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REVIVING HIS WORK: SOCIAL ISOLATION, RELIGIOUS FERVOR AND  
REFORM IN THE BURNED OVER DISTRICT OF WESTERN NEW YORK, 1790-  
1860

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

REVIVING HIS WORK: SOCIAL ISOLATION, RELIGIOUS FERVOR AND  
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By Patricia Lewis Noel, B.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

Major Director: Sarah H. Meacham, Ph.D.  
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This thesis examines revivalism and reform movements in rural areas of western New York. The bulk of literature on this region in the Second Great Awakening concentrates on middle class, urban people. This thesis argues that revivalism and evangelical fervor was carried to rural portions of the region by migrants from western New England. Evangelical Christianity and revivalism provided emotion succor for rural people grappling with negative social conditions, such as isolation, poverty, crop failure and alcoholism, in the New York frontier. Religious adherence became especially important for women, who were more isolated than men. Religious adherence and

revivalism allowed rural evangelicals an opportunity to “purify” society from sinful behavior. Revivalism waned as social conditions improved in rural areas, but the tradition of societal “purification” remained. In this way, rural evangelicals, as well as Quakers and Spiritualists, engaged in moral reform, to eradicate institutions and behaviors they perceived as sinful from society.



## Introduction

Between 1790 and 1860, religious zeal and revivalism swept through the young United States on a previously unparalleled scale. The religious excitement was particularly strong in western upstate New York, which as a result became known as the “Burned Over District.”<sup>1</sup> Revivalism and evangelical enthusiasm was intense in rural, poverty-stricken areas. The combination of theories espoused by the American Revolution and the Enlightenment eroded religious influence in American life by the 1780s. An increase in poverty and crime following the Revolution led western New Yorkers to turn to “revivalism,” the revitalization of religious beliefs through prayer meetings, protracted meetings or sermons. Revivals were most common in evangelical sects.<sup>2</sup> Revival religion provided rural western New Yorkers with comfort, stability and a sense of belonging in a volatile society. Revivals could be planned or spontaneous. They were held in homes, churches, barns and fields. They could be led by itinerant ministers. Burned Over District revivalism also included and gave leadership roles to women in ways never before seen in American religious movements.

Although the sudden surge of revivalism and development of new religions in the Burned Over District has been explained by most scholars as an urban reaction to changing market economies, I argue that the upsurge in religiosity among rural and lower-class whites between 1790 and 1860 was spurred by emotions caused by unstable society and family life in the rural frontier. The function of revivalism as an emotional

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<sup>1</sup> Western New York is defined as the region of the state to the west of present-day Syracuse, New York.

<sup>2</sup> Evangelicalism is defined in this thesis as sects that required its followers to experience personal salvation in which they publicly accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, as well as interpreted the Bible literally, and sought to actively convert others into their churches. Evangelicals believed mass conversion would signal the “Rapture,” or return of Jesus Christ.

outlet is further illustrated by the fact that revivalism waned as negative social conditions decreased. In spite of the decrease in revivals in the late 1830s and early 1840s, a strong moral and religious tradition remained in the region, leading many rural and lower-class people in the region to become active in moral reform movements in the 1840s and 1850s. As a result, the revivalist era and subsequent moral reform movements made this region of New York State the leader of the push for women's suffrage and abolition of slavery.

However, scholarship on the Burned Over District rarely discusses the impact of lower-class people and inhabitants of rural districts on the religious, social and political change in the area.<sup>3</sup> Scholars of the region have traditionally focused on longer-settled, urban areas and their bourgeois inhabitants who used religion to cope with unsettling changes in the market economy. Although residents of urban areas grappled with violence and crime, rural people struggled with the additional burdens of crop failure, and as a result of difficult transportation, isolation. Revivalism occurred in urban areas on occasion, such as the Rochester revivals led by Charles Grandison Finney in the 1830s. However, rural areas experienced revivalism within the first few years of settlement in the 1790s, and maintained a revivalist tradition until the 1840s. Documents such as church records, personal papers and diaries written in this region between 1790 and 1860, prove that nineteenth century religious revivalism began in rural, isolated areas. Diaries and letters written by European visitors to the region and church records from various Protestant sects in these counties reveal that religious upheaval began in the least

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<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, "rural" is defined as a community with an economy based mainly or solely on agriculture, or a township without a central village or marketplace.

populated and physically isolated settlements. Frequently these sparsely populated communities lacked a strong educational system, and were described by travelers as racked with disease, crop failure, poverty, and other forms of social instability. The emotional impact of these forms of social instability in rural areas has rarely been included in Burned Over District studies. It was the emotional reaction to these weaknesses in the fabric of early nineteenth century society that inspired many rural and lower-class Burned Over District inhabitants to turn to religion, rather than simply economic or market factors on their own. Religious adherence, participation in revivals and church membership acted as a salve for negative emotions caused by negative conditions in the frontier.

This thesis will prove that the religious activity in the Burned Over District began with rural people grappling with difficulties in their personal lives and society, and that religion served as an outlet for these concerns. Involvement in religious movements led rural and lower-class people to participate in moral reform movements which were largely spiritual in flavor. This work focuses on present-day Ontario, Seneca, Cayuga and Wayne counties in New York.<sup>4</sup>

### **Background of White Settlement**

Settlement and immigration patterns in upstate New York reveal that many early settlers brought a tradition of extreme Christian piety and religious adherence into the region. In addition, many migrants coming into the region were in the midst of major life changes, such as leaving their region of origin and their web of familial and social

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<sup>4</sup> All place names in this thesis are in New York State unless otherwise indicated.

contacts, which may have caused them to turn their church as a source of familiarity and comfort. Both travel and resettlement in the early nineteenth century were grueling and laborious. Familiar churches often served as reminders of homes left behind and were a constant in a world of change.

Although eastern and southern New York State had been settled since the seventeenth century, the northern and western districts of this state were still largely undeveloped at the close of the American Revolution. Western New York, and especially the Finger Lakes Region, was largely unsettled by whites but was not unknown to the early settlers. During Sullivan's Campaign of 1779, when Patriot troops were sent by George Washington to exterminate the region's British-allied Iroquois Nation, many of the foot soldiers marching along the lakes made note of the fertile soil, bountiful crops, and physical beauty of the landscape. They especially observed the huge size of the Indians' grapes, apples, peaches, and pumpkins. Later many of these men on this siege accepted large plots of land in the Finger Lakes as payment for their military service. After the American Revolution, most of these soldiers sold the land to speculators instead of settling it. In turn, the speculators sold the land to new migrants sweeping into the area from southeastern New York and New England in the 1790s and early 1800s, who were often the children and grandchildren of Sullivan's men.

In contrast, southeastern New York State residents clustered in New York City or along the banks of the Hudson River to the point of overpopulation. Residents of downstate New York began to run out of arable farm land and increasingly could no longer bequeath viable farms to their children. As a consequence, some pioneering

families began to push into the Mohawk Valley and farther west. New Englanders, finding themselves in a similar predicament, compounded by the fact that northern New England's land was notoriously rocky and difficult to farm, also began to migrate into New York State.<sup>5</sup>

### **How Revivalism Spread in Western New York**

Many of the early settlers in the Finger Lakes hailed from downstate New York, and some came from Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Virginia, but the vast majority migrated from New England. Of the New Englanders, Vermonters made up the largest percentage. This fact is significant because of Vermont's turbulent religious past. Vermont was not settled as early or quickly as the rest of New England in the colonial period due to its rocky and often barren soil, massive snowfalls, and frigid climate. Its mountainous backbone - as well as French influence - geographically and culturally isolated it from the rest of the region. Vermont developed, to a large extent, as a result of the First Great Awakening after the 1730s. Many of Jonathan Edwards' followers, who became known as "New Lights," moved to Vermont in search of greater religious freedom, and over the decades, Vermont became a harbor for New Lights and other "dissenters." Therefore, to a large scale, the religious fervor that would earn western New York the name the "Burned Over District" originated in Vermont. Most Vermonters migrated to upstate New York over the band of flat land between the northern edge of the Adirondack Mountains and the Canadian border, leaving a trail of religious dissent in their wake, mainly in the form of Freewill Baptists and later Millerites (Figure 1). When

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<sup>5</sup> Cross, Whitney R., *The Burned Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1950), p 6.

they settled permanently in the Finger Lakes region, their past tradition of religious fervor permeated the region with spiritual passion. In the 1830s, Vermont produced a large population of Spiritualists and Perfectionists, concentrated along Vermont's western edge.

### **Overview of Differences in Rural and Urban Participation in Revivalism**

In addition to being settled largely by nonconformist Vermonters, western New York State had the added political instability of being located in what was referred to as "the Gore."<sup>6</sup> The Gore was a large triangular piece of land covering much of what would become the Burned Over District, the base of the triangle resting near present-day Rochester and the point at the Pennsylvania border. The Gore was claimed both by New York and Massachusetts after the Revolution. The disputed nature of the land led to sparse settlement and social volatility, characterized by rough-hewn frontier communities populated mostly by fur trappers and Indian traders. As long as Massachusetts and New York fought over the Gore, only transients would take up residence there. Geneva, the largest settlement in the region, boasted a population of only six families by 1792.<sup>7</sup> Visitors and travelers described the early, rough settlements in less than glowing terms. For example, in 1791, land developer Elkanah Watson described Geneva, Ontario County, one of the earliest communities of notable size as "a small, unhealthy village containing fifteen houses, all log excepting three. It is built on a flat, with deep marshes

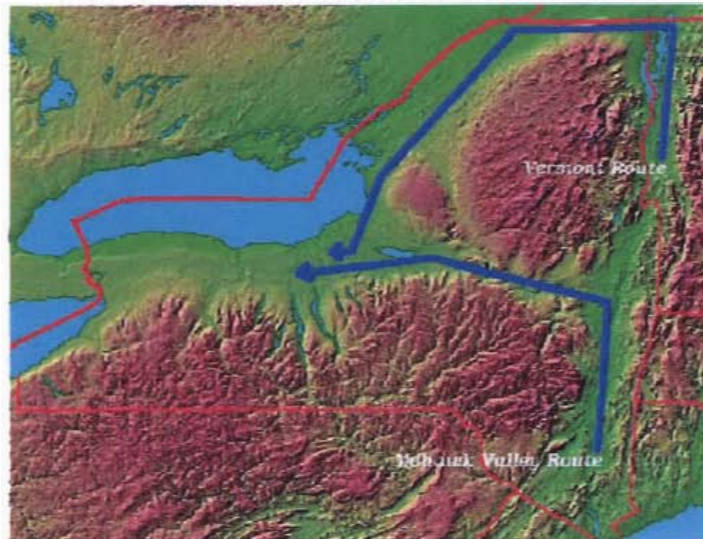
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<sup>6</sup> Emmons, E. Thayles, *The Story of Geneva* (Geneva, New York: The Finger Lakes Times, 1982), p. 53

<sup>7</sup> Brumberg, G. David, *The Making of an Upstate Community: Geneva, New York* (Geneva, New York: The Geneva Bicentennial Committee, 1976), p. 17.

north of the town, to which is attributed its unhealthiness. We received decent accommodations at Pattersons, on the margin of the lake, but our repose was troubled

**Figure 1: Paths of Westward Migration into Western New York<sup>8</sup>**



most of the night with gamblers and fleas.”<sup>9</sup> However, because of its position at the north tip of massive Seneca Lake, Geneva continued to grow and prosper and by 1792, despite Watson’s earlier comments, another early visitor called Geneva “elegant.”<sup>10</sup> Early nineteenth-century British travelers called increasingly-urban Geneva “captivating,” full of “taste, elegance, comfort and neatness,” and “distinguished for its picturesque beauty.”<sup>11</sup> One Englishman left Geneva “with a tender regret.”<sup>12</sup> Most of Geneva’s rapid

<sup>8</sup> Figure 1: Hendricks, Michael. March 24, 2004. “Consequences of Religious Excitement in the Burned-Over District.” <http://palmcluster.org/papers/consequences/consequences.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Emmons, *The Story of Geneva*, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> Haydon, Roger, ed., *Upstate Travels: British Views of Nineteenth-Century New York*. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1982), p. 139.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139, 184, 190-191.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

improvement was due to the arrival of Charles Williamson, a land agent, who laid out streets and lots. From his arrival in 1792, he had envisioned Geneva as a haven for the wealthy and educated. Williamson dictated that Geneva's homes should be built on the ridge overlooking Seneca Lake, with nothing between the houses and the lake except formal, terraced gardens, instead of in the marshes Elkanah Watson complained about. In 1796, Williamson built the Geneva Hotel, an outpost of opulence and refinement in a vast wilderness. Williamson's attention to aesthetics and luxury achieved his goal of turning Geneva into an oasis of luxury and elegance for the few wealthy and educated people that decided to settle in the Finger Lakes. Geneva established a small school in 1792, even before public funds were available. Four years later, the Geneva Academy was established, the forerunner of Geneva Medical College (now Hobart College). A newspaper, the *Ontario Gazette*, debuted in Geneva in 1796, and served all of western New York. The wealthy and educated who chose to settle in Geneva established mainline, non-evangelical Protestant churches, mainly Presbyterian and Episcopal. The Episcopal Church maintained an especially strong presence because of Southern influence from several wealthy, slave-owning Virginia families that had migrated to Geneva.<sup>13</sup>

Geneva was not the only outpost of wealth, education and refinement in the Finger Lakes region. Geneva's identical twin, Canandaigua, was located seventeen miles to the west. Like Geneva, travelers described Canandaigua in glowing terms and it

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<sup>13</sup> Brumberg, *Making of an Upstate Community*, p. 37. Brothers-in-law John Nicholas and Robert Selden Rose came from prominent, slave-holding Virginia families and settled in Geneva around 1803, building large, Greek Revival mansions on opposite edges of Seneca Lake.



became the county seat. Contrary to the assumption made by many scholars that the early settlement, high education level and wealth in parts of Ontario County laid the grounds for religious excitement, evidence in church records and personal papers points to the contrary. Although the educated and somewhat liberal residents of Geneva and Canandaigua would later embrace democratic political change sweeping through the region, religiously they remained largely undisturbed by controversy or revivalism. Similarly, larger, older communities in Seneca County remained largely untouched by revivalism. To the east of Ontario County, present-day Seneca County stretches along the east shore of Seneca Lake. Established villages such as Waterloo, Ovid, and Seneca Falls, although not as wealthy or impressive as Geneva and Canandaigua, shared the fact that although their residents would later join democratic political movements, their churches showed very little by way of the spiritual fervor that would grip much of the region. Although there were some recorded isolated incidents of religious enthusiasm and excitement in these towns, older, wealthier communities remained very much unfazed by the spiritual storms brewing in the rest of the Burned Over District.

In rural neighboring Wayne and Cayuga counties, however, revivalism hit hard. Wayne County was largely ignored by early Finger Lakes settlers.<sup>14</sup> One Scottish traveler described the hamlet of Clyde in Wayne County as “brackish” and full of “insects numerous and troublesome.”<sup>15</sup> He noted many deserted farms and a large number of

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<sup>14</sup> Wayne County is not in the Finger Lakes Region, but in the Ontario Flats Region north of the Finger Lakes and south of Lake Ontario. The soil is rich muck land perfect for grape, apple and peppermint production, although not the cereal crops (such as wheat) that early nineteenth-century settlers relied upon.

<sup>15</sup> Haydon, *Upstate Travels*, p. 155.

impoverished Iroquois. When the Erie Canal later cut through Wayne County, it deposited a large number of transient “adventurers” hoping to get rich quickly, as well as added crime, poverty and property damage. Only two marketplaces, Lyons and Newark, developed in Wayne County. Both grew rapidly as the canal bisected the county, but never grew to be urbanized areas such as Rochester. Lyons and Newark were rough, crime-ridden villages surrounded by sparsely populated countryside.

Cayuga County, to the east of Seneca County, was, from the beginning of the region’s settlement, thinly populated and heavily forested. From its earliest days Cayuga County was isolated from other, more-settled areas by a lake, thick forests and countless marshes. English visitor William Dalton described the county in 1819 as “gloomy” and possessing “bad roads,” which made social isolation even more difficult on the inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> At least one of its inhabitants, Lucy Carr of the village of Genoa, Cayuga County, complained of being “lonesum” and full of “anxiety” while living there.<sup>17</sup> Emily Howland, of the Cayuga County hamlet of Sherwood, frequently slipped into depression throughout her youth and felt confined and isolated by her surroundings. According to Edward Thomas Coke, a young Englishman visiting Cayuga County in 1832, “throughout [Cayuga County] there is an overpowering quantity of dense forest, with an intervening space of eight or ten miles between villages.”<sup>18</sup> Only one small town, Auburn, developed in Cayuga County, although Auburn did not gain a sizable population

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<sup>16</sup> Haydon, *Upstate Travels*, p. 254.

<sup>17</sup> Caleb Carr Letters, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Kroch Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

<sup>18</sup> Haydon, *Upstate Travels*, p. 246.

until the 1850s. Auburn was chosen as the county seat, likely because of its central location. As a result, most inhabitants in the extreme northern or southern portions county were isolated from their own county seat. The rural portions of the Finger Lakes Region stood in remarkably sharp contrast to wealthy Geneva, with its terraced gardens, academy and newspaper, all accomplished before 1800.

Because the isolation experienced by people in these outlying townships was often grueling and sometimes depressing, the emotions such conditions sparked led many early Finger Lakes residents to turn to spirituality or experience a rebirth in religion as an outlet for social expression, a tonic for loneliness and seclusion, and a way to control instability inherent in their lives.

### **The Decades of Social Instability**

That the Burned Over District activity occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century was not a coincidence. Religious movements in the United States often occur after a relaxing of social norms. Eighteenth-century New Englanders experienced the Great Awakening after a slackening of strict Puritanical practices and social norms. In the sixty years between the Great Awakening and the first signs of Burned Over District activity, New England society became visibly less religious and Puritanical, especially in the turbulent years leading up to and following the American Revolution. According to historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's research on the diary of Maine midwife Martha Ballard, between 1785 and 1812, more young couples were starting families before marriage, and the number of unwed mothers rose in these years. A full 38% of the births Ballard attended to between 1785 and 1797 were conceived out of wedlock and

according to Ulrich “premarital pregnancy was common throughout New England” in these years.<sup>19</sup> Although in earlier decades, a third of Puritan women became pregnant before marriage, the majority of these women married. After the Revolution, fewer couples who conceived out of wedlock married. Although eventually many single mothers married, many did not, and endured raising the child alone in a period when women had few ways to support themselves.

Single motherhood was not the only visible sign that Puritanical influence was waning in the decades preceding the Second Great Awakening. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Americans drank heavily, and on a scale unprecedented in previous years. Historian W.J. Rorabaugh has shown that “during the first third of the nineteenth century the typical American annually drank more distilled liquor [up to 90 proof] than at any other time in our history.”<sup>20</sup> Alcoholic beverages were a constant companion at every kind of event in American life, public or private. Reliance on alcoholic drinks “induced wife beating, family desertion, and assaults,” reports of which were all up in the first three decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

Violence and disorder were interwoven into American life in these decades, often aided by alcoholic beverages. Parents and teacher abused children, and domestic violence, tavern brawls, and public fighting were also on the rise. The bucolic peacefulness many modern Americans associate with this time and with rural areas is

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<sup>19</sup> Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 152, 157.

<sup>20</sup> Rorabaugh, W.J. *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic*, p. 190.

belied by incidents from this period of pervasive violence in homes, schools, taverns and public places. Social and public events were punctuated by fighting and altercations. As historian Jack Larkin wrote of this period, “many American gatherings were rough and crude in a way that paralleled the gritty and disorderly texture of the landscape.”<sup>22</sup>

Early death of children and spouses from disease and injury added to the uncertainty of life in the Burned Over District. According to Larkin, early nineteenth-century Americans endured excruciating pain and illness because of primitive or no medical attention for disease and injury. Diseases were often treated with bloodletting, laudanum or camphor. Most parents would outlive at least one child, which, although common, was not any easier for parents to endure. American homes and farms were described by European travelers as “dirty and slovenly to a degree,” and the people “filthy,” which added to the spread of disease and illness.<sup>23</sup> Americans did not understand how illnesses spread, which made the likelihood of spreading them greater. Epidemics eliminated whole families at a time. Cholera hit the United States in 1832 and was almost always fatal. The cholera epidemic, which many Americans saw as a punishment from God for “immoral” behavior, caused many to turn to religion to escape this perceived punishment. In addition, many grieving parents and widows turned to religion, through which they could assure themselves of a rewarding life after death with their deceased loved ones.

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<sup>22</sup> Larkin, Jack, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life, 1790-1840* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1988), p. 258.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

In rural, agricultural regions, farmers and their families relied on a good harvest for food as well as the ability to purchase material goods. Journals and letters written by travelers and itinerant ministers indicate that food was scarce for many rural western New Yorkers during a regular season, the diet of many rural people consisting mainly of potatoes and bread. When crops failed, grueling poverty and starvation followed, and this possibility weighed heavily on the minds of farm families, causing stress and anxiety. Religious revivals provided rural people with a form of respite from such anxieties.

All of these forms of instability combined to make early-nineteenth-century life difficult and uncertain. In thinly-settled areas, violence, disease and excessive drunkenness were magnified by rural problems, such as isolation, grueling agricultural labor, and the specter of crop failure. Physical isolation for those in frontier areas such as upstate New York added loneliness to insecurity. Daniel Drake, whose family had moved to the Kentucky wilderness from New Jersey, experienced “the loneliness of the wood, a solitude which was deeply felt by all of us.”<sup>24</sup> This isolation was especially hard on women, whose contact with others was curtailed by care of young children, lack of transportation, and pressing household duties. Although Puritanical influence waned throughout the eighteenth century, early western New Yorkers turned to what historian Michael Barkun calls “revival religion,” which required high levels of emotion, for succor and solace in a world many began to see as evil and unstable.<sup>25</sup> Membership in a church or charitable society served as a solution for loneliness for many rural New York

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>25</sup> Barkun, Michael, *Crucible of the Millennium: the Burned Over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986), p. 118.

settlers, especially women. Religion and spirituality were emotionally comforting constants in this volatile, erratic period for thousands of Americans, especially in western New York.

### **The Case of Thomas Barnes, 1808**

*Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. – Matthew 18:15-17 (KJV)*

As the new year of 1808 began in rural Brutus, a township in the even more rural Cayuga County, New York, a protest filed against one of its congregants, Thomas Barnes, rocked the First Congregational Church.\* Pastor Jabez Chadwick did not record the name of the protester in his meticulous church records, but he did record Barnes' offense. He had, in the presence of at least one other member of the church, renounced pedobaptism, the baptism of infants.<sup>26</sup> As the Congregational Church was a conservative, mainstream sect, and the oldest church in Brutus, members tended to view Barnes' assertion with the same distaste which in decades past New England Congregationalists reserved for radical dissenters such as Baptists and Anabaptists, who held similar beliefs about pedobaptism.

Late in January, Pastor Chadwick made a decision regarding Barnes' dissention and notated it in his record. He appointed Isaac Treat, one of the founders of the young church, to visit Barnes and dissuade him from his views. "If necessary," Chadwick wrote,

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\* In 1822, the township of Brutus was divided into two smaller townships, Brutus and Sennett. This church is located in present-day Sennett and is today called the Sennett Federated Church.

<sup>26</sup> First Congregational Church of Sennett, New York, Records, 1805-1886. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University.

“to proceed to the second that he take Eleazer Hamlin and if they do not gain our brother they are to exhibit a complaint against him at our next church meeting.”<sup>27</sup> On the day that Treat and Hamlin trekked through the snow to remonstrate with Barnes they were not successful in persuading Barnes to baptize his children. On February 2, Treat and Hamlin did as instructed and filed a formal complaint at church meeting. They wrote, “we whose names are underwritten do hearby complain to the Pastor of this Church that our brother Thomas Barnes renounces Infant Baptism in consequence of which he embraces these sentiments which we conceive to be Heresy,” and they signed their names.<sup>28</sup>

Chadwick evidently regarded Barnes’ opinion as injurious to the congregation as a whole. Later in the spring, Chadwick chose a new messenger, Moses Wilkinson. Wilkinson was instructed to inform Barnes that he was to attend meeting and answer the charges against him, but Barnes did not show. Chadwick then ordered Wilkinson to hand Barnes a letter, probably written by Chadwick, demanding that Barnes attend meeting. Wilkinson did so, but again Barnes ignored the command. In frustration, Chadwick decided to postpone dealing with Barnes until May, but put Barnes on probation.<sup>29</sup>

Although no further commentary in the church record relays what prompted Barnes’ change of heart, he attended meeting in May and apologized for his act of dissention. On June 3, Chadwick’s record smugly states, “The children of Thomas and Polly Barnes were baptized,” without any further evidence of why Barnes agreed to an

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* Ministers and clergymen in Protestant churches during this era used “probation” as a type of censure against church members breaking parish norms, usually as a last resort before exclusion or excommunication.



act he obviously felt strongly against.<sup>30</sup> The entry also offers the very first, and only, mention of Thomas Barnes' wife, Polly. Was she the congregant who informed the pastor that Barnes had renounced pedobaptism, perhaps upset by her children's unbaptized state? Had she been the force that changed Thomas Barnes' mind concerning pedobaptism? Because late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century families were patriarchy controlled, even in religious aspects, ministers and missionaries admonished women not to "usurp authority" in spiritual or any other type of matters.<sup>31</sup> Polly Barnes, fearing for her children's spiritual welfare, may have decided to usurp her husband's authority in order to comply with a larger spiritual authority.

Chadwick encountered what he considered behavioral problems in a number of his congregants. Another unfortunate parishioner to raise Chadwick's ire was Daniel Curtis. Curtis was a late joiner of the church, having moved to the area in 1807 and transferred into the congregation by letter. Curtis was "suspended" shortly after joining because he "lived in habitual neglect of the ordinances of the gospel," chose to "neglect Publick Worship" and "family prayer," and worst of all, "allowed of card playing and gambling in his house."<sup>32</sup> An unnamed member in Chadwick's records was absent one Sunday from Communion. He or she would be "dealt with accordingly," Chadwick wrote

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Ryan, Mary P., *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, England: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1981), pp. 65-75.

<sup>32</sup> First Congregational Church of Sennett, New York, Records, 1805-1886. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University.

menacingly, and was required to publicly explain the absence to the congregation.<sup>33</sup> Shortly after Curtis' suspension, church co-founder David Horton apologized to the congregation for unnamed "complaints exhibited against him."<sup>34</sup> In fact, the church records report many instances of members being absent from Communion. Chadwick's form of church leadership may not have been adequate to meet the emotional needs of his parishioners, who began to turn against him or Calvinist theology embraced by the Congregational Church. Chadwick's church record illustrates that that he ruled his little flock with an iron fist with no room for unorthodox ideas.

Chadwick's parish in tiny Brutus teetered on the edge of major religious change in the first decade of the nineteenth century, which would ultimately spread across much of Upstate New York in what would become known as the "Burned Over District." Much of the upheaval started with unknown, rural, lower-class people like Thomas Barnes, who blatantly challenged church authority and established religious dogma decades before and much farther into the western frontier than many religious history scholars have argued. In the Federal Census of 1800, Sennett, combined with several other townships, showed a population of 4,276 people spread thinly over an area of several hundred square miles. This region of southern Cayuga County lacked a cohesive economic center. Historian Whitney Cross claimed that this region had become economically mature by 1820, although it lacked an economic center and remained heavily wooded and difficult to farm

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

at least until the late 1830s.<sup>35</sup> However, this rural district showed signs of religious commotion before its urban counterparts - contrary to the assertions of almost all Burned Over District scholars, including Cross and Paul E. Johnson.

The historiography of the Second Great Awakening has concluded that the religious excitement began in the middle-class urban population, or in outlying districts once they became economically stable. Whitney Cross' work, *The Burned Over District*, was the first and most influential piece of scholarship written about Upstate New York's religious movement. Published in 1950, *The Burned Over District* laid the groundwork for the few but important books written on this subject matter. Cross asserts that many of the early settlers came from parts of western and northern New England that had also experienced religious upheaval, and brought with them a penchant for spiritual enthusiasm. However, he neglects to analyze why people in rural, isolated, and newer districts in both New England and New York State displayed more and earlier religious intensity than their neighbors in older, wealthier communities. In fact, Cross' work clearly states that revivalism was intense across the entire Burned Over District, and perhaps more intense in older, more stable communities. Although Cross argues that frontier conditions, isolation and loneliness had "certainly forever departed" shortly after the Erie Canal was finished, census returns, personal letters and diaries illustrate that many Finger Lakes residents dealt with physical and social isolation well into the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Residents and visitors alike complained of the difficulty of travel a

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<sup>35</sup> Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

full two decades after the canal's completion. Settlement patterns in western New York reveal that certain areas became populated and stabilized much more quickly than others. However, Cross glosses over the massive inconsistencies in population and class evident in early western New York settlements. In addition, his work attributes much of the religious excitement to the influence of Methodist circuit riders, although much religious controversy and revivalism occurred in other sects as well, and often more intensely and more frequently than with Methodists. In addition, as historian Curtis D. Johnson has pointed out, Methodist circuit riders were overworked and underpaid, covering vast distances between backwater settlements everyday. Many appeared in the middle of a workday when many farmers could not attend their services. Moreover, the riders themselves were exhausted and since each covered a vast tract of wilderness, often did not have time to discuss theological matters.<sup>37</sup> Cross and many other scholars have attributed revivalism and religious enthusiasm to urban sources, but church records from older, urbanized areas show little religious excitement. In choosing to base his study of the several dozen counties that make up the Burned Over District, Cross often generalizes and overlooks the geographic and socio-economic inconsistency in the revivalism.

Since Cross' work, other scholars have attributed revivalism to urban origins. Paul E. Johnson's *The Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*, published twenty-eight years after Cross' work appeared, differed greatly in scope. Johnson chose to greatly curtail the area of study to one community:

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<sup>37</sup> Johnson, Curtis D., *Islands of Holiness: Rural Religion in Upstate New York, 1790-1860* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 28.

Rochester, New York. Rochester, although not founded until 1815, was an early “boom town” that watched its population explode, especially after the completion of the Erie Canal, until it became one of the few large cities in Upstate New York. However, Rochester’s large population was an anomaly in western New York. By choosing to study the religious revivalism of the Burned Over District through the lens of Rochester, Johnson neglects the rural aspect of the revivalism and develops a formula that does not fit other areas of the Burned Over District. His arguments that changes in the market economy spurred moral and religious changes are compelling, but like Cross, he neglects emotional causes for the sudden and intense religious fervor.<sup>38</sup> Both Cross and Johnson use the economy to explain religious conversion, an experience which for many people is an intensely personal and emotional experience. Both scholars also neglected the important roles that women played in churches, benevolent societies, and moral reform.

Newer work includes social as well as economic history in studies of the Second Great Awakening. In 1981, Mary P. Ryan’s *Cradle of the Middle Class: the Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865*, Ryan also chose to examine one community. However, unlike Paul E. Johnson, Ryan chose a small community, instead of a large city. She also explored the beginnings and effects revivalism had on the community she chose, Oneida County, in a much more thorough manner. Like Johnson and Cross, Ryan dealt largely with the middle class, but also wove women’s history into the Burned Over District story. Ryan’s work analyzes the intense emotions many people – especially

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<sup>38</sup> Johnson, Paul E., *Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

women – felt before turning to religion. She discusses despair, depression, isolation, the shift from a public society to a private, home-oriented one and the effect frontier conditions had on the family in the first and second generation of white settlement in western New York. Her analysis of women's place in frontier society and their lack of rights or control illustrates the reason revivalism and ardent religiosity became so popular with women. Ryan's discussion of the instability of the family in the first decades of settlement and the changing role of women illustrates that women often used religion as an escape mechanism for unhappy or unfulfilling lives. These issues illustrate a deeper understanding of the causes of emotional religious revival.<sup>39</sup>

The Erie Canal and its impact on western New York society is the theme of Carol Sheriff's *The Artificial River: the Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862*. Sheriff explores the positive and negative effects of the canal's completion on the sparsely populated area. While the canal improved life in many ways by increasing transportation, opening markets and largely dispelling isolation, it created instability in the form of crime, drunkenness, population increase and property damage, almost immediately. The canal raised the expectation of residents along its shores, and then made them dependent on the canal for business and goods from further east. Sheriff perceives both the frustration and enthusiasm wrought by the changes brought by the canal. She ties the added instability and increased crime rate with an effort to eradicate them through religion. Sheriff's work fills a void in the literature about the emotional

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<sup>39</sup> Ryan, Mary P., *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

changes provoked by the “artificial river,” and its connection to society, class and religion.<sup>40</sup>

Burned Over District scholars have traditionally focused on the middle class, excluding study of the poverty-stricken areas of western New York when revivalism flourished. Curtis D. Johnson’s 1989 work *Islands of Holiness: Rural Religion in Upstate New York, 1790-1860*, however, acknowledges the contribution the poor made to the Second Great Awakening. Like Paul E. Johnson and Ryan, Curtis Johnson restricted his study to one community, in this case rural Cortland County. His study, like Ryan’s, spends much time on women’s involvement in revivalism. However, Johnson readily points out that Cross’ and Paul E. Johnson’s formulas cannot always be applied in the Burned Over District, and that areas were not settled uniformly. Johnson goes a step further than most Burned Over District scholars, illustrating similarities and differences between the religious denominations involved in revivalism and why certain religious ideologies appealed to one class over another on social and psychological levels. Johnson disagreed with other scholars who argued that revivalism was a tool of the mercantile class. Rather, he argued that the rising middle class avoided revivalism, contrary to other claims that revivalism began with the middle class, plainly states that many rural evangelicals were poor.<sup>41</sup>

Existing Burned Over District literature fails to connect religious enthusiasm with the emotions endured by people in a poverty-stricken, rural, socially unstable

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<sup>40</sup> Sheriff, Carol, *The Artificial River: the Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, Curtis D., *Islands of Holiness*, pp. 77-86.

environment. Although most Burned Over District works have discussed either explosive growth of evangelical sects or rough frontier conditions, none have tied this phenomenon to the emotional needs met by these churches. In addition, the change in politics and culture between the pre- and post-Revolution society and its effect on religion has not been explored fully. Many scholars have also glossed over the influence women had on revivalism and instead have chosen to credit men in the forms of circuit riders, missionaries, or charismatic ministers. By utilizing church records, letters and diaries left by those involved in or observing the Second Great Awakening in western New York, this thesis illustrates that rural people, especially women, turned to religion for the emotional need and stability it provides.



## **Chapter One**

### **“This Vast Wilderness”: Social Instability and Religion in Frontier New York**

Strict adherence to religion allowed settlers in the western New York frontier to exert control over an erratic society. Religion provided a constant in a frighteningly uncertain society, and offered settlers opportunities for the emotional release and support that their turbulent world denied them. Religion provided a source of comfort for early settlers battling poverty, crushing isolation and loneliness, constant and arduous labor, illness, death, failed crops and hunger in their new homes. The rough conditions the pioneers met upon settling in western New York made life difficult, grueling and unpredictable. Violence and drunkenness added stress to lives already fraught with difficulty. In many places around the country “positive barbarism” reigned.<sup>42</sup> According to historian Jack Larkin, rural social gatherings were “rough and crude...painfully coarse, even bizarre.”<sup>43</sup> The brutal condition early settlers of the Finger Lakes Region were often made worse by the fact that most had come from New England. Even backwoods districts of New England were older and more stable than western New York. For many new settlers from New England and southeastern New York, settling in western New York seemed like stepping back in time. English traveler John Howison described western New York as “this vast wilderness.”<sup>44</sup>

The paths and roads in the Finger Lakes were so bad that families, once settled, could not travel regularly for diversion or socializing, which contributed to loneliness and

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<sup>42</sup> Larkin, *Reshaping of Everyday Life*, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>44</sup> Haydon, *Upstate Travels*, p. 235.

isolation. Much of the state was covered in “primeval” forest.<sup>45</sup> Most of the paths could not correctly be called roads, but were instead stump-filled wagon tracks cut through the woods. In the marshy places so common in the Finger Lakes, logs were laid across the path to form “corduroy roads,” jolting affairs that overturned wagons easily. Early British visitors passing through the area noted ominously abandoned and broken wagons on the sides of these trails. Edward Thomas Coke, a young Englishman visiting the Finger Lakes Region in 1832, decried traveling through Seneca County “over a road where there was no road, over bridges where it would be much safer to ford the stream.”<sup>46</sup> Coke also noted the large number of creeks and deep ravines, which added to the terrible quality of travel in this region.

Early settlers often braved the terrain to travel for church services. Keeping the Sabbath offered lonely settlers a chance to gather with others at service and guaranteed a much-needed day of rest from tedious household chores. In thinly populated, outlying areas, before a congregation could be established, some families traveled many miles to attend service. Church was deemed more important than social calls, but provided the same social contact and support. Religious faith provided comfort and stability to such an extent that often churches were the first buildings erected, even before adequate housing. For instance, the most outlying and sparsely populated townships such as Aurelius, Romulus, Marion, and Bloomfield boasted at least one church each by the 1790s or very early 1800s.

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<sup>45</sup> Tripp, Wendell, ed. Conklin, Henry, *Through ‘Poverty’s Vale’: A Hardscrabble Boyhood in Upstate New York, 1832-1861* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1974), p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Haydon, *Upstate Travels*, p. 248.

Men and women experienced different levels of isolation. Farm men worked outside, and were able to travel to market towns to purchase or sell items, crops or livestock. Early male residents of Cortland County traveled to Geneva to grind flour, a distance of almost ninety miles. Often these expeditions could take days, leaving women alone at home or with only children for company. Women in frontier areas were more isolated than men, tied to the home and hearth by child care and an endless round of chores such as laundry, cooking, cleaning, spinning and sewing. As a result, Daniel Drake's mother, whose family had moved to the Kentucky wilderness from New Jersey, felt "entombed," and a rural Ohio woman told Frances Trollope "'tis strange for us to see company."<sup>47</sup>

Rural Finger Lakes women expressed similar anguish and experienced loneliness and depression. Emily Howland of Sherwood, Cayuga County, endured frequent bouts of loneliness and feelings of uselessness. She frequently wrote in her diary and letters of her crushing boredom, despair and feelings of uselessness. Her feelings of futility drove her into deep bouts of depression, which she called her "darkest self." Lucy Carr of Genoa, Cayuga County, wrote her daughter-in-law in 1857 that she was "lonsum." Mrs. Carr was especially isolated after her two sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren moved to Michigan. Her husband wrote to his son Caleb, "I think her anxiety about you and James Leaveing makes her worse Because she is so lonely I try to Be at home all I can But you Know I must goe to the village Some."<sup>48</sup> Methodist clergyman Rev. D.A. Shepard

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<sup>47</sup> Larkin, *Reshaping of Everyday Life*, p. 261.

<sup>48</sup> Caleb Carr Letters

expressed a similar sentiment in a letter he wrote to fellow minister Elias Bowen in 1841 that his wife was lonely in Cayuga County, having been “accustomed to living in large towns.”<sup>49</sup> In 1818, Hannah Beach wrote a New England friend from Seneca Falls, Seneca County, illustrating her unhappiness with the region. She wrote, “I am much more reconciled to the country than at first...but that must not hamper your coming here, it may be better in the future.”<sup>50</sup> Mary P. Ryan’s study of rural women in 1813 and 1814 clearly demonstrates the religious melancholy and despair present in the lives of rural women. Like Emily Howland, a Miss Fowler mourned, “I am dead to the world, I have a long time felt that it cannot give me happiness. I have no object in view on Earth.” Other women in Oneida County echoed Fowler, lamenting, “I am a poor creature,” “a vile sinner” and “at times am very unhappy.”<sup>51</sup>

Married women, frequently isolated and consumed by childcare and arduous housework, turned to religion and revivals, both consciously and unconsciously, as a way to alleviate stress. The prayers and singing at revivals functioned as an emotional release for many women, and many married women made time in their busy lives to attend church services and revivals. Religion was extremely important in Polly Conklin’s difficult life, which included dire poverty, near starvation, frequent moving, infant death and a heavy-drinking husband. According to her son Henry, although Mrs. Conklin had

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<sup>49</sup> Elias Bowen Papers, #2111. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collection, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

<sup>50</sup> Glenn C. Altschuler and Jan M. Saltzgeber, *Revivalism, Social Conscience and Community in the Burned-Over District: the Trial of Rhoda Bement* (Ithaca, New York and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, p. 76.

fifteen children to care for, she “took an active part” in the revivals held in the dark, cold, log schoolhouse in their district.<sup>52</sup> Conklin carried the lantern for his mother, who “loved the meeting so we went even if it was dark.”<sup>53</sup> He claimed that “she did not have much of a voice to sing but her prayers and exhortations were the sweetest and best I ever heard,” describing the peace and happiness that the revivals brought to his mother.<sup>54</sup>

Church membership provided rural single women and widows with a sense of belonging. Rural, young, unmarried women frequently turned to religion to alleviate feelings of ineffectiveness, dejection and isolation. Although an unmarried woman living at home was expected to assist her mother with chores, a single woman did have less responsibility than a wife and mother, which led many unmarried women to feelings of uselessness. Single women in outlying, isolated areas often did not have the same occupation opportunities as young urban women. Ruth Conklin Peaslee of Jefferson County joined the Methodists at a revival while single and living under her parents’ roof. Her brother Henry recalled, “How sweet she looked in her womanly Christian beauty for she had long before experienced religion and was now a respected and faithful member of the Methodist church.”<sup>55</sup> Acceptance into a church gave single women a sense of belonging to an important institution as well as respect from others, which was not often bestowed on single women in a society that frequently ignored them. Similarly, a

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<sup>52</sup> Tripp, *Through 'Poverty's Vale'*, p. 70.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

widowed grandmother, living with her children, could feel like a burden.<sup>56</sup> After years of raising children, running a home and assisting her husband, she may have found the years ahead of her empty and lonely. Like single women, widows had few occupational outlets. Rural single women and widows may have turned to religion and attended revivals to occupy time, and meet with other socially isolated women. For rural, poverty stricken women, the church also provided comfort and charity for many who needed it. In isolated regions, relief was frequently either not available or readily accessible to those in dire poverty. The church could monitor the living situations of its members and provide aid when needed. For instance, in January of 1832, Brother Chatfield of the Baptist Church in Galen, Wayne County, announced to the congregation that Sister Whiter was in the poor house and requested contributions for her.<sup>57</sup> Church membership, therefore, provided not only social and psychological comforts, but physical ones as well.

Physical environment did little to ease feelings of despair, isolation, and discomfort. Early settlers often began in housing that was meant to be temporary. These homes were by no means comfortable. Early residents of western New York usually lived in one- or two-room log cabins. These simple houses were often replaced or enlarged after the first decade of settlement in the 1790s. However, people in outlying areas utilized these unpleasant homes much longer than their urban counterparts. William Dalton, a native of England's Lake District, spent much of July 1819 in Scipio, Cayuga

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<sup>56</sup> Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, p. 284. Thatcher has written of tension and arguments between midwife Martha Ballard and her daughter-in-law Sally that occurred after Martha was widowed and moved into Sally's home.

<sup>57</sup> Baptist Church of Galen, NY. Records, 1830-1865. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

County. Dalton reported in 1819 that a few people in Scipio were still living in “log huts.”<sup>58</sup> Such homes were cramped and small, and most lacked decoration or even windows, leaving them smoky and dark. Baptist minister David Irish lived in such a house in Cayuga County with his wife and fourteen children. In 1794, Irish took a traveler – and the traveler’s horse – into his tiny, crowded home.<sup>59</sup> Lack of insulation and cracks between logs added discomfort in the bitter cold. “We stand Shivering with the cold with as good a fire as we can make,” Caleb Carr’s father wrote from Cayuga County in the 1850s.<sup>60</sup> A woman trapped inside such a habitation would welcome a trip out to attend religious service or a revival.

Early Finger Lakes residents experienced hunger as well as a lack of physical comforts. The first settlers in Cortland County in the 1790s exhausted their food supply and ate roots they dug up in the forest.<sup>61</sup> Baptist minister William Colbert described visiting impoverished homes in the Finger Lakes in 1793. While boarding at a house in present-day Seneca County he requested bread, but the family had none. He was offered a “potato pot,” the only food in the house. Luckily, Colbert bought flour before crossing Cayuga Lake, because the family he boarded with in Cayuga County also had “no bread.”<sup>62</sup> The summer of 1816 had simply never come, and snow continued to fall

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<sup>58</sup> Haydon, *Upstate Travels*, p. 251.

<sup>59</sup> First Baptist Church of Aurelius, NY. Records, 1795-1911. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

<sup>60</sup> Caleb Carr Letters

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, Curtis D., *Islands of Holiness*, p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> First Baptist Church of Aurelius, NY. Records, 1795-1911. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

through June, July and August. Crops had not grown and many people almost starved to death. Henry Conklin, who grew up in western New York in the 1830s, stated that his family frequently went hungry, often relying on potatoes and salt.<sup>63</sup> Lyman Loomis wrote in 1837 that his cattle were dying of “distemper.”<sup>64</sup> A man named S. Vosburgh wrote his son from Macedon, Wayne County in the 1840s that “peltings of a severe storm of rain hail and snow” fell as early as October 27.<sup>65</sup> A failed crop or sickly livestock could mean disaster for a farm family, not only in terms of food but because farmers often purchased their equipment on credit to be paid after the crop was harvested or livestock sold. His inability to do so because of crop failure would push his family farther into poverty and debt.

Because of repeated crop failure, rural families in western New York moved frequently, a fact which added more uncertainty to the lives of rural people. Attending church services and revivals gave settlers a sense of belonging to the community and acted as a constant for early settlers who moved frequently. Men in western New York were constantly moving, to find cheaper land near a better marketplace. William Dalton, an Englishman who visited Scipio, Cayuga County in 1819, found that “almost every estate in this township [Scipio] might be purchased.”<sup>66</sup> He noted that people in Scipio would sell their land and move at a moment’s notice. A woman married to a farmer in

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<sup>63</sup> Tripp, *Through ‘Poverty’s Vale’*, p. 73.

<sup>64</sup> Chester Loomis Papers, 1813-1865, #2238. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

<sup>65</sup> Emma Koberg, Collector. Letters, 1822-1852. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

<sup>66</sup> Haydon, *Upstate Travels*, p. 253.



Scipio with relatives in the area, or an established web of social contacts, could have it all ripped away from her if her husband decided to sell the land. Henry Conklin wrote that his father Samuel had sold their farm in Jefferson County, under severe protests from his mother. Conklin wrote that his father became “a little poorer at every move, making a slave of himself and my mother.”<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately families who moved frequently often began the arduous task of clearing land several times, and were never able to become financially stable. John David Fox, like Samuel Conklin, was never satisfied with his place of residence and moved his family constantly. The Foxes ricocheted between Rockland County, New York City, Monroe County, and Canada before settling in Wayne County in 1847.<sup>68</sup> In his fifties, Fox was still financially unable to purchase land and the family’s Wayne County home was rented. In addition to experiencing the hardships of clearing a new farm repeatedly, a family who moved frequently rarely felt at home. Church services provided stability and emotional comfort to families who frequently pulled up their roots.

Although other crops frequently failed, apples grew remarkably well in western New York. After the completion of the Erie Canal, one visitor remarked that apples were so abundant they bobbed “away on the Water.”<sup>69</sup> Western New York farmers used apples to produce cider to supplement their meager incomes. Cider was the most popular beverage in the North in the late eighteenth century, but consumption of distilled liquor

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<sup>67</sup> Tripp, *Through ‘Poverty’s Vale’*, p. 11.

<sup>68</sup> Weisberg, Barbara, *Talking to the Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, Inc., 2004), pp. 11-12.

<sup>69</sup> Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic*, p. 110.

increased rapidly after 1800. The staggering amount of alcohol consumed by early-nineteenth-century Americans added instability to the already uncertain life of frontier people. By 1810, upstate New Yorkers were the leading producers of distilled liquors, and not much else.<sup>70</sup> Consumption of distilled liquor reached its peak in the 1820s, dispatching an unheard-of rate of over five gallons per person annually, an increase of two gallons since 1800.<sup>71</sup> In 1843, Seneca Falls, Seneca County possessed two distilleries, a brewery and more than thirty liquor stores, which served a population of only three thousand.<sup>72</sup> European visitors watched with distaste as Americans drank themselves into stupors. “Why do [Americans] get so confoundedly drunk?” asked a bewildered Englishman, Frederick Marryat.<sup>73</sup> Englishman John Howison complained that his drunken dinner companions at a tavern in Auburn, Cayuga County, were “slovenly and clownish.”<sup>74</sup> E. Beardsley complained to Chester Loomis of Rushville, Ontario County that the region was full of the “worst kind of society.”<sup>75</sup>

Historian W.J. Rorabaugh has argued that the rapid increase in consumption of alcoholic beverages was due to feelings of inadequacy in men who failed to live up to

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 87, 107. The amount of alcohol in alcoholic beverages consumed in 1800 was three gallons per capita. The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 increased New York State’s grain market, and by 1840, upstate New York along with portions of Pennsylvania and Ohio produced half of the nation’s grain-distilled liquor. The New York State distilleries reached their peak in 1825, when the state could claim at least 1,129 such businesses. In addition to grain spirits, New York State and Pennsylvania produced 75% of the nation’s beer.

<sup>72</sup> Altschuler and Saltzgaber, *Revivalism, Social Conscience and Community*, p. 54.

<sup>73</sup> Larkin, *Reshaping of Everyday Life*, p. 275.

<sup>74</sup> Haydon, *Upstate Travels*, p. 142.

<sup>75</sup> Chester Loomis Papers.

ideals of independence espoused in post-Revolutionary America. American men were finding republicanism impossible to live up to; the “independent man” was unhappy because he was not really independent. For rural men, the distance and difficulty of getting to market, purchasing on credit, and crop failure caused frustration, and frequently led to alcoholism. Both John David Fox and Samuel Conklin fit the description of the frustrated “independent man.” Both were alcoholics and unable to establish themselves economically. Henry Conklin sadly wrote of his father, Samuel, “if father had let liquor alone he might have been a rich man instead of groveling forever through poverty’s vale.”<sup>76</sup> In fact, the 1820s saw American men binge drinking alone, which was a new concept.<sup>77</sup> In the solitary bender, an unhappy man both sought to withdraw from the society which alienated him, and forget his depression in a drunken haze. The move from social drinking among comrades took a turn with the advent of the solitary, miserable drinker.

Women and children dependent on men who were “drunkards” were at much higher risk for abuse, abandonment and lack of food and clothing. Countless advertisements for “runaway” wives ran in newspapers in Auburn, Lyons and Geneva. Mary P. Ryan has written that women took advantage of the frontier conditions to strike

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<sup>76</sup> Tripp, *Through ‘Poverty’s Vale’*, p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic*, p. 163. It is not a coincidence that the 1820s saw the first recorded incidents of *delirium tremens*, a condition in which the intoxicated person shakes uncontrollably, is plagued by horrifying visions and delusions, often tries to injure himself, and sometimes dies of acute alcohol poisoning. On January 2, 1848, twenty-six year old James C. Norton of Lyons, Wayne County, suffered such a death. (Lewis, Eric C. *Without the Children: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Diseases and Childhood Deaths in Wayne and Ontario Counties*. Lesson Plan, grades 4-6, Lyons Elementary School, Lyons, New York.)

out on their own.<sup>78</sup> However, many of these women probably ran away from abusive husbands. Margaret Fox and her children moved in with her unmarried sister in the late 1820s because of John David Fox's excessive drinking. Probably as a result of her turbulent upbringing in crime-ridden canal towns, Fox's daughter Leah married at the young age of fourteen. After her daughter was born later in the year, Leah's husband immediately abandoned her.<sup>79</sup> The Foxes resumed their relationship only after John David Fox converted to Methodism during a revival and gave up alcohol consumption.

Alcohol consumption on such a large scale led to an increase in crime. Scotsman Richard Weston described reading a newspaper in a Utica, New York barroom, taking care to sit near the window. "I always preferred being nearest the light," he wrote, "as I had little faith in the Americans. One is quite surprised at the catalogue of crimes, of every enormity, recorded in the American newspapers."<sup>80</sup> Violence stalked American society all over the country. Southern men were known for dueling and eye gouging, and a group of men in Kentucky allegedly roasted a companion over a fire after he refused to drink with them. Violence and disorder became especially prevalent in western New York after the completion of the Erie Canal brought in "adventurers" hoping to get rich quick. In fact, a large state prison, only the second in the state after Sing Sing, was erected in Auburn, Cayuga County in 1817 to house the rising criminal population. The crime rate also increased in Wayne County, which was bisected by the canal. Many western New Yorkers turned to religion and their churches when victimized by crime. In

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<sup>78</sup> Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, p. 21.

<sup>79</sup> Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>80</sup> Haydon, *Upstate Travels*, p. 154.

1818, Pliny Foster of East Palmyra, Wayne County accused Robert W. Holliday of theft, trespassing, assault and defamation. Since Foster made the accusation to the Presbyterian Church in Lyons, Wayne County, the church board tried Holliday. The board found Holliday guilty of secreting property, assault, and defamation, and duly suspended him.<sup>81</sup>

In addition to the stress of violence, crime and drunkenness, the very real possibility of an early death from illness haunted early Finger Lakes residents, causing anxiety. Frighteningly mysterious illnesses, and the lack of knowledge about how to treat them, underscored the alarming likelihood of early death. R.J. Stillman wrote to Chester Loomis in 1827 of his numerous and puzzling ailments. "I am reduced to a mere skeleton," he complained, "my eyes fail me...I shake often."<sup>82</sup> T.J. Nevins wrote to Loomis that his health was "tolerably good," then went on to describe a cough that produced "a state of weakness and imbecility not at all adapted to either mental or physical exertion."<sup>83</sup> Hiram Vosburgh of Albany complained of "sore lungs" to his mother in Wayne County.<sup>84</sup>

Along with illnesses such as consumption, epidemics posed a threat to early Finger Lakes residents. At least two major epidemics, and scores of smaller ones, plagued western New York between 1810 and 1840. On January 13, 1813, the Geneva *Expositor* warned its readers about an unknown epidemic that was entering the Finger Lakes region.

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<sup>81</sup> First Presbyterian Church in Lyons, NY. Records, 1799-1946. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

<sup>82</sup> Chester Loomis Papers.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Emma Koberg Letters.

Although the author of the article, Dr. Daniel Hudson, claimed he wanted to “quiet fears which are altogether groundless,” he described the horrific malady in graphic detail. Hudson’s statement that the patient “expires in the most distressing agony,” surely contradicted his aim, terrifying readers.<sup>85</sup> Richard Weston of Scotland traveled through the small village of Clyde, Wayne County, “a low-lying, sickly town,” in the 1830s. During his stay, he wrote that “two persons died that day in the house next to the bar where I took up my lodgings for the night; they were put into a box, and buried within four hours after their decease.” Later in the day, “a father and mother, along with two children, also died shortly after I arrived, and were likely put into boxes, and buried in pairs. The deaths, I was informed, averaged fifty per day.”<sup>86</sup> The disturbing possibility of early death provoked many western New Yorkers to turn to religion to ensure their salvation.

The most destructive epidemic, cholera, reached western New York in 1832. For the religious, cholera took on new meanings. Many saw the epidemic as a sign of God’s anger. Unlike more recent epidemics, such as typhus, many Americans believed cholera was unable to afflict good, upright, moral Christians. Cholera was a disease for the poor, criminal, alcoholic, and sexually promiscuous. Francis Wayland warned that “every

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<sup>85</sup> Hudson, Dr. Daniel, Geneva (NY) *Expositor*, January 13, 1813.

<sup>86</sup> Haydon, *Upstate Travels*, p. 156. Cholera is spread through drinking filthy water, and the urban poor who were crammed into squalid tenements and unable to get out of cities or to fresh water made up the bulk of the victims. However, cholera is a contagious illness, and as people fled New York City into the rural hinterland, they brought cholera along. The Erie Canal was a perfect conduit for the disease, and it spread rapidly across western New York. The disease first appeared in New York City on June 26 and Rochester on July 12, 1832. Cholera very well could have been the disease Richard Weston observed in Clyde, which is situated along the canal. The combination of filthy canal water and downstate New Yorkers fleeing the disease via canal would have made Clyde a likely place for an outbreak. The water, Weston declared, was “covered with a green scum, from which proceeded, by action of the sun, a close fog that produced a choking kind of effect on my breathing.” (Haydon 159)

intemperate man and woman” would die an “instant, agonizing, strange and horrible death” from cholera.<sup>87</sup> Even doctors warned that cholera was not contagious and more likely to affect “the sensual, the vicious, and the intemperate.”<sup>88</sup> Religious individuals may have taken such explanations to heart and pushed friends and relatives to convert to evangelism before it was too late. Non-religious individuals may have been brought to religion through fear of cholera and the wrath of God. Even evangelical preacher Charles Grandison Finney fell into the clutches of cholera but recovered, a sure sign to many that only constant prayer and the light of conversion could spare one from the plague. For many, however, the epidemic only added a sense of foreboding that the world was fast coming to a disastrous end. A minister commented, “We must regard it [cholera] as a prelude to the woes which are fast coming upon earth.”<sup>89</sup> The terror of the disease coupled with a desire to avoid it through religious adherence resulted in a flurry of revivals known as “cholera revivals.”<sup>90</sup>

The death of infants and children caused angst for new parents. Their fears were not groundless: a list of deaths in 1848 and 1849 in the village of Lyons and township of Galen, both in Wayne County, illustrates that the death rate for children under one year of age was an astonishing sixteen percent. In addition, over sixty percent of the deceased on the list of 165 were under twenty one years of age. New parents were often admonished not to become too attached to a new infant, because infant death was so common. An

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<sup>87</sup> Masur, Louis P., *1831: Year of Eclipse* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), p. 206.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>90</sup> Barkun, *The Crucible of the Millennium*, p. 111.

Upstate New York farmer announcing the birth of his son worried in a letter, “But how long we shall be allowed to keep him is unknown to us.”<sup>91</sup> The Wayne County death list establishes that some parents did indeed try to distance themselves from infants. At least four children on the list, some as old as two months, had not yet been named when they died. Moreover, it was not uncommon for a family to reuse the name of a deceased older sibling on a new baby.<sup>92</sup> However careful a family may have been to remain detached from a new baby, but the death of a child was always a horrific shock.

The grief-stricken sought to reassure themselves that their loved ones, especially children, were in a better place through adherence to religion. A poem printed in the *Geneva Expositor* on August 17, 1808 was written by a mournful father after the death of his small son: “That Great Spirit who at first/gave animation to his clay/was pleas’d to call him back to dust-to call his spirit far away...[he] will dwell where endless joys abound/in those celestial mansion high/where happiness supreme is found/and where he’ll never, never die.”<sup>93</sup> The grieving father was clearly turning to religion in his pain and envisioning his son in heaven helped alleviate grief. Polly Conklin of Jefferson County lost a baby son in 1821. She called him her “sweet little cherub gone with the angels,” and was happy he would never have to deal with “sin and temptation.”<sup>94</sup> Emily and Caleb Carr of Genoa, Cayuga County, lost a young daughter after they migrated to

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<sup>91</sup> Larkin, *Reshaping of Everyday Life*, p. 76.

<sup>92</sup> Lewis, Eric C. *Without the Children: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Diseases and Childhood Deaths in Wayne and Ontario Counties*. Lesson Plan, grades 4-6, Lyons Elementary School, Lyons, New York.

<sup>93</sup> *Geneva Expositor*, August 17, 1808.

<sup>94</sup> Tripp, *Through ‘Poverty’s Vale’*, p. 8.



Michigan. In a letter to Emily Carr, her mother-in-law Lucy wrote, “One of them little faces I shall see nomore in the flesh and none of them as they were when they left...she has been taken from the snares and temtations of a wicked world and gone to where the wicked cease...to sing the song of Moses and the Saints in a thourough and endless Eternity.”<sup>95</sup> William Pasko of Waterloo, Seneca County carefully included the religious particulars of his father’s funeral to his absent brother in a letter. “Elder Brown preached his funeral sermon from salms 73 chapter 26 verse my flesh and my heart faileth but god is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever,” he wrote.<sup>96</sup> Such religious texts provided comfort to grieving family members because they reaffirmed their belief that although the physical body was gone, their loved one lived on in heaven.

Early death of children or spouses, abandonment, poverty, isolation, violence and crime caused a sense of instability in both society and the family in the early nineteenth century. These forms of social instability were magnified in frontier areas like western New York. Historian Michael Barkun has argued that “the sense of family instability rose through the 1820s and by the 1830s had engendered a feeling of crisis.”<sup>97</sup> He points to the flood of child-rearing and domestic economy books that appeared all over the nation in the 1830s as a “measure of loss of confidence.”<sup>98</sup> For the poor, rural and isolated, who

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<sup>95</sup> Caleb Carr Letters

<sup>96</sup> Emma Koberg Letters

<sup>97</sup> Barkun, *The Crucible of the Millennium*, p. 118.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

would not have had easy access to such books, religion and church attendance often provided the stability, structure and emotional support they were frequently lacking.<sup>99</sup>

Life in the turbulent decades between the Revolution and the Civil War was for many western New Yorkers difficult at best, agonizing at worst. The intensity of revivalism in western New York was no coincidence given the combination of frontier conditions and the first settlers' religious backgrounds. Religion was a mechanism these displaced, rural New England natives used to deal with unfortunate circumstances, as their ancestors before them had done. The bulk of people involved in the Burned Over District revivalism were isolated, uneducated, unknown people struggling to create a stable society for themselves and their families.

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<sup>99</sup> Domestic economy books from this period, such as Sarah Josepha Hale's *The Good Housekeeper*, written in 1839, which includes chapters on hiring cooks and managing servants, were not usually written with poverty-stricken women in mind. (Hale, Sarah Josepha, *The Good Housekeeper*. Boston: Otis, Broaders, 1841).

## Chapter Two

### “The Spirit Speaketh in Them”: Religious Fervor in the Burned Over District

Religious excitement began in western New York shortly after the first settlers arrived in the 1790s. Religious fervor became especially intense in rural areas that experienced isolation and other negative social conditions. By 1838, at the height of religious activity in the Burned Over District, nearly one hundred years had passed since the First Great Awakening. However, Protestant Christians were still grappling with differences dividing the sects. These differences were of no small matter, for they dealt with one's own salvation and how that salvation was to be achieved. The residents of the Burned Over District largely turned to evangelical Christianity, which was more in line with republican ideals. Calvinism declined in popularity because it accentuated differences between people by deeming some elect and others damned. Evangelicalism dictated each follower experience personal salvation, by accepting Christ publicly as their personal savior, and that all people were equal in the eyes of God. Evangelicalism focused on the human effort to achieve conversion, and evangelicals sought to foster conversions. All people were sinners, capable of salvation by accepting Christ as their savior on their own.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Greven, Phillip, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 147. Evangelical Christians fell into two categories, pre-millennial and post-millennial. Pre-millennialists believed Christ would return after the world converted to Christianity and bring one thousand years of peace to true Christians. Post-millennials believed Christ would return after one thousand years of peace on earth, and so hastened to create a peaceful, moral environment. Post-millennials were in the majority in the Burned Over District.\* Because of the preponderance of post-millennials in the Burned Over District, religious excitement in the region took on a strong moral tone.

Residents of the poorer, more rural areas of the Burned Over District consistently turned to evangelicalism and later moral reform because of the control it gave them over their lives and the emotional release revivals provided. Additionally, even orthodox, non-evangelical Protestant sects in rural, unstable areas embraced aspects of evangelicalism and moral reform much more quickly than counterparts in wealthier, more settled communities. In fact, orthodox and evangelical churches alike in wealthy, urban communities experienced comparatively little religious excitement.

### **Early Religious Excitement in New England**

Much of the religious enthusiasm that shook the Burned Over District had origins in New England. New England, a stronghold of conservative Protestantism for over a century, was rocked by the First Great Awakening in the 1730s. Led by Congregationalist minister Jonathan Edwards, the First Great Awakening sparked the first large-scale reconsideration of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Although Edwards did not mean to provoke this effect, his sermons and subsequent revivals served to divide the “New Lights,” as they came to be called, from the “Old Lights.”<sup>101</sup> New Lights believed that salvation was achievable through human effort, through a conversion of the soul. This belief came to known as evangelicalism. Many evangelicals also believed that the conversion of all humanity would hasten the Second Coming of Christ. Old Lights clung to the conservative Calvinist belief that salvation was predetermined by God and that humans had no control over who was damned or elect. New Lights, often ostracized from

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<sup>101</sup> Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, p. 117.

older, conservative Congregationalist communities, moved into sparsely populated western and northern New England areas such as Vermont after the First Great Awakening. Although some New Lights remained Congregationalists, many embraced the newer Baptist and Methodist faiths and built strong, evangelical communities in Vermont and on the New York frontier. Together, through revivals, religiously intense New Lights would fight the specters of Deism, rationalism and religious complacency they believed haunted New England throughout the eighteenth century.

### **The Rise of Evangelicalism**

*Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate,  
saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.  
- 2 Corinthians 6:17 (KJV)*

The concept of evangelicalism dictated that followers actively seek a personal conversion, in direct contrast to Calvinism, which deemed Christians “damned” or “elect,” and unable to control their own salvation.\* Evangelicalism, although not a new concept, enjoyed a renewal of interest in western New York between the 1790s and 1840s. Evangelicalism was especially attractive to rural, lower-class Americans. Thousands of Americans converted to evangelicalism during the First Great Awakening, and throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Evangelicalism became popular as many Protestants found Calvinism irrelevant in their lives. To a certain class of American people who hacked homes out of the wilderness and endured brutal poverty, isolation, failed crops, early death, illness and war, sitting back and waiting patiently for

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\* Congregationalists and Presbyterians generally fell into this category, although many followers of these sects in the Burned Over District in rural areas adopted evangelical beliefs. The Presbyterian Church in Galen, Wayne County fell into this category. On the frontier, the line between evangelical and non-evangelical often became blurred, especially in the wake of revivalism.

one's salvation simply made no sense. Although wealthy and upper sort people in more stable communities continued to put faith in being "rewarded with eternal life by a benevolent deity" for practicing orthodox Protestantism, the majority of Americans did not have the luxury to do so.<sup>102</sup> Rural people experienced harshness in their lives and they expected the same from God. Many may have felt they did not have time to wait for God to deem them elect and so embraced a doctrine that left salvation in their own hands. Others may have felt that by ensuring salvation on their own terms they could enjoy happiness in heaven that had eluded them in life. Evangelicalism embodied republican ideals by allowing its followers to gain their own salvation. Conversely, Calvinism, through the doctrine of election, represented sharp divisions between classes and offered its followers no control over salvation.

Although Calvinist and orthodox Christianity declined in the North after the First Great Awakening, evangelicalism grew throughout the eighteenth century. The spirit of independence espoused during and after the American Revolution motivated Americans to embrace a more liberating form of salvation. Significantly, a period of revival called the "New Light Stir" occurred in Maine between 1774 and 1784, during the height of the war.<sup>103</sup> For evangelicals, conversion was ultimately a personal, solitary experience. This theory fit neatly with the republican "Independent Man" ideal. In addition, both Methodist and Baptist clergymen were much less educated than their Presbyterian or Congregationalist cohorts. Baptist and Methodists practiced "anti-intellectual"

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<sup>102</sup> Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, p. 298.

<sup>103</sup> Davenport, Linda Gilbert, *Maine's Sacred Tunebooks, 1800-1830: Divine Song on the Northeast Frontier (Composers of North America, No. 18)*. Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1996), p. 31.

Christianity, purely based on emotion with little need for the cerebral rationalism popular with non-evangelical Christians. Formal education was not deemed necessary for ministers because they were merely the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit. They did not actively read and interpret texts as non-evangelical clergymen did. As David Rathbone wrote from Scipio, Cayuga County, in 1812, “The Baptists generally in this Western Country...are of the opinion, that Ministers should take no thought how, or what they should speak...for it is not they that speak, but the Spirit which speaketh in them. And one of the Ministers told me that ‘I must let the Holy Ghost study my sermons for me.’”<sup>104</sup> An uneducated clergyman would be unheard of in Congregationalist or Presbyterian churches, but early Methodists and Baptist congregations felt formal education was unnecessary. The lack of education for ministers added to the appeal of these sects for people with little or no schooling; often the ministers in these denominations were in the same socio-economic level as the parishioners and followed a trade such as farming to support themselves when full-time preaching was not available or did not pay enough. Parishioners in evangelical churches felt they could relate to such ministers, rather than a well-educated clergyman. The Baptist and Methodist faiths grew rapidly amongst New Lights, and when they began to push west into New York State especially from Vermont, they took their adherence to emotional religiosity with them.

The conditions early settlers of the Finger Lakes Region endured forced them to turn to their religious beliefs again and again for support. Because exhibition of earthly love to one’s children, spouse, parents or siblings was frowned upon by evangelicals,

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<sup>104</sup> Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, p. 2.

they came to look upon the church community as their true family.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, people who converted to evangelical sects in adulthood often did so for the support supplied by tight-knit church communities and the control evangelicalism gave them over their unpredictable lives. Evangelicals turned to religion for emotional support and used it as a sustaining force in their lives. Although the path to conversion was difficult, Burned Over District residents endured the difficulty to ensure salvation, which provided emotional succor. Revivals acted as a way to both cleanse the soul of sin and achieve salvation, which brought immense elation into the lives of the converted. Evangelicals who found true conversion referred repeatedly to the joy of “mercy,” “freedom,” and “contentedness.”<sup>106</sup> Finney’s conversion, in which he prayed in the woods near his law office for hours, ended when he experienced great joy and peace. He returned to his office and played hymns on his bass viol until he experienced yet another “mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>107</sup> By ensuring salvation, evangelicals found a great weight lifted off their shoulders.

Evangelicalism also appealed to rural Burned Over District residents wishing to separate themselves from the society in which they lived, which they perceived as sinful. Rural people in western New York turned to evangelicalism for the stability and emotional comfort it offered from negative social conditions. However, the emphasis on being “separate” from what they termed the “world,” that is, non-evangelical society, also

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<sup>105</sup> Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, p. 31.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-96.

<sup>107</sup> Sernett, Milton C., *North Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), p. 13.



offered evangelicals a way to withdraw from what they perceived as societal ills. Only separation would ensure their distance from sin.<sup>108</sup> Curtis D. Johnson has argued that evangelicals in the Burned Over District developed an “island” mentality, that they alone embodied moral and upright Christianity in a sinful, unclean world. Through membership in evangelical sects, rural Burned Over District residents sought to avoid sin and adhere to moral behavior. For instance, Methodists prohibited consumption of alcoholic beverages, which likely appealed to people weary of the drunkenness, crime and violence prevalent in antebellum society.

Evangelicalism also gained a strong foothold in rural areas because the theory of separation prevalent in evangelicalism was easier to adhere to in socially and physically isolated places. Phillip Greven has argued that “evangelicalism generally flourished when individuals and households were most separate and self-contained, whatever the reason may be.”<sup>109</sup> Evangelicalism became so intense in isolated areas of western New York because of a combination of negative social conditions in rural areas and the lack of secular influence. People in urbanized areas such as Geneva could potentially come under non-evangelical influence through their academy, newspaper, and secular activities. Rural people without access to these diversions and influences were more easily able to foster separation and keep the theory of separation alive in their homes and communities.

Because of their stress on separation, evangelicals constantly sought to cleanse themselves and their churches of sin through “purification.” For many, this meant

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<sup>108</sup> Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, p. 26.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

forming new, “pure,” separate sects. Not only were evangelicals pushing to separate themselves from less “pure” sects, but from society altogether. The separation process added another element of control to the lives of evangelicals. For still more the purification process involved provoking conversions in those who had not yet accepted Christ as their Savior in order to hasten the Second Coming. This was accomplished through revivals. Some groups splintered off to form separate faiths altogether. For instance, disagreements over pedobaptism and allowing members of other sects to participate in communion caused several splits in the Baptist faith. Later, the constant need to purify the churches and people of sin led to the path of moral reform movements.\*

### **Revivals**

*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.  
- Philippians 2:12-13 (KJV)*

Church communities used revivals to revitalize flagging interest in religion and to stimulate new conversions. Revivals could be planned or spontaneous events and often included sermons, public confession of sin or conversion, singing and sometimes dancing.<sup>110</sup> Revivals sometimes started as a small gathering of church members, a prayer meeting, or Bible study group. A revival in Cortland County began in this way in 1812 when a female relative of Jacob Hoar organized a prayer meeting in her home. Soon the group was so large it had to meet elsewhere, and became a full-fledged revival, complete

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\* Despite frequent schisms in evangelical sects, some evangelicals such as the Disciples of Christ (Campbelites) felt it was more important for Protestant evangelical sects to band together instead of splintering over doctrine.

<sup>110</sup> Larkin, *Reshaping of Everyday Life*, p. 278.

with sermons, lectures, and new converts.<sup>111</sup> More frequently, revivals were planned events, usually a series of evening sermons by a visiting minister known for his oratory skills. “We are now in the midst of a precious revival of Religion. God is evidently moving by his spirit upon the great map of mind in this Community,” Mr. H. Boynton wrote in 1842 from Red Creek, Wayne County.<sup>112</sup> Revival participants sang simple religious tunes that could be picked up easily because many rural New Yorkers lacked hymnals and were illiterate.<sup>113</sup> Some revivals lasted a week or more. Revivals often occurred after a lapse in religious fervor and interest. Revivals served to revitalize waning interest in church members, and more importantly, attracted new members and the unsaved.

Revivals, protracted meetings and religious debates were familiar events in the Protestant world, and often ministers from this time period make little attempt to explain or describe them in their letters and journals. The few descriptions of early-nineteenth-century revivals come from travelers and participants. Frances Trollope visited frontier Indiana in 1832 and observed a revival, which she found disturbing. Trollope wrote that “the combined voices of such a multitude, heard at the dead of night...the dark figures of the officials in the middle of the circle...the lurid glare thrown by the altar fires in the woods beyond” all combined to produce an unearthly appearance.<sup>114</sup> In western New York, Methodists were most likely to hold revivals outside or in barns and give physical

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<sup>111</sup> Johnson, Curtis D., *Islands of Holiness*, p. 43.

<sup>112</sup> Emma Koberg Letters.

<sup>113</sup> Davenport, *Maine's Sacred Tunebooks*, p. 31.

<sup>114</sup> Larkin, *Reshaping of Everyday Life*, p. 279.

expression to emotion during prayer. Ministers called sinners desiring conversion to the forefront, as Charles Grandison Finney did with his “anxious bench.” Sinners wishing to be converted had to swallow their pride and be directed to the “anxious bench” in the front of the church. Once on the bench, the revivalists’ tears, prayers and testimonies would assist in the conversion process. Participants at a revival in Maine in 1818 danced, jumped and sang while others shouted, “Glory to God” and “Glory to Jesus.”<sup>115</sup> Revival attendants often wept and sang, but some developed a phenomenon named “the jerks.” Preacher Peter Cartwright described revivalists with the jerks convulsing on the ground, while others were taken with “running, jumping and barking.”<sup>116</sup> Such behavior illustrates the high levels of emotion revivalism produced. Finney’s great revivals in the Burned Over District, which attracted people of multiple sects, were characterized by weeping and groaning. Finney believed people who resisted groaning were fighting the “Holy Ghost.”<sup>117</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who attended at least one of Finney’s revivals, claimed that during Finney’s sermons his “great eyes roll[ed] around the congregation and his arms fl[ew] about in the air like those of a windmill.”<sup>118</sup>

Mrs. Trollope’s presence at the revival proves that some people attended revivals out of curiosity, interest or boredom. In a frontier area with little or no secular entertainment, a revival could function as not only a religious tool but a social activity. People on isolated farms could interact with friends and neighbors. This was especially important

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<sup>115</sup> Davenport, *Maine’s Sacred Tunebooks*, p. 29.

<sup>116</sup> Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life*, p. 280.

<sup>117</sup> Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, p. 177.

<sup>118</sup> Sernett, *North Star Country*, p. 17.

for women, who were bound to the home by housework and child care and less mobile than men, who often worked outdoors and traveled to market towns.

Women found revivals especially rewarding because it put them in control of their religious lives, when they lacked political rights and lived in a patriarchal society. Revivalism also gave women an opportunity to meet with other women and relieve stress created by the unrelenting, thankless jobs of housekeeping, childrearing and nursing. Whitney Cross has claimed that revivals in western New York were the first to include mixed audiences of men and women.<sup>119</sup> In fact, women frequently planned revivals and made up the bulk of the attendants. Male church membership, which had fallen off after the Revolution, was supplemented by female membership, and frequently female church members used revivals to convert unsaved male relatives.

Evangelical beliefs provoked severe anxiety in the hearts of many who had not yet experienced salvation. Some evangelicals, desperate for conversion, experienced intense depression and discord. The minister of the Baptist Church of Galen, Wayne County, remarked in 1833 that many of his parishioners were “like wrestling Jacob or weeping Mary at the feet of Jesus waiting for the blessing.”<sup>120</sup> Philip Greven has written that a period of depression and misery was required before one could be truly saved.<sup>121</sup> Charles Finney’s own conversion experience on October 10, 1821 was preceded by a period of

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<sup>119</sup> Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, p. 178.

<sup>120</sup> First Baptist Church of Galen, NY, Records. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

<sup>121</sup> Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, p. 75.

depression.<sup>122</sup> His anxiety over the state of his soul was exacerbated by revivals in his neighborhood in which dozens of residents achieved and confirmed their salvations. Elizabeth Cady Stanton experienced deep despair for some time after attending one of Finney's revivals.<sup>123</sup>

Although evangelicalism caused anxiety for unsaved followers, revivals provided an option for the unsaved to try for conversion. "How many have passed from death into life among us the day of Judgement will tell," Mr. H. Boynton wrote from the impoverished village of Red Creek, Wayne County in 1842 following a revival.<sup>124</sup> Evangelicals believed a true conversion was a blessed release from the toils of a difficult life. Although life on earth would remain grueling, converts were assured the reward of eternal life in heaven after their physical deaths. Protestant church music written during this time illustrates that death was a welcome release for the saved. Lyrics such as "death is the gate of endless joy," and "I don't mean to stay here long," permeated evangelical services and revivals in New England and western New York.<sup>125</sup>

Denominations that held the most revivals gained more converts in rural areas than non-revivalist sects. Revivals provided an opportunity for salvation, renewed interest in the church, and provided social contact and emotional release. Rural people frequently found non-evangelical doctrine constricting and overly conservative. Methodists and

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<sup>122</sup> Sernett, *North Star Country*, p. 13.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>124</sup> Emma Koberg Letters

<sup>125</sup> King, E.J. and B.F. White, *The Sacred Harp, Sixth Edition* (Chelsea, Alabama: Sacred Harp Publishing Company, 1981).

Baptist exhibited the strongest revivalist tendencies, and were the most successful at gaining converts during the Second Great Awakening. The Methodist Church, which engaged in protracted meetings, camp revivals and physical expression during prayer appealed to many who had come from emotionless or irreligious backgrounds. People belonging to formalist sects had few other opportunities for religious expression, which in formalist sects was reserved for clergymen.<sup>126</sup> It also pleased the few evangelical Congregationalists, who found its doctrine more in line with their ideas than that of their own church. The Methodist Church was a relatively new sect, founded in 1795. Methodism's youth may have made its doctrines appear fresher and more in line with current thought than older churches, such as the Presbyterians and Congregationalists. The "New Measures" which were the hallmark of the Methodist Church were later adopted by Finney during his remarkably successful revivals in western New York in the 1830s. The Baptist Church was similarly successful in gaining converts throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although an older group than the Methodists, the Baptists were constantly splintering off to form more "pure," primitive sects.\* According to Robert G. Gardner, eleven Baptist groups existed in the United States before 1790,

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<sup>126</sup> "Formalist" sects eschewed singing, spontaneous prayer (or "testifying") and revivalism. The services followed a strict formula in which the congregation listened to the clergyman. Presbyterians and Congregationalists were traditionally formalist, although many adopted revivalism in rural areas.

\* Methodists and Baptists also split with their non-evangelical cousins on the issue of baptism. As the case involving Thomas Barnes in Cayuga County illustrates, Congregationalists and Presbyterians practiced pedobaptism (infant baptism). Methodist and especially Baptists eschewed with this practice, allowing baptism only when one had achieved conversion. Many people in these sects were baptized as adults. Non-evangelicals believed parents should baptize their infants to bring them into the safety of the church as soon as possible; Methodists and Baptists sought to purify their churches by only baptizing true converts. The split over pedobaptism raged in non-evangelical churches throughout the period of excitement in the Burned Over District.

although not all were formalized sects.<sup>127</sup> At the dawn of the nineteenth century, Free Will (Open Communion), Seventh Day, Hard Shell and Regular Baptists were already visible in backwoods New England and the young, rural districts opening up in western New York.

“Old Lights” avoided and resisted the religious changes brought about by the New Lights and other evangelicals. The Old Light Congregationalists continued in their belief that God would call them to salvation when it suited him. Other non-evangelical Christians were Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Unitarians, Universalists and Quakers. Because of their formal, non-evangelical traditions and reliance on hierarchy, Catholics and Episcopalians in particular avoided revivalist tendencies. Old Lights continued to practice what Curtis D. Johnson refers to as “minimalism.”<sup>128</sup> Minimalists, who were often urban, wealthy and conservative, preferred unemotional worship and ministers that left church members’ private lives out of the church sphere. For minimalists, attending church was a public ritual and a duty more than an emotional need.

Wealthy, orthodox Protestants could find revivalism foolish, even threatening. R.D.H. Leekey of Rushville, Ontario County, wrote a long letter mocking revivalism to Chester Loomis in 1838. “The wondering sinner could hear the brazen gates of the infernal pit ‘grating harsh thunder’ as they opened exhibiting to his eyes the appalling spectacle of the myriads of damned souls that roll and swelter and hiss upon the ceaseless waves of that frightful gulf,” he wrote. He went on to mimic the imagery used by charismatic

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<sup>127</sup> Gardner, Robert G., *Baptist of Early America: A Statistical History, 1689-1790* (Washington, Georgia: Georgia Baptist Historical Society, 1983).

<sup>128</sup> Johnson, Curtis D., *Islands of Holiness*, p. 19.



preachers at revivals, describing “Satan triumphant...upon his fiery car over the souls of the damned...deriding with hellish laughter the dupes of his wily craft.” He finished, scoffing, “Every day some new recruit joins the standard of delusion to become a fanatic or a hypocrite through life...we must exercise no reason, use no arguments...the godly would take from him the means of subsistence.”<sup>129</sup> Rushville was a rural village prone to revivalism. Leekey found himself in the minority and felt his social and economic positions were threatened by evangelicals. Elisha Miller wrote Loomis that he was unable to retain his position as postmaster, because of he was “not...a church man.”<sup>130</sup> Although Loomis attended church, simply attending church without achieving salvation became unacceptable to many in the height of Burned Over District revivalism and such people were not considered true Christians by evangelicals. Consequently, another of Loomis’ correspondents, Richard Gilbert, sighed, “I wish you ware a Christian.”<sup>131</sup>

### **Evangelical Influence in Rural Areas**

Revivalism was most concentrated among evangelical sects, especially Methodists and Baptists. The Congregationalist and Presbyterians did not actively participate in revivalism on a large scale. Noted exceptions were Finney’s nationally-famous revivals in western New York. Finney had commenced his religious life as a Presbyterian minister, but broke with Presbyterian traditions and embraced the Methodist “New Measures” in the 1830s. Finney added the use of vernacular language and

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<sup>129</sup> Chester Loomis Papers

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

theatrical, charismatic preaching to the formula with massive success. Finney's preaching style was unheard of in traditionally Calvinist circles.

Finney's popular revival influenced some non-evangelical sects in rural areas. Some Presbyterian and Congregationalist ministers in outlying districts, taking a cue from Finney's huge success in Rochester, Monroe County, adopted the "New Measures" style of preaching. Non-evangelicals in backwoods districts were much more likely than their urbanized counterparts to engage in revival tactics to liven up congregations. Minimalists belonging to these congregations were often irritated to find such doctrine seeping into their weekly worship services and sometimes complained against the minister or split off to found their own congregations. However, the number of minimalist non-evangelicals was never high to begin with in western New York. Once religious enthusiasm entered a particular county or community, they often found themselves to be a very tiny minority. Many converted to evangelicalism through revivals and the influence of family and friends. Most non-evangelical ministers in settled, older communities resisted the urge to breathe new life into their congregations through revival, however, believing with some truth that revivals converted many who would eventually lose interest and "backslide."

Universalists also adopted revivalist tendencies along with some Presbyterians and Congregationalists, at least in rural areas. Charles Morford was a Universalist clergyman in Victor, Ontario County in 1818. Morford's sermons and poetry was peppered with references to revivals. His chief desire was to provoke a revival in his own congregation. "I have often wished that in some way, I could be made Instrumental in

bringing about a Reformation, and Revival,” he wrote. “I hope for a Revival...I feel jealous for the glory of God, and I long to see a most powerful display of his Irresistible power and grace amongst us, that, Sinners may be saved, Christ and his Cross honored.” Morford was crushed when he realized he had a congregation of so-called “backsliders” on his hands. “More than eighteen months ago I foresaw and feared what has now befallen us,” he admonished his flock from the pulpit, “as a Church and people, that is, that the Spirit would be withdrawn from us.” After an initial period of holy fervor, Morford’s congregation fell into “deplorable” condition. Morford “sought to make [you] sensible of the miserable and dangerous state that you were in by nature, and shewed you the only way to escape.” In a sermon, Morford complained that after a period of “Peace, and brotherly love” the congregation had lapsed into “Stupidity, Indifference, lukewarmness; coldness and deadness.”<sup>132</sup> Morford’s despondency illustrates why some non-evangelical ministers avoided revivalism. More importantly, it illustrates a shift in the core beliefs of this rural group of Universalists, from believing all were universally saved, to fear that some in the congregation had not achieved salvation. Morford’s sermons and poetry began to sound like revivalist doctrine. The Quakers, who did not hold revivals, also experienced minor evangelical influence. Evangelical Quakers formed their own sect called Gurneyism. Gurneyites in New York State emerged from rural areas, including Scipio, Cayuga County. Because of the intensity of evangelism in rural areas, transitionally non-evangelical sects came under strong evangelical, revivalist influence.

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<sup>132</sup> Morford, Charles, 1769-1849. *Sermons and Poems, 1818-1824*. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

### **Church Discipline and the Decline of Evangelicalism**

Evangelicals in the Burned Over District sought to root out sin in their congregations and discourage parishioners from “worldly” evil. Purifying evangelical parishes of world sin gave a large amount of control to church members. However, some evangelicals and their ministers were too zealous, causing feelings of alienation and discouragement among church members. The method used to cleanse their churches of sin, public confession, could be abrasive at best, humiliating at worst. Church records from the 1830s and 1840s illustrate that church discipline figured prominently in rural congregations, where intense revivalism encouraged the purging of sinful behavior. Urban congregations with a large number of “minimalists,” who preferred to keep personal lives and worship separate, experienced little or no church discipline.

Church discipline was nothing new, but in the 1830s and 1840s, an increasing number of evangelicals rejected discipline. While social conditions in the rural areas of the Finger Lakes region were harsh, evangelicals endured church discipline in exchange for the emotional comfort and structure religion provided in a very unstable society. However, as the Finger Lakes region became more settled, the negative social conditions that drove many to religion began to decline. That the role of evangelicalism declined as social conditions improved illustrates that many rural people were attracted to evangelicalism for emotional succor during the early, erratic years of western New York settlement. For instance, increased transportation decreased isolation, as well as opportunities to obtain material comforts and enjoy secular amusements. As negative social conditions declined, Finger Lakes residents were less willing to endure the harsh

and often mortifying church discipline meted out by ministers, church boards and other worshippers.

Church records from the 1830s and 1840s illustrate that both evangelical and non-evangelical church members in rural areas began to chafe against church discipline. Some argued or filed complaints when publicly disciplined. For instance, on February 9, 1833, the First Presbyterian Church of Galen, Wayne County withdrew fellowship from Jonah Hopkins for skipping meeting and being “in the habit of getting intoxicated and in making use of profane language.” On the very same day, Joseph Beadle – whose wife was a church member - was excommunicated for intoxication and replied that he was “sorry” he had joined the church anyway. Brother Foster, of the neighboring township of Rose, Wayne County, was disciplined by the minister for suing another parishioner. “Shit on the church,” he barked, “if it would not allow [him] to collect his debts.” Brother Foster later requested forgiveness, but some in the parish doubted the sincerity of his apology. Foster became “offended,” threw off his hat and left the church for good.<sup>133</sup> In the Presbyterian Church of Lyons, Wayne County, “scandalous” reports began to circulate about William Patton and Ann Van Winkle. Patton and Van Winkle were suspended from taking communion for “fornication” and “obscene and lewd conduct.”<sup>134</sup> Patton admitted the charges were true and a church clerk was sent to investigate the matter at the home Van Winkle shared with her brothers and sister-in-law. Later that

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<sup>133</sup> First Presbyterian Church of Galen, NY. Records, 1838-1896. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

<sup>134</sup> First Presbyterian Church of Lyons, NY. Records, 1799-1946. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

month, Ann Van Winkle's brothers Simon, John, and John's wife accused church clerk John Perrine of "taking improper measures" with Ann while acting as magistrate in the case. He had humiliated the family by asking her "imprudent" and "improper" questions about her relationship with Patton, and her family determined that Perrine had crossed the thin line between discipline and meddling.<sup>135</sup>

Curtis D. Johnson has argued that the Perfectionist strain in Finney's "New Measures" preaching led Christians to assert independence from the church body and its disciplinary actions.<sup>136</sup> This behavior fell directly in line with republican beliefs of independence and especially appealed to men. The major concept in the "New Measures" was Perfectionism, the concept that the truly converted could become perfect. The newly converted considered themselves perfect in God's eyes, and maintained that the church hierarchy had no right "to pass judgment on his or her activities."<sup>137</sup> The influence of Perfectionism in Finney's teaching may explain the spike in disciplinary actions taken by churches throughout rural regions of the Burned Over District in the 1830s and early 1840s. In addition to increased disciplinary actions, more church goers rejected the discipline meted out by ministers. For instance, only three of the ten people excluded from the First Presbyterian Church in Galen, Wayne County in 1831 and 1832 asked forgiveness for their offensive actions.<sup>138</sup> The Baptist Church in Sennett, Cayuga County

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Johnson, Curtis D., *Islands of Holiness*, pp. 108-110.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108-109.

<sup>138</sup> First Presbyterian Church of Galen, NY. Records, 1838-1896. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

excluded fifty-four people for unnamed transgressions in the 1830s, including whole families, none of whom reappear in the church records.<sup>139</sup> Evangelical and evangelical-influenced churches were, to an extent, victims of their own success as revivalist Perfectionism created converts, but caused more evangelicals to reject church discipline.\*

In the 1830s and 1840s, those alienated by church discipline often found succor in alternatives to evangelical sects, which led to an overall decline in evangelicalism and the end of the revivalist era. Universalism offered an alternative to these sects, and embraced republican ideals by declaring all Christians saved. The closely-allied sect of Unitarianism was popular mostly in wealthy, urban areas, but Universalism burst onto the New York frontier with great success in the 1830s. Curtis D. Johnson has argued that Universalism especially appealed to men because it embodied the new republican ideology of the post-Revolution decades by declaring everyone was the same in the eyes of God. Universalism allowed “an independent-minded man” to worship as he wished.<sup>140</sup> The Universalists were less judgmental than other Christian sects, and clearly stated that their main objective was to foster love and good will to all. Universalism appealed to minimalists because the church was less prone to meddle in the personal lives of its followers, only investigating rare reports of “unchristian” behavior.

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<sup>139</sup> Baptist Church of Sennett, NY. Records, 1838-1858. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

\* Revolt against church discipline became most extreme in Finney’s own Presbyterian denomination. Although Presbyterians were traditionally non-evangelical, many congregations in rural areas became highly influenced by evangelicalism as a result of Finney’s successful revivals. Presbyterian churches in urbanized areas, such as Geneva, remained largely untouched by Finney’s adoption of New Measures theology.

<sup>140</sup> Johnson, Curtis D., *Islands of Holiness*, p. 100.

Evangelical churches fought against losing members to other sects. Instead of trying to preserve membership by relaxing church discipline, evangelical churches increased discipline, which hastened the departure of many members. For example, in rural Rushville, Ontario County, the First Congregationalist Church records kept by Pastor Joseph Brackett indicate that Brackett was fighting to keep control of shifting beliefs in his parish. In November of 1830, Dorcas Owen was charged with heresy for “believing in the doctrine of universal salvation.” Owen would not recant her beliefs and a month later she was excommunicated. On March 3, 1831, Solomon Chatfield met the same fate as Owen for “belief in the doctrine of universal salvation on the general [illegible] of divine goodness.” Brother Samuel Crittenden was also accused of heresy for belief in universal salvation. On May 1, 1834, he, too, was excluded from the church.<sup>141</sup> In Cortland County, the Presbyterian Church excommunicated Stephen Brewer for visiting the Universalist Church, although he had only gone there to listen to lectures given by William Lloyd Garrison and Ralph Waldo Emerson.<sup>142</sup> Evangelical and orthodox sects clamored to prevent followers from joining a myriad of sects including the Disciples of Christ, the Shakers and Quakers.\* On February 26, 1831, Solomon Munsell and Stephen Hull of the First Presbyterian Church of Galen, Wayne County were sent to

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<sup>141</sup> First Congregational Church of Rushville, NY. Records, 1802-1898. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

<sup>142</sup> Johnson, Curtis D., *Islands of Holiness*, p. 100.

\* The Disciples of Christ (also called Campbellites and Christians) were founded in Kentucky in 1803. An evangelical, primitive sect, they based their entire way of life on a literal interpretation of the *Bible*. They believed all Christian sects should abandon differences and become one. The Disciples did not believe in paid ministry and preaching and baptism was conducted by the parishioners. Shakers followed the teachings of Ann Lee and believed her the female incarnation of Christ. They were celibate, lived in separate communities, and did not distinguish between sexes and races.



visit Elisha Blakeman, a former parishioner who had joined the Shakers at Alton, Wayne County to persuade him to return, which he did not. None of the evangelical church members disciplined or excommunicated for their beliefs asked to be readmitted.

Church discipline was not solely responsible for the decline of evangelical influence in the Burned Over District. Revivalism required a constant, high level of emotion that many new converts found difficult to maintain. For instance, although Polly Conklin was a lifelong Methodist, her husband Samuel, who was baptized at a Methodist revival, “backslid” and gave up church membership. Conklin determined “that if people were good though they did not belong to any church they would not be thrust out of the kingdom of God’s mercies.”<sup>143</sup> In addition, the construction of the Erie Canal and the waves of foreign immigration beginning in the 1840s brought a large number of people with radically different religious backgrounds to the Finger Lakes region. The combination of church discipline, waning emotional need for evangelicalism and changing ethnic makeup of the area hastened the decline of evangelical fervor.

### **The Path to Moral Reform Movements**

Although evangelical enthusiasm waned, the commitment to moral reform issues remained ingrained in rural areas where evangelicalism had been so fervent. Even after the decline of evangelicalism, evangelical churches in rural areas continued to practice “moral reform,” the push to change facets of society that evangelicals considered sinful, such as slavery and intemperance. Because post-millennialists believed the Second Coming would follow a period of peace and harmony, they hastened to create a peaceful

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<sup>143</sup> Tripp, *Through ‘Poverty’s Vale’*, p. 12.

environment free from sin for Christ's return. In fact, this tradition was so entrenched in rural areas that non-evangelical churches also participated in moral reform well before their counterparts in urbanized areas. Early reform-minded congregations supported women's rights as well as abolition of slavery and temperance reform. For example, the Congregationalists in South Butler, Wayne County chose a woman as their minister.\* Antoinette Brown of Henrietta, Monroe County received a degree in divinity from Oberlin College, but was unable to find a church in which to preach because of her sex. The Congregationalists of South Butler invited her to be their minister after she delivered a lecture in their community. What made Brown's ordination especially remarkable was that she was a Congregationalist, a non-evangelical sect. Congregationalists in this remote, poor and sparsely settled corner of Wayne County were much more socially progressive than their fellow Congregationalists and Presbyterians in urban areas like Geneva, Canandaigua and Seneca Falls. In fact, the minister that this particular church had employed before Brown's ordination had been an African-American man. This fact is significant when taking into consideration that even Finney's revivals in urban Rochester had racially segregated seating.

Other traditionally non-evangelical parishes in rural areas embraced reform long before non-evangelicals in more settled areas and communities. In 1840, a Presbyterian minister in the Township of Mentz, Cayuga County publicly stated his support for emancipation of slaves, unlike his fellow Presbyterian ministers in urbanized areas, such

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\* On September 15, 1853, Antoinette Brown became the first ordained woman in the United States in South Butler, Wayne County. Congregationalist parishes were independent to choose ministers and did not need to have the decision approved by a higher church authority. Olympia Brown (no relation), ordained a Universalist minister in 1863, was the first woman ordained with approval of a church government.

as Seneca Falls. The Presbyterian Church in tiny King Ferry, Cayuga County held abolitionist meetings. Reverend Charles Anderson of the Sennett Congregational Church housed runaway slaves in his parsonage. This church issued a proclamation fully supporting the abolition of slavery. Rural, isolated Congregationalists and Presbyterians were much more likely to hold revivals and move toward reform before either orthodox or evangelical sects in wealthy, urban communities.

Comparing the rural South Butler Congregationalists to the urbanized Seneca Falls Presbyterians reveals the clear difference between the rural enthusiasm for religious moral reform and the aversion many urbanized non-evangelical Christians maintained for embracing reform-oriented politics and radical doctrine. Many evangelicals who examined sin in themselves began to examine the sins of society, and begin social reform movements in order to purify the “world.” Many religious Burned Over District residents where revivalism had thrived often turned first to intemperance, and then slavery as a glaring signs of sin and debauchery and sought to root them out forever, using the church as their base.

For example, Rhoda and Jeremy Bement were full members of the Seneca Falls church in 1843, when Mrs. Bement was brought to trial in the church, accused by Reverend Horace Bogue of “unchristian outrage” and “unladylike” behavior. The Bements were fervent abolitionists. In September of 1843, Mrs. Bement handed Bogue a notice to be read after the service announcing an anti-slavery lecture by Abigail Kelley. Bogue neglected to read the notice two weeks in a row, and when Mrs. Bement questioned Bogue about this, he was outraged. Bogue did not feel Mrs. Bement had the

right to question his action and overstepped her bounds as a woman addressing her pastor. Bogue, wary to publicly endorse an abolitionist lecture given by a woman to a mixed audience of males and females, first suspended and then excommunicated Mrs. Bement. She later joined the Wesleyan Methodist Church, which had broken away from the Methodist Church in Seneca Falls for failing to oppose slavery ardently enough.

Unlike non-evangelicals in rural areas who had been influenced by moral reform movements, the Seneca Falls Presbyterian Church had on its membership roles some of the wealthiest and most prominent residents of the village. The fact that most of their fellow parishioners did not support the Bements in their quest for moral reform illustrates that urbanized areas were less receptive to reform-oriented ideas. Most church-goers of both non-evangelical and evangelical sects feared upsetting accepted doctrine and the “status quo.”<sup>144</sup> **Established churches in older and more economically stable communities** often resisted embracing moral reform because “to embroil the church in questions of social conscience was to imperil the unity of both church and community; those who insisted on active reform must either be shown the error of their ways, or, as a last resort, be thrust from the church.”<sup>145</sup> Church records from other urbanized areas, such as Geneva and Canandaigua, are silent on issues of moral reform. Ministers in older, urban churches may have feared upsetting their wealthier parishioners, many of whom were minimalists. Although many minimalists never formally joined a particular church, they were happy to contribute monetarily to the one they attended – as long as it remained to their liking.

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<sup>144</sup> Altschuler and Saltzgeber, *Revivalism, Social Conscience and Community*, p. 40.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

## Quaker Influence and Moral Reform

One sect often ignored by Burned Over District literature is the Society of Friends, often called Quakers. The neglect to examine Quaker influence of the Burned Over District is largely due to the fact that Quakers (except Gurneyites) were not evangelical, nor did they engage in revivalism. However, although not evangelical, Quakers heavily influenced western New York evangelicals through their commitment to moral reform and avoidance of sinful behavior. Their large numbers in western New York added to their influence on other sects. In 1827, there were approximately 20,000 Quakers in the New York Yearly Meeting, with at least 300 in Scipio Township alone, and nine meetinghouses in western New York.<sup>146</sup> Large pockets of Quakers lived and worshipped in Scipio Township and the hamlet of Sherwood, both in Cayuga County; Waterloo, Seneca County; and Farmington and Pumpkin Hook, Ontario County. Three-quarters of western New York Quakers became Hicksites, a more radically reform-oriented sect which broke away from the Orthodox Friends in 1827. Hicksitism attracted Quakers who were more radical in belief and action than orthodox Friends. Historian Robert W. Dougherty has argued that Hicksites tended to be poor, rural and less educated than their orthodox brethren. There was a large enough population of Hicksite adherents in southern Cayuga County by 1834 to need a meeting house of their own.

Of seventeenth-century English origin, the Quakers never shied away from supporting unpopular reform-oriented viewpoints. Quakers allowed women full rights and leadership positions equal rights within their church from inception and were the first

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<sup>146</sup> Cayuga County Historian's Office

Protestant sect to condemn slavery formally. Quakers had from their development been strict, dressing plainly in gray and with no ornamentation, eschewing alcohol, theatre, cards and dancing. They were also radicals, maintaining pacifism in a society overrun with violence, forming some of the earliest charitable societies and drawing no distinction between races. Friends used the words “thee” and “thou” to everyone, no matter how wealthy or prominent their family, when “you” was a more deferential term. Likewise, Quaker men did not doff their caps to anyone to illustrate the equality between all people. Quakers feared pride and promoted humility. The main characteristic of the Quaker faith was the belief that all humans had the “Inner Light” of Christ within. One must follow their Inner Light for their own true path; in addition, the belief in the Inner Light made ill treatment of others impossible for Quakers, hence their opposition to slavery, war and all forms of violence.

### **Religions Native to the Burned Over District**

The religious fervor in the Burned Over District not only inspired spiritual enthusiasm and purification in older, established religions, but it also sparked creation of new religions. The creation of new religions corresponded with the decline of evangelical influence and rise of moral reform movements. Some western New Yorkers found evangelical and orthodox doctrines too restrictive or incorrect, and others were tired of publicly explaining their “unchristian” behavior. Still others had intense religious experiences they felt did not “fit” into already established churches.\* Significantly,

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\* Jemima Wilkinson of the Publick Universal Friends; Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints; William Miller, founder of the Millerites (now Seventh Day Adventists) and

almost all religions native to the Burned Over District established after the decline of evangelicalism embraced moral reform and radical doctrine.

The most important religious doctrine native to the Burned Over District was Spiritualism, which was founded in rural Hydesville, Wayne County. Spiritualism attracted more converts than better-known native religions, such as the Mormon Church, in New York State and the rest of the country. For those weary of traditional religious doctrines, Spiritualism offered a clean break from every doctrine known in the United States at the time, eliminating ministers, public confession, structured worship, and the concept of sin or hell. In addition, Spiritualism was one of the most active sects in moral reform. Spiritualism found allies in the Quakers and Universalists, and had among its followers some of the most active and well-known reformers.

The founders of the Spiritualist movement, Margaretta (Maggie) and Catharine (Kate) Fox grew up in a turbulent household and were often sent to live with their older sister, Leah, in Rochester for months at a time. In December 1847, the Foxes found a small, two-room house in the tiny hamlet of Hydesville, Wayne County to rent. Hydesville, an isolated outpost in the township of Arcadia, stretched along a rural, wooded road. The rental home was just a few yards down a hill from a schoolhouse and within walking distance to a Methodist Church. Hydesville probably provided the stability their parents craved, but to Maggie, fourteen, and Kate, eleven, it was most likely very dull after the excitement of Rochester.

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Perfectionist leader John Humphrey Noyes all created their denominations in the Burned Over District. All claimed to have an intense, sudden, religious experiences and all disagreed with established churches.

In late March of 1848, knocking and rapping noises reverberating all over the house disturbed the Foxes. According to Spiritualist belief, Kate was the first to communicate with the raps.\* “Here, Mr. Splitfoot, do as I do!” she called, and made several knocking sounds.<sup>147</sup> To her mother’s horror, the unseen “spirit” copied every sound Kate made. Kate’s choice of the designation “Mr. Splitfoot” for the “spirit” is intriguing, since it was a nickname for the devil. It is possible she was trying to provoke or get the attention of her distant, excessively religious father.

As word of Maggie and Kate’s uncanny ability to communicate with whatever was making the sounds in their house, the girls were shoved into the glare of a media circus. They were taken to Rochester to live with their older sister Leah Fish. Soon Fish was reporting that she too had mediumistic talents and that the three sisters were constantly accosted by spirits in her Rochester home. Fish appointed herself manager of her sisters’ careers, and Spiritualism exploded. The girls traveled almost nonstop for years at a time, performing séances in small homes and huge auditoriums. Every time, the raps could be heard clearly.

One of the main appeals to Spiritualism was that it was not a religion per se, but a system of beliefs. People could practice their own denominations but believe in contact with the departed, which was the essence of Spiritualism. Later, radical thinkers – mostly men who had dabbled in the mid-nineteenth century rage for utopias – assigned a series of doctrines based on Swedenborgianism to Spiritualism, but for most of the masses

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\* In 1888, Maggie admitted she caused the raps all along by snapping joints in her feet, but Spiritualism was so popular that she felt compelled to recant this statement in 1889.

<sup>147</sup> Lily Dale Historical Society



enchanted with or just experimenting with Spiritualism, it was about making contact. This fact is not surprising due to the high and early death rate of children and spouses in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.\* Mary Redfield, the first person outside the Fox family to witness the knocking, asked the “spirit” poignant questions concerning her own daughter’s death. She was assured through a series of knocks that the little girl was in heaven with God.<sup>148</sup> After Spiritualism became popular, it served much the same functions that evangelicalism had in reassuring its followers that happiness existed in the afterlife.

Although many who had experienced pain turned to evangelical Christianity as an assurance to the wellbeing of their departed relatives, no concrete proof existed. But faith alone was often trying for those grappling with grief. Spiritualism, its practitioners believed, allowed people to converse with the dead, an option traditional Christianity did not offer. Caleb and Emily Carr, natives of Genoa, Cayuga County, lost a small daughter after they moved to Michigan.<sup>149</sup> The Carrs later turned to Spiritualism in their mourning. Isaac and Amy Post of Scipio, Cayuga County also turned to Spiritualism after the death

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\* Although death rates were high during the colonial era, Victorianism ushered in new ideas about the family, including the central focus on children, and extensive, elaborate grieving customs. Practicing Spiritualism and “conversing” with the dead became a new grieving custom for many Americans.

<sup>148</sup> Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, p. 22.

<sup>149</sup> Not everyone was enthralled with this method of contacting the dead. Caleb’s father wrote to Emily, “I dare not tell your folks anything that you wrote about Spiritualism and I hope you will not indulge in Such folly any more pleas Excuse my plainness and Blunt manner of Communication.” He closed with a warning, “There Seems Something Misterious to us in that humbug or Spiritualism...we wish you would be careful of what you imbrac and Remember we are all Bound to Judgement.” Mr. Carr’s admonishment illustrates that the Carr family practiced traditional Protestantism, but that Emily and Caleb may have found Spiritualism more comforting. (Caleb Carr Letters)

of several loved ones, including two children. The true believers in Spirituality used séances as a conversation with the dead.

Spiritualism came about as revivalism and evangelical influence in the area was declining due to population increase, improved transportation and the rise in secular amusements. In addition, Spiritualism offered a set of beliefs very different from what most western New Yorkers had become accustomed to in religion. Spiritualism appealed to disaffected evangelicals for a variety of reasons. Unlike evangelicalism, Spiritualism disregarded the concept of hell, which endeared them to Universalists. Spiritualism did not discipline or judge, which appealed to evangelicals tired of church discipline. Spiritualism was a radical yet refreshing change that focused on positive aspects of life and disregarded sin, control and discipline. Belief in Spiritualism eliminated the anxiety and discord that many evangelicals experienced while trying for conversion. Many people found its message – that there was definitely happy, rewarding life after death – innately comforting. As historian Ann Braude has pointed out, Spiritualism promised what no other sect could, “the abolition of death.”<sup>150</sup> In addition, Spiritualists supported reforms, such as the abolition of slavery, which had become ingrained in evangelical culture in western New York. Evangelicals who turned to Spiritualism were comforted to find that Spiritualists espoused similar principles.

Although many men were ardent followers of Spiritualism, including Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, women made up the vast majority of those attending séances and developing mediumistic talents. Women, often the caretakers when

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<sup>150</sup> Braude, *Radical Spirits*, p. 201.

a relative or neighbor was on her deathbed, were generally first to try to contact that person after his or her death, especially if that person was a child. In addition, women who developed mediumistic talents and traveled on the popular séance circuit were able to do what women were never able to before: address mixed audiences. This was possible because most of the time the medium would go into a “mediumistic trance.” The medium, while in trance-state was not considered to be a woman but the spirit of whomever she was channeling. From the trance state, the medium could say whatever he – or usually she – desired. It was a way for women to insert themselves publicly into the moral and political scene. Many “trance speakers” took full advantage of this opportunity so rarely afforded them in nineteenth century America. In their trances, they insisted the spirits they talked to supported women’s rights and abolition of slavery. As the influence of Spiritualism spread, so too did the progressive messages espoused by the “spirits.” Because many who practiced Spiritualism were already open to social reform, the messages were met warmly. In addition, because Spiritualism lacked a hierarchy, such as a disapproving minister or congregation, its practitioners were never prevented from activism in the public arena. This provided nineteenth-century Spiritualists an opportunity they, together with Quakers, took full advantage of.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **“Make Straight the Way of the Lord”: Moral Reform in the Burned Over District<sup>151</sup>**

The era of revivalism began to decline in the Burned Over District in the 1830s and 1840s. A commitment to reform remained a part of life in heavily-evangelical rural areas. As people pulled away from revivalism, the commitment to moral reform remained. Moral reform offered rural western New Yorkers, especially women, a new way to channel their emotions and energy after the decline of evangelicalism. Moral reform movements often began and enjoyed the strongest support in the rural areas which had previously been “burned over” by revivalism. Many people who became involved in reform movements were rural and lower-class, although their names have slipped through the cracks of historic recognition.

People often associated with reform movements, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Gerrit Smith, were wealthy and well-educated. They became well-known because their wealth and prestige made them more visible and mobile. People of this class campaigning for moral reform were the exception to the rule, however. A large number of rural western New Yorkers had become intensely religious in the Burned Over District and, as revivalism declined, shifted their energy to reform. Evangelical Christians in rural areas mainly turned to the temperance movement and abolitionism after the decline of revivalism. Rural Quakers, Hicksites and Spiritualists became active in both abolitionism and women’s rights. Together, Quakers, Hicksites and Spiritualists provided a bridge that turned the Burned Over District into what could be called the “Reform District.” Largely

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<sup>151</sup> *Holy Bible*, King James Version, John 1:23

because of strong and constant pressure from Quakers, Hicksites and Spiritualists, western New York became the site of the first Women's Rights Convention and was known as the "abolitionist belt." Western New York reformers fervently supported dress, diet, educational, and prison reforms. Women like Emily Howland and Amy Kirby Post, although largely unknown outside their native region, worked to ensure women's suffrage not only for themselves, but for women.

Many Burned Over District residents, especially evangelical Christians, became involved in reform through the temperance movement. Early adherents to the temperance movement sought to control unstable behavior exhibited by "drunkards" in their church congregations and in their families, much the way revivalists had sought to control salvation of church and family members. The Methodists forbade consumption of all alcoholic beverages by the 1820s, and other Protestant sects followed suit, as increasing numbers of Christians deemed alcohol consumption sinful.

The temperance movement became more radical as it progressed. In its earliest stage, the temperance movement only eschewed the use of hard liquor. Eventually, alcoholic beverages of any sort became unwelcome in temperance circles. Temperance adherents began to reject the use of wine in communion. Rhoda Bement along with other members of the church, complained in 1844 that the Communion wine at the Seneca Falls Presbyterian Church was highly alcoholic and inappropriate. Bement's brother, Elias Denison, claimed the wine tasted highly alcoholic and the smell of it had at times made him feel intoxicated. Prudence Douglass testified that the wine was "unpleasant &

the smell disagreeable.”<sup>152</sup> Eleanor Lum, who later became a Millerite, stated, “I always smell it as soon as poured out. It produces a flush & either sick or nervous headache. I have often remarked to my Husband that I did not wonder that reformed men were or should be afraid to taste or remain in the House when the wine was poured out....It always produces headache.”<sup>153</sup> Lum’s statement about “reformed men” illustrates that a temperance movement was already underway in Seneca Falls and possibly in the church itself.

To combat the worldly sin of alcohol consumption, temperance advocates turned their attention outward, much like evangelicals had targeted the “unsaved” through revivalism. W. J. Rorabaugh has argued that both revivalism and the temperance movement “were interwoven because both were responses to the same underlying social tensions and anxieties.”<sup>154</sup> Much as early, rural Burned Over District settlers had turned to religion to escape illness, death, poverty, and family tension, many who had engaged in revivalism embraced the temperance movement to once again exert control over a rising population, rowdiness, and crime. The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, which cut through the Burned Over District, exerted a great amount of influence on the temperance movement in the region. As many as 30,000 people worked for the canal system, many of them poor native-born Americans and impoverished immigrants. As the canal led to the swift development of “boom towns,” the sharp rise in the population led to instability, crime, drunkenness and violence. The towpaths were dangerous places to

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<sup>152</sup> Altschuler and Saltzgeber, *Revivalism, Social Conscience and Community*, p. 107.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>154</sup> Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic*, p. 210.

venture. The drinking and crime in boom towns was so dire that residents who had welcomed the canal became angry that the State was not ensuring the peace and safety of their region. The Bethel Missionary Society took this task upon itself. The missionaries delivered food and clothing to canal workers and went to great lengths to ensure the workers had a place to worship on the Sabbath and tried desperately to discourage drinking. Although their evangelical message went largely unheeded – most of the canal workers were Irish Catholic immigrants – they were mostly well-liked by the workers for the physical comforts they provided.<sup>155</sup> For western New Yorkers, the Erie Canal stood as a visible reminder of a society out of control. Historian Andrew Barr has written that Americans became obsessed with exerting control over themselves and their society in the decades immediately after the Revolution, and that the temperance movement was one of the most visible and powerful symptoms of a nation bent on control of societal behavior.<sup>156</sup> The control western New Yorkers had exerted over their own salvations in revivals foreshadowed the control they would wrest from drunks and “rowdies.”

Temperance advocates used a variety of means to exert control over widespread drinking. The temperance advocates of Seneca Falls turned their attention to “the world” by convincing shop keepers to stop selling alcohol, electing temperance advocates to office, and operating temperance newspapers.\* The most common tactic employed by

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<sup>155</sup> Sheriff, *The Artificial River*, p. 161.

<sup>156</sup> Barr, Andrew, *Drink: A Social History of America* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1999), pp. 355-366.

\* Other tactics used to recruit new members ranged from depressing and disturbing to pathetic and silly. Temperance extremists deemed cold water the only acceptable beverage. (“Cold water” became a rallying

temperance advocates, church-based temperance societies, were popular in rural, sparsely-populated areas. Temperance societies often drew no distinction between religious and temperance rhetoric. These societies utilized religious tactics previously used to encourage conversions and root out sin. The rural community of West Bloomfield, Ontario County started a large temperance society in 1837 with 117 men and women, a large number for a very small population. The Temperance Society gained members almost solely through religious lectures and revivals. Five new joined the society on July 5, 1838. This date is significant because temperance reformers often used the Fourth of July to inspire others to “freedom” from alcoholic drink. The Society attended a lecture given by General A.W. Riley at the Brick Church in Rochester, Monroe County and added forty-six new members. A sermon by a Mr. Littlejohn in May of 1839 garnered an amazing 156 new recruits. A lecture by Rev. Merrill from Riga, Monroe County provoked 128 people to join in 1842, and 121 members enlisted after a lecture by Benjamin W. Baker. An additional 164 new members joined in rapid succession between January and March of 1843.<sup>157</sup> A temperance society formed in the

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cry and a description of temperance extremists after some sacrificed coffee and tea as equally unhealthy and only indulged in cold water.) Widely-circulated temperance newsletters contained stories of children with drunken parents and abused wives. Artistic renderings of drunks surrounded by crime were ubiquitous in these publications. Alcohol became personified in stories and songs as an agent of the devil seeking to destroy Christian families and communities. Rum became “demon rum.” Temperance adherents tied alcohol consumption directly to sin and crime. Temperance advocates even used alcohol to scare their children. William Hines wrote, “If you must sometimes scare them in the room of telling them that bears will catch them, or hobgoblins or ghosts will catch them, tell them that *Rum* will catch them.” (Rorabaugh 198) The temperance movement inspired songs, often called “cold water hymns,” poems and books.

<sup>157</sup> Temperance Society, West Bloomfield, NY. Record book, 1837-1850. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. As with revivals, not all converts to temperance stayed the course. Between 1838 and 1842, six male affiliates, Jasper C. Peck, Thomas Hubbard, A.W. Nash, L.C. Fitch, John E. Seete and Jason Alvord, withdrew their membership.



hamlet of Marion Corners, Wayne County in 1847 “by a few energetic men, among whom were two clergymen,” A.B. Clemons of Palmyra, Wayne County wrote to John Graham of Geneva, Ontario County. Later, the Society charged Brother James Holliday “with violation of his [blotted out] obligation in granting Lisences for Sale of Intoxicating Liquors.” Whereas the church once censured members for public intoxication, temperance societies monitored who allowed the sale of liquor in the same light. “This temperance business is harsh on the purse,” one western New Yorker commented, probably thinking of tavern and grocery store owners forced to close their doors.<sup>158</sup>

Temperance circles, always associated with a church, maintained a strictly religious tone, even as the movement oriented itself to the “world.” For example, the Temperance Society of West Bloomfield began calling itself the Cold Water Army and became religiously militant in tone. A passage written in the record books illustrates that the Cold Water Army saw temperance as a cause akin to salvation. “Our unfeigned gratitude and thanksgiving to Almighty God, ought also to inspire us all to confidence in the success of this Holy Cause and calls on everyone who regards his happiness, his country or his God, for his unremitting exertion, in the support there of until the Cause shall triumph, and until Demon intemperance shall hide his hideous head in confusion shame and despair,” it reads.<sup>159</sup> The Society sought to control the number of taverns in the hamlet and organized children’s Temperance Societies in all West Bloomfield area

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<sup>158</sup> Emma Koberg Letters

<sup>159</sup> Temperance Society, West Bloomfield, NY. Record book, 1837-1850. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

schools. By 1842, a children's wing of the society had been formed. On at least one occasion, the children's society performed a musical for the church congregation. "The juvenile tee-totallers, then edified the congregation by singing a spirited cold water song...elicited from the assembly sundry demonstrations of applause," the Society's secretary wrote on January 25, 1842. Later in the year, the Cold Water Army examined pieces of a "drunkard's" stomach to illustrate the effects alcohol had on the physical body.<sup>160</sup> However, W.J. Rorabaugh has pointed out that famed physician Benjamin Rush had expounded on the unhealthful effects of overindulgence in the eighteenth century to no avail.<sup>161</sup> It was not until temperance became a holy cause in the 1830's that Americans started to pay attention. The physical detriment caused by alcohol never became a top priority for temperance advocates. Although physical harm was sometimes mentioned in temperance newspapers and lectures, it always took a backseat to crime and sin. The damage to the spiritual body was what mattered. Women, who had taken the lead in revivalism and had monitored family members' salvations, were more actively involved in the temperance movement than men. The movement declined by the end of the 1840s when drinking rates dropped sharply, largely due to efforts of temperance societies. Drinking rates dropped from five gallons of alcohol per capita in 1820 to one gallon per capita in 1840.

Although many non-evangelicals and Quakers supported temperance, evangelicals were the most vehement adherents to temperance. Their intensity alienated

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<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic*, pp. 40-41.

many people, especially young, single men. In many respects the temperance advocates alienated potential allies by drawing no distinction between a person who drank alcoholic beverages and a “drunkard.” Temperance circles could be meddlesome and judgmental, a trait already present in many churches. The judgmental strain in Protestant churches began to irritate church-goers in the wake of Finney’s embrace of perfectionism. A rise in population and improved travel facilitated the rise of secular and intellectual pursuits, and many young people, particularly men, did not join church-based groups as quickly as in years past. In West Bloomfield, the Temperance Society lost at least three young male members in its first year, Jasper Peck, A.W. Nash and L.C. Fitch, to the Young Men’s Association, founded in 1836. Started by eleven young men, the association held “debates, lectures, dissertations and other such exercises.” All members paid \$1.25 per year in dues. Debate topics suggested by these young men illustrate that they were leaning away from the anti-intellectual, emotion-based revivalism most likely espoused by their parents. “Is there any probability of the truth of the charges...brought against the Catholics?” the group asked. The young men, in the height of the Nativist movement, decided the charges against Catholics were false. Other topics raised by the debate group show their willingness to question and discuss what they had been taught. “Is the design of removeing the Indians to the west calculated to promote their good?” they asked. “Ought the vending of ardent spirits be prohibited by law?” Other topics included “Will the science of phrenology prove any practical utility to mankind?” and “Which is more

profitable, a fat Hog or a handsome Woman?" The latter topic, suggested by C.C. Hamlin, was discarded.<sup>162</sup>

The anti-slavery movement owed much of its beginning to the temperance movement. Evangelical Christians found the sins of greed and laziness especially offensive. Southern slaveholders claimed for decades that the *Bible* upheld slavery, a claim Christians all over the country, with few exceptions, accepted. However, during the religious movements in the Burned Over District, many western New Yorkers challenged this theory. Newly-revitalized Christians saw the teachings of Christ and the "peculiar institution" as incompatible. Once involved in temperance, many reform-minded people became involved with abolition. Abolitionist Christians deemed the institution of slavery, which served to oppress the slaves and make the wealthy man wealthier, sinful and evil. Whereas intemperance, or overindulgence in alcoholic beverages, led to crime and domestic abuse, slavery, the offspring of greed and laziness, fostered opportunities for physical and sexual abuse of slaves, as well as poor work ethic for Southern whites. Alvan Stewart, an abolitionist in Mexico, Oswego County, called slavery and drunkenness the "two monsters," and intended to see them "yoked together, and thrown as far beyond the sun as it is from here to it."<sup>163</sup> Temperance workers frequently stated that addiction to alcohol was a kind of slavery. Amelia Bloomer of Seneca Falls, writing in a temperance newsletter under the name "Gloriana," frequently made the comparison between alcohol and slavery. Heman Humphrey, president of Amherst College, issued a

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<sup>162</sup> Young Men's Association, West Bloomfield, NY. Meeting minutes, 1836-1844. Study Center for Early Religious Life in Western New York, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

<sup>163</sup> Wellman, Judith, *Grass Roots Reform in the Burned-Over District of Upstate New York: Religion, Abolitionism, and Democracy* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000) .p. 166.

pamphlet entitled *Parallel between Intemperance and the Slave-Trade*. Its cover depicted a chained slave praying in a corner, next to a clearly intoxicated slave trader, gripping a bottle of rum.<sup>164</sup> Famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison began his reform career in the temperance movement, but quickly became convinced slavery posed a greater moral threat to American society than intemperance.

Because of the overwhelming moral tone of the abolitionist movement, abolitionism became strongest in rural places which had been hotbeds of religious fervor during the revivalist era. Historian Judith Wellman has pointed out that farmers and other rural people made up the majority of “benevolent reformers and abolitionists” in the townships of Ithaca, Mexico and Paris in central New York.<sup>165</sup> Similarly, in Cayuga, Wayne, Ontario and Seneca counties, farmers and other rural people also made up the bulk of reformers. Cayuga County had previously been involved in religious enthusiasm, but also had the additional influence of large numbers of anti-slavery Quakers and Hicksites.

While mainline Protestant sects in the North came to support abolition gradually and unevenly, Quakers unanimously opposed slavery by the mid-eighteenth century. In 1776, the Society excluded slave-owning Quakers. Most early opponents of slavery, North and South, were Quakers. Quakers organized the New York Manumission Society in 1785.<sup>166</sup> Slavery, however, had a strong foothold in downstate New York. Through

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<sup>164</sup> Rorabaugh, *Alcoholic Republic*, p. 215.

<sup>165</sup> Wellman, *Grass Roots Reform*, p. 201.

<sup>166</sup> New-York Historical Society

pressure from the Manumission Society, the state passed An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in 1799, but slavery in New York State was not officially abolished until July 4, 1827. Although slavery remained entrenched in areas such as Long Island, Manhattan and the lower Hudson River region, it had never become economically important in upstate New York largely because farms in the region were very small and the economy unstable.\* Slavery was not practical on small farms with a high rate of crop failure. In addition, many western New Yorkers (or their parents) had originated in Vermont, the first state to abolish slavery, and were likely not comfortable with the institution.<sup>167</sup> Quakers in the Burned Over District used the region as a base for anti-slavery agitation, especially in rural communities such as Farmington, Ontario County and large sections of Cayuga County. Ex-slaves and abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman settled in western New York and found staunch allies in the Quakers.

The large pocket of Quakers and Hicksites in southern Cayuga County were especially active in the Underground Railroad, and organizing educational opportunities for former slaves and free blacks in western New York. A study of the Howland family illustrates the dedication to moral reform that permeated Quaker culture. Benjamin and Mary Slocum Howland were part of the large influx of New England Quakers that entered Cayuga County in the late eighteenth century. Together with other Quakers, the Howlands worshipped in a log cabin in Scipio Township until a meeting house was built

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\* In 1820, only 49 slaves lived in Cayuga County (1820 Federal Census).

<sup>167</sup> The Vermont Constitution of 1777 abolished slavery in Chapter 1, Article 1

in 1810. The population of Quakers in this corner of Cayuga County became so large that there were four meeting houses in the township by mid-nineteenth century.<sup>168</sup>

The Howland's son, Slocum, born in 1794, became a shop keeper in the tiny hamlet of Sherwood in Scipio Township, Cayuga County. Sherwood was chosen as the county seat in 1804 but lost the designation in 1805.<sup>169</sup> As a result of this loss, Sherwood remained tiny and isolated. Because of its large Quaker population, however, Sherwood was important to moral reform movements. As a landowner and shopkeeper of some means, Slocum Howland was a compassionate man who readily gave no-interest loans to friends and neighbors and assisted many Scipio residents in purchasing homes, land and educating their children. Most important, however, was Howland's dedication to abolition and women's rights. Slocum Howland actively assisted fugitive slaves and made his home in Sherwood a stop on the Underground Railroad. He attended the National Anti-Slavery Conference annually and kept issues of the *Liberator* in his home and shop. He passed his dedication to these causes as well as his financially generous nature to his daughter Emily Howland, born in Sherwood in 1827.<sup>170</sup>

Emily Howland, as a Quaker woman and daughter of a well-to-do reformer, had a much different upbringing than many of her lower-class, evangelical Protestant neighbors. The Howland family hired help for household chores such as laundry, cooking

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<sup>168</sup> Wiggins, Dorothy, *History of Sherwood, New York* (Auburn, New York: Cayuga County Arts Council, 1989), p. 22.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>170</sup> Breault, Judith Colucci, *The World of Emily Howland: Odyssey of a Humanitarian* (Millbrae, California: Les Femmes, 1976), p. 2.

and cleaning. Emily also received an exemplary education at boarding schools in Cayuga County and Philadelphia until the age of eighteen, when many of her Cayuga County contemporaries were illiterate or received very little formal schooling.<sup>171</sup> Unlike evangelicals, Quaker women had the option to be missionaries or traveling ministers, but neither of these options appealed to Emily Howland. By the age of seventeen, however, Emily Howland's commitment to moral reform became obvious. She channeled her energy into campaigning against slavery and for women's suffrage. In 1844, Howland and several other girls wrote an open letter to the Whig party encouraging them to fight slavery. After the letter's publication, Slocum Howland sent Emily to be schooled at radical reformer Mary Grew's school in Philadelphia. Emily Howland's biographer Judith Breault states that Howland was trying to protect his daughter from community reproach over the letter, although no negative reaction to the letter was recorded. Instead, Howland probably saw Emily's potential through the letter and chose to nurture her talent at Grew's school.<sup>172</sup> While he lived, Slocum Howland provided Emily with emotional and financial support in all of her reform-oriented undertakings, which included teaching African-American girls in Washington, D.C. in the late 1850s, working in the "Contraband Camp" in Washington, D.C. during the Civil War and purchasing a farm in Virginia on which to settle displaced former slaves after the war.

Despite Emily Howland's strong reform-oriented upbringing, she was crippled by frequent bouts of depression. The isolation she felt in Sherwood, separated from reformer

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<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.



friends in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., added to her feelings of uselessness. She once compared herself to a “bell never suffered to ring.” She was, she wrote, “a great dangling thing of no sort of use.”<sup>173</sup> Only involvement in moral reform alleviated Emily Howland’s crushing despair, isolation and depression. However, the depression she called her “darkest self” frequently inhibited her from joining more active, well-known women in the front lines of moral reform. As a result, she is largely unknown outside southern Cayuga County.<sup>174</sup>

Other Quakers and Hicksites joined the Howlands as abolitionist activists. Isaac and Hannah Kirby Post moved to Cayuga County from Long Island in 1823. Their youngest child, a son, died sometime before 1827. The Posts, who lived in Scipio Township, undoubtedly knew the large Howland family and may have attended the same meeting house. Hannah Post died in 1827, and Isaac remarried within the year to her sister Amy Kirby. Isaac and Amy had four children, one of whom, Matilda, died by 1848. Isaac’s son with Hannah Post also died young. Isaac and Amy Kirby Post, like the Howlands, dedicated their lives to abolition of slavery and women’s rights. They opened their Cayuga County home as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Unlike the Howlands, the Posts felt the Society of Friends did not embrace abolition strongly enough for their tastes.<sup>175</sup> Orthodox Quakers, while fully committed to moral causes, cautioned Friends from being too aggressive and preferred teaching through good example. Lucretia Mott,

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p 37.

<sup>175</sup> Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, p. 66. Weisberg discusses the Post family’s religious and political beliefs throughout the work.

an orthodox Quaker minister, strictly adhered to this warning.\* Orthodox Quakers hesitated to become active in politics, although some such as Emily Howland, Slocum Howland and Susan B. Anthony evidently disregarded this advice. The Posts joined the Hicksite Quakers, a branch of the Society formed by Amy Post's cousin Elias Hicks. In time, the Posts found even the Hicksites too politically inactive. They formed the Congregational Friends in Seneca County with other disaffected Hicksites and Quakers.<sup>176</sup> Later, the Posts and other Congregational Friends splintered off to form the radical Progressive Friends.

The case of William O. Duvall illustrates that some of the most active reformers in western New York lived in rural districts, and that many came under Quaker influence. One of the most radical abolitionists in the region, Duvall adopted "plain" Quaker speech, addressing everyone as "Friend" and using "thee" and "thou," although he never joined the Society of Friends. Duvall routinely hid runaway slaves in his home, located on an island in the Seneca River in the rural township of Mentz, Cayuga County. He also employed free blacks to assist him with farm work, a habit which caused his neighbors to dub the island home "Hayti." Duvall adopted the name with pride. Duvall and Slocum Howland communicated with each other, constantly looking for safe havens for slaves.<sup>177</sup>

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\* The Society of Friends cautioned its followers from being too aggressive, but not from working for equality through good example. Quakers who followed this advice, like Mott, did so mainly to avoid the sinful world of politics. No evidence exists that politically active Quakers in western New York were censured the way some mainstream Protestants were.

<sup>176</sup> Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, p. 66.

<sup>177</sup> Cayuga County Historian's Office, "Sites Related to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, and African-American Life," pp. 244-245.

Howland wrote Duvall about a family he was sheltering who had recently been discovered by a Southern woman visiting Sherwood. Duvall replied, "If he were to come to my place I would protect him to the last drop of blood in my veins. He and his family will be safe here and I will give him employment."<sup>178</sup> Duvall frequently wrote to well-known reformers and politicians such as Gerrit Smith and William Henry Seward, urging them to be more radical in their quest for abolition. In 1843, Duvall and one hundred men in Mentz, mostly farmers, sent an anti-slavery petition to Congress.<sup>179</sup> The fact that one hundred farmers in Mentz signed the petition exemplifies that many who took actions for moral reform were rural. No similar petitions were issued in urbanized Geneva or Canandaigua. Isaac Bell of Weedsport, William and Martha Kirk of Sterling Center, Canfield and Terissa Jarrod of Conquest and James Hickok and William Ingham of Meridian, were several of the rural Cayuga County residents who secreted and aided runaway slaves. Hickok and Ingham also aided in rescuing a runaway slave named George Washington from Auburn State Prison, whose former master had come to take him back to South Carolina.<sup>180</sup> Sometimes evangelical women worked with Quakers and Hicksites to raise funds for anti-slavery fairs. Emily Howland recalled sewing a pot-holder labeled "anti-slave holder" for a neighborhood anti-slavery fair when she was a child in the 1830s.

With their Quaker and Hicksite neighbors, evangelical Christians in Cayuga County joined the abolitionist movement. Evangelical Protestant reformers were, with

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<sup>178</sup> Cayuga County Historian's Office, "Sites Related to the Underground Railroad," p. 249.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

Quakers and Hicksites, deeply involved in moral reform in western New York. Evangelicalism symbolically espoused the principals of independence and hard work so culturally important in the decades after the American Revolution. Gradually, evangelicals realized that these values were belied by slavery. Several evangelical and non-evangelical churches in rural communities, especially the Baptist and Covenanter churches in Sterling, Cayuga County and the Presbyterian Church of King Ferry, Cayuga County held abolitionist meetings. Reverend Charles Anderson of the Sennett Federated Church housed runaway slaves in the parsonage. Evangelical church members, especially women, began to form “benevolent societies” in accordance with their interpretation of the *Bible*. This generally occurred in the aftermath of revivalism, when communities began to become more stable. In the 1840s and 1850s, Cassandra Green Hamlin, for instance, led a group of Port Byron, Cayuga County women to organize boxes of “goods” to antislavery groups. Hamlin also worked with other women to educate the children of ex-slaves.<sup>181</sup> Church members put their extra time and money into these societies, which embodied certain Christian principles. Michael P. Young has perceptively pointed out that the evangelical theory of “public confession” of personal sin caused evangelicals to turn their attention to national sin.<sup>182</sup> Through benevolent societies, church members sought to purge the nation of sins such as slavery. Most evangelical reformers were rural people, especially because evangelical revivalism had been so concentrated in outlying areas and never gained similar support in urbanized areas. Of the homes and businesses

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 256-257.

<sup>182</sup> Young, Michael P. “Confessional Protest: The Religious Birth of U.S. National Social Movements.” *American Sociological Review* Vol. 67, No. 5 (Oct., 2002), pp. 660-688.

in Cayuga County positively identified as stops on the Underground Railroad, all, with the exception of the Port Byron Hotel, were in outlying, agricultural communities. William and Martha Kirk of Sterling, Cayuga County, who opened their home to fugitive slaves, were faithful members of the Sterling Baptist Church. Canfield and Terissa Jerrod of Conquest, Cayuga County, who also housed slaves, were staunch Wesleyan Methodists.<sup>183</sup>

The women's rights movement sprang, almost accidentally, from the anti-slavery movement. In 1831, brothers Lewis and Arthur Tappan founded the first Anti-Slavery Society in the state. Abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Weld and Wendell Phillips soon became household names because of the impact of this society. Sarah and Angelina Grimke, who had been reared on a slaveholding South Carolina plantation and became Quakers, were the first women to speak publicly for the society. Public speaking by women drew the ire of ministers and many male abolitionists. Abolitionist women were encouraged to raise funds for anti-slavery fairs and join female benevolent associations, but speaking publicly against slavery was deemed unacceptable. Susan B. Anthony of Rochester, an abolitionist and temperance advocate, found herself similarly barred from lecturing on these issues. Lucretia Coffin Mott was famously denied a seat at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840.

The women's rights movement found fertile ground with many frustrated women who tried to take part in reform movements, only to find themselves silenced. Reform-oriented women, who supported temperance and abolition, banded together to campaign

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<sup>183</sup> Cayuga County Historian's Office, "Sites Related to the Underground Railroad," pp. 240, 272.

for women's rights. For Quaker and Hicksite women, who were allowed to speak in church and act as traveling ministers, had to ensure limited ability to speak outside their homes and meeting houses. Quaker and Hicksite women in western New York supported women's rights fervently. Spiritualist women, who like Quakers and Hicksites spoke publicly on reform, although often in "trance" state, added another force to the movement.

Not all women's rights campaigners in western New York were Quakers or Spiritualists, but members of these sects were in the vast majority. Evangelical women, who had been so involved in temperance reform and abolitionism, were much less involved in the campaign for women's rights. Although evangelical women had enjoyed new leadership roles in planning revivals and organizing benevolent societies, many evangelical women felt compelled to provide an example of Christian piety for their families in the domestic sphere and eschewed public speaking and campaigning. While evangelical women had created new leadership positions for themselves in the church and at home, they also assumed the role of religious guardian and teacher, which had belonged exclusively to men in the colonial period and early nineteenth century. This position as moral guide kept many evangelical women firmly in the home. Conversely, Quaker and Spiritualist women, largely separated by their religious cultures from influence of the cult of domesticity, took the lead in the early women's rights movement. With the changing religious tone in moral reform, more women from non-evangelical sects and urbanized areas took began to take part in reform. Although the women's rights movement in this region of the Finger Lakes was dominated by rural women with Quaker

and Spiritualist background, a few women from areas such as Geneva began to take part in women's rights.

After its foundation in 1848, Spiritualists, with Friends, became closely tied to both abolitionism and women's rights. When Kate and Maggie Fox were sent to live with their sister Leah Fish in Rochester, they befriended the Posts. The Posts became the earliest and most devoted converts to belief in spirit communication. Isaac later became a Spiritualist medium and healer. With Kate and Maggie, Isaac Post believed he succeeded in contacting his dead daughter Matilda. It gave Post comfort to think the little girl was around him always. Eliab Capron, a signer of the *Declaration of Sentiments*, estimated that by 1850, one hundred Spiritualist mediums resided in Auburn, Cayuga County.<sup>184</sup> Clandestine followers of Spiritualism most likely made the number even greater.

Isaac and Amy Post exerted much influence on the Fox girls. Their own mother was somewhat negligent and their father was aloof and stern. In fact, John David Fox remained in Hydesville almost the entire length of the girls' career, never traveling or attending séances with them. Although the Posts had strayed from orthodox Quaker teaching, they maintained a strong belief in the Inner Light which demanded the equality of all people and strongly embraced reform. It is not surprising, then, that some of the first messages from the "spirits" illustrated support for reform movements. Under the Posts' parental influence, and possibly to please them, the Fox girls interpreted the spirit

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<sup>184</sup> Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, p. 121.

messages with a reform-oriented bent. The spirits believed in women's rights and were abolitionists.<sup>185</sup>

The women's rights movement in Cayuga, Ontario, Wayne and Seneca counties was largely dominated by a tight circle of Progressive and Congregational Friends, Hicksites, Quakers and Spiritualists beginning with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Historian Ann Braude has stated that "dissident Quakers in upstate New York provided the nucleus" for the new movement.<sup>186</sup> Both Braude and historian Nancy Hewitt argue that "ultraist" women involved in the movement originated in "Hicksite farming villages in western New York."<sup>187</sup> Those that had moved to Rochester remained on the "lower rungs" of society.<sup>188</sup> Most of the women involved in organizing and running the convention, with the exception of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, belonged to a Quaker-oriented sect. Many also practiced Spiritualism. The Quaker and Spiritualist traditions of equality between sexes provided these women with a base from which to strike out at the oppression of women.

In the summer of 1848, Lucretia Mott traveled to Waterloo, Seneca County to visit her sister, Martha Coffin Wright. She met with Stanton, who lived in nearby Seneca Falls, and with Mary Ann McClintock and Jane Hunt. The women, who were all Quakers except Stanton, decided to hold a convention to discuss and promote women's rights. The

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<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>186</sup> Braude, Ann, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 57.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.



women were shocked that the convention drew three hundred people, including forty men, from Waterloo, Seneca Falls and outlying districts of Seneca and Cayuga counties. The fact that many rural people traveled miles to the convention demonstrates that women's rights was an issue in which rural people were interested in and ready to support.

Rural people were not only interested in women's rights, but were frequently more radical in their beliefs than the wealthier, urbanized women who engaged in reform movements. This circle of what Hewitt terms "ultraist" women exuded more radical ideals which at times alienated their own associates. Most "ultraist" women were rural Hicksites and Spiritualists. After the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, a group of participants met in Rochester, Monroe County several weeks later. Almost every woman at the meeting was a Hicksite, Progressive Friend or Spiritualist. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, authors of the *Declaration of Sentiments*, opposed the appointment of a woman as the next convention's director. Lamenting it as "a most hazardous experiment," they pleaded the other suffragists to allow James Mott the position. The two women advocated the position that had driven many to the women's rights movement in the first place: non-involvement of women. According to Braude, the convention almost disbanded over this issue. With much persuasion, mostly from Amy Post, Stanton and Mott agreed to allow Abigail Bush to direct the next convention.<sup>189</sup>

Western New Yorkers campaigned for other reforms as well. Dress reform became an important issue for women in the region. Dress reform led to diet and health

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<sup>189</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 59.

reform, also popular in the region. Reformers advocated the modernization of medicine and were early supporters of healing through the water cure, healthy diet and exercise, and spas. Some of the earliest spas in the United States were founded in the Finger Lakes Region. Reformers encouraged others to use diet to prevent disease and more natural ways to cure illness, eschewing harsh, destructive medicines such as calomel and laudanum. Education reform also sprang largely from the women's rights movement. Women in western New York, encouraged and inspired by Elizabeth Blackwell, the first American woman to receive a medical degree, pushed for advances in educational opportunities for women and girls.\* Many women chose education through which to advance women's rights. Emily Howland became a life-long educator and assisted with the founding of several schools for African American girls. As Judith Wellman wrote, that although New York was not alone in experiencing revivalism and moral reform, "it nurtured abolitionists, temperance people, dress reformers, water cure enthusiasts, peace advocates, educational reformers, asylum-builders and anti-tight-lacing societies. Although it was not the only reform area in American, it remained a vibrant, churning center of the storm for three decades and more."<sup>190</sup> The combination of evangelical Christian revival, Quaker and Spiritualist influence and the negative social conditions most had endured drove residents of western New York to strive for an improved society.

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\* Elizabeth Blackwell received her degree from Geneva Medical College (now Hobart College) in Geneva, Ontario County, in 1849, ranked first in her class. Her sister Emily later became a doctor and her sister Anna became a famous reform lecturer on the Spiritualist circuit. Both brothers, Henry and Samuel, became well-known abolitionists. Henry married women's rights reformer Lucy Stone and Samuel married Antoinette Brown, the first female minister.

<sup>190</sup> Wellman, Judith, "Crossing Over Cross: Whitney Cross' Burned-Over District as a Social History," *Reviews in American History* 17 (1989): 159.

For evangelicals in western New York, the temperance movement and abolitionism provided a way to create a moral society and free the nation from sin in aftermath of revivalism. Like revivalism, moral reform provided rural evangelicals with a way to channel their emotion and energy while providing a sense of being part of a whole that was working for the greater good. The evangelical tradition of “purifying” society of sin led many evangelicals into reform movements. For Quakers, long ridiculed for their progressive beliefs, the era of moral reform offered a more receptive environment to spread their values. Moral reform gave evangelicals, Quakers and Spiritualists an important sense of purpose. As Emily Howland wrote in her old age, people must “strive to overcome weakness & failure...a purposeless life is the most dreary one in the world.”<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Breault, *World of Emily Howland*, p. 149.

**Afterword**  
**The Burned Over District Since 1860**

*Moral Reform*

By 1860, anti-slavery sectionalism was high in western New York, and when the Civil War broke out in 1861, many western New York reformers supported the war wholeheartedly, with the exception of pacifist Quakers. One out of every six Union soldiers was from New York State. Among this number was William O. Duvall III, son of the owner of “Hayti” in Mentz, Cayuga County. He survived the war only to die a year later. After he no longer needed to hide runaway slaves, Duvall assisted free blacks with finding employment and campaigned for women’s suffrage. Unfortunately he died in poverty, and was much lamented by Cayuga County.<sup>192</sup>

Spiritualists, as abolitionists, largely supported the Civil War, and the Spiritualist newspaper *Banner of Light* encouraged male Spiritualists to join the Union Army. Spiritualists claimed Abraham Lincoln was inspired by spirits when drafting the Emancipation Proclamation. Unlike Spiritualists, the pacifist Quakers largely disapproved of the Civil War, although many Quaker women served as nurses to the soldiers and teachers to the newly-freed slaves. Congregational Friend and Spiritualist Amy Post collected food and supplies for ex-slaves during the Civil War. She took in an ex-slave, Harriet Jacobs, who lived with the Posts and under their encouragement wrote her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Amy Post and Lydia Maria Child wrote the introduction and conclusion.

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<sup>192</sup> Cayuga County Historian’s Office, “Sites Related to the Underground Railroad,” p. 252.

After the Civil War, moral reform movements in western New York were largely secular in nature, most likely due to a decline in religious fervor in the region. The religion-bound temperance movement largely declined due to its own success. The consumption of alcoholic beverages dropped sharply in the 1840s and 1850s, although temperance advocates who pushed for total prohibition were, of course, disappointed. Temperance again became a popular cause in the late nineteenth century in certain parts of the country, such as the South and Midwest, but was never again as popular in New York State.

After Elmira College for women opened its doors in 1855, women's education made great advancements. Henry Wells founded Wells College in the tiny village of Aurora, Cayuga County in 1863 as an institution of higher learning exclusively for women, although the college admitted men for the first time in 2005. Quaker Ezra Cornell founded Cornell University in Ithaca, Tompkins County in 1865, which immediately accepted students of either sex and any race or religion. Many of Emily Howland's former students went on to attend Cornell. William Smith of Geneva attempted to found a college for Spiritualists, but failed at this endeavor. William Smith College for Women opened in 1906 in Geneva, adjacent to the Hobart College campus.

### *Religion*

The religious and ethnic makeup of western New York changed dramatically after the revivalist era of the Second Great Awakening. Beginning in the 1840s, a wave of Irish immigrants settled in the Finger Lakes region. For instance, in the 1850 Federal Census, Geneva, Ontario County was home to less than fifty families bearing Irish

surnames.<sup>193</sup> In 1870, one hundred and fifty Irish families called Geneva home.<sup>194</sup> Italian immigrants began arriving in even larger numbers in the 1880s.<sup>195</sup> After the revivalism in the Burned Over District came to a close, evangelical Protestant influence rapidly disintegrated. In fact, the nation's most famous atheist, Robert Green Ingersoll, was born in 1833, during the height of revivalism, in tiny Dresden, Yates County, south of Geneva. Because of the large immigrant population, Roman Catholicism, which had once represented the smallest sect in western New York, quickly became the largest and remains the largest religious presence today. For example, in 2000, Catholics made up almost a third of the population of Cayuga County, over a quarter of Ontario and Seneca counties, and roughly a fifth of Wayne County. Evangelical Protestants in 2000, however, represented only 9.16% of Cayuga County, 3.85% of Ontario County, 4.2% of Seneca County and a tiny 2.66% of Wayne County.<sup>196</sup> Other visible religions include Mennonites, the Amish and the Dutch Reformed Church, as well as a small variety of mainline, orthodox Protestant churches.\*

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<sup>193</sup> *Federal Population Census for the State of New York, 1850*, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>194</sup> *Federal Population Census for the State of New York, 1870*, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>195</sup> *Federal Population Census for the State of New York, 1880*, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>196</sup> The Association of Religion Data Archives, [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com)

\* Although few evangelicals live in western New York, signs of evangelical influence remain. A large billboard in Gorham, Ontario County proclaims to passers-by, "The wages of sin is death!" the name of a Finney sermon. A neon sign in the window of a church in Lyons, Wayne County asks in Millerite fashion, "Where will you spend Eternity?"

In the 1860s, more traditionally-minded Spiritualists formed Spiritualist churches, which then joined into a loose assembly.\* In 1879, the Spiritualist Assembly purchased eighteen acres of rural, wooded land in Chautauqua County, New York.<sup>197</sup> Spiritualists moved to the area and built a small village called Lily Dale. Today, in order to purchase one of the brightly-colored Victorian mansions in Lily Dale, one must be a member of a Spiritualist church. The town is inhabited completely by Spiritualist mediums and psychics, whose homes are open to the public for “spirit readings.” Spiritualism was formally recognized as a religion by the federal government in 1893. In 1916, the Fox family home was moved from Hydesville to Lily Dale, but unfortunately burned in 1955.<sup>198</sup> Although still liberal, Spiritualism has turned away from being involved in politics.

The Hicksites and Congregational Friends no longer exist. The Society of Friends has since reunited into one sect, and no longer discourages political activism. Two Quaker meeting houses still operate in the Sherwood, Cayuga County area, and another in Pumpkin Hook, Ontario County remains active. Cayuga County’s most influential Quaker, Emily Howland, lived to the age of 101. Before she died in 1929, she was a peace activist during World War I, was granted the long-desired right to vote and founded a school in Sherwood, paying tuition for most of the children. It has since

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\* Some Christian Spiritualists broke away from the Assemble and formed the Church of Christ (Scientist), also known as Christian Scientists.

<sup>197</sup> Wicker, Christine, *Lily Dale: The True Story of the Town That Talks to the Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, Inc., 2003), p. 2.

<sup>198</sup> Wicker, *Lily Dale*, p. 7.

become part of the public school system and is today called Emily Howland Elementary School.

### *What Remains Today*

The most well-known religion native to the Burned Over District is the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons), although this sect gained the fewest converts in the Burned Over District. The church holds an enormous pageant every summer on Hill Cumorah in Palmyra, Wayne County, where Joseph Smith allegedly received golden tablets from the Angel Moroni. The Millerites left little behind, except Miller's personal chapel on the New York-Vermont border as well as pockets of Seventh Day Adventists in the Adirondack Region. The large house occupied by Jemima Wilkinson and her Publick Universal Friends still stands on a rural road in the township of Jerusalem, Yates County and is privately owned. Remains of New Hope Mills, a community of free blacks with whom Wilkinson traded, are visible from the edge of the Keuka Outlet Trail in the township of Milo, Yates County. Slocum Howland's shop in Sherwood is now the Howland Stone Store Museum, run by the Cayuga County Historical Society, and the Brick Meeting House where the Howlands worshipped is a private residence. The heavily-wooded Hydesville Road still connects the villages of Newark and Lyons, but the hamlet of Hydesville no longer exists. A crumbling one-room schoolhouse (probably attended by the Fox sisters), abandoned cemeteries and a small replica of the Fox home on its original site are all that remain today. The Congregational Church of Sennett, where Pastor Chadwick wrangled with Thomas Barnes over



**Figure 2: Brick Meeting House in Sherwood, Cayuga County<sup>199</sup>**



pedobaptism and where Reverend Anderson hid runaway slaves, combined with the local Baptist congregation and is now the Sennett Federated Church. The Wesleyan Methodist chapel in Seneca Falls is now the site of the Women's Rights Hall of Fame. Statues of Stanton, Bloomer, Anthony and other reformers line the Seneca-Cayuga Canal. Dozens of Underground Railroad stops in the Finger Lakes are standing and occupied today, including Duvall's "Hayti" and the Sennett parsonage. The site of Antoinette Brown's ordination in South Butler is still standing but currently is used as a barn. The Congregation Church in which she preached also remains, but is now a private home. The Lily Dale Historical Society houses in its collection the register from the local hotel, which includes the signatures of reformers Susan B. Anthony and Isabella Beecher Hooker.

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<sup>199</sup> Photograph by Greg Noel, 2006

**Figure 3: Slocum Howland's Store, Sherwood, New York<sup>200</sup>**



*Economics and Politics*

Economically and politically, western New York has changed very little. After railroads were established in Upstate New York, the Erie Canal began its swift decline. Although it had quickly improved New York State's economy in many areas after 1825, it could not compete with faster, more convenient trains that, unlike the canal, ran year-long. Merchants and farmers who relied on the Erie Canal lost business. The economy of what Carol Sheriff called the "canal corridor," which included most of the northern Finger Lakes region, stagnated.<sup>201</sup> The Finger Lakes region remains largely agricultural. Cayuga, Ontario, Seneca and Wayne counties had a total of 722,360 acres of farmland in 1997. Local farmers turned largely to fruit production in the second half of the nineteenth century, and today the economy is largely derived from grapes, wine, apples, cheese, and maple sugar.

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<sup>200</sup> Photograph by Greg Noel, 2006

<sup>201</sup> Sheriff, *Artificial River*, p. 173.

**Figure 4: Former Congregational Church of South Butler, Wayne County<sup>202</sup>**



The very reason many western New Yorkers turned to evangelical Christianity during the Second Great Awakening was poverty, which still haunts the region. In 1999, the rate of people living below the poverty level in Wayne County was 8.6%, 7.3% in Ontario County, and 11.1% and 11.5% in Cayuga and Seneca counties respectively. These figures do not take into account the additional 415,000 New Yorkers who slipped below the poverty level in 2000. The percentage of college-educated residents of these counties is well below the state average of 27.4%. In 2000, for example, only 15.5% of Cayuga County residents had a college degree or higher.<sup>203</sup> Industry is concentrated in cities such as Rochester and Syracuse, and unemployment in rural areas remains high. Geneva, once the wealthiest and most populated community in the Finger Lakes region, has been drained of jobs and saw its population slip to less than 13,617 people in 2006.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Photograph by Greg Noel, 2006

<sup>203</sup> Federal Statistics, [www.fedstats.gov](http://www.fedstats.gov)

<sup>204</sup> The Geneva Area Chamber of Commerce, [www.genevany.com](http://www.genevany.com)

The hamlet of South Butler, Wayne County, is one of the poorest communities in upstate New York.

**Figure 5: Ordination Site of Antoinette Brown Blackwell, South Butler<sup>205</sup>**



The reformism that swept through western New York as a result of the Second Great Awakening established New York as a leading state in progressive societal change. Although the ethnic and religious makeup of the region changed greatly, the state remained entrenched in progressive political movements. Four major abolitionist parties, the Free Soil, Barnburner, Liberty and Anti-Masonic, came to fruition in New York State before emancipation. After emancipation, the reformers of western New York put even more effort into securing women's rights. Without temperance influence, the women's rights movement pulled away from religion and suffrage became the ultimate goal. In 1872, Susan B. Anthony voted in the presidential election. She was tried for treason in the Ontario County Courthouse in Canandaigua and fined \$1.00. She refused to pay.<sup>206</sup> Other upstate New York natives such as Paulina Wright Davis, Matilda Joslyn Gage,

<sup>205</sup> Photograph by Greg Noel, 2006

<sup>206</sup> Ontario County Historical Society, <http://www.ochs.org/Menu/frame.html>

Lucy Colman, Dexter and Amelia Bloomer and William Henry Channing continued the long, arduous fights for women's suffrage through lectures, newsletters, and conventions, assisted, as always, by lesser-known activists. One of these little-known reformers was Charlotte Woodward, who attended the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 at the age of nineteen. She lived to see suffrage granted to women at the age of eighty-one, the convention's only survivor.<sup>207</sup>

Rough frontier conditions and the religious traditions carried to rural western New York from New England combined to ignite the fires of revivalism in the Burned Over District. Evangelical Christians struggled to perfect society, to "make straight the way of the Lord," leaving a tradition of reform long after revivals in the Finger Lakes region became a thing of the past. The institution of reform practiced by rural evangelicals in western New York combined with the progressive ideals espoused by Quakers and Spiritualists to make western New Yorkers, especially women, leaders in societal change.

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<sup>207</sup> Lewis. Jone Johnson, "Voices of 1920,"  
[http://womenshistory.about.com/od/suffrage1900/a/august\\_26\\_wed.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/suffrage1900/a/august_26_wed.htm)

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