

Cartwright, Andrew ^[1]

Cartwright, Andrew J.

by Jerry L. Cross, 1979; Revised October 2022.

1835–1903

Andrew J. Cartwright, minister and agent of the [American Colonization Society](#) ^[2], was born in Elizabeth City. Some contend that he was the son of enslaved parents and other believe that he was freeborn. Nothing is known about his early life except that he learned to read and write despite the lack of any formal education. If he did begin life enslaved, he left bondage through manumission or escape as a young man. Several years before the Civil War enforced [emancipation](#) ^[3], Cartwright was residing in New England and preparing himself for the ministry. By 1860 he was an ordained minister in the [African Methodist Episcopal church](#) ^[4] and served as a regular circuit minister to the New England conference. He married a local woman on one of his circuits and eventually fathered four children, but knowledge of his family is limited to the fact that they could all read and write.

During the Federal occupation of Eastern North Carolina, Cartwright returned to his native state, preaching to the freedmen in the area around Albemarle Sound. He settled in Manteo, where in 1865 he established the first [AME Zion church](#) ^[5] in northeastern North Carolina, the first in North Carolina having been established in New Bern the year before. Cartwright rode the circuit in the Albemarle section, founding numerous churches in [Pasquotank](#) ^[6], [Perquimans](#) ^[7], [Currituck](#) ^[8], [Camden](#) ^[9], and [Hertford](#) ^[10] counties. For his contributions to the AME Zion church, he received appointment as presiding elder for the northeastern district of North Carolina. The position granted him the status of assistant bishop, with supervisory power over the resident ministers in the district counties.

Cartwright was an enthusiastic promoter of the [camp meeting](#) ^[11] tradition, where sermons were fired with early nineteenth-century revivalism. His zeal for circuit riding and the popularity of his services made him a logical choice to represent the American Colonization Society in North Carolina. For ten years he preached a mixture of spiritual salvation and fulfillment of African American destiny through transport to Liberia. Most of the blacks who accepted the challenge were from counties where he regularly spoke. He himself eventually succumbed to his own enthusiasm for the venture. In January 1875 he requested and received funds from the American Colonization Society to journey to Liberia as a minister for the emigrants. Cartwright and some of his family sailed for West Africa, arriving there in June 1876; he thereby became the first missionary to Liberia.

Cartwright quickly discovered rampant immorality and religious indifference among both native Liberians and those recently arrived from America. The spirit of the evangelist rose to the challenge, prompting plans for a series of revivals in the towns and villages. His campaign opened at Brewerville on 4 July with less than stirring success. Undaunted, he persisted in his efforts and slowly but surely won converts to the AME Zion church. Even the lack of a house of worship (until 1892) did not deter the formation of a congregation, which numbered forty-nine by 1878.

The General Conference of the AME Zion Church in America, holding its 1880 meeting in Montgomery, Ala., officially accepted the establishment of the church in Liberia. Cartwright was named the official representative of Zion in Liberia and appointed presiding elder by Bishop Alexander Walters of the Seventh Episcopal District. The honor was granted partially in response to Cartwright's work but mostly because he was already settled in Liberia, where he had attained social and political status in the society. Even so, his appointment was not popular among a number of churchmen, including some of his own congregation. Laymen from Brewerville, unhappy with the slow progress of the church under Cartwright's supervision, petitioned the general conference to appoint Bishop James Walker Hood as resident head of the African mission. Bishop Hood had far too many other commitments to accept a new position, but he made clear his doubts that Cartwright could handle the job.

Time bore out Hood's prophetic skepticism. The work of supervising the growing missionary movement in West Africa was too much for Cartwright. No longer a young man, he was unequal to the task. Whether the parent church expected too much or Cartwright achieved too little, or perhaps both, the general conference of 1896 raised serious questions about his status as presiding elder in Liberia. The argument was extended to contest his role as an active minister in the AME Zion church, but his earlier success and lengthy service (over thirty years) had earned the respect and support of a large following. Debate over Cartwright's future was interrupted by the appearance of the man himself, there to make a progress report to the conference. The matter was dropped.

Cartwright returned to Liberia still the presiding elder of the West African District, but without the full support of the church. A disillusioned man, his last seven years were uninspired and uneventful. He died in Brewerville in 1903 at the age of sixty-eight.

Failure in later life has clouded his real contributions to the church and to religious history in general. He had neither the capacity nor the temperament to be the leader of a large sophisticated church body; he was first and foremost an

evangelist, an organizer, a mover of people. His forte was establishing churches, preaching to the unenlightened, and recruiting for the American Colonization Society. Taken out of that element, he was doomed to failure and general obscurity.

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[Biographies](#) ^[13]

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[Religious Leaders and Clergy](#) ^[15]

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Origin - location:

[Dare County](#) ^[17]

[Elizabeth City](#) ^[18]

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1 January 1979 | Cross, Jerry L.

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