

Father John Clark: The First Baptist Preacher in Missouri

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Missouri Baptists have many reasons to celebrate their heritage. Denominational records indicate that in 2005 there are more than six hundred thousand Baptists and two thousand Baptist churches spread across Missouri. These churches are anchored by a strong state convention that serves as the umbrella for sixty-four associations and dozens of ministerial programs. Missouri Baptists have established four undergraduate colleges, Southwest Missouri Baptist, Missouri Baptist College, William Jewell College, and Hannibal-LaGrange College. Missouri Baptists even boast a graduate school: Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Kansas City. The Missouri Baptist Convention also reported that 13,243 baptisms were performed in 2004. Despite the current squabble over the ownership of several denominational entities, Missouri Baptists are a strong, viable group whose presence can be felt across the nation. Their future appears bright.

When examining Baptist life in Missouri it is hard to imagine a day when Baptists were few in number, no ministers were present, and none of the current denominational machinery existed. Yet, prior to 1796, this was the situation. Missouri was just beginning to grow and become geographically important. Known as the "Gateway to the West," St. Louis was a critical city for settlers and pioneers moving west because it was the last major Anglo settlement before reaching the wiles of a largely unexplored wilderness.

Invariably, Baptists were numbered among these first trailblazers. The questions that then come to mind are: "Who was the first Baptist pastor in Missouri?" "When and where did he perform his ministry?" "What were the obstacles he faced?" "What were the results of his ministry?" These are but a few questions this paper will address.

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, Spain, though little more than an absentee landlord, claimed ownership of Missouri and much of what was known as the Louisiana Territory. Along with Spanish hegemony came the required allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. In order for

a settler to immigrate and to acquire ownership of land, Spanish law dictated that the person would have to demonstrate that he or she was *un bon catholique*. Only Roman Catholics were allowed to move into any section of the Spanish Southwest. Any Protestant minister who ventured into Missouri placed himself in danger of being thrown into the *calaboose*. The majority of the immigrants, however, were Protestant and as such were unable to attend public worship services in accordance with their own beliefs and traditions. To provide spiritual direction for these settlers, John Clark defied the immigration law and in 1796 became the first Baptist pastor to minister in Missouri.¹

Despite John Clark's pioneer and religious importance in Missouri, little information exists concerning his life. John Mason Peck provides most of the information in his biography, *Father Clark, or the Pioneer Preacher*.² Moreover, most of the extant information on John Clark appears to be drawn from Peck's work. All the major histories of Missouri Baptists such as R. S. Douglass's *History of Missouri Baptists*,³ R. S. Duncan's *History of the Baptists in Missouri*,⁴ and J. C. Maple and R. P. Rider's *Missouri Baptist Biography*⁵ are drawn exclusively from Peck's work. Peck, who worked in Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri, met Clark on several different occasions when their preaching circuits crossed paths. It would be safe to assume that if not for Peck's work, John Clark would be largely unknown in Baptist history.

Born in the parish of Petty in the port city of Inverness, Scotland, on November 29, 1758, John Clark was the son of Presbyterian parents.⁶ His father was a farmer who taught him the importance of an education and hard work, but gave him little spiritual direction. His life was hard and his drinking was a mirror of this reality. All religious influence came by way of his mother who ensured his attendance in local Presbyterian Church and his memorization of the catechisms. Out of his father's desire for him to learn the classics, he was sent to a school in Inverness at age six. Clark, however, did not enjoy Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, but

¹ J. C. Maple and R. P. Rider, *Missouri Baptist Biography: A Series of Life-Sketches Indicating the Growth and Prosperity of Baptist Churches as Represented in the Lives and Labors of Eminent Men and Women in Missouri* (Kansas City, Mo.: Western Baptist Publishing House, 1914), 17.

² John Mason Peck, *Father Clark, or The Pioneer Preacher* (New York: Sheldon, Lamport & Blakeman, 1855; rpt. Rare Book Collection, Rutgers University, 1970).

³ R. S. Douglass, *History of Missouri Baptists* (Kansas City, Mo.: Western Baptist Publishing House, 1934), 18-21.

⁴ R. S. Duncan, *A History of the Baptists in Missouri* (Saint Louis: Schammell & Company, 1882), 46-49.

⁵ Maple and Rider, 11-19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

was rather attracted to mathematics and geography.⁷ Made aware of his aversion to the classics, Clark's father sent him to the parish school at Nairn to study mathematics. His father's hope was that his training would prepare him to join his brother Daniel in Jamaica. His love of math and geography came together to form the two greatest desires of his young life, to travel the world as a sailor and to live in the American colonies.

With his brother overseas and his father's drinking and squandering the family fortune away, Clark remained at home to support his family until he was twenty years old. He then signed on as a mate on a ship bound for the West Indies. While aboard this ship, Clark was a privateer who helped hijack Spanish and French ships. Before arriving at his final destination, however, Clark was pressed into service at Barbados by the British navy and commanded by Admiral Rodney. After attempting to escape, he was thrown into irons in the ship's hold.⁸ When the ship was attacked by the Spanish, Clark was released, fought bravely, and was not required to return to the brig. Following the battle and while anchored at Tobago, he jumped ship, swam ashore, and began to look for his brother whom he had heard was living on the island. Clark was so disappointed when he found his brother and discovered that he was a drunken wretch and decided to return to Scotland to inform his parents.

To pay his passage home, Clark signed on as a mate on a British ship bound for London. Before leaving the Caribbean, however, his ship was captured by the Spanish and Clark was imprisoned in Havana, Cuba, for nineteen months.⁹ Upon his release, he made his way to Charleston, South Carolina, where he was captured by a press gang and once again forced into the British navy. Clark had no desire to be in the navy and to fight against the Colonies, so, along with three friends, he jumped ship while it was anchored in Charleston, South Carolina. As a British deserter, Clark realized that his best hope of escape would be to find the American army. He and his companions managed to find the camp of American General Francis Marion, better known as the "Swamp Fox," who welcomed the British deserters.¹⁰

After the conclusion of the American Revolution, he spent the next several years working as a mate on ships delivering merchandise along the American eastern seaboard and in the Caribbean. While aboard ship in 1786, he became aware of his sinful situation, and he "resolved to go into the country and teach school, where I could have the opportunity to

⁷ Duncan, 46.

⁸ Maple and Rider, 12.

⁹ Peck, 30.

¹⁰ Maple and Rider, 13.

read my Bible, meditate, and attend to the salvation of my soul.” He moved to Georgia to teach and became reacquainted with two “two Methodist preachers, by name of John Major and Thomas Humphries. He said they formed a circuit in those parts and preached at Col. Wooten’s house, where I boarded. They pleased me so well that I joined them.”¹¹ After teaching in Georgia and South Carolina for the next two years, he decided to return to Scotland and visit his family.¹²

Upon his arrival in London, Clark stopped an old man at the dock and asked where he might find a church. The man told him to visit the Foundry in Moorfields. When Clark arrived at the church none other than John Wesley himself was preaching.¹³ Even though Wesley was eighty-five years old at this time, the founder of Methodism was still a powerful speaker. Clark was enthralled with Wesley’s preaching and took his good fortune of being at the Foundry Church that day, as a sign that he was to become a Methodist minister. He also decided that after visiting his family at Inverness, he would return to America and seek appointment as a pastor in the Methodist Conference.

Clark returned to Georgia in 1785 where he became a member of the Methodist Episcopal Conference and settled in the small town of Fishing Creek. In 1791, he was ordained a deacon by Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury.¹⁴ He was assigned a large preaching circuit that included stops as far away as South Carolina. Despite the sometimes great distances between stops, he always walked to his preaching engagements. It was said that Clark was scared of horses and was given one on more than one occasion, but he claimed that he did not want to injure the horse. He later gave another reason why he did not want to keep the horse. Clark hated slavery and he knew that money from slave labor paid for the horse.

After serving two years in the Conference, he became disenchanted with the Methodist manner of church government.¹⁵ In particular, he held that each church had the biblical right to call or dismiss its own pastor and that this responsibility fell to the local conference or bishop. He would later also reject infant baptism and embrace believer’s baptism as the only correct mode for the administration of this ordinance. Clark also despised the Methodist Conference’s support of slavery. With these reasons supporting his rationale, he decided to move to Kentucky and minister to the settlers who were continually pushing west.

¹¹ Peck, 59.

¹² *Ibid.*, 61.

¹³ Douglass, 19.

¹⁴ Duncan, 47.

¹⁵ Maple and Rider, 16.

After spending several weeks preaching to settlers traveling through the Cumberland Gap, Clark pushed on into Kentucky before finally settling in Lincoln County. The settlers in Lincoln County recognized his educational and ministerial background, and he was hired to teach school and to serve as the local minister on the weekends. Clark did an excellent job in both respects. He is noted for introducing the first reading textbooks into Lincoln County and for his ability to instill a sense of morals into his students. He was also recognized for his strong biblical sermons and compassion for the settlers and the harsh life they faced. Clark remained in Lincoln County for two years and then pushed northwest to Illinois.¹⁶

Even though his Lincoln County congregation wanted to take up a collection and give him a horse as a token of their appreciation, Clark refused to accept the gifts and instead walked the entirety of the trip. He arrived at New Design, Monroe County, Illinois, along the Mississippi River in early 1797. He was immediately hired as a school teacher and unofficially served as the pastor to the region. Even though he still considered himself an independent Methodist, he was slowly becoming an independent Baptist.

Peck noted that the following year Clark first began to cross into Missouri to preach. He further stated that Clark was not only the first Baptist or Methodist ministers in Missouri but also the first the known Protestant minister to enter the territory.¹⁷ Clark's claim is verified by the Reverend John Glanville who wrote his obituary for the October 1834 edition of the *Western Christian Advocate*. Glanville claimed that "the first preacher that brought the gospel, as understood and taught by the Methodists, across the mighty Mississippi, was the Rev. John Clark."¹⁸

Clark had a burden for the settler's souls who, because of the illegality of Protestant preaching, had not had the opportunity to hear the gospel since leaving the United States. Though somewhat lenient to newly arrived emigrants, the Spanish law enforcing Catholicism as the only legal religion in the region was clear: "Liberty of conscience is not to be extended beyond the first generation; the children of the emigrants must be Catholics . . . Emigrants not agreeing to this, must not be admitted, but removed, even when they bring property with them. This is to be explained to settlers, who do not profess the Catholic religion."¹⁹

¹⁶ Peck, 151.

¹⁷ Ibid., 228.

¹⁸ *Western Christian Advocate*, October 1834.

¹⁹ Cited in Francois Xavier Martin, *The History of Louisiana, from the Earliest Period*. 2 Vols. (New Orleans: Lyman and Beardslee, 1827), 2:90.

Clark was not dissuaded by the Roman Catholic religious requirement. He soon developed a circuit that encompassed the easternmost sections of the modern cities of St. Louis and St. Charles. On one occasion at Bate's Rock, Clark asked the local Spanish commandant, Zenon Trudeau, if he could preach in his jurisdiction. Clark was told no and was reminded that no religion other than Roman Catholicism would be tolerated. Clark then thanked the commandant and went to gather supplies. When the other people who were also present left, the magistrate found Clark and told him that if he did preach in Missouri, he would be given three days to stop before he would be arrested. Since Clark only preached in Missouri for one or two days at a time, the stipulation did not affect his ministry. Peck related that the magistrates' warning became something of a joke to the families in Missouri with whom Clark visited. When Clark showed up to preach the people would ask him how long he was going to stay. Clark would answer "three days." The congregants would then remind him that he had better not stay any longer or he would "be thrown in the *calaboose*." Some of the Spanish commandants were not so kind. In many areas Clark had to hold services at night and in secret in order to avoid arrest.²⁰ On several occasions Clark met with only a few families at a time in order not to draw the attention of Mexican authorities.

While traveling Clark, who was often alone, thought about the scriptures and theology. On one trip in the fall of 1803, he came to the realization that infant baptism was incorrect and could not be a true ordinance. After conferring with another Methodist minister named Talbert, who had been thinking about the same issue, both men decided that believer's baptism was more biblical and decided to be immersed. Clark baptized Talbert who in turn immersed Clark.²¹ Several people who were present at this event also followed the minister's example and accepted believer's baptism. After his baptism, Clark began to associate with members of a Baptist group that called themselves "Friends of Humanity." Clark was initially attracted to this group because of their stance against slavery, but was also pleased with the Baptist concepts of local church autonomy, believer's baptism, and the lack of a bishop in Baptist ecclesiology.²²

Though he had been baptized by immersion, he had not been ordained by a Baptist church. Thus, he was a Methodist minister who had given up the Methodist credentials for the Baptist faith, but as of yet was not an official Baptist minister. Clark, therefore, was a Baptist in doctrinal

²⁰ Peck, 233.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 237.

²² *Ibid.*, 258.

matters, but as of yet had no home church membership or an official ties to the denomination.²³ Clark spent the next ten years with little official denominational affiliation or ministerial status, but these issues were of no concern to the Illinois and Missouri settlers. He was a Protestant preacher who was bringing them the Gospel. This reality took precedence over credentials.

Clark's ministerial skills were recognized by the Illinois Baptists in 1810. While attending an associational meeting of Baptist churches, several of the deacons decided to ordain Clark to the gospel ministry. After questioning him on the subject of Baptist doctrine and ecclesiology, the deacons decided he was qualified to serve as a Baptist minister and he was immediately ordained.²⁴ From this point forward, Clark, while remaining friendly with his former Methodist brethren, began to work more and more exclusively with Baptists.

After ten years in Illinois and frequent sojourns into Missouri, he decided to give up teaching and to dedicate all of his time to preaching. The main reason Clark decided to become a full-time minister was his frequent visits across the Mississippi River into the Spanish Country of Missouri. Whereas Illinois had few Baptist ministers, Missouri had none. Before the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, Protestantism had been illegal. Now, in 1810, with more immigrants moving westward and the legality of all faiths, Missouri needed full-time pastors to live within the region.

With his new mission field before him, Clark began to spend more time in Missouri, gather pockets of Protestants along his circuit, and help them organize into churches. His circuit, which later gave birth to a Baptist church in each locale, included Coldwater in St. Louis County, Florissant, Owens's Station in modern Bridgeton, Spanish Pond, and Fee Fee. Once a year these small Baptist churches would gather for an evangelistic meeting. These meetings gave rise to the Missouri Baptist Association in 1834.²⁵

Clark's local church membership was at the Cold Water Baptist Church where he became the church's second pastor in 1811. Founded in 1809 by Thomas R. Musick, the Coldwater Baptist Church, following the Fee Fee Baptist Church organized in 1807, was the second oldest Baptist church in Missouri. Because of internal problems concerning slavery, this church went out of existence in 1819.

Clark's anti-slavery position had been evident as early as his days as a Methodist minister in Georgia and South Carolina and later with his identification with the "Friends of Humanity" in Illinois. The Friends of

²³ Maple and Rider, 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

Humanity organized a church in Cold Water taking the name “The Baptized Church of Christ, Friends to Humanity, on Cold Water” in 1834. This church accepted black members, whether slave or free, into its membership, and they were treated on an equal basis with their white brethren. This church ceased to exist in 1839, but in 1844 its former members joined with the former members of the Coldwater Baptist Church to become the Salem Baptist Church.²⁶

Though the majority of his evangelistic endeavors were in Missouri, he continued to keep regular preaching appointments in Illinois. Once Clark was scheduled to preach at Upper Alton, Illinois, but ran into trouble on his way. After walking from St. Louis to the northern end of St. Louis County to the Ferry that would transport him across the Mississippi, he discovered that it had been swept away by a storm. He was then forced to walk back to St. Louis and catch a Ferry that would land him at a location far away from his Illinois appointment. After crossing, Clark then walked all night so that he would arrive on time. He had traveled more than sixty miles on foot to make his appointment. When a friend learned of what Clark had endured, he asked him why he had gone to so much trouble when no more than a handful of people would be in attendance. Clark answered, “This is nothing to what my Savior endured for me. Then, too, time is short and souls are precious. The people expect me to meet my appointments.”²⁷

Clark refused to be paid for his services at this meeting. In fact, he never accepted payment for preaching. The only tangible gifts he received were clothes that several of the women along his circuit made for him.²⁸ Unlike several Protestant denominations that did not believe that a preacher should be paid for performing the tasks of his call, Clark refused payment for other reasons. He realized that slaveholders were among this group, and he did not take any money acquired through what he considered an unchristian business.

While traveling his preaching circuit in Georgia and South Carolina in the late 1790s, Clark developed a love for the itinerant lifestyle of Methodist ministers. He enjoyed bringing the Gospel to those who were far removed from the possibility of regular church attendance. Even after his move away from the Methodist denomination, their itinerant spirit became a part of him. In 1810 Clark heard that preachers were needed in New Orleans in the region of west Florida, as it was still known in the early nineteenth-century. Since Louisiana had been controlled by the Roman Catholic Church until 1803, Clark believed they desperately

²⁶ Douglas, 49.

²⁷ Peck, 272.

²⁸ Maple and Rider, 19.

needed to hear the Gospel from a Protestant perspective. He took a canoe down the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans.²⁹ After spending several months preaching and organizing house churches in the Crescent City, he walked all the way back to Illinois and resumed his teaching and itinerant preaching ministry.

Clark was also something of an early colporteur. When he went on his circuit, he always carried Christian books, Bibles, and other materials to individuals who might never have the opportunity to purchase their own. Clark was also a strong proponent of an educated clergy, evangelism, missions, and associational work. Everywhere he traveled he always carried three spare Bibles that he could leave with the people he met out in the wilderness. Clark also helped John Mason Peck create Rock Spring Seminary. This seminary eventually became the Shurtleff College in Alton, the first Baptist College in Illinois. Clark had also gone to Kentucky in 1801 to participate in the revivals that were sweeping across the Bluegrass State. He believed the spirit was so strong in the revivals that he remained in Kentucky for more than a year. His students and congregants in Illinois became so concerned that he might not return that they sent someone to convince him to come back to New Design.³⁰

During the final years of his life, Clark, infirmed with age, was forced to preach while sitting in a chair. After he became too weak to preach, his friends would carry him in a chair to services. In November of 1833 Clark went to a Methodist Church at Cold Water, which he helped organize ten years earlier, for worship services. During the service, he fell ill and was taken to the home of Elisha Patterson in St. Louis County where he died on November 15, 1833. After serving as a pastor in Missouri for twenty-two years, he was laid to rest at the Coldwater cemetery at Salem Baptist Church, the oldest Protestant cemetery, still in use, west of the Mississippi River. Clark's grave is somewhat unusual as both the Methodist and Baptist denominations have marked it and claimed him as their own.

²⁹ William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, 3 Vols. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Louis H. Everts, 1881; rpt., Paris, Ar.: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1988), 1: 227.

³⁰ Peck, 246.