A. Religious Ferment

Some young ladies of his acquaintance came from one of those meetings to pass the night at his father's house. They were laboring under great nervous excitement, and, in the course of the evening, began to jerk most violently. The father, one of the most intelligent men in Kentucky, severely rebuked them, and told them bluntly that he would "have no such behavior as this in his house." The reproof was effectual, and the jerking spirit was exercised...

2. An Englishwoman Attends a Revival (1832)

Determined to expose the crude realities of American democracy to the British public, Frances Trollope could not pass up an opportunity to experience one of the frontier's celebrated camp meetings, which attracted a diverse mix of attendees, from devout evangelicals to curious spectators. Women and African Americans, both slave and free, were well represented at the gatherings, which promised salvation irrespective of race, gender, or social standing. To the uninitiated, like Trollope, the shrieks and howls that drifted from the revival tents seemed a perversion of the decorous services found in more traditional churches. What elements does Trollope find most distasteful? What do her reactions reveal about her own worldview?

We made the circuit of the tents, pausing where attention was particularly excited by sounds more vehement than ordinary. We contrived to look into many; all were strewed with straw, and the distorted figures that we saw kneeling, sitting, and lying amongst it, joined to the woful and convulsive cries, gave to each the air of a cell in Bedlam.

One tent was occupied exclusively by negroes. They were all full-dressed, and looked exactly as if they were performing a scene on the stage. One woman wore a dress of pink gauze trimmed with silver lace; another was dressed in pale yellow silk; one or two had splendid turbans; and all wore a profusion of ornaments. The men were in snow white pantaloons, with gay coloured linen jackets. One of these, a youth of coal-black comeliness, was preaching with the most violent gesticulations, frequently springing high from the ground, and clapping his hands over his head. Could our missionary societies have heard the tramp he uttered, by way of an address to the Deity, they might perhaps have doubted whether his conversion had much enlightened his mind.

At midnight a horn sounded through the camp, which, we were told, was to call the people from private to public worship; and we presently saw them flocking from all sides to the front of the preachers' stand. . . There were about two thousand persons assembled.

A hundred persons, nearly all females, came forward, uttering howlings and groans so terrible that I shall never cease to shudder when I recall them. They appeared to drag each other forward, and, on the word being given "Let us pray", they all fell on their knees; but this posture was soon changed for others.

that permitted greater scope for the convulsive movements of their limbs; and they were soon all lying on the ground in an indescribable confusion of heads and legs. They threw about their limbs with such incessant and violent motion, that I was every instant expecting some serious accident to occur...

I saw the insidious lips approach the cheeks of the unhappy girls; I heard the murmured confessions of the poor victims, and I watched their tormentors, breathing into their ears consolations that tinged the pale cheek with red. Had I been a man, I am sure I should have been guilty of some rash act of interference; nor do I believe that such a scene could have been acted in the presence of Englishmen without instant punishment being inflicted; not to mention the salutary discipline of the treadmill, which, beyond all question, would, in England, have been applied to check so turbulent and so vicious a scene.

3. Joseph Smith Has a Vision (1820)

Joseph Smith, prophet and first president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), was born in Vermont and moved as a young boy with his family to the town of Manchester, in western New York. The region was at that time pulsating with religious fervor and denominational rivalry. Pious but confused, the fourteen-year-old Smith prayed for guidance. The result, he later wrote, was a vision that led him to shun the contending existing churches and move toward the establishment of the Mormon religion. In his account of the episode, which follows, what is revealed about the religious temper of the age?

Some time in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country. Indeed, the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people; some crying, "Lo here!" and others, "Lo, there!" Some were contending for the Methodist faith, some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist...

I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My father's family was proselyted to the Presbyterian faith, and four of them joined that church, namely—my mother Lucy; my brothers Hyrum and Samuel Harrison; and my sister Sophronia. During this time of great excitement, my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness; but though my feelings were deep and often poignant, still I kept myself aloof from all these parties, though I attended their several meetings as often as occasion would permit. In process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I felt some desire to be united with them; but so great were the confusion and strife among the different denominations, that it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to