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Daniel Parker: Travel, Slavery, and Truth-seeking in 1845

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ABSTRACT

In 1845, at the age of sixty-four, Universalist preacher, educator, and abolitionist, Daniel Parker traveled by steamboat from Cincinnati down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans, returning a few weeks later. Over thirty-five years before, beginning in 1809, he had taken the same river route by flatboat, returning to Ohio by land over the Natchez Trace and through Kentucky, a journey that took four years (albeit with several diversions), and which he described, along with the rest of his life's story, in his autobiography of 1845. This paper will compare Parker's account of his second southern journey with his first, especially noting his conversations about slavery on his second journey, which he recorded in a travel journal (separate from his completed autobiography). This nineteenth-century memoir offers a contemporarily relevant example of one person's effort to find clarity in a nation increasingly divided by different versions of truth.

On May 10 of 1845, at the age of sixty-four, Daniel Parker began a journey by steamboat from Cincinnati down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans, returning twenty days later. Over thirty-five years before he had taken the same river route by flatboat, returning to Ohio by land over the Natchez Trace and through Kentucky, a journey that took four years (albeit with several diversions).

Daniel Parker took this second journey to New Orleans for many of the same reasons anyone would take a travel vacation, to see the sites, to meet people, and to have a little fun, such as staying in the Washington Hotel in New Orleans and taking a swim in Lake Pontchartrain. Always the itinerant minister, he found opportunities to preach to gatherings onboard the boat and on shore. In New Orleans, Parker accepted the offer of "a liberal minded minister by the name of Clap," to whom he was introduced by a friend from Cincinnati, to preach at his meeting house on Sunday evening.¹ He also, as he had done habitually all his life, observed

the world around him. In particular, he inquired into the practice of slavery, recording his observations in his journal.

Parker's travel journal of 1845 was a sequel of sorts to his autobiography, which he had recently written in sixteen octavo notebooks sewn together, and which presumably was sitting on a shelf in his home in Clermont County, Ohio, awaiting publication 175 years later. So, this paper today is sequel of sorts to the *Autobiography of Daniel Parker: Frontier Universalist*, edited by David Torbett, published by Ohio University Press in December of 2020.

Parker was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1781.² When he was seven years old, he moved with his family with the intention of settling on the land that his father, William Parker, had bought as a stockholder in the Ohio Company.³ The family halted in western Pennsylvania for several years, waiting out the Indian Wars on the old frontier, before settling at last on their land in Leading Creek in Meigs County, Ohio, in 1802.⁴

As a young man in 1803, Daniel and his brother John, who were both raised as Presbyterians, became enthusiastic converts and soon itinerant preachers of the Halcyon Church, led by the prophetic Abel Sarjent. The Parkers were drawn by the church's theology, especially its rejection of the idea of hell, its mystical interpretation of the Old Testament symbols Urim and Thummim, and its millenarian hope.⁵ In fact, their enthusiasm for the approaching millennium was such that in 1807, the two brothers, along with several other church members living at the time in Washington, Pennsylvania, took part in a severe fast, believing they needed to "go through great tribulation in order to be prepared for entering the kingdom." The fast ended with one member dying; with rumors, accusations, and public stigma falling on the band of "pilgrims" who participated; and with the Halcyon Church dividing (and declining). Abel Sarjent, who did not condone the fast, attacked the participants as schismatics.⁶

Seeking a new start after this crisis, Daniel Parker, who had moved back to southeast Ohio, accepted an offer in 1809 to travel with Alvan Bingham of Athens, selling a newly invented washing machine, which Parker, a carpenter and mechanic, would make to order. Together they traveled down the Mississippi by flatboat as far as New Orleans and north again by land as far as Tennessee, parting ways when Bingham got married in the winter of 1810. Daniel Parker continued into Kentucky in 1811 and remained in that state, seeking to recoup his investment in the washing machine business, until he returned to his family home in Ohio in December of 1813. While he found scant financial success on his travels, he gained life-changing experience, including falling in love with

and being rejected by the daughter of a Kentucky planter. Some of these experiences he recorded in a journal at the time and later copied into his autobiography of 1845. Most of the experiences he recorded in his 1845 autobiography, however, were, as he states in his introductory sentence, from memory.⁷

Parker was particularly affected by exposure to slavery. Having “seen little of slavery before,” he witnessed scenes that convinced him of its evils, including a slave auction, overwork, abuse, and in the most extreme instance, murder. A slave dealer knocked a man off a boat with a club in Natchez, Mississippi. Parker and his associates discovered the man’s body “floating about in a basin near the boat with his skull broken and much swelled.” They “went into town to find a coroner, but the people laughed at us, so we returned and buried him in the sand.”⁸

Ironically, during this same journey, Daniel Parker also found himself entangled in the institution of slavery. Wishing to be helpful to two men who had shown him hospitality in Kentucky, Parker offered to “take care of the families”⁹ while they volunteered their services against the British and their Native American allies in the War of 1812. This turned out to mean that Parker had volunteered to be a slave overseer for seven weeks. That he found himself in this situation can be blamed partly on circumstances. Less excusable are Parker’s complaints in his journal of 1812 about having to manage a “set of lazy negroes” who were also “lying and dishonest.”¹⁰ It was not clear to me as editor of his autobiography that Parker ever understood, even years later, how much this language, expressed during an emotional low point in his journey, contradicted his general antislavery and anti-racist position.¹¹ Nevertheless, the experience convinced him even more of the alienating and demoralizing aspects of slavery for all people involved, both enslaved and enslavers.

At the outset of his second southward journey in 1845, Daniel Parker was no longer the traumatized former preacher of a failed apocalyptic religious movement (about to become a failed traveling washing machine salesman) that he was in 1809. He had developed his theology, going beyond the annihilationism of the Halcyon Church to fully embrace the idea of universal salvation. He had gained some notoriety as a freelance Universalist preacher in the Ohio Valley, and now had his own church in Cincinnati.¹² He was now married to Priscilla Mulloy Ring and was the father of eight children. He lived with his family on a spacious homestead on the Ohio River that they had named Mount Hygiene (because it was a good and healthy place to be). He with his wife and son James K. Parker were co-founders of Clermont Academy, the first private,

coeducational, racially integrated, secondary school in Ohio.¹³ And he was a convinced and outspoken abolitionist.

As it was for many others, Parker's first antislavery activism took the form of speaking on behalf the American Colonization Society for two years in the early 1830s.¹⁴ But when he became convinced that the colonization scheme was not intended to end slavery but rather to rid the country of free Blacks, he then joined the ranks of what was then a new, more radical brand of antislavery activist, the abolitionists, who rejected the colonization solution

and advocated immediate emancipation, on the soil, as the natural and inalienable right of the slaves; urged the doctrine of human rights contained in our Declaration of Independence and the claims of the gospel upon all mankind, irrespective of color or condition; depicted in glowing language the horrors of slavery with a zeal corresponding to the magnitude and importance of the subject; repudiated worldly expediency, and insisted on the duty of adhering to correct principle, whatever might be the consequences.¹⁵

He lectured for the Clermont County Antislavery Society, subscribed and acted as an agent for James G. Birney's *Philanthropist*, and personally argued with any defender of slavery who cared to engage him on either side of the Ohio. The last chapter of his autobiography consists mostly of antislavery arguments.

On his second journey south, Parker, always a seeker of truth, again inquired into the practice of slavery. Convinced abolitionist though he had become, he was still trying to see if there was any truth to the proslavery argument that slavery was a misunderstood, benign institution. Or at least he was seeking to make his own antislavery arguments more convincing.

Parker explored a sugar plantation near Donaldsonville, Louisiana, at a stop on the trip downriver. He befriended an enslaved man and engaged him in a long conversation about his work and life and treatment. The man, who was originally from Kentucky and was brought to New Orleans as a small child, also happened to be a Baptist preacher. He explained that slaves worked fourteen-hour days, that they were rarely given more to eat than cornmeal (though his own master allowed him meat), and that slaves got whipped for holding their own religious meetings without White supervision. Parker asked him if enslaved people "were generally satisfied and would prefer remaining slaves rather than being free," adding "that the proslavery men said so." The man quickly disabused Parker of the notion, saying that "who ever said so were fools."

Parker trusted the testimony of his fellow minister of the gospel, saying “the expression of his voice and countenance indicated that he was a truth-telling Christian.” After touring the slave’s quarters and some more conversation, Parker left the man “with some good advice and an affectionate shake of the hand, expressing the hope with tears in my eyes, that if we never met again in this world that we might in a better.”¹⁶ Parker’s conversation with the enslaved man, which he records in detail, taking seriously his account of the man’s own experience, provides a nice contrast to his dismissive attitude toward the people who worked for him during his brief stint as a slave overseer in Kentucky some thirty-five years before.

However, Parker was confused by other reports, including some from acquaintances he trusted, that slaves were not always so badly mistreated. On the return trip he spoke with a Mr. William Hyatt, “an old acquaintance” on the steamboat, presumably a merchant from Cincinnati who did business in the South.¹⁷ Parker “enquired of him into the general treatment of slaves and told him what the black preacher had said in regard to their food.” Hyatt “denied its truth and said he had been for eight years trading along the whole coast” and “had sold large amounts of provisions and knew that the slaves generally had meat.”¹⁸

Daniel Parker expressed frustration at his limited access to information, exacerbated by the fact that “almost every white person I converse with in this country is either an advocate or an apologist for the system, which seems to have thrown over the whole face of society an impenetrable shield, through which the arrows of truth cannot easily penetrate.”¹⁹ To add to Parker’s confusion, enslaved people “for the most part” lacked knowledge of slave treatment in places beyond “their own immediate surroundings.” In any case, they were, with a noted exception, “nearly inaccessible to strangers” such as the inquisitive Daniel Parker.²⁰ Parker concluded that whatever “palliation” more humane slaveholders might offer, it remained “a cruel system which requires hearty and strong laborers to work all their lives for coarse victuals and clothes without the stimulus of wages, the advantages of education, or the right of legal marriage.”²¹

What then is to be learned from Daniel Parker’s account of his second journey to New Orleans and back to Ohio? One point is that Daniel Parker is a keen observer, both of his own thoughts and feelings and of the world around him. Daniel Parker really was a nosy parker, which makes his writing a valuable historical primary source. A welcome aspect of Parker’s writing, both in his autobiography and in his later steamboat travel journal, is that he refrained from tailoring his observations to fit a chosen master narrative. This distinguishes him from other memoirists of

his time, who tended not to let too much truth get in the way of a good story, such as the Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright. His bestselling autobiography was set around the same time and in the same places as Parker's, even dealing with some of the same people, but was written in such a way that almost every scene is an affirmation of rightness of Peter Cartwright.²² Parker, on the other hand, unselfconsciously records the strange, tragic, and embarrassing things that do not serve any of his rhetorical purposes. For example, the last part of his journal of 1845, covering his return trip, deals mostly with an infant, born and deceased on board the steamboat, whose alcoholic mother managed to persuade Parker, a teetotaler and temperance advocate, to beg some wine for her from the boat's barkeepers. The details that Parker recorded of the episode give enough insights and raise enough questions to make it the subject of a paper in itself.

Secondly, Parker gives evidence for how much more over these decades the Mississippi Valley had evolved from a territory with slavery to a slave society in which the institution shaped every aspect of life.²³ It was evident in almost every conversation that Parker recorded. It was evident in the changes of the very landscape that Parker described, where the seemingly endless cane brakes and strands of rushes that had lined the Mississippi's banks in 1809 had been cleared and replaced by large cotton plantations like that of John L. Martin, several miles south of the confluence of the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers.²⁴ Martin himself lived in Louisville, Kentucky, "but keeps an overseer on his cotton farm," which Parker acknowledged was "a splendid place" but one that could "hardly be brought to such perfection in a slave region upon the principle of 'doing unto others as we would have them do unto us.'"²⁵

This finally brings us to the last lesson to be learned from Parker's journal. Parker learned, not surprisingly, that he could not gain a comprehensive and objective understanding of Southern slavery in 1845 from a twenty-day tour, not if he was also going to take time to have a swim in Lake Pontchartrain. Ultimately, Parker had to make his moral judgments based on the principles that he had embraced over the years, values that allowed him to transcend the confusion of the gaslighting arguments and rhetoric of a proslavery society in 1845, and that allowed him at other times in his life to transcend his own limitations and prejudices. Ultimately, he had to rely on the Golden Rule, that one should treat others the way that one would like to be treated. Parker, during his brief journey, could not find evidence that American slavery was always and everywhere as bad as its unequal power structure allowed it to be (though history would prove that often it was).²⁶ But Parker did find evidence through a direct conversation that enslaved people desired to

be free, just like other people. And he knew that a system that required Black people “to toil for the luxurious support of others on whom the Creator has seen fit to bestow a fair complexion [sic] and different features”²⁷ could never be squared with the principle of reciprocity. To humbly trust the limited truth that one does have, and to rely on true principles, especially on the Golden Rule: this may be the best guidance that can be given in times of doubt, when faced by weighty moral decisions, when vision is clouded and facts are obscured by gaslighting and self-serving ideologies, whether those times of doubt are during Parker’s day or in our own.

¹ Daniel Parker, *Diary of a River Trip to New Orleans, 1845*, typed copy by Bertha C. Hardman, ca. 1947, Daniel Parker Papers, Manuscript Collections, Ohio History Connection, Columbus, part 2, 5. “Clap” was most likely Theodore Clapp (1792–1866), a celebrated Presbyterian turned Unitarian preacher, whose sermons at the First Congregational Unitarian Society of New Orleans drew thousands every Sunday with visitors from all across the United States and Europe (John Buescher, “Theodore Clapp,” *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, Nov. 11, 2000, rev. June 13, 2002, <https://uudb.org/articles/theodoreclapp.html>).

² Daniel Parker’s life is summarized in the introduction to *The Autobiography of Daniel Parker, Frontier Universalist*, ed. David Torbett (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020), xv–xlili. The introduction and notes also provide context for Parker’s story in reference to the old western territories, American religion, slavery and antislavery, and other aspects of American history. The book also has an extensive bibliography.

³ The history of the Ohio Company and the “first settlement” (actually the first government-sanctioned White settlement) of the Old Northwest Territory on the confluence of the Muskingum and Ohio Rivers can be found in Andrew R. L. Cayton, *Ohio: The History of a People* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 40–43; Cayton and Paula R. Riggs, *City into Town: The City of Marietta, Ohio, 1788–1988* (Marietta, OH: Marietta College, Dawes Memorial Library, 1991), 13–93; and Kevin F. Kern and Gregory S. Wilson, *Ohio: A History of the Buckeye State* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 100–17. It is also the subject of much of David McCullough’s *The Pioneers: A Heroic Story of the Settlers Who Brought the American Ideal West* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019).

⁴ The Parkers would be one of many families that poured into Ohio after the Treaty of Greenville brought a hiatus in the military conflict between Native Americans and the US government. See Kern and Wilson, 98, and Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745–1815* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 114.

⁵ Daniel Parker’s autobiography gives insight into the diverse range of religious groups in the old western territories in the early nineteenth century, but Parker’s single “most valuable contribution to the historical record” may be his unique insider’s account of the mysterious Halcyon Church and its leader Abel Sarjent. While not widely remembered today, the Halcyon Church was a significant religious movement in the Ohio Valley in its time, boasting at its height some twenty congregations with 440 regular members and 2200 other associates. See David Torbett, introduction to *Autobiography of Daniel Parker*, xxiii–xix. The popularity of the movement is evident even in the reports of its opponents, such as Methodist evangelist Peter Cartwright, who admits of Abel Sarjent, “his

followers were numerous in town and country. The Presbyterian and Congregational ministers were afraid of him.” See *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher*, ed. W. P. Strickland (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1856), 99.

⁶ Daniel Parker, *The Autobiography of Daniel Parker*, 35–40. The member who died was Amos Parkhurst. Apparently, spurious rumors about the death of Parkhurst found their way (with confused names and details) into memoirs and local histories published in decades later in the nineteenth century. See James B. Finley, *Autobiography of Rev. James B. Finley*, ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati: Printed at Methodist Book Concern for the author, 1854), 258; Samuel Hildreth, “Biographical Sketches of the Early Physicians of Marietta, Ohio,” *New England Historical & Genealogical Register* 3 (1849): 53–54; C. E. Dickinson, *A Century of Church Life: A History of the First Congregational Church of Marietta, Ohio* (Marietta, OH: E. R. Alderman and Sons: 1896), 31; and Alfred Creigh, *History of Washington County from Its First Settlement to the Present Time* (Harrisburg, PA: B. Singerly, Printer, 1870), 211–13. These rumors were then repeated in part by historians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. See Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 98; and David S. Reynolds, *Waking Giant: America in the Age of Jackson* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2008), 145. The publication of Daniel Parker’s firsthand account reveals the complicated truth behind a repeated anecdote illustrating supposed religious eccentricities on the old frontier. For an analysis of this event and its conflicting reports, see Torbett’s introduction and endnotes to Daniel Parker’s *Autobiography*, xxix, 177–79 (notes 54–66).

⁷ Parker, *Autobiography*, 1.

⁸ Parker, *Autobiography*, 50. Natchez, where Parker witnessed this murder, was an infamous terminal of the what was then a new domestic slave trade, labeled the “second Middle Passage” by historian Ira Berlin. From 1800 to 1860 over a million Black people were transported from the eastern states to the southern interior. See *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Viking, 2010), 99–103.

⁹ Parker, *Autobiography*, 73.

¹⁰ Parker, *Autobiography*, 73, 75.

¹¹ The punctuation of the manuscript autobiography of 1845 is unclear, but it appears that Parker’s racist language (“set of lazy negroes,” etc.) was from a journal he wrote in 1812 and had copied, the original of which has been lost. It is not the kind of language he used as a mature abolitionist in 1845. On the other hand, Parker the autobiographer, who was introspective and self-critical in other ways, did not explicitly comment on or criticize the racial language he used as a younger man. See Torbett, introduction and endnotes to *Autobiography*, xxxvi, 194n53.

¹² Parker also had written a book explaining his theology, his one book published in his lifetime: *Familiar Letters to a Brother in Two Series: On the Final Restoration of All Mankind to Holiness and Happiness; Through a Righteous Judgment, and an Equitable Retribution* (Cincinnati: C. W. Thorp, 1844). Daniel Parker is mentioned briefly in a few histories of American Universalism, including Richard Eddy’s *Universalism in America, Volume 2: 1801–1886* (Boston, 1886), saying he “contributed no small amount of influence in spreading the knowledge and acceptance of Universalist views” (168).

¹³ Torbett, introduction to *Autobiography*, xxxvii. Clermont Academy was founded after Oberlin College began enrolling Black and White and male and female students together at the university level (Kern and Wilson, 148), but there is not a known precedent for a racially integrated, private, coeducational secondary school in Ohio. Teaching Black and White students together in state

supported public schools was actually against Ohio law at that time (Kern and Wilson, 151).

¹⁴ For a history of the African colonization project, see P. J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816–1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), especially 59–68. For an explanation of the moderate, gradualist “emancipationist” antislavery position which often incorporated support for African colonization, see Torbett, *Theology and Slavery: Charles Hodge and Horace Bushnell* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), 42–47. For the African colonization enterprise and its ambivalent role in slavery debates in the Ohio Valley, see Matthew Salafia, *Slavery’s Borderland: Freedom and Bondage along the Ohio River* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 133–35; and James A. Ramage and Andrea S. Watkins, *Kentucky Rising: Democracy, Slavery, and Culture from the Early Republic to the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 37–40.

¹⁵ Parker, *Autobiography*, 124. For an outline of the more radical abolitionist antislavery position, including its rejection of African colonization, see Torbett, *Theology and Slavery*, 47–50. For a thorough recent history of abolitionism, emphasizing the racial and gender diversity of the movement, see Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016). See also Louis Filler, *The Crusade against Slavery, 1830–1860* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 48–81. For abolitionism in the Ohio Valley, see Salafia, especially 195–201; and Ann Hagedorn, *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

¹⁶ Parker, *Diary of a River Trip*, part 2, 1–2.

¹⁷ Matthew Salafia argues that the economic, cultural, and family connections across the Ohio River prevented the majority of those in the “borderlands” who lived north of the river, presumably like William Hyatt, from taking a strong abolitionist stand against slavery (1–8).

¹⁸ Parker, *Diary of a River Trip*, part 3, 2.

¹⁹ Parker, *Diary of a River Trip*, part 2, 5. He makes a similar statement in part 3, 2.

²⁰ Parker, *Diary of a River Trip*, part 3, 3.

²¹ Parker, *Diary of a River Trip*, part 3, 3.

²² For example, see Cartwright’s account in his biography of Daniel Parker’s mentor, Abel Sarjent (99–101).

²³ For the evolution of American slaveholding territories from “societies with slaves to slave societies,” see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 7. While Berlin’s chapter on the lower Mississippi Valley covers the time just before Parker’s first journey (325–57), Parker’s two travel logs prove Berlin’s claim that this process continued after “the first decades of the nineteenth century, when this book concludes” (13).

²⁴ For more on the environmental changes brought on by the cotton boom in the nineteenth-century, see Donald E. Davis et al., *Southern United States: An Environmental History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 68–70, 127.

²⁵ Parker, *Diary of a River Trip*, part 1, 3–4.

²⁶ Already in Parker’s lifetime, slave narratives published in the United States evidenced the extremes of slavery’s cruelty, one example being Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*, published in 1853 (Penguin Classics Edition, with introduction by Ira Berlin, New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 23–26, 108–119.

²⁷ Parker, *Diary of a River Trip*, part 1, 3.