Chapter 1

Reverend Pickands, the Bridge War, and the Public Culture

In 1837, Reverend James Pickands set a standard for religious involvement in public life that few clergy or church members ever matched. Pickands, the minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Ohio City (a rival city on the West bank of the Cuyahoga River, incorporated into Cleveland in 1854), played a prominent role in a violent skirmish known in Cleveland history as "The Bridge War." The bridge in question rankled Ohio City boosters because it diverted traffic coming from the south away from their town and toward Cleveland. One night in 1837, 1,000 protestors armed with guns, crowbars, axes, planks, stones, and other weapons gathered to march across the new bridge, intending to render it impassable. Pickands invoked divine aid as they began their march. According to some accounts, Pickands even led the procession. At the center of the bridge, Pickands and his compatriots confronted a similar army of Clevelanders led by that city's mayor. Three people sustained serious injuries during the ensuing battle. Despite Rev. Pickands's and his "army's" efforts to destroy the bridge, the bridge stood.[1]

Such active, even violent, action in the public arena runs counter not only to popular images of nineteenth-century religion but also to historians' accounts. Even when the pervasive cultural presence of religion is noted, it is most often in terms of the work of moral and benevolent voluntary societies. Pickands provides an indication that Protestants cannot be so easily pigeonholed. His direct involvement in a practical economic issue suggests that a different image for nineteenth-century religion must be developed. With Reverend Pickands in mind, it is the argument of this book that Protestants played an active role in the public life of a

developing commercial city. Their reach extended from education, temperance, and benevolence, areas customarily associated with religion, to economics, politics, and rituals of community life, areas where historians have underestimated their impact.

Pickands' participation in the Bridge War, as striking as it is, represents only one, quixotic, instance of Protestant involvement in the public life of Cleveland in the years before the Civil War. Other Cleveland Protestants would exercise their influence in ways less dramatic, perhaps, but no less significant. How can their power and influence be characterized?

Any study of the power and influence of religious communities necessarily enters into a debate about the relationship among ideals, self-interest, and social activity begun by Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Few issues are more vexing and complex—or more important. Virtually every study of religion in the antebellum years that touches on public life addresses the issue either directly or obliquely. *A Measure of Success* aims to contribute to this debate by describing the power and influence of Protestants in the "public culture" of a specific community at a particular stage of economic and urban development.[2]

By using the term "public culture," the intention is to encompass the widest possible variety of forces and influences that contribute to shaping values, attitudes, and institutions. Analyzing the public culture involves assessing the complex intermingling of political, economic, social, and cultural influences that constitute community life. It includes aspects of social life where values, attitudes, and institutions are established and maintained. The public culture is expressed in formal institutions such as political parties or orphan asylums, as well as in widely shared attitudes toward work, progress, and morality.

In addition to conceiving of the formation of public culture as a process, it might usefully be thought of as the forum or arena where power in its various forms is elaborated and made authoritative. Possessing formal instruments of political and economic power, such as owning businesses or holding political office, are certainly included. But equally, if not more important, is the ability to confer meaning. Those who succeeded in identifying railroads as instruments of moral and material progress, for example, certainly possessed power—they have set the stage for others to accept their understanding of what is important. That those who conferred such significance to railroads also owned the railroads,

or led churches whose leading members owned the railroads, indicates the extent to which these two forms of power were often closely related.

Rather than being a fixed entity, the public culture may be more profitably thought of as an arena that changes as participants vie to make their influence felt. It is a forum where power in its various forms is projected, elaborated, and made authoritative. Many individuals and groups vied for influence in antebellum Cleveland, and it is from this process that the public culture of the commercial city takes shape.[3]

Power and influence in this public culture take many forms. Reverend Pickands represents an immediate, direct exercise of power—the ability to prevail through physical force. Yet this is only the most dramatic invocation of power. Power belongs just as much to those who have the ability to confer meaning and importance (identifying railroads as instruments of moral and material progress, for example) as well as to those who possess formal instruments of economic and political power (ownership of businesses or occupying positions of leadership).[4]

Any aspect of social life where values, attitudes, and institutions are developed is part of the public culture. The public culture is expressed in formal institutions such as political parties and orphan asylums, in voluntary associations including those dedicated to benevolence or moral reform, as well as in widely shared attitudes toward work, progress, and technology.

Using the term "public culture" aims to provide focus to the discussion of social power and influence by finding an alternative to terms such as "politics," which is too narrow, and "society," which is too broad and ill-defined. Politics is included in the public culture because politics broadly conceived involves contests for power, authority, and the ability to bestow meaning on public life. But even an expanded definition of politics fails to encompass some crucial aspects of the process of establishing and maintaining power and authority, such as investing railroads with millennial import, or the involvement of churches and church members in July 4th observances. Including the discussion of politics under the rubric of public culture also serves as a reminder that politics functions in the context of ideological and economic concerns which must be accounted for in any full analysis of social life.

At the same time as it seeks to be a term more inclusive than politics, public culture is meant to be more precise than "society."

The concern of the book will be to focus on those aspects of society where values, attitudes, and institutions are established and maintained. To focus on "society" often results in a static portrait of existing social arrangements. It is just as important to highlight the ways society is constantly changing and to notice the individuals and movements vying for influence. Any human society is dynamic and fluid, the ever-changing result of a process. Nowhere is this more true than in an antebellum American city such as Cleveland which made the transition from village to city, and from horse to steamboat to railroad, in barely 25 years.

Using the term "public culture" underscores this dynamic process. The public culture emerges as the result of a contest between diverse groups and interests over public policies and values. It is always being created, revised, and defended. This concentration on the process by which the public culture is formed and maintained is particularly appropriate when applied to the public activity of Protestants, since they consciously sought to establish their influence and spread their message not only in Cleveland but throughout antebellum America.

In addition to being an alternative to "politics" or "society," focusing on the process by which the public culture was shaped directs attention to activities often seen as private, such as religiously inspired schools or voluntary societies. The work of these groups was ultimately part of the process by which the city's values, attitudes, and institutions were formed. In the world of the antebellum Protestant, the distinction between public and private had little meaning since the ideals formed in the church were assumed to be applicable to all society and the virtues of the home were seen as appropriate for the public world. Thus, the public culture is visible just as much in benevolent projects conducted by women, which are often considered private, as it is in businesses and political parties dominated by men. Benevolent projects such as the Ragged and Industrial School received public funds, even though they were "private" projects—in this case by the women of First Methodist Church—because they inculcated values considered appropriate for the developing commercial city. Using public culture as an analytical tool, then, allows appropriate recognition of the ways in which the work of women, usually described as "private," helped shape the "public" world of antebellum America. Since women constituted two-thirds of the membership of Protestant churches, any account of religion and public life that neglects

the often informal, indirect ways women shaped the city would be incomplete.

Measuring the power of a religious group in the public culture is a delicate task. Power and influence defy precise measurement. Some indices of power and influence used in this book, such as office-holding, filling of leadership positions, wealth, and occupational status, begin to suggest the extent of Protestant influence. To supplement this, much of the argument about Protestant power and influence in the public culture rests on another sort of evidence—particular "moments" when the tangle of motives and the variety of forces at work can be observed and analyzed. Three types of moments are particularly illuminating—moments of Protestant priority-setting, moments of participation and cooperation, and moments of social decision-making.

Moments of Protestant priority-setting provide an occasion to assess the internal state of the Protestant community. These are moments when Protestants juggled conflicting commitments, attempting to decide which to keep and which to revise or abandon. The salient example was the conflict between their Sabbath principles and the imperatives of an economic development of which they were prime beneficiaries. The convenience, efficiency, and profitability of running steamboats and railroads on the Sabbath tempted Protestants to abandon strict adherence to the Sabbath. In instances such as this, it is possible to evaluate the ways Protestants resolved their religious ideals, self-interest, and class interest.

In moments of participation in the broader society and cooperation with other people and institutions within it, we can glimpse at the relationship of Protestants to those outside their community. Protestants joined in public life by establishing a presence for themselves in a variety of ways, often in alliance with public officials. These instances of participation and cooperation occurred when Reverend Pickands led his bridge charge, when Protestant ministers led celebrations marking the completion of railroad lines, when churches took the lead in July 4th parades, when business leaders incorporated religious ideals in their advice to young men entering business, when benevolent institutions promoted the Protestant agenda, when churches were used for business meetings and public school commencements, and when public officials joined Protestants in benevolent and educational projects. At these moments, Protestants legitimated aspects of pub-

lic life and, in return, the community incorporated Protestants and acknowledged their centrality and their role in meaning-giving.

Moments of social decision-making, too, offer a window on Protestant power and influence in the city. Analyzing the moments when Protestants worked to pass and enforce temperance laws, or when they asked the city to supply money for a teacher for the Protestant Orphan Asylum, makes it possible to assess the extent of their ability to translate their wishes into social policy. Moments of social decision-making reveal which attitudes, forces, groups, and individuals held sway in forging the values and institutions that shaped the city's public culture.

Essential features of the role of Protestants in the public culture emerge most clearly when these various "moments" can be seen to coalesce into "patterns" of Protestant priority-setting, participation and cooperation, or social decision-making. Such indications of Protestant involvement appear, for example, when the city government continually cooperates in supporting Protestant benevolent institutions, or when Protestants invariably give priority to the imperatives of economic development rather than to their religious ideals.

Since using public culture as an analytical tool directs attention to patterns of cooperation as well as occasions of confrontation, an often-overlooked aspect of Protestant involvement in economic life becomes more visible. Protestant church members and ministers rarely confronted society's economic and political arrangements in obvious or systematic ways. The impact of Protestantism on antebellum America would have been more obvious if there had been a pattern of confrontation. Instead, church officers, members, and ministers had few criticisms to make of the emerging commercial and industrial economy. They applauded the public culture they in large measure created and maintained. Their crucial role in the process of public culture formation was to bestow their approval on a particular form of economic life. To put it another way, they privileged entrepreneurial capitalism. In the process, they made an element of their own ideology, the ideal of stewardship, an integral part of the new ethos. Looking for evidence of the process by which the public culture is created thus provides a way to evaluate not only direct, formal, and institutional exercises of power but also the more subtle, amorphous, and pervasive modes of power that constituted the dominant method of Protestant influence.

When all these indications of Protestant influence and power in the public culture are accumulated, a portrait of the extensive involvement of Protestant church members and ministers in the public culture emerges that extends far beyond the brief appearance of Reverend Pickands during the Bridge War. It is not surprising to find extensive Protestant influence in the public culture of Cleveland. Accounts of antebellum culture, particularly religious histories, have tended to stress, if not overestimate, the impact of Protestantism as a culture-shaping force. Many histories have focused on the national level, where the proliferation of voluntary societies and the prominent role of religious leaders in the antislavery movement have created an image of a pervasive cultural Christianity.[5]

Yet national visibility does not directly translate into immediate influence over the day-to-day growth and development of an urban settlement such as Cleveland. With the role of religion within a particular local community under the microscope, notions of a Protestant Empire or a Christian Commonwealth must be qualified, if not abandoned. When it came to shaping the public culture of Cleveland, Protestants found themselves one of many groups contesting for influence. Given the substantial role Protestantism played throughout the antebellum United States, what is most surprising about the history of Protestants on the local level is their limited influence. Whether it was the only partially successful temperance crusade, the loss of their central role in public rituals, or the accommodation, if not capitulation, to the imperatives of the commercial economy, Protestants often lost contests for power and influence.[6]

Another image that has dominated histories of antebellum religion is of a Protestantism secure and beyond challenge in its private sphere of home, family, morals, and character formation, and at the same time shunted to the margins, if not completely excluded, from political and economic life. It has been easy to pigeonhole religion in the private sphere because, once again, much of the attention in histories of antebellum religion has been on ministers and national voluntary organizations. Ministers did not own businesses, run for political office, or become mayors of cities. National voluntary societies, too, were largely confined to the private sphere. When they attempted to pass laws or elect candidates, temperance, antislavery, and Sabbath activists made forays into the public sphere, but these have usually been described as an extension of religion's role as

moral guardian rather than as an integral part of the Protestants' conception of religion. Turning attention to the involvement of Protestants in the public culture highlights their persistent interest in seeing their religious views embodied in public life. Working to pass temperance laws can best be interpreted not as an extension of their core function of supervising private morality, but as a reflection of their conviction that religion belonged at the center of all aspects of life, both public and private.[7]

When the focus is shifted away from ministers and national organizations to churches and church members on the local level, and from major, dramatic confrontations to the quiet, informal, and indirect spreading of influence and exercise of power that can be brought out by focusing on the public culture, the extensive public involvement of antebellum Protestants is apparent. While they did not dominate the culture, neither were they shunted to its margins. In the years from 1836 to 1860 Cleveland's Protestant ministers and church members took stands on political issues, led July 4th observances, played a prominent role in civic celebrations, and commented on the changes brought by technology and economic development. Churches used their disciplinary powers to set standards for moral conduct and business integrity. Protestant-based voluntary societies helped pass temperance laws and they enlisted the help of local authorities in benevolent projects. In addition, church members themselves took prominent leadership roles in a wide range of reform, business, and political organizations. All of these activities rested on the conviction that religion generated ideals appropriate to every aspect of social life, and they undermine any portrait of Protestantism which relegates it to the private sphere.

A Measure of Success argues that Protestants in antebellum Cleveland continually, and in many instances, successfully, vied to shape the public culture of the developing commercial city along lines favorable to their interests as members of an economically successful, well-connected leadership elite.[8] Protestants brought to this effort an ideology beset with tensions and ambiguities which they never fully resolved. This ideology was fashioned out of a number of influences—their acceptance of the imperatives of economic development, their interests as a social elite, and their religious convictions, particularly the insistence that religion generated ideals appropriate for all aspects of public and private life. Consequently, Cleveland's Protestant leaders created and then

applauded the developing commercial city and worked to inculcate some of the attitudes and behaviors needed for its economic expansion. At the same time, they did not completely embrace the ideology of economic development. Influenced by their religious ideals, they sustained the notion that they were part of an organic community where the most favored bore responsibility for the welfare of others. This attitude incorporated some restraints on laissez-faire capitalism's tendency to create a society of individualistic profit-seekers. With their sense of obligation to others, Protestants styled themselves stewards of the city. Much to their dismay, fewer and fewer Clevelanders welcomed their guidance in the increasingly pluralistic city Cleveland had become by 1860.

The title of the book, *A Measure of Success*, points to the two major purposes that have guided this examination of religion in antebellum Cleveland—to sum up the extent of Protestant power in the commercial city and to suggest a methodology that can be used to assess that power. As regards the extent of their power, after a quarter-century of effort, by 1860 Protestants had achieved "a measure of success" in planting their values, attitudes, and institutions in the public culture. They had established a substantial presence, but not a dominant one. The methodological contribution of this history of antebellum Cleveland Protestants is exemplified in the variety of ways it seeks to measure power and influence, and in the focus on the process of the formation of the public culture as an appropriate context for assessing power and influence.

Above all, *A Measure of Success* is an account of how people's lives, values, attitudes, and institutions were shaped by Protestant religion and economic and urban development. The city's Protestants actively participated in the contest over the values and arrangements which would prevail in Cleveland, one of many similar commercial cities emerging in early nineteenth-century America. Whatever the wisdom of the example he set in the Bridge War of 1837, Reverend Pickands, in blessing the march of the protesting West Siders and then joining in the battle, at least dispelled the notion that religion was separate from the strife and contention of public life. But Pickands' role was small and his impact was minor. Other Cleveland Protestants played a steadier, more permanent, and ultimately more decisive role in shaping the values, attitudes, and institutions that dominated the public culture of the expanding commercial city in the antebellum years.