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The first shed we come to, the preacher was lining out a hymn. He lined out two lines, everybody sung it, and it was kind of grand to hear it, there was so many of them and they done it in such a rousing way. . . . The people woke up more and more, and sung louder and louder; and towards the end, some begun to groan, and some begun to shout. Then the preacher begun to preach; and begun in earnest, too; and went weaving first to one side of the platform and then the other, and then a leaning over the front of it, with his arms and body going all the time, and shouting his words out with all his might; and every now and then he would hold out his Bible and spread it open, and kind of pass it around this way and that, shouting, “It’s the brazen serpent in the wilderness! Look upon it and live!” And people would shout out, “Glory!—A-a-men!” . . .

. . . You couldn’t make out what the preacher said anymore, on account of the shouting and crying. Folks got up everywheres in the crowd, and worked their way, just by main strength to the mourner’s bench, with the tears running down their faces; and when all the mourners had got up there to the front benches in a crowd, they sang and shouted, and flung themselves down on the straw, just crazy and wild.

—Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

In both Charles Grandison Finney’s rural New York and Huckleberry Finn’s fictional Missouri, genuine,† popular revivals were characterized by disorder and a level of excitement occasionally verging on hysteria. Moreover, in both New York and Missouri, as Huck goes on to note, the reform interest that often followed from revivalism and acted as a counterpart to true revivalism usually functioned as a desire to expand the evangelical message of the revival rather than to improve the moral conduct of the local population:
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He ["the king"] told them he was a pirate—been a pirate for thirty years, out in the Indian Ocean, and his crew was thinned out considerable, last spring, in a fight, and he was home now, to take out some fresh men, and thanks to goodness he'd been robbed last night, and put ashore off a steamboat without a cent, and he was glad of it, it was the blessedest thing that ever happened to him, because he was a changed man now, and happy for the first time in his life; and poor as he was, he was going to start right off and begin his way back to the Indian Ocean and put in the rest of his life trying to turn the pirates into the true path. . . .

Although the king was a con man falsely seeking financing for his mission to the pirates, and although Mark Twain intends the description as a satire of revivalism, the desire to extend the revival message rather than a moral message is a significant and now infrequently noted characteristic of antebellum revival and reform. When middle-class urban and semiurban populations began to participate in revivals in the northeast much of the disorder disappeared in favor of more seemly expressions of piety held in churches rather than sheds, and the reform interest shifted from non-moralistic, evangelical missionary work to stridently moralistic and legalistic efforts to reform society. Charles Grandison Finney was the bridge from Huck's revivalism to middle-class revivalism.

Finney's earliest religious experience closely resembled Huckleberry Finn's. At the Baptist church Finney attended in Henderson, New York, the preacher commonly exploded in emotional preaching, and his congregation responded equally emotionally. This was not a reaction to social or economic changes; it was the normal state of affairs in Jefferson County, New York, in most Baptist and Methodist congregations. The congregations' emotional responses generally resulted less in opposition to "excessive use of ardent spirits," or in efforts to enforce doctrinal tests than with attempts to improve the condition of the oppressed and those "destitute of the gospel." As a rule the beneficiaries of the Baptist missionary work do not seem to have included pirates, but they did include Burmese, slaves, Native Americans, "victims" of Masonry, and occasionally women.

The New England-descended Presbyterian population surrounding Finney, many of whom Finney later revived, differed enormously from the Baptists and Methodists. They would have considered the excitement of Huck's camp meeting a sign of immorality, and they would probably have shown little interest in the king's story, as they would have been more concerned with fighting the extensive whiskey drinking and fighting that
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Huck identified in a near-by town.³ Although New York State’s antebellum revival and reform impulse in many ways resembles Huck’s depiction, as well as the understanding of most historians, in other ways it has been forced to fit the historiographical paradigm of the Burned-over District.

Thus, in researching the course of Finney’s developing career as a revivalist in Jefferson County, New York, and the course and extent of revivalism in Jefferson County, I disregarded the most accepted interpretations of revivalism in the Burned-over District, beginning with the use of the term “Burned-over District.”

The “district” is as fictional as both the camp meeting in Pokesville and the pirates in the Indian Ocean; its historiographical use resembles that of “Great Awakening,” which Jon Butler has described as “interpretive fiction.” Participants in the awakening did not refer to it as a “Great Awakening,” and the event has defied precise definition. Nonetheless, “Great Awakening” serves historians as a means of describing a broad range of events.⁴ Analogously, historians frequently use “Burned-over District” to describe the area of New York State west of the Adirondacks and Catskills and north of the Erie Canal, because, they have argued, the area was “burned” by the fires of revivalism. Through the unquestioned use of the term, which many erroneously believe to have originated in the nineteenth century,⁵ historians have succeeded in furthering the interpretive fiction rather than in understanding the actual historical context. Historians have made a number of assumptions: the primacy of the Erie Canal in encouraging revival fervor; a connection between revivalism and reform; a tendency toward urban revivals in the district; Finney’s exceptional popularity; an unusual proclivity among the population toward forming “experimental” new religions; and a virtually static expression of fervor from 1820 to 1840.

While “Burned-over District” has served as a useful shorthand for referring to revivalism in antebellum New York State, many of the assumptions behind the fiction cannot be applied to Jefferson County. In the early nineteenth century it was an isolated rural region far from the Erie Canal; of the religious “experiments” that have come to define the Burned-over District, only the Mormons established a significant presence; Finney’s methods did not revolutionize revivals in Jefferson County; revivalism and reform were not necessarily connected with each other; and the most disastrous socioeconomic development in the county’s history, the opening of the Erie Canal, did not drastically alter the course of religious history in the county.
Recognizing distinctions in Jefferson County’s secular and religious history has led me to a new interpretive framework for religious fervor in the nineteenth century. Three different geographically defined socio-economic regions of varying religious expression are apparent in the county. Each region understood orthodoxy and orthopraxis differently. And within each region two different denominational means of expression, with the Baptists and Methodists on one end and the Presbyterians on the other, are also apparent. For the Baptists and the Methodists, fervor constituted a normal expression of piety; and for the Presbyterians until 1830, fervor represented disorder and thus impiety. On the other hand, for Presbyterians moral stringency represented piety. By 1830, after years of mutual contact, these regions and denominations, while preserving their original characteristics, grew more similar. Among the denominations, Baptists and Methodists tempered their fervor and developed a greater interest in reform; and Presbyterians accepted the tempered fervor, translated for them largely through Finney’s work, while they overlaid their moralistic interest onto their acceptance of revivalism. The interpretive fiction has emerged from a tendency to study the post-1830 expressions of fervor and reform.

Finney’s earliest theology formed amid the earliest geographical and denominational distinctions. And just as these regional and denominational distinctions diminished after 1830, they melted together in Finney’s theology after 1830 so that he became more acceptable to well-to-do urban congregations, while Methodistlike perfectionism nonetheless grew more predominant in his theology. By failing to acknowledge the distinctions underlying Finney’s theology, historians have failed to notice that Finney’s success, and the success of the Second Great Awakening in general along the northern frontier is not a Presbyterian success in the Second Great Awakening; it is a Baptist and Methodist success.

Finney brought the Baptist and Methodist revivals of rural New York State to the urban middle class, who nonetheless sought to distance their form of revivalism from both Finney’s and Huck’s. Finney accepted and fostered much of this re-creation, although he maintained an interest in evangelical reform movements, while the urban middle class adopted revivalism as a vehicle for societal moral reform. Both revivalism and Finney changed with contact with the middle class, but originally both resembled the revival and the preacher at Pokesville.

Thus, the history of revivalism in Jefferson County, New York, where Charles Grandison Finney had his conversion experience and where he
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first preached, does not suggest or support theories that rely on economic or cultural stressor arguments to explain the causes of Second Great Awakening revivalism. Strain and crisis cannot succeed as explanations of the background of revivalism in Jefferson County. Moreover, the history of revivalism in Jefferson County suggests that revivalism did not encourage reform. In fact prior to 1830, revivalism and reform were disjunctive.

The history of revivalism in Jefferson County does indicate that revivalism or fervid religion was a normal form of piety among loosely organized rural congregations before 1830; and that moral reform was the most esteemed form of piety among well-organized congregations. While the pre-1830 paradigm did continue to influence both fervid congregations and moralistic congregations, after 1830 these congregations grew alike.

Often, but not always, the less-organized congregations were Baptist; and the more-organized congregations were Presbyterian. Charles Finney grew up under the influence of a rural Baptist church in Jefferson County, where he learned the value of fervor as an expression of piety, and where he learned to place less value on efforts to reform society. As a Presbyterian minister in rural northern Jefferson County in 1824, he successfully adapted Baptist values for congregations of rural Presbyterians. His success in 1824 in rural northern New York, where social and economic conditions permitted diversity of expression among a normally rigid denomination such as the Presbyterians, allowed him to develop his revival methods six years before most Presbyterians became interested in expressions of fervor. His early experience in bringing Baptist values to Presbyterians made him unusually well adapted to succeed in the 1830s. The history of Jefferson County also provides a new perspective for examining Finney’s career as a revivalist, as his years in Jefferson County have been largely overlooked.

The story of the success of revivalism in New York State suggests that cultural hegemony is not imposed by elites onto nonelite culture. In Bobos in Paradise, David Brooks discusses a phenomenon that mirrors what happened in New York State almost 150 years earlier. According to Brooks, young sixties radicals, outside the business world, rejected the order and morality of the fifties WASP elites. The radicals valued self-expression, human relationships, and social equality over the “arid self-control” of the elites. Ultimately, according to Brooks, the sixties radicals became elites themselves, who created a new and revitalized bourgeois culture, and “at the moment it looks as if the bourgeoisie has, in fact, revived itself by absorbing (and being absorbed by) the energy of bohemianism.” Brooks sees order and structure among those working in com-
merce, and antinomianism among those initially outside that culture. Later, when, in effect, the commercial culture lost its vitality, and when the antinomian culture could no longer maintain its lack of order and structure, the two merged and shared values.¹⁰ I contend that during the 1820s much the same thing happened. Nonelites, mostly in agricultural areas with relatively little commercial development favored highly emotional religious expression, while elites in commercial areas prized morality and order above all else, and rejected emotional religious expression as unseemly. Eventually, in 1830, the two merged so that moral reform became more connected to emotional religious expression.

This then is the story of the interplay between structure and anti-structure, Victor Turner’s terms to describe respectively “the roles, norms, and institutions that constitute a given society,” and “forces in a society that contradict or negate the structure.”¹¹ It is the story of the effect of popular (or nonelite), religion on mainline (elite), religion.

In accord with Turner’s terminology, Peter Williams has described popular religion as a marginal movement:

In the gaps and interstices that emerged among the various traditional religious communities, whether Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or Native American, new movements began to form—sometimes fairly systemic and organized, more often inchoate and unformed—which at least temporarily helped to bridge the gap between the experience of chaos and its symbolic resolution into order. Some of these movements developed structures and formal organizations and endured, while others disappeared or continued to exist loosely at the fringes of the “official” churches and religious communities. . . . Many of them had little influence on anyone except a small band of dedicated followers, and thus slipped through the nets of historians concerned with the broadly representative and influential. Others eluded notice by students of religion because they did not seem religious in a strict or conventional sense of the term. What they all had in common was that they could not be easily classified according to traditional categories.¹²

This has meant that historians of popular religions have concentrated on officially unapproved, peripheral movements within denominations, or that they have been interested with cultural or civil religion.¹³ Williams also includes in this classification “sectarian” and “cultic” movements, some of which he considers “voluntarily segregated,” such as the Mormons, Hasidic Jews, the Amish, Mennonites, Hutterites, and the Doukhobors, as well as
others that were short-lived, such as the Father Divine Peace Mission. As long as any of these movements has not attained status as an “established” church or sect he considers it “popular.” In effect, these movements were unofficial or “extraecclesiastical” organizations that gave evidence of “anti-structure.” This follows from his summarization of the factors that denote both popular religion and antistructure:

The beliefs and lore of these movements are transmitted through channels other than official seminaries or oral traditions of established religious communities, whether tribal or modernized.

Popular movements . . . generally look for intervention or manifestation in the realm of everyday experience. This may take the form of possession by the Holy Spirit: of the expectation of an imminent millennium; or miraculous healings or other providential intervention into the natural or social realm; of new revelation from on high; or, conversely, of the demonic disruption of everyday life in the form of witchcraft.

In contrast to this, he indicates that “‘official’ religion tends to take on characteristics consonant with the broad sociological process called ‘modernization.’ It usually is routinized and bureaucratic.”

I contend, though, that the easily identifiable Baptists and Methodists within their “official” denominational structures constituted popular religions in the early-nineteenth-century North. Although neither would qualify under the imprecise terms “cult” or “sect,” and although neither would qualify as “voluntarily segregated,” neither was “routinized” or “bureaucratic” before 1830. Nor did their ministers generally attend seminaries, which could inculcate an official tradition. And each was intensely interested in the action of the Holy Spirit among its members in the form of fervor, or what has become known in its institutional form as revivalism. These denominations constituted antistructure in contrast to the structured and bureaucratic Presbyterians and Congregationalists.

As descendants of the Puritans, whom Williams recognizes as bureaucratic and routinized, the Congregationalists, and their counterparts on the northern frontier, the Presbyterians, imposed structure upon the frontier, and were the most apt to participate in the commercial and political affairs of the county. Although in those areas of Jefferson County where Presbygationalist structure was not matched by a secular structure, Finney’s revivals did best. Amid the chaos of frontier conditions, however, Baptists and Methodists expressed the chaos of their secular lives
in the chaos of fervent worship. In further contrast to Williams’s description, this fervent response did not serve “to bridge the gap between the experience of chaos and its symbolic resolution into order,” it served as an expression of the experience of chaos.

Eventually, though, as Williams, using Turner, remarks, antistructural groups are bound either to disappear or bureaucratize and routinize, while structural groups continue to bureaucratize until they reach a crisis point that requires that they accept some antistructure.18 This is what happened in northern frontier revivalism in the nineteenth century: the Presbygationalists became more like the Baptists and Methodists, while the Baptists and Methodists became more like the Presbygationalists.19 Williams and I differ in our understanding of this process.

As we differ in the role of chaos in encouraging fervor, we differ in our explanations of the meaning of revivalism. Williams uses Turner’s concept of communitas to explain a transitory expression of “spiritual equality” that occurred during a frontier revival, and

provided an important counterpoint to the social distinctions that characterized the structure of the settled parts of the region as a whole. On the one hand, the social and moral chaos of frontier life was forever repudiated and left behind. On the other, a new life in a rigidly structured community, in terms of both moral self-discipline and acceptance of rigid social, sexual, and racial roles was made more palatable.

Turner makes distinctions between forms of communitas all of which allow it to function in the “interstices” of society as Williams describes it.20 Williams’s description relies on the assumption that popular religion in America functions in the interstices of accepted religions, or that antistructure is not a free-standing phenomenon but one that depends on its relationship to structure. However, in the case of Jefferson County, where popular religion does not fall into the interstices but is in fact a denomination unto itself, such a description is inadequate. Moreover, it is excessively functionalist; I am not seeking here to describe why fervor succeeded, but to point to where and how it did succeed.

Although fervent congregations did maintain a spiritual and a secular equality, communitas does not describe as well as Henri Bergson’s concepts “closed religion” and “open religion” the distinctions between religious communities in Jefferson County.21 Closed religion seeks to maintain the status quo and to prevent the intrusion of possibly destructive outside forces. This form of religion is dogmatic and legalistic. Open religion,
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according to John Macquarrie, is “free and spontaneous, and culminates in the mystical union of the soul with God.”22 Thus, while agreeing with Turner’s use of structure and antistructure, I reject his depiction of it as an idiosyncratic counterpart to structure.23 Instead of viewing antistructure as a temporary means of coming to terms with structure, I follow Durkheim in considering the form of the religion an expression of the form of the participants’ secular lives. Hence, closed religion is an expression of structured, legalistic, and dogmatic lives outside of the churches, or an expression of commercially and politically oriented secular lives. Similarly open religion is an expression of less bureaucratically oriented lives, which one would expect to find in regions known more for their agriculture than business.24 Open religion is just as susceptible to bureaucratization as closed religion is susceptible to an infusion of antistructural values.

George Thomas’s Revivalism and Cultural Change: Christianity, Nation Building, and the Market in the Nineteenth-Century United States describes the congruity between daily life and institutional or religious life as isomorphism. I agree with his contention that strain and crisis theories do not satisfactorily explain the social mechanism behind nineteenth-century revivalism. Although he is concerned with describing the interplay between urban revivalism and the emerging market economy as a form of “practical rationality,” his description of “substantive rationality” as a characteristic of isomorphism in the South does hold for the “open” or antistructural religion seen in the rural revivalism among Baptists and Methodists in the North. In the substantive revivalism of both the South and the rural North, “authority relations are not abstract and legal in the sense of being standardized and universalistic.”

Within these communities, “there is no autonomous economic system because exchange relations are governed by moral rules and communal authority.” However, practical rationalization applies to closed religion which entails a bureaucratic environment.25

In describing how this isomorphism functioned in the earliest revivals in Jefferson County, I use the terms “antiformalism” and “formalism.” Antiformalists, who favored substantive rationality, were Baptists and Methodists who valued direct contact with God above all else. Fervor served as the means of expressing this contact. These communities in which all people had equal access to God’s grace tended to be egalitarian and non-hierarchical. Additionally, they placed as low a value on an orderly society outside of church as they did on an orderly church. They often viewed orderly churches as unholy, since these churches did not seek contact with God; and they viewed attempts to bring moral order to the outside com-
munity as misdirected religion. After 1830 their piety routinized. Their fervor toned down, and they began to take an interest in moral reform. However, moral reform tended to center on issues of social inequality rather than on a lack of social order. These churches favored missionary work, antimasonry, abolitionism, and women’s rights. In accord with Thomas’s isomorphism, these churches tended to dominate rural, egalitarian communities. Hereafter, I will use antiformalist as a synonym for rural Methodist and Baptist piety. This form of piety resembles Victor Turner’s anti-structure and Henri Bergson’s open religion. As discussed earlier, open religion will occasionally experience bureaucratization.

Formalists (who accepted practical rationality) were Presbyterians and Congregationalists who viewed order and morality as the two greatest values of religion and who placed emphasis on maintaining the ecclesiastical and social hierarchy. For these congregations among whom disorder and fervor represented unseemliness equal to sexual misconduct, morality and reform—notably concerns with temperance, sabbatarianism, and orthodoxy—consistently maintained positions of prominence. By 1830, though, their rigidity had developed to excess so that they needed an infusion of tempered fervor in order to remain viable. Nonetheless, their post-1830 fervor or institutionalized revivalism tended to be much more orderly than what the antiformalists had practiced. Additionally, they used revivalism as a vehicle to encourage their longstanding concern with order and moral reform. In accord with Thomas’s conception of isomorphism, these hierarchical, orderly churches dominated commercial regions. Hereafter, “formalist” will denote Presbyterian. Although Congregationalists were also formalists, few Congregationalist churches survived in Jefferson County; almost all Presbyterian or Congregationalist churches in Jefferson County opted for Presbyterianism after the Plan of Union of 1801.26 Formalists resemble Turner’s structure and Bergson’s closed religion. As open religions are susceptible to bureaucratization, closed religions are susceptible to infusions of antistructure or open religious values.

In the course of making this argument, I will frequently note the differences between Jefferson County and other regions of the state whose revivalism has been studied more thoroughly. Jefferson County, for example, depended on agriculture more than industry, even after the building of the canal. Thus nonelites, or those most likely to participate in an anti-structural worship, made up the bulk of the population.

This difference does not mean, though, that the evolution of revivalism in Jefferson County necessarily differed greatly from that of other
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areas. It does mean that these conditions are more obvious in Jefferson County and that they have been overlooked in areas with more prominent “modern” commercial and industrial economies. Thus, more than have the histories of other areas, the history of Jefferson County makes evident the prominence of the Baptists and the Methodists in driving an acceptance of fervid worship.

The following chapter reviews the history of Jefferson County that provided the background for revival and reform. The county’s unusual attraction for European nobility and its formation of three socio-economic regions in the south, midsection, and north provided distinct settings in which formalists and antiformalists expressed their religiosity. In the midst of these unusual circumstances, Finney was able to develop and express his new theology, and antiformalists and formalists were able to borrow from each other to create new values and practices.

Chapter 3 covers two aspects of revivalism in Jefferson County. First, it relates the backgrounds of Jefferson County’s successful revivalists. By far, outside of Jefferson County, Finney was the most notable of this group, but significantly, within Jefferson County, Finney was not exceptional. Finney differed from them in his ability to translate revivalism in Jefferson County to revivalism in more populated areas, but he was not alone as a revivalist in Jefferson County. Still, he deserves prominence in this narrative, since one of the things that makes Jefferson County interesting is that it was where Finney first succeeded as a revivalist. Following the discussion of the revivalists, chapter 3 details the religious status quo in Jefferson County before 1830, as formalists attempted to maintain order through church trials and reform work, and antiformalists encouraged missionary work inside and outside their congregations chiefly through emotional preaching.

Chapter 4 develops on this theme. After 1830 formalists continued to seek to maintain order, while antiformalists encouraged missionary work. However, formalists after 1830 were more willing to employ revivalism to achieve order, and antiformalists were more willing to employ reform to missionize.

Chapter 5 indicates the ways in which reform was transformed in order to meet the changes within the ranks of the formalists and antiformalists after 1830. It is true that revivalism and reform often coexisted, but antiformalists forwarded missionary-oriented reform in addition to their revivalism, while formalists resorted to revivalism in order to further legalistic, orderly reform.

Map 1.1 indicates Jefferson County’s separation from the rest of the
state and its distance from the Erie Canal, which ran through central regions of the state such as Monroe County, Onondaga County, and Oneida County. This map without the inclusion of county names appears in the Whitney R. Cross Papers, 1941–1951, collection #1678. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. Cross copied the map from the New York Mercantile Union, Business Directory (New York, 1850). See Cross, 358. Town and county names have been added to the map by the present author.