The Pawnee Mission Letters, 1834–1851

Richard E. Jensen

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The Pawnee Mission Letters, 1834–1851
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1834–1851
Edited and with an introduction by Richard E. Jensen
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Contents

List of Illustrations ............... vii
Acknowledgments ................. ix
Introduction ..................... xi

1. New England to St. Louis ........ 1
2. St. Louis to Bellevue ............ 47
3. The Pawnees and Their Agents.... 87
4. Travels with the Pawnees ....... 119
5. The Mission on the Loup......... 279
6. The Investigation ............... 423
7. Decline and Fall ............... 497
8. The Aftermath .................. 547

Notes ................................ 581
Bibliography ...................... 629
Index ............................. 639
Illustrations
following page 278

Christian Keepsake and Missionary Annual, Pawnee Indian illustration, 1838

Samuel Allis

Elvira Gaston Platt

Platt house and store

Pawnee earthlodge, 1871

Pawnee reservation boarding school

John Dunbar's sketch map of the Pawnee homeland, 1839

Map

The western world of Dunbar and Allis ................. x
Acknowledgments

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The western world of John Dunbar and Samuel Allis
Introduction

In the spring of 1834 Rev. Samuel Parker, Rev. John Dunbar, and Mr. Samuel Allis set out from Ithaca, New York, to find a suitable location for a mission to the Flathead Indians west of the Rocky Mountains. When they reached St. Louis in early June, they discovered that the fur traders and trappers who they hoped would guide them to the Flatheads had left for the West in May. Unable to obtain guides, the missionaries abandoned their objective. Parker returned to New York to organize another expedition to the Oregon country in 1835. Dunbar and Allis followed a vague contingency plan and pushed on up the Missouri River. In October they met with the Pawnee Indians. It was the beginning of a twelve-year odyssey in an effort to convert the tribe to Protestant Christianity and New England “civilization.” Their letters, and those of their associates who came later, provide a unique and personal portrayal of this small white community in the heart of the Pawnees’ domain.

Samuel Parker’s idea for a Flathead mission came about in 1833, when he read an article in the *Christian Advocate and Journal* that would wrench any pious heart. It was titled simply, “The Flat-Head Indians,” and was based on a letter written by William Walker, a Christianized Wyandot Indian, to Gabriel D. Disosway, a white Methodist friend in New York. During the winter of 1831–32 Walker and several other Wyandots had been scouting Indian Territory west of Missouri for a suitable site for a reservation. Walker wrote that he had seen a delegation of Flatheads who had walked from their homeland “on top of the Rocky Mountains” to St. Louis to find someone who would return with them and teach their people the proper methods of Christian worship. Disosway forwarded the letter, along with a few of his own comments, to the *Christian Advocate*, and it was published on the front page. The article also included a sketch depicting a Flathead as a person with a severely deformed cranium sloping back from the eyebrows to a point on the crown. If the message was not clear from the letter and the picture, Disosway made it so in his footnote. He concluded
that these Indians were so lost in moral darkness that they deformed their children’s heads, yet through some miracle they were looking for knowledge of the white man’s God, and therefore they must be helped. Had Walker’s letter reported only the bare facts, it would have been a rather dull and only moderately edifying missive from the West. However, Disosway’s zealous account and his embellishments elevated the Christian Advocate’s report to one of wide appeal. It not only focused attention on the need to bring the word of God to Oregon, but it also contributed to a series of events that ultimately led to an American, rather than British, Oregon.

Altruistically minded Christians viewed the Flatheads’ trip to St. Louis as a near miracle, but in truth there was nothing miraculous about it. It is also evident that Walker was a bit of a fraud, although no one questioned his veracity in 1833. The pilgrims to St. Louis consisted of three Nez Perces, who did not pierce their noses, and one Flathead, whose skull was completely normal. While Walker was in St. Louis at the same time as this delegation, there is no evidence he ever met them. Nor were these far western tribes unfamiliar with Christianity. About 1816 the North West Company sent Donald McKenzie to trade with these tribes. McKenzie brought several Iroquois Indians from eastern Canada to Flathead country to teach the western tribe how to trap beaver. These newcomers were nominally Christians and taught the Flatheads and Nez Perces their first notions about the white man’s religion. More information came from members of the neighboring tribes who had attended the Red River mission school in Canada. It is a near certainty they urged the Nez Perces to examine Christianity.

The Brethren and the American Board
After several attempts Parker finally gained the support of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, arguably the most prestigious organization of its kind at that time. The American Board could trace its creation to a small group of deeply pious divinity students at Williams College in Williamstown in the northwest corner of Massachusetts. In 1806 they formed a society called the Brethren. Four years later members of the association at Andover Theological Seminary presented a petition to the General Association of Massachusetts Congregational Clergymen. The carefully worded petition bordered
on entrapment when it asked the association if missionary objectives should be abandoned as visionary and impracticable. The association could only affirm the beneficial effects of missions. Having taken this position, they then had little choice but to consider the remaining questions in the petition concerned with the general direction missions should take and the likelihood of support for foreign missions from Protestant Americans. Samuel Parker was a student at Andover when the petition was presented.

The petition by the Brethren and the general spirit of the times resulted in swift action. Just two days after the petition was heard, nine clergymen were impaneled and given the ambitious but unwieldy title of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Its members met in September 1810 and adopted a constitution, most of which dealt with the duties of the officers and provisions for the payment of their expenses. Board members did not receive a salary. The board gave itself the responsibility for selecting mission sites, hiring missionaries, paying their salaries, and recalling them from service if necessary. Article two of the constitution was a statement of purpose, phrased in deceptively simple language. The American Board was “to devise, adopt and prosecute ways and means for propagating the gospel among those who are destitute of knowledge of Christianity.”

When the American Board was created it was intended as a purely Congregational body. By the time Dunbar and Allis set out on their mission, the board had grown to a large, influential organization. The governing body consisted of forty-seven Presbyterians, thirty-one Congregationalists, and seven Dutch Reformed.

The American Board’s first attempt to bring Christianity to Native Americans was in 1811, when a station was established for the Iroquois in northern New York. It was short lived and produced no viable changes. In 1817 the board established Brainerd Mission for the Cherokee near Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Mackinaw Mission near the strait between Lakes Michigan and Huron. Both flourished for a time until the Indians in these areas were forced by the government to move to Indian Country in the West.

The board had been toying with the idea of a mission in Oregon for some time, and in 1829 they sent Jonathan S. Green to explore the Pacific Coast. He visited the Spanish settlements to the south and the Russian colonies in the...
north, but inexplicably he never saw the Columbia River country. Upon his return to Boston he submitted an unfavorable report on the prospects in the West, which temporarily halted further consideration.10

The Methodist missionary Rev. Jason Lee would be the first to reach Oregon. Lee made the trip under the wing of Nathaniel Wyeth, a canny businessman who was on his second trip to Oregon.11 As a result Lee walked through the gates of Fort Walla Walla in the Oregon country on September 1, 1834.12 On that same day Samuel Allis boarded the steamboat Diana for his first trip to the Indian agency at Bellevue.13

Although the American Board’s earliest endeavors focused on Native Americans, the emphasis soon shifted to missions in foreign lands. The public’s imagination had been captured by the thought of devout Christians toiling in distant and exotic countries. Since public donations were the only source of funding for the American Board, it is not surprising the overseas endeavors were stressed. Of course, the board would never stoop to discuss this as a reason for their emphasis. In 1812 five missionaries went to Calcutta with vague instructions to establish a mission either in India or in Burma. The War of 1812, opposition from the British East India Company, and the conversion of two of these missionaries to the Baptist faith were unexpected obstacles, but a station was finally established in Bombay by 1815. In 1831 members of this mission included Rev. William Harvey and his wife, Elizabeth Smith Harvey. Six years later Elizabeth’s sister, Esther, would marry John Dunbar.14

The second American Board mission in the Far East arrived in March 1816 and began work in Ceylon. Among the group was James Richards, one of the Brethren who later became the dean of Auburn Theological Seminary.15 In the spring of 1834 Richards wrote to the American Board, recommending the inclusion of one of his students in Parker’s mission to the Far West. He thought John Dunbar should be chosen for his “consistent and uniform piety.”16

There were those who criticized the board for its preference for missions in foreign lands. Samuel Newell, an American Board missionary stationed in Ceylon, questioned “whether we did right in leaving the hundred millions of pagans of the western continent and coming to this distant region.” The American Board pointed out that Newell’s estimate of the population of the American West was greatly exaggerated, which it was. The board contended the thinly
populated areas had to be slighted because there were not enough missionaries to do the work. Because of the shortage, the board was forced to place the emphasis on densely populated areas such as Ceylon, India, and China, where a single missionary might be able to convert thousands of nonbelievers, at least in theory. David Greene, who was in charge of the Indian missions in the 1830s and 1840s, explained that missionaries themselves preferred to “live among a dense and settled population, have daily access to thousands . . . than to spend their lives in what they apprehend will be almost fruitless toil in reclaiming small tribes of sparsely settled migrants and nearly inaccessible men who are wasting away and seem devoted to extinction.”

The belief that Indians were doomed to extinction was widely held and had a long history, extending into colonial times. Isaac McCoy, a contemporary of Dunbar and Allis, was a Baptist missionary who could speak from experience, both as a missionary and as an organizer of mission stations in the West. McCoy thought American whites “seemed to be settling down in the opinion which had widely prevailed, from the time of our first settlement in America, that the aborigines were destined to become extinct, and, therefore works of benevolence had better be directed in places in which success might be hoped for.” As a result, “Indian missions were invariably thrown into the shade, in all benevolent operations.”

Another factor working against Indian missions was the anger aroused by Indian depredations. Although Indian-white encounters were only a hazy memory in the East, those recollections were frequently revived by newspaper accounts of clashes occurring on the frontier. Most easterners’ firsthand knowledge of Indians, if any, came from the disorganized remnants of eastern tribes starving in rural ghettos. This materially bolstered the belief that the extinction of Indians was a certainty. As a result, New England philanthropists were less generous in their support of missions to Indians in Kentucky or even Oregon than they were to stations in distant, mysterious places such as Turkistan, Jaffa, or Wailuku.

In spite of these misconceptions and prejudices, missions to Native Americans did receive some support. In the early 1800s a number of organizations were formed with the Indians in mind. The American Board’s early efforts have already been mentioned. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel,
the Connecticut Society, the New York Society, the United Foreign Missionary Society, and the Northern Missionary Society were just some of the organizations aimed wholly or in part at the Indians. The latter three were vigorous bodies when the American Board absorbed them.²⁰

A goal of the American Board and similar organizations was to bring Christianity to the Indians but at the same time teach them “civilization” as well. To be civilized one had to conform to a range of manners, habits, and customs practiced by an idealized white, Protestant American. Civilized behavior governed even people’s minutest actions, and any deviation from these nearly sanctified norms could be considered non-Christian. For example, Dunbar was stunned by the behavior of his Pawnee host, who expected his daughter to unsaddle his horse and take care of his baggage. When the young woman tried to unsaddle Dunbar’s horse, the animal shied away and Dunbar sniffed that his horse, “having a more just sense of propriety,” would not allow the woman to do a task that, in Dunbar’s world, was a man’s responsibility. If it was done by a woman it was a display of barbarism. He probably never realized the embarrassment he caused the young woman when he appropriated her role.

David Greene, who would be Dunbar’s superior, admitted the board knew next to nothing about American Indians in the West.²¹ However, he did not hesitate to discuss the American Board’s goals for these peoples in a letter to Lewis Cass, the secretary of war.

Permit me, Sir, merely to state here that, while the primary object of the Board, is the introduction among heathen & other unevangelized tribes Christian knowledge with all the blessings which flow from it to individuals & communities, the Board also aims to promote intellectual & social improvement generally; being fully persuaded that an intelligent Christianity can never prevail in a community or exert a controlling permanent influence over it, without the establishment of schools, the reading of the Scriptures, and the diffusion of general knowledge and of the arts of civilized life.²²

Disseminating both Christianity and “civilization” made the missionary’s task doubly difficult. Not only did the tenets of the church have to be revealed and the Native religion expelled, but a whole new lifestyle had to be introduced to replace the old ways. In Pawnee society the proper role of the men was hunting
Introduction

and warfare. Warfare was viewed as an acceptable activity by most white Prot-
estants if carried out under certain circumstances, but the whites were never
quite able to accept the circumstances surrounding the warfare between the
Pawnees and their enemies. Thus the Pawnee wars remained a heathen activi-
ty. Paralleling this attitude were white views on hunting. It was not considered
a legitimate occupation, but only a sport at best, and at worst a pastime to dis-
guise idleness. It was therefore unacceptable.

Dunbar and Allis considered hard labor akin to godliness. It seemed to them
that the Pawnee men spent an inordinate amount of time lolling about the lodg-
es, smoking and talking. The missionaries were very critical of what they per-
ceived as the men’s slothful ways. At the same time, they praised the Pawnee
women’s industriousness when they were engaged in such “civilized” tasks
as cooking and sewing. The women also planted and cared for the plots of
corn, beans, and squash, but women laboring in the fields was contrary to the
dictates of “civilized” behavior. Obviously, many white farmwomen did field
work, which could be excused because of some occasional necessity. Agricul-
ture was considered a male occupation, and the role reversal was a powerful
proof of savagery.23

Protestant missionaries in the 1830s viewed “heathenism” and “civilization”
as evolutionary phenomena. The idealized lifeways of New England Presbyte-
rians were at or near the apex of this developmental process. Just below them
were well-meaning but misguided folk, such as Baptists. Farther down the
scale were Catholics, and at the bottom were the Pawnees and other Native
American groups. Many white Americans held the mistaken belief that Indian
tribes would recognize the superiority of white culture, cast aside traditional
ways, and race up the evolutionary ladder to “civilization.” To accomplish this
transformation, it was only necessary to impart the lessons of the Bible, teach
the Indians farming and related industries necessary for a comfortable sub-
sistence, and set a good example. Many eastern whites firmly believed such a
program would work and would quickly result in conversions. Although the
Pawnees were beginning to experience some pressure on their way of life, the
old traditions still functioned fairly adequately, so they had no intention of
evolving into anything.

This evolutionary process was the basis for a serious difference of opinion
within the missionary community. Through most of the nineteenth century, Protestants argued whether Indians could become Christians before first learning the basics of “civilization.” Those believing most strongly in the power of the Bible to bring about conversions argued that non-Christians could be made to see the light while still in their “savage” state. They contended that the missionary’s first duty was the conversion of the non-Christian, because “civilization” was an outgrowth of Christianity. The Protestants who believed in “civilization first” contended that progress must first be made on the road to “civilization” because Christianity could not function outside of a “civilized” society.

After nearly two years with the Pawnees, Dunbar and Allis felt sufficiently confident to voice their opinions on this matter. Both men believed that before Indians could acquire any more than the rudiments of Presbyterianism, “they ought to be taught the art of civilization, and to cultivate the soil.” Thus they placed themselves on the side with those who believed true conversion to Christianity could not occur until the Indians at least began to dress and act like solid New England farmers. When the American Board sent reinforcements to help Dunbar and Allis, the newcomers took the opposite view, which became one cause of discord within the Pawnee mission community.

The argument was certainly not resolved with the Pawnees. Thirty years later, at a conference of missionary societies held in Washington DC, Rev. John C. Lowrie proclaimed, “The object of the missionaries is to give them [the Native Americans] the Gospel, and civilization will follow as the result. . . . The Gospel first, then civilization. The order should not be reversed.”

The Government and the Indians

U.S. government policies toward the Indians emerged from practices developed during the British colonial period. The formulation and implementation of colonial policies had been left to the discretion of each colony or, on occasion, to individual citizens. This situation deteriorated, and by the mid-1700s laws were passed placing control of Indian affairs in the hands of the Crown.

The Revolutionary War interrupted the development of a coherent British policy toward the Indians, and in the years that followed, the new republic was forced to deal with many more immediate problems. When the young nation began to consider Indian diplomacy, precedents had already been established, and the older philosophy was perpetuated with few changes.
Henry Knox, the first U.S. secretary of war, was given the responsibility of managing affairs with Indians. Knox believed Indians would become extinct unless they were taught the ways of “civilization.” In 1789 he sent his plan to President George Washington, stating, “Missionaries, of excellent moral character, should be appointed to reside in their nations, who should be well supplied with all the implements of husbandry, and the necessary stock for a farm.” Washington agreed. It was not until 1816 that Cyrus Kingsbury of the American Board brought the government and missionary work together as Knox had envisioned. Kingsbury convinced President James Madison to allocate funds to build a school and provide agricultural equipment on the Cherokee reservation, while Kingsbury provided the teachers. The result was the opening of Brainerd Mission.

The administration of Indian affairs was assigned to the War Department, but no administrative guidelines were provided, and consequently an ad hoc section evolved that lacked clear organization or direction. By the 1820s the burden of Indian affairs was beginning to overwhelm the section. Secretary of War John C. Calhoun in 1824 created the Bureau of Indian Affairs in an attempt to be more efficient. In spite of the official name the bureau was consistently referred to as the Office of Indian Affairs at that time. The creation of a specific agency was an improvement, but it still lacked legal sanction. This came about when President Andrew Jackson signed the law on June 30, 1834, creating the Office of Indian Affairs. The head of the office was the commissioner of Indian affairs. Below him were superintendents of Indian affairs. One was stationed in St. Louis and had charge of all of the unorganized U.S. territory. Territorial governors served as superintendents in their territories.

The field representative of the office was the Indian agent. He was responsible for administering the terms of the various treaties between the tribes and the U.S. government and for enforcing various laws pertaining to dealings with the tribes. Agents were appointed by the president with the consent of the Senate to four-year terms. In the 1830s they received a salary of $1,500 per year. The office argued that an agent was needed for every tribe, but a budget-minded Congress limited the number of agents to twelve. To circumvent this restriction the position of subagent was created. Despite their title they were not subordinate to agents. They had the same duties as an agent and were directly responsible to the superintendent, but they received a salary of only $750 per year.
John Dougherty was the agent for the Pawnees when Dunbar and Allis arrived. Dougherty was as well informed concerning the Pawnees as anyone the missionaries were likely to meet. He had been a trader to several tribes in the central Plains for a number of years prior to his agency job. This experience and his gift for languages enabled him to first get a job as an interpreter in the Office of Indian Affairs and then as the Upper Missouri agent on January 22, 1827.  

Dougherty’s headquarters had been at Fort Atkinson. When the army abandoned the post in 1827 and built Fort Leavenworth much lower on the Missouri, Agent Dougherty was ordered to remain in the vicinity of the old fort. He was adamantly opposed to this. Dougherty followed the army to Leavenworth and for nearly five years offered one excuse after another for staying there. Finally in 1832, when the excuses were no longer tolerated, he purchased a trading post at Bellevue belonging to Lucien Fontenelle, who acquired it from the Missouri Fur Company. Dougherty’s agency encompassed a vast area west of the Missouri River, east of the Rocky Mountains, and above the Platte River. In 1835 the agency was reorganized. Dougherty headed the new Council Bluffs Agency for the Pawnees, Omahas, Otoes, and Missourias. Tribes farther north remained in the Upper Missouri Agency under a subagent. Dougherty resigned in 1839 and was followed by a parade of agents of varying abilities.

In 1834 Congress passed the Trade and Intercourse Act. It was developed from the earlier edicts and was the principal legal base for Indian-white interaction during the Pawnee mission period. Though very similar in content to earlier laws, the 1834 act reflected changed conditions rather than any significant departure from the established philosophy.  

The first section of the 1834 law redefined Indian Country as “all that part of the United States west of the Mississippi, and not within the states of Missouri and Louisiana, or the territory of Arkansas.” The U.S. government recognized the Indians’ claim to tribal land by right of possession, and the land could be opened to white settlement only after it was exchanged for other land or purchased by the government. These purchases and trades required the consent of tribal leaders and were governed under treaties the leaders had signed. This kind of land acquisition was to prevent outright theft of Indian land and thereby remove one of the more serious causes of hostilities between Indians and whites. In many cases land acquisition through treaty negotiations prevented
open warfare, yet the stipulations were not always honored, and the legality of some were questioned in the courts for many decades.

The 1834 law also controlled trade between Indians and whites. At that time the Indians offered the pelts of beaver, muskrat, deer, and buffalo in exchange for guns, ammunition, knives, blankets, cloth, and ornaments. Whites wishing to enter the trade had to apply for a license by submitting evidence of their good character and posting a $5,000 bond. Those convicted of trading without a license were subject to a $500 fine and confiscation of their goods.

The law also made it illegal for anyone to “purchase or receive of any Indian, in the way of barter, trade, or pledge a gun, trap or other article commonly used in hunting, any instrument of husbandry or cooking utensils . . . or any article of clothing.” This section carried a fine of $50. John Dunbar had given foodstuffs to the Pawnees after they came home from an unsuccessful hunt and, in return, received what he termed “unessential items” from the grateful Indians. Dunbar’s detractors did not view this as an exchange of gifts and accused the missionary of violating this section of the trade law.

Liquor had always been used in the trade, both as a saleable commodity and as a gift to the Indians prior to a trade. Everyone agreed it was a deplorable practice, but all of the traders contended they had to use liquor because the competition did. The American Fur Company argued a more patriotic theme. Their excuse was that if Americans stopped using liquor, the Indians would seek out British traders and, in time, would be inclined to subvert American interests in the West in favor of alliances with the British. Although anti-liquor sentiment abounded, the economic importance of the fur trade and the demand for alcohol in the Indian Country greatly hindered any effort to impose a real prohibition.

An 1832 law stated, “no ardent spirits shall be hereafter introduced, under any pretence,” into the Indian Country.\textsuperscript{35} No penalty was provided. Under the 1834 Trade and Intercourse Act a whiskey peddler could be fined up to $500 and have his trading license revoked.\textsuperscript{36} The demand for alcohol was too great, and the War Department did not have the personnel to patrol such a vast area. As a result, whiskey peddlers were rarely caught. Agent Daniel Miller employed a clever subterfuge to induce Indian trader Peter A. Sarpy to reveal his whiskey supply when they were at one of the Pawnee villages. When Sarpy produced the
barrel, the agent poured it on the ground, much to the delight of the missionaries. Under the law, Sarpy's license to trade should have been revoked, but he continued in business and probably continued to use whiskey. The missionaries complained bitterly about the use of alcohol, although it seems the Pawnees indulged infrequently when compared to some of their neighbors.

The missionary effort received a great boost in 1819 when the government made a commitment to change the Indians' way of life with the passage of the Civilization Fund Act. The president was empowered “to employ capable persons of good moral character, to instruct them in the mode of agriculture suited to their station; and for teaching their children in reading, writing, and arithmetic.” The sum of $10,000 was appropriated annually to carry out the act. The bill was not intended to create government schools, but rather to pass on the funds to benevolent societies, who would provide the schools and teachers. Christian missionary societies already in place were quick to take advantage of the annual appropriation. Within two years the flurry of activity the bill created resulted in a change in government regulations, and more money was allocated. More than $16,000 was expended on the construction of school buildings, which was matched by some $5,000 from the societies. By 1826 thirty-eight schools, including six of the American Board's, were being subsidized.  

Treaties constituted another body of regulations governing Indian-white interaction. The first treaties with the Pawnees were signed in 1818 and in 1825. These were little more than expressions of mutual friendship. The tribe promised not to injure American citizens and not to deal with foreign powers. The right of the U.S. government to control trade between its citizens and the Pawnees was acknowledged.  

Treaties calling for the surrender of tribal lands invariably contained clauses providing for schools for Indian children and instruction in farming and other “civilized” skills. The Pawnees were not impacted by this type of treaty until after President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act in 1830. The law required Indian tribes living in states and territories to sell their land to the U.S. government and move to Indian Territory. Supporters of the law pointed out that the Indians under-utilized the eastern lands, and the valuable resources there were going to waste. They further argued that removal was for the Indians' benefit. Once the tribes were reestablished in this area specifically
set aside for them, they could live in peace, learn the basics of “civilization,” and be free of the influences of evil white men. These noble sentiments helped to disarm the law’s few detractors, who suggested the real reason for the decree was to satisfy the white man’s insatiable greed for land. In the early 1830s the law forced several tribes into the northeastern corner of present-day Kansas. Others went to Oklahoma. Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Catholic missionaries quickly followed and tried to teach white ways to Indians who had just been cheated by the white legal system.

Among the newcomers were the Delaware Indians, who began hunting on land claimed by the Pawnees. Not unexpectedly, trouble soon developed. In 1832 the government intervened in an attempt to restore peace. Congress authorized a commission to visit and examine the country set apart for the newcomers and to draw up treaties with the tribes. The next year the Pawnees were coaxed into signing a treaty in which they relinquished their claim to all land lying south of the Platte River, so it could become part of a common hunting ground for them and the new tribes. Thus the first example of government philosophy about land acquisition relative to the Pawnees was not for white settlement, but for other Native Americans.

The Pawnees signed the treaty on October 9, 1833. The president of the United States approved it on April 12, 1834. This treaty clearly reflected the spirit of the 1819 Civilization Fund Act and contributed to the decision to found a mission with the Pawnees. In return for the ceded land, the Pawnees were to receive in excess of $100,000 worth of goods and services over a period of years “for the purpose of advancing the welfare of the said Pawnees.” It was the first direct attempt by the government to teach the Pawnees the ways of “civilization.” The government would pay for a teacher for five years and for two blacksmiths, two strikers, and four farmers for ten years. The smiths and farmers were also expected to teach the Pawnees the technology of their respective skills. Unfortunately the treaty did not produce the desired results, and sporadic fighting continued. In retaliation for a Pawnee attack, the Delawares burned one of their villages only a few months before Dunbar and Allis arrived.

Hopes for the religious and secular conversion of the Pawnees were thwarted for a time, since the treaty stipulated that Indian Office employees would not be sent “until said tribes shall locate themselves in convenient agricultural
districts, and remain in these districts the whole year, so as to give protection” to the whites. For generations the Pawnees had lived in “agricultural districts,” so this part of the treaty was fulfilled. The real problem lay in the treaty clause that required the Pawnees “to remain in these districts the whole year.” This was impossible for although the Pawnees cultivated extensive fields of corn and a few other crops, buffalo hunting was still necessary to their survival. They would leave their villages in the late fall to begin the winter hunt, lasting five or six months, and sometimes travel as far as present-day northern Kansas or southern South Dakota. A summer hunt lasting no more than three months took place after the crops were planted. These long periods of nomadic life violated the letter of the treaty, but the American Board put forth its considerable influence to have the clause loosely interpreted.  

The Missionaries

When Samuel Parker read the Flathead article in the Christian Advocate, he probably had no knowledge of the Pawnees or Dougherty or the agency. What came to his mind was a rekindled missionary spirit that had lain dormant for twenty years, since his early ministry as a domestic missionary. Parker attended Williams College and graduated in 1806. It is not known if he was a member of the Brethren, but he certainly agreed with their goals. Parker went on to Andover Theological Seminary, a hotbed of missionary zeal. He was ordained in 1812 at the Congregational Church of Danby, New York, where he later served as pastor. By 1833 Parker was the pastor of the Congregational Church in Middlefield, Massachusetts. He had a wife, Jerusha, and three children. This and his advancing age would have kept less determined men out of the missionary business, but the Nez Perce/Flathead delegation, whom he dubbed “the wise men from the West,” bothered his religious conscience. Parker felt he had been negligent in his profession and set out to save the Flatheads with a determination of the apostles of old. These feelings may have resulted, at least in part, from the careers of some of his college peers, who were numbered among the most revered missionaries of their generation and who had preached to millions in Asia. Parker’s accomplishments must have seemed pale by comparison as he ministered to his flock in Middlefield.

On April 10, 1833, he wrote to the American Board, offering “to go beyond the
Introduction

Rocky Mountains to establish a mission among the Flat-head Indians, or some other tribe.” In the letter Parker reveals an impetuous nature, as well as a frightening lack of knowledge about what he was proposing. He was fired with the ambition to save souls in the Flathead country and offered his life to the project, yet his lack of knowledge about foreign missionary service forced him to use a generic greeting on his letter rather than addressing it to an individual. He admitted his proposed tour would be costly, yet he had no money himself. He recommended taking “one or two young or youngerly men” with him, but had no one in mind. He had almost no idea where he was going, but believed he would “take the Traders rout across the mountains” and “establish a mission where in divine providence it may appear best.”

In January Parker enlisted his “three young men of fervent piety,” but within a few weeks two of them had a change of heart. One changed his mind so quickly that no one bothered to record his name. The other volunteer to drop out was G. W. Schuyler, who then disappeared from the historical records. Although it is not entirely clear, it seems Samuel Allis was the third of the original trio. He had lived in Ithaca since 1828 and was a member of the Presbyterian Church. It is not unlikely he was present on January 6, when Parker made his plea to the Ithaca church members for the support of a western mission. If not, Allis certainly had opportunities to become acquainted with Parker and gain his confidence. Allis had exemplary qualifications for the position of a lay missionary. He was young, single, healthy, moderately well educated, and, most important, willing to go. Allis was born in Conway, a small town near the center of Massachusetts on September 28, 1805, and at age seventeen he apprenticed in the saddlemaker’s trade. In 1826 he moved to Williamstown, then to Troy, and finally to Ithaca, where he met Parker.

The writings of Samuel Allis reveal a pragmatic individual. He discussed the alien customs of the Pawnees with less condemnation than most. He expressed his opinions openly, at least in the beginning of his missionary career. He heard some stories about Arikara treachery and concluded there would be “no other way to stop them than to kill them off.” He also made another recommendation that must have shocked the American Board. He suggested “that a Missionary that was going among the wandering tribes, would in some cases be more useful to Marry one of there women, than to live a single life . . . a man married to
one of their women would have many advantages over a single man, and I think would have more influence.” 48 Allis would remain in the West and made many friends among the Pawnees. In 1857 the tribe signed a treaty with the government that included an article that Allis be given $2,000 because he “has long been a friend of the Pawnees.” 49 Allis would continue to serve as an interpreter until 1861, when his “age and feeble health” forced his retirement. 50

John Dunbar was recommended to Parker by Dunbar’s professors at Auburn Theological Seminary. Dunbar was a student there and the previous year had “resolved on going to the heathen, should Providence open the way.” 51 The letters written during his time as a missionary support only some of the Auburn professors’ recommendations. Dunbar’s compassion for others is abundantly evident, as is his frustration at being unable to alleviate their suffering. His empathy is equaled by a disdain for any custom different from those he practiced. More than once Dunbar’s introverted personality is evident.

Charles Augustus Murray was the guest of a Grand Pawnee chief on the summer hunt in 1835, when he met Dunbar. The Scottish tourist was not favorably impressed and described the young minister in terms reminiscent of those used by the professors, although Murray’s words were not as charitable.

The only other source from which I could gather anything, was from a young man sent by the missionaries from New England to learn the Pawnee language, with a view to his teaching their children hereafter the elements of religion, morals, grammar, &c. The history of the world affords ample evidence to prove that the first spreaders of the Gospel among savage tribes, must be active enterprising men, and enthusiasts; anything more directly opposite to these qualities than the character of the young missionary resident among the Pawnees I defy the whole world to produce, he was the most indolent, quiet, phlegmatic being I ever beheld, and in taciturnity worthy to be a priest of Momus himself; however I did now and then extract a few sentences from him, and such facts as he told me I could depend upon, as there did not appear to be a grain of fancy or invention in his composition; he had been with the Pawnees about eight months, and spoke a few words of the language, but he had not the bump—I beg pardon, the “organ” of language. His residence among them may be productive of some advantage to the estimate formed by the savages of the character of the whites, as his life is decent and moral.
In fairness to Dunbar, it must be noted that Murray tended to impugn nearly everyone he met. Even stronger reactions to Reverend Dunbar’s personality and behavior were expressed by members of Maj. Clifton Wharton’s expedition to the Pawnee villages with the First Regiment of Dragoons in August 1844. The dragoons were preparing to cross the Loup River near the village. Quicksand made crossing difficult, especially for travelers unfamiliar with the stream. According to Lt. James Henry Carleton,

> There being a Missionary Station but a short distance below the village, the Commanding officer was in hopes of some knowledge as to the best place for passage of the river, and the most desirable spot for an encampment, could be gained from people residing there; consequently, at a very early hour, he wrote a note to the Rev. Mr. Dunbar—the Missionary who had been stationed longest in the country—inviting him over to our camp, with a view of obtaining information on these points. The whole conduct of this reverend gentleman while we were in the country, was such as to merit the unqualified censure of every individual belonging to the Expedition. I will here make an extract from the Journal of our Chaplain, Mr. Ker, in which the Rev. Mr. Dunbar’s course toward us seems to be spoken of in very plain, though in very just terms.

According to the chaplain, no answer to the major’s request having been received, it was decided to go ahead and attempt the crossing without the desired assistance. The crossing, notes the chaplain, was,

> well known to the missionaries, who, with the Indians, often cross it; and to those acquainted with its many sinuosities. . . . Some of these missionaries, with Mr. Dunbar among them, were assembled on the opposite bank, and had a full view of our situation and difficulties, and yet not one of them offered the slightest assistance. The Indians were much more considerate and kind, for numbers of them came down from the village, and dashed like waterfowl into the river, as if this was their proper element; men, women, and children; some on ponies and donkeys, some swimming, and some wading along the shoals. . . . But query? which need civilization most, the Indians or the missionaries? The former, who dashed into the water to render us what assistance
they could, or the latter, who stood snug and dry upon the banks, looking on with stoical apathy? On ascertaining that Mr. Dunbar was among them, I approached him and announced my name and calling. At the same time, I extended to him my hand, which he received slowly and apparently with a good deal of reluctance, and replied to my salutation in the briefest and most distant manner, immediately stepping back into the company of his missionary friends and declining all conversation and further intercourse, as if he had already proceeded too far... To the rest of the officers he was quite as distant... Mr. Dunbar had not even the courtesy to visit the Commanding officer, to whom an apology at least was due for the unusual manner in which he had treated his letter. On the contrary, he seemed disposed to shun him altogether, and would have done so entirely, had not one of the officers (the adjutant) almost compelled him to call.53

George Belcher Gaston and his wife, Maria Cummings Gaston, joined Dunbar and Allis in May 1840. George Gaston was born in Danby, New York, in 1814. In 1834 he and his bride moved to the vicinity of Oberlin, Ohio. It was here that the Gastons fell under the spell of Charles G. Finney, who preached a version of Presbyterianism dubbed Oberlin Perfectionism, which was not accepted by the mainstream of the church. Nevertheless, Gaston was accepted by the American Board as an assistant missionary.

Within a few weeks of his arrival in the Pawnee country, Gaston concluded that Dunbar was not devoting enough time to purely missionary endeavors and did not hesitate to publicize his perspective. It was the beginning of a rift that would nearly destroy the mission community. Gaston resigned from the American Board in the spring of 1842, when he was hired as a Pawnee farmer. The Gastons left the Pawnees in April 1845 and returned to Oberlin. In the fall of 1848 they joined a religious sect and moved to Iowa, where they founded Civil Bend. Flooding forced a removal to Tabor, Iowa, a few miles away, in the spring of 1852. Gaston died there on May 1, 1873. His obituary described him as active and mechanically inclined and “not especially fond of books or study.” 54

James and Sara Clarke Mathers came to the Pawnees as lay missionaries early in 1842. They lived in Plainfield, about thirty-five miles southwest of Chicago, Illinois, where they operated a gristmill. They were instrumental in organizing a Congregational Church. The Mathers had three children. Their eldest
son, Carolan, was born in 1823. Marcellus was born about two years later, and daughter Sallie M. was born in 1841. James and his elder son were hired as government farmers for the Pawnees that spring. Mathers believed the only hope for the Pawnees was a rapid acceptance of Christianity and civilization and was not shy about whipping a Pawnee who did not live up to his expectations. In the fall of 1845 he got into a fight with a chief of the Loup or Skidi band over some gunpowder. The Skidi was killed in the fray, as was young Marcellus. Fear of reprisals forced the Mathers to leave the mission. They went west and settled in Santa Clara County, California.55

Lester W. Platt and Elvira Gaston were married in Oberlin, Ohio, in 1841. They were invited to join the Pawnee mission by Agent Daniel Miller, upon the recommendation of Elvira Platt's brother, George Gaston. They reached the Loup settlement on July 1, 1843.56

Within a month of their arrival Agent Miller nominated Lester Platt to be a teacher. A nomination by an agent was usually tantamount to confirmation, but this time it was rejected. The Indian office undoubtedly realized that Platt could speak no more than a few words of Pawnee and could not justify the salary of $500 a year.57

The Platts decided to stay, although Lester Platt was unemployed for fifteen months. During this time he began learning the Pawnee language and worked his farm, giving some of the produce to the Pawnees. Later Platt claimed the Office of Indian Affairs owed him $375 for the work he had done. Platt's request for the money crept slowly through the bureaucracy until mid-1848, when Superintendent of Indian Affairs Thomas H. Harvey ruled he was not employed and "was in the country at his own discretion."58 Platt was hired as a farmer late in October 1844. The following spring the agent submitted Platt's nomination as the Pawnee teacher. This time it was approved.59

In the fall of 1843 Elvira Platt took some Pawnee children into her home and started a school. After the mission on the Loup was abandoned, they went to Bellevue and took twenty Pawnee children with them. They stayed for a year, but according to Mrs. Platt, "the liquor element among the fur traders" demanded the Platts' removal. In 1847 they moved to the vicinity of present-day Nebraska City and then to Iowa.60

In 1861 the Platts went to the Pawnee reservation in present-day Nance County,
in central Nebraska, where they attempted to secure appointments as teachers. Disagreements with the agent resulted in Lester Platt’s eviction, and he opened a store on the edge of the reserve. Elvira Platt was allowed to remain and teach school.  

Timothy E. Ranney and his wife Charlotte were late arrivals in Pawnee country. Reverend Ranney was a graduate of Middlebury College, Vermont, and had attended Andover Theological Seminary. The American Board offered him a mission in Hawaii, but when this could not be arranged he accepted a position with the Pawnee mission in the spring of 1844. Shortly before leaving New England he married Charlotte Taylor, an Ashby, Massachusetts, schoolteacher. After the collapse of the Pawnee mission, the couple went to the Cherokee mission in present-day Oklahoma.

There were other whites at the Pawnee villages who were employed by the Office of Indian Affairs as farmers, blacksmiths, and strikers. The Indian office did not hesitate to accept applicants recommended by the American Board, assuming they might have a missionary spirit and would be more concerned about the “betterment” of the Indians and less about a handsome salary. The Platts and the Mathers were in this category and undoubtedly considered themselves to be missionaries first and government employees second. There were a few others, but they are only shadows in transit.

Rev. David Greene played a significant role in the Pawnee mission as the head of all of the American Board’s Indian missions. He had the unenviable task of encouraging the missionaries to increase their efforts at a time when the board had neither the funds nor the personnel to reinforce a mission. Greene also had to soothe the injured feelings of people on both sides of the divided Pawnee mission community.

The Pawnee
No one ever bothered to write more than a few words about the Pawnees’ reaction to the missionaries. When the Pawnees’ agent explained to the chiefs what Dunbar and Allis were proposing, the two men were immediately accepted. The Pawnees were curious about the white people’s religion and were receptive to learning new ceremonies that might improve their world. They also recognized the value of having some bilingual members of the tribe, and the
missionaries were willing to teach the children. At the same time, the Pawnees had no intention of discarding their religion or jettisoning their traditional lifestyle. Their interest in new ideas was certainly not motivated by any desperate need. Their ancestors had lived in earthlodge villages in central and southern Nebraska for three hundred years and possibly longer. The tribe, composed of four bands—Grands, Republicans, Tappages, and Loups—spoke a northern Caddoan language. The Loup dialect was slightly different, and this band tended to remain apart. They hunted by themselves and lived in a village always to the west of the rest of the tribe.

The Pawnees recognized a supreme deity, Tirawahat, which must have given hope to the missionaries. Any similarity to Christianity ended there. Below Tirawahat were lesser gods represented by the sun, moon, and certain stars. Various ceremonies were preformed to maintain an orderly world. The missionaries described these as nothing more than “foolish witchery.”

It seems not all the Pawnees were happy with the missionaries. In June 1838 some Pawnees paid a visit to the Potawatomis, who had recently settled across the Missouri River from Bellevue. There they met two Catholic priests, Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet and Father Felix Verreydt. Father DeSmet would later claim the Pawnees begged him to come to their village because they had evicted the Protestant ministers, who were accompanied by the devil.

Notes on the Letters and Editorial Methods

Nearly all of the original letters written by the missionaries and their associates can be found in two archives. The letters written by the missionary community are in the archives of Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Letters from the Pawnee missionaries to officials of the American Board in Boston were published under the title “Letters Concerning the Presbyterian Mission in the Pawnee Country, near Bellevue, Neb., 1831–1849,” Collections of the Kansas Historical Society 14 (1915–19): 570–784. This publication is referred to hereafter simply as “Letters.” A century ago introductions and explanatory notes were not considered necessary, although the editor of the “Letters” did add six brief footnotes. In 1985 Garland Publishing republished only the Dunbar and Allis correspondence. The eminent anthropologist Waldo R. Wedel added a ten-page introduction. A few other letters having a bearing
on the Pawnee mission, especially in the formative years, have been published in a number of periodicals. Published letters to the Pawnee missionaries are nearly nonexistent.

Letters written by employees of the Office of Indian Affairs constitute a body of unpublished material pertaining to the mission and the Pawnees. These letters are in the National Archives and have been microfilmed as Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, Council Bluffs Agency, Microcopy 234, reels 213–17, and Upper Missouri Agency, Microcopy 234, reels 883–84.

At least four letters have been lost or are hidden in some unlikely location within a collection. For example, Dunbar mentioned a letter from Greene dated March 19, 1838, while Greene listed Dunbar’s letter of August 16, 1845. Neither could be found.

The letters have been transcribed with a minimum of editorial manipulations. Certain words are misspelled by today’s standards. For example, in the 1830s buffalo was spelled with only one “f,” while traveling had a double “l.” Allis and a few others with only a minimal education relied on phonetic spellings. Thus Allis might write about the corn “groing” in the field or using “bords” to build a corncrib. Since these “misspellings” are easily understood, there seemed no need to correct them. They also retain a bit of the letters’ original character.

Punctuation tended to be erratic. Commas and hyphens were used extensively and many were added in random locations. Many of these were potential stumbling blocks for readers and have been removed. Authors of the letters occasionally underlined words or phrases for added emphasis. The underlines have been retained.

Bad penmanship caused problems in transcribing some of the letters. Other letters have suffered from water damage and flimsy paper, which allowed the ink to bleed through. Most of these problems were found in the copies of letters from Boston to the missionaries in the field after 1837. These factors, either alone or in combination, resulted in illegible words, lines, and, on occasion, entire letters. Some severely damaged letters had a scattering of legible words that suggested the general theme. These instances have been noted in the editor’s introductory remarks to a related letter. Illegible words are indicated by ______________. Italicized words are the editor’s best guess in deciphering scribbled words.