Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society

The windows recently installed in the Boston University School of Theology Library celebrate the lives of the women that formed the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, founded on March 23, 1869, to assist missionaries across the world. One of the first countries they helped was India. Other countries soon to benefit from the society’s work, included China, Japan, Korea, Africa, Mexico, and South America. Some of the women were wives of faculty of the newly formed Boston Theological Institute. Soon the seminary would be the founding school of Boston University, chartered by the city of Boston in 1871. [Fig 1 and 2 Tremont Street Methodist Church, Wikipedia]
Tremont Street Methodist Episcopal Church

Tremont Street Methodist Episcopal Church was located at 740 Tremont Street in Boston, Massachusetts. It was built in 1862, based on a design by architect Hammatt Billings. The Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society Founders' windows were installed in 1889. The rest of the stained glass windows were installed in 1942 at the recommendation of Clementina Butler, daughter of Rev. William and Clementina Butler, and other members of the Tremont Street Methodist Church. A few of the windows are permanently installed here at Boston University School of Theology Library. The windows chosen for display were those that had some historical ties to Boston University and the New England Annual Conference Commission on Archives and History records’ collection housed in the library’s archives.

Tremont Street Methodist Church remained a Methodist congregation until the 1970s. During the 1970s, the New Hope Baptist Church took over the building. In 1996 the New England Annual Conference named the church a historic site. Later, the church was designated by the General Conference as a Heritage Landmark in 2000. The Heritage Landmark showcased its historical significance beyond the Annual Conference. In 2011, the church was purchased by a developer and transformed into condominiums. The windows were removed and saved through collaboration among the Boston University School of Theology, New England Conference Commission on Archives and History, New England United Methodist Historical Society, and the New England Conference United Methodist Women.

More information about the Tremont Methodist Church can be obtained by visiting the Boston University School of Theology Library Archives page devoted to New England Church Records collections. The library is the repository for the New England Annual Conference Commission on Archives and History records and books.

The Windows

In 1889, the first two commemorative, stained glass windows were installed in the Tremont Street Methodist Church. The two windows celebrating the founders of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society were placed at the back of the sanctuary above the front door of the church.
The windows honoring Rev. William and Clementina Butler, Mrs. Mehitable Baker, and Harriet Warren were installed in the room where the first meeting of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society was held on March 23, 1869. Many years later in 1942, Clementina Butler and Rev. Azariah Reimer decided to install additional windows in the church. They held the mutual hope that the stained glass windows would “preach” to visitors the story of the many women and men that were part of the Tremont Street Methodist Episcopal Church who had an impact on the city of Boston and the world. On March 23, 1942, Rev. Reimer told the story through a sermon about the windows and legacy of those featured in them.

The Women In The Windows

**Rev. and Mrs. Butler**

Rev. William and Clementina Butler were the first missionaries to bring Methodism to India. Their stained glass window contains the medallion featuring the Taj Mahal of Agra, an iconic landmark in India.

William and Clementina Butler were originally from Ireland. Butler immigrated in 1850 and Clementina soon followed. They were married in 1854. Just two years later, in 1856, the couple sailed to India to bring their Wesleyan Methodism to the people of India. They helped homeless and struggling people in India. Upon returning to the United States, Clementina spoke to groups of women about the work that needed to be done in India, while William spoke from the pulpit urging more support for missionaries. It was one of these stirring sermons delivered in 1869 that sowed the seeds for the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society. In March 1869, the society would be founded by Clementina Butler, Lois Parker, and other interested female members of the Tremont Street Methodist Church.
Dr. Dana Robert, Truman Collins Professor of World Christianity and History of Mission, and Director of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at, Boston University School of Theology, reflects on the details of the Butlers’ missionary work:

“After 1854 when Alexander Duff spoke at General Conference, the Methodist Church decided to send missionaries to India. The volunteers to found the mission were the Butlers. Unfortunately, the Butlers went at the time of the Sepoy rebellion and had to flee for their lives. They were shocked by the bodies of women in the Ganges River and determined to start educating girls in order to save them. Mrs. Butler was joined in this desire by other women missionaries, including Mrs. Lois Parker, who with her husband Edwin had attended the Concord Biblical Institute prior to sailing for India. They were on the same ship as future bishop, James Thoburn. Mrs. Butler, Mrs. Parker, and others then met in March 1869 to found what became the WFMS. Rev. Butler taught Sanskrit and India missions at the School of Theology soon after its founding.”

Read more about the Butlers and other mission-related people and topics on the History of Missiology website hosted by the Center for Global Christianity and Mission.

**Mrs. Bishop Osmon Baker**

Little is known about Mrs. Bishop Osmon Baker. We now know that her first name was Mehitable. She taught alongside Bishop Osmon Baker at Newbury Biblical Institute. She was a bright woman who expressed progressive views about the work her husband did as a minister, professor, dean of the Methodist General Biblical Institute in Concord, NH, and Bishop of the General Conference in 1852. Her letters can be found in the Boston University School of Theology Archives in the Bishop Osman Baker Collection.

Dr. Robert speaks to Mehitable’s impact,

“Mrs. Mehitable Baker, wife of the dean of the Methodist General Biblical Institute, was elected first president of the New England Branch of the WFMS. The women adopted a branch system i.e. decentralized branches that collaborated to send missionaries. She taught at the Newbury Biblical Institute, the predecessor institution to the Methodist General Biblical Institute, among other claims to fame.”
Harriet Merrick Warren

Mrs. Harriet Merrick Warren is remembered in her stained glass window with the medallion featuring a quill and paper reading, "Write for these words are true, and faithful," as she was the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society’s first Corresponding Secretary and Editor of the Society’s journal, *Heathen Woman’s Friend* later renamed, *Woman’s Missionary Friend*. She edited the journal until her death in 1893.

Harriet Merrick was born in Wilbraham, MA the daughter of a preacher and prominent member of Hampden County, John M. Merrick. Her father was a trustee of Wilbraham Academy where Dr. William Fairfield Warren, Harriet’s husband, attended school. Education was very important to the Merrick family. It is not surprising that Harriet pursued a degree from Wesleyan Academy and was able to speak several languages.

She married William F. Warren in 1861. William and Harriet Warren spent years in Germany, learning about the ways they educated students in that country. Dr. William F. Warren served as Missions-Anstalt for the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He brought many of the ideas, principles, and practices he was exposed to in Germany back to the Methodist General Biblical Institute in Concord, New Hampshire, where he taught. In 1867, the Biblical Institute moved to Boston, MA. In 1869, William F. Warren was part of the group of men that helped charter Boston University.

While William was away at Annual Conference, preaching, or working on the chartering a major university, Harriet was busy writing and advocating for women. She held executive positions on committees within the New England Annual Conference and in groups beyond the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, including the General Executive Committee of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Dr. Robert heralds her as major leader of “woman’s work for woman” in her 1996 publication, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice*. Additionally, she had these positive words of praise for Harriet, “When the women organized themselves, they founded a journal to keep contact among the branches and to promote their work. At the same time that the women were founding the missionary society, men were moving the Concord Biblical Institute to Boston to found Boston University, led by the School of Theology. Tapped to
be first president was the missionary William Warren. His wife Harriet became first editor of the journal *Heathen Woman’s Friend*, which she edited until her death in 1893. The journal always showed a profit. Mrs. Warren also was part of the team of women who appealed to the mission board to allow the existence of the national WFMS. She also helped found the New England Conservatory.”

You can view the papers of William Fairfield Warren at Boston University Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center. Some of Harriet’s papers are part of this archival collection. [Contact the Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center](#) to make an appointment to view these primary resources.

**Isabella Thoburn**

Isabella Thoburn was the first missionary that the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society sent overseas. She went to India, focused on improving educational opportunities for women in Lucknow, India. In 1871, she began a girls’ school in Lucknow and then a boarding school in Lal Bagh estate. During the 1880s, she returned to the United States lecturing about her mission work and teaching in Chicago at Chicago Training School for City, Home, and Foreign Missions. Later she returned to India to do more work in the mission field. In 1903, she found Lucknow Women’s College, later renamed in her honor, Isabella Thoburn College.

Dr. Robert relates the impact the New England and Philadelphia branches had on Isabella Thoburn’s work. “The New England Branch organized itself to send money for Bible women, and with the Philadelphia Branch to send two missionaries: Miss Thoburn (to join her brother James, as an educational missionary from New England), and Clara Swain, a medical doctor from Philadelphia. Thoburn founded what became the first college for women in Asia.”

Learn more about Isabella Thoburn in this biography that can be found in our [Research Collection](#).

**Clementina Butler**

Clementina Butler, daughter of Rev. William Butler and Clementina Butler, is commemorated in her stained glass window with the official seal of Mexico, featuring the eagle destroying a serpent. Her parents are honored in another window in this exhibition.
Clementina’s brother, John, served as a missionary in Mexico. Both children were influenced by an 1877 revival that took place at the Boston University School of Theology. Famed missionary, William Taylor, spearheaded this revival, convincing John, to get active in the Mexican mission field.

Clementina was the driving force behind the installation of the stained glass windows in the Tremont Street church in 1942. She supported mission work done by her brother, John, in Mexico and also founded the Committee on Christian Literature for Women and Children in Mission Fields in 1912. Clementina wrote missionary literature for women. She assisted and supported the work of mission work in India, too. She assisted the work of an Indian woman, Pandita Ramabai, who led a group of women in translating the Bible into the Marathi language. Ramabai learned Hebrew and Greek in order to translate the Bible for rural, Indian folk who found the classical style of other translations too difficult to read. The Bible in Marathi is the first one translated by a group of women.

Dr. Robert expands on Clementina Butler’s impact,

“After her return she was incredibly important on the home front, as chairwoman of the Ramabai society (to support the work of Pandita Ramabai), as a Co-founder of the Committee on Christian Literature for Women and Children, and national leader of women, and in New England Methodism in the early 20th century.”

See an original, first edition of the Bible in Marathi. It is part of the Massachusetts Bible Society Collection, one of the many biblical collections found in the School of Theology Library’s Research Collection.

**Deaconess Mary Lunn**

Mary Lunn is immortalized in the stained glass window with a medallion featuring the seal of the New England Deaconess Hospital. She was the first superintendent of the New England Deaconess Training School, securing the properties near Shawmut and Massachusetts Avenue in 1889, to provide the space for the training school and the hospital. In 1918, the school became part of the Boston University School of Religious Education and Social Service, the predecessor to the BU School of Social Work.
Mary was born in Racine, Wisconsin in 1854 to two local preachers in the Methodist Episcopal Church. During her formative years, she was a Sunday School teacher. She also immersed herself in all aspects of work within the Christian church. She began schooling for deaconess work while in Wisconsin around 1888. She left behind the formal, deaconess schooling a short time after starting, to begin working as a deaconess in Boston. She quickly became superintendent of the New England Deaconess Training School. Mary would stay in this post, dedicated to the cause of educating deaconesses and comforting the sick in Boston’s South End for twelve years. She would go on to work for two years in New York and then California, where she was superintendent of the Los Angeles Deaconess Home.

Dr. Robert provides some interesting context, highlighting the significance of Mary Lunn’s work, “The women at the deaconess school, and later SRE, were the first large body of women alums who can technically be seen as part of STH, including the first African-American women at STH. In 1890, the only women enrolled at STH were designated as “special students.” Many more women went to the Deaconess Training School. Harriet Warren was one of the founding trustees of the home and training school. In 1896, they and other Methodists, founded Deaconess Hospital.”

Experience more of the history of the New England Deaconess movement in the New England Annual Conference Commission on Archives and History Collection.

Resources

New England Annual Conference Archives, Boston University School of Theology
https://www.bu.edu/sthlibrary/archives/neccah/

New England Annual Conference Archives Finding Aids, Boston University School of Theology
http://sth-archon.bu.edu/

History of Missiology, Center for Global Christianity and Mission, Boston University School of Theology
https://www.bu.edu/missiology/

Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University
http://www.bu.edu/archives
The Bible in Marathi, BU Library Search Record


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