

Note: This Work has been made available by the authority of the copyright owner solely for the purpose of private study and research and may not be copied or reproduced except as permitted by the copyright laws of Canada without the written authority from the copyright owner.

Crouse, Eric R. "Methodist Encounters: Confronting the Western and Urban Frontiers of Nineteenth-Century America." *Methodist History* 40, no. 3 (April 2002): 157-167.

METHODIST ENCOUNTERS: CONFRONTING THE WESTERN AND URBAN FRONTIERS OF 19TH-CENTURY AMERICA

ERIC R. CROUSE

Dear to the American heart is the symbol, myth, or theme of the frontier. Throughout its history the United States has embraced the ideal of conquering new "territory," pursuing the promise of a better society. In the 19th century, the importance of conquering the frontier can be seen in the prominence of western expansionism and in the popularity of late 19th century urban revivalism. Methodists were key players in both cases. Frontiers for Methodism included the "virgin" west of the first half of the century and the unchurched masses in the growing cities of the second half of the century. By adapting to the shifting and plurality of frontiers, Methodism sought to secure its advance in the 1800s. Methodist encounters on the western frontier, by way of itinerant circuits and camp meetings, proved to be successful, but encounters within the urban frontier of the late 19th century by Methodist Sam Jones and the medium of modern revivalism resulted in mixed success.

At its core, a country has a unifying and informing symbol. For Americans, a powerful symbol is "The Frontier." This symbol suggests "a line that is always expanding, taking in or 'conquering' ever-fresh virgin territory . . . it holds out a hope, never fulfilled but always promised, of Utopia, the perfect human society."¹ A symbol for frontier was the line to the west, though not always easy to visualize, that needed to be pushed, conquered, populated, and converted. In the eyes of Frederick Jackson Turner, the frontier was located "at the hither edge of free land" but was also a "process."²

Frontier expansion and Methodist growth in the early 19th century corresponded with Americans' acceptance of notions of manifest destiny, a term coined in 1845 by Jacksonian Democrat, lawyer, and journalist John O'Sullivan. O'Sullivan's warning of Europeans "checking the fulfilment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions," articulated what many Americans had believed for years. Manifest destiny expressed the

¹Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anasni Press, 1972), 31–32.

²Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 16; Ray Allen Billington, ed. *The Frontier Thesis: Valid Interpretation of American History?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

belief that the United States, as God's chosen nation, had a sacred obligation to spread over all of North America.³

Biblical rhetoric to connect westward expansion with God's will was heard in many circles. Senator James Jackson declared in 1802 that, "God and nature have destined New Orleans and the Floridas to belong to this great and rising empire." On the issue of Indian removal from land because of their alleged failure to farm, Richard Wilde of Georgia stated in 1830 that "Jacob will forever obtain the inheritance of Esau. We cannot alter the laws of Providence."⁴ On the prospect of annexing Texas, a poet wrote, "we do but follow out our destiny, as did the ancient Israelite."⁵ Although Mexico controlled California, the *American Review* proclaimed in 1846 that, "no one who cherishes a faith in the wisdom of an overruling Providence, and who sees. . .the silent operation of an invisible but omnipotent hand, can believe it to be the interest of humanity. . .that this vast and magnificent region should continue forever in its present state. . ."⁶ Contemplating a possible war with Mexico, the *Hartford Times* stated that God would call Americans, "to redeem from unhallowed hands a land, above all others favored of heaven, and hold it for the use of a people who know how to obey heaven's behests." Later, an unidentified Pennsylvanian wrote a letter to the *Washington Daily Union* calling the war, "the religious execution of our country's glorious mission, under the direction of Divine Providence, to civilize and christianize, and raise up from anarchy and degradation a most ignorant, indolent, wicked and unhappy people."⁷

The countless manifest destiny-type arguments and expressions voiced in the first half of the 1800s provided a stamp of approval for those who ventured westward and notable among those who pushed the frontier line of the nation were the Methodists. In the mid-19th century, Nathan Bangs wrote of the great success of Methodist itinerants in the west "and the growing importance in a national point of view."⁸ Manifest destiny notions benefitted Methodism which was willing to turn its attention to the west and adapt to frontier conditions.

Revivalism of the early 19th century also facilitated Methodist growth in the west. Evangelist Charles Grandison Finney argued that revivals had ceased for many years in the late 18th century because people were entrenched

³Julius W. Pratt, "The Origin of 'Manifest Destiny,'" *American Historical Review*, Vol. 32 (July, 1927): 795.

⁴Quoted in Albert Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1935), 47, 85, 119.

⁵Quoted in Weinberg, 128.

⁶Quoted in Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1955), 100-101.

⁷Quoted in Weinberg, 166, 173.

⁸Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Volume II* (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1853), 348-49.

with the dogmas that Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield had preached. With an emphasis on the doctrines of Divine sovereignty and election, people had become apathetic, "waiting for God to come and to do what he required them to do."⁹ The period of revival and evangelical activity from 1800 to 1830, known as the Second Great Awakening, spurred Americans into embracing new-consensus ideologists. A reformulation of the outdated and dysfunctional Edwardian Calvinist world view occurred. With the rampant spread of revivals during the antebellum period, the predominance of Calvinism ended and the faith of much of the nation shifted towards a more democratic pietistic evangelicalism.¹⁰ The central theme of the revival message was that the only requirement to attain spiritual conversion was the acceptance of Christ's atonement. A good number of people who heard this message were bound to be intrigued with its egalitarian implications that assigned them greater control over their destiny. When Americans ventured westward, Methodist preachers were in step promulgating an Arminian doctrine in tune with democratic pietistic evangelicalism.

Thus, revivalism and the acceptance of manifest destiny ideals facilitated Methodist work on the frontier. The rise of Methodism in America was spectacular in the first half of the 19th century. Methodism went from being a small religious society of less than 5000 members in 1776 to become the largest single denomination in 1850 with 2.6 million members.¹¹ As one Methodist wrote in the early 19th century: "Our own continent presents to us fields sufficiently vast, which are opening before us, and whitening to the harvest."¹² In the west, settlers arrived "destitute of the ordinances of religion,"¹³ but the Methodists quickly made great gains whereas other denominations, with the exception of the Baptists, did not effectively adapt to a mobile social order. Episcopalians and Congregationalists failed to match the progress of Methodism which was less fettered.¹⁴ For example, Methodist activity did not require a well-educated and well-paid clergy since Methodist congregations, known as "classes," were usually served by local unpaid preachers. These amateurs came from the ranks of the common people and thus were in tune with the various needs of frontier folk.¹⁵

⁹Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard, 1960), 203.

¹⁰William McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), xiv, 106.

¹¹Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 56, 58.

¹²Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Volume III* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1857), 144.

¹³Nathan Banks, *A History of Methodist Episcopal Church, Volume II* (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1853), 77.

¹⁴Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage*, 196.

¹⁵Finke and Stark, 72-73, 76.

In addition to the locals were the itinerant preachers who rode two or three month circuits which linked a number of "classes," preaching to scattered homesteads on the frontier. Circuit riders such as Peter Cartwright of the Methodist Episcopal Church visited far-flung settlements and experienced the frontier way of life. Cartwright wrote of the independence, self-reliance, and toughness of traveling Methodist preachers:

He went through storms of wind, hail, snow, and rain; climbed hills and mountains, traversed valleys, plunged through swamps, swam swollen streams, lay out all night, wet, weary, and hungry. . . slept with his saddle blanket for a bed, his saddle or saddle-bags for his pillow, and his old big coat or blanket, if he had any, for a covering. . . took, with a hearty zest, deer or bear meat, or wild turkey, for breakfast, dinner, and supper, if he could get it.¹⁶

They were a hardy breed and even Andrew Jackson was impressed by the fearless nature of ministers such as Cartwright, "pioneer heralds of the cross throughout the entire west."¹⁷ Cartwright's own assessment was that the Methodist pioneer preachers were among the best men "ever called of God to plant Methodism in this happy republic. . . especially in our mighty west."¹⁸

Frontier life was arduous, but the Methodists experienced impressive success. Hardly had pioneers finished pitching their tents or building their log cabins when the traveling Methodist preachers arrived to preach a message of sin and salvation. The itinerants did not require a well-populated and flourishing settlement.¹⁹ The Methodists and pioneers were on the fringe of "unbroken Indian country. . . advancing further and further into their country [while] the Indians kept constantly receding and melting away before their rapid march." When the frontier line was pushed there were no churches that allowed for more formal services. As ministers of the gospel, the Methodists suited the "western people [who] wanted a preacher that could mount a stump, a block, or log . . . and without note or manuscript, quote, expound, and apply the word of God to the hearts and consciences of the people."²⁰

The revival spirit of the era was alive and thriving at frontier camp meetings. The trees, the fires, and the tents witnessed "hundreds of immortal beings moving to and fro – some preaching – some praying for mercy, and others praising God from a sense of his pardoning mercy – all these things presented a scene indescribably awful and affecting."²¹ Camp meetings could be chaotic with preachers presenting a fiery message of sin and

¹⁶Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright: The Backwoods Preacher* (Cincinnati: Cranston and Curtis, 1856), 243.

¹⁷Cartwright, 192–93, 358.

¹⁸Cartwright, 79.

¹⁹Cartwright, 485.

²⁰Cartwright, 249, 358.

²¹Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 109.

salvation, competing with hecklers but also with the chaos resulting from people singing, laughing, crying out, groaning, sobbing, jerking, or falling prostrate to the ground, many of whom brought visibly into the Kingdom of God.

The earthy, emotional tone of camp meetings captured the attention of western settlers seeking to be right with God and early 19th-century reports indicate that large numbers in the hundreds attended.²² One early 19th-century Methodist wrote of religious life in the west: "It was seldom we had any preaching; but if a traveling minister should come along and make an appointment, all would go out to preaching."²³ Peter Cartwright, for example, was known to attract a great mass of people from "many counties a hundred miles round."²⁴

The impact of Methodism went beyond spreading the gospel "on the farthest bounds of western population"²⁵ and bringing frontier folk into the church fold. As Methodist itinerants, local preachers, and missionaries were successfully preaching a message of sin and salvation on the frontier, Methodists, in general, were supporting the politics of frontier encounters and western expansion. Swept into the White House by an expansionist fervor, the first Methodist President of the United States promoted territorial growth.²⁶ The *New York Herald* urged James Polk to, "put into operation those principles and elements of power, which have been committed to the hands of the American people by the Almighty, for the purpose of regenerating . . . this continent."²⁷ Among Methodists, there was little sign of opposition to the Mexican War. The Baptists and Methodists, who together constituted nearly seventy percent of Protestant members in the United States, saw the conflict as a crusade against Roman Catholicism. With zeal, these evangelical denominations "eagerly awaited the hour when vast new areas would be opened to the true Gospel of the Protestant missionary."²⁸

In Nathan Bangs' history of Methodism, published in the mid-19th century, American insurrection in the 1830s against "the oppressive government

²²William Warren Sweet, ed., *The Rise of Methodism in the West Being The Journal of the Western Conference 1800–1811* (Nashville: Smith & Lamar, 1920), 170.

²³James B. Finley, *Autobiography of Rev. James B. Finley; Or Pioneer Life in the West*, ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati: R.P. Thompson, 1853), 154.

²⁴Finley, 320.

²⁵Finley, 346.

²⁶Paul H. Bergeron, *The Presidency of James K. Polk* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1987), xiv, 9, 20, 260. He had always admired Methodism and at his deathbed he insisted on baptism by this church despite his mother's wishes to accept baptism through the Presbyterian church.

²⁷Quoted in Graebner, *Empire of the Pacific*, 110.

²⁸Jack H. Schroder, *Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846–1848* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 108–109. Also see, Clayton Sumner Ellsworth, "The American Churches and the Mexican War," *American Historical Review*, Vol. XLV, 2 (January 1940): 306–340.

of Mexico” is assessed as a necessary step for proclaiming “salvation unto the people.”²⁹ By early 1848, Mexico relinquished its claim to Texas and ceded New Mexico and California to the United States. The vitality of the territorial expansionist spirit which was embraced, acted upon, and justified by the government during this period was comparable to the intensity of Methodists seeking to advance their message throughout the United States. A few years later Peter Cartwright would write: “I have lived to see this vast western wilderness rise and improve, and become wealthy without parallel in the history of the world.”³⁰

The frontier of the second half of the 19th century differed from the earlier period. By 1867, the United States had laid claim to its present North American land holdings. As the old frontier was disappearing, the frontier that gained the most newsworthy attention was the modern city and the growing number of unchurched masses. In one sense it was a reversal of the frontier experience. Instead of a migration to the west there was a migration of rural folk to large urban centers. The urban frontier had to be transformed since many of the migrants to the late 19th-century city included people who needed to be reached and converted with an evangelical message. The frontier had shifted to the city and the more conspicuous pioneers of this frontier were the evangelists who developed modern urban revivalism, which was an extension of revivalist, frontier religion.

Methodist Sam Jones was one of the most well-known evangelists of the late 19th century and was as much a character as Methodist circuit preachers of the past. According to one of Jones' biographers, “As forthright and independent as the circuit riders of old, to westerners Jones was a reminder of those wonderful camp-meeting days when folk would gather from miles around, having fire and brimstone for the first course and grace for dessert.”³¹ Jones underscored that revival attenders needed to feel free and not withhold their emotions: “In order for these services to be successful we must feel perfectly easy while we are here. I want you to feel easy. I want you to laugh, or cry, or shout, provided you feel like it and have anything to shout about.”³² He had a “rumpled folksiness” that was distinct compared to many urban clerics, which led some to charge that he was “coarse, unlettered, vulgar, unrefined, and not acquainted with the usages of so-called polite society.”³³

²⁹Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Volume IV* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1857), 285.

³⁰Cartwright, 524.

³¹Kathleen Minnix, *Laughter in the Amen Corner: The Life of Evangelist Sam Jones* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993), 117. And Jones did receive support for his hell-fire preaching. See “Brimstone Theology,” *The Chicago Tribune*, March 22, 1886.

³²“Sam Jones Starts In,” *Baltimore American*, May 3, 1886.

³³Minnix, *Laughter in the Amen Corner*, 2; “A Study of Sam Jones,” *Baltimore American*, May 30, 1886. Also see, “Sam Jones' Daily Life,” *Baltimore American*, May 6, 1886.

Jones' decision to become a minister was initiated when as a young man he promised his dying father that he would become Christian.³⁴ In 1872, Jones was appointed a traveling Methodist preacher to a circuit of five churches within four counties in Georgia. He was ordained four years later, an event he later rejoiced over when he realized that he had become fully ordained only two years before the Methodist church required all candidates to have theological training. His antipathy of learned sermons and distrust of the theological colleges was an attitude that many frontier preachers shared in the early nineteenth century. Jones made his position clear. It was ridiculous "to see a dry, dogmatic preacher dressed in his cold, conventional suit, with his dingy manuscript of a sermon prepared thirty years ago, stand in the pulpit of a \$40,000 church and read his soporific message to the slumbering forty."³⁵

Relying on earnest exhortations from the heart rather than learned sermons, Jones revitalized churches and continued to gain fame on subsequent appointed circuits. Successful campaigns outside of Georgia followed, securing his place as a nationally-known evangelist, particularly his 1885 Nashville revival where he filled a five-thousand capacity tent three times a day over four weeks and thus earned his reputation as "the Moody of the South."³⁶ Given that many Methodist newspapers were bemoaning the worldliness of the church, Jones' arrival was a welcome one.³⁷

The advance of Jones on the urban frontier occurred as the western frontier was closing. The United States proceeded from a agricultural society relatively untouched by industrialism to one in which industrial life influenced almost all of the activities of the American people. Evangelists such as Jones faced changes resulting from modernity. Increasing immigration, rapidly growing cities, new forms of transportation and communication, and the growth of industry caused fundamental shift in American social and cultural life. This era saw increasing production and profit become the measures of community success as intense nationwide competition dominated over the relatively stable, local business affairs of the past. But the city became cacophonous and impersonal and there were many people who were separated from church life, thereby raising the anxiety of evangelicals concerned with the need to sanctify the urban experience.

In the midst of the frustrations and upheavals taking place in the cities, Jones offered an old-fashioned gospel message harkening back to simpler days.³⁸ As many pioneers had done, he accepted the enduring American

³⁴Laura Jones, *The Life and Sayings of Sam P. Jones* (Atlanta: The Franklin-Turner Co., 1907), 50–56.

³⁵Quoted in Minnix, *Laughter in the Amen Corner*, 74.

³⁶William McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1959), 282.

³⁷Minnix, 5.

³⁸McLoughlin, 146, 149.

“success myth” which held that a “decent” Christian who worked hard could achieve success. The American doctrine of self-reliant individualism was packaged with Jones’ focus on the sin of society and the saving salt of the gospel. His attitudes shared traits with the early 19th-century frontier folk who exalted those individuals who were self-made. People had ventured to the west and then to the urban frontier for mainly the same reason. They sought self-improvement.

Jones and many other late 19th-century Methodists upheld the sacred frontier heritage of individualism. While the revival message of Jones was frontier (emotional with few direct attachments to institutional Christianity), the methodology was modern. New methods and techniques were needed if revivalism was to succeed in the larger urban centers. Evangelists such as Jones adopted a revival format which underscored the importance of organization. Each meeting was well-planned and a team of at least two specialists carried out the bulk of the duties: one preacher gave the main message, and a soloist sang gospel hymns. The well-organized revival meeting itself was administered with careful attention to promptness and efficiency. Typically held in a large building or church, meetings were predictable, but they still offered a degree of vivacity that broke “the monotony of urban existence, just as camp meetings had performed that function on the frontier.”³⁹

A connection was also made with the masses by Jones’ use of the language of popular culture, the “commoner’s tongue.” In an earlier period, there was a craving for emotionalism on the frontier.⁴⁰ The frontier line of the west was gone, but earthy, emotional language, spiced with hope remained. Presenting the gospel in a manner their listeners could understand, evangelists such as Jones not only transferred the enthusiasm of evangelicalism to the metropolis, but furnished the urbanite – a villager at heart – a taste of a less complicated bygone era. As was the case with camp meetings, urban revivalism meetings reassured Americans that God was concerned with their hard work, personal obedience, and souls.⁴¹ Jones gave Methodism a boost in the United States by coalescing modern technology and organization with an old-fashioned message that had much in common with a frontier sermon.

Jones, however, had much more financial support than was the case for early Methodist frontier preachers. Since American evangelists conducted their meetings by business principles and avoided talk of social reform to solve the problems of city life, they received the sanction and financial back-

³⁹Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religion of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 743.

⁴⁰Billington, 91.

⁴¹Bernard Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River: The Story of the Great Revivalists and Their Impact Upon Religion in America* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1958), 162, 229.

ing of prominent businessmen in the cities they visited.⁴² Capitalist leaders saw fit to support revivalism and its advance against the city with its growing vexations. Thus, revivalism constituted, according to one historian, “the single largest response of evangelical Protestantism to the challenge of the urban frontier.”⁴³

In the city the frontier included the unchurched masses. Consequently, Jones was usually well-received in cities by Methodist and other Protestant clergymen eager for church membership growth. In the early 1800s, the Methodists adapted well to frontier conditions and were rewarded with significant growth. But how did Methodists fare with the urban frontier? Were the cities regenerated?

Jones was deemed important because he was seeking to remake or at least improve urban society and urban revivalism did initially appear to be effective given that “immense multitudes were moved to seek the right way.”⁴⁴ Newspaper reports captured the intensity of crowds seeking access to meetings. At one meeting in Baltimore a lady broke her jaw as she jumped off a street car anxious to hear Jones. At another meeting many scaled the building to view the revival from the roof windows while at other meetings hundreds were turned away, too late to gain access in overflowing revival sites.⁴⁵ For one Chicago meeting, it was estimated that 10,000 people were denied entrance.⁴⁶ The newspapers also reveal individual cases of people experiencing reform due to Jones’ “inspiring utterances.”⁴⁷ In one report on the 1886 Chicago revival, the *Tribune* stated: “That it will pass into local history bearing the stamp of success is absolutely assured; and that it will work a permanent good in the morals of the city is admitted by those best capable of judging.”⁴⁸ As for conversion numbers, some claimed that 10,000 accepted Christ at Jones’ one-month revival at Nashville in 1885.⁴⁹ Other conversion figures for a number of campaigns included: Memphis (1884) 1,000; Cincinnati (1885), 2,000; Baltimore (1886) 2,000; and San Francisco (1889) 1,200.⁵⁰

As impressive as the numbers were, the results often fell short of sanguine expectations, causing historians of revivals to argue that these meet-

⁴²Minnix, 106.

⁴³Ahlstrom, 743.

⁴⁴“An Explanation from Dr. Grammar,” *Baltimore American*, June 2, 1886.

⁴⁵“Sam Jones Defines Love,” “Men’s Vices Condemned,” and “A Crowd at the Rink,” *Baltimore American*, May 17 and 29, 1886.

⁴⁶The *Chicago Tribune*, April 5, 1886.

⁴⁷For example see “Letters to Mr. Jones,” *The Chicago Tribune*, March 24, 1886.

⁴⁸“Sam Jones’ Last Day,” *The Chicago Tribune*, April 5, 1886.

⁴⁹McLoughlin, 287, 301. At Chicago, Jones avoided making large claims. See the *Chicago Tribune*, April 5, 1886.

⁵⁰McLoughlin, 305, Minnix, *Laughter in the Amen Corner*, 71. “Sam Jones’s Work Done,” *Baltimore American*, May 31, 1886.

ings failed to add appreciably to church membership numbers.⁵¹ Working-class interest was crucial. Although there was the desire for the working-class masses to become involved in church life, few workers found the increasingly bourgeois nature of urban churches appealing. In a Chicago newspaper editorial the problem is clearly identified; “They (Jones and company) have drawn many hundreds of people who never go to church and who cannot be induced to listen to the regular preachers, partly because they do not feel at home in our wealthy churches, and partly because the ministers preach clear over their heads.”⁵² Jones could attract the working-class to egalitarian and neutral revival sites (often skating and roller rinks) to hear an old-fashioned gospel message, but the next step of church membership was another matter.

Of course, the transformation of the urban frontier into a Christian society was a utopian ideal – a promise that could not be fulfilled. Quixotically expressed ideals confronted reality. This had been the case with the western frontier. Yes, circuit riders like Peter Cartwright successfully promoted Methodism and indirectly, if not directly, westward expansion, but the western frontier was also replete with obstacles that generated transgressions, such as bloody conflict and greed.

The late 19th-century urban frontier, however, was an even more challenging problem than a modernized camp meeting could possibly solve. The number of converts and certainly the numbers who became church members as a result of revival meetings was fairly insignificant. Perhaps it is no surprise then that Methodist leaders at conferences were cooling to the idea of free-roving itinerant evangelists and that Jones was one of the last major Methodist evangelists of national stature.⁵³

On a positive note, Jones was a “man of the people,” embodying a “perfect simplicity.”⁵⁴ Methodist evangelists such as Jones appeared to make a steady and peaceful advance on the urban frontier. Of their own free will, thousands of city dwellers had gathered at the numerous revival meetings and conversions did occur. Although in 1890 Methodism lost its position as the largest religious body in the United States, having been overtaken by the Roman Catholics,⁵⁵ many Methodist church members were at least revitalized in the late 1800s due, in large part, to a revival experience that shared common traits with frontier religion.

Overall, the attempt to better society was a noble one, but the promotion of frontier ideas like self-reliant individualism, progress, and perfectibility was somewhat flawed in the eyes of workers who were alienated by mainstream church life. While such ideals suited a significant component of

⁵¹Minnix, 14. One of the more pessimistic assessments is McLoughlin, 265–268.

⁵²“The Good Work of the Two Sams,” *The Chicago Tribune*, April 6, 1886.

⁵³“But One Sam Jones,” *Baltimore American*, May 11, 1886.

⁵⁴“Pictures at the Rink,” *Baltimore American*, May 23, 1886.

⁵⁵Finke and Stark, 145.

American society, the working-class saw that frontier-like individualism was not guarantee of success in a harsh urban-industrial environment.

The growth of Methodism, in the early and late stages of the 1800s, fit well with the symbol of frontier and the idea of realizing a better society. During the antebellum period, Americans voiced manifest destiny and expansionist arguments through the utilization and even manipulation of Christian rhetoric and symbolism. At the same time, Methodism benefited from westward expansion because it was pliable enough to meet the needs of frontier folk. As for the late 19th century, the cities were in need of being transformed. The goal was to reach the unchurched masses, who in one sense were the frontier, and induce them into the church fold. Similar to the circuit preachers on the frontier, evangelists such as the ingenious Sam Jones served not one community but many communities. Yet no modern evangelist could significantly transform city life. The problems of modern, industrial cities were too complex to be solved with simplistic solutions. The frontier had shifted and old ideals required adjustment if old glories were to be realized.