

Nature of the Burned-Over District

In 1800 only about 10% of the nation's population were church members. Between 1825 and 1835 at least 1343 "revivals" take place in New York State as part of the so-called Second Great Awakening of the 1820s and 1830s. A key preacher in New York State was the Rev. Charles Grandison Finney. He broke with the traditional Calvinist doctrine (such as predestination) and stressed that humans have free will and can choose for God.

In the Second Great Awakening, the three largest denominations were the Methodists, the Baptists, and the Presbyterians. Methodism became especially popular among the common folk because of its simplified doctrines, spiritual preaching and emphasis on personal religious experiences. Methodist membership also grew greatly because it had an efficient organization.

This Burned-Over District or North Star Country spawned many important reforming movements. In terms of religion, there were the brand-new denominations such as Mormonism. Because of the intense belief that evil needed to be weeded out wherever it existed, there came such reforms as abolitionism, women's rights, dress reform, education reform, peace advocates, asylum builders, the Millerites, etc.

A split came in the Methodist church over the issue of slavery. For many years the Methodist elders had tried to suppress northern abolitionist preachers because the elders wanted to ensure the continued success of the Methodist church as a nation-wide church movement and organization. At the 1840 General Conference, the formal split occurred in the Methodist church. On May 31, 1843, the Wesleyan Methodist Church was organized at Utica. It was the first specifically abolitionist denomination in the U.S. We experienced that split in Methodism here in Seneca Falls. A similar split happened in the Presbyterian church over the issue of slavery. The Congregationalists and the Baptists don't have an ecclesiastical hierarchy so local churches could join in on the abolitionist crusade if they so wished without having to worry about interference from higher authorities.

In the mid-1840's we have the highwater of anti-slavery church secession in the North Star Country. There were 317 comeouter congregations in NYS by 1845. Of the 781 towns in upper New York, 261 had at least 1 abolition church or a significant element of church-based abolitionism. Interestingly these abolitionist churches were clustered along an axis formed by the Erie Canal.

There had been a split within the abolitionist movement. While all abolitions were coming around to favoring the immediate emancipation of all slaves, there was disagreement about the use of the political process to achieve that goal. William Lloyd Garrison and his Boston colleagues had opposed the idea of forming an anti-slavery political party. Many abolitionists in the Burned-Over District, however, were willing to form a political party based on the single issue of doing away with slavery. This became a reality with the formation of the Liberty Party in Warsaw, NY in November 1839. They nominate James G. Birney as the Liberty Party candidate for President in the 1840 presidential election. He was the ideal candidate for this Liberty Party, for he was a reformed slaveholder (from Kentucky) whose conversion to

immediatism epitomized the redemptive power of evangelism. I mention this because once again we see a clear example of the activist moralistic anti-evil fervor coming out of the Second Great Awakening in the Burned-Over District.

[This article was written by Walter Gable, the Seneca County Historian, in January 2005.]

Reforming Spirit in the Burned-Over District

A. Events

1836—Geneva's Colored Anti-Slavery Society established
Nov. 1839—establishment of the Liberty Party in Warsaw
1842—establishment of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society
July 1848—first women's rights convention held in Seneca Falls
Aug. 1848—Free Soil Party organized in Buffalo
October 1, 1851—the Jerry Rescue in Syracuse
1852—Women's State Temperance Convention organized in Rochester

B. Quotes

Marjory Allen Perez (historian) on the nature of Seneca Falls and Waterloo in the mid-1800s

“The villages of Seneca Falls and Waterloo sit side-by-side at a critical axis of east-west and south-north travel patterns. In the mid 1800s these communities were fertile breeding grounds for the social reform movements of the day, especially women's rights....”

Milton Sernett (historian) characterization of the North Star and the North Star Country (“burned-over district”)

- “In its most literal sense, the North Star was the astronomical reference point used by freedom-seekers on the Underground Railroad. But the North Star was also emblematic of the struggle itself, a moral enterprise which began in the wake of Upstate New York's evangelical awakening during the 1820s and did not cease until passing away of the abolitionist generation during the 1870s.”
- “For those in the Burned-Over District who had pledged to seek good and shun evil, it was a small step from thinking in terms of individual regeneration to concluding that there needed to be a national conversion on the question of slavery.”