# Cane Ridge Meeting House 1801

**Revival Reverberates Today**
**Seminal Event's Bicentennial Celebrated**



July 30, 2001

PARIS, Ky. - Hundreds lay on the ground in religious ecstasy: some motionless as corpses, others shouting in joy or anguish.

Hundreds more laughed uncontrollably, sang, or twitched and jerked.

Rich and poor, slaves and free people, skeptics and believers, some 20,000 people gathered 'round the log Cane Ridge Meeting House in rural Bourbon County 200 years ago this August for what would become the seminal religious event of its day: an epochal happening whose influence is still playing out today.

The Cane Ridge revival planted religious idealism and was the first great social gathering in a new state emerging from the fearful isolation of its violent frontier days.

It also was the biggest, wildest, and most widely publicized event in a broader movement known as the Western Revival, which transformed American religious culture.

Starting Saturday, caretakers of the log Cane Ridge Meeting House will celebrate the bicentennial of the revival with nine days of worship services and lectures, culminating in a large communion service August 12, 2001.

They don't expect as big or wild an event as in 1801. But they fully expect that what they present will resonate.

"We were not interested [in] a re-enactment where everybody wears old clothes and I pretend to be the preacher and you pretend to fall down and be saved, because we thought it would be hokey," said the Rev. Robert Steffer, co-curator of the Cane Ridge Preservation Project, which is run by trustees of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). "We thought it would be better to have something that was for Christians of today that looked back while also looking forward."

Several denominations and movements trace their roots to Cane Ridge and related revivals. Louisville's massive Southeast Christian Church is a direct descendant. Revivalist Baptists and Methodists, who were fringe sects in the 1700s, rode the revival wave to rapid growth in the 1800s. And later generations of camp meetings, exuberant Pentecostal revivals, and Billy Graham-style mass evangelism bear the marks of Cane Ridge.

News of the revival also drew the Shakers to Kentucky like bees to nectar.

"It arguably remains the most important religious gathering in all of American history, both for what it symbolized and the effects that flowed from it," wrote Paul Conkin, author of *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost*.

"Never before had such a diversity of seizures or 'physical exercises' affected, or afflicted, so many people," wrote Conkin, a retired Vanderbilt University historian. "The Cane Ridge sacrament has become a legendary event, the clearest approximation to an American Pentecost, prelude to a Christian century."

The 1801 gathering, built around a Presbyterian communion service, lasted from a rainy Aug. 6 until Aug. 12, ending only when both humans and horses had used up all available food.

With wails and convulsions, thousands lamented their sins.

"The noise was like the roar of Niagara," wrote eyewitness James Finley in his biography. "At one time I saw at least five hundred swept down in a moment as if a battery of a thousand guns had been opened upon them, and then immediately followed shrieks and shouts that rent the very heavens."

To be sure, many at Cane Ridge had their minds on more than just heavenly things.

The temporary city that grew up around Cane Ridge gave lonely Kentucky farmers a chance to meet - and mate. A bumper crop of babies resulted nine months later.

That, along with the whiskey peddlers, horse traders and gawkers at the fringes of such gatherings, gave ammunition to critics who said the revival was out of control.

But others were happy with the growing religiosity and declining lawlessness that resulted.

"It was a major step in turning the frontier into a more settled society," said church historian Richard Harrison, former president of Lexington Theological Seminary. "People were getting more accustomed to being together as a group rather than being isolated."

The remote Cane Ridge shrine, set amid the rolling hills, towering corn stalks, and plump hay rolls of Bourbon County, draws 6,000 visitors annually.

Brad Paradis, a student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, visited the site with his brothers on a sweltering afternoon last Monday, drawing inspiration for his future ministry.

"There's no significance, spiritually, to this building," he said. "It's just that a bunch of people who trusted God got together here, and God did something big. To be able to see where it started, that's pretty cool."

In the years leading up to Cane Ridge, Methodist and Baptist churches were having small revivals, but the largest crowds were gathering for Presbyterian communion services, which were

part of a centuries-old tradition, imported by Scottish immigrants, that combined intense religious services with social gatherings.

Momentum built with Presbyterian communions in Western Kentucky's Logan County. Presbyterian minister Barton Stone, inspired by his visit to Logan County, scheduled a communion at his own Cane Ridge church for Aug. 8, 1801.

People began arriving two days earlier. Some 140 wagons were parked on the grounds, and while some participants worshipped, others made regular trips with their horses to nearby creeks.

Preachers gave sermons from a wooden platform, but so many people had come that many began paying attention to impromptu sermons delivered by lay folk. Eyewitness Finley counted seven people at one time preaching from tree stumps and wagons.

Presbyterians, Methodists, and some Baptists were present as host minister Stone sought to make the event as nondenominational as possible.

Preachers terrified listeners with the threat of hell at their days' end. People were "dropping down on every hand, shrieking, groaning, crying for mercy… praying, agonizing, fainting, falling down in distress," said a letter attributed to the Rev. James Campbell, written just after the gathering.

"Some singing, some shouting, clapping their hands, hugging and even kissing, laughing… and all this at once" made "terror thrill through every power of the soul," he wrote.

As many as 1,000 people took communion on Sunday. Much larger crowds were in such tumult in the surrounding grounds that some Presbyterian ministers thought things were getting out of hand, but Stone allowed events to flow.

After Cane Ridge, the Presbyterian ministers had their hands full. Mired in doctrinal debates and disciplinary hearings, the Presbyterians suffered two major schisms.

Logan County revivalists, suffering a backlash from Presbyterian leaders, formed the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, which is still prominent in the Kentucky-Tennessee region.

Its revivalist roots are still evident, said Stated Clerk Robert Rush of the Memphis-based denomination. "You would go into very few Cumberland churches that wouldn't give an altar call."

Stone, meanwhile, was becoming increasingly unhappy with Presbyterian government and Calvinist theology, which he later called a "dark mountain between heaven and earth."

He and his supporters started the Christian Church movement - trying to replace denominationalism with independent churches. The movement became a de facto denomination itself and in the 20th century split into three movements.

But many people today consider Stone virtually a patron saint of Christian unity, Harrison said.

And the anti-denominationalism of Stone and the revival he played host to also fed a new American trend, Conkin said: the separation of church membership from conversion.

"People are converted and may take months to decide which church today," Conkin said. "That's all the way down to Billy Graham today."

While mainstream Presbyterians lost ground to Baptists, Methodists, and their own splinter groups in the wake of the 1801 revival, "one could also argue that the 'losers' were also winners by remaining critical of some of the excesses unleashed by Cane Ridge," said John Mulder, President of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. "By staying anchored to its core theology, it avoided being swept away by emotion," he said.

The revival also tapped into the populist spirit of the new American republic, with user-friendly hymns, plain-language sermons and a theology that emphasized humans' free will more than traditional Calvinism, which said only God decides who will be saved or damned.

"If you can choose which party to vote for, you have the free will to choose whether to go into the kingdom of God," said Baptist historian Bill Leonard, summing up the prevailing mood.

"Something truly American [took] place" at Cane Ridge, church historian Anthony Dunnavant said in an interview last year.

In the New World, people believed they could find God "in a return to pure sources, rather than participation in the Old World corrupt tradition," said Dunnavant, who was dean of Lexington Theological Seminary until his death in February and is now buried at Cane Ridge's cemetery.

It was not the America that founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine envisioned, in which superstitious religion would wither in an age of reason.

Leonard, dean of the Wake Forest (NC) University Divinity School, quoted an old Methodist hymn that captured the revival mood: "The world, the Devil, and Tom Paine have tried their worst but all in vain."

The revival also fed social consciousness, Harrison said. With black worshippers and at least one black preacher participating, it fed antislavery sentiments, and the Cane Ridge congregation itself later became abolitionist.

Roman Catholics, settling to the west around Bardstown, denounced Cane Ridge's "dying follies" as "one more sad commentary on the Protestant rule of faith," according to Bellarmine University professor Clyde Crews' local Catholic history, *An American Holy Land*.

But Catholics and Protestants shared a vision of Kentucky as a Promised Land, Leonard said.

"Catholics could find a home on the frontier and be free to be Catholic, and Protestant (sectarian groups) could find a place to not just do their thing but thrive," Leonard said. "By the 1830s, Baptists and Methodists, who are tiny little sects in the Revolutionary War, are the largest Protestant denominations."

**Meeting house shows its age - in a good way**



July 30, 2001

Caretakers for the Cane Ridge Meeting House say it's the largest one-room log building in North America, measuring 40 by 60 feet.

Presbyterian pioneers built the church in 1791 shortly after they arrived in the region, lured by explorer Daniel Boone's description of a fertile land full of towering cane, co-curator Robert Steffer said.

A second-story "slave gallery" was used in the church's early years, but it was taken down in 1829 after the church decided to integrate and to oppose slavery, Steffer said. Church members also covered the logs with white clapboard on the outside and plaster on the inside.

In 1804, the church left the Presbyterian denomination, becoming the mother church of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination and related Christian Church and Church of Christ movements. After the dwindling Cane Ridge congregation closed in the 1920s, Disciples officials formed an independent board to maintain it as a shrine.

Preservationists worked to restore its original rugged appearance, returning the loft (which had been stored in a barn) and removing the clapboard and plaster. But weather and woodpeckers began taking their toll on the exterior, so the Disciples surrounded the building with a large stone structure in 1957, making it a church within a church.

Steffer said experts on historic architecture have marveled at the log building's craftsmanship.

"These are artistic things that were done by people with rather crude tools," Steffer said, pointing to the hexagonal chestnut pillars and subtle, ornamental grooves. "At the beginning, this was quite a stretch to build a building like this."

The Cane Ridge Preservation Project operates on a $50,000 annual budget and is host to more than 100 group meetings each year, from worship services to family reunions, Steffer said.

The burial ground at Cane Ridge holds the grave of Barton Stone, host of a landmark 1801 revival and a patriarch of the Christian Church movement. The cemetery was closed to future burials more than 80 years ago, but in the last 12 months was the scene of two significant memorial ceremonies.

On August 12, descendants of a former slave and Cane Ridge member, Samuel Bonaparte "Bone" January, dedicated a memorial to honor him and other slaves believed buried in unmarked graves.

Descendants of January's former owner, who still live in the area, also attended.

In February, caretakers found room in the nearly full cemetery to bury Disciples church historian Anthony Dunnavant, the dean of Lexington Theological Seminary, who died of cancer at 46.

"He loved Cane Ridge so much and had done so much important research on Cane Ridge," said former seminary President Richard Harrison, now pastor of Seventh Street Christian Church in Richmond, Va. "It was seen as something particularly appropriate for this young, brilliant scholar who was cut down in his prime."

**Denominations After Cane Ridge**

These denominations and movements formed, spread, or sputtered after the Cane Ridge revival in 1801.

**Christian Churches, Churches of Christ** - Cane Ridge pastor Barton Stone and other breakaway Presbyterians rejected denominations and idealized the early Christian church. Joining with a similar movement led by Pennsylvania minister Alexander Campbell in the 1830s, these churches splintered in the 20th century into:

The Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), Indianapolis-based mainline group, the only fragment that recognizes itself as a denomination; 834,000 members.
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, conservative, decentralized network includes Louisville's Southeast Christian Church; 1.1 million members.
Churches of Christ, conservative group distinguished partly by its a cappella worship music (since the New Testament doesn't call for musical instruments); 1.5 million members.

**Presbyterians** - Amid debates over whether the revival was healthy, they suffered two splits with the Christian Church (1804) and Cumberland Presbyterian (1810) movements and lost ground to more revivalistic denominations, but they stabilized and became an influential mainline church. Their descendants:

Louisville-based Presbyterian Church (USA), mainline denomination with 2.5 million members.
Cumberland Presbyterian Church, formed in 1810 by leaders of a revival in Logan County, Ky., that inspired the Cane Ridge gathering. It rejected Presbyterians' strict Calvinism and requirements that pastors have a classical education (impractical on the frontier). Though most churches reunited with mainstream Presbyterians in 1907, Cumberland Presbyterians still number 102,000 members, mostly in the Kentucky-Tennessee region.

**Methodists** - This small denomination quickly institutionalized the camp-meeting revival concept that arose spontaneously at Cane Ridge and Logan County. Their nimble system of

circuit riders and lay preachers led to explosive growth on the frontier, reaching 2.6 million members in 1830 and nearly 13 million in their four main denominations today.

**Baptists** - As with the Methodists, this group grew by embracing revival tactics, preaching to black slaves as well as whites, and using a decentralized structure and lay preachers, particularly effective on the frontier. They counted 2.7 million members in 1830. The Southern Baptist Convention, at 16 million members, is the largest American Protestant body today, in addition to millions in other Baptist denominations.

**Shakers** - This celibate, apocalyptic sect sent missionaries west on news of Cane Ridge, converting many revivalists, including two ministers. They also became a lightning rod for conservative critics of the revival's wildest excesses, giving the controversial Christian Church movement the status of respectable moderates. The Shakers, extinct except for a tiny community in Maine, are now admired for their minimalist architecture, woodwork and music. Their two Kentucky communities are preserved as historic sites: Pleasant Hill in Mercer County, and South Union in Logan County.