

THE PALIMPSEST

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Aratus Kent

The spirit of federation was prevalent in America after the Revolutionary War. The common cause of independence had taught the value of cooperation. In politics this trend toward permanent alliance resulted first in the adoption of the Articles of Confederation and later in the formation of "a more perfect Union" under the federal constitution. The churches, too, saw the advantages of working together, particularly in the missionary field. In the same year that George Washington was inaugurated first President of the United States the First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church formally expressed sympathy with the Congregational churches in extending religious influence to the frontier communities in the West.

The formation of the Missionary Society of Connecticut in June, 1798, was a landmark of cooperation between Congregationalists and Presbyterians for the development of American home

missions. "The object of this Society", declared one of the articles, "shall be to Christianize the heathen of North America, and to support and promote Christian knowledge in the new settlements within the United States." From that time the two denominations worked together in the selection of missionaries, and the plan of union soon spread.

The story of the progress of Presbyterianism and Congregationalism toward Iowa begins at the lead mining village of Galena on the Fever River in northern Illinois. To this western outpost came all sorts of fortune seekers. A Kentuckian brought many slaves to work his mines. Traders found new opportunities for profit. In 1824 the government placed Lieutenant Martin Thomas in charge of the lead mines. He and his assistants ruled the rapidly growing community until civil government was established. During those early years when settlers were flocking by scores into the Fever River district, few of the amenities of civilization were observed.

Not all the pioneers, however, were unprincipled ruffians. In a letter to the Secretary of the American Home Missionary Society in 1828, Christopher R. Robert described conditions and asked for help in establishing religious services. At that time the population of Galena was esti-

mated to be about 1200, and more were coming by every boat. The number of children was small in proportion to the population, probably not exceeding fifty. No school was provided. Neither was there any "public means of grace," though a Catholic priest had once resided there and a Methodist clergyman had preached to the miners in the summer of 1827. "But you can readily imagine what the situation of the people must be, in the moral and religious point of view," wrote Robert. "The Sabbath is not much regarded in the village, the miners do not generally work on that day — I fear, not out of regard to it."

There were, nevertheless, "some few pious persons in the place, and a number of others friendly to religion," who wanted a minister settled there, preferably of the Presbyterian denomination. A subscription list was being circulated to raise money for a clergyman. "Two names are down for \$125", and Robert thought enough would be subscribed "to support a man one year, at least."

One difficulty would be in "obtaining a proper place for meetings, as the houses are most of them built of logs and very small. But it is thought this difficulty may be overcome by erecting a temporary building, which could be done in a short time." The project of building a church had been agitated but nothing had been accomplished.

Aside from suggesting that the clergyman should be a "sensible, judicious" person, Robert was "diffident in expressing an opinion as to the requisite qualifications of the minister whom you may send to this field; but from your knowledge of the character of the people, you will doubtless think it desirable to send one of some age and experience in the ministry." Moreover, he would need to be prepared to "undergo much privation for a few years, or until the country becomes more settled. His fare must be plain, much of the time salt provisions, and few or none of the luxuries of life."

John Shackford, a resident of Saint Louis, felt moved in 1828 to appeal to the East in behalf of the cultural life of the upper Mississippi region. "A residence of near three months at Galena has convinced me of the great necessity there is for some one to lead the inhabitants in the ways of righteousness. They are, most of them, so bent on pleasure and business, that the thoughts of death and the judgment seem never to enter their minds. Funerals, excepting two or three instances recently, have been conducted in a manner that I hardly thought possible in any part of our land; — the corpse taken from the dwelling and carried to the grave by a few persons, and not a word said, either by way of consolation or admonition. There

are some it is true who disapprove of this uncere-
monious mode of burial, and have expressed a de-
sire that there might be some person to officiate, at
least on such occasions. The last time I heard
from the subscription there, for the support of a
clergyman, it amounted to \$400. I did hope that
ere this, some person authorized to preach the gos-
pel would have visited the place, and do not yet
despair of seeing one."

To such a place and into such conditions came
the Reverend Aratus Kent, graduate of Yale and
disciple of the great Timothy Dwight. He came
to the region when the settlers were not just sure
whether they were to be Congregationalists or
Presbyterians. The situation has been well sum-
marized in Clark's *Leavening the Nation*:

"Presbyterianism had never proved indigenous
to the soil east of the Hudson, and by an illogical
parity in reasoning, Congregationalism was as-
sumed to be equally foreign to soil west of that
river. Hence it was not uncommon for New Eng-
land pastors to advise their emigrating members
'to be loyal Presbyterians at the West'. Students
in the Seminary were taught that 'Congregational-
ism is a river rising in New England and emptying
itself South and West into Presbyterianism'. In
1829 the directors of the American Education So-
ciety recommended all young ministers going west

to unite with Presbyteries and 'not hold on upon Congregationalism;' and it was publicly acknowledged, at that time, that one half of the young men from Andover became Presbyterian ministers."

Aratus Kent was born in Suffield, Connecticut, on January 15, 1794. His boyhood was spent during Connecticut's most influential literary period. The year after Kent's birth Timothy Dwight, grandson of the great Jonathan Edwards, began his memorable presidency of Yale. He emulated his grandfather as a man of letters, religionist, and college president. Dwight, however, modified slightly the theological interpretation of Calvinism as given by his grandfather. Kent came under the influence of Dwight and entered Yale. There, in his freshman year, he listened to President Dwight lecture on the philosophy and psychology of religion. Under the spell of this theology, Kent was converted and united with the Congregational Church. He decided to follow his great teacher in the study of religion. In 1816 he received the baccalaureate degree from his teacher's hands. The next year Dwight's career ended in death, but a sturdy band of disciples proposed to carry his precepts to all parts of the country.

Nor was this an easy task. The first half of the nineteenth century saw two external forces working in American thought: French scepticism and

English deism. Then, too, the frontier, with its incessant struggle with the elements, turned men's thoughts from the supernatural to the natural. The result was an attitude toward the Bible, institutionalism, and politics quite unlike that from which the New England Congregationalists had come. With all this in mind, Dwight sent out men like Aratus Kent to battle with the new civilization.

Kent received his commission as a missionary to the "Northwest" in March, 1829. He reached Galena at the end of April, going by way of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Plunging at once into his work, he established the first Sunday school in northern Illinois. Kent's church in Galena was what would now be called a community church. The people preferred a Presbyterian clergyman, and the New Englanders believed Congregationalism became Presbyterianism as it approached the Mississippi. In the meantime Kent extended his work as far as possible, founding churches and schools. Some of these churches later became Presbyterian and others Congregational.

Meanwhile, other laborers came into the new field. In 1831, two years after Kent's arrival at Galena, the Reverend Asa Turner visited the mines. He and Kent discussed the problems of carrying the gospel to the pioneer communities on

the frontier. Both men were aware that the frontier was moving westward faster than the church was following. In a few years the Iowa country west of the Mississippi would be opened for settlement. Already men were impatient to begin working the Dubuque lead mines.

As soon as the Black Hawk Purchase was opened, Aratus Kent included the region around Dubuque in his missionary jurisdiction. In August, 1833, he preached in a cabin at Dubuque. This was the first public religious service in that community. Two years later the Reverend Cyrus L. Watson came as a regular Congregational minister. Meanwhile, Kent preached at other settlements in the Iowa country. Through his influence in those early years Congregationalism was introduced throughout the lead district. It was said that he bore "his labors with cheerfulness and a zeal that made him respected among all classes with whom he mingled, performing his duty like a true Christian".

Kent not only founded churches and schools but took a decisive stand against slavery. He believed that the teaching of Jesus could not be reconciled with slavery and forbade communion to slave holders. As a result the Southerners who had brought slaves to Galena formed their own church. He declared that the "holding and treat-

ing of human beings as chattels is a sin directly opposed to the gospel and to the Law and Prophets as interpreted by our Lord Jesus Christ". In this he was fully in accord with the Friends and the Congregationalists in Iowa who were conducting a very active underground railroad. His attitude coincided with the opinions of Emerson and Whittier who were much interested in the anti-slavery movement in the West. In 1852 Lincoln visited Galena and praised Kent and his work in behalf of freedom and in the cultural development of that region.

After nineteen years of incredibly hard work, Kent resigned as pastor of the Galena church. The rest of his life was devoted to the founding of schools and churches. He was one of the leaders in the establishment of Beloit College, and he laid the cornerstone of Rockford College.

Some of his churches became Presbyterian and some became Congregational, for as time went on the Middle West became denomination conscious. His influence extended throughout Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa. Aratus Kent died on November 8, 1869, and was buried in the town he had helped build. His enduring fame lies in the fact that he saw into the future and built as did the prophets before him.

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