and “Old Lights,” as well as “New Sides” versus “Old Sides.”

Tensions arose among Presbyterians as they tried to cope with change and unfamiliar situations. Disputes came in many forms. Some debated the notion of visible gifts of the spirit, so-called “New Testament baptism,” now most often associated with Pentecostals. Orthodox Presbyterians, disgusted by the emotionalism unleashed by the revival movement, considered it an impediment to spiritual growth. Founders of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, by contrast, embraced both the revival movement and the emotions they aroused out of a sense of necessity and as natural outgrowth of the frontier experience. Benjamin W. McDonnold, the first serious chronicler of the Cumberland Church, long an heir of the revival movement, noted “Opposition to revivals *per se* is an exotic plant in Presbyterian gardens.”¹⁷

The number of things Presbyterians argued over proved considerable, and some were a little silly. As Presbyterian leaders searched for a middle way, they lobbied for and against the following: “protracted camp meetings” which was code for revivals; night gatherings for worship; calling other ministers to aid in services; weeping in the pulpit; exhibiting emotion in the pulpit. They pondered the legality of itinerant preachers—a direct condemnation of the Methodist system of circuit riding clergy. Should ministers attend seminary in order to be ordained? Was singing hymns permissible or should only psalms be sung?¹⁸ Was any noise—shouting, groaning, shouting “amen,” or crying out for mercy—from the congregation to be

¹⁷McDonnold, 42.

¹⁸In Scotland, most Presbyterian churches forbade the use of organs and pianos, and only allowed psalms to be sung in worship. See David W. Stone, “‘An Inestimable Blessing’: The American Gospel Invasion of 1873,” *American Transcendental Quarterly* 16: 3 (2002): 193.

condoned? Was the introduction of a “mourner’s bench” productive or counter-productive?¹⁹

Those issues and more plagued the church. McDonnold wrote in 1889, “Yet for years, and even now, ‘the anti-revival party’ of the mother church holds up the Cane Ridge meetings and Stoneite [Barton Stone’s Restoration] theology as samples of what the meetings and doctrines of Cumberland Presbyterians are.”²⁰

Meanwhile camp meetings flourished and camp grounds sprang up across Tennessee and Kentucky. They reinvigorated existing congregations and inspired the creation of new ones. Monroe Seals, the first pastor of the First Presbyterian Church at Cookeville, commented about frontier religion in the Upper Cumberland, saying: “In our early history superstition was widespread. It was sometimes mixed with religion. A man had a full jug of liquor behind the door and a fiddle hanging on the wall. He would get converted at a meeting and go home and throw the fiddle out a back window, but leave the jug behind for future use.”²¹ Camp meetings stirred up emotions for the time being, only to fade away until the next revival got them all wound up again. After the campgrounds cleared people slowly lapsed back into their old ways.

¹⁹*Ibid.* The Cumberland Presbyterians acknowledged their genesis in the Presbyterian Church but bristled at comparisons with Methodists. “One feature, however, of McCready's meetings at a later day was clearly due to McGee, who ran through the church shouting and telling the people to shout, until he succeeded in producing quite a tumult. The Presbyterians generally condemned shouting, and this feature of McCready’s meetings, after McGee’s visits, was one of the grounds of their bitter complaints. So it is probable that the “shouting,” once so common, now SO rare, among Cumberland Presbyterians was of Methodist parentage.” McDonnold, 19.

²⁰McDonnold, 45. Stonites and Campbellites narrowly interpreted the scriptures and, though both were ordained Presbyterian ministers, they renounced the church and were highly critical of its system of governance.

²¹Monroe Seals, *History of White County, Tennessee* (Spartanburg, South Carolina: The Reprint Company Publishers, 1974): 26.

In the interim, however, superstition reigned. Frontiersmen put their faith in spells and nostrums once the preachers went away. They saw omens in black cats, swamp gas, and the way blood splattered on the ground at a hog killing. Many believed that witches and “haints” created mischief for the settlers.²²

Camp meetings often proved contentious. Ministers of one denomination openly criticized the dogma of another, often in less than gracious terms. Circuit riding Methodist minister Isaac “Ike” Woodard, attacked his competitors in the Upper Cumberland with invective and sarcasm. He denounced Presbyterians, saying: “There are Presbyterians. They believe in the final perseverance of the saints. One of them, my neighbor, got drunk last week and beat his wife. He was a nice saint, a wife-beating saint. He may have been a nice fellow before the devil shot the feathers off of him.”²³

Some frontier preachers who answered the call to preach in the Upper Cumberland were little better than rascals. “The immoral preacher will get drunk, wink at crime, beat his debts, preach while under the influence of liquor [and] commit fornication. . . He has been a blight on Christianity.” Other ministers, who sincerely wanted to serve God, were hampered by their poor education and agility of reason. Some were literally afraid that an education would impair their faith. Reverend L.C. Kelly of Pineville, Kentucky, complained that the “Open-your-mouth-and-

²²*Ibid.* For descriptions of camp meetings see: Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981).

²³Quoted in Seals, 42.

God-will-fill-it preacher is one who has gone to seed on inspiration. He is against education.”²⁴

Among the oldest Presbyterian Churches in the Upper Cumberland were the Cherry Creek Presbyterian Church and the Sparta Presbyterian Church—both in White County and established in 1800 and 1813 respectively. Other Presbyterian congregations were organized in DeKalb, Jackson, Overton and Smith Counties between 1811 and 1820. Dr. Hezekiah Priestly, pastor of the Sparta Presbyterian Church, founded the first school in White County, Priestly Academy, in 1815. The facility served double duty as both a church and school, and its grounds also served as the first city cemetery in Sparta. Soon after, however, Presbyterians in the region succumbed to peer pressure, and gravitated toward the Cumberland Church. Memucam Wade succeeded Priestly, and steered the church away from its high church moorings. He noted that “the Cumberland Presbyterians having captured most of the Presbyterian Churches in this section in the revolution that took place after 1810.”²⁵ Even Cherry Creek Presbyterian Church allied its congregation with the Cumberland Presbyterians and by 1834 ranked as the largest denomination in the White County.²⁶

Along with new churches came camp grounds for summer revivals. One of the most prominent camp grounds in the Upper Cumberland was located a few miles north of Standing Stone (now Monterey) in Overton County, known as the Cave Spring Campground. Nearby

²⁴Rev. L.C. Kelly, “Mountain Preacher and Mountain Problem,” *Missionary Review of the World* 57 (May 1934): 232-233.

²⁵Seals, 34.

²⁶Cherry Creek was the last church to join the Cumberland Presbyterians and the first church in the Upper Cumberland to reunite with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1906. See Seals, 44.

Sinking Cane, on the Overton County-Putnam County border, acted as an annual meeting site throughout the 19th Century. Rock Spring Campground in Overton County provided another place for the annual get-togethers.²⁷ As new congregations emerged, the Presbyterian Church lacked enough ordained ministers to compete with the Methodists and Baptists, and looked for some viable solution to the problem.

Tennesseans appealed to the Transylvania Presbytery of Kentucky for supply ministers. Unconcerned about ordained preachers, the frontiersmen wanted more frequent opportunities to attend worship services. Many wanted to have church at least twice a month.

Three founders of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Alexander Anderson, Finis Ewing, and Samuel King, presented themselves to the Presbytery in 1801. All “had previously been under serious impressions that it was their duty to devote themselves to the ministry,” but lacked a college degree, were men with families and “somewhat advanced in life.” But because they were more literate than many of their peers, had worked closely with ordained ministers, and understood the basics tenets of the church, the Transylvania Presbytery allowed them to be “exhorters.” In that capacity they could provide basic lessons about church doctrine, and a modicum of pastoral care, but could not perform the duties of ordained clergy (e.g. baptize, administer communion, etc.). This was intended to be a stop-gap measure in the tradition of the Log College until resident clergy could be provided.²⁸ These unpaid lay ministers adopted the Methodist model of circuit riding, attending to the needs of a number of churches in a district,

²⁷McDonnold, 31, 34.

²⁸Ben M. Barrus, Milton L. Baugh, and Thomas H. Campbell, *A People Called Cumberland Presbyterians* (Memphis, Tennessee: Frontier Press, 1972): 50-51, hereafter *A People Called Cumberland Presbyterians*; McDonnold, 48-66:

often taking up to four months to complete the circuit. Their success inspired frontier congregations to petition the Presbytery to license them without a divinity degree.²⁹

Because of the geographical size of the Transylvania Presbytery that serviced Kentucky and Tennessee, it was subdivided to create the Cumberland Presbytery from which the division that came among the denomination emerged. The Cumberland Presbytery decided to ordain Alexander Anderson, Finis Ewing, and Samuel King in spite of their lack of divinity degrees. The Cumberland Presbytery endorsed and embraced the revival movement, and their followers represented the majority in the new ecclesiastical territory. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* also sparked heated debate about whether all or any part of it was relevant on the frontier.³⁰

On October 15, 1802, the Synod of Kentucky met and divided the Transylvania Presbytery in two, designating them the Transylvania and the Cumberland Presbyteries. Almost immediately the Cumberland Presbytery faced a potential schism, because its ten ordained ministers were deeply divided. Five supported the revival movement while the other five detested it.³¹ The impasse later resulted in the creation of a new denomination, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, which embraced the revival movement and mellowing the teachings of John Calvin and *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.

The conflict with the Mother Church began in 1804, and spread throughout the frontier regions of Kentucky and Tennessee. Some tensions stemmed from the attitude the mainstream

²⁹McDonnold noted of these intrepid men, “Even the daring pioneers of Methodism had not then reached some of these regions [that these men had]” 55.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 57-59. Detractors derided the Cumberland Presbyterians as “the revival party,” and “anti-education.”

³¹*A People Called the Cumberland Presbyterians*, 52.

Presbyterian Church back east held toward the Cumberland Presbytery. In essence they looked down on the less educated, less genteel frontiersmen and deemed them inferior. Many, who considered the Cumberland Presbytery a threat, spread the unfounded rumor that they were New Light evangelical fanatics and decidedly anti-education. Other detractors considered them little better than besotted Methodists, prone to excessive emotionalism. A minority equated the Cumberland Presbytery with Shakers, who chose to deviate from established dogma and practice strange rituals. One faction damned the Cumberland Presbytery as having fallen under the sway of the contentious former Presbyterian minister and co-founder of the Restoration Movement, Barton Stone.³²

Members of the Cumberland Presbytery considered the pressures placed upon them by the Mother Church as similar to the Spanish Inquisition. Mainstream Presbyterians acted unfairly toward them and their accusations were unfounded. The Cumberland Presbytery maintained that the crisis was handed in a manner that was un-Christian both in its harshness and its judgements of the intellectual capacity of frontier ministers. The Commission of the Synod began to suspend the duties of a number of frontier preachers of the Cumberland Presbytery, deeming them illiterate and apostates.³³ Between 1806-1809 the situation worsened. James McCready withdrew from the Commission. William Hodge and John Rankin attempted to reconcile the competing factions and find common ground for both groups, but negotiations failed.

Taking matters into their own hands, Samuel McAdow, Finis Ewing, Ephraim McLean,

³²*Ibid.*, 55.

³³*Ibid.*, 62-63.

and Samuel King met at McAdow's home in Dickson County, Tennessee, on February 4, 1810. There they drafted an ultimatum to the Presbyterian Church. It stated that they had waited patiently, though in vain, for governing bodies of the church to address the issues dividing them. They wanted the Cumberland Presbytery to be returned to good standing and demanded "a restoration of our violated rights." Failing that, they saw no way to move forward. As a result they intended to form their own denomination based on the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, "except the doctrine of fatality that seems to be taught under the mysterious doctrine of predestination."³⁴ In an attempt to stifle critics the declaration stipulated that in order to be licensed or ordained in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, a minister *had* to be educated. Initiates who wanted to preach were required pass a battery of examinations on "English Grammar, Geography, Astronomy, natural and moral philosophy and church history."³⁵

Those four men who drafted the resolution represented the founding ministers of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Even though they broke away from the mainstream Presbyterian Church, all of them expressed their hope of reconciliation with the Mother Church in the future. In an exercise of good faith, repeated attempts to rejoin the church occurred from 1810 to 1813, through negotiations conducted by Gideon Blackburn and Duncan Brown.³⁶

In October, 1813, the Cumberland Presbyterian Synod convened for the first time at Beach Church in Sumner County, Tennessee. It became abundantly clear that immediate reconciliation with the Presbyterian Church was not forthcoming. In order to differentiate their

³⁴Quoted in *ibid.*, 76.

³⁵*Ibid.* Samuel McAdow's home is a historic site within Montgomery Bell State Park.

³⁶*A People Called the Cumberland Presbyterians*,

stance from that of the larger Presbyterian Church, the delegates composed a “Brief Statement,” which took issue with certain aspects of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. It expressed four points of contention:

1. That there are no eternal reprobates.
2. That Christ died not for part only, but for all mankind.
3. That all infants dying in infancy are saved through Christ and the sanctification of the Spirit.
4. That the Spirit of God operates on the world or as co-extensively as Christ has made atonement, in such manner as to leave all men inexcusable.”³⁷

Additionally the meeting called for the creation of a committee to compose a confession of faith defining the beliefs of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

At Sugg’s Creek in Wilson County, Tennessee the committee presented its report to the Synod along with its revised *Westminster Confession of Faith*. “All the boldly defined statements of the doctrine objected to were expunged, and corrected statements were made. But it was impossible to eliminate all the features of Hyper-Calvinism from the Westminster Confession of Faith. . . for the objectionable doctrine, with its logical sequences, pervaded the whole system of theology.”³⁸ Framers of the new confession carried on undaunted. They were confident that “they had formulated a system of doctrines which any candid inquirer after truth might understand.”³⁹ Unanimously adopted it became the Confession of Faith of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. This led to the organization of a Cumberland General Assembly which

³⁷Frank Slemons, “In the Supreme Court at Nashville, December Term, 1911, *Bonham v. Harris*, Answer of the Complainants to Defendant’s Petition to Re-Hear, filed December 19, 1911,” (Nashville: Tennessee State Library and Archives, Middle Tennessee Supreme Court Records, MTSC Box 1952): 3-4.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 4-5.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 5.

officially met for the first time at the appropriately named Princeton, Kentucky in 1829, where the denomination officially came to fruition.⁴⁰

After the break with the Presbyterian Church, the Cumberland Presbyterians proved more successful in gaining converts than the parent church. Seen as too rigid and out of touch with the realities of life in rural Tennessee and Kentucky, the Presbyterian Church lost large numbers of congregants. Pews sat empty and many Presbyterian Churches closed their doors as the Cumberland church took root. The Cumberland Presbyterians cast off the “hifalutin” airs of the Presbyterians and incorporated language that common farmers easily understood. Cumberland ministers filled their sermons with stories shaped by the realities of life in the hinterland, and often rolled up their shirt sleeves and worked alongside their parishioners at barn raisings and corn shuckings. As Tennessee was divided into new Presbyteries, people in the Upper Cumberland of Kentucky and Tennessee belonged to the Princeton and Lebanon Presbyteries. By the 1830s many Presbyterians left the denomination for the more pragmatic Cumberland Presbyterian Church throughout the region. Presbyterian Churches in Jackson, Overton and White counties were gradually absorbed into the Cumberland Presbyterian orbit with little complaint and less conflict.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 4-6. The *Cumberland Presbyterian Confession of Faith* stood as originally composed until 1881 when delegates suggested that it be revised at Austin, Texas. This remained in effect until the attempted merger with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1903.