

2021

## Review of Robert W. Steffer's Saving Cane Ridge

Robert D. Cornwall

*Retired Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Minister, drbobcornwall@msn.com*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/journalofdiscipliana>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Cornwall, Robert D. (2021) "Review of Robert W. Steffer's Saving Cane Ridge," *Journal of Discipliana*: Vol. 74 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/journalofdiscipliana/vol74/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Disciples History. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Discipliana by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Disciples History. For more information, please contact [jmcmillan@discipleshistory.org](mailto:jmcmillan@discipleshistory.org).

Robert W. Steffer. *Saving Cane Ridge*. Cane Ridge, KY: Cane Ridge Shrine, Inc., 2015. Xi + 378 pages.

For those who identify with the Stone-Campbell Movement, Cane Ridge, Kentucky is a sacred site. Not only is it the site of one of America's great revivals, but it is also in many ways the place where the movement this American religious movement has its beginnings. Before Thomas Campbell issued his *Declaration and Address*, which launched the Campbell side of this movement, Barton Stone had hosted a revival that helped launch the Second Great Awakening, helped form the Springfield Presbytery, and then laid that presbytery to rest with the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*. While the meetings that inaugurated the merger of the Disciples and the Christians in 1832 did not take place in the meeting house, Cane Ridge played a role in the creation of this new movement. Thus, the meeting house at Cane Ridge, which was built in 1791 and to which Stone would come to serve as its pastor after his ordination in 1798, is for the Stone-Campbell Movement a sacred site. Indeed, Cane Ridge would become the first church in Stone's Christian movement. Though it was not the location of his death, it became his final resting place. Barton Stone's name might not be well known to many people even within the movement that bears his name. He would be eclipsed by Alexander Campbell, and yet he left an important legacy that is represented by the shrine at Cane Ridge.

*Saving Cane Ridge* was written by Robert W. Steffer, a former curator at the Cane Ridge Shrine. He currently lives in Toronto and serves as the President of the College of Churches of Christ (Disciples in Canada), which serves as a funding and supportive arm of the Canadian region that provides grants for ministerial students and laypersons. Ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, he has served the church in a variety of capacities including as the Executive Regional Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Canada from 1987-1997. He holds the Bachelor of Arts from Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington, the Bachelor of Divinity degree from College of the Bible, Lexington, Kentucky, and a Masters of Arts and Ph.D. from Indiana University. It was after he retired from the Canadian Regional Ministry that he and his late spouse, Diane DeMoisey, served as co-curators of the Cane Ridge Shrine in Bourbon County, Kentucky from 1998-2006. From that experience, Steffer wrote a comprehensive history of the effort to preserve Cane Ridge as not only a historic site but a sacred one as well.

While Barton Stone and the Cane Ridge Revival figure in this story, they are not the focus of *Saving Cane Ridge*. The purpose of Steffer's book is to tell the story of how the meeting house was saved from being demolished and then preserved for posterity after it closed as a church in 1921. This closure took place after 130 years of continuous use as a church. Local church leaders in Kentucky led the effort to preserve the building, which would in time be returned to its original condition, which required significant work. This was done so that later generations might come to know the story of Barton Stone and the revival that helped launch the Second Great Awakening. The challenges faced by those who deemed this building worthy of preservation were significant. Nevertheless, due to their efforts, the spiritual descendants of Stone's ministry have a pilgrimage site to visit. (I am one of those pilgrims who have visited and had my picture taken in the pulpit). The faith communities that look back to Stone's ministry include the Christian Church (Disciples

of Christ), the Churches of Christ, and the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ (all of whom also claim descent from the pioneering efforts of Thomas and Alexander Campbell, as well as Walter Scott), as well as one of the traditions that today make up the United Church of Christ. That faith community that has connections with Stone chose not to unite with the Campbell/Scott reform movement.

The difficulties faced by those who sought to preserve this site may be rooted in the fact that Stone's star was eclipsed by Campbell after the merger. (See my review of *Answered by Fire*, edited by Leonard Allen and Carisse Mickey Berryhill for more on attempts to reclaim the legacy of Stone and the Cane Ridge Revival). Nevertheless, there is a growing appreciation for Stone within the movement, which has helped sustain the efforts to preserve the building.

The church was built in the late eighteenth century and continued to be used as a church until 1921. At that point, it was largely abandoned and decay set in. Fortunately, churches in the area realized that the site had not only historical significance, but sacred significance. Nevertheless, gaining financial support for its renovation from the churches was difficult. One helpful element in the effort to save the meeting site was rooted in a growing appreciation for historic sites as seen in Henry Ford's attempts to preserve historic buildings at Greenfield Village and John D. Rockefeller's support for developing Colonial Williamsburg. There was also, nearby, the Lincoln Marriage Cabin and Temple at Harrodsburg, Kentucky, which provided a model for historic preservation. It was in 1934 that Cane Ridge caught the attention of the Historic American Buildings Survey, which led to the recognition that the meeting house was a historic building. Though the nation was in the midst of the Great Depression, efforts commenced to raise money to restore the building. Again, it was local church leaders who took the lead, since the larger church was unable to support the venture. Steffer takes us on a journey through the many efforts to organize support, renovate the building, which had been modified over the years, so it could be returned to a condition similar to what it would have looked like in 1801. While World War II interrupted the preservation efforts the dream was not lost. The question was how to preserve the meeting house and provide for its ongoing maintenance. As anyone who has visited will know, the decision was ultimately made to build a shrine that would contain and protect the meeting house from the elements.

Not only does Steffer tell us how the building was preserved, but he tells about important visitors, denominational events held there, as well as prominent speakers. Among those who would visit and speak at Cane Ridge was Alben W. Barkley, the 35<sup>th</sup> Vice President of the United States, who, though a Methodist, was married to a life-long member of the Christian Church. Others who spoke there included A.W. Fortune, W. E. Garrison, P. H. Welshimer, and Edgar DeWitt Jones. We learn about the decision to call a director for the shrine in the 1950s. Steffer, who was one of those directors, tells us about each of the persons chosen and the nature of their work while at Cane Ridge. We learn about the lives of each of these persons and the work undertaken during their time as Curator to advance the preservation of the meeting house and the telling of the story of Cane Ridge. Although the book was published in 2015, the story ends with the recognition of six years of service by James Trader as Curator on December 21, 2012.

Steffler provides the reader with much important and helpful information about the meeting house and the efforts to preserve it for posterity. He shows a great love for the site and for the role it plays in the history of the Stone-Campbell Movement. In some ways, the book reads less like a tight narrative and more like a chronicle of persons and events. Thus, it could have used a bit of editing. Nevertheless, Steffer reminds us of the important role this sacred site played not only in the Stone-Campbell Movement but in American history writ large. There is a tendency among Americans to dismiss the importance of history and pilgrimage sites. They may appear to be museum pieces, but Steffer helps those of us who are part of the Stone-Campbell Movement better understand how we came to be. Therefore, this is not merely a museum that preserves the past. It is a sacred site that can inspire faith in those who visit. This site and others like it also remind us that the Christian faith is rooted in history. Therefore, persons and places are important elements of the story. This makes it important to preserve sites such as this. We are fortunate that visionary persons saw the importance of its preservation, even if (as demonstrated by the author) many in the Stone-Campbell Movement didn't understand the importance of preserving the site. It would have been a travesty for us had this old wooden chapel been lost to the elements. Therefore, thanks go to Robert Steffer for his work in preserving the site and for telling its story.

*Robert D. Cornwall served until his retirement in June 2021 as Senior Minister of Central Woodward Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Troy, Michigan. He holds a Ph.D. in Historical Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary. He currently serves as a board member of the Disciples Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministries and co-chair of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America-Disciples of Christ Bilateral Dialog. Among his books is Freedom in Covenant: Reflections on the Distinctive Values and Practices of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), (Wipf and Stock, 2015).*