

## *John McMillan's Journal: Presbyterian Sacramental Occasions and the Second Great Awakening*

John McMillan (1752–1833) was an industrious Presbyterian official who moved to the Pennsylvania backcountry during the revolutionary era, and his journal helps us understand an important Presbyterian practice during those days: the sacramental gathering. McMillan was known for his leadership in churches, presbyteries, ministerial education, revivalism, war, and politics. The son of immigrants from northern Ireland, McMillan was born in Chester County, Pennsylvania. After receiving a Presbyterian revivalist education (which included a stint at the College of New Jersey), he moved west over the Allegheny Mountains to Washington County, Pennsylvania, where he arrived in 1776 to pastor two congregations, Chartiers Creek and Pigeon Creek. McMillan and several Presbyterian ministers who moved to that area formed presbyteries and educational institutions that trained frontier ministers and created ministerial networks for cooperative endeavors.

One of those cooperative endeavors was administering the “Sacrament of the Supper.” McMillan’s journal, now in print, provides a glimpse into these communion gatherings, which were the venue for many revivals during the revolutionary era and the so-called Second Great Awakening.<sup>1</sup> Presbyterian sacramental gatherings, days-long celebrations of the Lord’s Supper, had become a staple in the Scottish Presbyterian calendar by 1750, and Scots-Irish immigrants to the New World continued the practice.<sup>2</sup> Sacramental occasions typically included a fast day on Thursday, preparation sermons on Friday and/or Saturday, communion sermons on Sunday, and thanksgiving sermons on Sunday night and Monday.

<sup>1</sup> John McMillan, *Journal*, in *John McMillan: The Apostle of Presbyterianism in the West, 1752–1833*, ed. Dwight Raymond Guthrie (Pittsburgh, 1952), 202–57. Guthrie printed part 1 (Oct. 1774 to Aug. 1776) of the journal from a 1909 copy of the holograph, now lost. Guthrie acquired the holograph of parts 2 (Aug. 1776 to July 1791) and 3 (Jan. 1820 to Oct. 1833) of the journal from Mrs. Helen Wragg, great-great-great-grandmother of John McMillan. Guthrie discusses these sources on pages v and 202. The archival department of U. Grant Miller Library at Washington and Jefferson College has a transcript of McMillan’s journal from Oct. 26, 1774, to Aug. 6, 1776, and a transcript of his Aug. 1776 through July 1791 diary. I have not been able to locate a transcript of part 3 of his journal (Jan. 1820 to Oct. 1833).

<sup>2</sup> The best account of sacraments in this period is Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton, NJ, 1990), 50–68.

According to brief notations in McMillan's journal, which we have for the years 1774 to 1790, he organized sacramental gatherings for his congregations as early as 1780 and always had the assistance of area ministers.<sup>3</sup> He, in turn, assisted other Presbyterian ministers with sacramental gatherings at their various congregations. McMillan recorded his participation in as many as seven sacramental occasions in one year, though he averaged about five per year in the 1780s.

Sacramental occasions were an important part of the social and religious fabric of revivalistic Presbyterian life in the backcountry. Every year new communicants were welcomed and old ones renewed. These gatherings created space for social bonding, identity formation, rekindling of friendships, and discussion of politics, war, and God. McMillan certainly combined political and religious discourse at these meetings. A member of the Washington County militia during the Revolutionary War and well-known for his patriotism, he brought his politics into the pulpit—even threatening to refuse the sacrament to those in his congregations who did not oppose the Whiskey Rebellion. The occasions were also a central venue of Presbyterian revivalism, the place where people experienced conversion and joined the church. In a magazine article, McMillan reported:

At the first sacramental occasion after the work [of God for revival] began [in 1781], forty-five were added to the church. . . . This time of refreshing continued in a greater or lesser degree, until the year 1794. Upon every sacramental occasion, numbers were added to the church, who gave comfortable evidence of their having obtained a saving change of heart.<sup>4</sup>

The sacramental gatherings were a locus of backcountry culture wherein religion, politics, economics, war, and isolation created the perfect storm of emotion and devotion to Christ and country.

McMillan's journal demonstrates that sacramental gatherings were consistently held in his area throughout the 1780s and that numerous backcountry ministers assisted one another throughout each communion

<sup>3</sup> McMillan, *Journal*, 202–36. Unfortunately, the extant manuscripts of the journal are incomplete. The journal stops in the early months of 1791 and does not resume until 1820.

<sup>4</sup> John McMillan, "A Brief Account of the Revivals of Religion, Which Have Taken Place in the Congregation of Chartiers, in Washington County, Pennsylvania," *Western Missionary Magazine* (Jan. 1805): 353. In this quote McMillan is referring to the "out-pouring of the Spirit," synonymous with the "work," which started in December 1781 and continued until 1794, not to the gatherings themselves, which he began in 1780.

season. Backcountry Pennsylvanians thus perpetuated an important Presbyterian practice that eventually became a central venue of early Second Great Awakening revivalism. James McGready (ca. 1760–1817), a pupil of McMillan's, experienced conversion at one of these communion-gathering revivals. As McMillan's journal notes, McGready later assisted him at a sacramental occasion in October 1788. Toward the end of the 1790s, McGready began replicating the sacramental practice in Kentucky, stimulating what became known as the Second Great Awakening.

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