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Letter from Richard McNemar to Laurence Roelosson

INTRODUCTION

By Christian Goodwillie

Among the earliest manuscripts in the Communal Societies Collection at Hamilton College is a copy of a letter written by Shaker Richard McNemar to one “Laurence Roelosson.” The letter is dated “Henderson County (Ky.) March 3d. 1809.” Henderson, also known as Red Banks, lies about seventy-five miles south of the location of the Shaker community that was established at West Union, Indiana. It is also about 120 miles north of the location of the South Union, Kentucky, Shaker community. It was described as follows in *The Western Gazetteer*: “Henderson—the county town of Henderson county, stands on the *red bank* of the Ohio, 75 miles below Louisville. The houses are principally built of logs, and its appearance is dull, but it enjoys a considerable share of the Orleans trade; five hundred hogsheads of tobacco have been shipped at this place in a single year. Henderson County is bounded north by the Ohio, east by Green and Muddy rivers, which separate it from Ohio and Muhlenburgh counties, west by Tradewater river which divides it from Livingston county, and west by Christian. The staple of this county is tobacco; but cotton is raised in considerable quantities.”¹

Red Banks (Henderson) was the location of some of the earliest activities of the Kentucky Revival. Richard McNemar quoted a letter to this effect in his history, *The Kentucky Revival*: “The following extract of a letter, dated Caneridge, Jan. 30, 1801, gives a striking account of the work; as it first appeared in the lower parts of Kentucky and Cumberland—‘The work is still encreasing in Cumberland: It has overspread the whole country. It is in Nashville, Barren, Muddy, Gasper, Redbanks, Knoxville, &c.’”²

One family particularly active in the early religious history of the county were the Roelofsons. The surname variously appears as Rollison and Roelosson in early sources. The accepted spelling by a modern kinship network seems to be Roelofson. Lawrence Roelofson Sr. can be placed in Washington County, Pennsylvania, by 1781. After an initial stint in Fort Vienna, McLean County, Kentucky, he relocated with his nine children

to the vicinity of Henderson, Kentucky, by around 1793. Research by George and Helen Beattie indicates that “[by] 1801, the sons and sons-in-law of Lawrence, Sr., acquired lands near Highland creek, southwest of Red Banks, and moved there, forming what was then called Roelofson’s Settlement. When, in 1843, a post office was established there, the place took the name Smith Mills.”³

Right about this time the Kentucky Revival had begun in earnest. An 1855 letter states that Lawrence Roelofson Jr. was a follower of Presbyterian revivalist James McGready (1763-1817).⁴ McGready presided over congregations at the Muddy, Red, and Gasper Rivers in Logan County, Kentucky (the future home of the Shaker community at South Union). Perhaps Lawrence Jr. attended revival meetings where McGready preached, as it is not documented that McGready was attached to a congregation in Henderson County before around 1806. Roelofson family records describe Lawrence Jr. as being born probably “near the Pennsylvania/New Jersey/Maryland border before the Revolution about 1760.” In personal appearance he was “tall and slender, blue eyes, white hair, light complexion, blind in one eye, over which he wore a knitted pad; walked with a cane, serious, austere manner, diligent student, spoke both English and German, singer, mechanical turn of mind. In earlier years, made ‘piggies’ of cedar and brooms of white hickory saplings, the ‘bottoms quite large.’ He would peel bark, make flat splints for the sweeper, which had a small handle. He was always busy, but not successful, financially.” Apparently Lawrence Jr. lost his right eye “by accident with a pen knife when he was about 13 years old.”⁵

At a meeting of the Transylvania Presbytery in October 1802, “Lawrence Robison” was licensed as an “exhorter and catichist [*sic*]” to serve the newly created Cumberland Presbytery.⁶ By 1805 however, the nascent Cumberland Presbytery was in schism. Men who had been enfranchised to preach during the height of the revival when the need was greatest were now found to be a threat to the hierarchy of the Presbyterian Church. Roelofson’s revivalistic enthusiasm must have gotten the better of him, as he was shortly among a select group of Presbyterians deemed “irregularly licensed” and stripped of their right to preach at a meeting of the Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky at Gasper Meeting-House, Logan County, Kentucky, in December, 1805. Roelofson was not present at this meeting. The Synod, after conversing with those Cumberland Presbyterians present in a “friendly manner,” decided that unless they were willing to

“stand an examination as to their qualifications for the Gospel ministry,” they had virtually renounced “the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church ; and it being proclaimed by common fame that the majority of these men are not only illiterate, but erroneous in sentiment ... they do hereby solemnly prohibit, the said persons from exhorting, preaching, and administering ordinances in consequence of any authority which they have obtained from the Cumberland Presbytery, until they submit to our jurisdiction, and undergo the requisite examination.”⁷

Lawrence Roelofson Jr., and many of his revivalist compatriots in the Cumberland Presbytery, happily separated from the Synod of Kentucky and eventually formed the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. In the intervening years, however, a new religious movement had arrived on the scene amidst the still-glowing embers of the Kentucky Revival. The movement was Shakerism, brought on foot from New Lebanon, New York, by three missionaries—Benjamin Seth Youngs, Issachar Bates, and John Meacham. These missionaries arrived in Kentucky during March of 1805. Over the next four years they made important converts among the former Presbyterian revivalists of Kentucky, including Roelofson’s fellow Cumberland Presbyterian John Rankin, and Richard McNemar of the Washington Presbytery.

The Ohio River crossing at Red Banks was a major thoroughfare for Shaker missionaries as they traveled between southeastern Indiana and Logan County, Kentucky. A pocket of Shaker converts began to coalesce near Roelofson’s home at Red Banks. Despite his enthusiasm for the Kentucky Revival, the preacher must have taken umbrage at the extreme tenets of Shaker celibacy, pacifism, and christology. The letter reproduced below seems to have been written as a defense of Shakerism by Richard McNemar, likely in response to an attack (now unlocated) on the sect written by Roelofson. In the letter McNemar sympathizes with Roelofson as a fellow revivalist and former mainline Presbyterian, but also states he is “sorry that your lamp should go out & your soul be eventually numbered with the foolish virgins” for not accepting the further light of the Shaker gospel. In closing his letter McNemar attempts to relight the revival fire in Roelofson by writing: “I know your soul has once been sick of sin & of that confused Babylon where it is covered with a sanctified profession: and if you sincerely continue to walk by the same rule, I can say to you as the angel said to the beloved disciple, Come up hither & I will shew thee the Bride the Lambs wife, & you shall see that holy city the new Jerusalem.”⁸

No further evidence of contact between Roelofson and McNemar has been found. Roelofson eventually moved to Illinois. He remained a faithful member of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and died on April 1, 1855. A journalist who visited him near the end of his life stated: "The writer visited him last winter in January. He supposed, from circumstance (records being lost), to be between 90 & 95 years of age. He was feeble, but full of religious enjoyment, waiting and desirous to be removed to his eternal rest."⁹

Notes

1. Samuel Brown, *The Western Gazetteer; or Emigrant's Directory* (Auburn, N.Y.: Printed by H. C. Southwick; 1817), 106.
2. Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival* (Cincinnati, Albany: Re-Printed by E. and E. Hosford, 1808), 20.
3. George W. and Helen P. Beattie, "Jesse Kimball: Pioneer," *Indiana Magazine of History*, March 1922.
4. <http://www.cumberland.org/hfcpc/leaders/RoelofsonLawrence.htm>, accessed September 16, 2009.
5. Ibid.
6. James Smith, *History of the Christian Church ... Including a History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Cumberland Presbyterian Office: Nashville, Tenn. 1835), 594.
7. Robert Davidson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky* (Robert Carter: New York, 1847), 239.
8. Richard McNemar to Friend Roelofson. Sewn into a booklet, [16] p. 16 x 10 cm. Included with the letter is "Daniel's Vision of the Four Beasts" and an untitled work which begins with a paragraph on marriage, followed by an unrhymed verser sign "Orne" and dated "Busseron, Nov. 5th 1810—Philadelphia Repertory." Hamilton College Library, Communal Societies Collection, MS1010.
9. <http://www.cumberland.org/hfcpc/leaders/RoelofsonLawrence.htm>, accessed September 16, 2009.