



Editor's foreword: The ABCFM Collection at Harvard

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Foreword

The ABCFM Collection at Harvard

The last article in the *Harvard Library Bulletin* devoted to the collection of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions appeared in 1952. It was the work of the Board's librarian at that time, Mary Walker,¹ and it still stands as a useful description of the collection and its scholarly attractions. The ABCFM was the largest of the American Protestant missionary societies, and at various points in the nineteenth century it had missions in more than twenty countries. The Board's archives have an importance far beyond ecclesiastical or missionary concerns, being fundamental primary sources for the history of places as diverse as the Oregon territory, West Africa, Turkey, and Hawaii. The three articles in this issue fasten on printing history, which is just one subject served by the collection—although an exceptional one in that the missionaries were themselves the printers.

Mary Walker wrote her article not too long after this collection, or at any rate most of it, had come to rest in the Harvard College Library. About the *way* this took place she does not say much, but the story deserves to be told briefly here.² In 1927 the librarian of the Andover-Harvard Library, Owen H. Gates, offered to house that part of the Board's historical material that needed better security than could be furnished by the Congregational Library at 14 Beacon Street in Boston (the building which also housed the Board's offices). The offer was accepted by the Prudential Committee (the executive body) of the ABCFM, and so, much of the ABCFM's collection was deposited at the Andover-Harvard Library—first in room Z in Bartlett Hall (the stacks), and the manuscripts later in a purpose-built cage. But there were no easy arrangements for anyone actually to use the collection in this library, nor was there any environmental control to slow down the deterioration of the old bound volumes of letters. In 1940 the Board's librarian, Enoch F. Bell, innocently mentioned these concerns to one of the Widener Library staff, and very soon (January 1941) he found himself party to a draft agreement drawn up by the Director of the Harvard University Library Keyes Metcalf and the then Assistant Librarian in charge of the Treasure Room, William Jackson. On this proposal, the Library would take the entire collection on deposit, the older materials going into the Treasure Room, and the rest to other parts of the library system.

Unfortunately, Bell did not reckon on the peculiar constitution of the Andover-Harvard Library Council, which had been hosting the archives. This Council was established in 1910 to administer the combined libraries of Harvard Divinity School and Andover Seminary. By 1941, Andover Seminary was part of the Andover Newton Theological School, but its library was still merged with that of Harvard Divinity School (as, indeed, it still is today). The Andover trustees were represented on the library Council, and it was from them that the Harvard offer elicited a protest. They ought to have been consulted, they said; but more than that, there were strong reasons for the whole collection to go to Andover Newton instead of Harvard. Andover Seminary had

¹ "The archives of the American Board for Foreign Missions," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 6 (1952): 52-68.

² For the following paragraphs I am dependent on the

unpublished essay "Transferring the Archives" by Enoch F. Bell, dated February 1945. See HOLLIS for copies of this typescript in Harvard libraries.

been the *alma mater* of generations of Congregationalist ABCFM missionaries, and the archives ought to remain in their spiritual home rather than in a secular university.

Librarian Bell was unimpressed by these “sentimental” arguments, and he wrote (rather quaintly, as it seems now) that

the spirit shown by the Harvard authorities in those days—their nobility and courtesy as well as high intelligence and genuine interest in the Board and its work—was proof enough that the Board need not fear that its missionary archives would have less “spiritual” oversight than if they were administered by professionally religious librarians and teachers.

He was, however, unable to carry the Prudential Committee of the Board with him, and there ensued some earnest negotiation. The Andover-Harvard Council produced an agreement in October 1941 according to which “manuscripts” and items of “research value” should go to Harvard, and the rest to Andover Newton; but these terms turned out to be themselves open to different interpretations, and the argument went on for two more years. Harvard had the better of it at last, but a provision satisfactory to Andover Newton was found in the category of Bibles. Certain especially valuable Bibles (such as the eleventh-century Georgian gospel manuscript which had been particularly coveted by both institutions) would have to come to the Houghton Library,³ but all other Bibles would go to Andover Newton—in the interests of “amity” (the librarians all had a horror of acrimony) and because, it was said, many of the Bible translations had been the work of Andover men. Andover Newton would also keep the Board’s collection of museum objects. All else was to be allocated to Harvard, either to Widener (most printed books⁴) or to the new Houghton Library (manuscripts and some early imprints). This was the agreement put into effect at the end of 1944, and it explains one or two anomalies that have occasionally puzzled subsequent users of the collection.⁵

Since the article of 1952, there have been further developments. Houghton continued to accept substantial additions to the collection, including a number of missionaries’ personal papers, deposited in the 1960s. In early years permission to consult the archives had to be requested from the Board, but this arrangement proved cumbersome, and in 1971 it was agreed that (with just a few restrictions) access should be on the same basis as for other material in Houghton. In 1961, when the Congregational church was incorporated into the United Church of Christ, the ABCFM became the United Church Board for World Ministries, an agency of the new denomination. The UCBWM now keeps its own archives, and all the post-1961 material that had come to Houghton has been returned. In 1968 the Board finally closed its library in Boston, and offered the contents, consisting chiefly of a large and interesting pamphlet collection, to Harvard. This material, judged to be of intra-missionary interest, was accepted by the Andover-Harvard Library. Thus there was again an ABCFM collection (but an entirely different one) at Andover-Harvard.⁶

The microfilming of the manuscript archives, a project envisaged by the ABCFM in the 1930s but not proceeded with, has been another development of recent years. Since the UCBWM, and not Harvard, is still the owner of all the material in the collection, it has generally been private funding that has made this filming possible. The latest and most comprehensive project was carried out in the 1980s by Research Publications, Inc., covering the principal series of the archives up to 1919. In connection with the filming, the company has published a guide(1994), including indices of missionaries and mission stations.

J. F. Coakley

³ It is now Houghton Library MS Georgian 1.

⁴ These were removed to Houghton in 1984.

⁵ For example: the Bibles at Andover Newton have Widener call-numbers. This is because they were cataloged at Harvard along with the other printed books before being identified and removed. Or again: pho-

tographs of missionaries are in the picture collection at Houghton, unless they are daguerreotypes, in which case as museum objects they are at Andover Newton.

⁶ Some items were transferred to Houghton in 1998: see below, p. 7 note 11.