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Illinois Wesleyan Professor Publishes First Biography of Peter Cartwright

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Long before the red state-blue state phenomenon, a Methodist frontier circuit rider named Peter Cartwright introduced evangelical Christianity into politics, running several campaigns of his own and even using a famous opponent's "unchurched" status against him in one of those races.

Cartwright's life in politics and his contentious relationship with Abraham Lincoln are among the fascinating details brought to light in a new book by Robert Bray, the R. Forrest Colwell Professor of English Literature at Illinois Wesleyan University.

Peter Cartwright, Legendary Frontier Preacher, published by the University of Illinois Press, is the first full-length biography of the 19th-century preacher, who called himself "God's breaking plough" and is credited for the rapid growth of Methodism in the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys.

Bray's initial interest in Cartwright was based, in part, on the frontier preacher's role as one of the founders of Illinois Wesleyan. But Bray soon found that Cartwright belonged to a much wider context than just American Methodism. He was active in national issues, including slavery, and was, for 20 years, "a social, political, and religious antagonist" of Abraham Lincoln.

In his book, Bray traces Cartwright's journey from his birthplace in Virginia to Illinois, where he moved in 1824 because of his opposition of slavery and a desire to live on "free soil." He remained a lifelong resident of the state.

In Illinois, where clergy were not prohibited from running for elected office, Cartwright became active politically, running for the state legislature four times and winning twice. In an 1832 campaign, he placed fourth in an at-large contest to elect four, thereby defeating Lincoln, who finished eighth.

"Cartwright was one of the first to use his local and national constituencies as a preacher to help him be effective as a politician — first to get elected and then to work for policy," said Bray. "But in many respects, Cartwright stood over on the Jacksonian side of the political fence — very much *unlike* the evangelical Republicans of today who, though they claim to be interested