



2005

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Recommended Citation

Hanna, Jeffrey G. (2005) "How a frontier preacher made his mark on politics," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*: Vol. 14: Iss. 4, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol14/iss4/6>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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How a frontier preacher made his mark on politics

A new biography demonstrates that debates over religion's place in the public square are centuries old.

By Jeffery G. Hanna

Long before the red state-blue state phenomenon, a Methodist frontier circuit rider named Peter Cartwright introduced evangelical Christianity into politics, running several campaigns of his own and even using a famous opponent's "unchurched" status against him in one of those races.

Cartwright's life in politics and his contentious relationship with Abraham Lincoln are among the intriguing details brought to light in a new book by Robert Bray, the R. Forrest Colwell Professor of English Literature at Illinois Wesleyan.

Peter Cartwright, Legendary Frontier Preacher, published by the University of Illinois Press, is the first full-length biography of the 19th-century preacher, who called himself "God's breaking plough" and is credited for the rapid growth of Methodism in the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys.



Frontier preacher Peter Cartwright

Bray's initial interest in Cartwright was based, in part, on the frontier preacher's role as one of Illinois Wesleyan's founders. However, Bray soon found that Cartwright belonged to a much wider context than just American Methodism. He was active in national issues, including slavery, and was, for 20 years, "a social, political, and religious antagonist" of Abraham Lincoln.

The book traces Cartwright's journey from his birthplace in Virginia to Illinois, where he moved in 1824 because of his opposition of slavery and a desire to live on "free soil." He remained a lifelong resident of the state.

In Illinois, where clergy were not prohibited from running for elected office, Cartwright became active politically, running for the state legislature four times and winning twice. In an 1832 campaign, he placed fourth in an at-large contest to elect four, thereby defeating Lincoln, who finished eighth.

"Cartwright was one of the first to use his local and national constituencies as a preacher to help him be effective as a politician — first to get elected and then to work for policy," said Bray. "But in many respects, Cartwright stood over on the Jacksonian side of the political fence — very much unlike the evangelical Republicans of today who, though they claim to be interested

in things like state's rights, really are more strongly federal in their top-down idea of what the morality of the United States should be.

“Cartwright clearly thought that the Christian Republic had to be based on Christian moral principles and the Bible. But he did not want to reach into every home and tell people how to live.”

Cartwright did use the issue of religion against Lincoln in 1846 when the two men were opponents for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Cartwright ran as a Democrat; Lincoln as a Whig.

Noting that Cartwright and Lincoln agreed on many of the issues of the day, including the Mexican War and slavery, Bray wrote that Cartwright had “just one issue to push: religion, or his Whig opponent's lack of it — the very matter that, by conscience and practical good sense, he ought to have avoided.”

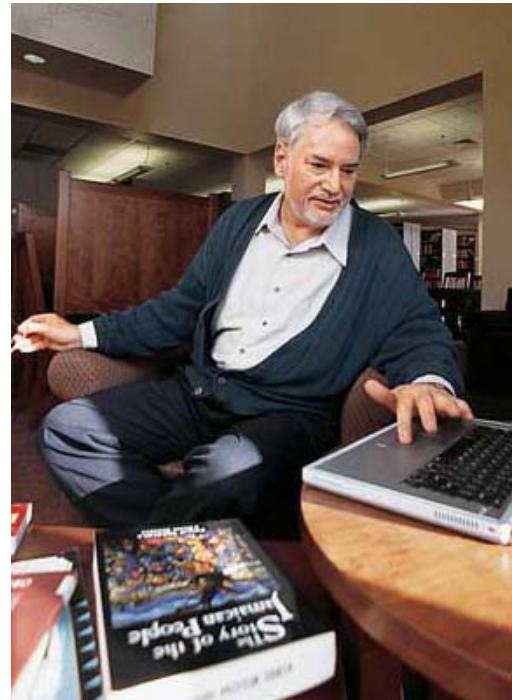
In his campaign, Cartwright called Lincoln an “infidel,” by which, Bray said, he meant that Lincoln “had not been evangelized.” Although Lincoln won the race handily, he did feel it necessary to issue a handbill in which he countered Cartwright's charges, admitting that he was not a church member but claiming he has “never denied the truth of the Scriptures.”

“I don't believe that Lincoln was deeply concerned about losing the race to Cartwright,” Bray said. “But the mere fact that he felt, in his caution, that he had to put out the handbill shows that he was aware that, even at the lowest level of national office, a candidate's religious principles were a litmus test for office.”

Bray also examines the various accounts of Cartwright's later expressions of admiration and support for President Lincoln, especially in his prosecution of the Civil War.

“Whether Cartwright ended up thinking that Lincoln was a great leader and a great man is a real open question,” said Bray. “There are fascinating accounts of a speech that Cartwright made in New York in 1861 in which he allegedly defends Lincoln to a group of New York businessmen. But that is the very last you ever hear of Cartwright speaking of Lincoln.”

Bray, who is currently working on a new book about Lincoln, said that a primary goal of his Cartwright autobiography was making it accessible for all readers.



According to Bray (above), Peter Cartwright introduced evangelism into American politics. (Photo by Marc Featherly)