

The Rise of 19th-Century American Spiritualism, 1854–1873

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During an initial period of rapid expansion, American Spiritualists did not form churches or settle ministers. As a result, something other than numbers and locations of churches and ministers must chart the 19th-century rise of this religious movement. Fortunately, the leading Spiritualist newspaper of the period, the Banner of Light, published extensive lists of public meetings, lectures, and prospective lecturers. In addition, both the Banner and the Spiritual Telegraph newspapers published early lists of their subscription agents. Even though they do not directly address the central Spiritualist activity of the séance, these lists offer a detailed view of where and when the initial and rapid growth of American Spiritualist activity occurred. Data gathered from these lists put explanations about the rise of this 19th-century Spiritualist movement on a better empirical foundation.

INTRODUCTION

According to contemporary estimates, during the third quarter of the 19th century, thousands and perhaps millions of Americans participated in Spiritualism—defined here as talking with the dead (Albanese 2007:220–21). While there is no way to verify these estimates directly (Emmons 2003:60) and “adherents’ abhorrence of organization makes their movement difficult to chart” (Braude 1990:400), newspaper reports confirm that nearly 800 American cities and towns were involved in at least one of the following Spiritualist activities:

- (1) Some locations hosted Spiritualist lectures designed to make new converts and strengthen the already converted, much like revival meetings in other denominations. Some of these lecturers spoke conventionally but others spoke for the dead in a trance state. Typically, one Spiritualist newspaper reported, “F. L. Wadsworth speaks at Troy, N.Y., April 22nd and 29th.”
- (2) Those who wanted to give lectures advertised in newspapers. The return addresses on these ads identified the locations where one or more residents felt qualified to speak, either about Spiritualism or for the dead. For example, “Selden J. Finney. This eloquent and truly inspired speaker will answer calls to lecture.”
- (3) As time went on, lectures by itinerant Spiritualists were increasingly augmented or replaced by regular, established meetings that were the analog of church services. For example, “Lamartine Hall, New York. Meeting for free spiritual discussion are [sic] held every Sunday at 3 p.m.”
- (4) In the earliest years of the movement, Spiritualist newspapers also published the names and locations of sales agents who were charged with bringing in new subscribers and serving existing ones. Whether or not these agents were Spiritualists, their sales activity indicates the cities and towns where the newspapers saw the best market for their publication. For

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example, "Philadelphia: Mr. M. W. Robinson, No. 307 N. 11th Street, will act as our agent and deliver the paper to subscribers promptly." (*The Herald of Progress*, April 28, 1860)

Systematic data are conspicuously missing from the newspaper lists about the most central of all Spiritualist activities, the private meeting or séance in which mediums put participants in contact with the dead. However, the séance was so central to 19th-century American Spiritualism that we may assume it was present in rough proportion to the other forms of activity examined here.

Even though talking with the dead is endemic in most cultures and occurred among both native and immigrant Americans (Emmons 2003:57, 63), the sheer amount of Spiritualist activity during the third quarter of the 19th century calls for special explanation. In fact, a number of explanatory factors have been widely discussed. Most basically, the four kinds of Spiritualist activity surveyed here increased rapidly in America at a time when bereaved citizens were seeking new assurance of continuity and justice after death and when traditional religion was becoming less able to offer this assurance. On the one hand, as sectors of 19th-century America industrialized and urbanized, residents became increasingly concerned about the fate of the deceased, especially their children. In part, this was because industrialized and urbanized Americans decreased their family size, thus putting more value on the individual child, just at the time that increased mobility brought increased contagion and Romantic literature encouraged heightened parental feelings (Braude 1989:53; Emmons 2003:60; Marshall 2003). On the other hand, a growing familiarity with world religions, promoted by religious periodicals with missionary interests and general magazines with colonial interests, led some to question claims of Christian uniqueness (Verter 1998:122–27). Religious pluralism, the result of post-Revolutionary freedoms and increased immigration, diluted the authority of competing Christian sects while the natural sciences, professionalized medicine, and literary criticism of the Bible all began to challenge religious truth claims. The result was a 19th-century crisis of faith just at the time that relief from the loss associated with death was more in demand (Braude 1989:4).

Several factors combined to make Spiritualism a viable new source of comfort and assurance during this period. The mid-19th century was a time of social and geographic mobility, encounter with immigrant groups, industrialization, and intense revivalism; all of these engendered bold individualism and normless anomie (Juster and Hartigan-O'Connor 2002:403; Nelson 1969:69–70). Unsettled by secular developments, freed from traditional norms, and individually empowered, many Americans were attracted to Spiritualism's "radical individualism" (Braude 1990:406). They were also attracted to the movement's defense of inward religious experience as repeatable, scientific fact (Carroll 1997:65–71; Moore 1977:26; see also Bednarowski 1973 and Swatos 1990). At the same time, evolving religious views decreased the imagined distance between heaven and earth and made Spiritualist claims of contact between the two more credible (Carroll 1997:2–3; Emmons 2003:59). This change in religious views was least apparent in the Southeast states because industrialization and urbanization affected the region less and "an intellectual blockade . . . set up to protect slavery helped insulate [traditional] theology from criticism." By the mid-19th century, however, in the northern tier of states, all but the lower middle class (small farmers and artisans) had largely rejected the traditional teaching that individuals could do nothing to earn their own salvation (Howe 1972:307–21). As a result, even for those who remained in orthodox churches, religion became largely a matter of moral behavior by which adults could earn a place in heaven and of personal devotion to a loving God who would find a way to save even unbaptized children (Rabinowitz 1989:xv–xxxi, 157). Consequently, the prevalent idea of heaven changed from the home of the Lord of the Universe, where a few would go into eternal service, to a place of continued moral progress and domestic bliss with a reunited earthly family; a place very much like earth (Gutierrez 2009:98–99; McDannell and Lang 2001). In addition, wonders like the telegraph encouraged the belief that nothing was impossible in the modern age (Weinstein 2005).

Many who turned to Spiritualism for consolation found it was also a path to religious leadership and an opportunity to air suppressed moral concerns. Across cultures, those whose natural voices have been suppressed have found speaking for the dead a powerful political tool because it derives authority “from direct individual spiritual contact or experience rather than from office, position, or training” (Braude 1989:6; Emmons 2003:57). Thus, for a time, Spiritualists were among the few American women allowed to speak in public. On this basis, they proclaimed woman’s rights, a more benevolent heaven than orthodox ministers preached, and critiqued white male failings such as intemperance, solicitation of prostitution, and the ill treatment of women, children, blacks, and American Indians (Klass and Goss 2002:711–12; McGarry 2008:163). In response, Spiritualist descriptions of heaven were consistent with both the religious assurances and the better earth that many desired (Buescher 2004:53, 127, 152–54). Spiritualism also offered a feeling of universal connection, a community of mourners, and a return to primitive Christianity in which spirits spoke to men—all valued at a time of religious crisis. In addition, Spiritualism had an undeniable entertainment value (Cox 2003:17; McGarry 2008:9; Moore 1977:26; Taves 1999:186–95).

The empirical foundation for these explanations has been almost entirely anecdotal. To address this lack and put the study of 19th-century American Spiritualism on a firmer base, this study mines newspaper reports of Spiritualist activity for detailed data on the initial rise and spread of the movement. As far as they go, received descriptions and explanations are found to be consistent with these new data. Unanticipated in the existing literature, however, this study finds that the majority of Spiritualist activity in the third quarter of the 19th century was confined to less than 100 high-activity locations, the evolving distribution of this activity followed distinctive trajectories (state to state and region to region), and there is clear evidence of a historical shift from irregularly held lectures to regularly held meetings.

DATA

According to Ann Braude, “Spiritualist periodicals linked isolated believers across America” and “helped fill the gap left by the lack of formal organization.” The movement’s largely itinerant leaders “could only be followed through the centralized information provided by newspapers” (Braude 1990:405). Thus, most of over 100 Spiritualist periodicals published during the third quarter of the 19th century printed news of Spiritualist activity. A few also tried to maintain comprehensive lists of this activity. In 1852, former minister Samuel Byron Brittan and merchant Charles Partridge started the *Spiritual Telegraph* of New York City, the “most widely circulated and longest lived” antebellum Spiritualist periodical (Carroll 1997:121–22). Until it ceased weekly publication in 1859, the *Telegraph* regularly included lists of its own sales agents by location. These lists offer valuable information about the early rise of American Spiritualism. Published yearly from 1857 to 1861, the *Spiritualist Register* of Auburn, New York, listed names and addresses of those wanting to lecture. In 1858, the *Register* also published an extensive list of the location and times of Spiritualist meetings. The weekly *Spiritual Clarion*, also of Auburn, published a version of the *Register*’s lists in 1859. The weekly *Herald of Progress* of New York City was in print from 1860 through 1864 and in its last year printed extensive lists of would-be lecturers, scheduled lectures, and regular meetings. The weekly *Religio-Philosophical Journal* of Chicago also included lists of both would-be lecturers and established meetings from 1865 until it ceased publication in 1877. However, in his June 11, 1870 issue the editor wrote “[w]e are sick of trying to keep a standing register of meetings and a list of speakers” and thereafter the *Journal*’s lists were short and spotty. Far beyond the others, “[t]he most widely read Spiritualist paper, the *Banner of Light*, had a truly national circulation, reporting on speakers and events and printing correspondence from every region of the country” (Braude 1990:406). Founded in Boston in 1857

by journalist Luther Colby, the *Banner* published weekly lists of would-be lecturers, scheduled lectures, and established meetings until well beyond the scope of this study.

This study mines the lists in the *Banner of Light* and *Spiritual Telegraph* for data on irregularly held Spiritualist lectures, regularly held public meetings, those who advertised as would-be lecturers, and newspaper agents. An exploratory count of the number of public meetings that appeared on *Banner* lists from 1860 to 1882 shows that the initial rise of Spiritualism was over by 1873. In order to outline the initial growth of Spiritualism, lists from the *Banner* and *Telegraph* were entered into Excel spreadsheets, starting in 1854 when the lists began through 1873 when the movement's initial growth ended. Two lists per year were sampled. In order to avoid counting the same lecture twice, the sample lists were in different seasons, one in a spring issue and another in a fall issue. In almost every case, the lists reported activity by city or town. In the few cases where activity was reported for parts of a city or town, the data were aggregated for consistency. Thus, the numbers for Warren and West Warren PA were combined. Most notably, towns contiguous to Boston were treated as one metropolitan area. Although the Boston area was ranked highest on every kind of list, the data obtained were national in scope.

RESULTS

Figures 1–4 summarize the data gathered from newspaper lists for the period 1854 to 1873. A white bar shows the total amount of Spiritualist activity on one of the lists and a black bar shows the number of different locations where the activity reported on the list took place. As shown in Figure 1, 15 lists of newspaper sales agents were sampled, 12 from the *Spiritual Telegraph* (left-hand series) and three from the *Banner of Light* (right-hand series). At some places the number of agents is greater than the number of locations because a newspaper posted more than one agent in the same city or town. Similarly, for the period 1859 to 1873, 29 sampled lists (all in the *Banner*) reported 1,036 public Spiritualist meetings in 130 different locations and 1,346 lectures in 348 different venues. Figures 2 and 3 divide the data into two nearly equal parts. As shown in Figure 4, from 1856 to 1873 32 sampled lists (two in the *Spiritual Telegraph* and 30 in the *Banner of Light*) displayed 4,078 ads placed by would-be lecturers and posted from 576

Figure 1

Numbers of newspaper agents and distinct posting locations, per sampled list (left-hand series from the *Telegraph*, right-hand series from the *Banner*)

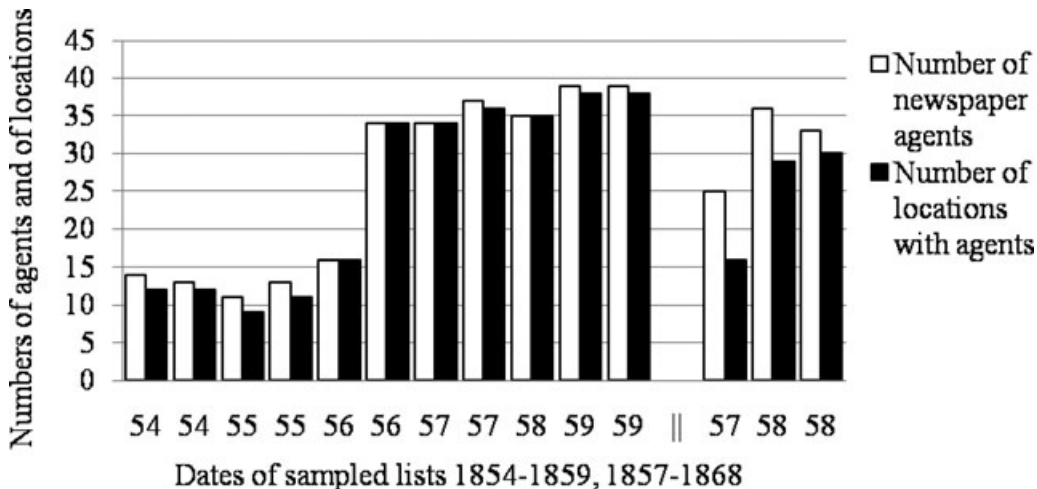


Figure 2

Numbers of meetings and of distinct meeting locations, per sampled list (all from the *Telegraph*)

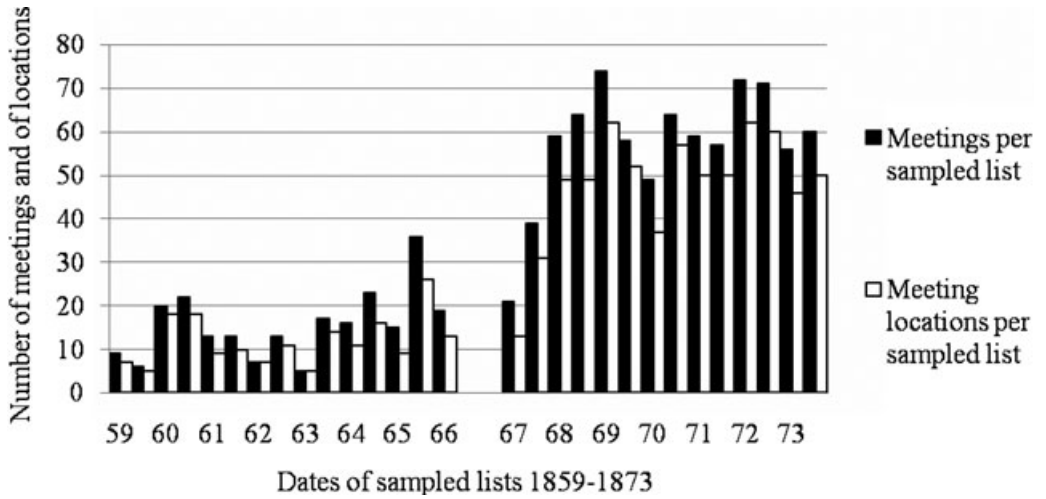
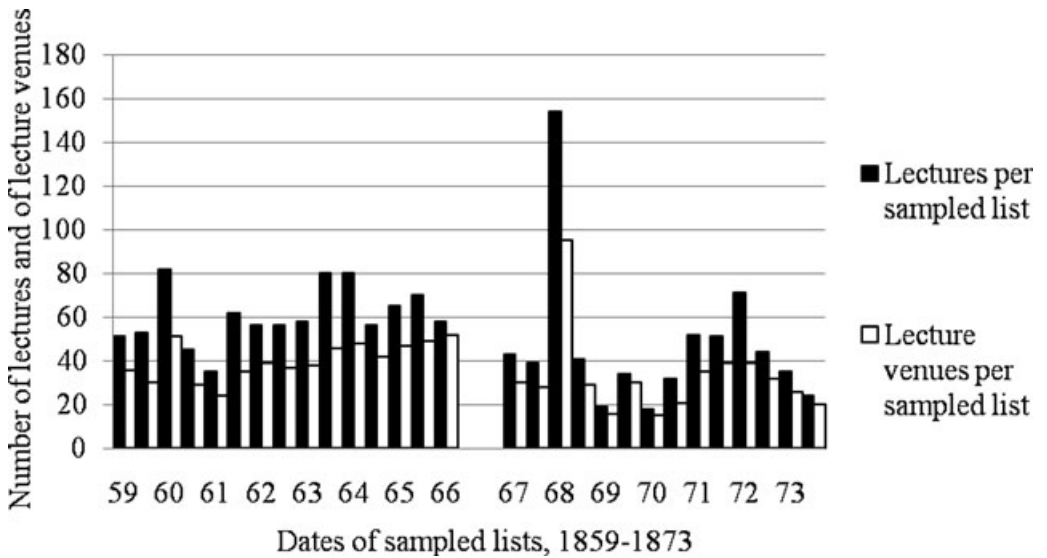


Figure 3

Numbers of lectures and of distinct lecture venues, per sampled list (all from the *Telegraph*)



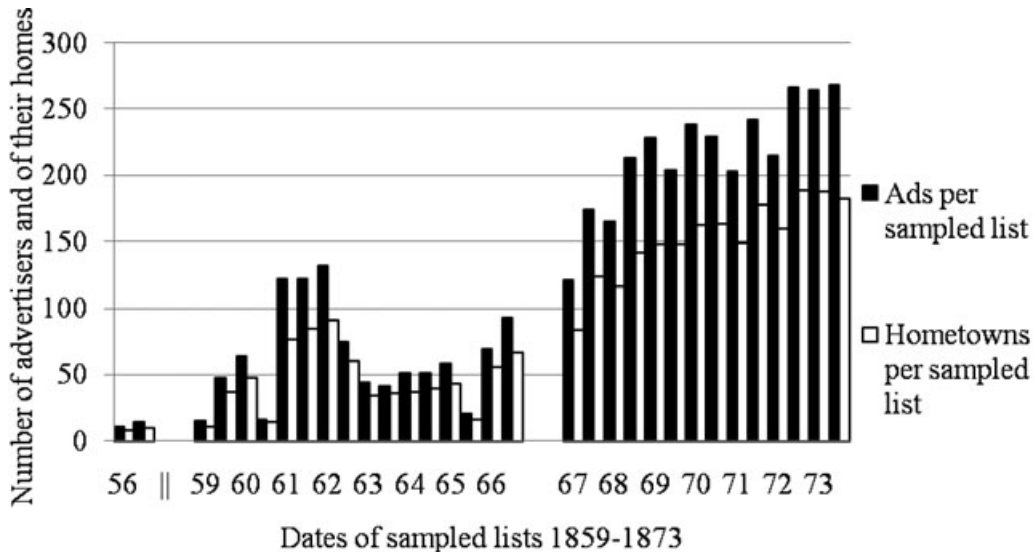
different hometowns. The left-hand series in Figure 4 is from the *Telegraph*, the right-hand series is from the *Banner* and the data are divided into two nearly equal parts for the period 1859 to 1873.

Spiritualist Activity by State

The activity shown in Figures 1–4 was not evenly distributed across states. Graphing state subtotals over time (not shown) reveals that meeting activity in some states followed a different trajectory than the summary data. Most dramatically, three-fourths of the public *meeting* activity summarized in Figure 2 occurred in just seven states, listed in order of decreasing meeting activity: Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Maine, Illinois, Connecticut, and Michigan. In Massachusetts

Figure 4

Number of ads and number of advertiser hometowns, per sampled list (1856 data from the *Telegraph*, the rest from the *Banner*)

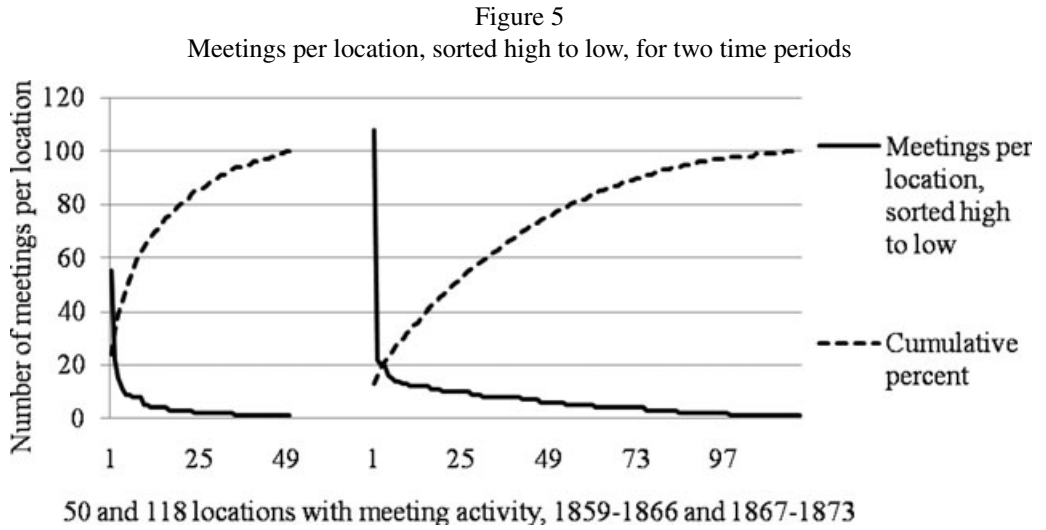


and Ohio, which together contributed more than half of all the meeting activity on the sampled lists, the meeting activity rose steadily after the Civil War. Conversely, in New York, Illinois, Connecticut, Indiana, and Colorado (contributing together about a fifth of the public meeting activity) activity jumped to a peak shortly after the Civil War but then fell steadily. The overall trajectory of total public meeting activity after the war is thus a result of steady activity in most states, rising activity in Massachusetts and Ohio, and declining activity in New York, Illinois, Connecticut, Indiana, and Colorado.

Three-fourths of the *lecture* activity summarized in Figure 3 occurred in the same seven states, listed in order of decreasing lecture activity: Massachusetts, New York, Maine, Ohio, Connecticut, Michigan, and Illinois. Consonant with Figure 3, this lecture activity declined in all these states after the Civil War but state subtotals reveal that in all but New York lecture activity declined especially quickly, to almost to zero by 1873. Finally, turning from meetings and lectures to advertising, three-fourths of the advertising activity summarized in Figure 4 occurred in just eight states, listed in order of decreasing activity: Massachusetts, New York, Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, Vermont, Connecticut, and Maine. Advertising activity in these states, however, followed the same overall trajectory shown in Figure 4.

High-Activity Locations

Not only was Spiritualist activity unevenly distributed over the states, it was also highly concentrated in a few cities and towns. This is indicated in Figure 5, which ranks locations from high to low meeting activity for two time periods. On the left side of Figure 5, locations that reported any amount of public meeting activity from 1859 to 1866 are ranked from most to least meeting activity, left to right, 1 to 50. On the right, locations that reported meeting activity from 1867 to 1873 are ranked, left to right, 1 to 118. Boston is location 1 in both periods. During the earlier period, location 50 is Waukesha WI. After the war, location 118 is Walworth NY. Vertically, the figure plots both the decreasing amount of meeting activity per numbered location and the accumulating percentage of total activity as it adds each numbered location to the running



total. Clearly, the first few locations on the far left contributed about half of all the public meeting activity prior to 1867 and the rest of this meeting activity was thinly spread over the remaining locations. In fact, only locations 1–9 (see Table 1) appear on as many as half the sampled lists and, together, these nine contributed about half of all the public meeting activity between 1859 and 1866. Similarly, after the end of the war only locations 1–46 (see Table 1) appeared on as

Table 1: Locations with high levels of meeting activity, for two periods

1859–1866	1867–1873	
1. Boston MA	1. Boston MA	24. Battle Creek MI
2. NYC NY	2. Baltimore MD	25. Troy NY
3. Lowell MA	3. NYC NY	26. Clyde OH
4. Portland ME	4. Brooklyn NY	27. Milan OH
5. Foxboro MA	5. Portland ME	28. St Louis MO
6. Providence RI	6. Salem MA	29. Bridgeport CT
7. Worcester MA	7. Lowell MA	30. Louisville KY
8. Plymouth MA	8. Worcester MA	31. Cincinnati OH
9. Taunton MA	9. Philadelphia PA	32. Putnam CT
	10. Chicago IL	33. Newburyport MA
	11. Foxboro MA	34. Dover, ME
	12. Plymouth MA	35. Springfield, IL
	13. Cleveland OH	36. Milford, MA
	14. Hammonton NJ	37. Painesville OH
	15. Vineland NJ	38. New Orleans LA
	16. Adrian MI	39. Carthage MO
	17. Washington DC	40. Manchester NH
	18. Lynn MA	41. Morrisania NY
	19. Situate MA	42. Yates City IL
	20. San Francisco CA	43. Houlton ME
	21. Hingham MA	44. Buffalo NY
	22. Springfield MA	45. Williamsburg NY
	23. Stoneham MA	46. Andover OH

Table 2: Locations with high levels of advertising activity for two periods

1859–1866	1867–1873	
Boston MA	Boston MA	Clyde OH
NYC NY	Chicago IL	Woodstock VT
Lowell MA	NYC NY	Toledo Oh
Cleveland OH	San Francisco CA	San Jose CA
Chicago IL	Vineland NJ	Fitchburg MA
Taunton MA	Sturgis MI	St Louis MO
Lawrence MA	Lowell MA	Centralia IL
Hartford CT	Cleveland OH	Deerfield OH
Worcester MA	Buffalo NY	Berlin Heights OH
Rockford IL	Philadelphia PA	
Manchester NH	Providence RI	
Philadelphia PA	Clyde OH	
Woodstock VT	Hammonton NJ	
Springfield MA	Rochester NY	
Plymouth MA	Bridgeport CT	
Bridgeport CT	Adrian MI	
Cincinnati OH	Hartford CT	
Bellefontaine OH	Manchester NH	
Foxboro MA	Battle Creek MI	
New Haven CT	Dayton OH	
Fall River MA	Milford MA	
Exeter ME	Washington DC	
Portland ME	Lawrence MA	
Albion MI	Baltimore MD	
Detroit MI	Newport ME	
W Killingly CT	Worcester MA	

many as half the sampled lists and, together, contributed about half of all this meeting activity. Locations are listed in decreasing order of public meeting activity.

Turning from meetings to ads and using the same criteria, the number of hometowns from which would-be lecturers submitted a high number of ads to the *Banner of Light* also increased, from 26 out of 284 locations before 1867 to 34 out of 434 locations after the Civil War. Table 2 lists these locations of high advertising activity. In contrast to what we find for meetings and ads, before 1867 Spiritualist lectures were concentrated in 30 out of 250 locations and, after the war, lectures were concentrated in just 17 out of 225 locations as shown in Table 3. Finally, returning to the early data on newspaper agents, between 1854 and 1859, 85 different cities and towns appeared on 15 sampled lists. Just 18 of these cities and towns, however, appeared on half or more of the lists and together these 18 accounted for half of all the postings. The 18 high-activity locations are listed in Table 4. Additional examination shows that (a) from the earlier to the later period not only did the number of locations with high public meeting activity increase but also this meeting activity became more concentrated (from 62 percent in these high-activity locations before the end of the war to 73 percent after the war). Conversely, (b) while the number of locations with high advertising activity also increased, advertising activity actually became less concentrated in these locations (from 46 percent to 40 percent). Most dramatically, (c) there were both fewer locations with high lecture activity after the war and this activity was less concentrated in these locations (from 59 percent to 46 percent).

Table 3: Locations with high levels of lecture activity for two periods

1859–1866	1867–1873	
Boston MA	Boston MA	Manchester NH
NYC NY	Chicago IL	Battle Creek MI
Lowell MA	NYC NY	Dayton OH
Cleveland OH	San Francisco CA	Milford MA
Chicago IL	Vineland NJ	Washington DC
Taunton MA	Sturgis MI	Lawrence MA
Lawrence MA	Lowell MA	Baltimore MD
Hartford CT	Cleveland OH	Newport ME
Worcester MA	Buffalo NY	Worcester MA
Rockford IL	Philadelphia PA	Woodstock VT
Manchester NH	Providence RI	Toledo OH
Philadelphia PA	Clyde OH	San Jose CA
Woodstock VT	Hammonton NJ	Fitchburg MA
Springfield MA	Rochester NY	St Louis MO
Plymouth MA	Bridgeport CT	Centralia IL
Bridgeport CT	Adrian MI	Deerfield MI
Cincinnati OH	Hartford CT	Berlin Heights OH
Bellefontaine OH		
Foxboro MA		
New Haven CT		
Fall River MA		
Exeter ME		
Portland ME		
Albion MI		
Detroit MI		
W Killingly CT		

Spiritualist Activity by Region

Finally, consider together the 95 cities and towns that appear in Tables 1–4. These places of high Spiritualist activity—slightly more than 10 percent of the nearly 800 cities and towns that reported any level of activity—were located in the states and regions shown in Table 5. The states with the most high-activity locations were also those where we have already seen the highest concentration of overall activity: Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut, Ohio, Maine, Michigan, and Illinois. Between 1854 and 1859, the combination of Spiritualist interest and proselytizing as represented by newspaper agents was greatest in New York State and somewhat less in New England, along the Mid-Atlantic coast, and in the Midwest. Between 1859 and 1866, the period of roughly steady public meeting, lecture, and advertising activity (see Figures 2–4), New England

Table 4: Locations with high levels of early activity by newspaper agents

Boston MA	New Haven CT	Clymer NY
Philadelphia PA	Winsted CT	Earlville NY
Cleveland OH	London ENGLAND	Morris NY
Thompsonville CT	Cedar Rapids IA	Morrisville NY
Baltimore MD	Glendale MA	Southold NY
Auburn NY	Coldwater MI	Reading PA

Table 5: Number of locations with high levels of spiritualist activity, by period, state, and region

<i>Mid-Atlantic States</i>	1854–1859*	1859–1866**	1867–1873**
NY	6	3	6
PA	2	1	1
MD	1		1
NJ			2
DC			1
Total	9	4	11
<i>New England States</i>			
MA	2	13	15
CT	3	8	4
ME		4	3
VT		1	
RI		1	1
NH		1	1
Total	5	28	24
<i>Midwest States</i>			
OH	2	4	6
MI	1	3	2
IA	1		
IL		2	4
MO		1	2
IN		1	
WI		1	
KY			1
Total	4	12	15
<i>Other</i>			
ENGLAND	1		
LA			1
CA			2

*Newspaper agents.

**Meetings, lectures, and/or advertiser hometowns.

had by far the most highly active locations, the Midwest less than half that number, and the Mid-Atlantic states very little. Finally, after the war (1867–1883) when overall public meeting and advertising activity tripled and lecturing activity declined slightly, the greatest number of highly active locations continued to be in New England but there was a large increase in the Mid-Atlantic states. In addition, there was a barely discernible spread of high-activity locations to the Gulf and West Coast. Also, a small number of low-activity locations (not shown) appeared in the Mountain West, Canada, and even the Southeast.

DISCUSSION

There is good reason to conclude that the results reported here empirically capture the rise of Spiritualism in 19th-century America. The *Spiritual Telegraph* and *Banner of Light* were the major Spiritualist newspapers of the movement's first quarter-century. Furthermore, the *Banner* defined itself as a national publication and, in 1866, established a Western Department in Cincinnati to serve the Midwest states (McGarry 2008:196 n.183). It is true that the *Banner* reported distant Spiritualist activity less completely than in-state papers. For example, the *Herald of Progress*

of New York City, May 28, 1864, reported 6 meetings, 1 lecture, and 11 would-be lecturers in New York State. For the same year, the lists sampled in the *Banner* reported 1 and 3 meetings, 3 and 5 lectures, 4 and 11 would-be lecturers in the same state. Four years later, the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* of Chicago, May 9, 1868, reported 8 meetings and 21 would-be lecturers in Illinois while the *Banner* reported 5 and 3 meetings and 14 and 19 would-be lecturers in that state. However, papers in other locations agreed with the *Banner* that Spiritualist activity was higher in Massachusetts than in their home state. In 1858, the *Spiritualist Register* reported 21 meetings and 46 would-be lecturers in Massachusetts, 9 meetings and 76 would-be lecturers in its own state of New York (1858:24–28, 30–32). Six years later, the *Herald of Progress*, May 28, 1864, reported 10 meetings, 7 lectures, and 11 would-be lecturers in Massachusetts but only 6 meetings, 1 lecture, and 5 would-be lecturers in its own state of New York. Similarly, the *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, May 9, 1868, reported 34 meetings and 39 would-be lecturers in Massachusetts but only 8 meetings and 21 would-be lecturers in its own state of Illinois.

Lending further credibility to the findings, other comparisons suggest the trends reported reflect changes in Spiritualist activity and not just changes in reporting by the newspapers. For one thing, the trends shown in Table 5 are consistent with widely accepted anecdotal evidence. Nelson (1969:5–18, 24–27, 82–85) found that Spiritualism spread quickly from upstate New York to New York City, New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and the Midwest, that it spread more slowly to a smaller number of Western, Gulf, and West Coast locations, and that its association with slavery abolition prevented its spread (at least openly) in the Southeast. Delp (1987:102) put the largest numbers of Spiritualists in the old Northwest, New York, Ohio, and Massachusetts. Similarly, Carroll (1977:1, 102–03, 178–79) found that 19th-century Spiritualism was most popular in the Northeast and Midwest. For another thing, the trends shown in Figures 1, 2, and 4 are also consistent with accepted anecdotal evidence. Moore (1977:64–67) judged from the varying opposition to Spiritualism that the movement grew quickly during the early 1850s, leveled off, declined during the Civil War, recovered after the war, and declined again in the late 1870s. McGarry (2008:50) found that the movement actually grew during the Civil War and contemporary Spiritualist Emma Hardinge reported that the war “added two million new believers to Spiritualism” (Weisberg 2004:211). Cox (2003:233, 237) observed that other contemporary estimates of Spiritualist membership rose to a peak in 1867 and declined in the 1870s. Additionally, the *Spiritualist Register* of Auburn, New York, published lists of would-be lecturers from 1857 to 1861 and these show the same upward trend as the *Banner* data (1857:24–26, 1858:24–28, 1859:23–27, 1860:24–28, 1861:22–26).

The trends reported here are consistent with the claim that Spiritualism burgeoned when concern with the dead increased and the consoling power of traditional religion diminished. For example, the postwar peak of Spiritualist activity in Figures 1 and 3 is consistent with the increased desire for consolation over military loses. At the same time, the decline in number of lectures given after the war, the overall decline of public meeting activity after 1873, and the earlier decline of meetings in New York, Illinois, Connecticut, and Colorado are consistent with a gradual fading of the same cultural factors that initially made Spiritualism such a widely attractive religious option. For example, after mid-century infant mortality declined (Weisberg 2004:261). Spiritualism lost its credibility as a source of consolation because of increasingly blatant performances by Spiritualists and discoveries of fraud discredited the idea of contact with the dead (Nelson 1969:82). “Many American reform movements drifted from their pre-war individualistic origins” (Braude 1990:407). The Spiritualist claim to be a scientific system lost credibility as American ideas of science evolved from a crude Baconianism to a more sophisticated hypothetico-deductivism (Swatos 1990:476). Spiritualism also lost a political function as women who once expressed their political concerns as conduits for the dead found they could speak for themselves (McGarry 2008:65). Finally, the religious and social crisis described by Nelson faded as the American transition from a religious to a materialistic culture proceeded.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite its failure to fully capture activity distant from Boston, the newspaper data presented here are generally supportive of previous descriptions and explanations of the remarkable, 19th-century rise of Spiritualism in America. However, the data presented here are also more detailed than the anecdotal descriptions in the existing literature and reveal (a) a concentration of Spiritualist activity in relatively few high-activity locations, (b) contrasting trends of Spiritualist activity in different states and regions, and (c) a dramatic rise in numbers of meetings and ads after the Civil War when numbers of lectures were declining almost everywhere. On this third topic, not only did the number of meetings increase after the war but also the number of locations with high meeting activity and the percentage of meetings concentrated in these locations increased. At the same time, there were both fewer locations with high lecture activity after the war and this activity was less concentrated in these locations. All these findings call for further study of the high-activity locations and contrasting trends identified here. In addition, the postwar decline of lectures and increase of meetings almost certainly reveal a transition in American Spiritualism that is already familiar in other new religious movements—from sporadic, enthusiastic activity to settled, organized activity. This might be confirmed by a focused study of Spiritualism in the locations that changed from high lecture activity before the war to high meeting activity after the war, most notably in Battle Creek, Michigan; St. Louis, Missouri; Putnam, Connecticut; and Cleveland and Cincinnati, Ohio.

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