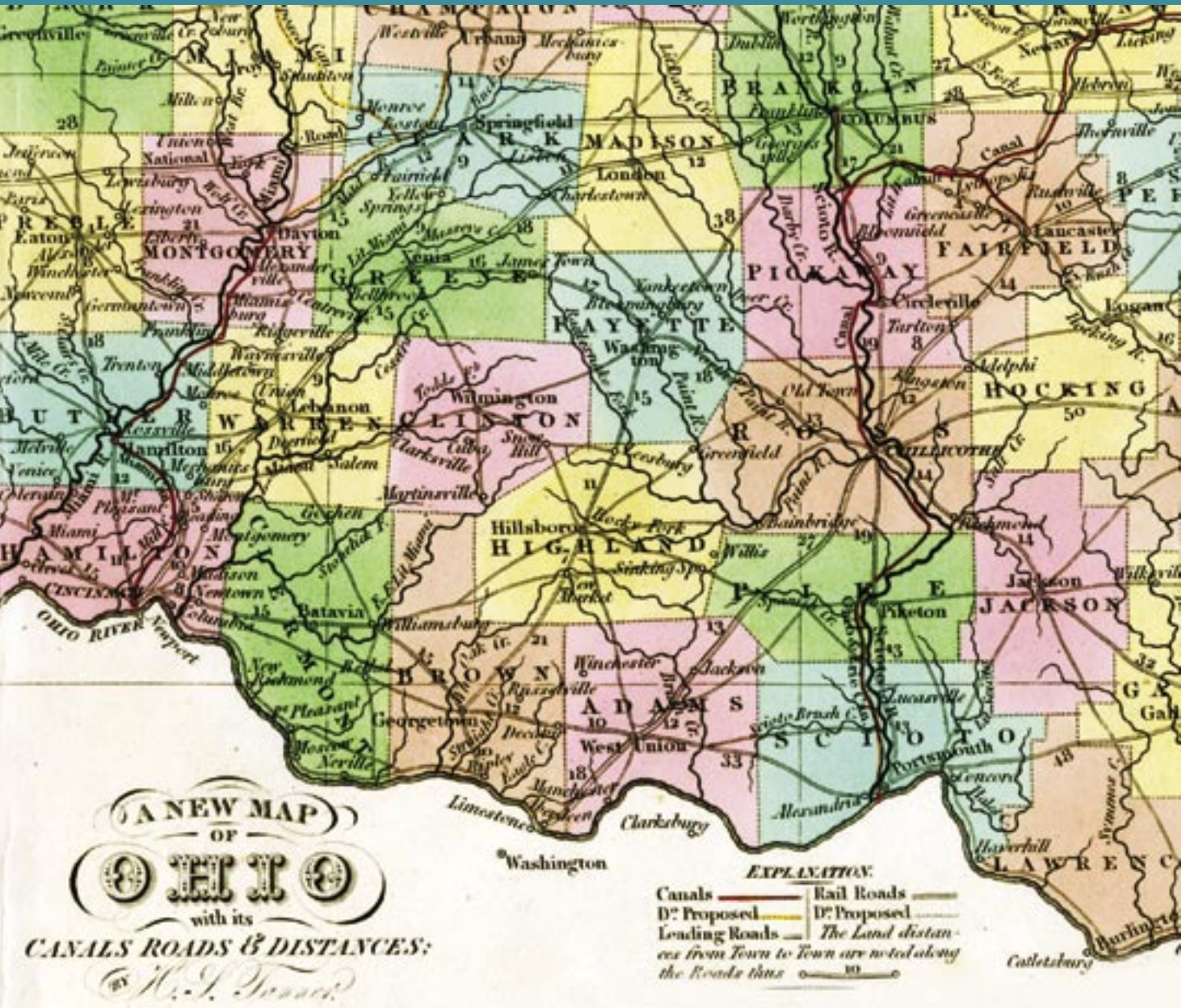


OHIO VALLEY HISTORY

A Collaboration of The Filson Historical Society, Cincinnati Museum Center, and the University of Cincinnati.

VOLUME 5 • NUMBER 4 • WINTER 2005



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Ohio Valley History (ISSN 746-3472) is published in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Louisville, Kentucky, by Cincinnati Museum Center and The Filson Historical Society. Periodical postage paid at Cincinnati, Ohio, with an additional entry at Louisville, Kentucky.

Postmaster send address changes to The Filson Historical Society, 1310 S. Third Street,

Louisville, Kentucky, 40208.

Editorial Offices located at the University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio, 45221-0373. Contact the editorial offices at phillicr@email.uc.edu or stradlds@email.uc.edu.

Ohio Valley History is a collaboration of The Filson Historical Society, Cincinnati Museum Center, and the Department of History, University of Cincinnati.

Cincinnati Museum Center and The Filson Historical Society are private non-profit organizations supported almost entirely by gifts, grants, sponsorships, admission and membership fees.

Memberships of Cincinnati History Museum at Cincinnati Museum Center or The Filson Historical Society include a subscription to *Ohio Valley*

History. Back issues are \$8.00.

For more information on Cincinnati Museum Center, including membership, visit www.cincymuseum.org or call 513-287-7000 or 1-800-733-2077.

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Volume 5, Number 4, Winter 2005

A Journal of the History and Culture of the Ohio Valley and the Upper South, published in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Louisville, Kentucky, by Cincinnati Museum Center and The Filson Historical Society.

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Soul Winner:

Edward O. Guerrant, the Kentucky Home Missions, and the “Discovery” of Appalachia

MARK ANDREW HUDDLE

In January 1916, the Presbyterian newspaper, the *Christian Observer*, invited the famous home missionary, Edward O. Guerrant, to contribute some reminiscences of his long, productive ministry. Guerrant, who would soon celebrate his seventy-eighth birthday, had labored more than half his life in the southern Appalachian mountains. He had been one of the first individuals to identify the inhabitants of that region as an “exceptional population” in need of the benefits of mission work. Along with the Rev. Stuart Robinson, Guerrant worked for years to convince the Synod of Kentucky to devote its precious resources to the “uplift” of mountain people, and within a decade his efforts had become a model for denominational outreach in other parts of the country. After two decades as the Synod’s evangelist in the eastern Kentucky mountains, Guerrant founded the interdenominational “Society of Soul Winners.” The Society recruited and trained ministers and teachers for the “mountain work,” as well as built churches, mission schools, colleges, an orphanage, and a hospital. In 1911, Guerrant transferred control of the Society of Soul Winners to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the United States (South). But even at the age of seventy, he maintained a remarkably strenuous schedule, crisscrossing the mountains, often on horseback, to minister to the people of the mountains.

Guerrant responded to the *Observer’s* request with a lengthy piece entitled, “Forty Years Among the American Highlanders.” In it, he offered a description of the mountain folk that he had served for so long:

They are today the purest stock of Scotch-Irish and Anglo-Saxon races on the continent. For hundreds of years they have lived isolated from the outside world, with no foreign intermixture. . . . They are not a degenerate people. They are brave, independent, high-spirited people, whose poverty and location have isolated them from the advantages of education and religion. They have been simply



*Edward O. Guerrant
(1838-1916), ca. 1860.
The Filson Historical
Society*

passed by in the march of progress in this great age, because they were out of the way.¹

Guerrant's brief description illustrated many of the tensions that contributed to the rise of the home missions movement and made it so controversial then and since. The missions to the mountains were the product of a specific historical moment when the southern Appalachians and the people who lived there held a singular fascination for many Americans. At a time of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and especially immigration, these "pure" Americans, isolated and "passed by in the march of progress" awaited only the civilizing power of education and religion. These were not seemingly inassimilable foreigners but native-born Americans who just needed a hand up.



Congregation at Buckhorn, Kentucky, 1903. The Filson Historical Society

cized (sometimes viciously) for being cultural and religious imperialists who openly denigrated indigenous traditions for the benefit of their "mainstream" denominations. Edward O. Guerrant has been specifically singled out as one of the culprits.

Yet such interpretations have taken far too narrow a view of the home missionary movement. Reducing the narrative to a culture clash between two warring monoliths, the so-called "mainstream" Protestant denominations on the one hand and indigenous mountaineers on the other, has over-simplified a complex and important story. Historians have wrenched the home missionary movement out of its rightful place in the political, social, cultural, and religious history of the Gilded Age and Progressive era, failing to account for its origins in that period of American religious history in which the Christian America movement made its transition to a "social gospel." Those who have

Perhaps no group has had such a controversial place in the literature of Appalachian studies as the home missionaries. For a variety of reasons, they played a critical role in the creation of Appalachian stereotypes and the perceptions of mountain people as outside the American mainstream, or "the other" in historical parlance. They have been portrayed as being in willing partnership with the economic interests that moved to exploit the region's resources or as the unwitting stooges of capital. They have been criti-

singled out Edward O. Guerrant for special criticism have failed to take note of those elements that made him a rather anomalous character in the story of the mountain missions – elements that strike at the very heart of the identity politics that set down the characteristics of “authentic” highlanders. Edward Guerrant’s mission efforts in the mountains of eastern Kentucky provide a compelling portrait of the remarkable scope of the missionary enterprise and the important role that the missions played in mediating, rather than facilitating, the remarkable transformations that buffeted mountain life.

Born on February 28, 1838, in Sharpsburg, Kentucky, where the outer Bluegrass meets the western edge of the Appalachians, Edward Owings Guerrant received advantages nearly beyond his parents’ circumstances. His father, Henry Guerrant, a native of Virginia who had studied at Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, and at the young age of sixteen read medicine with an uncle, Richard Putney of Charleston, South Carolina, relocated to Kentucky about 1835 after he inherited land there. Nearly three years after Edward was born, his father Henry was one of six physicians residing in Sharpsburg. Although he was respected in the community, the glut of medical practitioners in the small town proved to be a constant economic challenge for the family. With six children to feed, the Guerrants struggled to make ends meet. Even so, their eldest son, Edward, described his childhood as a happy one. His father exercised nominal leadership in Sharpsburg; his pious mother, Mary, set a religious tone at home. Tragedy struck the family in January 1850 when Guerrant’s mother died suddenly. Twelve-year-old Edward was thrust into the role of caregiver for his younger siblings. He also worked a series of jobs to contribute to the family’s precarious finances.²

At the same time, Guerrant exhibited a precocious talent in the classroom. He was a star at the Highland Literary Institute where he so impressed the principal that he advised Guerrant’s father to take all possible measures to ensure higher academic training for Edward. The advice was unneeded; the Guerrant family placed the highest premium on procuring a quality education for all their children. In the fall of 1856, Edward Guerrant enrolled at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. Once the epicenter of early Kentucky politics, Danville by the 1850s had evolved into an impressive educational center that included Centre, one of the foremost colleges west of the Appalachians, as well as the Kentucky School for Deafmutes [*sic*], the Henderson Institute for Women, and the Danville Theological Seminary.³

At Centre College, Guerrant received an intensive classical education studying Latin, Greek, English literature, physics, mathematics and chemistry. He polished his public speaking skills and proved an able debater, joined the school literary society and published his first poetry, edited the school newspaper, and was elected president of the junior class. When he graduated in 1860, his classmates honored him by choosing him as the class salutatorian. More

important, given his eventual path in life, Guerrant took an active role in the religious life of the college. He made a point of attending the sermons of the great evangelists who spoke at the school; indeed, Lewis Green and Stuart Robinson would each play an important role in Guerrant's professional life. When the great revivals of 1857 swept through the region, Guerrant was an active participant and he experienced a powerful religious stirring. As he described it, "after several days fruitless and painful search, I was delivered from my fears and doubts by being directed to go at once to Christ."⁴ Soon afterward, he affiliated with the Presbyterian Church.



Humphrey Marshall (1812-1872), ca. 1862. The Filson Historical Society

Not surprisingly, upon graduation Edward Guerrant set his sights on the ministry, enrolling at the Danville Seminary located near his beloved Centre College. Events, unfortunately, conspired to delay his religious training. First, Guerrant's studies were hampered by ill health that eventually required him to withdraw from the school. Before he could re-enroll, Confederate forces attacked Fort Sumter and the nation was plunged into Civil War. Although Kentucky remained in the Union, the Guerrants would prove unwavering Confederate partisans, so much so that both Henry Guerrant and his youngest son, Richard, served time in a Union prison for their agitation during the conflict. Edward immediately ran off to southwestern Virginia to meet up with Gen. Humphrey Marshall, who sought to raise an army of Kentuckians for Confederate service. Whatever Guerrant lacked as a warrior, he more than made up for as a secretary. Erudite and articulate, he quickly won a position as a clerk on the General's staff. By December 1862 he was named Marshall's adjutant and received promotion to captain. When Marshall left the military to take a seat in the Confederate Congress, Guerrant served variously with William Preston, John S. Williams, and finally with his great hero, John Hunt Morgan.⁵

During his military service, Guerrant fed his literary pretensions by keeping what eventually became an enormous diary. He was, in fact, an inveterate diarist continuing the practice until the last years of his life. His compatriots may have been somewhat bemused by Guerrant's writing habit but after the war they called on him on more than one occasion to settle disputes arising from their own faulty recollections. In the postwar period, he gladly loaned out personal papers to historians who sought to tell the Confederate side of the Kentucky war story. His continued loyalty to the Lost Cause earned

Guerrant a place on the executive committee of the Kentucky branch of the Southern Historical Society, and he delivered lectures on John Hunt Morgan and served on the committee that eventually raised a monument to Morgan in Lexington in 1911. He was an active member of the Confederate Veterans Association and in later years spoke at gatherings of both Confederate and Union veterans including a large gathering in Columbus, Ohio, near the Ohio Penitentiary where Morgan and Guerrant's own father and brother had been held. Guerrant considered writing his own history of the conflict but eventually published only two articles in *Century Magazine's* "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War" series. He did write a memoir of his wartime experiences but chose not to publish the work, fearing that his pro-Confederate stance would alienate northern supporters of his missionary work. Yet this fear never stopped the Rev. Dr. Guerrant from informing his audiences of where his sympathies lay. Writing in 1908, he declared:

"My old Virginia father taught me that next to God I should love my country and Virginia and Kentucky were my country. That we were defeated settled no principle and brought no dishonor. . . . I shall leave my children no prouder heritage than their father was a Confederate soldier."⁶ Studies of Guerrant and the home missions have generally failed to recognize how formative his wartime experiences were and how instrumental these experiences were in his later missionary efforts. He spent most of the war in southwest Virginia, east Tennessee, and eastern Kentucky. The main strategic concern of the Kentucky troops was to protect the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad that ran 330 miles through the mountains from Lynchburg to Knoxville. For nearly four years, Guerrant traversed the southern mountains, becoming intimate with its peaks, valleys, and most important, its people. He was fascinated by the mountaineers he met on his journeys, many of whom became friends for life. He wrote at length about the Rhea family whom he met and visited numerous times during the war and then made a point of visiting for years afterwards.⁷ He was often shocked by the poverty that he witnessed, but seems to have felt an affinity for the mountain people:

The road over the mountains to Kentucky was terrible for an army but poor and desolate as this country is, it is fruitful in peaches and children. Any number of flax-headed, barefooted, cunning-eyed, little dirty "lords of creation" and ladies may be seen at every shanty, crowded down between these rock-ribbed hills.⁸

Perhaps the most important personal experience for Guerrant during his military service in Appalachia was meeting wife-to-be Mary Jane DeVault of

Humphrey Marshall (1812-1872), ca. 1862. The Filson Historical Society



Leesburg, Tennessee. No scholarly treatment of Guerrant's missionary work takes note of his familial ties to the mountains of east Tennessee. If the rhetoric of the home missions literature often portrayed the southern mountains as foreign land, the personal connections of the missionaries to the region were often far more complicated.

When hostilities ceased in the spring of 1865, Guerrant's life took a surprising turn. Rather than returning to the seminary, he enrolled in the Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. After a year at the school, Guerrant transferred to Bellevue Hospital Medical College in New York City, graduating in the spring of 1867. Few clues suggest why he made such an abrupt change of direction. What is clear from diaries, correspondence, and reminiscences later in life is that Guerrant took the role of "Christian physician" very seriously. His experiences in the mountains during the war marked him; Guerrant saw a need and he responded to it.

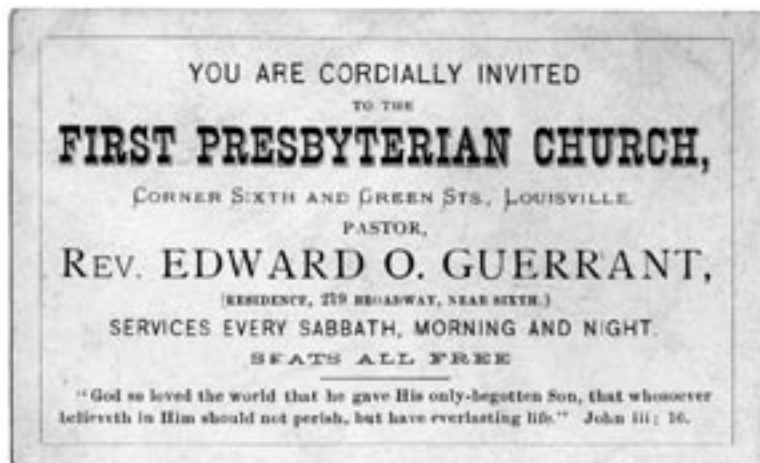
With medical degree in hand, he returned to Kentucky, settling near his boyhood home at Mount Sterling, then known as the "capital of Eastern Kentucky." Guerrant married in 1868 and quickly built a lucrative practice in the town at the edge of the Cumberlands. But he did so in an unusual way. Rather than reap the benefits of the economic development around Mount Sterling (the town became a rail hub in 1872), he chose to build his practice in the outlying mountain communities where medical care was sparse. His letters from the period tell of horseback trips of two to three days into the mountains to communities like Hazel Green and Frenchburg. He was more than just fascinated, titillated or appalled by what he saw in the remote reaches of the mountains; he was drawn to them because he felt comfortable there. He recognized the poverty but he also admired the qualities of mountain people. If he evinced a patronizing attitude toward mountaineers on occasion, he also showed them respect and admiration.⁹

Despite the success of his medical practice, Guerrant grew restless. By 1873 he had decided to return to the seminary. In the fall of that year, he enrolled at the prestigious Union Theological Seminary at Hampden-Sydney, Virginia. Union was a center for Presbyterian leadership in the South and had old ties to the Virginia aristocracy and the South's political elite. Patrick Henry, David Rice, and James Madison had served as Trustees. John Randolph grew up nearby, as did Confederate general Joseph E. Johnston. When Guerrant was a student there, the institution boasted some of southern Presbyterianism's most illustrious divines, men like John Holt Rice, Benjamin M. Smith, and especially Robert L. Dabney. Guerrant and Dabney, in particular, established a close personal and professional relationship that lasted throughout their lives. Older and more mature than most of his classmates, Guerrant excelled at Union and quickly established himself as a counselor (and in some instances physician) to the younger seminarians. His classmates often called upon him to engage

his faculty mentors in public debate on the great issues of the day, much to the delight of the community. The impression that he made on students and faculty members alike served him well later in his career, offering a ready-made network of supporters for the mountain missions.¹⁰

Once he completed his coursework at Union, Guerrant again returned to Mount Sterling to begin his ministerial career accepting the call to the local Presbyterian church in the spring of 1875. He enjoyed the work at Mount Sterling but one cannot help but sense that he had a grander vision of his life's work. In 1877 the Synod of Kentucky named him to its Home Missions Committee, with responsibility for presenting the annual "Report on Home Missions" at the Synodical annual meeting. That very year, he shocked the gathering with a blistering critique of denominational mission work. According to the young minister, of "the one hundred counties of Kentucky, sixty are entirely unoccupied by our church." Only ten thousand Presbyterians worshipped in the entire state. By Guerrant's reckoning only two explanations could account for this lack of success: a weakness in doctrine, or a weakness in leadership. He went on to note that within "one days ride from Mt. Sterling, the Capital of Eastern Kentucky, there are four county seats which have no house of worship, and some of these towns contain hundreds of souls. They have jails and gambling hells, and drinking shops, but no house for God's worship."¹¹ Guerrant called on the Synod to hire "men of zeal" who would dedicate themselves completely to home missions work.

Guerrant's performance sent shockwaves through the meeting. Ministerial elders were not in the habit of enduring criticism from one of their underlings. As Guerrant later noted, he feared that he would be overwhelmed by the negative reaction of church leaders. But at the moment things looked most bleak, Stuart Robinson, a denominational luminary, stood in defense of Guerrant's report and urged the Synod to dedicate more resources to the cause of mission-building across the state.¹² While Robinson's intercession blunted criticism of the young minister, it did not lead to any groundswell of support. Four years passed before the Synod acted on Guerrant's recommendations, and fund-raising efforts during that period were woefully inadequate. Regardless, Guerrant had managed to put home missions on the Synod's agenda and it was no coincidence that he pointed to the "destitution"



Business Card of Rev. Edward O. Guerrant, ca. 1880. Guerrant was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Louisville before he was appointed Synodical Evangelist for eastern Kentucky in 1881. The Filson Historical Society

of those mountain communities in eastern Kentucky to drive home his point. At the Synod's meeting in 1881, Guerrant was appointed "Synodical Evangelist" for eastern Kentucky. Once again he was drawn into the mountains. Years later he was explicit about his desire to return to the highlands: "When I became a minister I naturally remembered that country where many of my old comrades lived, Christless and churchless, and determined to give them what little help I could."¹³

Guerrant served as the evangelist to eastern Kentucky for four years. At the end of his tenure, he estimated that he had brought more than 2,700 converts into the church, organized twenty-five congregations, and built fifteen church buildings. Moreover, he ordained ninety-six church officers, recruited seventeen to the seminary, and raised nearly \$18,000 for the support of those churches and the evangelists who ministered there.¹⁴ He preached in every space imaginable: in barns, courthouses, jails, cabins and schoolhouses and just as often outside in the elements. He traveled on horseback and mule, by canoe, and on foot. His medical training proved a popular draw. "Crowds of sick follow to every place to be examined for all sorts of ailments," Guerrant later remembered. "I prescribe for them. Very popular, as I charge nothing."¹⁵ His children remembered their father carrying a large tent and portable organ on his travels and holding meetings on the nearest hillside. During the "noon recess" Guerrant would hold his medical clinic. Later, Guerrant's son, Edward, Jr., also a trained physician, accompanied his father deep into the mountains. As he recalled, "these clinics [were] attended by hundreds of people who come on foot, on horses, on mules, in wagons, for miles and miles across the mountains. Often they carry their sick on cots or in their arms."¹⁶



*Rev. Stuart Robinson
(1814-1881), ca. 1867.
The Filson Historical
Society*

When Guerrant resigned as itinerant evangelist in 1885, the Synod, recognizing his talent, designated him "evangelist-at-large," and while he continued to minister primarily to the mountains, he was also much in demand as a guest preacher in New York City, Washington, D.C., and in cities all over the South. These tours provided him with networks of supporters who stood ready to raise money and support for what he now termed, the "mountain work." Guerrant was a pioneer in the Appalachian missions field, but by the 1890s every major "mainstream" denomination had deployed missionaries in the southern mountains. In his field reports, Guerrant mentioned encounters with Methodists, Baptists (particularly of the "hardshell" variety), Congregationalists, Universalists, and even Mormons. He singled out mountain people as an "exceptional population," as a people in need of "uplift."

Guerrant's experiences were in no way unique. His efforts were bound up in the historical transformations buffeting both region and nation. Appalachian studies scholars have spilled no shortage of ink describing the process by which Appalachia entered the national consciousness as a distinct region with its own "peculiar" culture and people, and the role that the home missionaries played in that process. In his seminal study, *Appalachia on Our Mind*, the historian Henry D. Shapiro has argued that in their attempts to "understand themselves and their civilization" Americans have attached certain meanings to mountaineers. A "perception of otherness" about the region and its people was made more problematic by the fact that this "deviant" population was white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and native-born. The first to recognize this "strange land" and "peculiar people" were "local color" writers who authored the travel vignettes that were immensely popular in the 1870s and 1880s. According to Shapiro, the same characteristics that appealed to these writers and their expanding readership also attracted home missionaries, who convinced themselves that the region, in Guerrant's words, was "Christless and churchless."¹⁷

The missions to the mountains began at that moment in the post-Civil War period when the denominations defined their own mission as the "establishment of a unified, homogeneous Christian nation through the integration of unassimilated populations into the mainstream of American life." Similarly, David Whisnant, has claimed that post-Civil War America witnessed the triumph of a Republican "vision of a truly unified American society in which competing interests would be cemented in national purpose by the tenets of Protestantism and capitalism."¹⁸

Another important impulse in this turn towards the mountains was the collapse of Reconstruction and the perceived failure of the mission work among the freedmen. Indeed, the historian James C. Klotter has noted that the stereotypes used by missionaries to portray African Americans in this period—worst housed, worst fed, most ignorant, most immoral, lazy, shiftless—were soon transferred to mountain people. Because the mountaineers were white, however, they were unencumbered by notions of racial and ethnic inferiority. All



Soul Winners on horseback, 1903. From left to right: Mary Guerrant, Edward O. Guerrant, and Gen. Oliver O. Howard. Howard visited Rev. Guerrant in Kentucky in 1903 to report on the activities of the Soul Winners for the Christian Herald. The Filson Historical Society

that the inhabitants of the southern mountains needed to move back onto the path of progress were the appropriate doses of religion, education, and civilization.¹⁹ This seductive argument combined self-justification with an appropriate “middle class” sales pitch to appeal to an anxious America.

In all of these studies, home missionaries played a crucial role in affixing a perception of “otherness” on the Appalachian region. They contributed to the growing idea that this diverse and disparate area was in fact distinctive and in need of uplift, a perception that endured well into the twentieth century and played a significant role in the shaping of government policy. Dissenting voices, especially those of mountain people, went unheard and in the case of home missions, they denigrated or ignored altogether indigenous religious traditions. Certainly, some of the best works on the region have demonstrated conclusively that many missionaries, especially those who came from outside the mountains, did bring middle-class values and prejudices to their labors. Recently Jess Stoddart’s history of the Hindman Settlement School and Sandra Lee Barney’s study of the medical profession in the mountain South have both highlighted the transformative zeal that many of those drawn to the missions brought to the work. Yet they ignore the reformism emanating from the local elites of Appalachian towns who also championed the uplift of their rural neighbors.²⁰

*Henry Ward Beecher
(1813-1887). Cincinnati
Museum Center at Union
Terminal, Cincinnati
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Yet if one reads Guerrant’s work, especially *The Galax Gatherers*, with care, his interaction with other denominations becomes far more complicated and interesting. The denominational loyalties broke down in the rugged terrain of the mountains. There was more interdenominational cooperation than McCauley allows. After all, the Society of Soul Winners was non-denominational; not a Presbyterian mission organization. Guerrant, who spent most of his life in the Sharpsburg-Mount Sterling, Kentucky, area and forty years traversing the southern mountains, certainly did not see himself as a minion of eastern capital. As a well-educated, solidly middle-class American and a member of Appalachia’s own rising middle-class, he brought his own cultural predilections and biases to his work. However, when one considers Guerrant’s origins and upbringing and the varied experiences that contributed to his interest

in and connections to mountain people then McCauley’s stark assessment rings hollow. Indeed, Guerrant’s home base at Mount Sterling, lying on the border between the mountains to the east and the Bluegrass region to the west, is itself significant. Guerrant, as the historian David Whisnant argues, was an

“important mediator between the social and economic orders and self-concepts of the two areas. More particularly, Guerrant served as a Christian mediator of the claims of social conscience which the former laid on the latter.”²¹ Guerrant did not bring change to the southern mountains but he did seek to provide mountain people with the tools to weather that change.

By focusing on the psychology of “otherness” or on the construction of an “Appalachian mountain religion,” scholars have often taken too narrow a view of the historical context in which the missions movement evolved. In the same way that America’s churches proved the bellwether for the sectional conflicts of the antebellum period, American religious life in the post-Civil War period mirrored the tensions and conflicts in American society. As the intense sectional struggle over Reconstruction gave way to economic acceleration and industrial revolution, as technological and scientific breakthroughs challenged old certainties, and as waves of immigrants (many of whom were non-Protestant) flooded into America’s cities, the so-called “mainstream” denominations exhibited myriad stresses and strains as they negotiated a period of dramatic change.

Truly, the United States from 1870 to 1890 was a religious hothouse. A remarkable ferment occurred *outside* the major denominations. The major periodicals of the day collectively defended spiritualism. In 1875, Mary Baker Eddy published *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* and founded Christian Science and Helena Blavatsky formed the Theosophical Society. A year later, Felix Adler founded the Society for Ethical Culture. All of these groups challenged the “theological verities” of the day. And internally, signs of instability emerged across the denominational board. Indeed, in 1874, the Presbyterians weathered the David Swing affair. Swing was a young Chicago-area minister accused, tried, and found guilty of heresy by his Presbytery for rejecting church doctrine and embracing the “power of love.” In the same year, one of America’s most famous ministers, New York’s Henry Ward Beecher, was accused of having an adulterous affair with the wife of friend and associate, Theodore Tilton. The Beecher-Tilton Affair touched off a year of soul-searching as pundits bemoaned the nation’s moral collapse.²²

But there were far more practical concerns confronting America’s churches. After a significant period of interdenominational cooperation in the antebellum period, a period in which the churches created interdenominational mission societies dedicated to the Sunday school and temperance movements, Bible and tract distribution, and evangelical outreach, the conflict over slavery exploded, tearing the major denominations apart. The mainstream churches emerged from the war divided by section, race, and theology. The prewar schism between North and South endured, African Americans exercised their newfound freedom by leaving the southern churches in droves and establish-

ing their own places of worship. All of the denominations wrestled with the continued fallout over Darwinism, which had a profound effect on the theological underpinnings of American Protestantism. At the same time they faced unprecedented challenges to their Protestant vision of a “Christian America.” Rapid industrialization and urbanization, fueled by wave upon wave of immigrants, unleashed class warfare and a host of social ills. The Gilded Age and Progressive eras witnessed an intensifying and virulent period of nativism buttressed by Victorian racial theorizing that placed racial and ethnic groups into “hierarchies of civilization.”²³



Guerrant leading Sunday school in the mountains, 1903. The Filson Historical Society

In the face of these perceived threats, the Protestant denominations sought some common ground. Indeed a so-called “kingdom of God on earth” theology had emerged by the 1880s, marking a significant shift in religious thought. A younger generation of clergy believed that the churches had to move beyond a simple conception of individual salvation and offer a powerful social message. Their “social gospel” provided a spiritual foundation for the social and political reformism of the period. The churches were determined to play a role in eliminating poverty, disease, filth, and immorality. They had a responsibility to minister to the “unchurched” and to facilitate the integration of new immigrant groups (and of course mountain people, and native Americans) into the national culture.²⁴

Interestingly, this social vision tended to equate Protestant Christianity, notions of civilization, and “Anglo-Saxonism.” In spite of the nation’s crushing social problems, many believed that the United States had a God-given mission and destiny that was as much determined by race as faith. Or, in the words of the Methodist evangelist, James H. King, the “most important lesson in the history of modern civilization is, that God is using the Anglo-Saxon to conquer the world for Christ by dispossessing feeble races, and assimilating and molding others.”²⁵ Middle-class Americans in this period drew from a powerful “discourse of civilization” that tended to conflate racial differentiation with the “millennial drama of growing human perfection, conflating biological human evolutionary differences with moral and intellectual progress.”²⁶

From this swirl of beliefs about the world sprang the home missions. Although often unacknowledged by historians, one of the most widely-read books of the 1880s was, in fact, a home missions tract. Josiah Strong’s *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* is often cited as a religious

justification for imperial conquest and expansion. Yet the American Home Missionary Society published it. Strong may have ended his text with an impassioned discussion of Anglo-Saxon superiority and the United States' special role in the global "competition of the races," but most of the book is focused on the obstacles preventing the nation from fulfilling its destiny. According to Strong, there were seven "perils" threatening the body politic: immigration, Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, intemperance, socialism, materialism, and the unbridled growth of the city. If Americans could overcome those perils at home, posited Strong, *then* they would be free to carry the light of Anglo-Saxon civilization to other shores. *Our Country* sold nearly 200,000 copies and every indication suggests that contemporary readers and reviewers understood the book to be a call to mission work in the United States, not simply an argument for imperial expansion.²⁷

Contemporary justifications for missionary work in the mountains are rife with appeals to Anglo-Saxon solidarity. Mountain people may have been "left behind," but their isolation protected them from the immigrants that threatened America's racial, and hence national, fiber.²⁸ Samuel Tyndale Wilson said as much in his influential 1906 home missions text, *The Southern Mountaineers*:

So has God stored away in this great mountain reservoir of humanity four millions of sturdy race to be a source of refreshment and strength to the nation in trying days to come, the days of struggle to preserve our civil and religious institutions unimpaired in the Armageddon with which the hordes of foreign immigrants are threatening our nation.²⁹

However much he subscribed to a racialized vision of mountaineers, Edward O. Guerrant was rarely so apocalyptic. He demanded that the people he ministered to be treated with respect, and he found much to admire in their struggles. In his memoir, *The Galax Gatherers*, he was quick to describe a mountain family as:

Americans—pure, old Anglo-Saxon blood, unmixed for hundreds of years—true, honest, industrious, brave people. That they are poor is the fault of their environment; they are inhabitants of the rugged Cumberland Mountains, where the land is scarce and unproductive and money scarcer.³⁰

None of the debilitating aspects of race appear in Guerrant's characterization of mountain people that compromised many of the other "exceptional

"My first class at Witherspoon College, 1903." *The Filson Historical Society*



populations” singled out for mission work. Mountaineers were a source of hope as well as people in need of assistance.

From 1886 to 1896, Guerrant served at two churches in addition to his missionary duties. He served at Wilmore, Kentucky, the site of one of the oldest Presbyterian churches in the state and at nearby Troy, the site of a congregation he had organized a few years before. Not only did he continue his forays into the rugged Cumberlands, he was also much in demand as a lecturer on the mountain mission work. In 1896 the “Theological Class” at Central University of Kentucky invited Guerrant to give a series of lectures on the subject of “Evangelistic Work.” At the urging of the students and faculty, he expanded his presentations into his first book, *The Soul Winner*. This primer on evangelical outreach quickly became a mainstay on reading lists at Presbyterian seminaries across the country. Guerrant commented on nearly every imaginable aspect of organizing a church and running a service. Besides the chapters, “How to Preach,” and “What to Preach,” sections appear on “Prayer,” “Attitude in Prayer,” “The Morning Service,” “The Evening Service,” “The Singing,” and “The Children,” as well as chapters on the importance of the sexton and the ushers to the functioning of the church community. To illustrate his teaching points, Guerrant drew from his experiences in the mountains. He appended the text with a series of “Field Notes,” reminiscences of his experiences on the frontlines in the battle for souls, designed to supply the reader with ready examples of his philosophy in action. A number of these “Field Notes” were later reprinted in *The Galax Gatherers*.

Tent meeting near Buckhorn, Kentucky, 1903. Gen. Oliver O. Howard, preaching; Anne and Edward O. Guerrant seated. The Filson Historical Society



Guerrant’s nuts-and-bolts primer opens a window into his efforts at this “mountain work” at what was the end of its first phase. Advising the seminarians to “not only preach earnestly but *plainly*,” he referred them to the “Sermon on the Mount.” “How simple, how plain, how pointed, how practical!,” he offered. “Let that be your model.” He also counseled brevity, noting that a “good sermon is never too long.”³¹

More important, he demanded that his readers—these future missionaries—respect the people to whom they ministered. “You must not suppose that they [mountaineers] are barbarians or heathens,” Guerrant argued. “They are a brave, hardy, generous race of men. God never made a more hospitable people nor one more grateful for service done for them, nor more appreciative of the Gospel.” Success in the mountains required more than “zeal or learning of books.” Granted, they did not have much in the way of formal

education. But, in “some respects,” he asserted, “they are wiser than their teachers.” Theirs was a “gift of common sense, the most uncommon kind, and the most valuable.”³²

Guerrant also cautioned his readers to beware of *what* they preached. “Preach the gospel only and plainly,” he counseled, “leave art, polemics and pyrotechnics alone. You are to win souls, and not to war with them.” Interestingly, in light of much that has since been written about the home missions, Guerrant urged these future missionaries to respect the culture of the mountains. “Don’t undertake to teach morals or manners. That is not the gospel. Let them have their own way of dressing, cooking, talking and eating. You try and save their souls, and let others look after the non-essentials.” “Above all,” he continued, “don’t criticize their faults, nor laugh at their ignorance of books and things.” Many missionaries had destroyed whatever influence they had by such behavior.³³ Obviously, one must scrutinize Guerrant’s “lessons,” as he was writing for a very narrow audience of theology students. But his emphasis on soul-winning to the exclusion of educational or cultural work is striking given the direction his work would take one year later.

We can only speculate whether Guerrant’s Society of Soul Winners, founded in 1897, marked an evolution in his ideas about the “mountain work” or was a direct response to the so-called “settlement schools” that were cropping up throughout the southern mountains in the 1890s. We know that his work had an important influence on the settlement schools, especially those that took root in the Kentucky mountains.³⁴ Regardless, the Society of Soul Winners had a far greater scope and vision than anything undertaken by the Synod of Kentucky. The Society took the whole of southern Appalachia as its field, eventually establishing missions in West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina. It began with one evangelist but in just four years had sixty-seven on the payroll; within ten years, 360 evangelists had affiliated with the organization, who held more than twenty-two thousand services in more than ten thousand locations. The Soul Winners organized 879 Bible Schools,³⁵ as well as constructing fifty-six churches, schools, and mission houses. And despite historians’ recent emphasis on interdenominational competition as a catalyst for mission work, the Society of Soul Winners was non-denominational.

Edward O. Guerrant was undoubtedly a warrior for Presbyterianism. But in the rough and tumble world of the southern mountains, rugged conditions made for strange theological bedfellows. Religious affiliation seems to have been much more fluid in the mountains. Guerrant’s descriptions in *The Galax*



Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Murdoch near Witherspoon College, Buckhorn, Kentucky, 1903. The Filson Historical Society

Gatherers demonstrate remarkable cooperation between denominations. He counted Methodist and Baptist evangelists among his closest friends and they shared everything from the pulpit to sleeping accommodations. They also assisted in one another's services, serving as ushers and chorale directors. In fact, Guerrant seems to have had quite an affinity for the singing at Methodist services and asked his Methodist friends to lead the singing at his own services as often as their itineraries allowed.³⁶ The only group in the mountains regu-

larly to incur Guerrant's wrath was the Mormons, whom he referred to as "perverts" and their faith as "idolatrous man-worship."³⁷

The greatest departure for the Society of Soul Winners was a series of ambitious educational and social service enterprises. In 1902, Guerrant established Witherspoon College in what is today Buckhorn, Kentucky. Soul Winner evangelist Harvey Murdoch had labored in the



Dedication of the Beechwood Seminary, Heidelberg, Kentucky, 1912. Governor McCreary and Guerrant are in the background. The Filson Historical Society

mission field around Buckhorn (then known as Laurel Point) for some time, eventually establishing a church at the site. He and his wife, Louise, had long entertained the dream of establishing a Christian "college" (essentially a high school by today's definition) in the mountains. With Guerrant's support their dream became a reality.³⁸ Witherspoon College flourished. By the time of Murdoch's death in 1935, the school offered grades one through twelve and boasted a large physical plant that included a medical clinic. In the 1950s, Witherspoon became the Presbyterian Child Welfare Agency of Buckhorn, also known as the "Buckhorn Children's Center." Five years later, Guerrant established a second school, Highland College, at Puncheon Camp, Kentucky in "Bloody Breathitt" county, an area known for the prevalence of feuding as well as generally high levels of violence. Soon after he established the Highland Orphans Home at Clay City, and in 1912 he built the area's first hospital. In 1917, a year after Guerrant's death, the Highland Orphans Home, Highland School, and Highland Hospital were consolidated into the Highland Institution under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church, South.³⁹

By 1909, Guerrant had begun to feel all of his seventy-one years and the day-to-day operation of the Society of Soul Winners was taking its toll on his health. Co-workers urged him to consider transferring control to another agency with the resources and administrative apparatus to handle the Society's

growth. Naturally, Guerrant looked to the denominations but the decision was in no way easy. As a non-denominational body, many decisions alienated some mission workers and contributors. But after two years of negotiations, Guerrant reached an agreement with the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the United States to transfer all assets. The resolution passed the Assembly on March 24, 1911.⁴⁰ The General Assembly's assumption of the Society proved a catalyst for the creation of a Synod of Appalachia, consecrated in 1915. Fifty years before the creation of the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Presbyterian Church of the United States gave "formal definition of the region's unique status."⁴¹

The transfer of the Soul Winners did not, however, mark the beginning of Guerrant's much-deserved retirement. He continued to be involved in the day-to-day operations of the Soul Winners Society, right down to planning the construction of new buildings and purchasing furniture for the already established schools. In 1913, he received an eight hundred dollar donation from the temperance lecturer, Cynthia Burnett-Haney, and used that money to establish the Stuart Robinson College at Blackey, in Letcher County, Kentucky. The school was affiliated with the Highland Institute for some years and was then transferred to the control of the local schools system. Remarkably, Guerrant kept the same hectic schedule until his death on April 26, 1916, ministering to the needs of "his highlanders," raising money for the missions, lecturing, and preaching.⁴²

Despite prevailing historical interpretations to the contrary, Edward O. Guerrant's religious proselytizing was only a part of his work. He was responsible for bringing basic healthcare to places that had little or none and he established educational enterprises that continue to operate long after his death. In a period of American history during which the mountain South was integrated into an industrializing national economy, Guerrant and many home missionaries like him played a critical role in mediating the transformations that forever changed life in Appalachia. Rather than facilitate that wrenching process, Edward Guerrant made it, however slightly, more humane. ❖

Excerpt from the author's "Home Missions Revisited: Edward O. Guerrant and the "Discovery" of Appalachia," an introduction to *The Galax Gatherers: The Gospel Among the Highlanders* by Edward O. Guerrant (reprint 2004), used with permission from the University of Tennessee Press. The author wishes to thank Durwood Dunn and John Inscoc for their inspiration, support, and infinite patience in the completion of this article.

1. Edward O. Guerrant, "Forty Years Among the American Highlanders," *Christian Observer* (Louisville), January 26, 1916, 18.
2. Biographical material on Guerrant's family and early years can be found in J. Gray McAllister and Grace Owings Guerrant, *Edward O. Guerrant: Apostle to the Southern Highlanders* (Richmond: Richmond Press, Inc., 1950), 1-12.

Also see Martha B. Crowe, "'A Mission in the Mountains': E. O. Guerrant and Southern Appalachia, 1839-1916," *American Presbyterians: Journal of Presbyterian History* 68 (Spring 1990), 46-54.

3. McAllister and Guerrant, *Edward O. Guerrant*, 12-14.
4. *Ibid.*, 16-20. Also see William C. Davis and Meredith Swentor's "Introduction" to Davis and Swentor, eds., *Bluegrass Confederate: The Headquarters Diary of Edward O. Guerrant* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 2-4.
5. For an overview of Guerrant's military career see Davis and Swentor, eds., *Bluegrass Confederate*, 4-13; and McAllister and Guerrant, *Edward O. Guerrant*, 26-53.
6. McAllister and Guerrant, *Edward O. Guerrant*, 56-57.

7. Ibid., 44
8. Ibid., 38
9. Ibid., 55-63.
10. Ibid., 64-73.
11. Edward O. Guerrant, "Original Draft of Report on Home Missions, Read before the Synod of Kentucky, Covington, Kentucky, October 18, 1877," reprinted in Guerrant, *The Soul Winner* (Lexington: John B. Morton and Co., 1896), 121-29.
12. Guerrant, *The Soul Winner*, 119-20.
13. McAllister and Guerrant, *Edward O. Guerrant*, 90-91
14. Edward Guerrant, "Report of Evangelistic Labor to the Synod of Kentucky, Mount Sterling, Kentucky, October 1885," reprinted in *The Soul Winner*, 173-83.
15. Quoted in McAllister and Guerrant, *Edward O. Guerrant*, 97-99.
16. Ibid., 98.
17. Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), ix-xiv.
18. Ibid., 32; David Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 8-10.
19. James C. Klotter, "The Black South and White Appalachia," *Journal of American History* 66 (March 1980): 832-49. Also see Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind*, 34.
20. Jess Stoddart, *Challenge and Change in Appalachia: The Story of the Hindman Settlement School* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 9-47. Also of some importance is Stoddart's historiographical essay on the home missions and settlement schools literature which appears as Appendix 1, 225-31; Sandra Lee Barney, *Authorized to Heal: Gender, Class, and the Transformation of Medicine in Appalachia, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 15-40. For an excellent discussion of Appalachia's indigenous middle-class see Altina L. Waller's classic, *Feud: Hatfields, McCoys, and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
Arguably, the historian Deborah V. McCauley has offered the most strident attack on mountaineers' religiosity. While systematically delineating a distinctive "Appalachian mountain religion," she posits a monolithic "American Protestantism" that exercised imperial power in its relationship to Appalachian mountain religion. In her analysis, the home missions movement in the mountains was an "attempt to consciously and systematically overcome mountain people and their religion," and the goal of the major denominations was to "absorb" mountain people into the "national culture and the national religion of American Protestantism." Significantly, McCauley argues that this goal was to be realized by the "complementary interaction" of Christianization and industrialization, both of which "shared the value of modernization." Deborah V. McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 9, 392-95.
21. Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine*, 38.
22. I have relied heavily on Richard Wightman Fox, "The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism, 1875-1925," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (Winter 1993), 639-60; and Fox, *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
23. See Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 57-64.
24. Ibid., 81-85. Also see Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 2-7. Curtis offers an excellent discussion on the generational aspects of the social gospel movement.
25. Quoted in Handy, *A Christian America*, 91.
26. Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 26-27.
27. Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Baker and Taylor Co. for the American Home Missionary Society, 1885); Dorothea R. Muller, "Josiah Strong and American Nationalism: A Reevaluation," *Journal of American History* 53 (December 1966): 487-503.
28. See Klotter, "The Black South and White Appalachia," 840. Also see S. Marc Sherrod's interesting discussion of this racialized discourse in Sherrod, "The Southern Mountaineer, Presbyterian Home Missions, and a Synod for Appalachia," *American Presbyterians: The Journal of Presbyterian History* 71 (Spring 1993): 31-40.
29. Samuel Tyndale Wilson, *The Southern Mountaineers* (New York: Literature Department, Presbyterian Home Missions, 1906), 158-59.
30. Edward O. Guerrant, *The Galax Gatherers: The Gospel Among the Highlanders* (Richmond, VA.: Onward Press, 1910), 102.
31. Guerrant, *The Soul Winner*, 30, 32.
32. Ibid., 98-99.
33. Ibid., 100-101.
34. See Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine*, 34-38.
35. McAllister and Guerrant, *Edward O. Guerrant*, 141; Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine*, 37-38.
36. Guerrant, *The Galax Gatherers*, 39-40, 55, 77.
37. Ibid., 119-21.
38. McAllister and Guerrant, *Edward O. Guerrant*, 149-50
39. Ibid., 158-59.
40. Ibid., 185-86.
41. Sherrod, "The Southern Mountaineer, Presbyterian Home Missions, and a Synod for Appalachia," 32. The Synod of Appalachia was dissolved in 1971.
42. McAllister and Guerrant, *Edward O. Guerrant*, 215.