CONFLICTS and HARDSHIPS ENDURED to SPREAD the GOSPEL:
NEBRASKA’S EARLIEST MISSIONARIES

Spreading the Gospel had not been high on the Episcopal Church’s list of priorities in the years immediately following the Revolution and establishment of the Protestant Episcopal Church. During that era, the greater concern of clergymen was to simply keep the new American denomination alive. Animosity toward England and the Anglican Church extended to the new Episcopal Church, which had no more than 200 clergymen and few communicants; no more than one person out of each 400 people in America was an Episcopalian. Existing church buildings pre-dated establishment of the new denomination, and most either had been badly damaged in the war or were in dire need of maintenance. Additionally, since the new American Constitution separated church and state, building construction and maintenance, as well as clergy salaries, had to be paid from Church coffers – not those of the colonial governments, as had formerly been the case. Most parishes, and even the first dioceses, lacked the funds to compensate their clergy and pay other expenses, such as building repairs. Even the inestimable Bishop William White, one of America’s first three bishops, continued to serve as rector of Christ Church in Philadelphia, from which he took his salary, while he ministered to communicants as Bishop in the Diocese of Pennsylvania – which had almost no budget. Thus over a decade into the nineteenth century, Episcopal clergy had made no nationally co-ordinated effort to send Episcopal missionaries onto the frontier.

However, by the turn of the nineteenth century, the need for missionaries in frontier regions was clear. The September 1792 General Convention passed a resolution recommending that, on the first Sunday in September each year, all ministers in all churches preach a sermon about church mission and the need for missionaries. Additionally on that Sunday, the minister and the vestry in every church were to designate that an offering be collected which would be used “to carry into effect this charitable
design.” This essentially left mission work to each individual diocese, and the plan was discontinued after three years. At the General Convention in 1820, a committee in favor of establishing a missionary society put forth a constitution for such a body that was approved by the House of Bishops. The new group was called “The Protestant Episcopal Missionary Society in the United States, for Foreign and Domestic Missions.” No missionary was to be employed in any organized diocese. Over the next fifteen years, foreign missions were undertaken through the society, but domestic missions remained the initiative of individuals and individual dioceses. By 1835, the Church acknowledged that mission should not be a branch of the Church, but the responsibility of the whole Church. Every member of the Church was therefore also a member of the Missionary Society – meaning that no one needed to pay dues to belong, as had been the practice of the English Church. At the General Convention that year the Board of Missions was established to oversee “the general missionary operations of the Church, with power to establish missionary stations, appoint missionaries, make appropriations, . . .” and in general, administer the work of spreading the Gospel. At that same convention, the Church elected its first missionary bishop, Rev. Jackson Kemper, rector of St. Paul’s Church, Norwalk, Connecticut. In the sermon at his consecration on September 25, 1835, Rt. Rev. George Washington Doane, Bishop of New Jersey, first defined the role of Missionary Bishop because, until that date, the Episcopal Church had no such position. He described the office this way:

   a Bishop sent forth by the Church, not sought for of the Church – going before, to organize the Church, not waiting till the Church has partially been organized – a leader, not a follower, in the march of the Redeemer’s conquering and triumphant Gospel.

The rubric to that sermon added this caveat: “No diocese in our communion should be allowed to proceed to the election of a Bishop until there had been duly settled in it six presbyters in charge of parishes for one year, and until there should also be six parishes duly organized.” Although both
Missouri and Indiana had already achieved statehood, neither jurisdiction had enough Episcopal communicants – or parishes – to constitute a diocese, and both were therefore eligible for supervision as missionary districts. That rule was altered several times, but the 1859 Triennial wrote simply that a diocese could be established only after it included thirty presbyters and fifteen self-supporting parishes.

Between the establishment of the first missionary district in 1835, and creation of the Missionary District of the Northwest in 1859, across the West, multiple territories were organized and opened to settlement, and regions that were once territories became states. Bishop Kemper’s first two territorial assignments, Indiana and Missouri, became independent dioceses in the 1840s. But Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin were organized, first as territories and then states, so although the borders of his missionary district changed, Bishop Jackson Kemper continued as the only Missionary Bishop and the region he administered remained vast. Although Nebraska Territory was organized and opened to settlement by non-natives in June 1854, it was not included in any existing missionary district, so theoretically there were no Episcopal missionaries working in the territory. A missionary district could only be established by the General Convention, and a proposal was placed on the agenda of the 1856 General Convention. Although both houses acknowledged “the expediency of constituting a new Missionary jurisdiction, to be composed of Nebraska and Kansas,” the lower house did not approve the measure, and Nebraska Territory remained without a church administrator until 1859. However in the interim, Presiding Bishop Thomas Brownell asked Bishop Kemper to supervise Church activities in Kansas, and Bishop Henry Lee of Iowa to administer the Church in Nebraska Territory. Despite its lack of missionary district status, from mid-1857 until the arrival of Bishop Joseph Cruickshank Talbot in April 1860, three very hardy Episcopal clergymen ministered under primitive and dangerous conditions to residents in the territory. The three were Rev. Eli Adams, Rev. Stephan Massoch, and
Rev. Melancthon Hoyt. Each of them was instrumental in establishing one or more parishes in the territorial era. The stories of the first two missionaries in Nebraska Territory follow.

Rev. Eli Adams

Rev. Eli Adams, then a resident of Iowa and attached to its diocese, was the first missionary in the territory. Described as “an elderly gentleman of delicate health, . . . kindly disposition and personally very attractive,” Rev. Adams was nearly sixty years old before he arrived in Nebraska Territory in 1857. By then, he had spent thirty years on the frontier as a missionary. Born in Peru, Massachusetts on January 24, 1797, Rev. Adams was schooled at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. After graduating from Massachusetts Theological Seminary at Andover in 1827, he became a missionary with the Home Missionary Society, an organization of Presbyterian, Congregational, and Dutch Reformed missionaries pledged to take the Gospel to poverty-stricken regions where the population could not afford to support a minister. His first appointment in October 1827, was in South Carolina. He gradually worked his way westward, spending some five years in upstate New York. By 1840, he had settled in Willoughby, Ohio. In September 1847, he attended the Annual Convention of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Ohio held in Zanesville, where he was one of four candidates for Holy Orders. He was ordained deacon at the close of the 1847 convention, and called to serve at St. Philip’s in Cuyahoga. From Ohio, he moved west to the Diocese of Illinois, and by 1857, he had been accepted by the Diocese of Iowa.

In 1857, Iowa Bishop Henry Lee asked Rev. Adams, then living in Burlington, Iowa, to come to Nebraska Territory to help set up a church in Florence, Nebraska; situated just north of Omaha, the town had been established on the site of the 1846-1848 Mormon Winter Encampment. Rev. Adams salary was paid in part by Davenport businessman Ebenezer Cook who had invested in the Florence
townsite. The aging missionary arrived in summer 1857, working until late in the year, during which time he established the parish of St. James’ in Florence. When it became apparent that the viable metropolis north of the Platte River on the Missouri’s west bank would be Omaha and not Florence, Bishop Lee asked Rev. Adams to move south to Nebraska City to inaugurate a parish there. The village of Nebraska City had grown on the west bank of the Missouri River at a spot that had long been used as a Missouri River crossing place for emigrants needing to move from Iowa to the territory that became Nebraska. When the Mormon War began in 1857, the federal government placed its Quartermaster Depot at Nebraska City as well – and the town quickly bustled, surpassing Omaha City in population by 1860. After initiating a small congregation in the oldest part of the community, late in the summer, Rev. Adams went back to his home in Burlington, Iowa.

Returning to Nebraska in early 1859, the missionary raised funds for construction of a building, as well as for the donations of sacred vessels and vestments. His wife and youngest daughter soon joined him in Nebraska Territory. After Missionary Bishop Joseph Cruickshank Talbot arrived in 1860, the missionary traveled with the new prelate, who referred to Rev. Adams as the “excellent and venerable missionary at Nebraska City,” on his first missionary trip into the southern territory near the Kansas Territory line. The Nebraska City parish had a large active, congregation where, in addition to the necessary pastoral work, Father Adams also directed the ecclesiastical education of another early Nebraska Territory clergyman, Rev. Issac Hagar. In April 1861, Rev. Hagar was the first deacon ordained in the territory.

The region, as yet so sparsely settled that it made life arduous, took its toll on Rev. Adams’ health. By 1862, he reported being periodically “unwell.” In February 1863, he was “too unwell to attend church.” In fact, his wife Sarah had died on December 18, 1862. Her funeral was held at St.
Mary’s, but her body was returned to Lakeview Cemetery in Cleveland, Ohio, for burial. On August 4, 1864, Rev. Adams resigned, returning to Ohio, where he died on March 30, 1876. He was buried along side his wife.

Rev. Stephen Massoch

Rev. Massoch was called to minister to the German speaking populations in America. Born in Hungary in 1797, Rev. Massoch was first trained as a surgeon in his native country. He married in Hungary, where he and his wife Marie had two children. When the children were still pre-teens, Dr. Massoch immigrated to the United States, arriving in New York harbor on September 18, 1850. The Massochs spent some time in New York, where the surgeon became acquainted with two clergymen in the Diocese of New York, Rev. Drs. Turner and Crusé. Probably because Dr. Massoch was Bohemian and spoke German fluently, the clergymen encouraged his emigration to St. Louis were there was a large German-speaking population. By 1854, Dr. Massoch was living in St. Louis where he met the rector of Christ Episcopal Church, Rev. Montgomery Schuyler, and several of St. Louis’ Episcopal clergymen to discuss the probability of translating a Book of Common Prayer into German. Rev. Schuyler described Dr. Massoch’s effort as that of “a reformed Romish priest,” seeking “reception into the ministry of the Church,” working “among the Bohemians as a missionary, all of whom are Romanists, and with but one Bible in their own language.” Collectively the group of clergy offered Dr. Massoch about $500 per year for his missionary efforts and work on the translated Prayer Book. On November 21, 1854, Dr. Massoch was received as a priest at ordination ceremonies in Christ Episcopal Church in St. Louis. At the next annual convention in May 1855, Missouri Bishop Cicero Stephens hawks described Rev. Massoch thusly:
An aged man, of no ordinary learning and ability, well tried and approved among his old friends, . . . acknowledging with a hearty earnestness, the errors of his past bondage, . . . promising with an unmistakeable [sic] zeal, to minister in our pure branch of the Church Catholic for the souls of men. . . . the Rev. Dr. Massoch came commended to me from New York by some of our most valued brethren, and that his special commendation to me, . . . came from two valued presbyters of the Diocese, . . . and also from the Rev. Drs. Turner and Crusé of the Diocese of New York.

Rev. Massoch’s work among the German population in St. Louis was extensive. In his 1855 report, the priest noted that some twenty-five Bohemian Roman Catholic “families had abandoned their antiquated Jewish and Heathen ceremonies and other fascinations.” German, Polish, and Silesian families also joined the Church. Father Massoch also distributed Bohemian and German Bibles, as well as “One thousand copies of our Common Morning Prayers, and six hundred copies of the Domestic Family Prayers . . . printed in the Bohemian language.” As he would later do in Nebraska Territory, Rev. Massoch opened a school during the winter months for sixty-eight Bohemian and German children. He was still using his medical skills as well to assist the immigrants; in fact he was listed in the 1857 St. Louis City Directory as a physician. To others “in the uttermost need and distress,” he offered clothing, stoves, wood, and food. In 1856, his report indicated that he continued to offer medical attention to the ill. However, his mission had no building, so he preached in communicants’ homes. Equally as detrimental to his work was the fact that many of the Bohemian converts were unable to find work, and were settling in small communities beyond St. Louis.

By 1857, his mission was functioning from a “Presbyterian Sunday School, on the Soulard Market, which is the very centre of all the foreign population here.” And he noted that “prospects . . . are brightening.” However, later in the year, the missionary sounded a more ominous tone. His small congregation needed a church building; that “being very poor, cannot support a minister,” “that this poor congregation desires from their minister not only the word of God, but also temporal assistance, as
visitations in their sickness, remedies for their diseases, and Christian burials, gratis.” He added that, for his work in translations of the Prayer Book, “he owes his creditors 250 dollars.” He then called on Church administrators to “send us forth double the force in the field.” No record of his work in St. Louis over the next two years remains, however the 1859 St. Louis City Directory described Dr. Massoch as a “missionary” operating from a small building at “Decatur near Lafayette.” His son Stephen was also still in the city, working as a librarian in the Mercantile Library. On March 1, 1860, Rev. Massoch was transferred to Nebraska Territory. This meant that his meager salary would now be paid by the Board of Missions. From the harsh immigrant conditions in St. Louis, he moved to Arago in the far southeast corner of the territory, then sparsely settled and exceedingly primitive. He was then 63 years old.

The southeast corner of Nebraska Territory fared well during the era of steamboat transportation along the Missouri River, and several small communities in Richardson County thrived during the era, albeit briefly, including Arago. Laid out by Germans, the Nebraska Territorial legislature approved the acts of incorporation as a city on January 10, 1860. In his early reports from Arago, Rev. Massoch was very pleased with the progress he made after his arrived with his family in April 1860. By the time Missionary Bishop Joseph Cruickshank Talbot made his first trip into the southern part of his district in September 1860, Rev. Massoch, was constructing a building of logs for use as both church and school. The number of students fluctuated between twenty-five and forty, and he worked with them six hours every day, assisted by his son. He believed that the presence of the school grounded the population, who would have rapidly scattered without the institution. Although, the winter of 1860 was exceedingly harsh, school for the students and services for the town’s inhabitants continued unabated – and in the same building, which was being rapidly outgrown. The
families paid $5 for each of their students, and town entrepreneur Stephen Story provided a lot for
construction of, and offered $150 toward building materials for, a larger church structure. But even
with the tuition from the anticipated additional emigrant families, the funds to construct any new,
larger building were insufficient. “The rest must be expected from abroad,” wrote Dr. Massoch. Just
as in St. Louis, Rev. Massoch felt called to minister to all the residents of the region, a fact of concern
to the bishop. His ministry “was not as entirely Church work as I would wish.” Lutherans, Roman
Catholics, and German Reformed churchmen were all members of his congregation. But – there was
no other church or clergyman, and noted Bishop Talbot on his visit there in April 1862, the Episcopal
priest was “highly respected, and, I trust, will be able in time, and under God’s blessing, to bring them
under ‘one fold’, under the ‘one Shepherd.’”

Rev. Massoch continued to work in his school and to conduct services on Sundays. As more
emigrants moved into the region in 1863, the Hungarian priest determined to use the fourth Sunday
each month to visit “my scattered lambs in the country, as they are too far from town to attend here.”
By the time the Board of Missions presented their 1864 report, Rev. Massoch had resigned “for
personal reasons.” He was 67 years old. Little is known about Rev. Dr. Massoch’s whereabouts for
the next several years. In September 1868, the *Proceedings of the Council for the Diocese of
Nebraska* reported that he was living in Covington, Kentucky. In late 1869, he went to New York City
where he became ill in the Spring of 1870. As an aged priest, he was cared for in St. Luke’s Hospital,
founded by Rev. William Augustus Muhlenberg. He died there of meningitis on May 26, 1870; he is
buried in an unmarked grave in St. Michael’s Cemetery. Arago fared no better. Never more than a
village, by the late 1870s, the town had only some 300 residents. There were three general stores, one
drug store, one hotel, and a variety of necessary shops, such as those that sold wagons or implements.
The tiny town also had a cooper’s shop and that of a blacksmith, as well as a pork packing plant. But as river boat traffic died, and railroads were built to the north, Arago too died. Today no vestiges on the landscape remain of the old community.

It is difficult to comprehend the depth and intensity of the spiritual calls experienced by our early missionaries. The hardships braved by Bishop Joseph C. Talbot, by Rev. Eli Adams, and by Rev. Stephan Massoch – all to spread the Gospel to strangers in an unknown, uncharted land – are almost inconceivable to those of us who sit in comfortable homes and offices all week, venturing into a comfortable pew in our comfortable church buildings only on Sunday mornings. There is much to take away from their stories about who we are as Episcopalians, and the models left to us of their spiritual zeal and personal commitment to the challenges of undertaking God’s work.

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