

Frontier Religions

The Expansion of Western Frontier Religions in Nineteenth-Century America

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Frontier Religions: Migratory Religion on the Oregon Trail

The mythology of the American Western frontier enticed more than 500,000 Oregon Trail emigrants between 1840 and 1870.¹ Those who braved the trail were named “the overlanders.” Oregon Trail emigrants were chasing dreams of wealth, prosperity, and freedom.² United States westward expansion sparked a political ideology that popularized the idea of “manifest destiny,” or the belief that Americans were God’s chosen people to expand American national boundaries while occupying the land from “coast to coast.”³ This Christian belief foundation capitalized on the religious mobilization in the United States from 1776 to 1850. While some religions thrived in this democratized environment of religious fervor and increased affiliation, other sects stagnated and struggled to remain competitive in frontier America. This article will visualize and demonstrate the migratory pattern of religious affiliation along the Oregon trail in snapshots based on the United States Census reports for 1850, 1860, and 1870.

Methodology and Sources

Starting in 1790, the United States Census Bureau performs a decennial count of the United States population. Up until the early twentieth century, the Census process included an accounting of the number and types of religious bodies within the United States. Analysis is based on data from the U.S. Census reports on religious congregational bodies for the years 1850, 1860, and 1870 while applying shape data from the National Historic Geographic Information System. It is important to note that this census data does not show the numbers of people affiliated with each congregation but demonstrates the numbers of a sect’s congregation in geographic areas, specifically state and county jurisdictions.

The Census Bureau does offer numbers associated with a congregation’s “seating count” as an insight to probable congregational sizes. However, this analysis does not utilize the “seating count” data as it does not provide an accurate depiction of membership, because the Census Bureau counted the maximum seating capacity of a church building and not necessarily the number of people affiliated with a congregation.⁴ The purpose of this study is to observe the concentration of specific religious groups on the United States frontier in the mid-nineteenth century.

For clarity, major sects like the Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, and Congregationalist religions were selected to demonstrate geographic concentrations of congregations on the frontier, as well as demonstrate regional and national religious affiliation trends. For example, while the Congregationalist sect is prominent in the upper northeast region of the United States, it is not prevalent in the frontier of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Data for the Congregationalist faith is utilized to demonstrate how some religions embraced the democratized nature of religious affiliation while other sects struggled to accommodate and remained isolated in traditional areas. In contrast, the Methodist religion grows exponentially on the Western frontier but not necessarily in the northeast from the period of 1850 to 1870.

For the county level analysis, states and counties impacted by the Oregon Trail were utilized to specify a geographic location for frontier emigration patterns. This analysis does not discount the impact of other overland trails during this time period but seeks to isolate a snapshot into emigration religious concentrations in 1850 to 1870 America.

Mobilization

A record number of overlanders used the Oregon trail in 1850 as part of a massive westward migration.⁵ Seventy-five percent of the overlanders came from Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Ohio, while the rest originated from border states like Kentucky, Tennessee and Illinois.⁶ Westward expansion spurred dreams of freedom and autonomy. This is shown by the fact that sixty percent of emigrants that used the Oregon Trail were farmers seeking land ownership while others emigrants were artisans like carpenters, blacksmith, teachers, doctors, and itinerant preachers.⁷ Americans understood that land ownership was equivalent to wealth, civic power and independence, and emigration was a pathway to achieve the sought after autonomy.⁸

People's experiences on the Oregon Trail varied, and gender particularly informed a person's emigration reality. John Mack Faragher asserts that, for men, the trip was universally a test of physical strength while for women the trip tested their inner strength because of the rupture from social networks and established communities.⁹ This break from traditional social constructs caused many overlanders to seek spiritual fulfillment in their new homelands. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark's compelling analyses of overlanders' search for spiritual fulfillment demonstrates the change in American religious economy in the mid-nineteenth century. An overall decline in conservative religions may be attributed to the diversification in religious choices, inability of some sects to move westward, and the democratization of laity and congregations.¹⁰

From 1760 to 1850, some religious sects thrived in a revived religious marketplace. A democratized access and approach to religion caused conventionally dignified and educated clergy to "[disdain] the vigorous marketing techniques" used by new religions.¹¹ More traditional religions distanced themselves from common consumers, and in turn, many non-elite religious seekers distanced themselves from traditional, hierarchical religions. The new religious affiliation opportunities gave people the option of selecting a congregation that best suited an individual's needs. "If the high church ways of Episcopalianism did not suit, perhaps the emotionalism of a Methodist revival would fill the bill."¹²

Hierarchical, traditional religions like Congregationalism struggled to adapt to the new competitive nature of the religious economy and the changes in populous demands for religious affiliation. For many overlanders, the frontier symbolized an "escape from the burdens of a restrictive social order: unstructured by family, church, law, and school, 'the territories' represented a flight from civilization."¹³ The Methodist and Baptist congregations thrived in the religious atmosphere of loose structure in the American territories while traditional colonial religious mainstays, like the Congregationalists, remained mainly in the highly populated, "civilized" Atlantic seaboard.

By 1850, Methodists and Baptists were the predominant religions in the Western frontier, while Protestant bodies continued their overall eighteenth and nineteenth century declination.¹⁴ This pattern of religious influence is demonstrated in Figure 1.

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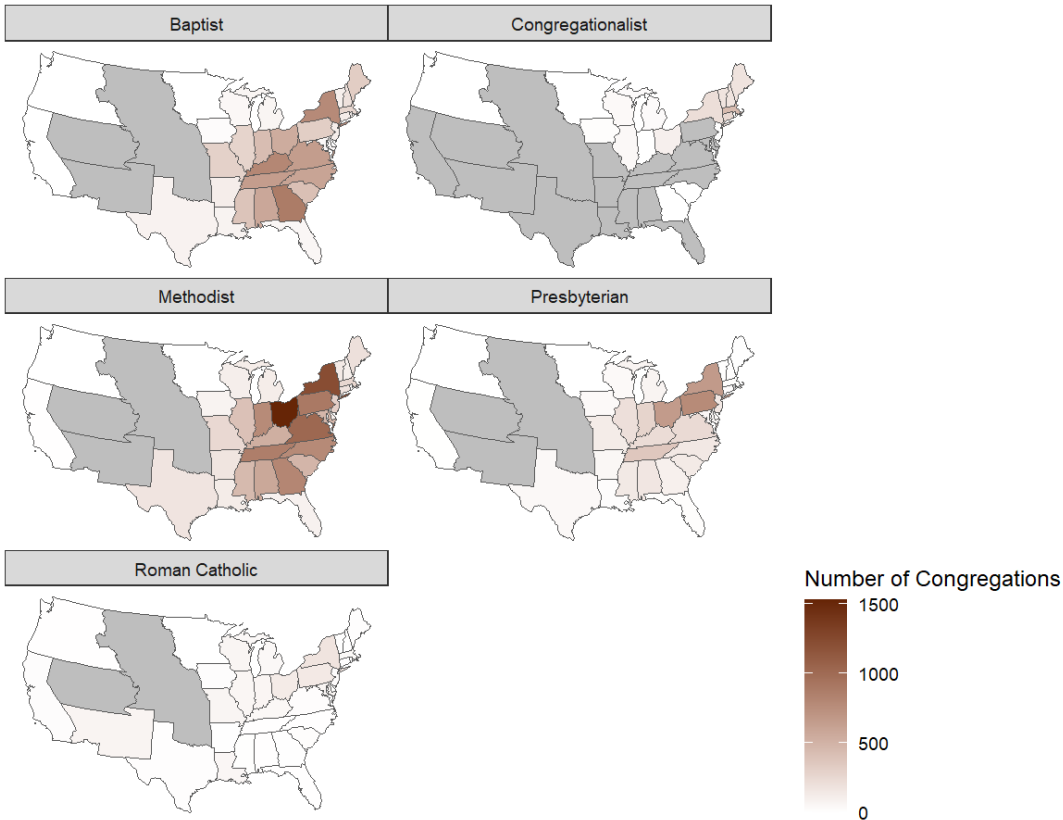
Figure 1: Prominent American Religions in 1850

Figure 1 is an 1850 denominational map demonstrating the Western frontier concentration of the Baptist and Methodist faiths, while Presbyterian and Congregationalist congregations are concentrated in the Northeastern United States. The Roman Catholic faith is not as prominent but spread evenly throughout the central and Northeastern United States.

Figure 2 and 3 demonstrate the increased concentration of Congregationalist and Presbyterian congregations in the Mid-Atlantic and Southern United States, while their concentration in the Western frontier was very minimal from 1860 to 1870. As the population moved West, Congregational organizations struggled to adapt to the demands of the new geographic expansion and remained confined and concentrated in New England.

In addition to the struggle of meeting the demands of a moving population, Congregational churches were traditionally organized and supported by local taxation and led by an educated clergy. The formally educated ministry, who depended on local financial support, were unwilling, and many times unable, to emigrate to isolated townships, because rural population centers could not financially support a paid clergy.¹⁵ For those overlanders seeking a Congregationalist experience, Presbyterians met the various religious demands and replaced some of the demand for Congregationalism on the frontier. However, for the most part, Congregationalist ideology was less attractive to frontier populations compared to the religious experience offered by the Methodist or Baptist faiths.¹⁶

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Figure 2: Prominent American Religions in 1860

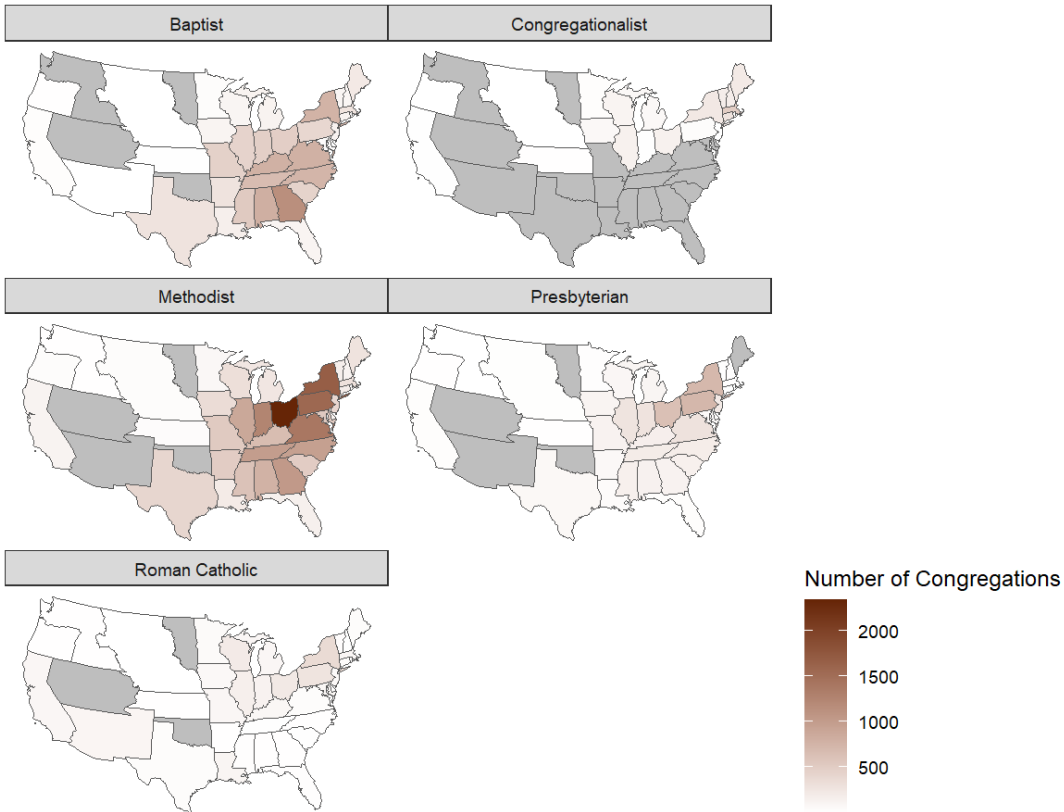


Figure 2 demonstrates the trend of increase and stagnation of specific religions in 1860 United States.

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Figure 3: Prominent American Religions in 1870

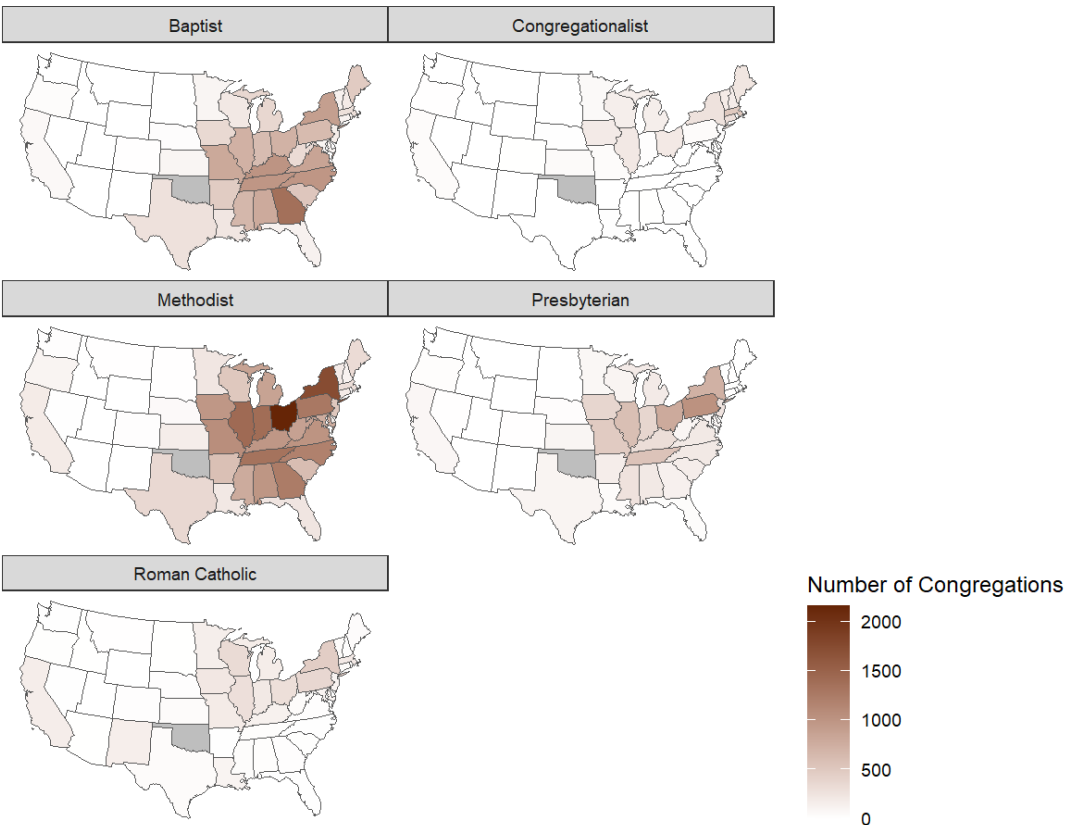


Figure 3 continues the trend from Figure 2 showing the greater increase of some faiths, specifically the Methodist and Baptists sects.

The trend also demonstrates the isolated status of the Congregational faith and slow growth of the Presbyterian faith in 1870 United States.

While the formally educated, financially incentivized clergy remained in established communities in the Northeast, Methodists achieved more conversions by providing a laity, such as local, circuit-riding amateur preachers, who the population were more likely to connect to emotionally and intellectually. Both the Methodist and Baptist organizations were structured with their ministerial leaders originating from "common folk" and were, usually, uneducated, unpolished and spoke from the heart.¹⁷ Because Baptist and Methodist preachers were literally from the body of the "people," they expressed themselves in relatable vernacular and had greater success reaching congregants through heartfelt preaching.¹⁸ This pattern of engaging layman preachers differed from traditional, formally educated clergy in the Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian sects. Overlanders identified with the Baptist and Methodist uneducated clergy and viewed educated ministers as unrelatable "snobs." One frontiersman described the difference between Presbyterians and Methodists as "'They were the aristocracy, and we the poor people.'"¹⁹

Democratically based itinerant preachers served congregations on the road and did most of the "preaching, baptizing, marrying and burying."²⁰ This pattern of flexible congregational leadership established the opportunity for "centralized direction, and local control" throughout the frontier states.²¹ This trend of increased affiliation in democratically based religions is shown in Figures 4. This map demonstrates the Methodist congregational concentration in Oregon Trail states in 1850, and Figure 5, shows the dramatic increase of concentration and geographic spread of Methodist congregations in 1870.

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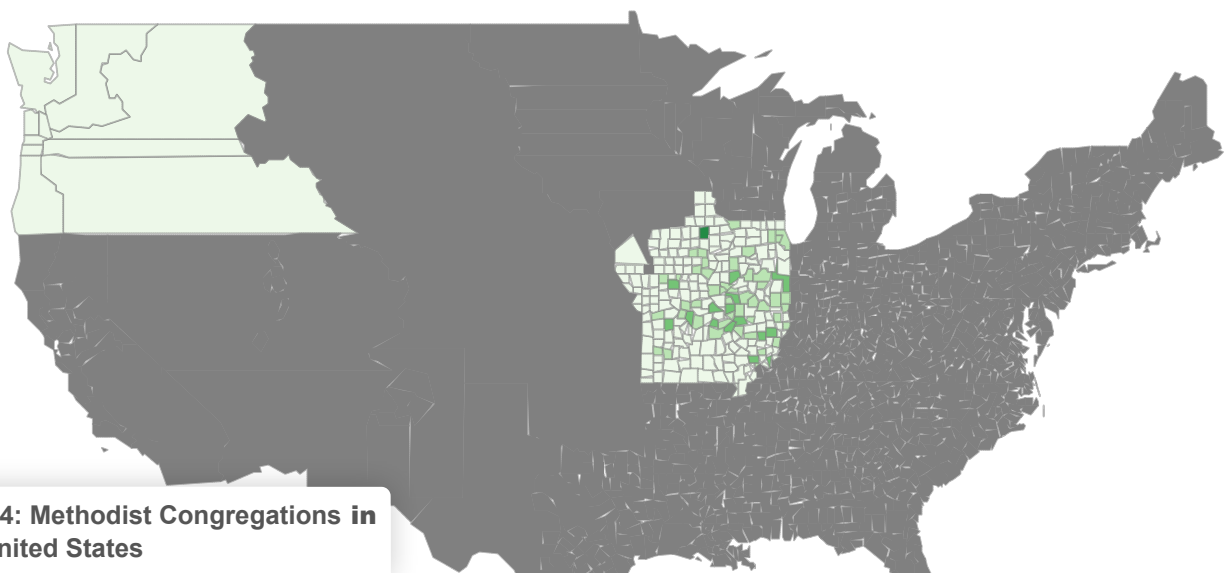


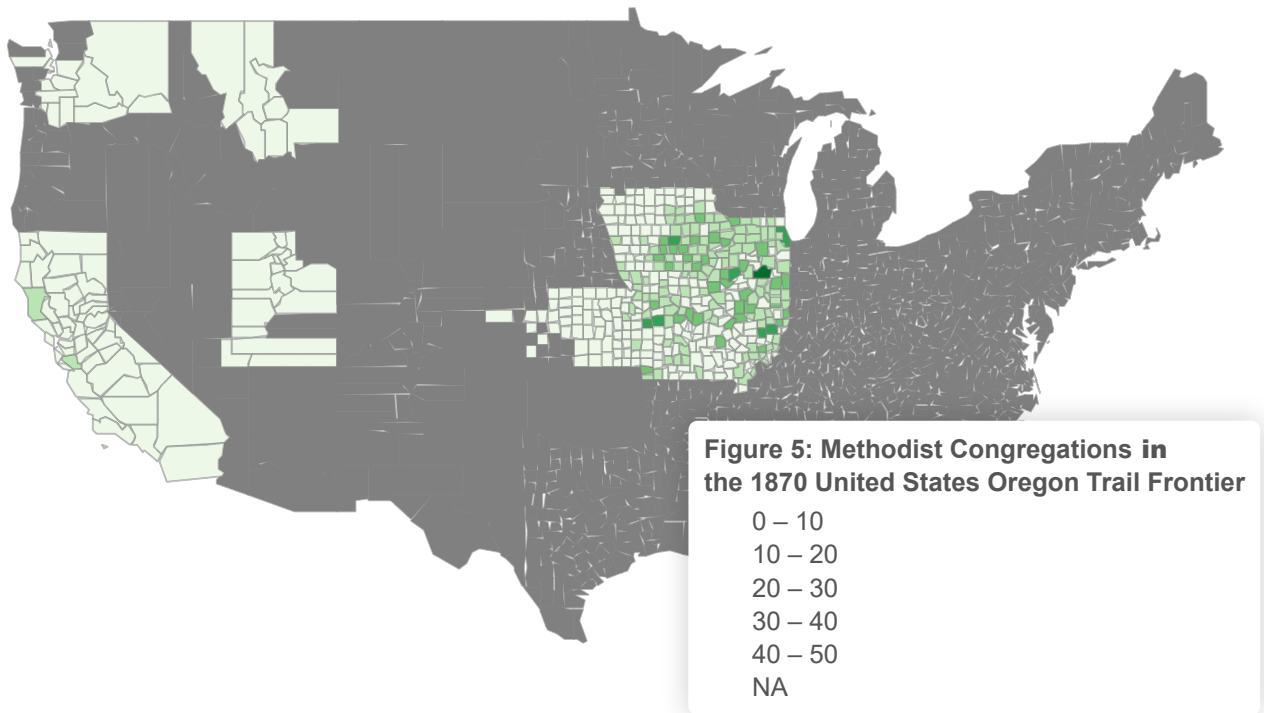
Figure 4: Methodist Congregations in 1850 United States

- 0 – 5
- 5 – 10
- 10 – 15
- 15 – 20
- NA

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Figure 4 isolates states where the Oregon Trail passed through. The concentration of Methodist congregations is evident in Eastern Missouri and Western Illinois.

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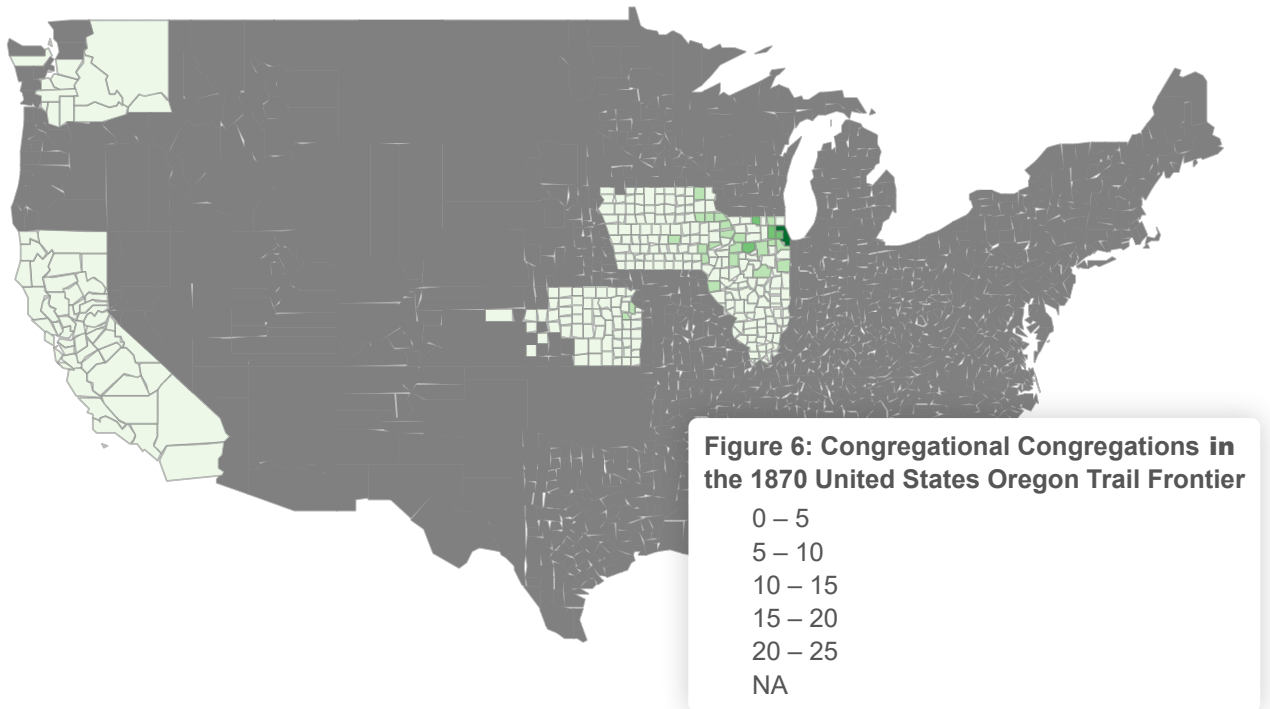
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Figure 5 continues the trend analysis from Figure 4. The growth and concentration of Methodist congregations increases in Western frontier states.

For comparison, Figure 6 demonstrates the slight growth in Congregational congregations on the Western frontier along the Oregon Trail. While the Methodist and Baptist congregations had proliferated Missouri, Illinois, California and the Oregon Territory, the Congregational congregations remained mostly concentrated in the Northeastern United States with a few concentrations in the upper northeast corner of Illinois and very few identified west of central Iowa.

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Figure 6 demonstrates the slight expansion of Congregational congregations in the 1870 Western frontier.

While the Congregationalists had a gradual decline in affiliation during the mid-nineteenth century, a traditionally hierarchical religion did have a resurgence of affiliation by 1870. Nationally, from 1850 to 1870, Catholic congregations doubled in quantity every ten years, while Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist congregations increased at a consistent rate. The accelerated rate of growth in Catholic congregations could be explained by the increased Catholic Irish immigration to the United States, and the sluggish growth of other denominations may be a nod to the human losses from the American Civil War.²² It is interesting to note that Finke and Stark describe the large increase in Catholic congregations by 1870, and while this is true nationally, an analysis of Oregon Trail states does not indicate a large increase in Catholic congregations. The concentration of Catholic congregations on the American frontier shows a much more gradual increase, regionally, over the course of twenty years.

Figure 7 compares the growth of four religions in the United States over the course of two decades, and affirms assertions by Finke and Stark regarding large growth patterns in Catholic congregations through 1870.

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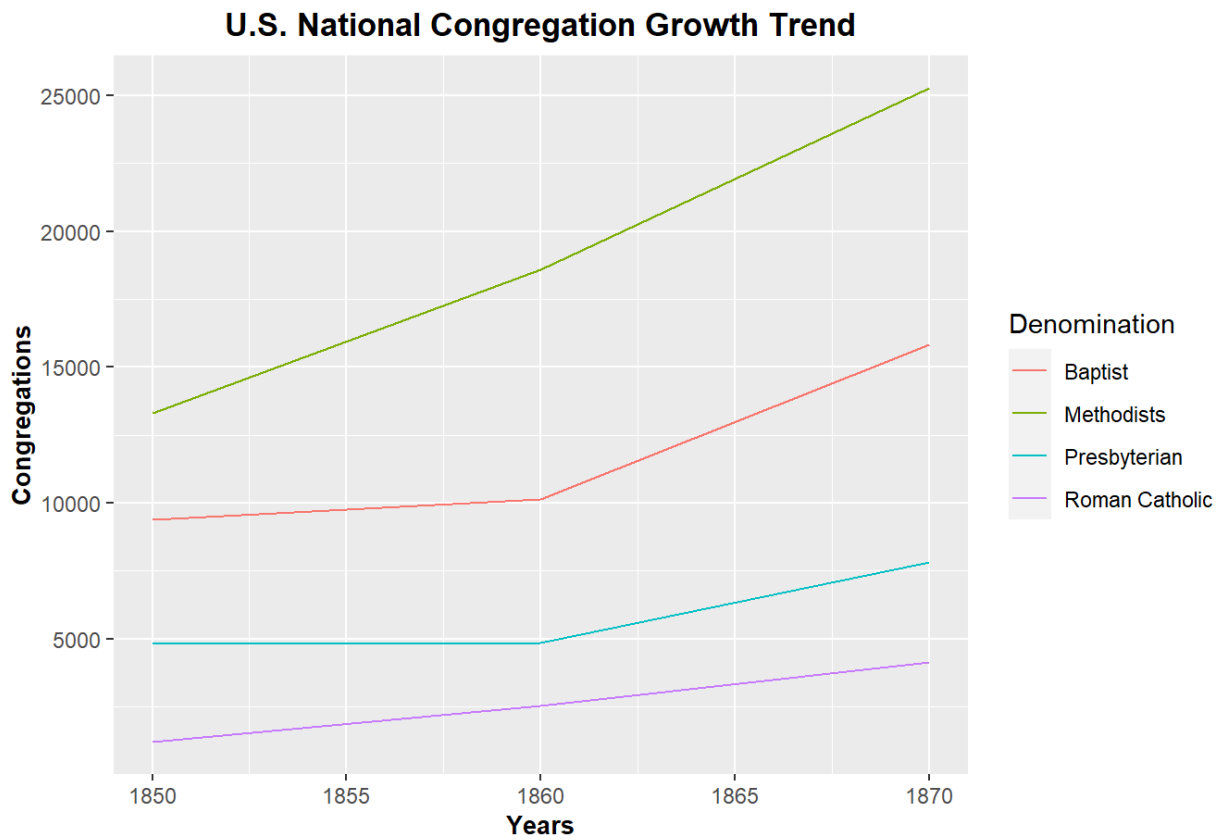


Figure 7: Compares Growth of Religious Congregations from 1850-1870 in United States

In frontier counties, Figure 8 demonstrates that Methodist congregations have an exponential growth trend over twenty years while Presbyterian and Baptist congregations show a steady growth trend from 1850 to 1870. While the national trend does display a steady concentration of Catholic congregations, frontier counties show a slight slowing in Catholic congregational growth trajectories starting in 1860.

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Oregon Trail Congregation Growth Trends

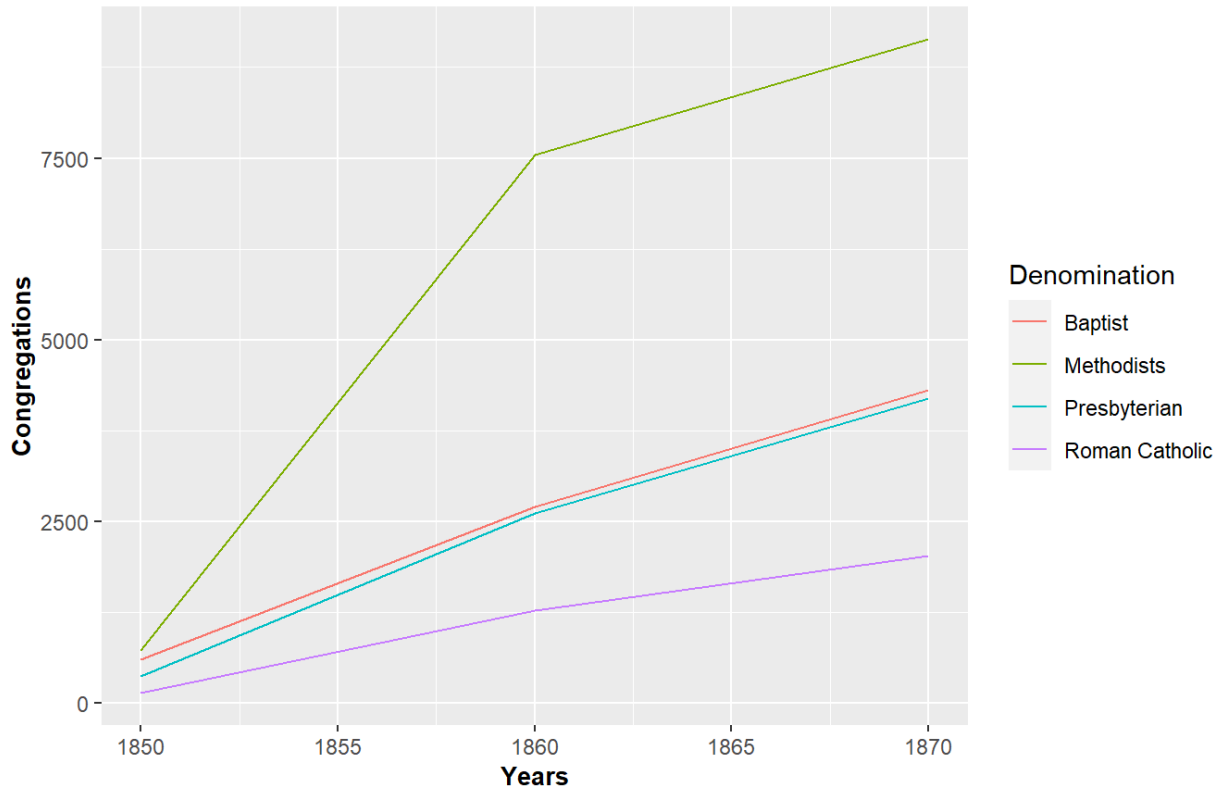
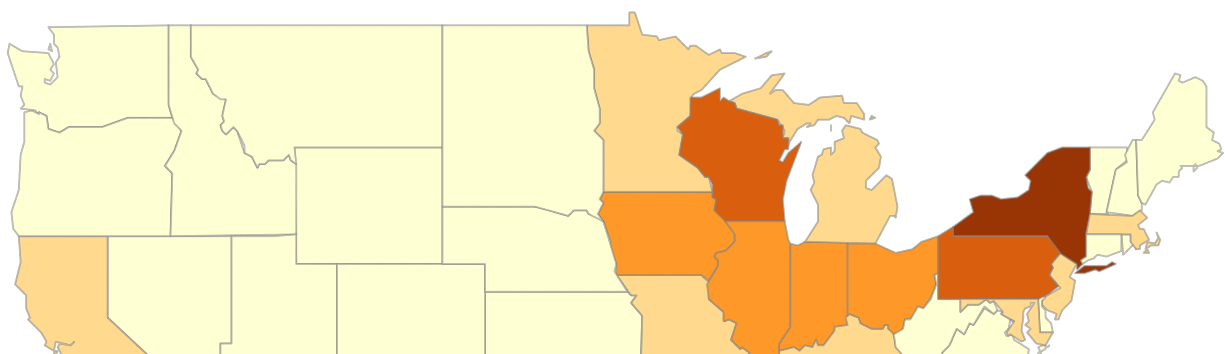
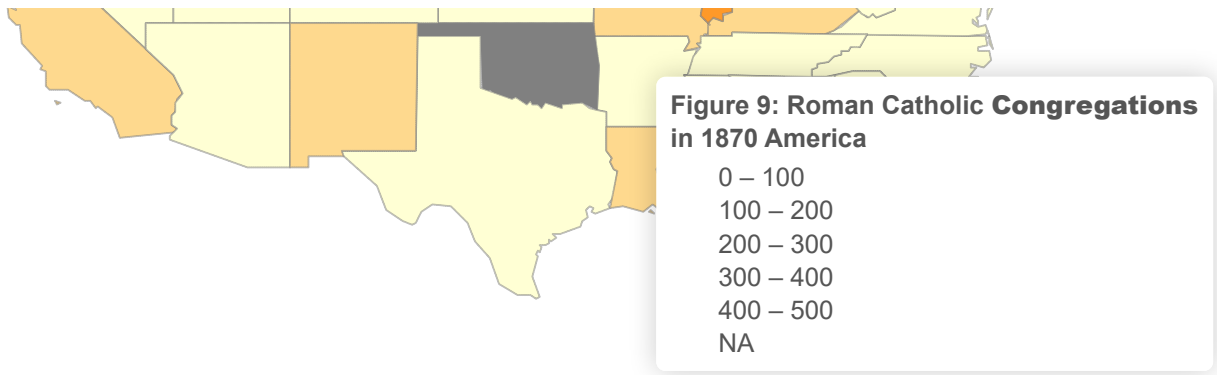


Figure 8: Religious Congregation Comparison in 1870 American Frontier States

For a further detailed comparison, Figure 9 is a national visualization of Catholic congregational concentrations. This absolutely affirms Starke and Finke’s assertions of strong national growth in Roman Catholic congregations but also demonstrates a strong Catholic concentration in the Northeastern United States and a moderate concentration in the Southwest.

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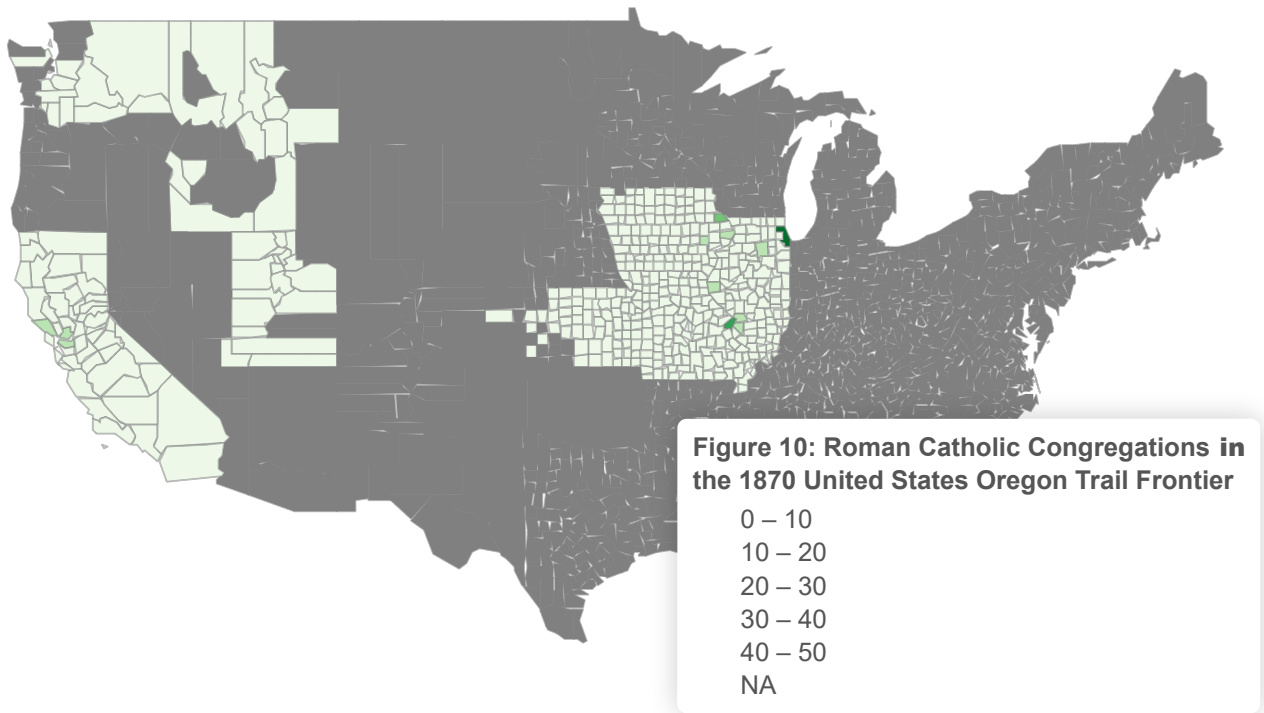


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Figure 9 demonstrates the strong concentration and national growth of Catholic congregations.

While Figure 9 demonstrates continual growth in national Catholic congregational concentration, figure 10 isolates the Oregon Trail states to gain a perspective of Catholic congregational concentration in the American Western frontier in 1870. It is interesting to note that national trends of robust Roman Catholic growth are not mirrored in the frontier states.

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Figure 10 demonstrates minimal concentrations of Roman Catholic congregations in frontier counties in 1870 United States.

While Roman Catholic congregational concentrations were intense in the Northeast and Southwest, by 1870, Roman Catholic congregations were not prevalent in the states impacted by Oregon Trail travelers. It is possible that Catholic

congregational concentration was greater in the Northeast because of immigration hubs in coastal cities and greater in southern California because of the close proximity to Spanish-influenced Catholic Mexico.

Conclusion

While Roman Catholic congregations grew quickly nationally from 1850 to 1870, this hierarchical religion was slower to grow in the American frontier as it appealed less to adventure seeking overlanders and more to new American immigrants who were already affiliated with Roman Catholicism. As Americans sought new adventure and opportunity in the United States Western frontier, overlanders traveling on the Oregon Trail sought new social networks and community. The settlement of new communities spurred a discovery in religious freedom that caused an explosion in specific sectors of the religious marketplace. The frontier population rejected traditional religious hierarchical constructs, so religious organizations and laity that could adapt and mobilize to match the increased democratic conviction, thrived and increased in concentration on the American frontier.

Mapping visualizations create an evocative portrait of religious affiliation in nineteenth-century America. Through further analysis on the impact of religious affiliation on the western frontier, much can be discovered by analyzing national trends with granular level data along frontier emigration routes in order to better understand emigration patterns, and the evolution of American religious belief and practices.

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U.S. Census Bureau. "Census of Religious Bodies 1870." International Historical Geographic Information System. <https://ihgis.ipums.org/>.

Footnotes

1. Jackie Gonzales.; Young, Morgen. "Overlanders in the Columbia River Gorge, 1840–1870: A Narrative History." National Park Service. September 24, 2020. 25. <https://shorturl.at/ilpQR>. Accessed 4/25/2023. [↗](#)
2. Angela Miller; Berlo Janet; Wolf, Bryan; Roberts, Jennifer. *American Encounters: Art, History and Cultural Identity*. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008). 211. [↗](#)
3. Jackie Gonzales. "Overlanders in the Columbia River Gorge." 26. [↗](#)
4. Roger Finke; Stark, Rodney. "Turning Pews into People: Estimating 19th Century Church Membership." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Vol. 25, No. 2. June 1986. 180, fn 1. See Finke and Starke's discussion on seating capacity and the inaccurate depiction of the total membership among of Shakers in 1860. [↗](#)
5. Will Bagley. *With Golden Visions Bright Before Them: Trails to the Mining West 1849-1852*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012). 299. [↗](#)
6. John Mack Faragher. *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). 16.; Jackie Gonzales. "Overlanders in the Columbia River Gorge." 29. [↗](#)
7. John Mack Faragher. *Women and Men on the Overland*. 16. [↗](#)
8. Colin Calloway. *The Indian World of George Washington: The First President, the First Americans, and the Birth of the Nation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). 37. [↗](#)
9. Ibid. 178.; Roger Finke. "Demographics of Religious Participation: An Ecological Approach, 1850-1980." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. March 1989. Vol. 28, No. 1. 47. [↗](#)
10. Ibid. 29. [↗](#)
11. Roger Finke; Stark, Rodney. "How the Upstart Sects Won America: 1776-1850." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. March 1989. Vol. 28, No. 1. 29. [↗](#)
12. Ibid. [↗](#)
13. Angela Mille. *American Encounters: Art, History and Cultural Identity*. 211. [↗](#)
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15. Alan Taylor. *Liberty Men and the Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1990). 131. [↗](#)
16. Roger Finke. "How the Upstart Sects." 33. [↗](#)
17. Ibid. 35. [↗](#)
18. Ibid. [↗](#)
19. Ibid. 37-38. [↗](#)
20. Ibid. 33. [↗](#)
21. Ibid. [↗](#)
22. Roger Finke; Stark, Rodney. "Turning Pews into People: Estimating 19th Century Church Membership." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Vol. 25, No. 2. June 1986. 186. [↗](#)