

CRC - EARLY RELIGION ON THE FRONTIER

Disclaimer by the author: This writing is for historical purposes only. It is not intended for religious argument but solely for telling a story of history. I have written this from a few sources and recollection of my studies of the Restoration Movement. It is presented as a presentation of my studies and it is not intended to offend anyone. In no way do I want to invite a discussion on doctrine issues.

What I present to you is a result of personal study that I have done over the years. The sources are The Cane Ridge Reader, Life of Barton W. Stone, Tennessee Christians, Marshall County Sesquicentennial History, Lincoln County Pioneers, Methodism In Tennessee, Goodspeed History, (Website – Restoration Movement), Biography of David Lipscomb and verbal conversation.

Our country had just fought for its independence from England. In receiving our independence there was a break from the Church of England. With this break came the freedom of religion. Quoting from Mary Pepper Fort's, Religion In Tennessee Before 1820. ***“Religious freedom is the most valuable and cherished of all freedom was guaranteed by the section of the Bill of Rights that was prefixed to our constitution and reads as follows: That religion or the duty which we owe to our creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience, and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice forbearance, love, and charity toward each other. The settlers were willing to endure any manner of hardships to obtain this freedom.”***

As I share this presentation I want each of you to use your imagination. Some of our earliest settlers were Scotch-Irish and with them came the Presbyterians from Scotland. As they settled here they looked to America as a place where they would have freedom to worship. Imagine the old pioneer preachers out for weeks on horseback preaching in the communities. They did not have the modern conveniences that we have today. Often, they preached under brush arbors, maybe by the light of a coal oil lamp, they may have taken a side of pork, a dozen eggs or fresh vegetables from the family garden, but they were dedicated to their congregations of their faith. Often times they were out in inclement weather. It may be rain or snow but they were still on horseback preaching. The circuit rider was often referred to as “God’s Shock Troops.” Many of these congregations did not have buildings of worship to worship in. Such was the case of the Arbor Hill Church of Christ in Marshall County founded on property donated by my great grandfather Joel Richard Whorley in the 1880’s. They met under a brush arbor on top of a hill.

On the frontier there were three major religious groups. They were the Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist.

In Tennessee the story is told of Rev. Charles Cummings, a Presbyterian minister, who preached at a congregation in the Holston Valley in Upper East Tennessee during the year 1772. It was his custom on Sunday morning to dress himself neatly, put on a shot pouch, shoulder his rifle, mount his horse and ride to church, where he would meet the congregation, each man with a rifle in his hand. Entering the church building he would walk gravely through the crowd, ascend the pulpit, and after depositing his rifle in one corner of it, so as to be ready for any emergency.

One of the earliest Methodist ministers on the frontier here in Middle Tennessee was Samuel S. Moody. Moody was born May 1, 1810 in Powhatan County, Virginia. In 1828, he had professed religion in the

Chapel Hill Community of Henry County, Tennessee. From what family researchers have found Samuel S. Moody married Letita Thompson Cannon on 29 October, 1840. She was the daughter of Clement Cannon and Susan Locke. Clement Cannon was the father of Shelbyville. Susan Locke was the daughter of Charles Locke. Charles Locke is a Patriot that many have joined the DAR and SAR as their Revolutionary War ancestor. Samuel experienced riding hungry, cold with the falling rain, sitting on his horse for many miles, and preached to a cold and hard-hearted congregation who gave him neither friendly salutation, food, nor shelter, he felt like deserting his work.

Another Methodist preacher of the area was Adam Springs Riggs born in Williamson County, near Riggs Crossroads, June 6, 1816. His parents David and Sophia Riggs moved to Bedford County during his childhood. In answers to prayers to his father and mother, he embraced religion while alone in prayer in the secret grove of Bedford County, near Shelbyville on Sunday evening 19 June, 1836 and the next Saturday 25 June, 1836 he was received into the Methodist Church.

Quoting from ***Methodism In Tennessee***, "**Shelbyville is a handsome town, situated on the north bank of the Duck River, and the county seat of Bedford County. The lands in Bedford County are fertile, and well adapted for agriculture purposes. Methodism, as has been seen, was introduced into the Duck River country at an early period, and in portions of Bedford County made rapid progress. In the town of Shelbyville, the Methodist have not been so numerous as they are in other towns and cities of Tennessee; yet there has always been, since the first organization, a respectable Church, which numbered among its members some of the most worthy and honored citizens of the place. The Turrentine, Ruth, Cannon, Knotts, Blackmore, Shapard, Brown, Holt, Moody, Wilhoite and others equally worthy. In the county of Bedford, the Methodist are numerous.**" There is a story of Wilson Turrentine being threatened of being horsewhipped at the outbreak of the Civil War if he preached from the pulpit at the Old Union Church in the 18th Civil District of Bedford County. As he entered the building he carried two large rocks and placed them on the pulpit in plain view. Nothing happened.

The Salem Church in Bell Buckle was probably established in 1805. A session was held at Norvell's Campground in Bedford County beginning 07 November, 1821. It was erroneously spelled "Norrells." The campground where the church stood was properly called Salem.

The Shelbyville First United Methodist Church was probably established in 1820. There are numerous congregations of the Methodist faith throughout Bedford County.

A few years after the birth of our country there seemed to be a decline in religion. As this decline became evident there was an awakening on the frontier and as a result there were many campfire meetings. One of these meetings where there was great attendance was held in a community about twenty miles east of Lexington, Kentucky in Cane Ridge, Kentucky. Gathered at this event were preachers from the Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist faiths. There were presentations made simultaneously throughout that weekend. The families came together in their horses and buggies, mules and wagons and on horseback for this great religious experience. Estimates have ranged from 20,000 to 30,000 in attendance. There was a high fervor among the participants at this event. It was reported that there was hysteria, fainting, jerking, lightheadedness and other mental disorders occurring.

One of the preachers at the Cane Ridge Campground meeting was Barton W. Stone, who had a great impact on religion throughout our area. Stone was born in Fort Tobacco, Maryland and educated in North Carolina. He migrated into Middle Tennessee in 1796 just as Tennessee had joined the Union. He

was here in Middle Tennessee for a while then moved to Cane Ridge, Kentucky. On the date of 31 October, 1811, he married Celia Bowen a cousin of his first wife. With this marriage, he sold his Kentucky farm and moved to Mansker's Creek in Sumner County to the farm of his mother-in-law. He lived there for about a year and there was a dispute that arose about the inheritance of the farm. That farm is the home of Bowen-Campbell Mansion that is believed to be the oldest brick home in Middle Tennessee. After the dispute, he moved back to Kentucky hoping to buy his original farm back but the owner had raised the price considerably and he decided he could not afford it, so he purchased a farm near Georgetown, Kentucky. Barton W. Stone was of the Presbyterian faith.

As Stone preached early on with the Presbyterian Churches of Cane Ridge and Concord there arose doctrinal differences with the Washington Presbytery, jurisdictional trouble with the Synod of Kentucky and the dissolution of the Springfield Presbytery. Stone became an active force in the Christian Church / Disciples of Christ / Church of Christ. Stone had a major impact on religion in Middle Tennessee and as a result many pioneer preachers and congregations were planted throughout Middle Tennessee. Among these were Wilson Hill in 1816, and Liberty in Marshall County in 1823, Cedar Creek in Marshall County in 1831 and Mt. Herman and Rock Creek in Bedford County in 1832. About 1833 there was a merger with the congregations that were founded by Alexander Campbell. Congregations formed after that merger were Lewisburg 1838, and Cane Creek in 1841 plus many more.

A few of the pioneer preachers that were influenced by Barton W. Stone and/or Alexander Campbell from the four-county area were the following.

Moses Lard – (insert picture) Moses Lard was born in Bedford County, Tennessee on the date of 29 October, 1818. His family migrated to Ray County, Missouri about 1829. He was born of a poor family and his father died when he was of a young age. At that time his mother was unable to care for him. She said to him and his brother "My dear boys, I have nothing to give but my blessing and these two little books." She then gave them two small testaments and placed them in their hands. Moses Lard received support and entered Bethany College receiving a degree of Master of Arts and was valedictorian of his class. Alexander Campbell was an influence in his life and he was the publisher of Lard's Quarterly. In 1865 he wrote that the Christian Church and the Church of Christ were used interchangeably. A note of interest: Moses Lard's daughter Virginia Juliet was the third wife of Governor Silas Woodson, the governor of Missouri from 1873 to 1875. They married on 27 December, 1866.

Tolbert Fanning – (insert picture) Tolbert fanning was born 10 May, 1810 in Cannon County. Tolbert Fanning was greatly influenced by Barton W. Stone. In return Tolbert Fanning was of great influence on a lot of younger preachers of his era. He worked throughout Middle Tennessee and Northern Alabama.

One Sunday at the East Main Street Congregation in Murfreesboro he preached about "**The Ungodly Practice of Slavery in America**". This sermon came a day after he witnessed one of his brethren of his congregation selling one of his slaves and dividing the family. This sermon was delivered thirty years prior to the Civil War.

In 1832 he moved to Nashville and the following year he traveled throughout Kentucky preaching with Alexander Campbell.

In 1835 he married Charlotte Fall, she was a sister to Phillip S. Fall, who preached for the Baptist Church of Nashville. Phillip S. Fall converted to the congregation of the Christian Church.

Tolbert Fanning and his wife Charlotte believed in education and they founded the Female Academy in Franklin, Tennessee and they later moved it to Nashville where it became known as Elm Craig. The location of the school is where the Nashville International Airport is located today. Afterward they expanded the operations to include a boy's agriculture school, with the students working on the farm. From this location they founded Franklin College and among the notable students were T. B. Larimore, William and David Lipscomb and others. During the Civil War there were no classes conducted at the school, but classes resumed in 1865. Shortly after resuming classes there was a fire that destroyed part of the buildings and the school was discontinued. He was a strict disciplinarian. David Lipscomb related he got one of the worst whippings he ever had from Fanning for kissing one of the girls.

Calvin Curlee – (insert picture) Calvin Curlee was born around 1791 in North Carolina and with his parents he migrated into Cannon County, Tennessee. He married Rebecca Fortenberry and they reared a large family. He was raised in the Baptist faith and after hearing Alexander Campbell preach in Nashville he was converted to the Christian Church. He was a very close friend of Tolbert Fanning as they both were from Cannon County. Calvin Curlee had a very large farm in Cannon County and from this he donated five acres for a church house and a cemetery, which became known as the Curlee Church and Cemetery. In 1844 he is one of the pioneer preachers that is riding horseback throughout the frontier preaching in Bedford, Cannon and Warren Counties. His work was continued through his grandsons Dr. J. P. Curlee of Cannon County and E. H. Hoover of Chattanooga. Calvin Curlee had several descendants here in Bedford County, in fact in this community. Some of those descendants are kindred families of some of us. His grandson Dave Curlee was a friend to our family in the 1950's.

Joshua Kennerly Speer – (insert Picture) Joshua Kennerly Speer "J. K." was born in 1794 in Yadkin County, North Carolina. He was raised in the Baptist faith. At the age of twenty-four he moved to Williamson County, near Franklin. He began reading the **Christian Baptist** that was a publication of Alexander Campbell and from there he began to study the Bible. On the fourth Sunday November, 1823 he delivered his first sermon. He also preached at many congregations throughout North Alabama and Southern Middle Tennessee. He had a close association with Tolbert Fanning, David Lipscomb and Dr. T. W. Brents. In the year 1857 he is living in the New Herman Community of Bedford County and is the preacher of one of the oldest congregations in the state of Tennessee. He died at his home in New Herman 27 May, 1858. The dates that are inscribed on his stone in the New Herman Cemetery are inscribed in error as to his death date.

Dr. T. W. Brents – (insert picture) Dr. T. W. Brents was born 10 February, 1823 in Lincoln County, Tennessee. The area he was born in later became a part of Marshall County. His parents were from Kentucky and are buried in the original Brents Cemetery in the Tally Station Community that we visited yesterday on our heritage tour. In his early life he had very limited resources for an education. He became a blacksmith by trade and he often worked very hard in the day hours and spent most nights studying by the light of a coal oil lamp. For a brief time, he practiced law but then he turned his mind toward medicine. He entered medical school in Nashville and then later Macon Medical School in Macon, Georgia. He became an accomplished surgeon. He left the medical profession to preach the gospel. While preaching he became a merchant in Shelbyville. In 1878 he was elected President of Burritt College in Spencer, Tennessee. In 1874 he published his first book "The Gospel Plan of Salvation," which is still available in Christian Book Stores today. He was also a great debater and many times coached David Lipscomb in debating. He held many gospel meetings in many congregations throughout the area. His home congregation was Cane Creek Church in Marshall County. His farm was what I knew

of as a youngster as the Claude Coffey Farm on the Branchville Road west of Richmond on the Bedford – Marshall County line. He was a man of many talents: blacksmith, lawyer, surgeon, merchant, bank president, college president, farmer, preacher, writer and debater. Many of us are related to the Brents family either directly or through kindred families. We have our Sherman, Texas Cousins here today, Dr. Brents had a grandson that was a very successful businessman in Sherman, Texas

C. R. Darnall – (insert picture) C. R. Darnall's father Cornelius Darnall settled in the Mulberry Community of Lincoln County. Neighbors of the Darnall family were Parks, Whitaker, Robinson and the Brights. Cornelius Darnall was a Revolutionary War Soldier. C. R. "Calvin Robinson" Darnall, the son, our subject was born 15 June, 1822 in Lincoln County, Tennessee. His opportunities for an education were very limited. After the death of his father he went to live with his Uncle John Broadway. Uncle John Broadway wanted C. R. to study law. He attended the Fayetteville Academy and after the death of his uncle under the direction of the Reverend J. H. Eaton, President of Murfreesboro University he abandoned the study of law. In 1842 C. R. Darnall married Sarah White Tally and they moved to Marshall County.

In 1853 he conceived the idea of building a school in the Marshall County area. With the aid of Professor C. L. Randolph who was teaching school in Richmond, C. R. Darnall opened the New Hope Academy. From the years 1853 – 1861 there were both male and female students at New Hope Academy. After the Civil War he relocated the academy to the Female Institute in Lewisburg. The enrollment during 1866/67 was 152; 1867/68 – 172; 1868/69 – 172; 1869/70 – 200. It was quoted that, "**He had given opportunity to numbers of poor girls and boys to go to school to him and after being competent, teach and obtain means and pay. Never had one single poor child either the orphan or any other, been refused the chance to get learning.**"

Note: The New Hope Community is in south central Marshall County, near the Lincoln County line, northwest of Petersburg. The historic Fishing Ford Road runs through the community. This is the road that Andrew Jackson traveled when he was recruiting for the War of 1812. The New Hope Cemetery is located in the community. It was a thriving community in the early days. Several of us have family that are buried there. New Hope Cemetery is located where some historians believe what may have been the location of the New Hope Academy. Several of us are kindred families of the Darnall family. One of the most noted family members that went on to national prominence was Linda Darnall that starred in many movies in the 1940's and early 50's.

J. D. Floyd – (insert picture) J. D. Floyd was born 01 September, 1839. He served as a Lieutenant in the Confederate States Army. He was influenced by Dr. T. W. Brents. He attended New Hope Academy in Marshall County. He helped organize the congregation at Flat Creek in 1868 and began preaching there regularly in 1871. He continued preaching at Flat Creek for fifty years. He died 30 November, 1919 with his funeral services conducted by Brother B. F. Hart. He is buried in the Rose Bank Cemetery in Flat Creek.

J. R. Bradley – J. R. Bradley preached at many congregations throughout the foothills of Chestnut Ridge. Congregations being Chestnut Ridge, Molino, Stoney Point, New Herman, Richmond.

Chestnut Ridge Church of Christ was a very active congregation at one time. I do know that Johnny Prosser was active with that congregation, J.R. Bradley was the long-time preacher. Families that were a big part of the congregation were Dunn, Fullerton, Rozar, Gammill, Duncan, Bledsoe and many others.

The Chestnut Ridge Congregation closed its doors two to three years ago, and this is sad. A side note, that was told to me recently was the two escaped convicts that shot and killed the two transportation officers of the Georgia Department of Correction this past summer hid out at the abandoned church building two to three nights. They thought that the congregation would be having Wednesday evening Bible class and that was when they moved out.

(insert Pictures from Wayne Owens) In the early Baptist congregations in "The Ridge" foothills I have found James Prosser, Drury Richardson and the Needham Sorrells families worshipped at the Concord Congregation down in Belleville. The Concord Congregation does not meet today. There is a cemetery at the site of where the Concord Baptist Church building once stood on Stonesboro Road.

There was a very active Baptist Congregation known as Cold Forks /Ball Forks. This congregation was in Mulberry. An active member of this congregation was John Whittaker an ancestor of Carolyn Whittaker Crowley our CRC cousin. Other active members were Benjamin Boone and Daniel Warren.

I also found my Howell Johnston family very active in the Baptist Congregation at Mt. Olivet in Booneville.

As per conversation with David Cleek, the Hickory Hill Upper Cumberland Presbyterian Church that meets in the "The Ridge," the building where they worship was originally a Methodist Congregation building in the early 1900's. Around 1948 the congregation separated from the Cumberland Presbyterian to become an Upper Cumberland Presbyterian Congregation. The separation came from their differences with the Cumberland Presbyterian using the Revised Standard Version of the Bible and the Upper Cumberland Presbyterian using the King James Version. Families that have worshipped at Hickory Hill over the years have been the Powell, Warren, Bledsoe, Prosser, Hines, Cleek, King and others.

Moore's Chapel was an early Methodist Congregation located in Bluestocking Hollow in the 20th district of Bedford County. The church building was dismantled in the 1930's. The Moore's Chapel Cemetery is still beautifully maintained. Several of us have ancestors that are buried there. My ancestors are James Moore and his wife Francis Bledsoe. Also buried there is Jacob Bledsoe the Revolutionary War Soldier and the grandfather of Francis Bledsoe. I believe these families were founders of this congregation and possibly the property came from the Moore family, although it probably was from the father of James Moore as we look at the dates of the founding of the church and cemetery. I am in search of his father.

Providence or Bluestocking Hollow Presbyterian Church was established prior to 1827 in Blue Stocking Hollow. Reverend George Newton, a noted Presbyterian minister and educator, probably was active in the establishment of the congregation. Land for the church building was given by Daniel White and Robert E. Bradshaw. Reverend Amzi Bradshaw supplied the church for a number of years. He was the son of James W. and Sarah Bradshaw. He married Hannah Brown and died in Texas in 1859. Thomas Dryden, Andrew Bain and William Morrison were trustees for the church in 1848. The minutes of this congregation are on file in the Manuscript Department of the Tennessee State Library and Archives in Nashville.

The present Pleasant Grove Methodist Church (where we are meeting today) was dedicated 08 June, 1952. A former building was purchased from the Cottage Grove Church was given by J. W. Wiggins, a son of Harrel Wiggins. Dr. A. J. Kimmons and wife gave additional land to the present congregation in 1938.

It is noteworthy that many of our religious groups did not meet during the Civil War years of 1861 – 1865. After the war there was a plea from David Lipscomb for help in rebuilding the South. From the biography of Lipscomb, he told of the many struggles of the farmer of the South. James Garfield was very active in the Christian Church but he and Lipscomb had many differences. One of those differences was Garfield's belief that the South needed to be punished for the War. Lipscomb was a courageous fighter for the South. Over the years there were doctrinal differences in the Christian Church. Early on it was infant Baptism, missionary societies, acapella music. Garfield had been active in the Christian Church. One Sunday during the conflicts in Murfreesboro Garfield came to the East Main Street Congregation in Murfreesboro, he removed his side arm and his sword from his side and went to the pulpit to speak. Garfield became President to the United States but he and Lipscomb had many differences of opinions. In 1906 there was a religious census and from this census is where it is noted the separation of the Christian Church and the Church of Christ. The main dividing points were the conflicts of the Civil War and acapella music.

I have given you a brief bio of several pioneer preachers. Interestingly doing genealogy research I have found several families named their boys after these pioneer preachers. That shows that our pioneer families had respect for these men that rode in the saddle and preached the gospel.

There is much more I could share with you, but I have probably said enough.