IMPRESSIONS OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA:  
THE MISSION OF ELIZUR WRIGHT, JR., 1828-1829  

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In November 1828, the American Tract Society assigned Elizur Wright, Jr., as its agent for Western Pennsylvania. The American Tract Society was one of nearly a dozen voluntary benevolent societies formed by a united front of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and Methodists between 1815 and 1830 to spread evangelical Protestantism and to maintain the expanding American republic on a sound Christian basis.¹ From its headquarters in New York City, the American Tract Society directed its agents to canvass specific areas, to distribute religious pamphlets, and to establish local affiliates. The religious pamphlets or tracts were inspirational testaments that provided dramatic renderings of the evangelical verities: the sinfulness of human nature; the direct relationship between man and God; regeneration through faith; and the duty of active proselytizing. Tracts were sold at cost, ten pages for a penny, or were given gratis to the poor, and an astonishing 65 million were distributed within six years after the society's founding in 1825.²

The central goal of the evangelical united front was the extension of its religious institutions and values into the West. Organizations such as the American Bible Society, the American Home Missionary Society, and the American Tract Society sought to establish the basic infrastructure of Christian civilization on the frontier and thereby link the West to the East. Without proper moral instruction and a sufficient number of churches, the people on the frontier might, as one leading evangelical warned, degenerate into "a dark minded, vicious populace," instead of becoming an enlightened, sanctified

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citizenry. In the wilderness, some might stray from orthodox ways; others might abandon religion altogether.

Western Pennsylvania was such an area of concern for the American Tract Society. Although settled for several decades, the trans-Appalachian region of Pennsylvania was still in the process of being properly civilized and Christianized according to evangelical standards. The region included a potpourri of religious and ethnic groups: congregations of Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, and Catholics; and communities of English, Welsh, Scotch-Irish, and Germans. Increasing numbers of Irish Catholic immigrants attended by their priests in the Mississippi River Valley were evidence to evangelicals of a papist plot to win the West and subvert the Protestant nation. Another challenge was presented by the booming city of Pittsburgh where the enthusiasm for profits appeared greater than that for piety.

Wright's mission was to bring the people of Western Pennsylvania under the influence of evangelical Protestantism. Born in Connecticut in 1804, raised in a devout Congregationalist home on the Western Reserve of Ohio, and graduated a Phi Beta Kappa from Yale College in 1826, Wright spent the next two years as a schoolmaster near Boston in an effort to bolster his meager finances so that he could enter a seminary and pursue his intended career as a minister. Dissatisfaction with schoolteaching and an unsuccessful attempt to read theology on his own forced the pious young man to re-evaluate his career plans, especially since he had fallen in love with Susan Clark, one of his students. In lieu of theological studies, Wright felt obligated to act in the world to save sinners. He chose to enroll as an agent of the American Tract Society in the trans-Appalachian West at an annual salary of $150. He would then gain an income, create the foundation to support a family, and be able to devote himself fully to evangelicalism. As he wrote Susan, through tract work he might "affect the destinies of multitudes of all ages reclaiming them from the degrading service of sin to that of the living and true God, raising them from all the pains of hell, to all the joys of an eternal heaven."

3 Lyman Beecher, A Plea for the West (Cincinnati, 1835), 36.
Wright's tenure as a tract agent lasted only from November 1828 to March 1829 when he accepted a professorship at Western Reserve College in Ohio, but his reforming zeal and organizing talents would continue throughout his life. He subsequently served as secretary of domestic correspondence of the American Anti-Slavery Society from 1833 to 1839, as the first insurance commissioner in Massachusetts from 1858 to 1866, and in 1878 as president of the Liberal League, an association of free thinkers. A series of letters he wrote to his fiancée and his parents during the winter of 1828 and 1829 provide a case example of evangelical enthusiasm and an intimate look at a tract agent's impressions of life in Western Pennsylvania.

Faced with covering a vast area, Wright's goal was nevertheless to put at least one tract in every home west of the Allegheny River. His method of operation was to ride on horseback visiting people, handing out tracts from his saddlebags, and organizing affiliates of the national society, if there were enough interest. The auxiliary societies would receive tracts from the parent organization and would be responsible for supplying their neighbors with the pamphlets. Thus the American Tract Society believed that religious orthodoxy would be encouraged in the West.

Thanks to the friendliness of the Western Pennsylvanians, Wright was commonly invited to share meals and to spend the night. In the environs of the small village of Sewickley on the Ohio River, he rode some twelve miles before he was able to gather about a dozen people into a local tract society. He stayed the night in the home of a church elder who farmed five large fields among the hills a couple of miles from the river. Away from the main road and set deeply in a valley next to a spring, the house was a notched log structure chinked with mud and without any plaster to cover the inner hewed beams. There were two floors in the house and two rooms on each level with a large fireplace in the main room for heat. Wright described the style and location of the cabin as standard for Beaver County and critically wrote, "The Pennsylvanians are a people who care nothing for taste or improvement and are determined to go on just as their fathers have gone on before them." Yet Wright liked the people and praised their "remarkable" hospitality which was much appreciated during the cold winter months. He described Western Pennsylvania as "the most healthy part of the

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6 The original manuscripts of the Elizur Wright, Jr., letters are in the Library of Congress; the typescripts are in the Boston Public Library.
7 Elizur Wright, Jr., to Susan Clark, Nov. [?] 1828, Wright Papers, LCMD.
world” with pure air, beautiful skies, and fine weather for December.\(^8\) The land was a great wilderness but without any danger; the only wild animal that he encountered was a deer that bounded across the road in front of him.

In Mercer County he found the population, which he estimated to be 3,000, widely dispersed and isolated in a dense forest thirty-five miles long and twenty-five miles wide. Neighbors were likely to be more than a mile apart and were separated by thick stands of beech and maple. The “Pennsylvania way of settling” was to make a clearing in the woods, erect a log cabin near a source of water, and remain well back from the main road. The meeting houses were made of hewed logs with a nearby cemetery fenced in by poles. Wright, who paternally lectured his Boston fiancée on the delicate and refined nature of womanhood, found an interesting counterpoint in the young daughters of the settlers who tended the horses and were adept riders. As he approached a cabin, a girl would skillfully take his horse, remove the saddle, and tie the horse to a tree branch. The Western Pennsylvanians were adapting to the wilderness in their own way.\(^9\)

Within the space of one week in Mercer County, Wright had ridden 100 miles and established five auxiliary tract societies. At Sharon, a village of some thirty homes, he found a community of the Disciples of Christ, more popularly known as Campbellites after the sect’s founder, Alexander Campbell, who had settled in Western Pennsylvania after his arrival from Ireland in 1809. The Campbellites were theologically an offshoot of Scotch-Irish Presbyterianism. Although Campbell preached an ecumenical Christianity, evangelicals such as Wright ironically perceived the Disciples of Christ as a manifestation of what they feared the frontier would produce—the splintering of established denominations into new sects. While his horse fed on oats, Wright dutifully gave several tracts to each family and hoped that the tracts would lead these people to religious orthodoxy.\(^10\)

The Irish Catholics were another group Wright actively proselytized. Although he found most of the Irish friendly, it was a cultural shock for Wright, who had last lived in a sophisticated community near Boston, to accommodate himself to what he considered the crude

\(^8\) Elizur Wright, Jr., to Susan Clark, Dec. 12, 1828, *ibid.*

\(^9\) Elizur Wright, Jr., to Susan Clark, Dec. 30, 1828, *ibid.*

but amiable manners of impoverished frontiersmen. Having spent the night with an Irish family in the wilds of Venango County, he breakfasted on a large stack of honeyed pancakes, but the poor sanitary conditions lessened his appetite. Everyone dipped his knife into a common dish of honey, which offended Wright because the utensils were dirty. He ate only enough of the fried pork to be polite, for it had been hung up fresh in the fireplace and had since accumulated a thick layer of grime. Although he found the cuisine none too tempting, hunger eventually overcame his fastidiousness.  

Wright believed the Irish Catholics of Butler County to be the most backward people in Western Pennsylvania. In his words, "A great part of them are but little above the half civilized state." He depicted their homes as hovels filled with numerous children of all ages. Unable to explain the cause of poverty in other than moral terms, Wright attributed the meager standard of living of the Irish Catholics to spiritual error. Because of the destitution of the Irish Catholic immigrants, he distributed tracts without charge. One Irishman mistakenly thought Wright was giving away tracts of land; nevertheless Wright left him with a half dozen religious tracts in the hope that they might be read. In good evangelical fashion, he believed, however, that the local priest would personally profit by exacting a pecuniary penance from his flock for having strayed into Protestant pastures.

On one occasion, Wright called on the local Irish priest, who cordially received him into his study which was adorned with a rifle and a crucifix above the fireplace. Offered brandy, Wright firmly declined because of his "cold water" principles which prohibited the consumption of stimulating drinks. Accused by the priest of trying to make his congregation doubt their religion, the Protestant and Catholic antagonists engaged in a long discussion in which each freely quoted scripture but generally talked past the other. Wright was nevertheless impressed enough with his spiritual adversary to comment that "the whole [encounter] made me wish I was as good a follower of Christ as he was of AntiChrist." Wright’s contact with the Irish Catholics only reinforced his prejudices about their poverty, culture, and religion.

11 Elizur Wright, Jr., to Susan Clark, Jan. 29, 1829, Wright Papers, LCMD.
12 Elizur Wright, Jr., to Elizur Wright, Sr., and Clarissa Wright, Feb. 7, 1829, ibid.
13 Elizur Wright, Jr., to Susan Clark, Feb. 20, 1829, ibid.
In addition to the settlers of the hinterlands, the citizens of Pittsburgh also needed spiritual regeneration. Wright referred disparagingly to Pittsburgh as the "Black City," for its furnaces blotted out the heavens with dense smoke. The talk of the town was not of "eternal rewards" but rather of today's profits. The ethos of evangelicalism was hard put to contend with canaling and commerce, industrialization and urbanization. Wright complained that Pittsburgh's dominant business concerns meant that "men are too much engaged for themselves to mind the welfare of others. Every man here seems to be straining every nerve to get rich. . . . Such a whirl of business is not to be seen in any other city of my acquaintance." 14

Wright respected, however, the progress represented by Pittsburgh's business activity. His descriptions evoke a sense of wonder at the economic development of Pittsburgh to the virtual exclusion of other topics. The contrast between the primitive frontier of Butler County and the dynamic city of Pittsburgh must have been dramatic. The noise, the constant dark smoke, and black mud ankle deep on the walkways were evidence of the energy and swiftness with which a wilderness had been transformed into an expanding industrial center. The air pollution was the consequence of the extensive use of coal that fueled the city's iron, glass, paper, and cotton industries. He observed that "coal is dug as free as dirt all over the country for fifty miles around." 15 Steam power was even being used to pump water from the Allegheny River to a reservoir on Grant's Hill 100 feet above the city which would be gravity-fed through iron pipes to supply the people with water.

The commercial vitality of Pittsburgh derived from the opportunities for transportation afforded by the confluence of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio rivers. Wright marvelled at a covered bridge that spanned the Allegheny River; the bridge was about a quarter of a mile long, had a promenade for strollers, and was high enough so steamboats could pass. A similar bridge crossed the

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Monongahela River. An aqueduct in the last stages of completion was to carry the Pennsylvania Canal, which connected Pittsburgh with Philadelphia, across the Allegheny River. He watched stone cutters preparing a tunnel of several hundred feet to connect the canal with the Monongahela River and the steamboat traffic.\textsuperscript{16}

Since the building of the first Mississippi River steamboat in Pittsburgh in 1811, the city had developed a bustling river trade. All manner of boats plied the three rivers and on the wharfs of Pittsburgh were huge piles of lead from Galena, molasses from New Orleans, and stacks of iron, cotton, corn, flour, and pork. Looking down from the bluffs of the city, Wright was fascinated by the large steamboats, such as the Robert Fulton and the Delaware, with their high decks, sumptuous cabins, and powerful engines. When the Delaware left the pier, it fired its signal gun which caused a thundering reverberation as it boomed off the surrounding cliffs, adding to the urban din.\textsuperscript{17}

Pittsburgh was not, however, without its religious institutions. A large Episcopal church was built in a Gothic style with a steeple only rivaled by that of the city hall. There were ten other churches, plain brick structures, and at least one Roman Catholic church. Ironically some forty Irish workers, probably Catholics, were preparing the foundation for the evangelical Western Theological Seminary. Welsh immigrants had their own clergyman who conducted services in their native language since most of the parishioners understood little English. Wright's contribution to evangelizing Pittsburgh was in forming local tract societies, distributing literature, and raising funds for the American Tract Society.\textsuperscript{18}

Wright's impressions of life in Western Pennsylvania at the end of the third decade of the nineteenth century indicate that on the one hand life in the hinterlands remained quite primitive while on the other hand Pittsburgh was undergoing rapid modernization. Compared to the standard of living he had known in his home area of the Western Reserve of Ohio, he found the condition of rural dwellers of Beaver, Butler, Mercer, and Venango counties to be noticeably less well-to-do. Life in such places was not a bucolic idyll but a hard struggle for survival amid crude log homes, harsh winters, and the threat

\textsuperscript{16} Elizur Wright, Jr., to Susan Clark, Dec. 12, 1828, Wright Papers, LCMD.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.; Elizur Wright, Jr., to Susan Clark, Nov. 24, 1828, Wright Papers, LCMD.
of impoverishment. Wright's sense of astonishment with the pace of Pittsburgh's economic transformation is all the more noteworthy because he could compare it with his experience of the last six years spent in New Haven and near Boston, not exactly stagnant urban centers. The dynamic quality of Pittsburgh was a significant departure from the simpler and more static conditions he found in the outlying districts. The contrast between city and countryside was striking.¹⁹

Although Wright did not put a tract in every home west of the Allegheny River, as he had originally hoped, he estimated that by January 29, 1829, he had distributed 50,000 pages of tracts, formed twenty auxiliary societies, and ridden 1,000 miles.²⁰ He had labored to evangelize a vast wilderness, to convert Irish Catholic immigrants, and to regenerate a profit-oriented Pittsburgh. Wright probably did not convert many impoverished Irish Catholics to Protestantism or reclaim the schismatic Campbellites for orthodoxy, but his individual effort contributed to the hold of established religion through the organization of local tract societies. The combined endeavor of all the benevolent societies did, moreover, extend the institutions and ideology of the East, especially the values of the dominant Protestant order, throughout the trans-Appalachian region. The evangelicals laid the foundation for a Christian civilization on the frontier of Western Pennsylvania and the Old Northwest that encouraged the cultural cohesion that bound the area to the Union during the Civil War.²¹ Wright's personal labors emphatically document the dedication with which evangelicals spread not only the religious message of Christ's atonement for sinners but also the cultural values of the eastern Protestant establishment.


²⁰ Elizur Wright, Jr., to Susan Clark, Jan. 29, 1829, Wright Papers, LCMD.