

Hiram McKee: Frontier Abolitionist

REL-431

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Introduction

Somewhere in the middle of the twists and turns of human history, we often forget events, people, and stories that have formed our present realities. Even men and women who change the course of history can easily fall into the cracks of time and be forgotten. The Wesleyan Church is no exception. For every Orange Scott and L.C. Matlack out there, there are hundreds of others who played crucial roles in forming identity of The Wesleyan Church as we know it today who are no longer remembered. Sadly, in ceasing to remember them, we end up not only forgetting where we came from, but we also lose an important part of who we are as a denomination. This paper is an attempt to re-discover a key figure from Wesleyan History – a man who helped to significantly shape The Wesleyan Church, especially in the mid-western United States; this man is Hiram McKee.

It was somewhat difficult to track down information about McKee, because there is hardly anything written specifically about him. Most of my sources only mention Hiram McKee briefly as a side note. There is one couple from California (as of 2003), however, that has kept track of McKee and has unearthed some of his story: Douglas and Madeleine Hickling. Madeleine is Hiram McKee's great-great-great granddaughter, so she has access to personal memoirs and family stories that have helped piece together some of the history. One of my sources is a personal memoir of Madeleine's grandmother and Hiram's granddaughter, Jane Peterson. My father, Mark Wilson, received a copy of this memoir from corresponding with the Hicklings. Although the memoir contains some faulty information (for example, the memoir states that Hiram was born in 1821, when in reality he was born in 1806), it helps to fill in some of the details of Hiram's story. To clarify, in this paper, the citation (Hickling) will refer to the Hickling's website, and (Peterson) will refer to the memoir.

Early Life and Impact

Hiram McKee was born on May 28th, 1806 in Utica, N.Y. and grew up in Sacketts Harbor, N.Y. on the shore of Lake Ontario (Hickling). Not much is known or recorded about McKee's early life or his education, although we do know that in his early twenties, McKee was a part of a religious discussion group in Oswego, N.Y., where he met his lifelong friend, Brigham Young, who would later become a key figure in the Mormon Church (Hickling). The two kept in touch and corresponded by letters often throughout their lives. In 1834, Hiram McKee was ordained as a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Interestingly enough, McKee was ordained on the same day as another M.E. minister, Rev. George Pegler. Pegler, who later became a Wesleyan Methodist, was the pastor of the church in Utica, NY where the first organizing Wesleyan conference was held (Pegler 478).

Although there is no documentation to prove it, it is not far-fetched to assume that fellow M.E. ministers and vehement abolitionists Orange Scott, L.C. Matlack, and La Roy Sunderland significantly impacted Hiram McKee's views on slavery, since McKee lived in New York at the same time that the abolitionist movement was getting going in the northern states. McKee played an active part in the founding of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection and was one of the thirty-five ministers present at the Utica Convention on May 31-June 7, 1843, where the Wesleyan Methodist Connection was formed (Haines 66). McKee served a delegate from West Chazy, N.Y. at that convention (Matlack 334).

Hiram was a busy man in the next few years of his life. The next time his name shows up, he was organizing churches in Plattsburgh and North Stockholm, N.Y. in 1843 (websites: "History of Stockholm" and "Turnpike Wesleyan"). In 1844, McKee attended the very first General Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection in Cleveland, OH, filling in as a

delegate for someone named “M. Bates” (Matlack 347). In 1845, McKee was serving as the pastor of a Wesleyan Methodist Church in Peru, N.Y. (Hickling), and also served as the president of the Champlain Conference, which covered parts of New York and Vermont (Scott 225). It is obvious from this as well as from his presence at the Utica Convention in 1843 and the General Conference in 1844 that McKee was viewed as a leader among the early Wesleyan Methodists, and had significant influence, at least in the Champlain Conference.

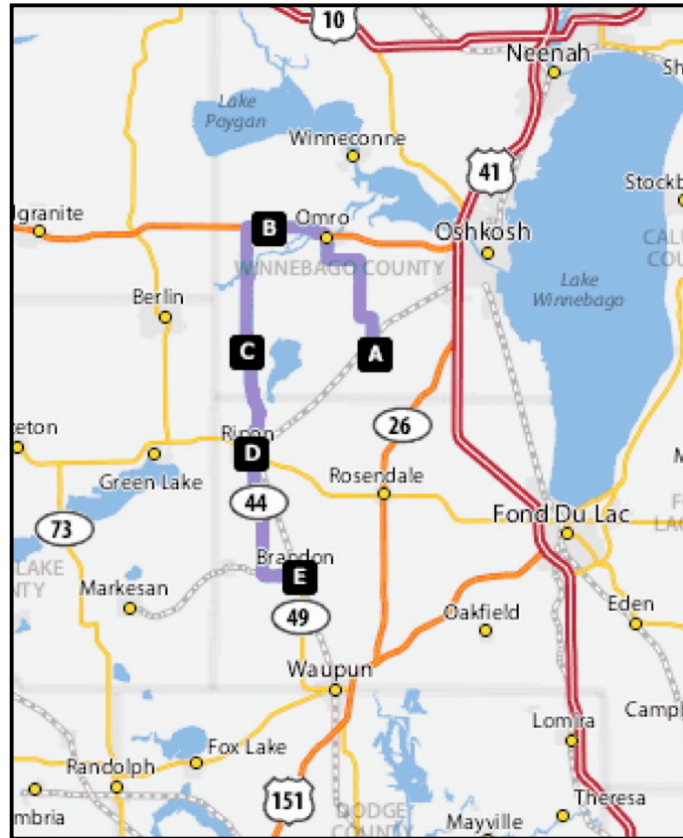
Just the Man for the Job

In May of 1845, McKee was preparing to move on to another stage in his life and ministry. At that time, Orange Scott wrote about him:

“Rev. Hiram McKee... expects to bid adieu to (New York’s) green hills and delightful valleys for the far West. Brother McKee is just the man, physically and mentally, for extensive labors and sufferings, either in the east or west; and though his loss will be felt here, I rejoice that he is going to the Prairie-land. All we need in order to raise up a mighty army in the West is laborers of the right stamp (Scott 225).”

A few months after this was written, Hiram McKee packed up his belongings and his family and moved to Wisconsin, which was considered the “far West” at the time. Nothing is known about the trip out west or where they settled first, but the next earliest time that McKee was mentioned was in March of 1846 in a small, brand new Wisconsin settlement. *The History of Winnebago County* says: “At the rising of the Nash house, after the last log had been placed, Rev. H. McKee, who had arrived the day before, mounted the building and proposed that the town be named. The name adopted was Utica (Lawson 339).” It is interesting that the town was named after the birthplace of both the Wesleyan Methodist Connection as well as Hiram himself, and it also speaks of the influence and leadership that Hiram McKee had that he was the one

chosen to name the town after only being in the town for one day. Lawson also points out that McKee was the first minister to hold religious services in at least two other towns in that general area – Rushford and Nepeuskun (Lawson 302, 332). Rev. McKee was well known in that area, and was in many ways the primary spiritual leader in that region of Wisconsin during the 1840's. Lawson says “Rev. Hiram McKee, whose name frequently appears in the life of several surrounding towns, was the first settled minister and typical frontier evangelist and powerful speaker, being known far and near as ‘the sledgehammer preacher (Lawson 340).” The Wisconsin Magazine of History Vol. 30 refers to McKee in 1847 as a “circuit-riding preacher.” The figure to the right is a modern day look at some of the towns where McKee had connections, as well as a possible route he may have taken as a circuit rider. McKee stayed in Wisconsin until the mid 1860's, traveling all around southeastern Wisconsin and preaching in log



This map shows some of the towns specifically mentioned in some of the sources connected with Rev. McKee. It is very likely that this could have been McKee's circuit, as he was a circuit-riding preacher in that area of Wisconsin.

- A. Utica, the town which was named by McKee in 1846.
- B. Rushford, McKee conducts first religious service in the history of the town (1846).
- C. Nepeuskun, McKee conducts first religious service in the history of the town (1847).
- D. Ripon, where the Republican Party was formed in 1854 and where McKee is reported to have preached to the “Indians.”
- E. Brandon, where McKee lived from 1858 to the early 1860's. Also a place where McKee was reported to have preached to the “Indians” (Hickling).

Also shown is Waupun, WI, where the first Wisconsin Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection was held (Hickling).
(map from <http://maps.yahoo.com/> 10/21/10)

cabins, stores, and schools, and preaching to “Indians” in Ripon, Milwaukee, Wapum, and Brandon (Peterson).

Apparently McKee’s success in preaching the gospel in the “far West” impressed some of his fellow Wesleyans back in the eastern states, because when he came back east for the 1848 General Conference, he was temporarily appointed as the president of the conference with L.C. Matlack serving as the secretary; McKee was eventually replaced as president by Daniel Worth (Matlack 365).

The Frontier Abolitionist

Hiram McKee was not shy about getting involved in political issues. Growing up in Utica, N.Y. and taking part in the formation of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, McKee had the privilege of being on the frontlines of the abolitionist movement, which served to engrain abolitionist values in his heart and mind. Jane Peterson says in her memoirs that (unsurprisingly) McKee preached abolitionism from the pulpit. Even in the northern states, this was not always popular. Peterson recounts a story about how one time, while Rev. McKee was preaching, someone threw a dead cat at him, and followed that up with rotten eggs (Peterson).

Especially in the 1840’s and 50’s, McKee was continuously looking to push the abolitionist movement in both ecclesiastical as well as political spheres. McKee was viewed by most as a “radical” (McManus 91), and was part of an extreme abolitionist faction of the Free Soil Party called the Barnburners (Smith 153). In 1852, McKee ran for congress under the Free Soil platform, and garnered 2168 votes, but lost the election (Smith 136). He had run for congress one other time before that “in the infancy of the Free Soil Party” against former governor James D. Doty, but was beaten then as well (Lawson 91).

The Free Soil party had its roots in the Liberty party, which was intimately connected with the Wesleyan Methodists (McManus 92). Milton Sernett writes, “Though...the Liberty Party was not a church and the Wesleyan Methodist Connection was not a political party, ...the Wesleyans often operated politically as an extension of the Liberty Party (Sernett 22).” Further illustrating the influence of the Wesleyan Methodists on the formation of the Free Soil party is the fact that the Free Soil party was formed in 1848 in none other than Utica, N.Y., the same town where five years earlier the Wesleyan Methodist Connection was established.

In 1854, the issue of slavery exploded in Wisconsin, largely due to the arrest and poor treatment of a slave who had escaped to Wisconsin named Joshua Glover. This led to a meeting in Ripon, WI of fifty-four Freesoilers, Whigs, and Democrats to form a new antislavery party; this was the beginning of what we now know as the Republican Party. Although I have not yet

found any documentation that proves it, I believe that Hiram McKee was at that meeting, and I think that I have a fairly solid argument. First, Ripon, WI was one of the towns on McKee’s circuit and was close enough for him to attend the meeting. It is



even possible that McKee could have preached in that same schoolhouse where the meeting was held. Second, we know that McKee was a fervent abolitionist, and was a member of the Free Soil party. This would have been a very important issue to McKee, and considering that something this important was going on in what was practically his own backyard, it seems reasonable to

assume he would attend the meeting. Third, after the March 20th meeting in the Ripon schoolhouse, there was another meeting in Madison on June 13th, which was attended by upwards of one thousand people (McManus 91). Hiram McKee was a speaker for this meeting. McManus says, “Similarly, Myron and Harlow Orton, prominent conservative Whigs from Dane county, were permitted to address the gathering along with the radicals Booth, Charles Clement, Hiram McKee, and the recent Wisconsin immigrant and abolitionist, William Abijah White (McManus 91).” Considering Rev. McKee’s strong abolitionist ideals, his prominent influence in the area, his proximity to Ripon, and his leadership at the Madison meeting on June 13th, 1854, it seems logical that McKee would have played some part in the formation of the anti-slavery Republican party. Regardless of whether McKee was at the Ripon meeting or not, however, it is safe to assume that McKee had a significant political influence in southeastern Wisconsin at the time.

The Rest of the Story

In 1862, Hiram McKee and his family left Wisconsin and moved to Minnesota, then to Iowa, Missouri, and finally ended up in Nebraska where he died in 1878 at the age of 72. On his gravestone there is an inscription that reads: “A brand plucked out of the fire (Hickling).” This is both an allusion to Zech. 3:2 as well as to John Wesley’s narrow escape from a house fire when he was pulled out from the second story window just as the roof was collapsing.

While Hiram’s story is certainly an interesting and eventful one, there is still much more to be discovered. Perhaps in time, we will be learning about him in our Wesleyan History classes. For now, however, it is enough to simply remember his story with gratitude and consider the impact that he had on who we are as a denomination today.

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