

Primary Source: Description of a Nineteenth Century Revival

Ministers used revivals to bring people into the church, and to bring believers who had strayed from God back to righteousness. Participants at revivals often prayed for a conversion experience — an intense emotional and sometimes physical experience of God's presence.

People often began this process in despair, recognizing that they were sinful and were doomed to hell. This period of emotional turmoil might last several hours, days, weeks, months — even years. Eventually, they would have an emotional experience in which they felt God's presence telling them that their sins had been forgiven and that they would be saved — that they would go to heaven when they died.

Samuel McCorkle (1746–1811) was a Presbyterian minister and teacher in Rowan County. He believed in the importance of education, but he also argued that education was not enough to make people good — they also needed revelation from God. He preached the need to be “reborn” so that people might understand God's will for them and for the world.

Narrative of Proceedings at Jersey Settlement, Rowan County, North Carolina.

June, 4–8, 1802.

A sermon was delivered on Friday to a large, thoughtless, disorderly crowd, which became gradually composed and serious, until Monday, which was the most solemn day that my eyes ever beheld. Near three thousand persons attended, and of these [near three hundred were exercised throughout the occasion](#), and perhaps not fewer than half of them on Monday.

Nothing very unusual at such meetings appeared, until Sunday evening, when a [stout negro-woman, who had been all day mocking the mourners, fell; and fell in a state of horror and despair that baffles description](#). In this state, she continued with intervals, for three hours. I viewed her all the time, and it was impossible for my imaginations to conceive of her being more tormented had she actually been in hell. She often roared out, "O hell! hell! hell! Thy pangs have seized me! O torment! torment! What torments me! Hell can't be worse. Let me go there at once. It is my dreadful doom." She said she saw hell-flames below, herself hung over by a thread, and a sharp, bright sword drawn to cut it through. Her exertions, at this moment, no angel nor devil could describe. Two stout negro-men where no match for her struggles. Such an exercise I never beheld, and I have seen not less than a thousand. No one that saw it, ever beheld anything that would stand in comparison. At intervals, she cried, "O for mercy! but what have I to do with mercy? No mercy for poor miserable me." Hope, however, began to prevail, and at last she shouted, "Glory, glory!" as loud, and as long as she had roared out "Hell-torment" before. "Astonishing" said she, "I have mocked the mourners, boasted that I could stand, been in hell, and O praise God, praise Him, praise Him, He has brought me out. Never, never, let me forget to love, and praise, and serve my God, my Redeemer."

Very different, but less noticeable was another exercise on Monday after a sermon and two [exhortations](#), arose, with trembling and wild consternation, a man who adjured the preachers before God, to say on their conscience, whether they did believe the necessity of those convictions which they had been urging. The whole assembly was struck with solemn astonishment. The preachers, after a pause, said with one voice, "We do, we do believe it." He then turned to the assembly, and begged of [those who had felt convictions](#), to pray for him, and others who had not. He sat down. An awful silence ensued, and then a prayer was performed for them. When this scene ended, he rose, and called on all who had not felt conviction, to join with him in prayer for themselves. After a short, [pathetic](#) prayer, he retired. I afterwards conversed with him. He said that he had never suspected our sincerity, but I wished to have the assembly impressed with our public declaration; that his first feeling was a bodily sensation rising from his bowels towards his breast, and that with this sensation arose his resolution to speak, and an impulse irresistible to execute it. And certain am I that, had he studied for a year, he could have devised no plan that would have produced such a solemn effect on the assembly. In the evening he was severely exercised, and obtained as much consolation as, in his words, "such a sinner could expect." "This," said he, "is the chief ground of my consolation, that I feel resolutions made with a temper which I never experienced before. I think I feel that I am acting from principles, and that I feel the principles from which I act." [This man possessed a large portion of natural understanding, and a liberal education](#), but regrets that he has been too long wandering through the wilds of infidelity and intemperance. He has firmly resolved to abandon his old companions, and choose new ones, and be another man. May God enable him so to do.

[What wonders are doing around us! What think you of a wedding, a gay giddy bride, and a severe exercise on her bridal day?](#) All this has happened in the vicinity of this meeting, but a few days before it, I conversed with the bride. She said she had [thought seriously of this work before](#), but was not, when struck, thinking seriously about anything. She was [struck](#) soon after the ceremony was performed, and struck in such an awful manner, that for some time she knew not what was the matter. Her friends were prodigiously alarmed, and their mirth turned into sober sadness. She at last obtained a little consolation, and told me she was earnestly seeking for more. In the vicinity of this place is a man of mid-age, who was struck in his bed; and [a young woman, who experienced all this work in secret](#) five or six years before she saw it in others. I know her, and believe that she abhors a lie.

Westfield, August 9, 1802, to Mr. Landgon in Salisbury, Rowan county, North Carolina,

Yours, &c.,

SAMUEL M'CORKLE.

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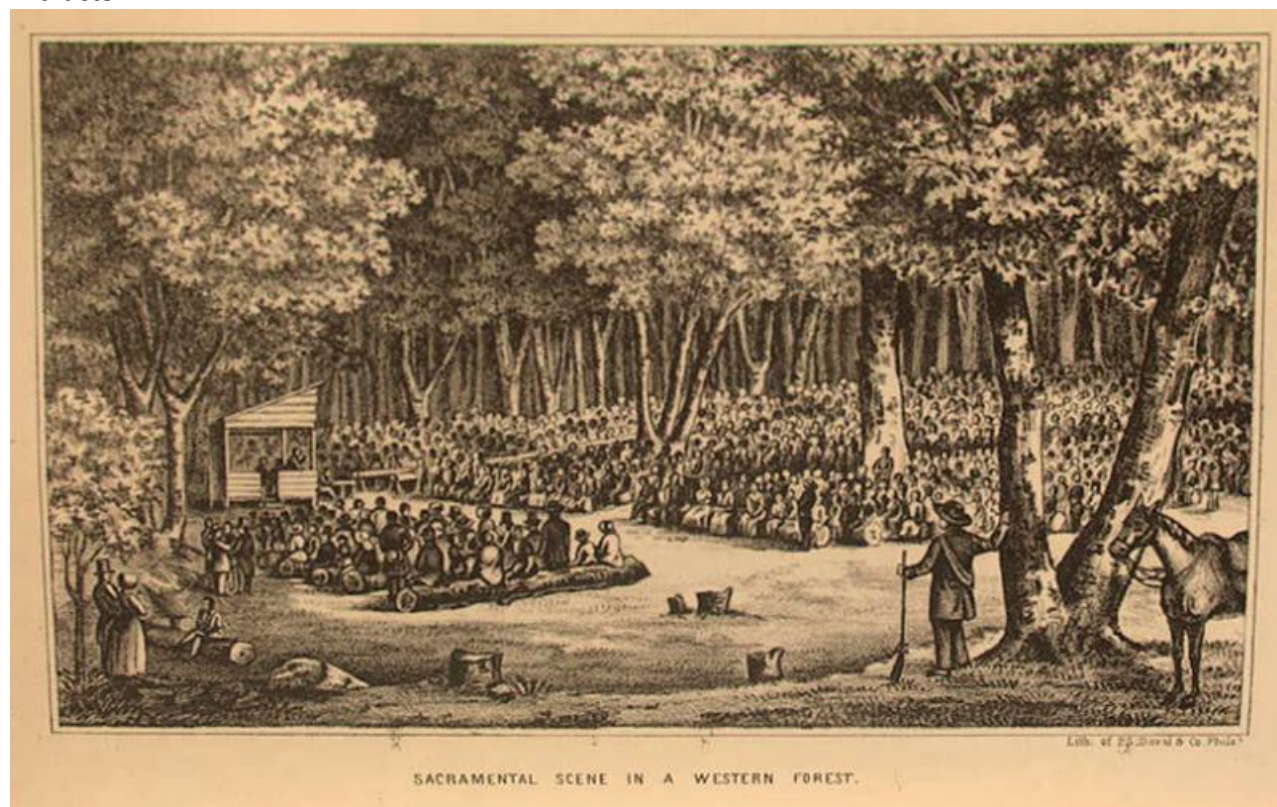
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This illustration, from about 1801, shows a revival in the "western woods."

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