

**Frontier Faith:**  
**John Clark and the Conquest of Religious Intolerance in Early Missouri**

James L. White

2601 Oak Hill Road, De Soto, Missouri 63020

(636) 535-9488

Missouri Baptist University

First Baptist Church Festus/Crystal City

Pastor Carey Jones

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Embarking into a religiously intolerant region, moving into the Louisiana Territory, early Baptists forged a tale of defiance and unwavering determination. While Baptists were plentiful in the Eastern United States of America, they were nonexistent West of the Mississippi. This absence was due to the Spanish influence in the Louisiana Territory prior to 1803; strict Spanish rule prohibited any and all forms of Protestantism. However, a small grouping of Baptists, led by a man named John Clark, pioneered the Baptist faith west of the Mississippi River. Though this defiance of Spanish rule was unexpected and not tolerated, strong perseverance by Clark propelled Protestant influence, leading to the establishment of the first Baptist churches in the Missouri Territory. The convergence of Spanish rule, John Clark's resistance, and the Louisiana Purchase served as catalytic forces which fostered the formation of cornerstone Baptist congregations such as Bethel Baptist Church, Fee Fee Baptist Church, and Cold-Water Baptist Church, asserting their foundational role in the early establishment and expansion of Baptist principles throughout Missouri.

The Spanish government obtained rule over the Louisiana Territory in 1764, and, after beginning to inhabit the land in 1766, spread a strict Catholic influence over the territory. The Spanish government, already known for their intolerance of any other form of religion besides the Catholic faith, made Protestantism illegal within the Louisiana Territory. Therefore, any Protestant immigrants who entered the territory would be forced to conform to the Catholic practice and abandon their Protestant faith. It was already known that there were many individuals who were migrating into the Upper Louisiana Territory during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and among those migrants were Baptists. The Baptist denomination had grown rapidly within the Eastern colonies with, at the time of the American Revolution, 290 or more Baptist churches in Virginia alone.

While the rule of the Spanish government was strict if one was caught practicing the Baptist faith, it was not generally oppressive; one could practice their faith if the authorities were unaware. The general laxness of the Spanish government facilitated a high-volume Protestant migration into the Louisiana Territory for land. Part of what influenced these settlers was the idea of religious freedom—a Baptist principle, a key reason for the United States Revolution, and a founding idea within the United States Constitution. These Baptist migrants felt as though inhabiting the Spanish territory would ensure religious freedom and tolerance of their Protestant faith. Unfortunately, this was not the case with the Spanish government:

[Under] Spanish rule, religious freedom was unknown. Romanism refused liberty of conscience, in the early days, French governors carried out the policy of intolerance and admitted, for the most part, only Catholic settlers. When Spain took control of this territory the government policy became even stricter, for Spain was at that time the most intolerant country in the world. The Catholic king warned his officials to strictly enforce his laws pertaining to religion in this land, and for some time they were severely carried out (Abraham 20).

The Spanish government's intolerance was documented throughout history. The Commanding General of the Louisiana Territory, Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, issued many orders of intolerance during his time leading the territory. One of the documented instructions that he gave his soldiers was, “Liberty of conscience is not to be extended beyond the first generation; the children of the emigrants must be Catholics. Emigrants not agreeing to this must not be admitted, but removed, even when they bring property with them. This is to be explained to settlers who do not profess the Catholic religion” (Martin 20). This idea was completely antithetical to the Baptist principle of freedom of religion. The orders of Commanding General Gayoso and the general disposition of the Spanish government made the expansion of the Baptist faith past the Mississippi River seem impossible.

Despite these repressive laws and restrictions upon Baptists and other Protestants, immigration of both still took place. Large swaths of Baptists would begin to move into the Louisiana Territory. According to R.S. Duncan, the first Baptists of St. Louis County formed three different settlements: one near the Spanish Pond, which is north of modern-day St. Louis; another between Owen's Station (modern-day Bridgeton) and Florissant; and a third on Fee Fee's Creek (Duncan). John Mason Peck, the famous Baptist historian, claims that by 1798 there were about fifty persons within this vicinity who were either Baptist or Protestant (Abraham 21). One of the first Protestant families prevalent in this area were the Musick's. Although it is reported by Peck that they enjoyed their new homestead within the Louisiana Territory, their hearts yearned to be able to openly worship God. They were forbidden from holding public meetings, and Baptist ministers were prohibited from entering the territory. Therefore, the Musick's often satisfied their desire to worship through private prayer meetings within their home.

The Baptist faith would begin to expand across the Mississippi into the Louisiana Territory with the arrival of John Clark. Clark arrived in the territory in 1798, and, although he was not Baptist by membership, Clark's convictions were Baptist in principle. He would be the first preacher other than a Roman Catholic to ever set foot on the western shore of the Mississippi River. He lived in New Design, Illinois, but crossed the Mississippi River into the Louisiana Territory in defiance of the Spanish law, gathering a little group around him in St. Louis County. During this trip, Clark would preach the first Protestant sermon in the Upper Louisiana Territory before quickly returning to Illinois. While the location where he preached is not definitively known, according to Robert Douglass, the sermon likely took place "in the vicinity of St. Louis, probably near the church that is called Fee Fee" (Douglass 18). There were many early Baptist settlements within this region, thus making it a prime location for Clark to preach the Gospel and

Baptist principles. The seed of the Baptist faith was planted in the fertile soil of Fee Fee's Creek and left to grow over a period of time.

John Clark expanded his journeys into Missouri and began to hold meetings and revivals, rather than quickly preaching and moving on. If caught by Spanish authorities, Clark would be imprisoned, and a release would not be likely. Clark would travel into Missouri during the dead of night, crossing the Mississippi River by canoe and silently paddling to the other side. It was on an undated spring night in 1798 that the first Protestant worship service was held. The exact location is unknown, but it is reported to have been held a few miles below a Spanish Fort named St. Charles the Prince. Men, women, and children would all kneel in prayer and listen to the hymns led by Clark and the Word that he preached. At the end of the service, congregants would bravely depart into the shadows, and Elder Clark would return to Illinois, this was the first of many secret services conducted by Clark in Missouri Territory (Abraham 23). This was one of Clark's most paramount contributions to the expansion of Baptists across the Mississippi River. Following this first service, Clark would continue to hold these gatherings and worship against the Spanish government's orders.

Due to Clark's growing popularity among the Baptists in the area, the leading Baptist member of the St. Louis district, Abraham Musick, asked for permission to meet with the Lieutenant Governor of the territory, Zenon Trudeau. It was during a previous open council meeting that John Clark asked permission from the Spanish government to be allowed to visit the Missouri Territory and preach the Gospel, and this request was brusquely refused. Clark threatened to never enter the territory and do such a thing lest he face the consequences of the Spanish government. Musick's request for an audience with Lieutenant Governor Trudeau would be entertained, and John Peck would recall the interview that was held between Trudeau and Musick;

Trudeau's response to Musick is as follows from the pen of Peck, "you must not put a bell on your house, and call it a church, nor suffer any person to christen your children but the parish priest. But if any of your friends choose to meet at your house, sing, pray, and talk about religion, you will not be molested, provided you continue, as I believe you are, good Christians" (Peck). Thus, permission was given to Musick to hold services within his home—that being Catholic services. Though the Spanish government did not watch, participate, or regulate the services that were held within the homes, thereby giving Musick and Clark the freedom to conduct worship as they felt fit within their homes. In writing about the services that took place at the meetings of John Clark, Margaretta Wherry, in her historical sketch of Fee Fee Baptist wrote, "They had no use for a bell in their services and it would have taken a loud one to call the people together, scattered as they were from Florissant to Chesterfield. They did not want infant baptism as they thought the children should be old enough to understand and take vows for themselves when they were baptized" (Wherry). These gatherings epitomized Baptist principles, such that infant baptism was not practiced, and only believers' baptism would be practiced at his gatherings and events. Clark's services would continue to grow and cultivate the seed of the Baptist faith within this area and lead to the growth of Baptist migration into the territory.

The seeds of the Baptist faith had been firmly planted in the eastern Missouri Territory; the areas of St. Louis County and Fee Fee's Creek were heavily saturated with Baptist influence due to John Clark. It was at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the Baptist faith would finally be able to grow uninhibited. Napoleon Bonaparte, the First Consul and Master of the French Republic, wanted to establish a new French nation in the new world. Thus, Napoleon forced subservient Spain to transfer its ownership of the Louisiana Territory over to France. Unfortunately, Napoleon, having trouble in the West Indies and needing funding to continue his wars, gave up on his dream

to found a new French nation in the Louisiana Territory and sold the entire territory to the United States. The impact that this purchase of territory would have on the Baptist faith cannot be understated. Fee Fee Baptist historian, Ruth E. Abraham wrote:

Neither Jefferson nor Napoleon, who played such an important part in the transaction, realized or even considered the possibility that the guiding hand of God was using them as instruments to extend the glories of His Kingdom. Nevertheless, the transfer was a consequential event, a distinct means of extending religious freedom. Now the tender seedling of Baptist faith found new food and favorable conditions for growth (Abraham 25).

It was then in 1804 that the transfer of the Louisiana Territory was officially made to the United States. The oppressive reign of the religiously intolerant Spanish had finally come to an end. Baptists and Protestants alike were finally able to freely cross the Mississippi River and worship God, practicing believers' baptism and the Lord's Supper in the Baptist traditional way.

Reverend T.H. Jenkins wrote about the ending of the Spanish Rule in the territory:

The raising of the stars and stripes over this territory was the guarantee of liberty as all religious restrictions were swept away and the way was open to the preaching of the Gospel. However, Protestants and Baptists had to win their own freedom against the intolerance of the Roman faith. The territory became a battle ground, the rise and progress of Baptist sentiments brought on the conflict, and by the grace of God, the final blow to Papal supremacy in the United States was struck on Missouri soil (Jenkins).

When the Louisiana Purchase was made, there was not a single organized body of Evangelical Christians in the entire territory. When the Spanish government left the area, the Missouri Territory would devolve into chaos. Given the United States was extremely lenient in its enforcement of the laws that far west, lawlessness, turbulence, and disorder ensued within the area. Many of the American settlers who began to move into the area were ignorant of the Bible and Protestant values, let alone Baptist principles. The new settlers in this area of Fee Fee Creek were completely indifferent and/or hostile to the Bible and its teachings. This sinful condition was noted by many who traveled to the area and would become so troublesome that the Foreign

Mission Board of the Triennial Convention would begin to assign missionaries to go and evangelize in these areas. Ruth Abraham writes based upon John Peck's writings the following:

Peck, in describing the conditions in St. Louis at the time of his first visit, said that at least one half of the population were infidels and in bitter opposition to religion. They were profaned, boasting that the Sabbath had never crossed the Mississippi and never would. They held mock ceremonies of the Lord's Supper, burned Bibles, the Sabbath was a day for hilarity. It is no wonder that the first Baptist ministers in Missouri came as foreign missionaries, and as late as 1816, Peck and Welch were appointed by the Foreign Mission Board of the Triennial Convention to work among the heathen in Missouri (Abraham 31).

In response to the lost in this area, Baptist preachers began to pour into the Missouri territory to preach the Gospel. Preachers such as David Green, James Kerr, Thomas Johnson, T.R. Musick, Lewis Williams, John Mason Peck, and James Welch were some of the preachers and evangelists that flooded this region with the Baptist faith. As previously discussed, John Clark played a massive role in the expansion of Baptists in this area and his influence did not cease once the United States took over the territory. John Peck wrote of John Clark, writing, "He settled at Bridgeton, became a member of the Cold-Water Church near St. Louis, and was pastor there. He was greatly loved, a thoroughly dedicated servant of the Lord who wielded influence in the territory around St. Louis" (Peck). It was during these early years of freedom that no church formed due to the scattered locations of the early Baptist families. Clark would continue to visit different settlements and preach the Gospel to these Baptist pioneers.

The first Baptist church was finally organized and planted in the Missouri Territory by David Green in Tywappity Bottom in 1805. The organization of this church was, unfortunately, weak and short-lived, though it still maintains the status of being the first church formed west of the Mississippi River; this being Bethel Church. Additionally, Bethel Church was the first house of Protestant worship erected in Missouri. Unfortunately, the church developed anti-missionary

beliefs and the controversy resulted in the death of Bethel Church, thus making the first Baptist church west of the Mississippi a short-lived one.

Fee Fee Baptist was formed and organized in 1807, but the specific date of its opening was not preserved. The church was made up of Thomas Musick and a small group of Baptist friends in the vicinity of Fee Fee Creek as they met at a local home situated on the east side of the creek. The first meeting would spark a fire within all the attendees to continue to come back and worship regularly, as well as to tell other Baptists in the area about the church that had formed and grown the congregation. As more settlers moved into the area, they also found a church home at Fee Fee Baptist. This church has now become the longest-running Baptist church west of the Mississippi, as Fee Fee Baptist church is still in operation to this day. The influence and success of Fee Fee Baptist would lead to the expansion and growth of other churches such as the aforementioned Cold-Water Church, and the eventual growth of Baptists in the area to such an extent that the Bethel Association would be formed in 1816. Baptist growth exploded in this region of the country within just a decade, resulting in deep roots of the Baptist faith throughout St. Louis and surrounding areas. That is evidenced today through the existence and operation of numerous Baptist institutions such as Hannibal-LaGrange University, Missouri Baptist University, and Southwestern Baptist University.

The intricate relationship between Spanish rule, John Clark's ministry and perseverance, and the Louisiana Purchase played a vital role in driving the emergence of Baptist congregations such as Bethel Baptist Church, Fee Fee Baptist Church, and Cold-Water Baptist Church. The groundwork for the planting of these churches cannot be overlooked, as it was vital to the roots of the Baptist faith in the state of Missouri. As these congregations continue to thrive, they serve

as reminders of the sacrifice and dedication of early Baptists. It is to individuals such as John Clark that modern-day Baptists owe a significant debt of gratitude.

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