CHURCHES AND SOCIAL CONTROL ON THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA FRONTIER

MARIAN SILVEUS

The early settlers of western Pennsylvania were not universally God-fearing, praying men to whom churches were indispensable. There were, to be sure, the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who gathered in one another’s cabins in “praying societies” and who, as their settlements grew larger, made vigorous efforts to obtain regular ministers. There were, too, the German members of the Reformed and Lutheran denominations who met together to sing and pray and to have the school-teacher read a sermon to them. Baptists and Methodists who migrated into the region were likewise eager to retain the blessings of their respective religions, and Quakers began to hold their meetings immediately upon arrival in the new country. Such groups, however, were in a decided numerical minority; from figures as to the membership of some of the churches and liberal estimates as to the membership of the remainder, it can be computed that during the pioneer period probably not more than one person in six in the entire population of western Pennsylvania had any connection with a church. More nearly deserving the sobriquet of “typical pioneer” than the religious individual, in fact, was the man who left his old home largely to escape just such institutions of established communities as churches. Adventurers, failures, and outright scoundrels, to name them in a scale of descending respectability, drifted into western Pennsylvania in large numbers. Although they settled all over the region, they were not apt to choose districts dominated by strait-laced Presbyterians. They

1 This article has been adapted from a paper read by the author, who is librarian on the staff of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey, at a joint meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association and the annual history conference of the University of Pittsburgh on April 19, 1935. Ed.
became especially numerous in the towns, and travelers in the region seldom failed to comment on the "depravity" of such places as Pittsburgh and Bedford.²

Respectable elements in the population frequently found a partial key to such conditions in the lack of churches. When David McClure was in Pittsburgh in 1772 he commented that the inhabitants seemed "to feel themselves beyond the arm of government and freed from the restraining influence of religion." A writer in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* for August 26, 1786, enlarged on the idea of what a church meant to a community:

The black cloth, the sedate and grave presence of a divine, the idea of dignity and reverence, from common opinion, annexed to his character, restrain the disorderly in the streets where he walks, or in the neighbourhood where he lives. . . . Even the convening to church, teaches the lower class of people to attend to dress and cleanliness, and to set a value on their personal appearance. . . . Human nature is insensibly actuated by these secret springs and touches, and we see a people where a church is established, even where there is not great devotion evident, nevertheless more orderly, temperate and industrious than elsewhere.

Throughout western Pennsylvania men of substance seem to have been pretty well convinced as to the value of churches in promoting order in their communities and in improving their moral tone. Some were themselves religious men who were prompted by personal needs to give support to a church. Others were looking to the prosperity of their settlements and

² Material for this article has been culled from a wide variety of secondary and source materials. Printed church records include the Presbytery of Redstone, *Minutes . . . September 19, 1781, to December, 1831* (Cincinnati, 1878) and the Synod of Pittsburgh, *Records . . . September 29, 1802, to October, 1832* (Pittsburgh, 1852). The manuscript collections of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, principally the Tomb and Coldren collections, contain transcripts of records of a number of churches in the region; and several University of Pittsburgh master’s theses, among them Daniel R. Kovar’s "Social Life in Early Fayette County as Seen Especially in Church and Court Records" (1929) and Prudence B. Trimble’s "The Presbyterian Church and Temperance in the United States, 1811 to 1919" (1929), contain primary materials. Of value also have been a number of travel accounts notably David McClure’s *Diary . . . 1748-1820* (New York, 1899) and the report of two missionaries, John F. Schermerhorn and Samuel J. Mills, *A Correct View of That Part of the United States Which Lies West of the Allegheny Mountains* (Hartford, 1814). A great number of county and town histories, as well as histories of individual churches and of denominations, have been utilized in filling in the background.
aided the churches in much the same spirit in which they promoted schools and cooperated in attempts to set up courts and local government.

In Pittsburgh the religious element was so small that had it not been for the support of the progressive elements the establishment of churches would have been long delayed. The Penn heirs deeded lots to the Presbyterian, the Episcopalian, and the German Reformed congregations for trifling sums. Hugh Henry Brackenridge did his agnostic best to insure a church for Pittsburgh. When the question of the incorporation of the Presbyterian congregation was before the legislature, he tried to have the word “Presbyterian” omitted and the name “Religious Christian Society” adopted; he was afraid that there were not enough people of one faith in the town to warrant separate churches, whereas a non-denominational “society” might survive, and in his opinion a church “was useful to keep up order and enforce the practice of morality.” The realization that it would be impossible to establish a non-denominational church among sectarian-minded people, however, led others to oppose his scheme, and it was defeated.

In 1805 Judge William Jack, a Greensburg Episcopalian, “motivated by a desire to promote the welfare of the borough of Greensburg,” donated a lot “to the Burgesses and inhabitants to and for the use of them and their descendants forever to erect thereon a house for the public worship of the Almighty God.” The town of Greensburg did not take advantage of the opportunity to build a municipal church, and in 1816 the Presbyterians were given permission to build their church on a part of the grant. Judah Colt, agent of the Pennsylvania Population Company in Erie County, helped to found the Presbyterian church at North East in 1801, and after his removal to Erie he became an elder in the church that was established there and donated rooms for its use in a building owned by him. The Holland Land Company, in an effort to promote settlement in Crawford County, tried to encourage the settling of ministers and offered special inducements to the Reverend Amos Chase of Connecticut to settle there. Leading landholders either gave or sold for small sums the land for churches. Such was the case at Somerset, where Peter Ankeny gave the ground for the church; at Sharon, where William Budd gave
the Baptists a plot of land; at Long Run near Greensburg and at Dunlaps Creek in Fayette County, where William Marshall and Thomas Gallaher respectively donated ground for the Presbyterian churches. General John Neville built a church for the Episcopalians at Woodville and financed the education of its first regular minister.

Even with such encouragement the churches had difficulty in surviving. Where the boisterous and rebellious elements constituted too large a proportion of the population, religion could scarcely get a hearing. The Reverend Samuel Barr, the first Presbyterian pastor at Pittsburgh, was at the outset encouraged by the results of his preaching and remarked in one of his early sermons, "How pleasing to reflect that this place, the very spot of the Western country which was most noted for vice and immorality, should bid the fairest for piety and godliness." But his discipline was not strict enough to please his colleagues in the Presbytery of Redstone, and in 1789 he resigned his Pittsburgh charge. After his departure conditions grew worse; certain lax elders in the church gained unenviable reputations, and so enervated did the congregation become that only an occasional minister appeared before it during the period from 1793 to 1800. To complicate the problem, lawless men drifted into the town from districts where a greater degree of order existed.

In many districts the early churches became an important influence. The very existence of a church probably did improve the general conditions in a community, as was maintained by the writer in the Gazette quoted above. In addition, the churches controlled certain religious, spiritual, and social privileges that made their influence of more positive value. The effectiveness of this control depended on the degree of conviction among the population as to how valuable these privileges were. Consequently, when the minister was persuasive enough to convince his hearers as to the indispensability of these privileges, this means of control became important; and it was of paramount importance when such a large proportion of the population had been drawn into membership that to be a member in good standing was necessary for one's social and economic welfare.

The punishment inflicted by the churches on those who failed to con-
form to the accepted standard was the deprivation of church privileges. For slight first offenses a reprimand was enough. More rigorous was the requirement that the offender acknowledge his guilt and profess repentance, while in cases of slander public apology was frequently required. Suspension from the “extenuating privileges of the church,” principally Communion, until “satisfaction” should be made or until the culprit should give “evidence of repentance” was the most common form of punishment. Another device is illustrated by the disciplinarian measures imposed by the Presbyterian church at Dunlaps Creek upon a man who desired to have his children baptized. He was charged with having used “unguarded expressions” at different times, and only after he had acknowledged his guilt, professed his sorrow, and promised to be on his guard in the future, did the session declare the way open for baptism. Permanent removal from the church rolls was reserved for such crimes as adultery or the acceptance of the teachings of another church; thus the congregation of the Turkeyfoot Regular Baptist Church at what is now Ursina declared that Susanah and Isaac Dwire were “no more under our love on Account of Denying the Doctrines which they on [c]e held And Joining the Methodists.” All the churches except the Society of Friends used the weapon of expulsion sparingly, since they could ill afford to lose members.

Each denomination had its own method of administering discipline. Among the Presbyterians the session of the individual church was the first court of trial, with appeal possible, in important cases, to presbytery, synod, and even to the general assembly. Trial by these judicatories had many of the characteristics of civil trials, such as the calling in of witnesses and the presentation of evidence. In the Methodist church the book of discipline was revised at the annual conference and was enforced by the preachers. Quaker rules of conduct were likewise imposed from above; the “preparative meetings” of the entire congregation had original jurisdiction and generally assigned each case to a committee for investigation. Decisions were subject to revision by the monthly, quarterly, and even yearly meetings. The Baptists were the most democratic. Their congregations customarily drew up a covenant or set of rules for governing
themselves, rules that generally included some statement as to the regulation of their personal lives, as did the following one from the covenant drawn up in 1775 by the Turkeyfoot congregation:

We do promise to watch over each other's life and conversation and not suffer sin upon our Brother without reproof as the Lord shall discover it unto us to stir up one another to love and good works to warn Rebuke and admonish each other in meekness and love according to the Rule of God's work.

The Baptists ordinarily sat in judgment on their fellows at their weekly business meetings. The union congregations of the Lutheran and Reformed churches also adopted sets of rules for governing and disciplining themselves and provided that the wrongdoers should be brought before the preacher and the consistory.

Practically every phase of an individual's conduct was considered a proper field for regulation. Although the Quakers were the strictest in their insistence upon support of the church and attendance at "meeting," the other denominations imposed obligations of a similar nature. Thus the rules of the Turkeyfoot Baptists specified that those who failed to attend the business meetings were to be "subject to such Censure as the Church think necessary." Erie Presbytery in 1804 upheld the action of a church session that deprived a member of church privileges because of his neglect of family worship. The German congregation at Brothers Valley in Somerset County included in its rules a statement that "Every member of the congregation shall according to his ability be bound to contribute [and] ... who ever refuses to do this shall no longer be considered a member of the congregation and all services of the preacher shall be withheld." When the Great Bethel Baptists at Uniontown were building a new meetinghouse in 1784 they "resolved that the members shall work at the meeting house every day that is appointed ... under penalty of five shillings for neglect."

In regard to marriage and marital relations the churches and their clergymen performed services that were definite contributions to an ordered society on the western Pennsylvania frontier. They read the marriage service for many couples who lived so far from any center of justice that a civil ceremony would have been impossible; for a number of these
the marriage ceremony was the only contact with a church. Among their own members, the churches enforced their respective marriage regulations and in so doing helped to enforce the laws of the colony and later of the state. Those who failed to conform were severely treated; thus the Turkeyfoot Baptists excommunicated a woman "for Cohabiting together with the Man that is now her husband before they were Lawfully Married." Publishing the bans or giving notice of intent to marry was required in nearly all the churches and was similarly required by state law. Toward the end of the frontier period an effort was made to get away from the custom in the Presbyterian church, and, although the Pittsburgh Synod refused to consent to the relaxation of the rule, the Presbytery of Erie in 1812, under the frontier influence, decided against the continuance of the practice. Preachers also assisted in ironing out difficulties between man and wife, for divorce among good church members was out of the question; Rehoboth session, for instance, received the apology of a member for "having Struck his wife Some time ago."

The observation of the Sabbath was almost a fetish among the strictest church members, especially the Presbyterians. No work was done on that day that could possibly be done on another day, and even traveling and visiting were prohibited. A session in 1811 tried two brothers for "driving their team home, from some distance, on the Sabath"; it decided that the reasons given by the brothers were "not of sufficient weight to have warranted them to have travelled on the Sabath... and that they should acknowledge their fault and pray repentance." Another session tried a church member for "authorizing or knowingly permitting" his son Peter to engage in sugar-making on the Sabbath and exonerated him when he proved that he "did not know or approve of his family Conduct." The fact that the United States postmasters were expected to open the mails on Sundays did not condone a Presbyterian's performance of that duty, and the postmaster at Washington was excluded from the special privileges of the church for so doing. The Presbytery of Ohio and the Synod of Pittsburgh upheld this action. When the case, with a number of similar cases from other places, was appealed to the general assembly, that body began a campaign to have the practice abolished by the government. In spite of all
efforts to enforce general Sabbath observance, however, there was much violation of it, and the missionary, John F. Schermerhorn, reported in 1812 that traveling, visiting, hunting, and fishing on the Sabbath had become very common.

Personal conduct of church members throughout the week was also subject to strict regulation. “Attending places of diversion” was a serious charge. “Promiscuous” dancing was sufficiently sinful to cause a Presbyterian’s name to be read out in church. The Great Bethel Baptists reprimanded one of their number for behaving in an unchristianlike manner “in getting angry and fighting and speaking unadvisedly.” A Presbyterian admitted to his session that he had been guilty of drawing lots at the last election. Lying and slander were common misdemeanors. A woman member of Great Bethel Baptist Church was reprimanded for “talking scandalously about her Neibour’s children,” and the Turkeyfoot Baptists suspended a woman from fellowship for two and a half weeks “for telling an Untruth.” In the one major disorder in western Pennsylvania during the frontier period, the Whiskey Insurrection of 1794, the churches took the side of order and the federal government, and the preachers used all their power to check disorderly resistance to the excise laws. Both the Presbytery of Erie and the Presbytery of Ohio passed resolutions excluding from church privileges any who had taken part in the insurrection.

During the early part of the frontier period the churches did not try to exercise a very strict control over the use of intoxicating liquors. Liquor was generally accepted as a necessity in the daily life of the frontiersman, and at such religious or semireligious occasions as weddings, funerals, and christenings it was an essential part of the fare. Total abstinence was not expected of anyone, even the preachers. An often repeated story about Dr. John McMillan and the Reverend Joseph Patterson concerns a visit they made to a tavern; after the drinks were served, Patterson paused to offer up a prayer, and McMillan seized the opportunity to drain both glasses. “You must watch as well as pray,” he advised his companion. Although the Eastern governing bodies of the Presbyterian church had condemned the use of liquor at funerals as early as 1766 and by 1789 had begun a campaign for temperance, it was not until about 1802 that the
Presbyterian preachers of western Pennsylvania joined in the movement. Soon thereafter the serving of spirits at presbyterial dinners was stopped. In 1804 the *Western Pennsylvania Missionary Magazine*, organ of the Synod of Pittsburgh, printed an article maintaining that the custom of drinking ardent spirits was too common and prevalent among professors of religion and that the evil would have to be cured "before we can rationally expect to see that glorious morning." Various sessional minutes indicate that charges of "over-drunkenness" were occasionally made against members, but these charges were frequently coupled with charges of such concomitant misdemeanors as "unChristian conduct and conversation" or "profane language." Liquor remained, however, a necessary commodity. On the occasion of a baptism in Erie County in 1815 it was discovered at the last minute that there was no whiskey in the house, and since it was Sunday none could be bought; faced with this dilemma, the assembled company concluded that the whiskey was more important than Sabbath observance, and a boy was sent to get some "with orders to make all due explanations of the case."

Churches occasionally extended their control into fields that the civil authorities might have been expected to cover exclusively. The Westland Preparative Meeting of the Society of Friends near the present site of West Brownsville disowned two women who were accused of "opening the Door of a House when the Family were absent and taking several things out." The Presbyterian session of Rehoboth investigated a charge against one John Blaine of "taking some Flour, not his own" from a Mrs. Furier's mill. After giving Blaine "every opportunity of defence," the session concluded that the charge was supported and that Blaine should not enjoy the privileges of the church until he should give satisfactory evidence of repentance. The Methodist book of discipline provided that the accounts of a member who failed in business should be investigated and that, if he were found to be dishonest or to have borrowed without the ability to repay, he should be expelled. Complaints about one of the members of the Presbyterian congregation at Dunlaps Creek came to the session of the church in 1787 and again in 1795; the first time the session decided there was no proof against him, and the second time it resolved
“to publish to the Congregation That Robt Adams owns that he was wrong in taking obligations on Joseph Crabill for too much money for land he sold to him but sd Adams declares that he Still thinks his right to said land was good. The Session declined to hear any more such transient complaints between Hugh McCreary & Robert Adams—concluded with Prayer.” The Second Associate Reformed Presbytery, in April, 1799, dealt with a charge of fraud in the sale of a horse against a member of Laurel Hill congregation. It was charged that he had sold the horse for a seven-year-old, whereas it was actually five or six years older. At three meetings that solemn body discussed the affair and finally persuaded the two parties to agree “to bury [it] in oblivion from an abundant persuasion that a judicial discussion thereof would be highly prejudical to their respective domestick and religious connections.”

Probably the most amusing instance of church control over business practices is that of the man who was charged with having sold whiskey “which froze in the bottle” and with having received more pay for it “than he was supposed to have received according to an agreement.” The session heard the testimony of a number of witnesses who had bought whiskey from the man at about the same time, as well as that of those who had seen the whiskey that was supposed to have frozen. One described the condition as “slushy ice,” while another testified that “the whiskey was good—better than what was usual in this country.” The session finally concluded that “the fact alleged” was not established but that, by his own acknowledgment and the testimony of witnesses, the defendant “had put a small quantity of water into his last bbl.,” an act that was censurable; and he was therefore excluded. When he expressed repentance he was rebuked, admonished, and restored to his former standing.

In addition to disciplining their members into good behavior, the churches undoubtedly were influential in making people feel the need for leading better lives. Some of the old sermons were pretty potent drafts for any sinner to swallow, and the process of “fencing the tables” at Presbyterian Communion services—the outlining by the minister of the various sins for which one might be excluded from Communion—was an even more forceful portrayal of the road to damnation and back again. Parents whose children were to be baptised were given solemn instruction as to
their own conduct, and they had to take pledges that probably persuaded the more religious to try to lead exemplary lives. The isolation of the frontier, the paucity of reading matter, and the lack of other forms of intellectual stimulation gave the churches and the preachers an opportunity to dominate the lives of the people, an opportunity of which they took full advantage.

The discipline that was thus exercised and the influence that was thus exerted were by no means universally effective. Sessional and presbyterian records are replete with examples of the inability of those bodies to deal with stubborn sinners. The case of Rebecca McGrew, with whom Rehoboth session had to deal, illustrates the way in which the churches were thwarted. Rebecca was charged with slander; she sent the session a written declaration that "she declined the authority of the Church and renounced its privileges & that she wanted neither to attend as required at Jno Barkhamers or any other time or place." Session declared that she "had expressed herself in a very unChristian & irritating manner" and agreed that "she ought to Submit to an admonition of the Session & Give Satisfactory evidence of Sorrow for Sd conduct & be deprived of the healing Ordinances of the Church until She Complies with Sd judgment of Session." The sessional records do not indicate whether or not this action had any effect on Rebecca McGrew.

Preachers and religious laymen refused to allow sinning to go unchallenged among nonmembers. For example, the Reverend William Woods, pastor of the Presbyterian church at Plain Grove, now Grove City, reported a man to the justice of the peace for making maple syrup on Sunday. About 1800 moral-minded citizens of western Pennsylvania, greatly concerned about the reign of vice and immorality in their communities, began to organize what they called "watch and ward" societies. Their declared purpose was to aid civil authorities in bringing conviction against offenders under the laws that existed or might thereafter be enacted for the suppression of vice and immorality. Among the vices that they particularly tried to combat were the "profanation of the Lord's Day," the keeping of tippling houses and gambling houses, riotous or disorderly assemblages of persons, and profane swearing and cursing. The Pittsburgh Moral Society was founded by the Presbyterians about 1809.
One of its projects was the conducting of a school on Sunday afternoons for the purpose of keeping the "vicious and neglected young people" off the streets. Spelling and reading were taught. Four years later a Sunday school of religious instruction was started.

One of the most important ways in which the preachers extended their influence was through their lay teaching. Many of them conducted schools of their own or taught in the academies. The influence of the Presbyterian preachers at Canonsburg was of inestimable importance in raising the general cultural and moral level of the region. When a layman taught, the preachers and the religious laymen felt the necessity of keeping an eye upon his actions. The Presbytery of Ohio in 1794 withdrew the privileges of the church from a schoolmaster "for immodest action toward a young lady." This case inspired them to recommend to their congregations "to be particularly careful not to employ masters of immoral conduct or unsound principles but to discourage such: and do their utmost in their neighborhoods to encourage masters of good morals and orthodox principles in matters of religion." Sessions were enjoined to inquire into the conduct of the schoolmaster, to visit schools every three months, and to see that the master taught the principles of religion at least one day a week.

The fact that the churches of western Pennsylvania during the pioneer period attracted only about one-sixth of the population to membership and the evidence that they were not entirely successful either in disciplining their own members or in casting a virtuous glow over their respective communities should not make the historian lose sight of the fact that the churches did, nevertheless, make important contributions to the advance of orderliness in the region. The existence of a church in a district was a factor in attracting the right kind of settler and in making it advisable for disorderly elements to move on. Its discipline kept well-intentioned individuals within the accepted paths of conduct and reinforced the settlers' faith in the standards that had prevailed in their old homes. The presence of educated preachers both directly and indirectly raised the intellectual standards of a community. Without the churches the transition of western Pennsylvania from a frontier to a civilized region would have been a longer and more laborious process.