

----- Through The Years -----

Rev. Peter Cartwright is one of the most interesting and influential Methodist Episcopal preachers of the early nineteenth century. He was a circuit rider who grew to prominence in the church and in politics. He even ran against Abraham Lincoln in two elections.

Peter Cartwright was born in Virginia in 1785 to Peter and Christiana Cartwright. Mr. Cartwright senior had fought in the Revolutionary War. The Cartwrights moved to Kentucky in 1790. Young Peter led a pretty wild life and became quite a gambler. Once, after attending a wedding, he began to feel ill at ease about this life and asked his mother for spiritual help. Christiana, a devout Christian, prayed for him. Peter was so distressed that he thought he was going to die. He promised the Lord that he would turn his life over to Christ if God would help him get over the anxiety he felt. After Cartwright attended a revival meeting in 1801 he decided to become a Methodist. He received an exhorter's license from the church (similar to a Local Pastor today) and was later ordained by Francis Asbury. Rev. Cartwright baptized over 10,000 people and gave over 15,000 sermons. The only books he carried were his Bible, a hymn book and a copy of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1808 he married Frances Gaines. They had two sons and seven daughters. On several occasions Rev. Cartwright was confronted by rowdies who attempted to interrupt his services. He was not above running them off and challenging them physically.

He moved to Illinois in 1824, wanting to live in a free state. He was opposed to slavery, but disagreed with some of the abolitionist's methods, calling them violent and unchristian. He helped to establish the Illinois General Conference. He founded a church in 1838 and a successor church which he started in 1857 still exists today in Pleasant Plains. It is called the Peter Cartwright United Methodist Church.

Rev. Cartwright was very active in politics. He was elected to the Illinois Legislature twice. In 1832 Rev. Cartwright, a Democrat, defeated Abraham Lincoln, the Whig candidate (this was prior to Lincoln becoming a Republican) for the legislative position. The two ran against each other in 1846 for Congress and this time Lincoln won. The campaign was difficult and bitter with both candidates taking many verbal swipes at each other (some things never change). However, in 1862, when the Civil War raged, Rev. Cartwright spoke to a group of New Yorkers opposed to Lincoln's presidency. He admonished the group and said that Lincoln was the right man to go forward and lead the country during the national crisis.

Another aspect of Rev. Cartwright's life which is worth mentioning is that though he had very little formal education, he helped in establishing three Methodist colleges in Illinois. They are: McKendree University (Lebanon, IL), Illinois Wesleyan University (Bloomington, IL), and MacMurray College (Jacksonville, IL). McKendree is the oldest college in Illinois. Rev. Cartwright died in 1872 and is buried in Pleasant Plains, IL.

Do you have any MUMC history you would like to share with the congregation? Please send it to:

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