

'Not in our Neighborhood'



The SPGNA, American Indians, and the Turn to Foreign Missions in the Early Republic

Hazelnuts. That's what the girl at the door was selling. But why? Surely that question must have crossed the minds of white inhabitants in Norwich, Connecticut, when a young Indian girl presented her rather unusual wares. In the early 1840s, this Mohegan girl trekked the five miles from the Mohegan reservation north along the Thames River to Norwich, Connecticut, to sell her goods, likely from a basket that she had woven. Such peddling attempts by Natives were commonplace in the nineteenth century, but this particular girl had a special purpose. She was selling hazelnuts in order to collect an offering for the "American Board"—that is, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), founded by New England Congregationalists in 1810. Apparently the white minister of the Mohegan church, Anson Gleason, had visited her parents' home at Mohegan to solicit donations for the ABCFM and, lacking any money to offer, the daughter instead went into the forest and collected hazelnuts to sell in order to raise funds for "Foreign Missions." This Mohegan girl wasn't alone, however, in her fundraising efforts; her family often contributed half a dollar per year to the ABCFM collection, and the mixed white and Indian congregation at the Mohegan Church contributed an annual average of twenty-five dollars between 1836 and 1841.

Hazelnut-bearing North American Native youth as financial supporter of U.S. Protestant foreign missions? If this surprises us, it is perhaps because we haven't fully understood the continuities and changes within the larger history of missions in North America at the turn of the nineteenth century. At the most basic level, this episode hints at an essential continuity between prior colonial evangelization efforts by Euro-Americans among the indigenous populations of North America and the early-nineteenth century shift toward "foreign" or global missions. During the colonial period, the Mohegans and other New England Natives had repeatedly been evangelized by missionary societies based in the British Isles. The Mohegan Church (and the accompanying school) in the 1840s was a direct legacy of this colonial-era evangelization. And yet, in the opening years of the early republic (1783-1810), a slow shift was taking place, one that increasingly caused the eyes and prayers of Americans to look toward "foreign" fields of missionary service, however defined. And—as in prior eras of evangelistic activity—Native Americans were important to these efforts, in terms of providing historical models and ongoing inspiration and, in some cases, becoming participants and partners in supporting global missionary activity.

At the center of much of this early national activity was a missionary society that in itself embodied and facilitated these transitions: the Society for

Propagating the Gospel among Indians and Others in North America (SPGNA). Founded in 1787, it was the first missionary society in the new United States, predating the better-known ABCFM (1810) and even the New York Missionary Society (1796). In many ways, the SPGNA spanned an older colonial world and an emerging internationally minded early American republic. Its founding revealed the deeply politicized nature of such ongoing Indian evangelization in the early republic and the eventual turn toward global missions. The SPGNA also embodied the three primary (and overlapping) missionary impulses of the early nineteenth century: Native, domestic, and foreign. Precisely because it fills this strange void, the SPGNA is often overlooked in the history of Christian missions and missionary efforts (whether domestic or foreign) in the United States. Its members and founders—drawn from the elite of New England society—were humanitarians who hoped to spread literacy, education, and their particular brand of activist Congregationalism to all corners of the North American continent, and even beyond.

Although the SPGNA officially limited its scope to North America, its members clearly saw their missionary organization as part of a grand unfolding Protestant evangelistic drama that included domestic works of literacy and education right alongside missionary efforts in more remote locales around the globe. The sermons, publications, and foci of the SPGNA suggest that “foreign” missions did not necessarily mean “overseas.” Instead of a sharp division between “domestic” missions and “foreign” missions, the SPGNA’s records suggest that, from the perspective of 1787 or even 1800, much of the western regions of the North American continent were just as “foreign” as destinations like Africa or India. In short, this essay suggests that the notion of “foreign” was an unstable and constantly changing category. By the 1790s, there was a continuum of foreignness envisioned by East Coast humanitarians, one that started in the central and western portions of North America and ended in the more remote portions of the globe. The SPGNA, while often overlooked, served as a transitional missionary society, bridging an older, colonial Native-focused missionary effort and an emerging globally centered movement that had as its goal nothing less than the evangelization of the entire world.

One of the repeated themes from the reports and published sermons on the SPGNA in its first twenty years of operation was the intense difficulty—near impossibility—of successful Indian Christianization

The Society for Propagating the Gospel among Indians and Others in North America (or The Society with the Long Name, as later generations called it) had at least two origins. The most immediate and formal beginning was in 1787, when the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK; founded in Scotland in 1708) contacted a few leading ministers and philanthropists in Boston with a request. The SSPCK was in charge of some funds that were technically reserved for North American missions and, following American independence, its leaders felt that the money should be administered

by individuals or an organization based in the United States. The money, in fact, was largely the result of an enormously successful fundraising trip undertaken by the famous Mohegan Presbyterian minister Samson Occom. Between 1766 and 1768, Occom toured the British Isles, raking in over 12,000 pounds in contributions toward the evangelization and education of North American Natives. When Occom's sponsor, Eleazar Wheelock, used much of the money to found Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, in 1770, the SSPCK overseers of some of the funds declined to give Wheelock unrestricted access to the rest of it, since they—like Occom and others—disagreed with Wheelock's use of the funds.

This unexpected offer of funds from the SSPCK caused Massachusetts ministers and humanitarian-minded civic leaders to spring into action. In 1787, they petitioned the Massachusetts state legislature for a charter, which was given on November 19, 1787, for a "Society for Propagating the Gospel Among Indians and Others in North America." Largely Congregational, the SPGNA preceded the early revivals of the so-called Second Great Awakening in the 1790s. As such, it is not simply an example of a typical early nineteenth-century "evangelical" missionary or reform society (as perhaps with the founding of the ABCFM), but it did later benefit from and draw participation from revival-minded individuals. The SPGNA over time seemingly diverged theologically from the ABCFM and other conservative Protestant "evangelical" missionary societies. During the controversies over Unitarianism (the belief that only God the Father is fully God) and the ensuing church splits within Congregationalism, the SPGNA decided to draw equally from Unitarian and Trinitarian Congregational churches for its membership, a move that caused later commentators to assert that it had turned Unitarian, which was not entirely true.



"Norwich City, from the South," taken from History of Norwich, Connecticut, from its settlement in 1660 to January 1845, by Miss F.M. Caulkins (Norwich, 1845). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Click image to enlarge in a new window.

But the SPGNA was also rooted in the colonial period. In 1762, New England humanitarians had tried to incorporate their own missionary society, "The Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Indians in North America."

Although the Massachusetts governor and legislature approved its formation, the Board of Trade and Plantation in London revoked its corporate charter in 1763, largely under pressure from the Anglican archbishop and King George III, who argued it would interfere with the Anglican SPG's own missionary efforts in North America. This rejection would not quickly be forgotten. John Adams mentioned the interference of the SPG in his 1765 essay, "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law," and nearly 140 years later, in 1898, one SPGNA official suggested that perhaps this unilateral denial should have been mentioned in the Declaration of Independence: "He hath forbidden us to form societies for the conversion of the Indians." The continuities between 1762 and 1787 were clear: the name of the society only changed slightly, and seven of the proposed original 1762 founding society members were listed among the twenty-one founding members of the 1787 society.

Studies of American foreign missions have often supposed a sharp beginning in the U.S. with the founding of the ABCFM in 1810. But American Protestant missionary efforts were deeply embedded in a proximate colonial past and usually trailed missionary efforts out of England. (And to be sure, Protestant missionary efforts lagged far behind Catholic ones for centuries.) That is to say, American missionary societies in the early republic are best understood as being intimately connected to both the colonial period and to European missionary efforts, particularly those in England and Germany. From the perspective of people on the ground, and from the longer vantage point of the historian, the ABCFM was simply yet another Protestant missionary society for work in "foreign" fields. In the years prior to the American Revolution, several main missionary societies were formed and operated out of the British Isles. These included: the New England Company (1649; rechartered in 1662; Independent/Congregationalist); the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (1698; Anglican); the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (1701; Anglican); and the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (1708; Presbyterian).

Consequently, Anglo-American men and women were no strangers to "foreign missions," even in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Stories of Catholic missionaries circulated throughout the Atlantic, often involving caricatured methods used by Jesuits and Franciscans in the Americas to Christianize indigenous populations. English Protestants might have been critical of such activity (as conducted by Catholics), but they were nonetheless incredibly aware of it. Roger Williams, for example, in his *Christenings Make Not Christians* (1645), articulated (and criticized) a widely held caricature of global Catholic missions as falsely baptizing tens of thousands of Natives, a critique Cotton Mather and others repeated well into the eighteenth century.

But more positive models of global missionary efforts also circulated in the early eighteenth century. In the 1710s, missionary-minded Protestants in America and England eagerly read reports of the evangelistic efforts by pietistic Lutherans in the Danish colony of Tranquebar on the eastern coast of

the sub-continent of India. Reports of the missionary successes there first circulated in 1709 as *Propagation of the Gospel in the East: being an account of the success of two Danish missionaries, lately sent to the East-Indies, for the conversion of the heathens in Malabar*, with several subsequent editions through 1718. Copies of *Propagation of the Gospel in the East* reached Cotton Mather, the prolific, busybody Boston minister whose own correspondence included a far-flung range of European intellectuals. Mather promptly began corresponding with the author, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg. In 1718, John Ernest Grundler, another missionary in Tranquebar, sent Mather a Tamil New Testament.



Mohegan Church, Uncasville, Connecticut. Photograph by the author.

These foreign Protestant missionary efforts left a deep impression on Mather. When he was asked to preach a sermon before the NEC commissioners in 1720, Mather used a strategy that SPGNA sermons exhibited a century later: placing the evangelization of New England Natives alongside global Protestant efforts. While putting into print an admiring account of the efforts of John Eliot and Thomas Mayhew in New England, Mather included a description of the progress of the gospel in Tranquebar. His conviction that they were two parallel movements accomplishing the same goal must have been strengthened by actually holding in his hands the 1663 translation by John Eliot of the entire Bible into Massachusetts/Wôpanâak and the 1715 Tamil New Testament from the opposite side of the globe. Mather celebrated this global Protestant missionary effort as the "*glorious design of propagating our holy religion, in the Eastern as well as the Western, Indies.*" English ministers and magistrates kept tabs on and participated in more general Protestant missionary activity in the eighteenth century, including the NEC, the SSPCK, the Anglican SPG, the Moravians, and the efforts of other smaller evangelistically minded denominations, such as early Methodism. These missionary societies and denominations employed hundreds of individuals over the century before the American Revolution, some of which (the SPG and Moravians especially) served in global contexts, outside of English-

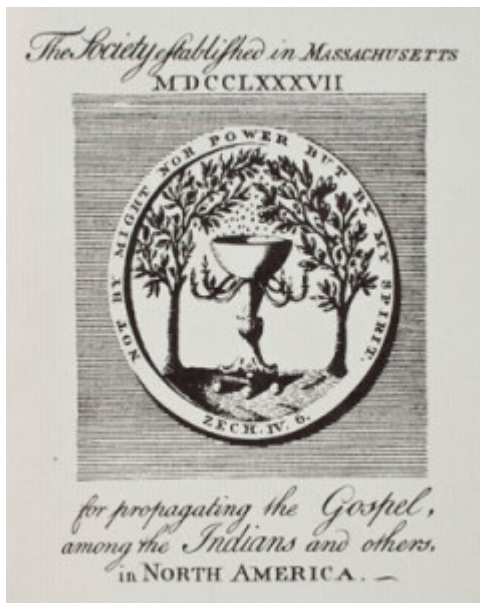
speaking regions.

The American Revolution put an end to much of the British-sponsored missionary activity in North America, especially in New England. The SPG was not welcome in the United States (particularly after the acrimonious debates over the Anglican attempts to install an American bishop in the 1760s, and the perceived role of the SPG), and the NEC largely redirected its funds to Canada after the American Revolution, although a very small trickle of money continued to older missionary locations in New England and New York until 1796. Beginning in the early 1790s, British Protestants began turning their eyes toward other foreign lands, especially those in the East Indies. In 1792, English Baptists formed the Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen, and in 1795, the non-denominational London Missionary Society was founded. William Carey, one of the first missionaries sponsored by the Particular Baptist Society and sent to Calcutta, India, was especially influenced by the writings of colonial North American missionaries to Natives, including David Brainerd and John Eliot.

But American independence also stimulated humanitarian activity and organization in the United States. Even as American Protestants kept tabs on English missionary developments, by 1800, dozens of states, towns, and denominations had pulled together domestic aid and missionary societies that worked among local and distant populations. The earliest ones (after the SPGNA) included the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen (founded by the Moravians and incorporated in Pennsylvania in 1788), the New York Missionary Society (1796), the Northern Missionary Society (1797), the Philadelphia Missionary Society (1798), the Missionary Society of Connecticut (1797), and the Massachusetts Missionary Society (1799). The SPGNA stood as the earliest of such missionary societies, prompted into action by a Scottish foreign missionary society and enacted by local humanitarians who had a long history of colonial evangelization of Native nations.

In North America, the public revival of missionary efforts to Native Americans through the SPGNA after the American Revolution was surprisingly politicized in a variety of ways. On the one hand, these early missionary societies valorized the prior generations of English missionaries in New England—John Eliot, Thomas Mayhew Sr., Daniel Gookin, David Brainerd—whom they largely saw as successful in their efforts. The wider public saw it differently, however. Many Americans in New England viewed past missionary efforts as a waste of time and resources. Consequently, early SPGNA public notices and announcements had a defensive tone and quality to them, as if they were trying to win over a highly skeptical public. An SPGNA notice in the *Independent Chronicle* in 1791 stated that it was “well aware of the difficulties, which attend the gospeling the Indians, and the prejudices against the attempt, which the expenditure of vast sums in the ineffectual pursuit of this object, have excited in the public mind.” SPGNA leaders countered such pessimism by proposing a “hitherto unattempted” methodology, that of educating Indian children in religion, practical trades, and “the various arts of civilization and domestic life.” In fact, however,

nothing about this plan was new at all, as the SPGNA leaders must surely have known. Schools had been central to Native evangelistic efforts in New England from the mid-seventeenth century and were ongoing in various Indian communities in New England and New York, even as this SPGNA notice was being printed. Perhaps to win over a greater following (and funding), the SPGNA also spent considerable time describing the planned practical outreach to poor rural whites in New England, a plan they implemented in subsequent years.



The original 1787 seal of the society, with the biblical and symbolic theme of evangelism as gathering in the harvest. Cover, "Handbook of the Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Indians and Others in North America, 1787-1964," Richard D. Pierce, ed. (Boston, 1964). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

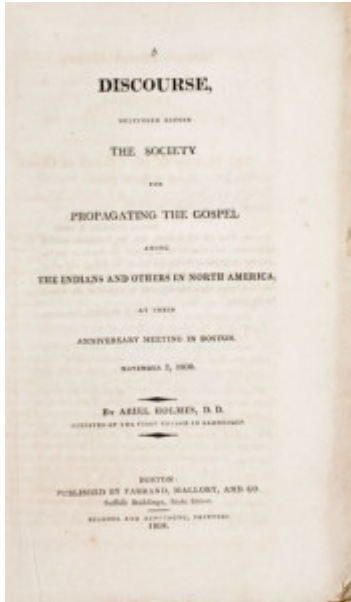
In fact, one of the repeated themes from the reports and published sermons on the SPGNA in its first twenty years of operation was the intense difficulty—near impossibility—of successful Indian Christianization. And in 1804, when John Lathrop preached the first annual sermon to the members and interested parties of the SPGNA, he was surprisingly frank: "Although the Society has given all the aid in its power, towards the support of Missionaries among the Indians, it cannot say, that much good hath resulted from that part of its labours," he confessed. Still, such dour assessments were almost always countered by optimism, in part by looking at past successes of missionaries, and by thinking about current global efforts by other denominations and societies. SPGNA leaders also justified their ongoing efforts by saying that even if only one soul was saved, the efforts would be worthwhile: "If the *value* of one soul is far greater than of all the treasures and glories of the world, surely the *salvation* of one, and especially of a number, must be an ample recompense for all the arduous and expensive means, which have been employed for its accomplishment."

Some New England observers disagreed with Indian evangelization for other reasons, however: they saw it as deeply hypocritical. As the eminent statesman Samuel Dexter Jr. wrote to Peter Thacher on June 14, 1788, just one year after the founding of the SPGNA, “[The Indians] are now, as they ever have been, deceived and defrauded by public bodies, as well as individuals. And, while things remain so, should national, or particular governments, whether European or American, call upon their people to pray for the conversion of the Indians, it would be mocking of Heaven; and if attempts should be made by any of them to effect it by sending missionaries, it would be as irrational as for a cruel planter in the West Indies to discourse to his African slaves of the merciful and benign Spirit of the religion of Christ.” Most Native leaders would have agreed, as 200 years of prior critique of white colonialism had made clear. But Dexter was a minority voice on the issue, and West Indian planters and American land speculators alike found evangelization to be a useful tool in accomplishing their goals. And, despite his doubts, Dexter himself signed on as a member of the SPGNA and personally contributed to its work.

This public re-engagement with Indian missions had political resonances in other ways as well. The very year of the SPGNA’s founding, 1787, was the same year the Northwest Ordinance was signed, which triggered a decade-long battle of resistance against U.S. westward expansion by a wide collection of Native nations on the western edges of the United States. Article Three of the Northwest Ordinance contained impossibly idealistic language regarding the treatment of Native Americans:

The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and in their property, rights and liberty, they never shall be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorised by Congress; but laws founded in justice and humanity shall from time to time be made, for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with them.

Despite professions to the contrary, the Northwest Territory ended up being a massive land grab that involved the invasion of Indian lands and the conquest of sovereign Indian nations. But the federal government’s vision for Native Americans in these territories very much lined up with the missionary fantasies of instilling “Religion, morality and knowledge,” along with good government, schools, and education. SPGNA leaders were well aware of this larger continental context and even quoted from the Northwest Ordinance. And in their original petition to the Massachusetts state legislature in 1787, the founders of the SPGNA highlighted the political importance of Native missions. Of widespread concern was the fact that “the British are practicing every art to induce the Indians to retire from among us, into the more interior parts of the continent, that they may secure to themselves exclusively the benefits of the fur trade, and their alliance in any future rupture.” The SPGNA, then, would counter these devious British designs by more securely allying Native nations within the boundaries of the United States to U.S. interests.



Title page, A Discourse, delivered before the Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Indians and Others in North America, at their Anniversary Meeting in Boston, November 3, 1808, by Abiel Holmes, D.D., Minister of the First Church in Cambridge (Boston, 1808). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

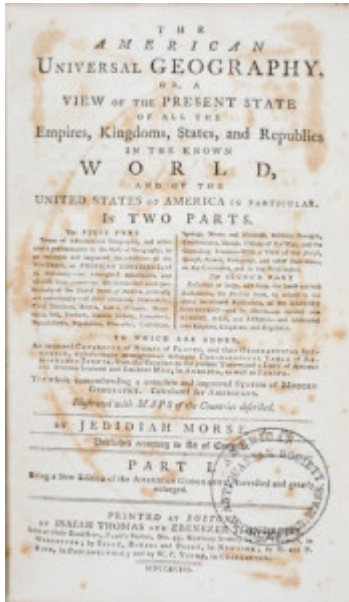
All of this sheds light on why local governments and the U.S. federal government actively promoted and funded missionary efforts among Indian nations in the early republic, particularly more numerous western ones. Likely the very first instance of this was the SPGNA, which for the first decade or so of its existence received 150 pounds each year directly from the state government of Massachusetts. Massachusetts Governor John Hancock signed his name (less famously, perhaps, than to the Declaration of Independence) to a proclamation in 1788 calling on state residents to "contribute according to their abilities" to the SPGNA. Later SPGNA sermons called on the Massachusetts legislature to renew their funding for Indian missions. In subsequent decades, the SPGNA even appealed directly to the U.S. Congress for aid in the education of Indian children, as it did in February 1817. Similarly, the ABCFM, founded in 1810, received \$2,500 from the U.S. federal government each year, a standing commitment that dried up only in the 1830s when ABCFM missionaries defied the 1830 Removal Act. Fascinatingly, the SPGNA's political importance was symbolized in its very meeting spaces at times: in the Massachusetts Senate chamber on January 3, 1788, and in the Suffolk County courthouse in May of that year.

After the revolution, Americans looked two directions simultaneously: westward and globally in a growing spectrum of "foreign." For the SPGNA, interest in Native Americans remained strong, but this interest shifted noticeably over time from local New England Native groups who were (wrongly) seen as largely invisible, unimportant, and dying out, to Native nations that were perceived to be larger, more militarily potent, less Christianized, and more important

politically. In the early years of its existence, SPGNA efforts focused (somewhat selectively) on Natives in Maine, on Martha's Vineyard, in Rhode Island, and in New York. In most cases, these were simply extensions of prior missionary outposts started in the colonial period under the NEC. The relative disdain for local Native groups can be felt even in the official sermons of the SPGNA. In 1808, Abiel Holmes addressed the members of the SPGNA and, after affirming the history of Native evangelization in New England by colonial missionaries, asserted that their focus should be elsewhere. "Where is the field of our labours?" Holmes queried, "Not in our neighbourhood, but in a distant wilderness."

Even as early as 1814, SPGNA missionaries were sent to "Western Indians." By 1843, the society deemed it "necessary to discontinue missions to the Indians of the Narragansett and other tribes, once flourishing but [then] rapidly disappearing in New England." That same year, money was set aside to hire a Native preacher and to support a boarding school among the Cherokees in the southeast, indicating a more decisive turn to more remote Indian nations in North America (and, in some ways, more closely mirroring the work of the ABCFM among North American Natives). By 1883, SPGNA missionaries had served in distant regions such as Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, western Canada, Washington State, and Dakota, among other places, in addition to East Coast locales.

In this way, international missionary societies seemingly envisioned the American Midwest and the western borderlands of North America as the outer fringes of "the world." That is to say, the line between the global and the western U.S. was increasingly blurred. It is not surprising that American missionary societies should so easily conflate American Indian and foreign missions. After all, for most of the colonial period, North America was very much a foreign mission field for British missionaries, as the name of the Anglican SPG indicated (Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts). Later observers noted this as well. In 1860, S. M. Worcester stated of early New England missions to Natives: "And now, what classifying or denominating term is it proper to apply to the missions of the first settlers of New England and their immediate descendants? Were not all these 'foreign parts?' Was it not all *heathen* ground, and so considered for a long period by Christians on both sides of the '900 league ocean?'"



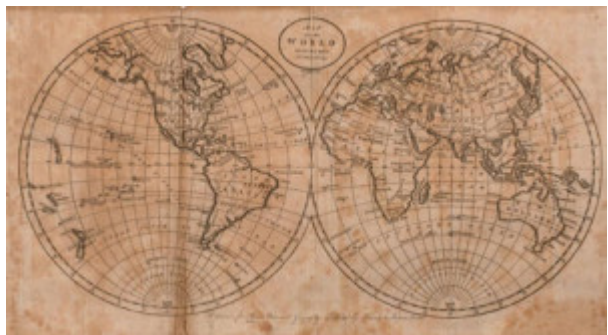
Title page, *The American Universal Geography, Or, A View of the Present State of All the Empires, Kingdoms, States, and Republics in the Known World, and of the United States of America in Particular: In Two Parts, Vol. 1*, by Jedidiah Morse (Boston, 1793). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

One person's foreign is another person's domestic, of course, but the notion of American Indians as belonging to a foreign "other" land was reinforced in the colonial period and aided in the blurring of lines by American independence between the North American west and the rest of the globe. To East Coast humanitarians in 1790 (as well as to soldiers who fought on the ground), the North American continent west of the Ohio River was an entirely foreign land, with large Native groups and sporadic outposts of Spanish, French, and English traders and old military forts. Even in the 1830s Sarah L. Huntington, who was then working among the Mohegans in Connecticut, noted to a friend regarding the views of the ABCFM, "You know all the Indians are regarded by that body as a foreign nation."

In fact, the ways that East Coast humanitarians surveyed, described, and assessed the moral vacuity of international lands echoed the descriptions and language regarding the relatively unorganized and unsettled western regions of the North American continent. As Amy DeRogatis has argued in *Moral Geography*, cartographic enterprises and publications by missionary-minded New Englanders always contained within them normative assessments of morality or its apparent lack. Jedidiah Morse, in his popular *The American Universal Geography*, quoted the 1787 Northwest Ordinance regarding the need for religious and educational order to be brought to that vast territory: "Religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." Morse might have found the culture and civilizations of China and India to be inherently more interesting than and superior to those of western Natives, but they were (in his view) still in need of the same religious salvation and moral uplift that only

Christianity could bring.

Within SPGNA reports and activities, one can observe the distinct shift in missionary strategy toward global awareness that was soon replicated in the dozens upon dozens of various missionary societies, most particularly in the ABCFM after its founding in 1810. Although in the early years of the SPGNA global evangelistic efforts were not necessarily a pressing concern for Boston humanitarians, within two decades that had changed entirely. Starting in 1804, the SPGNA sponsored public annual sermons for members and a wider public that were intended to raise support for and interest in a wide variety of Protestant missionary efforts, of which the SPGNA was a part. In the first decade of these annual public sermons, two main themes stand out: first, an homage to colonial precedents for Native evangelization, and second, an effusive recognition of a far broader, global context for missionary efforts. Regarding a clear colonial heritage, Abiel Holmes's sermon in 1808 lauded "The pious and successful labours of the Mayhews, the Bournes, and the Sergeants, of Wheelock, Brainard, Hawley, and Kirkland"—all colonial missionaries—along with the one who stood the tallest, John Eliot.



"Map of the World from the Best Authorities," engraved by Amos Doolittle (Boston, 1796). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. [Click image to enlarge in a new window.](#)

But the strongest theme of these early SPGNA sermons was global Christian missionary efforts, from the first century CE to the early nineteenth century. John Lathrop's inaugural SPGNA sermon in 1804 placed the SPGNA in a longer heritage of Protestant missions (primarily in England and Scotland). He also connected the work of the SPGNA to the global efforts of these prior missionary societies, including work among Indians in the western regions of the U.S. (near the Mississippi) and Natives in Paraguay. This theme continued in 1805, when Levi Frisbie, the pastor of the First Church in Ipswich, Massachusetts, preached a sermon before the SPGNA in which he declared that the New Testament command to "Go teach all nations; go preach the gospel to every creature," extended "to the swarthy African, the plundering Arab, the roving Tartar, and the wandering Savage who traverses the wilds of America, from the desert plains of Patagonia to the dreary mountains of the frozen pole."

Similarly, in 1810—the same year the ABCFM was formed—Jedidiah Morse delivered

a lengthy address to the members of the SPGNA that captured this increasingly capacious vision for how the SPGNA fit into a much larger narrative of Christian history. Starting with the emergence of Christianity in the first century, Morse took his hearers and readers on a whirlwind tour of global Christian expansion up through his own day and age. Christian missionaries—and, notably, “Christian and civilized nations”—had slowly been spreading over formerly “Unknown Lands” in the Americas, spreading the light of “science and religion” over those “dark regions.” Tellingly, Morse placed the SPGNA into a seamless continuum of global missionary activity. For Morse, there was no sharp division between the North American continent and the rest of the world; in many senses, both were foreign fields of sorts. Morse seemed especially admiring of the Moravians, who were serving as missionaries in the Americas, the Caribbean, the West Indies, and other global locations. Within his own lifetime, Morse noted that missionaries were being sent out from Great Britain, Germany, Denmark, Holland, and the United States to serve in foreign fields.

Perhaps more controversially, Morse believed that the proliferation of missionary societies between 1790 and 1810 indicated that God was “preparing the world for some grand revolution.” And what, in fact, would such a “grand revolution” look like? According to Morse, it would involve:

a more extensive commercial intercourse among the nations; by wards, conquests, and revolutions; by raising up a modern Alexander [the Great], to subjugate a large portion of the world; by an increase and diffusion of knowledge derived from travellers, and enterprises for discovery; especially by means of Missionaries, who are already scattered in every part of the world, and every day are increasing in number, and exploring some new region; not only learning the languages of the nations, but communicating the knowledge of their own; by all these and other means, which Divine providence may ordain, may not the English and French languages become to the world, what the Latin and Greek languages were before the Christian era?

Morse’s “grand revolution,” in other words, was nothing short of an anticipated program in cultural, religious, linguistic, and militaristic imperialism, emanating from the United States and western Europe. And it wasn’t just Morse’s idea. In an 1813 sermon before SPGNA members, Joshua Bates proposed as his central thesis (as the later published version indicated in all capitals): “THAT THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION IS DESIGNED ULTIMATELY TO PREVAIL THROUGH THE WHOLE WORLD, AND HAVE A GENERAL INFLUENCE ON THE CHARACTER AND CONDITION OF ALL MANKIND.”



Map, "New England by Ashur Adams," taken from *A Compendious History of New England, Designed for Schools and Private Families*, by Jedidiah Morse, D.D., and Rev. Elijah Parish, A.M. (Charlestown, Mass., 1804). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. [Click image to enlarge in a new window.](#)

But the SPGNA didn't simply shift its efforts overseas in light of the spreading enthusiasm for global missions. Instead, they inserted themselves and their continental focus into the emerging global drama of Protestant missions, primarily by directly connecting world missionary effort and "domestic" missions like their own. Joshua Bates, in his 1813 SPGNA sermon, asserted that "the different immediate objects of missionary societies all unite in one grand object. Whether, therefore, you contribute, to send missionaries to heathen lands, or to supply the destitute with the preached gospel in our own country—whether you aid in translating the scriptures into other languages, or furnishing them for the poor, who speak our own language, you are still promoting the same glorious cause." And Elijah Parish, in his 1814 SPGNA sermon, after giving a little mini-tour of the globe highlighting nations that do not "know God" (including Natives of Pacific islands, Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetans, along with the "sovereign Lama"), asserted: "Nor are we the only people engaged in this good work. All Christendom seems to be roused by the same impulse. From Petersburg to Calcutta, we hear the same strains of Christian benevolence."

SPGNA leaders urged action, since they strongly believed that evangelization of North American Natives would contribute directly to the unfolding of a global divine plan. "The Gospel is now spreading with incredible rapidity, into the dark recesses of Europe," Abiel Holmes told the SPGNA members in 1808, "traversing the immense regions of Asia; and penetrating even the inhospitable deserts of Africa. . . . [H]ave we not just cause to expect an universal propagation of the Gospel? Yes: The time will come, and *will not tarry*, when the Pagan idolater shall *cast his idols to the moles and to the bats*; when the

Indian Powows shall be silenced by the songs of Zion; when the Vedas of the Hindu, the Shasters of the Gentoo, and the Koran of the Mahometan, shall be exchanged for the HOLY BIBLE; when the religion of the Brahma, the Institutes of Menu, the rites of the Lama, the Zend of the Zoroaster, and even the laws of Confucius, shall be superseded by the *glorious Gospel of the blessed God*. *The Lord will assuredly hasten it in his time.*” By placing their own efforts alongside global missionary endeavors, SPGNA leaders inserted themselves into an imagined global evangelistic drama.



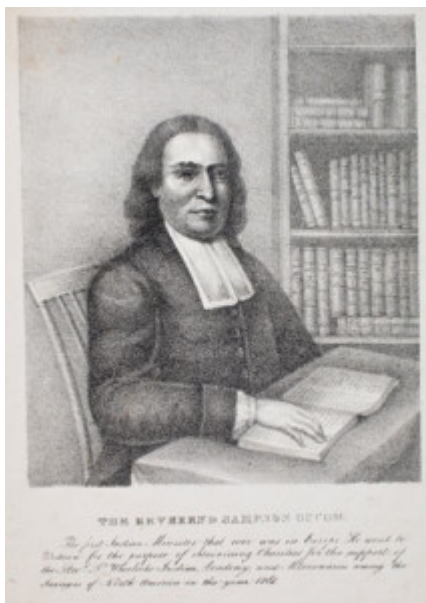
Broadside, “Commonwealth of Massachusetts,” by John Hancock, esquire (Boston, 1788). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Click image to enlarge in a new window.

But this wasn't simply a rhetorical stance. Although missionary efforts to Natives in the early republic have often been interpreted as separate from global, foreign missions, at many points they intersected, silently, intentionally, and importantly. In 1818, Jason Chater, a Baptist missionary sent out from England to Ceylon, sent his copy of the 1663 Indian Bible (translated by John Eliot and Native linguists into Massachusett/Wôpanâak) as a gift to the Society of Inquiry Respecting Missions at the Andover Theological Seminary.

Other examples abound, including the ABCFM-funded Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut. Founded in 1816, its opening was inspired by the increasing number of Native Hawaiians that the China trade brought to New England coastal towns. The first class of students in 1817 included seven Hawaiians, two Bengalis, an Abenaki (New England) Indian, and two white New England youths who later were sent to Hawaii as missionaries. By early 1819, the student population included individuals from Canton, Tahiti, Malaysia, and Indonesia, along with a sizable population of Cherokees and Choctaws from the American southeast. Notably, however, six additional students were from the

Iroquois Confederacy in New York: three Oneidas, two Stockbridge Natives, and one Tuscarora. SPGNA missionaries had served among the Iroquois for almost three decades by 1819 (particularly at New Stockbridge and with the Oneidas), and the NEC, SSPCK, and Eleazar Wheelock had promoted and sponsored schools and churches in Iroquoia for half a century before that. In particular, the two Stockbridge students at the Foreign Mission School in 1819 hailed from New Stockbridge, New York—precisely where SPGNA-sponsored missionaries had served for many years.

In other ways, too, these two histories and movements were connected. The Mohegan Church, which sits today on Mohegan lands next to the Thames River in south central Connecticut, was partially the result of an early 1830s campaign by Sarah L. Huntington and other interested individuals. Partially imposed upon and partially welcomed by the Mohegans (especially Lucy Occom Tantaquidgeon and her daughter Lucy Tantaquidgeon Teecomwas), the little church building became an important symbol of the Mohegans' civilization and Christianization—enough, at least, to stave off removal, by some accounts. In 1832—just after the official opening of the Mohegan Church—this little Indian chapel became a launching pad for global Protestant missions. In that year, a crowd gathered at the church for a commissioning and send-off sermon for a group of Protestant (white) missionaries under the auspices of the ABCFM heading to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii). A small offering was collected of only several dollars, but it marked the beginning of Mohegan support of ABCFM missionaries, which led to the door-to-door sales of hazelnuts by a young Mohegan girl a decade later. And Sarah L. Huntington (Smith), who helped found the Mohegan Church in 1831, shortly thereafter departed as a missionary to Syria with her husband in 1833.



“The Reverend Samson Occom,” lithographer unknown. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

So closely intertwined were the missionary efforts to Natives and global

indigenous peoples, in fact, that when Norwich, Connecticut, leaders recounted the missionaries sent out from their town in the 1840s, the list blended seamlessly from the missionaries to Native Americans (starting with Samuel Kirkland in 1766 to the Oneidas in New York) to western North America (Cherokee and Oregon), and finally, globally. Missionaries named farther down the list included ones sent to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), Ceylon, Madira, Syria, Africa, and Singapore.

Although the important role of the SPGNA in galvanizing foreign missions has been overlooked in recent decades, this has not always been the case. In a 1937 sesquicentennial publication, George E. E. Lindquist noted that the SPGNA "may with apparent justice lay claim to be a forerunner of missionary organizations, established in the early part of the 19th century (several of which have celebrated their centennial in recent years). . . In fact, the modern missionary movement came into being, indirectly at least, as a result of the impetus furnished for the conversion of the North American Indians." Twentieth-century commentators continued to see the SPGNA as the legacy of colonial missionaries, even as they recognized that the contexts had changed dramatically. In 1933, George Hinman published a study of missionary work among Natives for the SPGNA, in which he noted: "This psychology of a subjugated race constitutes one of the most serious obstacles in the way of the work by the government and the churches to bring the Indian into a homogenous American life. The problem is not as simple as it was when Roger Williams, and John Eliot and David Zeisberger began their work with the Indians." Similarly, Lindquist's sesquicentennial publication included reference to John Eliot and an image of Samson Occom.

Nineteenth-century global missionary societies—including the SPGNA—had self-consciously placed themselves as the spiritual descendants of colonial evangelistic efforts among Natives. But there was a deep irony in this claim to spiritual heritage, for even as these global efforts built upon early New England activities, the evangelistic project in New England was far from complete (as defined by whites, at least). In many ways, the turn to global missions was in fact spurred by the possibility of more productive prospects overseas than among the somewhat religiously recalcitrant Natives on the East Coast who were largely Christianized and had been repeatedly evangelized for almost two hundred years. The leaders of the ABCFM certainly understood this to be the case. In its second annual report, the ABCFM noted that although there were still "many millions" of unconverted Natives in North America, and the attempts to fully evangelize them "have been attended with so many discouragements," the solution was to shift missionary efforts toward the "more promising field" of southern Asia without entirely giving up on Native evangelization. The SPNGA leaders agreed regarding the difficulty of Indian evangelization, although they never shifted their primary focus away from Native Americans. Instead, they placed their own work in a larger expanse of foreign and even global missions, even though they never actually sent their own missionaries to those more "more promising" global fields.

In the end, the idea of a Mohegan Christian Indian youth selling common hazelnuts to white Norwich residents to support global Christian missions may indeed be the completion of a full circle rather than an anomaly to be explained. The American Protestant turn to “foreign” missions was built on the back of a far longer history of Euro-American Protestant missions to North American Indians, and indeed, often in conjunction with Natives themselves. The SPGNA, as Lindquist noted, stood in between these two worlds—colonial and early republic, Native and global—and, indeed, facilitated the expansion of one into the other.



Frontispiece portrait of Mrs. Sarah Lanman (Huntington) Smith, painted by Samuel L. Waldo, engraved by John Sartain, taken from *Memoir of Mrs. Sarah Lanman Smith, late of the mission in Syria, Under the Direction of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*, by Edward W. Hooker, pastor of the First Congregational Church, Bennington, VT (Boston, 1839). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

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Further Reading

For a footnoted PDF version of this essay, please contact the author.

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