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# Covaulting Religion: Anne Newport Royall Meets the Cumberland Presbyterians in Alabama

Michael Strickland

The only existing Cumberland Presbyterian church in my home county, Lawrence County, Alabama, is a tiny congregation near the Mt. Hope community called the Hickory Grove church. The lack of a strong presence in the county does not reflect a lack of determination from Cumberland Presbyterians to plant churches in the area. In fact, the Cumberland Presbyterians were active all over Alabama in the years immediately before and after Alabama achieved statehood. The purpose of this article is to consider the point of view of an early, and now famous, resident of Moulton (my hometown), in the state's earliest years, that of Anne Newport Royall, as she documented the arrival of the Cumberland Presbyterians into the area.

## **Royall Comes to Alabama**

Anne Newport Royall's history has been well-documented and need not be exhaustively repeated here. The salient points are that, having been widowed by her husband in 1812 and locked in a legal battle for several years over his estate in Virginia, Anne launched out to see the expanding United States, traveling through Kentucky, down through Tennessee, and into North Alabama. Royall spent several years in the

area, first entering the state around Christmas of 1817. She sent letters from Huntsville, then from Melton's Bluff, which is in the northern part of Lawrence County along the Tennessee River. By March of 1819, she had moved to Moulton, which would be (and still is) the Lawrence County seat when Alabama achieved statehood in 1819. She stayed in Moulton, a town she described as "handsomely laid off" in an area "as rich as the heart can wish" approximately two years before moving north to Courtland (also in Lawrence County) and then westward to Florence.<sup>1</sup> In 1830, she published the letters she had originally written to a friend in Virginia as *Letters from Alabama on Various Subjects*. *Letters* was her third volume of travel writing, following *Sketches from History*, which she published in 1826, and *Mrs. Royall's Pennsylvania* in 1829. Along with documenting her travels, Royall later began publishing a weekly newspaper, *Paul Pry*. In *Paul Pry*, she shared personal anecdotes and opinions, especially with regards to politics and religion, endeavors which earned her the title of first female journalist in America.<sup>2</sup>

### **Royall's Religion**

Royall was notoriously outspoken and often irreverent in her attitudes toward religion. Some have suggested that her exposure to her much older husband's extensive and eclectic library and his Masonic influence encouraged her to resist and combat the evangelical movements of her day.<sup>3</sup> She lampooned fundamentalist Christians in

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Newport Royall, *Letters from Alabama on Various Subjects* (Washington, D.C., 1830), 107.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Forbes, "Anne Newport Royall: the First Female American Journalist," in *Women Who Made a Difference* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 257-260.

<sup>3</sup> See Carol Sue Humphrey, "Anne Newport Royall (1769-1854)," in, *Women in Communication: A Biographical Sourcebook*, ed. Nancy Signorielli (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 349-59, at p.350.

her work with nicknames such as “Holy Willy,” “Preacher Thunder,” “Simon Sulpher,” Mucklewrath,” and “Counselor Law.” Later in life, after she left Alabama for Washington, D.C., she was embroiled in a battle with a neighboring church that, according to Royall, dared pray for her soul and to harass her at the same time.<sup>4</sup> She proclaimed:

I was pleased that the gospel spreaders were so deeply interested for my soul (my body was to go to pot) that the evangelical-tractical-biblical-sabbath school-prayer meeting, good, honest, pious, sound Presbyterians of Capitol Hill, had come to a resolution to convert me.<sup>5</sup>

The end result of the struggle was not her conversion but her conviction of being, “a common scold,” a sentence of a “ducking” (dunking) in the Potomac, and the sentence being replaced by a \$10 fine which was paid by her friends.<sup>6</sup>

### **Royall Meets the Cumberland Presbyterians**

In the early 1880s, the Cumberland Presbytery in Kentucky was dissolved by the Kentucky Synod of the Presbyterian Church for ordaining ministers without the requisite education. Failing to require strict allegiance to the Westminster Confession of Faith was a second factor. Ousted leaders officially reconstituted the Cumberland

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Newport Royall, *Mrs. Royall's Pennsylvania, or, Travels continued in the United States*, Volume 2 (Washington, D.C., 1829). See the appendix, esp. pages 3-7, for her personal description of the events, including her friends and enemies.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, appendix, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Daniel Wells, *Women Writers and Journalists in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 102-03.

Presbytery in 1810 in Burns, Tennessee, and immediately set about evangelizing surrounding areas. The area around Moulton in the early 1820s was “run mad with preaching” when Ann Royall first encountered members of the “new sect called Cumberland presbyterians (*sic*).” Along with the Baptists and Methodists, Cumberland Presbyterians were forced to preach outdoors due to a lack of meeting houses in Moulton. Royall’s descriptions of Cumberland Presbyterians show that she was unimpressed, particularly with the fact that they did not “deem education a necessary requirement to preach the gospel.”<sup>7</sup> She relayed stories meant to demonstrate the ignorance of the denomination’s members. For example, she noted how one lady did not know the meaning of the word “piety,” mistaking it for a religious sect, nor did she know that there were other religions in existence.<sup>8</sup>

Royall’s disdain for many of the Christian denominations she encountered was frequently mentioned in her letters, but the Cumberland Presbyterians and their preacher received by far the most critical assessment.<sup>9</sup> Her detailed description of the events during the sermon of an unnamed Cumberland Presbyterian preacher delivered to an audience of 500 (her estimate), comported with accounts of similar meetings throughout the frontier. In a letter dated April 30, 1821, Royall reported:

Principally confined to women and children, the young women had carefully taken out their combs, from their hair,

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<sup>7</sup> Royall, *Letters*, 122-23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>9</sup> For example, she called Christianity a “plot of priests” in a letter written from Moulton in May of 1821, and recounted a story she had heard of a Presbyterian elder’s greed in taking advantage of a poor woman. She further explained that, rather than judging all Christians by one, that she would “judge all by all, for they are all the same.” See *Letters*, 136-37. Emphasis Royall’s.

and laid them and their bonnets in a place of safety, as though they were going to set in for a fight; and it was much like a battle. After tumbling on the ground, and kicking sometime, the old women were employed in keeping their clothes civil, and the young men (never saw an old man go near them) would help them up, and taking them by each hand, by their assistance, and their own agility they, would spring nearly a yard from the ground at every jump, one jump after another, crying out, glory, glory, as loud as their strength would admit; others would be singing a lively tune to which they kept time— hundreds might be seen and heard going on in this manner at once. Others, again, exhausted by this jumping, would fall down, and here they lay cross and pile, heads and points, yelling and screaming like wild beasts of the forest, rolling on the ground, like hogs in a mire... and like those who attend the camp meetings, they were all of the lower class of the people. I saw no genteel person among them... I am very sure, half a dozen words of common sense, well applied, would convince those infatuated young women that they were acting like fools. In fact a fool is more rational.<sup>10</sup>

Outdoor church meetings were not new to Royall, who compared the meeting in Moulton that day to a camp meeting in her home state of Virginia, “but more shameless.” She told of naïve young women and children as young as ten years old “getting religion,” but also of a more experienced woman whose dramatic response at the meeting prompted

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<sup>10</sup> Royall, *Letters*, 124.

one young man to opine that the young lady “gets converted every meeting she goes to.”<sup>11</sup>

While such an experience was new (and offensive) to Royall, the events she witnessed were consistent with other revival meetings which had been taking place across rural America for two decades. The best known analog is the much larger revival in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1800 and 1801.<sup>12</sup> Cumberland Presbyterian historian B.W. McDonnold, writing over 70 years after the events described by Royall, considered the ecstatic expressions which took place in the young Cumberland Presbyterian movement as evidence of the “New Testament baptism of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>13</sup>

Royall surmised that the cause of the congregation’s behavior was the frenzied preaching being delivered by the “great rough looking man” in their presence. She had been intrigued by a stranger’s description of the speaker as “a monstrous fine preacher,” but she was taken aback at the man’s performance:

He began low but soon bawled to deafening. He spit in his hands, rubbed them against each other, and then would smite them together, till he made the woods ring. The people now began to covault (*sic*) and dance and shout till they fairly drowned the speaker.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> See Michael J. McClymond, “Issues and Explanations in the Study of North American Revivalism,” in *Embodying the Spirit: New Perspectives on North American Revivalism*, ed. Michael J. McClymond (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 1-46, esp. 34-36, for several examples.

<sup>13</sup> B. W. McDonnold, *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Nashville, 1893), 27.

<sup>14</sup> Royall, *Letters*, 123.

To Royall, the preacher's demeanor and message were evidence of the Cumberland Presbyterian's lack of emphasis on education. Of course, many preachers from various denominations on the frontier lacked formal ministerial education. The Cumberland Presbyterians had not the time nor resources by 1821 to provide schools for that purpose. This lack of formal training did not, however, prevent the Cumberland Presbyterians from growing rapidly in other places (predominantly in Kentucky and Tennessee) in the early nineteenth century, nor did it greatly hinder the preacher in Lawrence County on that April day in 1821.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Preacher**

Who was the preacher so despised by Royall? B. W. McDonnold's *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* provides a likely candidate in the person of the Reverend Robert King. King was a second-generation Cumberland Presbyterian who, during his career, preached in Tennessee, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas and Missouri. McDonnold documented King's extreme devotion to his denomination's cause, a dedication that saw him go months without pay and to mortgage the family farm in Tennessee to pay for his

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<sup>15</sup> Lack of education among the revivalists of the nineteenth century was common among most of the denominations, though ministers were probably no less educated than the average frontier people to whom they preached. In fact, Southern attitudes against highly paid, well-educated ministers gave pioneer preachers opportunities to preach that populated areas in the Northeast almost certainly would not have. Further, see Roger Finke & Rodney Starke, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 79-80.

missionary efforts.<sup>16</sup> He was known for his sacrifice, but also for his preaching. Further south from Lawrence County, in Alabama's early state capital Cahaba, King's preaching was such a sensation that he was invited to use the capitol building for a Sunday sermon, which drew a large crowd.<sup>17</sup> McDonnold suggested that, from reading King's papers, Robert spent a great deal of time preaching to the Indians on the frontier with success.<sup>18</sup> His dedication to preaching was so great that he even preached a sermon on his deathbed.<sup>19</sup>

McDonnold acquired King's papers upon his death, among which can be found the following entry of interest:

In April, 1821, I was ordered by the presbytery to form a circuit on the south side of Tennessee River, in the counties of Morgan, Lawrence, and Franklin, in Alabama. I had to hunt my own preaching places, and make my own appointments. The country was all newly settled, having been lately purchased from the Indians. Here I found many good Cumberland Presbyterians. I formed a circuit of four weeks' extent, with regular daily appointments. I succeeded in getting up three camp-meetings, one in Morgan County (then Cataco County); Here I was assisted by the Rev. James Stewart, the Rev. James Moore, and my father. ... The results of those three camp-meetings were one hundred and fifty professions.

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<sup>16</sup> McDonnold, *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church*, 113.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 159-60.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 641.

Besides these, there were a good many professions at my circuit appointments.<sup>20</sup>

Note that Royall's letter is dated April 30, 1821, a date consistent with the period mentioned by King. If King's diary mentioned the specific results of the meetings in Lawrence County, McDonnold did not include them. King's papers are now apparently no longer extant.

### **Covaulting**

On several occasions, including in her recounting of King's sermon, Royall used the word "covault" to describe the reaction of the people. She made it clear that it was not her word. In her letters, Royall gave her opinions of the various dialects to be found around her, from fellow Virginians, to North Carolinians, Tennesseans, and Georgians. She determined that covaulting was "of Tennessee birth" and humorously added that she hoped to see it added to the English language some day. She further explained:

[Covault] signifies an unruly or ungovernable man; also an untamed horse, or anything that cannot be controuled (*sic*)... It appears to be a compound of co and vault, which are both very significant.<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, Royall did not explain the significance of those terms. However, Royall used the word covault to describe the excited reactions she saw at outdoor church meetings. Besides Royall's cryptic suggestion, the origins of the word are unclear. I am unable to find any references to it in regional dictionaries or popular literature. It appears

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>21</sup> Royall, *Letters*, 122.

to be a local word, perhaps, as Royall suggested, brought from Tennessee, but the geographic breadth of its use are unknown.

This does not imply, however, that the word fell out of use. It was still in use in the area until the end of the twentieth century, a fact which I can relate firsthand thanks to recollections from my great-grandmother, Ruby Cheatham (née Roberts; born 1911), or Big Mama to our family. Big Mama lived practically her entire life in Lawrence and Morgan counties, never too far from the border of each, except for brief stints in Chicago and California to find work. She married my great-grandfather, Joy Cheatham, in 1928, and the two lived a hardscrabble existence farming and performing manual labor such as picking cotton and grave digging. Big Mama was very critical of her mother-in-law because of her dereliction in child raising, especially her tendencies to leave home for a week or more at a time to attend revival meetings, while leaving several children at home. Big Mama said that Mrs. Cheatham “would go off covaulting” whenever certain preachers came to the area. Those of us in the family never knew exactly what she meant by that, but Royall’s description of a spiritual frenzy would fit the context nicely. Aside from Big Mama, I have never heard anyone use the term, and thus far none of the older members of the community whom I have spoken to are familiar with the word. I can attest that the word will live on at least one more generation, and hopefully beyond if my children decide to make use of it.

### **Conclusion**

Currently in downtown Moulton, the First Methodist Church and Moulton Baptist Church sit close to the square. Both of these denominations were mentioned by Royall as having preachers but lacking meeting houses in her day. Both modern congregations trace their beginnings to the early 1800s when Royall was a resident. For

some reason, Cumberland Presbyterianism never took hold. The records of the Cumberland Presbyterian General Assembly mention that, in March of 1825, the Bigby Presbytery (encompassing much of Northwest Alabama) was constituted in Lawrence County at “Concord meeting house,” but the exact location of Concord is unknown.<sup>22</sup> In 1830, Cumberland Presbyterian Rev. J.W. Ogden was working in Moulton, and although he had arrived with preconceived notions of an ignorant and irreligious population, he soon changed his mind:

From the acquaintance which I have formed, I am of opinion there is as much intelligence and refinement of manners in proportion to the number of inhabitants as in any of the Western States; and although there are not as many church going people or as much visible morality as in the Eastern States, yet I am of opinion that there is as much genuine piety, and as much of the life and power of religion among those who profess it as in any country through which I have traveled; particularly in North Alabama, where the people are blessed with a remarkably lucid and spiritual ministry, such generally as would do credit to any country.<sup>23</sup>

Ogden saw fertile ground for his mission, so the lack of a strong presence in the area in later years is perhaps somewhat surprising. One potential reason for the lack of long-term success of the Cumberland

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<sup>22</sup> *Semi-Centennial General Assembly of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Nashville, 1880), 21.

<sup>23</sup> No author cited, “Sources and Sketches of Cumberland Presbyterian History,” *The Theological Medium: A Cumberland Presbyterian Quarterly* 6.4 (Oct 1875): 385-425 at pp.391-392.

Presbyterians around Moulton may be explained by the presence of the only other church immediately off the square today, the Moulton Church of Christ, my home church. Preachers from the Christian Church, as the movement was mainly referred to in the mid-to-late 1800s, were active in the area not long after Royall left, and a Christian Church may have been established there as early as 1826.<sup>24</sup> What is sure is that several prominent community leaders were members of the Christian Church in Moulton later in the century, and at least one Cumberland Presbyterian minister there, Rev. Andrew O. Horn, became a member of the Christian Church.<sup>25</sup> The mainline Presbyterian denomination also had its own troubles in establishing a long-lasting congregation in Moulton in the nineteenth century. In 1832, the Presbyterian General Assembly reported that there were twenty-eight members in Moulton in 1830, 44 members in 1832, and forty-one in 1838.<sup>26</sup> In 1871, when the Christian Church was looking to expand,

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<sup>24</sup> Or, often by their detractors, the members were referred to as Campbellites, after the most prominent of their foundational leaders, Alexander Campbell.

<sup>25</sup> Crockett McDonald, the first documented member of the Christian Church in Moulton, came there in 1826 from Kentucky. There, he preached as well as serving as mayor, post-master and probate judge from the 1830s-50s. See James E. Saunders, *Early Settlers of Alabama*, Part 1 (New Orleans, 1899), 67, where McDonald and Horn are discussed. Horn was also clerk for the county court in the 1820s. The self-published history of the Moulton Church of Christ, compiled by the now deceased (and dear personal mentor) John C. Hardin, claims that Crockett McDonald established the congregation upon his arrival in town in 1826. However, Tolbert Fanning, a prominent Christian Church preacher in the nineteenth century, claimed to have started the congregation in June of 1943. See Fanning's *Christian Review*, 1 no. 11 (1844): 244.

<sup>26</sup> See *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1830), 293. See *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, (Philadelphia, 1832), 395. See *Minutes of the General*

they were able to purchase the Presbyterian building and lot for \$250. The sale was made by “D.J. Goodlett, the only surviving elder.”<sup>27</sup> In such a small community, it may be that there was only room for three established congregations at that time.

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*Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, (Philadelphia, 1838), 260.

<sup>27</sup> These details provided by Riley Turner, “History of Moulton, Alabama, Church of Christ,” *World Evangelist* 28 (July 1, 2000): 4. There is still no Presbyterian Church in downtown Moulton.