

Haystack Prayer Meeting

'We can do this, if we will!' (SJ Mills)

At the Semi-Centennial Anniversary of the institution of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM) at Bradford, Massachusetts, Dr. Samuel M. Worcester summarized very concisely the situation which existed during the pioneer days in America. He wrote:

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which fifty years ago this day was instituted at Bradford, had its origin neither in Bradford, nor Andover, nor Williamstown, nor any other single locality, but in the revivals at the end of the eighteenth, and the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was but an embodiment and expression of the missionary spirit, which was then witnessing itself in public and private supplications, and in other modes, as seldom or never before, since the days of the Fathers of New England. (Worcester; The Haystack Centennial))

During the latter part of the eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth century several missionary societies were formed in the United States. As early as 1796 the Baptists organized a missionary society for carrying on work in the State of New York. The Connecticut Missionary Society was instituted in 1798 and the Massachusetts Missionary Society in 1799.

In 1802, the Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society was organized.) In 1804, the Massachusetts Missionary Society amended its constitution so as to embrace work in foreign parts, - 'through the more distant regions of the earth, as circumstances shall invite and the ability of the society shall admit.' The Synod of Pittsburg instituted the 'Western Missionary Society' in 1802 and carried out an extensive work on the frontiers. (The Haystack Centennial)

In looking back over those pioneer days in organized missionary effort, it is instructive to observe that the unity of missions was ever borne in mind. It was largely a question of administration and not a new kind of missionary spirit that drew the sharp distinction between home and foreign missions which in those early days was not so apparent as it is to-day.

There had existed in Newport a foreign missionary society as early as 1773, but this society was short-lived owing to the outbreak of the American Revolution. During 1806 and 1807 the American churches had given some six thousand dollars to Dr. Carey's work in India.

The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society, though doing a work almost solely in "the new settlements within these United States," expressly stated in its constitution that it would not limit its work to America but would extend it "farther, if circumstances should render it proper." It was the catholic spirit of missions which characterized the latter part of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century in the religious life of America. (The Haystack Centennial)

(Back then,) Williamstown ... was a frontier village, similar in many respects to any western village of the last half century, composed of men with patriotic hopes and daring wills. It had passed through some fifty years of struggle with the primeval wilderness and the hostile dwellers in these and bordering regions. It was near the site of the frontier military post, Fort Massachusetts, some three miles to the eastward.

During the French and Indian wars and later during the American Revolution, Williamstown and the neighboring villages rendered enduring service on behalf of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and in the name of American independence. From Fort Massachusetts detachments were sent toward the northwest and even into the lower regions of Canada. At the battle of Bennington it is said that 'Every man in this town, except a cripple on crutches, shouldered his gun and rushed to the field of conflict,— while the cripple went from house to house encouraging the women who could hear distinctly the booming of the guns during the anxious hours.'

In 1765, the town (up to that time known as West Hoosac), was incorporated under the name of 'Williamstown.' This name was employed according to the wishes of Colonel Ephraim Williams, one of the foremost settlers in this region and for many years commander of the garrison at Fort Massachusetts, who in his will provided for a free school in this village, on the condition of the village perpetuating his name in that of the town. This year marks also the beginning of the Congregational Church of Williamstown. (The Haystack Centennial)

Twelve years after the incorporation of Williams College in 1793, the Second Great Awakening spread from its origins in Connecticut to Williamstown, Massachusetts. Enlightenment ideals from France were gradually being countered by an increase in religious fervor, first in the town, and then in the College. (Williams College)

Haystack Prayer Meeting

In the spring of 1806, Samuel J. Mills, the 23-year old son of a Connecticut clergyman, joined the Freshman class. Mills, after a period of religious questioning in his late teens, entered Williams with a passion to spread Christianity around the globe. (Williams College)

He found the town and college under the influence of a great revival. Though felt but slightly in the college in 1805, in the summer of 1806 it was profoundly stirring men's souls. Prayer-meetings by groups of students were being maintained zealously.



Sloan's Meadow – Williams College

On Wednesdays, the men met south of West College beneath the willow trees. On Saturdays, the meetings were held north of the college buildings, beneath the maple trees in Sloan's meadow. Only suggestions of the willows remain, but some of the maple trees are still standing. (The Haystack Centennial)

On a Saturday afternoon in August, 1806, five Williams College students, Congregationalists in background, gathered in a field to discuss the spiritual needs of those living in Asian countries. The five who attended were Samuel J. Mills, James Richards, Francis L. Robbins, Harvey Loomis, and Byram Green.

The atmosphere was laden with moisture, and the threatening clouds had doubtless detained many who on a fair day would have been present.

The meeting was interrupted by the approaching storm. It began to rain; the thunder rolled with deafening sound familiar to those who dwell among the hills; the sharp quick flashes of lightning seemed like snapping whips driving the men to shelter.

They crouched beside a large haystack which stood on the spot now marked by the Missionary



Haystack Prayer Meeting (Crecer Foundation)

Monument. Here, partially protected at least from the storm, they conversed on large themes. The topic that engaged their interest was Asia. The work of the East India Company, with which they were all somewhat acquainted, naturally turned their thoughts to the people with which this company sought trade.

Mills especially waxed eloquent on the moral and religious needs of these people, and afire with a great enthusiasm he proposed that the gospel of light be sent to those dwelling in such benighted lands. All but Loomis responded to this inspiration of Mills. Loomis contended that the East must first be civilized before the work of the missionary could begin.

The others contended that God would cooperate with all who did their part, for He would that all men should be partakers of the salvation of Christ. Finally at Mills' word, 'Come, let us make it a subject of prayer under the haystack, while the dark clouds are going and the clear sky is coming,' they all knelt in prayer. (The Haystack Centennial)

"We can do this, if we will!"

Like other colleges of the time, Williams College was heavily influenced by what came to be called the Second Great Awakening, a revival movement that began with the Cane Ridge camp meeting in Kentucky in 1801.

'The brevity of the shower, the strangeness of the place of refuge, and the peculiarity of their topic of prayer and conference all took hold of their imaginations and their memories.' (Global Ministries)

The students were also influenced by a pamphlet titled 'An Inquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use means for the Conversion of the Heathen,' written by British Baptist missionary William Carey.

Before Carey, many Christians believed the Bible's Great Commission was fulfilled by the apostles. At one meeting when Carey presented his ideas to a group of ministers, one is said to have admonished him: 'Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine.'

After publishing his book, Carey spoke to a group of ministers at a Baptist association meeting in Nottingham, England, where uttered his famous quote: 'Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.' The next day the ministers decided to form the Baptist Missionary Society, which is today called BMS World Mission.

At what came to be known as the Haystack Prayer Meeting, the Williams students discussed 'the moral darkness of Asia' and the desire to send the gospel to 'that dark and heathen land.' (Allen; Ethics Daily)

After praying, these five young men sang a hymn together. It was then that Mills said loudly over the rain and the wind, 'We can do this, if we will!' (Williams College)

That moment changed those men forever. Many historians would tell you that all mission organizations in the US trace their history back to the Haystack Prayer Meeting in some way. Yes, these men turned the world upside down. And it all began in a prayer meeting under a haystack. (Southern Baptist Convention)

Though only two of the five Williams students at the Haystack Prayer meeting ever left the United States, the impact of their passion for missions is widespread.

Mills engaged in missions in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, in the Southwest United States, and in New Orleans. He influenced the founding of the American Bible Society and the United Foreign Missionary Society before he died in 1818 while returning from a short-term mission trip to Africa with the American Colonization Society. Richards left America in 1815, serving as a missionary in India until his death in 1822.

Loomis, true to his early convictions, dedicated his life to domestic missions in the State of Maine. Robbins engaged in missionary work in New Hampshire before returning to pastor a church in his native state of Connecticut. Green preached for a short time before serving in New York State government and later in the U.S. Congress. (Williams College)

Formation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions

Samuel Mills became the Haystack person with the greatest influence on the modern mission movement. He played a role in the founding of the American Bible Society and the United Foreign Missionary Society.

In 1808, Mills and other Williams students formed 'The Brethren,' a society organized to 'effect, in the persons of its members, a mission to the heathen.' Upon the enrollment of Mills and Richards at Andover Seminary in 1810, Adoniram Judson from Brown, Samuel Newall from Harvard, and Samuel Nott from Union College joined the Brethren.

Led by the enthusiasm of Judson, the young seminarians convinced the General Association of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts to form The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. (Williams College)

As well as being the first documented resolution ever made by Americans to begin foreign missionary work, the 1806 Haystack meeting has been credited with leading to the formation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). The ABCFM gave students an opportunity to go abroad and spread the teachings of Christianity.

In June 1810, Mills and James Richards petitioned the General Association of the Congregational Church to establish the foreign missions. American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was formed with a Board of members from Massachusetts and Connecticut.

“Christians have wanted some grand object to seize their hearts and engage all their powers ... The spread of the gospel and the conversion of the world constitute the very object wanted – the common cause which ought to unite ... the great family of Christians.” (Leonard Woods; Wagner)



Samuel John Mills Jr

“The American Board of Foreign Missions, however, can neither claim, nor does it desire exclusive patronage. There are other Foreign Missionary Societies, for whom there is room, for whom there is work enough, and for whose separate existence there are, doubtless, conclusive reasons.”

“Christian charity is not a blind impulse but, is characterized in Scripture, as ‘the wisdom from above’, such wisdom - as is in heaven, - which is ‘pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.’”

“The system of operation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions may be considered under two divisions, - its Home Department, and its Foreign Missions.” (Missionary Herald, 1823)

“The general purpose of these devoted young men was fixed. Sometimes they talked of ‘cutting a path through the moral wilderness of the West to the Pacific.’ Sometimes they thought of South America; then of Africa. Their object was the salvation of the heathen; but no specific shape was given to their plans, till the formation of the American Board of Foreign Missions.” (Worcester)

“The Board has established missions, in the order of time in which they are now named at Bombay, and Ceylon; among the Cherokees, Choctaws, and the Cherokees of the Arkansaw ...” (Missionary Herald)

In its first fifty years, the ABCFM sent out over 1250 missionaries. Most were from the smaller towns and farm villages of New England. Few were affluent, but many were trained in colleges where they received a classical education, which included Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. When they reached the mission field, they were able to translate the Bible from the original Greek and Hebrew into difficult and often previously unwritten languages. They built educational systems in their lands of ministry and were often called upon to advise foreign governments.

Missionary reports were printed in the Missionary Herald, the magazine of the American Board established in 1821. For many Christians in America, the Missionary Herald was their window to the world. Descriptions of native customs, history, economic activities, and geographical features were included along with accounts of the influence of the Gospel on these far off lands. In a day before TV, radio, or

rapid communications, such missionary reports became prime information for many Americans about foreign lands.

The ABCFM saw to it that schools and hospitals were established in all the mission fields. Native leaders were trained to continue the work of the ministry. (Global Ministries)

The long tradition of foreign missions at Williams College, as begun by Mills and his contemporaries in 1806, since has included the work of numerous alumni abroad and domestically.

Though the College never held religious affiliation, President Mark Hopkins served as chair the American Board from 1857 until his death in 1887. Williams has also been host to commemorative services of the Haystack Prayer Meeting in 1856, 1906, 1956, and most recently in 1981, drawing missionaries and other participants from around the globe. (Williams College)

The scope of American Foreign Missions has extended far beyond that of Christian missions, including the establishment of educational institutions throughout the world as first begun in 1815 by Hall and Nott's pioneering work in India.

Though contemporary perceptions of foreign missions have changed, the College honors the tradition of the Haystack both through the "Haystack Scholarship" for students from foreign countries and by the Haystack-inspired "Williams in China" and "Williams in Hong Kong" programs that send Williams students to study and teach English abroad. (Williams College)

‘Ōpūkaha’ia Inspired the American Protestant Mission to Hawai‘i

At this same time, in the Islands, a Hawaiian, ‘Ōpūkaha’ia, made a life-changing decision – not only which affected his life, but had a profound effect on the future of the Hawaiian Islands.

“I began to think about leaving that country, to go to some other part of the globe. I did not care where I shall go to. I thought to myself that if I should get away, and go to some other country, probably I may find some comfort, more than to live there, without father and mother.” (‘Ōpūkaha’ia)

‘Ōpūkaha’ia swam out to and boarded Brintnall’s ‘Triumph’ in Kealakekua Bay.

“After supper the captain made some inquiry to see if we were willing to come to America; and soon I made a motion with my head that I was willing to go. This man was very agreeable, and his kindness was much delighted in my heart, as if I was his own son, and he was my own father. Thus I still continue thankful for his kindness towards me.” (‘Ōpūkaha’ia)

“My parting with them (grandmother, aunt & uncle) was disagreeable to them and to me, but I was willing to leave all my relations, friends and acquaintance; expected to see them no more in this world.”

“We set out on our journey ...” (‘Ōpūkaha’ia)

After travelling to the American North West, then to China, they landed in New York in 1809. They continued to New Haven, Connecticut. ‘Ōpūkaha’ia was eager to study and learn - seeking to be a student at Yale.

“In this place I become acquainted with many students belonging to the College. By these pious students I was told more about God than what I had heard before ... Many times I wished to hear more about God, but find no body to interpret it to me.”

“I attended many meetings on the sabbath, but find difficulty to understand the minister. I could understand or speak, but very little of the English language. Friend Thomas (Hopu) went to school to one of the students in the College before I thought of going to school.” (‘Ōpūkaha’ia)

The Mills family invited ‘Ōpūkaha’ia into their home. Later Mills brought ‘Ōpūkaha’ia to Andover Theological Seminary, the center of foreign mission training in New England.

The following are portions of a December 20, 1809 letter written by Samuel J Mills to the Rev. Gordon Hall, then a student in the Theological Seminary at Andover (he was later a Missionary to Bombay.) It speaks of ‘Ōpūkaha’ia and his influence in establishing the Hawaiian Islands Mission.

“Very Dear Brother, I received your kind letter, and feel much indebted to you. I have been in this place about two months. When I came, I found my worthy friend E. Dwight here ...”

“... I roomed with him about two weeks, and then removed my quarters to the Rev. Mr. Stewart's, with whom I have lived to the present time. As every day is not so singularly spent by me as this has been, I will notice something not a little extraordinary.”

“To make my narrative understood, you must go back with me to my first arrival in this place. Mr. Dwight, I then found, was instructing a native Owhyean boy. Two natives of this island arrived here five or six months ago, and this was one of them.”

“As I was in the room with Mr. Dwight, I heard the youth recite occasionally, and soon became considerably attached to him. His manners are simple; he does not appear to be vicious in any respect, and he has a great thirst for knowledge.”

“In his simple manner of expressing himself, he says, ‘The people in Owhyhee very bad - they pray to gods made of wood. Poor Indians don't know nothing.’”

“He says, ‘Me want to learn to read this Bible, and go back then, and tell them to pray to God up in heaven.’ (Not having a place to stay,) I told him he need not be concerned; I would find a place for him. ...”

“I told him he might go home with me, and live at my father's, and have whatever he wanted. He then came with me to my room. I heard him read his lesson, and attempted to instruct him in some of the first principles of Christianity, of which he was almost entirely ignorant. ...”

“I told him further, that as my father was one of the Missionary Trustees, he would no doubt obtain for him a support, if it was thought best to educate him, which is my intention to attempt so far as that he may be able to instruct his countrymen, and, by God's blessing, convert them to Christianity. To this he could hardly object. ...”

“He had been talking with the President of the College, and I told him I would see him on the subject ... (and I) related to him a part of my plan, which was that Obookiah should go with me to my father's, and live with him this winter ...”

“... and be instructed in the first principles of reading and writing, as well as of Christianity, where he would be abundantly furnished with the means of acquiring both. ...”

“The President came fully into the opinion that this was the most eligible course which could be pursued, if Obookiah was willing to go. Obookiah is his Indian name, and he is seventeen years old, I told him he would be glad to go; he was without a home - without a place to eat, or sleep.”

“The poor and almost friendless Owhyean would sit down disconsolate, and the honest tears would flow freely down his sunburn

face; but since this plan has been fixed upon, he has appeared cheerful, and feels quite at ease.”

“What does this mean? Brother Hall, do you understand it? Shall he be sent back unsupported, to attempt to reclaim his countrymen?”

“Shall we not rather consider these southern islands a proper place for the establishment of a mission?”

“Not that I would give up the heathen tribes of the west. I trust we shall be able to establish more than one mission in a short time, at least in a few years; and that God will enable us to extend our views and labours further than we have before contemplated.”

“We ought not to look merely to the heathen on our own continent, but to direct our attention where we may, to human appearance, do the most good, and where the difficulties are the least. We are to look to the climate - established prejudices - the acquisition of language - the means of subsistence, &c. &c.”

“All these things, I apprehend, are to be considered. The field is almost boundless; in every part of which, there ought to be Missionaries.” (Samuel J Mills to Rev Gordon Hall, December 20, 1809)



‘Ōpūkaha’ia

Formation of the Foreign Mission School

By 1816, contributions to the ABCFM had declined. There were several reasons including post-War of 1812 recession and the fact that India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) were too remote to hold public interest. (Wagner) Folks saw a couple options: bring Indian and foreign youth into white communities and teach them there, or go out to them and teach them in their own communities. They chose the former.



Foreign Mission School

In October, 1816, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) decided to establish the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Litchfield County, Connecticut, for the instruction of youth like 'Ōpūkaha'ia. By 1817, a dozen students, six of them Hawaiians, were training at the Foreign Mission School to become missionaries to teach the Christian faith to people around the world. Initially lacking a principal, Dwight filled that role from May 1817 - May 1818.

The object of the School as set forth in its Constitution, was "The education in our own country of Heathen Youths, in such manner, as, with subsequent professional instruction will qualify them to become useful Missionaries, Physicians, Surgeons, School Masters, or

Interpreters and to communicate to the Heathen Nations such knowledge in agriculture and the arts, as may prove the means of promoting Christianity and civilization." (Missionary Herald, January 1821)

At the beginning of the school's tenure, 'Ōpūkaha'ia was considered a leader of the student body, excelling in his studies, expressing his fondness for and understanding of the importance of the agricultural labor, and qualifying for a full church membership due to his devotion to his new faith. 'Ōpūkaha'ia yearned "with great earnestness that he would (return to Hawai'i) and preach the Gospel to his poor countrymen."

Pioneer Company of American Protestant Missionaries to Hawai'i

'Ōpūkaha'ia was being groomed to be a key figure in a mission to Hawai'i, to be joined by Samuel Mills Jr. Unfortunately, 'Ōpūkaha'ia died at Cornwall on February 17, 1818, and several months later Mills died at sea off West Africa after surveying lands that became Liberia.

Edwin W Dwight is remembered for putting together a book, 'Memoirs of Henry Obookiah' (the spelling of the name based on its pronunciation), as a fundraiser for the Foreign Mission School. It was an edited collection of 'Ōpūkaha'ia's letters and journals/diaries. The book about his life was printed and circulated after his death, becoming a best-seller of its day.

'Ōpūkaha'ia, inspired by many young men with proven sincerity and religious fervor of the missionary movement, had wanted to spread the word of Christianity back home in Hawai'i; his book inspired missionaries to volunteer to carry his message to the Hawaiian Islands.

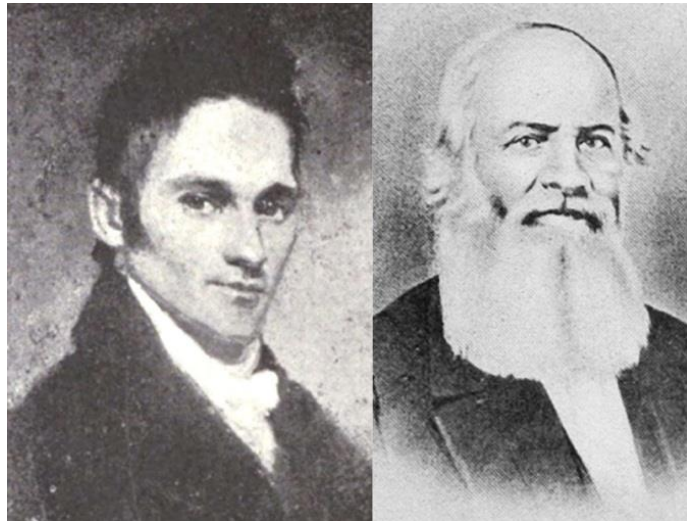
From Andover Theological Seminary, Hiram Bingham wrote in a letter dated July 18, 1819, to Reverend Samuel Worcester of the ABCFM that “the unexpected and afflictive death of Obookiah, roused my attention to the subject, & perhaps by writing and delivering some thoughts occasioned by his death I became more deeply interested than before in that cause for which he desired to live ...”

“... & from that time it seemed by no means impossible that I should be employed in the field which Henry had intended to occupy ... the possibility that this little field in the vast Pacific would be mine, was the greatest, in my own view.” (Bingham noted by Brumaghim)

The coming of Henry ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia and other young Hawaiians to the US, who awakened a deep Christian sympathy in the churches, moved the ABCFM to establish a mission at the Islands. When asked “Who will return with these boys to their native land to teach the truths of salvation?”

Bingham and his classmate, Asa Thurston, were the first to respond, and offer their services to the Board. (Congregational Quarterly) They were ordained at Goshen, Connecticut on September 29, 1819; several years earlier from Goshen came the first official request for a mission to Hawai‘i; this ordination of foreign missionaries was the first held in the State of Connecticut.

In giving instructions to the first missionaries, the ABCFM, noted: “You will never forget ‘Ōpūkaha‘ia. You will never forget his fervent love, his affectionate counsels, his many prayers and tears for you, and for his and your nation. You saw him die; saw how the Christian could triumph over death and the grave; saw the radiant glory in which he left this world for heaven. You will remember it always, and you will tell it to your kindred and countrymen who are dying without hope.”



Hiram Bingham

Asa Thurston

On October 23, 1819, the Pioneer Company of missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) from the northeast United States, set sail on the Thaddeus for the Hawaiian Islands. They landed in Kailua-Kona on April 4, 1820.

Over the course of a little over 40-years (1820-1863 - the “Missionary Period”), about 184-men and women in twelve Companies served in Hawai‘i to carry out the mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in the Hawaiian Islands. Collaboration between Native Hawaiians and American Protestant missionaries resulted in, among other things, the

- Introduction of Christianity;
- Development of a written Hawaiian language and establishment of schools that resulted in widespread literacy;
- Promulgation of the concept of constitutional government;
- Combination of Hawaiian with Western medicine; and
- Evolution of a new and distinctive musical tradition (with harmony and choral singing)