

## The Beginnings of Missouri Baptist History

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## **Introduction**

“Baptists are like the Canada Thistle; given a favoring spirit laden breeze, and they may be wafted to the remotest parts of the earth, and wherever they light, they take root.” (Maple and Rider) It was the year 1906 when J.C. Maple wrote this down and started the project of preserving and remembering the earliest Missouri Baptist History. In 1910, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, the Missouri Baptist Historical Society gathered and unanimously appointed Maple and Professor Rider so that “the memory of our honored dead might be preserved for the Denomination.” (Maple and Rider) Maple says that “The year 1906 marks the beginning of the second century of Baptist work in Missouri.” Indeed, the Baptist history is full of rich stories of faithful servants of Christ. Like J.C. Maple and the Missouri Historical Baptist Society, it is in the interest of this paper to remember and honor their history. Baptist roots in Missouri began with the earliest pioneers in Bethel Church, the life and legacy of John Mason Peck, and the influence of John “Father” Clark in the homes of Missouri settlements.

## **Earliest Beginnings**

When Baptists first entered Missouri, there was no Missouri. This is because the territory of land that would become Missouri was under the reign of the Spanish crown (Canada 3). As such, the accepted religion was not of the Baptist denomination, but Romanism. This caused the few Baptists to be “threatened by emissaries of the Pope” (Duncan 35). After Spanish Rule ended in 1800, the French took back the land only to sell it to America in 1803. The Missourian population in 1799, three years after the start of Baptist history, was just 6,028 people (Duncan 32). After the purchase of the Louisiana territory by the United States in 1803, Missouri became religiously free (Maple). Baptist families moved west and the start of Baptist influence in the

new state of Missouri had begun. Before this religious freedom, there are two notable families that braved the Spanish rule. These families include Thomas Bull and his wife in 1796 and Enos Randall and his wife the year after (Duncan 37). R.S. Duncan says of them “But they: ‘counted not their lives dear to unto them’, and went forward, not fearing them who could kill the body but trusting in “Him who had the power to destroy both body and soul in Hell” (Duncan 35). This kind of attitude is what started the earliest Baptist perseverance in Missouri.

On July 19, 1806, Bethel church began in a small twenty by thirty-foot-long cabin made of poplar logs and became the first “first permanent church organized in Missouri” (Duncan 39). As J.C. Maple puts it, “The Canada Thistle had taken permanent root.” This “root” would go on to sprout and bear much fruit in the way of missions. When John Mason Peck visited Bethel church, he remarked that there are “more real friends and liberal contributors to missions in this church than in any other in the Territory” (Jenkins). It was not long after Bethel began before it moved, more properly the people did, to Jackson County. R.S. Duncan again says that “The old house has been torn down. The hand of time and the ruder hand of man, have fully accomplished the work of demolition. But that spiritual temple, of which every truly regenerate man and woman forms a part, will never feel the weight of years, nor yield to the wasting for of time” (Duncan 41) Physical churches may come and go, but the bride of Christ will not pass away. The small pieces of wood that built Bethel church served to build the greater foundation of what would become a great Baptist denomination in Missouri that serves the bride for the glory of the King. Bethel Church’s mission minded attitude would continue to be reflected at the Centennial in 1906. Reverend A. M. Ross Pastor of Jackson Baptist said, “From the days when John the Baptist began his preaching in the wilderness until this good hour, we have never been without a wilderness in which to preach” (Maple, Centennial 28). This way of thinking is clearly seen in

two great men who were laborers in building the Baptist foundation. The wilderness for John Mason Peck and Father John Clark was the beloved state of Missouri.

### **John Mason Peck**

John Mason Peck was born on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1789, in Litchfield South Farms, Connecticut (Maple and Rider) Peck grew up in a Christian home that taught and believed in solid Christian values. As children, their parents helped him and his siblings to understand the Bible. Maples says that “The solid principles of morality were woven into every fiber of the brain” (Maple and Rider). On May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1809, Peck married his wife Sarah Paine and just two years later their family moved out of Connecticut to Green County, New York. Their new location consisted of only eight families. However, it was this small group of Congregational Puritans that led Peck through a “careful and prayerful study of the New Testament” (Maple and Rider). This study of the New Testament convinced Peck that the Baptist understanding was the correct one. From the workings of the Spirit, Peck became a member and was given a license to preach. The day after receiving this license, he preached for the congregation (Maple and Rider). From this point forward, Peck would preach a sermon nearly every day (Babcock 70).

While the people in New York were glad at his conversion to the Baptist denomination, his family back in Connecticut was less so. Having failed to tell them of this, they called him to “stand trial” because they believed he had broken covenant vows with them (Maple and Rider). They said that "what they had against him was neither scandal, nor heresy, nor even his renouncing their sentiments and joining the Baptists; but for leaving them a hearing thus virtually excluding them without giving them an opportunity to defend themselves and if they could, to reclaim him” (Maple and Rider). Thus, being called upon to give a defense for the Baptist denomination, Peck did just that. He used scripture to try to convince them to fix “their error in

reference to Baptism” (Maple and Rider). While they did not agree, the two parties made a peaceful but permanent separation.

Even though this congregation was not convinced of the Baptist beliefs, the momentum for the American Baptists had begun. Hearing that Adoniram Judson and Luther Rice had become Baptists gave Peck an extra passion for missions. J.C. Maple said that this event “was the call from God to awake and begin the world-wide mission that the World's Conqueror had given to His followers” (Maple and Rider). Arguably, John Mason Peck responded most to this call. Peck, setting his sights on spreading the gospel, said “he dare not limit his exertions to the narrow region of his own immediate neighborhood” (Maple and Rider). From this birthed a union with James Welch to start a mission in Saint Louis, Missouri. In 1817, these men were appointed by the Triennial Convention. (Early 53) Welch and Peck set out on July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1817, to see the Kingdom of God established across the Great River. Peck knew that “they were here for the one purpose. To preach the gospel of salvation to the lost” (Maple and Rider).

Once in Missouri, Peck and Welch rented a room and began to teach. After nine months of ministry, Peck had his first converts believe and be baptized in the Great River (Babcock 93) However, Peck also faced difficult tasks. One of these was preaching a sermon over a man named Joshua Barton who was shot to death in a duel. His sermon, coming from Isaiah 1:15, was titled “your hands are full of blood” (Maple and Rider). In his preaching of salvation for the lost, Peck necessarily had to preach the news of blood covered wretched sinful humans in need of a pure and Holy Savior. J.C. Maple says of him,

It required a large amount of moral courage in that day and among the people then living in the "wild Western city," to take such a stand. But John M. Peck was a man who seemed never to have a thought of his personal safety. He was wholly absorbed in doing just what he thought was right, and there was a total absence of any consideration of self-interest or personal popularity (Maple and Rider).

From this selfless attitude, Peck desired to start a biblical school for higher education. In March of 1819 it was decided that Peck would go to start a new mission in St. Charles. He hoped that he would plant a seminary there, but this unfortunately was not able to happen (Maple and Rider). Peck went to the eastern states where he sought an establishment to be made for higher education. Though Peck would not live to see the day happen, his efforts and influence in the early Baptist realm helped start seminaries that are “Biblically educating God-called men and women to be and make disciples of Jesus Christ” (Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary).

If someone today were to ask Peck whether he made a difference, his answer would more than likely be no. When his house was burned down, several thousand volumes of books, doctrine, and general notes were lost forever. This catastrophic event greatly grieved Peck. He writes,

“Well, it seems to me to be providential. I have done what I could, and failed. I am afraid my materials are so destroyed that I cannot obtain means to prepare my projected work on the Moral Progress of the Great Central Valley of the Western World. I can only say, the will of the Lord be done” (Maple and Rider).

While Peck thinks himself a failure, all Missouri Baptists today should think him a faithful servant of Christ who helped build the foundations what is known today. Like Peck, Baptists today should, whatever the circumstances hold, learn to say “the will of the Lord be done.” John Mason Peck “was fearless; had no care for his own ease or comfort; he lived wholly for others. And as centuries pass by his labor will be more valued and his character better appreciated” (Maple and Rider).

### **John “Father” Clark**

John Clark, later in life to be known as Father Clark, was born in Scotland on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1758 (Peck 9) The family to which Clark was born were “strict Presbyterians who paid

careful attention to the morals of their children” (Peck 10). Though Clark’s father was not very influential in his spiritual life, his mother taught him to pray and recognize his lost condition in need of a heart change. This brought Clark at the age of eight to have “many alarming fears about death and hell” (Peck 11). Though unsure, Clark thinks he may have experienced salvation at this time. However, his faith would show no signs of evidence for another twenty years.

After this, Clark was sent by his father to a well esteemed school in the Parish of Nairn, a university in Scotland, where he learned accounting, mathematics, and philosophy (Peck 13) The reason for this education is that Clark’s father wanted him to be able to join his brother in the mercantile business in Jamacia (Peck 13). However, Clark would not go on to join his brother’s business but learned to become a sailor. At age 20 Clark first started his career as a sailor. Arriving from one of his trips Clark came back to find his home in poor condition, both literally and emotionally. J.M. Peck says that he found his father “wasting away their means of support” (Peck 18). Thus, the burden of providing was placed upon Clark. He made \$200 dollars from his merchant business and gave almost all of it to his family. After making sure they were stable, he left on a long-desired journey across the Atlantic Ocean to the West Indies (Peck 19) Little did John Clark know that this would be the very last time he saw his family, for they would pass away before he had a chance to return. Clark said that “I fancied it was in my own power to see them whenever I pleased. I little imagined that man may appoint but God may disappoint” (Peck 19).

Clark’s adventure over the ocean was not what he hoped. He soon found himself forced to work for the British Navy. After trying to escape, he was bound in chains. Clark greatly disliked his current state. However, his perspective looking back toward his sailor hardships was “This seeming affliction was a blessing in disguise, intended by Infinite Wisdom for my

everlasting good” (Peck 20). After some time, he would go on to do other merchant and sailor jobs before finally stopping in 1785. What did Clark stop for? He stopped because he knew God was calling him to do His work. J.C. Maple writes of him, “He fully realized his lost condition as a sinner in the sight of God. He sought and found salvation through the atonement made by the Divine Christ” (Maple and Rider). At the age of 28 Clark could finally confirm his salvation and began serving Christ (Maple and Rider).

After quitting sailing, Clark joined a Methodist church where he stayed for many years. Though he loved this Methodist church, Clark was a man that diligently searched the Scriptures for the truth. This posture led him, though ever so slowly, to become a Baptist. Peck says that “For several years the conviction had increased that he was unbaptized, and that by this ordinance more than any other, the disciples of Christ made a profession of faith in Him” (Peck 236). He also was convicted that infant baptism was wholly unbiblical (Peck 236). From these convictions, he and another Methodist named Mr. Talbot, decided to Baptize one another (Peck 237). This marked the beginning of John Clark and his influence on the Baptist denomination.

John “Father” Clark developed a ministry that was very different from that of John Mason Peck. Like the Apostle Paul, Father Clark would go from town to town sharing the gospel and encouraging families. (269) Something unique to Father Clark, even when he was old, was walking everywhere he preached. In almost every tour, he would walk and not ride upon any animal. This somewhat odd conviction came from past experiences with sailors and animals. His first tour through Missouri was in the summer of 1820. This journey made Father Clark the first preacher in Missouri. For, “No preacher of the gospel had ever gone thus far in the vast west” (Peck 269). From this tour onward, Father Clark would preach nearly every day as he traveled from settlement to settlement. The route he would take would cover a distance of two hundred



and forty miles (Peck 270). Since he took this route several times a year, this means Father Clark walked nearly one thousand miles each year as an old man. This is how he earned the title “The Pioneer Preacher.” If there ever was a man of devotion, passion, and love for the people of Missouri, look no further than John Clark. This ministry is what Father Clark did until his death in 1833 (Peck 284). From this, it is evident that John “Father” Clark was an essential instrument that the Lord used in establishing Baptists in Missouri.

### **Conclusion**

The foundation of Missouri Baptists is, in part, built upon the creation of Bethel church, John Mason Peck, and John “Father” Clark. Something that all of these first Missouri Baptist pioneers had in common was a passion for the Gospel, an indifference towards their own wealth and well-being, and a heart for the lost. By God’s grace this character and attitude for the world will continue to be in the hearts and minds of Baptists in Missouri. Like the Centennial gathered in 1906, this paper begins to demonstrate that God has done marvelous works through a simple God-fearing people. Reverend A. M. Ross said of the early Baptist pioneers that they are “Like Israel of old, there they received the manna from heaven which preserved their lives while they crossed the wilderness and made it possible to bequeath unto this and succeeding generations, a land which, indeed, flows with milk and honey – a Canaan not beyond the Jordan, but beyond the great Mississippi river.” (Maple, Centennial 28) From the sufferings and sacrifices of the first Missouri Baptists, a great denomination was born. The Pioneer Period in Baptist history was able to grow from the sacrifices of John Mason Peck, John Clark, and the families that founded the first Missouri Baptist Church. With these great people of God, Baptists can join in declaring “Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your Name be the glory because of your faithful love, because of your truth.” (Psalm 115:1 CSB)

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