The Legacy of Samuel J. Mills Jr.

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The year 2012 marked the two hundredth anniversary of the origins of the U.S. foreign missionary movement. Much attention was rightly paid to Adoniram Judson, the most famous member of the original band of missionaries. Unfortunately, little has been made of the contribution of Samuel J. Mills Jr., the man most historians acknowledge as the “father of the foreign missionary work in Christian America.” Part of the reason for this oversight is that Mills, one of the original four missionary candidates who in 1810 petitioned and were accepted by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), never served as a foreign missionary. Still, no man did more than Mills to support and advance the cause of Protestant missions from the United States during the movement’s formative years.

Mills’s legacy is best summed up by the subtitle of Thomas Richards’s biography: “Missionary Pathfinder, Pioneer, and Promoter.” Mills was a pathfinder who had an innate ability to venture into new territory, perceive an unmet religious need, and devise a plan to meet that need; a pioneer who broke new ground with his ideas for a variety of voluntary associations to carry out his visions; and a promoter who could deftly elicit the support needed to implement his plans. One of the first Americans to feel the need for American churches to take part in the British-led movement to spread the Gospel to foreign lands, Mills initiated and guided the student movement that inspired Congregationalists to organize the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), was instrumental in the formation of the Foreign Mission School to educate indigenous people from abroad so that they could become ministers and missionaries in their homelands, and was a primary mover in the formation of the Presbyterians’ United Foreign Mission Society. On the domestic front, his two missionary trips to the American West drew attention to the spiritual deprivation on the frontier and motivated evangelicals to develop specific plans to provide ministerial support and Bibles to the peoples of that region. Finally, Mills’s sojourns in the South made him painfully aware of the miserable physical and spiritual condition of the slaves there, causing him to work to create a school to prepare African Americans for ministry and to join the nascent movement to end slavery in America. All of this he accomplished in a span of less than ten years. So while Mills may not have served on a mission field, his tireless work to organize and support a variety of organizations to assist missionaries in their work of preaching the Gospel, both at home and abroad, was foundational to the success of the movement.

Mills’s Early Days and Education

Samuel J. Mills Jr. was born April 21, 1783, in Torrington (now part of Torrington), Connecticut, the last of seven children of Samuel and Esther Robbins Mills. His father was a respected Congregational minister, noted revivalist, and occasional home missionary to the wilds of Vermont. His mother was a devout Christian who dedicated the life of her youngest son to religious service and worked diligently to steer him in that direction. As a youth, Mills was inspired by the lives of missionaries John Eliot and David Brainerd, and after a prolonged two-year conversion experience, he dedicated his life to missions in 1801, prepared for college at Morris Academy, and entered Williams College in the spring of 1806 to prepare for the ministry. In August of that year Mills led the famous Haystack Prayer Meeting. There, under a stack of hay during a violent thunderstorm, a group of five young men dedicated their lives to the cause of missionary work in a foreign land. In 1808 Mills attracted a group of missions-minded young men and formed the for-a-time famous Society of Brethren. Buoyed by the mantra “We can do it if we will,” interest in foreign missions began to spread across the campus. After graduation, Mills and the Brethren moved on to Andover Theological Seminary for their theological training. There they formed the Society of Inquiry on the Subject of Mission to plan and promote the cause of foreign missions. Out of this society would emerge the original band that became the first American missionaries sent by the ABCFM. Though not as well-known today as it was a century ago, the group that formed around Mills and called themselves the Society of Brethren were the impetus for the creation of the first U.S. foreign missionary organization and an inspiration to the early foreign missionary movement in general.

Crucial to understanding Mills’s contribution to missions is his New Divinity theology. First encountering this theology through the preaching of his father, Mills was thoroughly indoctrinated through his study at Williams College, a bastion of New Divinity theology. Sometimes referred to as “Hopkinsianism” for its founder, Samuel Hopkins, the New Divinity theology was a modified version of Calvinism known for its emphasis on “disinterested benevolence” – a devotion to God that demanded willingness to be damned to hell if it would lead to the greater glory of God. Such selfless dedication helps to explain the frenetic pattern of service undertaken by Mills during his brief life and suggests an answer to the mystery of why the man who set in motion the American foreign missionary movement never served as a foreign missionary himself.

American Foreign Missionary Movement Origins

American foreign missions began in the summer of 1810, when Mills, James Richards, and Luther Rice (all members of the Breth-
ren), along with fellow seminarians Samuel Nott, Samuel Newell, and Adoniram Judson, joined together to petition the General Association of Congregational Churches to fund their plan for an American missionary presence in Asia. After soliciting the advice of the Reverends Samuel Spring and Samuel Worcester and Professor Moses Stuart of Andover Theological Seminary, Rice and Richards, who had another year of study left, were omitted to increase the chances that the General Association would shoulder the financial burden. In late June the remaining four men made a formal request for support at a meeting of the General Association, which led to the formation of the ABCFM. Within two weeks of the General Association’s commitment to the young seminarians, Mills was replaced by Gordon Hall as the fourth missionary. The official record of the ABCFM is silent on the matter, but a number of theories have been advanced to explain this mysterious transaction. Some claim Mills was in poor health, others note that he had not completed his course of study at Andover, while still others claim the Brethren decided that he could better serve the cause as a promoter and recruiter. While all such explanations seem plausible, a better explanation rests with willingness on Mills’s part, in line with the New Divinity theology by which he had been formed in college and seminary, to do whatever was needed to advance the cause of foreign missions. We may surmise that Mills, recognizing that his friend Gordon Hall was better prepared and qualified to serve in the first missionary contingent, selflessly gave up his appointment for the greater glory of God.

Nor was this the only time Mills put the needs of missions ahead of his own desires. After the first contingent of missionaries was sent, a second was planned but then was delayed because of the outbreak of the War of 1812. During the war the ABCFM selected and trained the next group, which included Mills. When peace came in 1815, the board was ready to dispatch the second party, but once again Mills was removed from the list at the last minute. This time he clearly had asked to be relieved of his appointment so as to assume the work of Edward Warren, who had come down with an illness and was advised not to undertake a planned arduous journey to the American West. As it turned out, Mills’s sacrifice turned his life in another direction, for his talents were drawn off into the movement to form a national Bible society, and away from his goal of becoming a missionary.

Mills also was instrumental in the formation of a number of other foreign missions organizations. The Sandwich Islands Mission and the Foreign Mission School of the ABCFM owe their origin to Mills and his friendship with Henry Obookiah. A native of the Sandwich Islands, Obookiah had fled the islands after his family was killed during an intertribal quarrel. Arriving in Connecticut, he determined to get theological training so that he could return to his people to preach the Gospel. Mills met Obookiah during a visit Mills made to Yale in 1809. Inspired by the young Hawaiian, Mills lobbied for the creation of a school to educate young men like Obookiah. The result was the Foreign Mission School at Cornwall, Connecticut. Although neither Mills nor Obookiah lived to see it, the work of Mills and the inspiring story of Obookiah eventually led to the formation of the Sandwich Islands Mission. Mills was also a prime mover in the formation of the United Foreign Missionary Society. After his tours of the West, he moved about the Middle states urging other denominations to take up the cause of foreign missions. He was most influential in Presbyterian circles, helping to devise the plan, and lobbying countless hours, for the formation of the United Foreign Missionary Society, which became a reality in 1818.

Home Missions and Related Endeavors

The foreign missionary movement was part of a much broader reform movement that swept the nation in the first half of the nineteenth century. For evangelicals, the primary focus in the early stages of the antebellum reform movement was salvation of the lost, both here and abroad. The primary means of evangelization came through the foreign and home missionary societies. Supplementing these missionary organizations was a cadre of voluntary associations that supported the work of evangelism by providing Bibles to instruct the new converts in the ways of faith, tracts to supplement preaching, Sunday Schools to convert and train the young, and education societies to underwrite the cost of ministerial training for pious but indigent young men who aspired to the ministry. As important as Mills was to the foreign missionary movement, he was just as valuable to the formation of national societies dedicated to home missions and the distribution of Bibles.

After graduating from Andover Theological Seminary in 1812, Mills undertook two missionary tours (1812–13 and 1814–15) to the American West and South. On his first missionary tour, sponsored by the Massachusetts Missionary Society and the Connecticut Missionary Society, Mills and his traveling partner, Rev. John F. Schermerhorn, did some preaching and a lot of reconnoitering to assess the spiritual condition and needs of the inhabitants of the West. Beginning in New England, the two men made their way through New York and Pennsylvania on to Ohio, then down through Kentucky, Tennessee, and on to the port of New Orleans. From there, they made their way across the South and headed north through the Carolinas and Virginia to New England, thus completing a grand tour of much of the United States as it then existed. Everywhere they went they found a dearth of Bibles, ministers, and churches; a lack of respect for the Sabbath; and a general disregard among the inhabitants of the West for the condition of their souls. What existed in abundance was proflanity, gambling, drinking, and fighting. Upon his return to the East, Mills published a report of his travels and began soliciting local missionary and Bible societies to raise funds to send men and Bibles to the West to remedy this disheartening situation. Through these pleas he gained the backing of the Massachusetts Missionary Society, the Philadelphia Missionary Society, and the Philadelphia Bible Society for the purchase of 5,000 French Bibles, hundreds of English Bibles, and 15,000 tracts, as well as the resources to underwrite the cost of a second journey.

His second trip followed much the same path as the first, with the addition of a stop in St. Louis. This time Mills and his partner, Rev. Daniel Smith, came bearing Bibles and tracts to distribute among the spiritually destitute. They also preached the Gospel and organized Bible societies in the communities they visited. As a result of Mills and Smith’s reconnaissance, the churches in the East learned that most of the citizens of the West still did not have access to ministers, churches, or Bibles. Upon his return in 1815 Mills focused on the need for a national Bible society.

In 1814 Elias Boudinot had tried, with scant success, to unite the local and state Bible societies into a unified whole that could better coordinate the publication and distribution of Bibles. But of the nearly one hundred Bible societies polled, only twenty were willing to participate in the creation of a larger organization. Boudinot received the boost he needed when Mills published the report of his second missionary journey. Characterizing the West and its religious life as the “valley of the shadow of death,” Mills was able to persuade the New Jersey, New York, and Philadelphia Bible societies to band together to form a national organization to...
meet the dire need for Bibles in the frontier regions of the United States. As a result of his appeals, the American Bible Society was formed in January 1816.\(^4\)

Although he never lived to see it come to fruition, the work of Mills and his associates proved foundational for the formation of a national home missionary society that would serve the needs of people in frontier regions. Prior to his trip the churches of New England and New York had formed local domestic missionary societies, but these focused on the needs of the frontier regions of their own states and not the unsettled territories beyond their borders. The reports of Mills and his associates describing the dismal spiritual condition of the inhabitants of the West led to an awakening in the churches of the East that ultimately led in 1826 to the formation of the American Home Missionary Society.\(^5\)

Both of his missionary tours to the West included a trip through the South, bringing Mills into contact with the institution of slavery and the spiritual plight of African Americans. Finding slaves without Bibles or ministers and living in inhumane conditions, Mills tried to remedy both. He began with the spiritual, working to found the School for Educating Colored Men so as to prepare African American ministers to meet the spiritual needs of slaves in America and to serve as missionaries to Africa. Mills also was instrumental in the formation of the American Colonization Society (ACS), the first national organization dedicated to ending slavery. The ACS planned to eliminate slavery gradually by purchasing slaves and sending them back to Africa. Mills was chosen by the society to go to Africa to scout out a tract of land that would serve as the new homeland for newly freed slaves. This mission proved to be his last. On the return voyage, he became ill and died, but not before he had completed the task of identifying a homeland for the ACS to which it could send recently freed American slaves.\(^6\)

### Conclusion

Despite his work for a variety of causes, Mills never lost his desire to become a foreign missionary. From 1815 until his untimely death in 1818, he continued to sign his correspondence...
“missionary brother” and had to be cajoled by Gordon Hall into keeping up his recruitment efforts.7 With characteristic self-denial, Mills never complained about his disappointment until his fateful final trip to Africa, when he unburdened himself to his traveling mate, Ebenezer Burgess. With great emotion, Mills confessed to Burgess that he still longed to settle in some remote village, preaching the Gospel to those who did not know it. As Burgess wrote, “He was probably disappointed that he was not approved and sent out as missionary with his best friends, Hall and Newell. He once alluded to it, but said that it was now the height of his ambition to be the pastor of any little church in the outskirts of our country, that he might feed a few of the sheep and the lambs of Christ’s flock.” It seems unfortunate that the visionary and inspiration for this great work was denied the realization of his dream to serve as an American foreign missionary. However, if one views Mills as a man who lived by the New Divinity ideal of “disinterested benevolence,” willingly sacrificing his personal ambition to do the needed work for the advancement of the kingdom of God, the self-sacrificing contours of his life make sense.

**Selected Bibliography**

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1813  
*Communications relative to the Progress of Bible Societies in the United States.* Philadelphia: Philadelphia Bible Society.

1814  

1815  

**Works about Samuel J. Mills Jr.**


**Notes**


15. Foster, *Errand of Mercy*, 183–84. Foster argues that Mills’s report provided the “larger objective” for the formation of such a society.


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