

The Connecticut Missionary Society and Book Distribution in the Early Republic

James R. Rohrer

This article examines the book distribution efforts of the Connecticut Missionary Society between 1798 and 1812. As part of an effort to aid Congregationalist migrants in frontier settlements, the society distributed tracts, hymn books, sermon collections, and theological treatises for use in worship, catechism, and schooling. The society also established proto-public theological libraries in frontier communities. These efforts probably had little impact upon the overall development of American evangelicalism, but they clearly met an urgent need felt by many Congregationalist churches during the early republic.

On 24 December 1798 Reverend Seth Williston, a young Congregationalist missionary from Connecticut, passed through the newly settled town of Romulus, New York. Like many other villages in the state, Williston found Romulus to be “remarkably dead” in spirit. Parents, the evangelist complained, “dreadfully neglected” the religious and literary education of their families, and everywhere there was “a great want of pious books among the people.” To remedy the situation Williston believed that sympathetic Christians in Connecticut should “supply the new settlers with some of the best authors in divinity and especially to be mindful of the children.”¹

Williston’s concern for theological and literary education led him to organize a subscription library in another frontier hamlet, “Patterson’s Settlement,”² an accomplishment that filled him with deep satisfaction. “I am in great danger of being blown up by pride,” he confessed following the organizational meeting of the library proprietors. During subsequent months he guided the members in their initial selection of titles, and on a visit to Hartford he purchased several volumes for the infant collection.³

Seth Williston was a typical Congregationalist missionary. Between 1798 and 1818 the Connecticut Missionary Society (CMS), evangelistic arm of the Connecticut General Association of ministers, commissioned 148 men to minister in the new settlements of northern New England,

New York, Pennsylvania, and the Old Northwest. The voluminous papers left by these missionaries as well as the records of the society's well-financed book committee reveal an aggressive campaign to systematically disseminate theological literature throughout the northern frontier.

The CMS campaign, which preceded by two decades the rise of the evangelical "benevolent empire," constituted an early effort to mold republican moral character by means of religious education. The society pioneered many of the distribution techniques later employed on a more massive scale by such publishing agencies as the American Tract Society and the American Sunday School Union. In addition CMS missionaries promoted grammar schools, subscription libraries, and numerous short-lived proto-public libraries as part of their program of spiritual regeneration.⁴ These latter entities differed significantly from either the Bray parish libraries of colonial America or the ubiquitous Sunday school libraries of the nineteenth century, and constitute a previously unrecognized variety of American theological library.⁵

I

The Connecticut General Association organized the CMS in June 1798 to undertake home missionary work among the rapidly multiplying "new settlements" of the northern frontier. As early as 1795 the association estimated that there were already more than two hundred settlements where Connecticut migrants resided without any orthodox pastoral guidance.⁶ When central New York and the Connecticut Western Reserve in Ohio opened to settlers in the mid-1790s, the number of such "vacant settlements" increased exponentially. CMS missionaries struggled to provide spiritual succor to these uprooted settlers, to check the spread of heterodox beliefs among them, and to organize them into self-sustaining Congregational churches as quickly as possible.

To perform these duties the CMS initially engaged settled Connecticut pastors to undertake four-month tours in the new settlements. When this approach soon proved insufficient, the society adopted the novel plan of ordaining young men to serve as full-time evangelists, a policy that deviated sharply from traditional Congregationalist opposition to itinerancy. These Congregationalist missionaries functioned much as Methodist circuit riders, moving from town to town, preaching revival sermons, catechizing youth, administering the sacraments, and distributing religious literature.⁷

From the outset the CMS placed a heavy emphasis upon book distribution as a necessary adjunct to preaching. Because the number of vacant frontier posts far exceeded the supply of suitable evangelists, settlers in

many places had to wait for months or even years between visits from Congregationalist missionaries. Given this reality it was essential that lay leaders take the initiative in gathering congregations and conducting worship services themselves. In 1795 the Connecticut General Association reminded Congregationalist emigrants of their covenant obligation to maintain religious observances even in the absence of gathered churches or ordained clergy:

strictly observe the Sabbath; constantly assemble yourselves on that holy day for public worship; and unite in prayers and praises, in reading the scriptures and the best sermons you can obtain. As far as may comport with your circumstances, furnish yourselves with Bibles and other good books, and employ your utmost exertions to give your children a religious and good education.⁸

Several years later the newly organized CMS reiterated this admonition, reminding settlers that the perpetuation of their religious traditions necessarily depended upon their own efforts. Despite the shortage of ministers, the society urged, “let your gravest and most able men lead in social prayers and praises, and let them read the best printed sermons they can obtain.”⁹

This advice highlights the conceptual distance between Congregationalist missionary leaders and their Methodist or Baptist competitors. The CMS leadership was staunchly committed to the New Divinity doctrines associated with Jonathan Edwards and his theological heirs.¹⁰ Unlike their “sectarian” rivals, who generally relied upon uneducated lay preachers, Edwardseans deemed it unsafe for settlers to follow ministers who had received neither formal theological training nor a license from a recognized Congregationalist association. The CMS never envisioned lay settlers proclaiming the Word of God for themselves. Instead migrants were to gather for regular “reading meetings,” to hear and discuss published sermons penned by approved evangelical authors.¹¹

Thus one primary goal of the CMS publishing campaign was to provide frontier laity with the resources they needed to worship properly and to teach sound doctrine. The book committee placed a high priority upon the distribution of sermons and hymn books for corporate worship, as well as devotional material for “the family altar.” The society also produced catechisms, primers, and children’s tracts for use in both homes and schools. In March 1801, for example, the book committee placed a fairly typical order with Hartford printer John Babcock for 500 family devotionals, 44 hymnals, 700 Philip Doddridge tracts on family worship, and 353 volumes of Jonathan Edwards’s sermons.¹²

In addition to worship materials, the society issued many polemical works on key theological controversies of the era. Topics included the nature of genuine revivals, the authority of scripture, infant baptism, and the dangers of Arminianism and Universalism. The committee especially favored the essays of Jonathan Edwards, but it also commissioned numerous works by such local New Divinity luminaries as Benjamin Trumbull of North Haven, Charles Backus of Somers, and CMS general secretary Nathan Strong, pastor of Hartford First Church.

The single most widely circulated CMS publication was undoubtedly the *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine (CEM)*, one of the first monthly religious journals in the United States. The society launched the journal in 1800 in the aftermath of the so-called "Second Great Awakening" in Connecticut, both to fan the flame of spiritual renewal and also to raise money for the permanent fund. Modeled after the *London Missionary Magazine*, the *CEM* carried news of revivals and missions from around the world, as well as monthly excerpts from various classics of evangelical Calvinist theology. Bound together in book form, the *CEM* soon found its way into homes and libraries as far south as Georgia and as far west as the Ohio valley.¹³

II

The CMS attempted to distribute its printed resources as systematically as possible. The society instructed missionaries to keep careful records of the kind of literature most needed in each community they visited. The missionaries also selected reliable lay leaders who would willingly assist with storing and distributing the reading material. In order to avoid wasteful duplication, the society kept track of the titles and quantities of works stored at each station.

The book committee employed the services of trustworthy migrants or teamsters to carry boxes of literature from Connecticut to the new settlements. Most commonly these carriers were departing church members who agreed to add society books to their own household belongings, either gratuitously or for a small fee. Thus in 1806 Rev. Josiah Andrews of Long Island notified the Trustees that:

if you have any missionary books on hand that you wish to send to the Westward you now have a convenient opportunity. Mr. Josiah Pierson the bearer of this is on his way with a waggon, to the Genesee, & will carry some of them, if you desire it, twelve or fifteen miles beyond the Genesee River. He expects soon to remove his family there, & his brother Simon Pierson also who is with him, they will therefore be interested in the business, & I think be suit-

able persons, to send them by. They are both members of our church, worthy men. I have spoken with them concerning the books, and tho' they are so very heavy loaded that they cannot carry a great weight, yet they are willing to carry a few if it should be the Trustees wish.¹⁴

For such services the society usually compensated settlers according to the distance involved, with recorded sums ranging between 67¢ and \$1.25.¹⁵

After reaching their destination carriers typically turned over the literature to the designated lay distributors. From these distribution points missionaries then circulated the books to needy settlers throughout the surrounding region. Settlers could also apply directly for desired reading material, the distributors being advised to exercise their own discretion in deciding how to dispose of society resources.¹⁶

The CMS often made decisions about distribution in response to popular demand. Society officers received a stream of letters from frontier settlements, appealing for specific types of literature. Because few other benevolent agencies could match the financial resources of the CMS, a much broader circle of citizens than Congregationalist migrants alone sought out the society's aid. Written appeals came from Christians of various denominations, from grammar school committees, heads of fledgling academies and colleges, and from unchurched parents who worried about the future of their unschooled children.¹⁷

A typical request, sent in 1812 by the Congregational Society of Bloomfield, New York, complained about the "great evil which arises from the want of religious books in this society." Most households, the letter noted, "are destitute of Bibles; the religious instruction of children is neglected for want of catechisms X our singing on the Sabbath is not performed with that decency it otherwise might be for want of Psalm-books to supply the singers."¹⁸ Another letter, from a settler in Ohio, begged for "some useful & suitable sermon books to be read in our meetings for divine worship; as it is but seldom that we are favored with the preached gospel."¹⁹

A Vermont correspondent in 1811 lamented the lack of regular worship services in his village and the division of the people into many rival sects. The man had recently received from a friend a volume of selections from the *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine*. Regarding these short, pithy pieces as ideal for instructing the public, the settler requested the society to give his village as many free copies of the *CEM* as possible, but to refrain from sending "more lengthy labored discussions."²⁰

Other settlers, however, remained undaunted by the more technical theological works which the society issued, and they found them perfectly

suited to their needs. An emigrant in Camden, New York, in 1801 appealed on behalf of “a large settlement of people here mostly from Litchfield County” who rarely received missionary visits. “We meet among ourselves on the Sabbath,” the settler reported, “to read some books from the missionary society for which we feel very thankful.” Among the works which they had already read “and much admired” were two weighty treatises on divine revelation and regeneration, and two volumes of Jonathan Edwards’s sermons.²¹

Such letters substantiate missionary claims that Congregational settlers eagerly received and utilized CMS publications. The people of Meredith, New York, missionary Jedediah Bushnell reported in 1800, “have lately begun their reading meetings” on the Sabbath. “They read books,” Bushnell observed, and would quickly digest as many sermon collections as they could procure.²² Oliver Hill, itinerating around Susquehanna, Pennsylvania, likewise noted how the settlers often walked “3 or 4 miles to a reading meeting on a rainy day and bad roads.” The people had devoured the CMS material previously distributed, Hill assured the society, and eagerly awaited fresh titles on his next visit. “A greater quantity of evangelical primers for children would be especially useful as those already received are about as diligently read and studied by children and by some of their parents as any book in their possession.”²³

Indeed, demand for society literature quickly exceeded the available supply, raising the issue of how best to maximize the number of settlers reached. In an effort to get CMS publications into as many hands as possible, in 1806 the society began to foster the creation of religious libraries. Rather than giving away books or tracts to individuals or single families, the missionaries instructed lay stewards to act as librarians, managing small collections on behalf of the society and loaning the material out to settlers for short periods of time.

In some cases the stewards apparently limited access to those who attended public worship. Alpheus Coburn of Cabot, Vermont, reported in 1806 that the books in his charge

are very servisible for the inhabitance of the society that I belong to; they are very much engaged in reding them & I mak it a rule to have them returned to me evry week & supply them with others, & I find that they are very servisible not only for reding but they have attendance to draw the people to meeting for sack of having a new book.²⁴

In many cases, however, the books were not restricted to worshippers. Jotham Cummings, who took charge of the literature in Holland, Vermont, explained to the society that the material in his trust was “read

with much interest and kept constantly circulating. The books . . . are kept as near the center of our settlement as can be done with convenience & regularly drawn & returned.”²⁵ Reverend Thomas Merrill, who labored in Vermont and New York, stressed to his stewards the importance of unrestricted access:

I have directed the person to whom I committed books for the use of a town to hold them as a kind of librarian. In some small towns I have permitted them to be connected with a library, but however to be free for the use of all the inhabitants of the town.²⁶

Joel Benedict, working in the Catskill Mountains of New York in 1810, followed the same practice in the village of Cook’s Falls.²⁷

In their efforts to encourage “Godly reading” among the general public, Congregationalist missionaries perhaps unwittingly helped to promote the democratization of American Christianity. As Harry Stout has argued, colonial New Englanders typically owned no theological literature apart from the Bible itself. In most communities the minister possessed the only lexicons, commentaries, doctrinal treatises, and sermon collections, a fact that helped to assure clerical domination of religious discourse.²⁸ The remarkable proliferation of mass-produced religious literature in the early republic was thus a key component of what Nathan Hatch has called the “democratic revolution” in American Christianity, a phenomenon which armed the laity with the resources and knowledge needed to reflect theologically for themselves. According to Hatch, the orthodox New England clergy generally opposed this democratization of religious knowledge.²⁹ Yet the example of the CMS suggests otherwise. Despite the generally conservative social and theological orientation of the New England clergy, CMS book distribution efforts both presupposed and facilitated the formation of a knowledgeable and activist Congregationalist laity wielding a significant degree of religious authority.

III

How did missionary publications immediately affect the settlements served by CMS evangelists? Unfortunately we cannot go beyond the impressionistic accounts given by the missionaries themselves. Because there are virtually no other surviving records of the collections created by the CMS, it is not possible to ascertain how broadly society literature actually circulated. The society received many testimonials from grateful laypeople, some attributing cases of conversion and even widespread revivals to the influence of CMS literature.³⁰ But substantiating such statements is impossible.

Certainly the work of the CMS book committee declined rapidly following the War of 1812. By the 1820s CMS missionaries devoted little of their time and energy to literature distribution. The rise of national evangelical tract societies and the explosive growth of the Sunday school movement removed much of the need for CMS efforts. These specialized agencies, operating with budgets vastly larger than the CMS and employing armies of full-time colporteurs, could produce literature more cheaply and distribute it far more efficiently than state and local efforts heavily reliant upon part-time volunteers.

Moreover, the religious needs of many Congregationalist migrants changed rapidly as frontier communities grew more populous and developed more stable educational institutions. Eventually most vacant churches secured permanent pastors. Common schools took root almost everywhere, and revolutionary changes in printing technology, marketing techniques, and systems of communication and transportation soon combined to flood the nation with inexpensive reading material of every conceivable sort. By the 1830s American communities even in frontier regions no longer faced a shortage of religious literature.³¹

The literary work of the CMS probably had little impact upon the overall development of American evangelicalism. Nonetheless, the record suggests that the society succeeded in accomplishing its primary objective. At a time when countless orthodox New England migrants found themselves momentarily cut off from their traditional sources of spiritual support, CMS reading material helped to fill the gap. Without the resources that the society made available, it is likely that many frontier congregations would have ceased to gather and that many Congregationalist migrants would have drifted into competing religious bodies. Thus, the CMS book distribution campaign played a vital if fleeting role during one critical phase in the history of American Congregationalism.

Notes

1. John Q. Adams, ed., "The Diaries of the Rev. Seth Williston," *Journal of The Presbyterian Historical Society* 7-9 (December 1913-March 1917): Part 10, 24. Hereafter cited as Adams, "Diaries."

2. Now the village of Whitney Point, Broome County, New York.

3. Adams, "Diaries," Part 2, 245, 247-8, 254.

4. References to these small libraries are scattered widely throughout missionary letters and journals. Given the scattered and sometimes fragmentary nature of the evidence, it is unfortunately impossible to determine exactly how many collections the CMS created and where all of these collections were located.

5. On Bray libraries see C. T. Laughler, *Thomas Bray's Grand Design* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1973). See also Bernard C. Steiner, "Rev. Thomas

Bray and his American Libraries," *American Historical Review* 2 (1896): 59–75; and William D. Houlette, "Parish Libraries and the Work of Rev. Thomas Bray," *Library Quarterly* 4 (October 1934): 588–609. The best treatment of Sunday school libraries is found in Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790–1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 48–52. See also Frank Keller Walter, "A Poor But Respectable Relation: The Sunday School Library," *Library Quarterly* 12 (1942): 731–9; F. Allen Briggs, "The Sunday School Library in the Nineteenth Century," *Library Quarterly* 31 (1961): 166–77; Arthur W. Swarthout, "The Church Library Movement in Historical Perspective," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 6 (1970): 115–18; Thomas W. Laquer, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture, 1780–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); and Donald G. Davis, "Bread Upon the Waters: The Printed Word in Sunday Schools in 19th Century England and the United States," in *Reading for Moral Progress: 19th Century Institutions Promoting Social Change* (Champaign, Ill.: Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1997, Occasional Paper no. 207), 5–18.

6. Connecticut General Association, *A Continuation of the Narrative of the Missions to the New Settlements, According to the Appointment of the General Association of the State of Connecticut* (New Haven: T. & S. Green, 1795), 19–20.

7. The fullest analyses of the CMS are James R. Rohrer, *Keepers of the Covenant: Frontier Missions and the Decline of Congregationalism, 1774–1818* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), and Ronald H. Norricks, "To Turn Them From Darkness: The Missionary Society of Connecticut on the Early Frontier, 1798–1814," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Riverside, 1975. See also discussions of the CMS in Charles L. Chaney, *The Birth of Missions in America* (South Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1976); Oliver Wendell Elsbree, *The Rise of the Missionary Spirit in America, 1790–1815* (Williamsport, Penn.: The Williamsport Printing & Binding Co., 1928); Colin B. Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1939); Charles Roy Keller, *The Second Great Awakening in Connecticut* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942); and Richard D. Shiels, "The Connecticut Clergy in the Second Great Awakening," Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1976.

8. Connecticut General Association, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the New Settlements in the Northern and Western Parts of the United States* (New Haven: T. & S. Green, 1795), 5.

9. Missionary Society of Connecticut, *The Constitution of the Missionary Society of Connecticut: With an Address from the Board of Trustees, to the People of the State, and a Narrative on the Subject of Missions* (Hartford: Hudson & Goodwin, 1800), 7.

10. On the New Divinity see especially Mark Valeri, *Law and Providence in Joseph Bellamy's New England: The Origins of the New Divinity in Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); William Breitenbach, "The Consistent Calvinism of the New Divinity Movement," *William & Mary Quarterly* 41 (1984): 241–64; and Joseph Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement: Calvinism, the Congregational Ministry, and Reform in New England between the Great Awakenings* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981).

11. On Baptist and Methodist attitudes see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 67–122.

12. Book Committee file, March 1801 account sheet, Connecticut Missionary Society Papers, Congregational House, Hartford, Connecticut. Hereafter cited as CMS Papers. The Philip Doddridge tract was the oft-reprinted *A Plain and Serious Address to the Master of a Family on the Important Subject of Family Religion*. The

hymnal issued by the CMS was *The Hartford Selection of Hymns. From the most approved authors, to which are added a number never before published. Compiled by Nathan Strong, Abel Flint, and John Steward* (Hartford: John Babcock, 1799).

13. See *The Georgia Analytical Repository* 1 (1802): 14, for evidence of a southern readership. The first series of the magazine ran for seven years, from July 1800 to June 1807. A second series, retitled the *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine and Religious Intelligencer*, ran from January 1808 to December 1815. Both series have been microfilmed in their entirety. See *Missionary Society of Connecticut Papers, 1759–1948*, microfilm edition (Glen Rock, N.J.: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1976), reels 16–19.

14. Josiah B. Andrews to Abel Flint, n.d. 1806, CMS Papers.

15. An undated 1801 fragment identified as “Abel Flint’s Bill” lists the amounts paid to book carriers over a two-year period. Book Committee Records, CMS Papers.

16. Many letters shed light on the developing CMS distribution system. See, for example, Seth Hayes to Abel Flint, 20 February 1800; Eliphalet Nott to Abel Flint, 1 June 1800; Heman Comstock to CMS, 23 July 1800; Allen Adams to Abel Flint, 7 February 1803; J. Washburne to Abel Flint, 3 February 1804; Noah Cowles to Abel Flint, 20 May 1807; Moses Gillet to Abel Flint, 23 May 1811; Thaddeus Osgood to Abel Flint, 11 June 1811, CMS Papers.

17. See for example, Joel Humaston to Abel Flint, 1 November 1806, CMS Papers, appealing for books for the schools and library recently established in Vienna, Ohio.

18. Bloomfield Congregational Society to CMS Trustees, 5 May 1812, CMS Papers.

19. Zenas Pelton to CMS Trustees, 7 October 1808, CMS Papers.

20. Elias Buel to Nathan Strong, 1 April 1811, CMS Papers.

21. John Humaston to Benjamin Trumbull, 23 May 1801, CMS Papers.

22. Jedediah Bushnell to Nathan Strong, 29 September 1800, CMS Papers.

23. Oliver Hill, missionary journal for 1813 and 1814, CMS Papers.

24. Alpheus Coburn to Nathan Strong, 19 September 1806, CMS Papers.

25. Jotham Cummings to Abel Flint, 1 July 1811, CMS Papers.

26. Thomas Merrill to Abel Flint, 17 March 1812, CMS Papers.

27. Joel Benedict, journal commencing 20 December 1810, CMS Papers.

28. Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 32–3.

29. See Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 132.

30. Moses Gillet to Abel Flint, 3 February 1813, CMS Papers.

31. On this theme see Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 125–27; David D. Hall, “The History of the Book: New Questions? New Answers?” *Journal of Library History* 21 (1986): 31; and two essays by David Paul Nord: “The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815–1835,” *Journalism Monographs* 88 (1984): 1–30, and “Systematic Benevolence: Religious Publishing and the Marketplace in Early Nineteenth-Century America,” in Leonard I. Sweet, ed. *Communication & Change in American Religious History* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 239–69.