2004

Congregationalist Richard Cordley and the Impact of New England Cultural Imperialism in Kansas, 1857-1904

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What constitutes an authentic western hero? The archetypal image of the Jeffersonian ideal, the yeoman pioneer farmer who brought all the benefits of the American republic to the West, was the quintessential western hero until the Civil War era. Following this destructive period in American history, the armed gunfighter or cowboy replaced the yeoman farmer as the popular image of what it meant to be a western hero. But what about the clergy? As a major social force throughout the nineteenth century, religion proved an important factor in the settlement of the American West. Yet the idea of a religious figure as a western hero has never emerged in the popular culture adaptations of the Western, since the clergy are usually portrayed as gentle, “soft,” or even somewhat effeminate.¹

The image of a Protestant minister defending his homestead and town with a rifle, and later serving as a member of the Kansas militia during the Civil War, contradicts the popular stereotype. Congregational minister Dr. Richard Cordley was such a man. He embodied an intellectualized Jacksonian “common man” who preached to his congregation, yet when trouble arose was not afraid to pick up a weapon and join his fellow Kansans in the battle for independence, freedom, and liberty. Cordley’s life and significance resonate across the Great Plains. His story is one among thousands who traversed the continent in the mid-nineteenth century and settled in the Great Plains. Removing denominational affiliations, Cordley’s efforts at proclaiming the gospel mirror those of other western missionaries and circuit riders throughout the Dakotas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas. However, unlike other

¹ Key Words: Anti-Slavery, Congregational, Cultural Imperialism, Education, Kansas-Nebraska Act, Missionaries, Quantrill’s Raid, Religious Reform, Women’s Rights.

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Protestant missionaries in the Plains, Cordley’s radically liberal agenda not only put a New England cultural stamp on a region of predominantly conservative, evangelical Protestants, but created a haven in eastern Kansas of liberalism and New England mores that even today stands in sharp contrast to its neighbors. Cordley’s heroism manifested itself in his ability to spark moral, humanitarian, and radical reforms that helped free slaves, promote women’s rights, establish educational facilities, foster prohibition legislation, and voice concerns over the inhumane treatment of American Indians and Chinese immigrants. In the process, Cordley, like other Congregational ministers of the early nineteenth century who migrated through the Ohio River valley, advocated New England cultural imperialism and transplanted New England mores to the Great Plains and Mountain West. In 1835 noted Congregational minister Lyman Beecher issued his now-famous “Plea for the West,” in which he declared that “we must educate, we must educate, or we must perish by our own prosperity. If we don’t, short from cradle to the grave will be our race. If in our haste to be rich and almighty, we outrun our literary and religious institutions, they will never overtake us.” Beecher’s plea exemplified the complex gospel message of the early nineteenth century that was currently sweeping the nation. His fellow Congregationalist Reverend Horace Bushnell similarly argued that “barbarism [was] the first danger” in America’s contemporary thrust west. Fearing “barbarism” and anarchy, plus the ills of perceived Catholic domination, the mainline Protestant denominations served as forerunners of the social gospel movement and the mission systems to colonize the American West. Along the way, the churches advocated moral reforms such as honoring the Sabbath, prohibition, and the abolition of prostitution; humanitarian reforms such as solving the problems of crime and disease; and radical reforms such as abolishing slavery and promoting women’s rights. In so doing, most of the northern Protestant denominations aligned themselves to the main forces of change during the antebellum period.

Following the American Revolution and the destruction of the organized churches’ control of the colonies (the Church of England in the South and the Congregational Church in the North), mission work in the newly acquired lands west of New York became a major concern for several mainline Protestant faiths. In 1783 Yale president Ezra Stiles predicted that Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians would spearhead the reform movements and “dominate the religious life of the new nation.” Although there were nearly 750 Congregational churches in 1780 and 2,200 by 1860, these statistics do not compare to the overwhelming spread of Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, and Roman Catholics into the American West.

From 1788 through 1791 Yale Congregationalist Timothy Dwight helped create a union between the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians, thus ending decades of struggle and debate between the two Protestant denominations. Dwight agreed with the Presbyterians to establish a joint missionary society that would spread a New England-based faith and culture to the American West and other regions of the continent. In 1801 the Congregational Church united with the Presbyterians in a joint effort to colonize and “civilize” the American frontier. Embracing a “mixed polity,” both the Congregationalists and Presbyterians agreed to share the responsibility of establishing missions in the American West to perpetuate their version of the gospel message. Under the auspices of this 1801 Plan of the Union, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was formed in 1810, and by 1826 it had united with the United Foreign Missionary Society. Under this organization, famed Congregational minister Samuel Worcester was assigned as minister to the Cherokee in Georgia. Later he became notorious for his defense of Cherokee sovereignty in Worcester v. Georgia in 1832. Additionally, the Congregationalists joined with the New School Presbyterians and Re-
formed Dutch churches to form the American Home Missionary Society on May 10, 1826. However, internal debates and arguments between Old and New School Presbyterians divided the denomination and greatly reduced their impact on the western missionary societies. In 1837 Old School Presbyterians abandoned the Plan of the Union, and despite attempts to recruit New School Presbyterians to join, the Congregationalists abandoned the Plan in 1852. Also, on May 27, 1861, New School Presbyterians pulled out of the American Home Missionary Society, leaving the Congregationalists with total control. Although the Congregationalists would solely manage the entire organization from then on, the name was not changed to the Congregational Home Missionary Society until 1893.7

During this period the Congregationalists had also established the Andover Theological Seminary (1808) under Reverend Ebenezer Porter to facilitate additional missionary work in the American West. Proclaiming an evangelical message, nearly 40 percent of all foreign missionaries were Massachusetts-based Congregationalists. The first attempts by these various missionary societies focused on establishing religious institutions and spreading the message of Christ, but a small group of Andover graduates set their dreams and goals on a higher trajectory. Although western clergies, such as these Andover graduates, would never achieve the fame and recognition of their better-known eastern counterparts, they would refocus the social gospel message in innovative fashions to meet the needs of their western parishioners.

In 1856, following the heated Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and the ensuing rage between proslavery forces and abolitionists, four clerics, Reverends Sylvester Dava Storrs, Roswell Davenport Parker, Grosvenor C. Morse, and Richard Cordley, established the "Andover Band," later named the "Kansas Band." Their goal was to counteract the proslavery forces in Kansas and form a truly Christian state within the American West. However, the Kansas Band were not the first Congregationalists to enter the region. In 1819 the Congregationalists had united with the Presbyterians and Dutch Reformed Church to establish missions with the Osage Indians, and by 1824 had opened Neosho Mission.8 These missionaries "exerted a large influence on the moral and religious development of the state."9 In 1854 two groups from New England also traveled to Kansas to defeat the proslavery vote. By 1856 the New England Emigrant Aid Company had set up a few colonies in the eastern sections of the state. After receiving letters from Congregational settlers and Reverend Storrs in Kansas, the twenty-eight-year-old Richard Cordley decided to journey west from Michigan to the newly founded Free
State town of Lawrence, Kansas. As Cordley later noted in his memoir, "the band owed its existence to the heart and brain of Sylvester D. Storrs, who first suggested it and worked persistently for its success. Its first inspiration was due to the Kansas troubles which were then at their height, but the chief thought was to develop a Christian state in the center of the continent." 10

Born on September 6, 1829, in Nottingham, England, Richard Cordley belonged to the new wave of immigrants who arrived in America in the early nineteenth century. Cordley was only four years old when his parents, James and Ann Minta Cordley, traveled to Michigan and settled in Livingston County, fifteen miles southwest of Ann Arbor. He was nine years old before he attended his first formal school in the area. As Cordley observed, "[M]y mother was a cultivated woman, and taught me herself, and I could read quite well before I knew what a school was." 11 Born into a family of ten children, of which six boys survived, Cordley was raised in an orthodox household that honored the Sabbath. 12 When he was ten years old, he lost sight in one eye when he fell behind an oxen team stuck in the mud and gouged his eye on one of their horns. 13 In 1838 the first school district was established in the area by Cordley's father. This frontier log schoolhouse held three months of school every winter. When Cordley was fourteen, he attended school at the nearby Ann Arbor Classical School. To fund his education, he worked nine months on the farm and attended school for three months. In 1850 he entered the state university. Four years later, Cordley graduated from Michigan University and in July 1857 from Andover Theological Seminary. Topeka cleric Lewis Bodwell journeyed to Andover to convince Cordley and his fellow Andover graduates to emigrate to Kansas. In May 1857 the American Home Missionary Society's senior secretary, Dr. Milton Badger, visited the Andover graduates and arranged for their expedition to Kansas. 14 Badger and the American Home Missionary Society agreed to pay Cordley a salary of $600.

Before leaving for Kansas, Cordley spent the summer at home in Michigan on a short vacation. He had received an offer to preach at the university in Ann Arbor but declined, despite the offer of a salary two or three times as large as that from Plymouth Congregational. 15 As he noted, "I spent the summer at my old home in Michigan, and enjoyed the first real vacation I had had for many years. I was worn down when I left the seminary, and this summer at home was of great benefit to me." 16 On November 8, 1857, Cordley arrived in Jefferson City, Missouri, about 200 miles from the Kansas border. After spending some time with Reverend Storrs in Quindaro, Kansas, Cordley traveled the remaining forty miles to Lawrence. Reaching Lawrence later that month, Cordley recollected that the city "was the Jerusalem of my hopes." Cordley hoped to "transplant the principles and institutions of the Puritans to these fertile plains," to "pro-
claim the gospel in Kansas.” 17 He was delighted to discover a Congregational church already established in the location, as Plymouth Congregational Church had been founded by Reverend Samuel Y. Lum in 1854.18 A member of the American Home Missionary Society, Lum was part of the second New England Emigrant Aid Company’s group to venture to Kansas shortly after the first arrivals earlier in the year. Lum delivered his first sermon on October 1, 1854, in a tent, the precursor to the Plymouth setting. By October 15, Lum and his small congregation of ten followers resolved to build a permanent building. As Cordley noted, “their circumstances and their purposes corresponded with those of the Plymouth Pilgrims,” hence the name of the church.19 In the following year, 1855, Lum was instrumental in establishing the Congregational General Association of Kansas, which would serve as a “synod” of Kansas Congregational ministers. At their first meeting in 1857, Lum decreed “that the system of American Chattel Slavery is a high crime against God and humanity, and as such, is prima facie evidence against the Christian character of those implicated in it.” Thus began the Kansas Congregational radical reform movement.20 However, by 1857 Lum’s health had deteriorated and he resigned that spring; Cordley was ordained as minister later that year. Cordley arrived in Lawrence to preach his first sermon at Plymouth Congregational to a congregation of twenty-two members on December 2, 1857.21 On January 21, 1858, he was officially ordained by the Congregational Council at Quindaro. Two years later, he humorously addressed his congregation and discussed the loss of Lum and the congregation’s selection...
of him as replacement: “In the midst of the discussion, your present pastor came upon you unasked, and hard times soon after collapsing the pockets of the people, the church resigned itself to its fate, and has never since gathered courage enough to shake off the incubus.”

A staunch advocate of New England moral reforms, Cordley began his service in Kansas by addressing the issue of honoring the Sabbath. At the 1858 General Association meeting, attended by both Cordley and Lum, Cordley decreed “that we regard the Sabbath as a divine institution, founded upon the wants of human nature; and we believe its strict observance necessary to the physical and moral welfare of the race.” Like most Congregational and other Protestant ministers of the nineteenth century, Cordley also advocated the prohibition of alcohol. In his scrapbook, Cordley kept documented scientific records and medical evidence that described the horrid problems of alcoholism.

During his time in Lawrence, Cordley offered Lum’s unfinished Congregational church as the headquarters for the Constitutional Convention meeting, held in 1857. Determined to influence the moral development of the region, Cordley realized that his influence as a Congregational minister was necessary to sway an antislavery constitution for the developing state. Yet in spite of his avowed goals, Cordley’s impressions of Lawrence were somewhat bleak: “There were scarcely any fences or dooryards, and gardens were almost unknown. There had been hardly a tree or bush planted on the town site. All this was strange to me and gave a lonesome, desolate impression. That I had no home and had to wait three weeks before I could have a room of my own, no doubt added to the sense of loneliness.” From 1857 to 1860 Cordley lived through “depressing times.” Immigration from New England to Kansas had halted completely, and the westward migration known as the California gold rush failed to bring any permanent settlers to the area. Also, when Cordley arrived in 1857, he came alone. After only one year, he returned to his home in Michigan, married Mary Minta Cox in May 1859, and brought her back to Kansas. Although they had no children of their own, in 1875 the Cordleys adopted Margaret Jones. While the adoption record does not give her age, she is listed as a minor. Called “Maggie” by the Cordleys, she married in 1881 but preceded her parents in death in 1889.

On November 16, 1862, the completed Plymouth Congregational Church was dedicated in a ceremony conducted by fellow minister and friend Reverend Roswell Davenport Parker of Wyandotte, Kansas. Plymouth Congregational seated 350 members and cost $8,000 to complete. Although Cordley’s congregation numbered only seventy at the opening, the completion of the worship house signified that the promise for the future of Congregational reform remained strong.

By the autumn of 1857, there were eight Congregational churches in the state. As Cordley stated, “the fellowship of the churches was not an easy thing to establish and a still more difficult thing to maintain.” Although the distance between Lawrence, Topeka, Wyandotte, Emporia, Quindaro, and Leavenworth was relatively small by today’s standards, at that time it added to the isolation and difficulty of procuring New England-style reform in the area. Despite these difficulties, Cordley was able to establish three Congregational churches in the town of Lawrence alone, along with furthering several reform causes in the region. Although Cordley’s Plymouth Congregational Church (1854-present) is the only original city structure left today, the other two Congregational facilities served important roles during the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries.

In 1860 Cordley established the Congregational Church of Wakarusa, about five miles south of Lawrence. Additionally, in 1862 Cordley helped organize the Second Congregational Church of Lawrence, later named the Lawrence Colored or the “Freedman’s Church.” As a result of Cordley’s reform efforts among runaway slaves at Plymouth Congregational, many newly educated slaves decided to form
their own congregation. Despite being known as “contrabands” among the Congregational elite, these renegade churches offered African Americans both power and control over their spiritual destinies. From its inception in March 1862, Second Congregational Church was specifically designed to assist runaway slaves and freedmen living in Lawrence. Sponsoring educational programs, Sunday schools, and other innovative reform measures, Cordley was able to secure volunteer instructors to serve as teachers for the African American community. As he stated:

On Sabbath evening, March 16, a Church was organized among the “Contrabands” at Lawrence, as the “Second Congregational Church.” Eight persons covenanted together, and others are expected to unite. Only one of these persons had a letter of dismissal from the Church from which he came. His letter was made out for himself and wife. We asked him where his wife was. He replied, “they sold my wife and children down South before I got away. But I got a letter for both, hoping I might find her sometime.” We have seldom seen Slavery in so odious an aspect.39

Cordley was also able to garner funds for the church from the Congregational Union for this venture. The second church itself would be owned by the Plymouth Congregational Church trustees, but, as Cordley declared, “it is held, of course, in trust for the Second Congregational Church, to be transferred to them whenever the legal status of the Contrabands shall be sufficiently determined to make such a transfer safe.”30 Although Cordley served as pastor of Second Congregational on occasion, the pastorate remained largely vacant until Daniel Ellex became pastor and the church was officially commissioned in 1863. Lawrence’s Second Congregational Church was finally dedicated, despite the absence of a minister, on September 28, 1862, with Cordley’s Plymouth Congregational Church officially holding the title. Prior to Ellex’s arrival, the vacant church boasted a total of only eight members, six men and two women. But under Cordley’s leadership there were 60 members who attended the Second Congregational Sabbath schools. Under Ellex’s control, membership rose to twenty-three, ten men and thirteen women, with a Sabbath school attendance of 100 in the first year. From 1864 to 1866 membership rose and then declined. Interestingly, while total membership fluctuated over the period, the number of
female members was always greater than the number of males attending the church. However, throughout 1864 Ellex’s members who participated in the Sabbath schools outnumbered Cordley’s. By 1865 Cordley’s Sabbath numbers doubled those of Second Congregational Church. During Quantrill’s raid in 1863, Second Congregational was burned. Though later rebuilt, the church only lasted until the early years of the twentieth century. In 1900 the church had only nineteen members; it eventually closed its doors in 1903.31

Apart from Second Congregational Church, Richard Cordley also was instrumental in the founding of Lawrence Pilgrim Church in 1867. Another of the “contraband” churches, Lawrence Pilgrim, unlike Second Congregational, was not immediately recognized by the national Congregational authorities. From 1867 to 1912 Lawrence Pilgrim, or “North Lawrence Congregational Church,” functioned primarily for Congregationalists who couldn’t attend Cordley’s main branch at Plymouth. Reverend J. Franklin Morgan of Boston relocated to Lawrence and held religious services at Pilgrim for four years. With the rising population of Lawrence, Cordley believed that a second Free-State church would best facilitate Congregationalist needs and desires, as well as draw more members into the faith. However, during a massive flood in 1903, Pilgrim’s structure was damaged. On December 10, 1910, the last service was held in Pilgrim, and on November 17, 1911, the church united with Plymouth. However, the union was not official until January 7, 1912.32

Apart from his church-building efforts, Cordley remained an advocate of New England moral and radical reforms and was quickly inaugurated into the seething sectional crisis that began to divide the nation and state. Like other Congregational reformers, Cordley advocated the keeping of the Sabbath, prohibition (except in medicinal capacities), education, and, most importantly, the abolition of slavery, the freedom of American Indians, the promotion of women’s rights, and the recent concerns over Chinese immigration.

In the late 1850s Cordley continued his moral and radical reform efforts and established several Sunday schools specifically to educate runaway slaves. Also, he formed night schools that drew on volunteer Lawrence teachers to assist in the education process. In the summer of 1859 Cordley utilized a Kansas-style underground railroad to free runaway slaves escaping from Missouri and other nearby slave territories. “I had burned with indignation when the law [Fugitive Slave Act] was passed in 1850,” he had said.33 In 1856, during a great exodus of runaway slaves to the state, Gen. James H. Lane and others established “Lane’s Trail,” complete with stone markers from Topeka to Nebraska City, to assist the slaves’ escape into Canada. In one such incident, Cordley housed a young slave girl named Lizzie and helped her flee the proslavery forces that wanted to recapture her. Cordley later recollected that “we came to look forward with dismay to the time when Lizzie must leave us.”34 Famed proslavery militant William Quantrill once called for Cordley’s execution and declared his intention to “kill that damned abolitionist preacher.”35 When Quantrill sacked the town of Lawrence on August 21, 1863, many Free State supporters and Congregational church members were brutally slain. Cordley remembered the raid as “a general and indiscriminate slaughter.”36 During the attack, Cordley, his wife, and little daughter, Maggie, abandoned their home and fled for safety at the riverbank.37 Cordley’s house and all possessions were destroyed. The task of rebuilding Lawrence, both physically and spiritually, fell upon Cordley’s shoulders. He observed that “one saw the dead everywhere, on the sidewalks, in the streets, among the weeds in the gardens.”38 On the second Sunday after Quantrill’s raid, August 30, 1863, Cordley held a special sermon to ease his parishioners’ fears and losses. Similar to his Puritan forebears, Cordley drew upon Old Testament images and metaphors. From the Book of Isaiah, Cordley read, “For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a
moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee." He continued his sermon by stating, "For freedom's battle, once begun, bequeathed by bleeding sire to son, though baffled oft, is ever won." Although Lawrence remained broken, Cordley had re-united his church and reclaimed its devotion to ending slavery, despite such violent opposition. A year after Quantrill's raid, another raid similarly threatened Lawrence. On October 8, 1864, notice arrived in Lawrence that Gen. Sterling Price was marching toward Kansas with nearly 20,000 Confederate troops. Cordley noted that "I was a member of the rifle company which had been formed some months before. We had armed ourselves with repeating rifles." As a private in the Kansas state militia, Cordley was sworn to protect Lawrence from another devastating attack. However, General Price's raid was confined to Kansas City, where he was defeated.

During his thirty-eight years as pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church in Lawrence, Cordley became known as the "nugget preacher." Whereas other noted Congregational ministers such as Jonathan Edwards, Cotton Mather, Henry Ward Beecher, and Lyman Abbot embraced revivalist and/or extemporaneous styles during the First and Second Great Awakenings, Cordley traditionally preached in short sentences that often contained a "nugget of truth." Cordley "saw truth, not in abstract form but in vital relation to the lives of the men to whom he was speaking." Additionally, Cordley published numerous articles in national periodicals such as The Christian Union, The Independent, American Messenger, The Congregationalist and Boston Recorder, The Christian Banner, and The Advance. After only one year as minister of Plymouth Congregational, he began The Record, later renamed the Congregational Record, the first Congregational paper in the state.

The Congregational Record originally began as a quarterly publication. Cordley recognized that "the establishment of a Congregational paper for Kansas has for some time been a subject of serious discussion. The Eastern papers, excellent as they are, do not, and cannot, furnish that medium of communication which our churches need." The paper included minutes of the General Association of Kansas meetings, as well as information on various Congregational activities in Kansas and across the nation, including church statistics. In addition, the paper also carried information regarding other denominations' activities in Kansas. As editor, Cordley dreamt that this publication would become the religious periodical of the West, a paper to rival even Boston's famed Congregational Quarterly. Cordley noted that after its first issue appeared in April 1859, over 250 copies were ordered by various Congregational churches in the region. The cost was 50 cents a year. However, by 1862 The Record had not achieved Cordley's lofty hopes and began carrying advertisements similar to that of a popular magazine. Also, The Record soon became a monthly instead of a quarterly publication. During Quantrill's raid in 1863, The Record offices were burned and all the material for publication was destroyed. By 1865 The Record had recovered from the attack, but it primarily published church statistics and notices. During the 1865 meeting of the General Association, the members decided to suspend publication unless additional funds could be provided by the association or from other sources. The association decided to publish The Record for one more year. Although the magazine continued for a few more years, it never secured enough funding to justify its long-term publication.

Cordley's missionary and New England-style reforms did not end with the failure of The Record. Along with the other Protestant denominations, the Congregationalists realized that education lay at the heart of missionary work and humanitarian reforms in the West. Thus, he led the way in establishing several educational institutions. Numerous Congregational schools and colleges were created throughout the American West during this period, and Congregational clergy were especially prominent in this endeavor. In
Kansas alone, the Congregationalists established a public school and university infrastructure that still exists today. Plymouth Congregational Sunday school claimed to be the first school in Kansas.46 Cordley was also instrumental in establishing Lincoln College (now Washburn University) in Topeka and the University of Kansas in Lawrence. As early as 1857, the General Association had resolved that a university should be built either in Topeka or Lawrence “under the control of the General Association of Congregational Ministers and Churches of Kansas.”47 On January 25, 1865, the General Association of Congregational Churches in Kansas held a general meeting in Topeka to establish a university system within the state. Following the Puritan ideal of an “an educated clergy preaching to educated congregations,” Cordley and his fellow Congregational ministers decided to build a Congregational university system to rival that of the Methodists, Roman Catholics, and Presbyterians in the state.48 Earlier, in 1857-59, the General Association had met in Topeka and Lawrence to debate the best location for the university. Cordley and the other Congregationalists (later the trustees of Lincoln College) stated that “to found and endow a College is often regarded as simply providing new facilities for the advancement of Literature. Something more than this we would believe, however, possessed the minds of those who established Harvard and Yale. Such institutions were in their minds inseparable from a Free Church and a Free State.”49 Both Cordley and his minister friend Sylvester D. Storrs recognized “the danger from this quarter is enhanced from the fact that Romanism, on the one hand, and German infidelity on the other, early acquired a wide spread influence in this valley.”50 To counteract the influences of Catholicism and German Rationalism in Kansas, the Congregationalists demanded a “Strong Protestant Centre of Education that will not only aid the advancement of Science and Literature, but shall also disseminate correct ideas of civil and religious liberty.”51 The Kansas Congregationalists wanted to continue in the monumental efforts of their Puritan forefathers regarding education. Cordley and others ended their educational declaration by proclaiming “sincere love for our country and a wise solicitude for its future peace should induce us to plant, in the first stages of its growth, such institutions in this ‘seat of empire’ as shall anchor it securely to the great Puritan ideas.”52 Cordley and his fellow Congregationalists recognized that because of eastern elitist perceptions of the American West, western ministers’ efforts to establish a university would be rendered comical, if not futile. Cordley published a letter from the Boston Journal in the Congregational Record that demonstrated such attitudes:

Those are greatly privileged at the West who have the means to send their children East to be educated. But the number of such is very few, and always will be. But however superior our educational facilities may be, there are advantages inseparable from home education—that, we mean, of the neighborhood—carried among those of similar habits and modes of life, and allowing the young to be under the constant oversight of their parents. Hence the West must have its own institutions of learning.53

Despite the formulation of concrete ideas regarding a Congregational university in the state, the members of the General Association could not agree on its location.

After much discussion, Topeka was selected to house the new educational facility. However, with little financial backing, Topeka lost its bid in 1858, and Lawrence assumed control of the future university location. Under Reverend Lum, the Congregational trustees decided to build Monumental College in Lawrence as the central and prime Congregational university in the state. It was “designed to commemorate the triumph of Liberty over Slavery in Kansas, and to serve as a memorial of those who have assisted in achieving this victory.”54 In 1859 the trustees decided to build the university on Mount Oread (site of the
present University of Kansas). But with the Civil War breaking out, creating severe monetary constraints, the construction of Monumental was delayed. Even after a joint agreement with the Presbyterians and Episcopalians for additional funding in 1861, Monumental College never got off the ground during the war years. flocking the Civil War, the Topeka contingent was able to raise enough money to found the Topeka Institute, or Lincoln College, which later became Washburn University on November 18, 1868, with the financial assistance of $25,000 from Massachusetts deacon Ichabod Washburn. The Special Committee on Theological and Collegiate Education of the Congregationalists recognized their Kansas brothers’ efforts as “laying the foundation of a Congregational College, which shall, on the field of its early victory, be a monument of the triumph of freedom over slavery; a memorial of that Christian emancipator whose name it bears.”

Although Topeka had secured its college, Lawrence was not to be outdone. Cordley and his followers submitted a proposal to the state senate, which was passed on February 20, 1863, and on September 12, 1866, the University of Kansas finally opened its doors.

In addition to his role as founder of two major state universities, Cordley served as a regent at Kansas State University. He was also on the Lawrence School Board for twenty years and served as its president from 1885 to 1891, and Cordley Elementary School still exists there. In 1871 Washburn elected Cordley as its president, but he declined the offer. In 1874 the University of Kansas bestowed a Doctor of Divinity degree, the first degree granted by the university, upon Cordley to honor his reform efforts and pioneer work in the field of education. However, like most Protestant denominational colleges in the West, Cordley’s institutions failed to retain their Congregational affiliations. The American West, as many missionaries soon learned, was too large and sparsely populated, with various conflicting faiths, to fulfill western denominational college hopes.

Cordley also spearheaded women’s reform issues during his thirty-eight years as pastor at Plymouth Congregational. As early as 1857, Plymouth Congregational Church established the first women’s organization called the Home Missionary Society. It began as a sewing society to raise money for the church by making clothing for the poor. It lasted until 1865. In 1870 the First Pilgrim Congregational Church of Kansas City, Kansas, issued its congregational-approved constitution, which declared: “The church not only approves the female members taking an active part in the business meetings and prayer meetings, but that we consider it absolutely necessary that they should do so in order to advance their own spirituality and that of the church.”

During the Second Great Awakening, Congregational revivals and renewals attracted more women than men, and “female converts in New England outnumbered men by three to two.” Additionally, in 1853 Antoinette Brown was ordained as the first female minister by the Congregational Church. Missionary wives and female ministers also served important administrative, religious, and social functions in the American West. Under Cordley’s pastorate, a Ladies Social Circle was established specifically to promote the gospel. Additionally, Cordley’s wife held weekly prayer meetings and services in her home for members and nonmembers. Sponsoring various lecture series, concerts, and speaking contests, Congregational women united the isolated church members and made the church their center of western religious life for hundreds of followers. In addition, the women of Plymouth Congregational desired to expand their missionary work beyond Lawrence. The American Board was involved in establishing Congregational missions to various countries, and in 1881 the Woman’s Board of Missions of the Interior was organized within Plymouth Church to assist the American Board’s efforts. In 1884 Mrs. Cordley organized another missionary society to assist the Woman’s Board and local missionary concerns. Additionally, Cordley supported the 1887 law that granted municipal
suffrage to women. Cordley realized that women had long been the strongest supporters of temperance and prohibition, and their ability to vote on such legislation would strengthen the Congregational position for abolishing alcohol in Kansas.63

Besides missionary work among slaves and women, plus reform efforts in education and temperance, Cordley was also interested in assisting American Indians and newly arrived Chinese immigrants. An ardent liberal for his day, Cordley placed various items of poetry, interviews with Mark Twain, and sermons by noted Congregational ministers Henry Ward Beecher and Lyman Abbot in his scrapbook. One such piece was Beecher's "New Men in the New Nation: The Chinese Question" from 1879, which advocated education and reform of the horrible working conditions of Chinese immigrants in the West. Although Cordley had scarcely any contact with such immigrants, he agreed with Beecher's assessments. A more immediate concern for Cordley, however, lay with the Delaware Indian Reservations near Lawrence. When Cordley first arrived in Kansas, he traveled across the Delaware Indian Reservation to reach Lawrence and was greatly impressed with the people he met there. In a sermon at Haskell Indian School in Lawrence, Cordley proclaimed, "[I]f our government will only establish and maintain schools like this, in sufficient numbers, the Indian question will soon settle itself. These children, educated, trained in useful arts, and Christianized, will go forth to a different life from that their ancestors led."64 Cordley also hoped that education would end the horrible Indian wars that were plaguing the West. He was also a virulent opponent of continuing the reservation system:

[B]efore that time arrives when we must face this question, it may occur to some of our statesmen to treat the Indian with simple justice, protecting him like any other man, and giving him the same rights and opportunities as other men. The Reservation system, as it is now carried out, is certainly very near its end. Why not give each Indian his own, make him a citizen, and clothe him with all the privileges and subject him to all the conditions of other men?65

Cordley was also the forerunner of the environmental conservation and preservation movements. In 1879 he began planting shade trees throughout Lawrence and the surrounding areas for aesthetic and practical applications.66

In 1875, poor health and a general dissatisfaction with his church forced Cordley to resign his position at Plymouth Congregational and return home to Flint, Michigan. He did so, he said, for "a change of work and climate." In a letter to Plymouth Church, Cordley stated, "But when I think of the weariness with which I have labored, and how the work has increasingly pressed upon me, and must continue to do so, I feel sure the question will come up again, if even I should decide now to remain—and I shall be compelled to meet it soon, even if I put it aside now." He also noted that I am moved to this act simply by the feeling that I cannot much longer carry safely, the load of work which must press on me here, and must seek relief in a change. I feel inexpressibly sad to think that this necessity will sever ties that have been so close and so strong, and which the changing years that have gone have only served to strengthen. Here has been my only field and my only home. Here have been my life and my thought. Whatever may be the fortunes of the future, the memory of Lawrence and Plymouth Church will never grow dim.67

Cordley remained in Michigan for three years as pastor of First Congregational Church in Flint. Then, in 1878, he returned to Kansas to become pastor at Emporia for six more years. During his stay in Emporia, the membership rose to 180 and he helped build a new church. While Cordley served in Flint and Emporia, Plymouth Congregational had two replacement ministers. Reverend Leverett W. Spring
of Massachusetts served as pastor for nearly six years, and following his resignation, Reverend George H. Scott served for three more. Then, in 1884, Cordley returned to Lawrence as pastor.68

Few nineteenth-century Congregational clerics achieved the notoriety of their eastern brethren of the same era. Mention Richard Cordley and his Andover Band, Myron Reed in Colorado, or Josiah Strong in Wyoming, and audiences will assume a puzzled, quizzical look. While few may recollect Topeka Congregationalist Charles M. Sheldon for his famed In His Steps and “What Would Jesus Do” social gospel message, western clerics as a whole have been marginalized in American religious history. Lyman Beecher, Charles Grandison Finney, and Henry Ward Beecher achieved national notoriety as Congregational reformers in the nineteenth century. Yet, despite Cordley’s efforts and those of other clerics in the Great Plains, they still remain as footnotes in the canon of western history and its mythic legends. Why? Although some have achieved recognition in regional, state, and local histories, clerics, unlike the generic cowboy hero or villain, simply cannot be universalized, but are understood solely in denominational terms. These denominational classifications have limited the minister’s role in the pantheon of western stereotyped figures and situations that dominate popular culture adaptations in novels, film, and television.69 But if the western clerics never achieved the name recognition of their eastern brothers, their ability to adapt the national, urban social gospel message to a more localized, rural setting is still apparent in the educational impact and cultural influence of New England. But even Cordley realized the dilemma of transplanting New England religion to the American West. In an 1884 publication, he stated:

Western churches differ. Some are as quiet in their tastes as any New England parish, while others require a boisterous style, which would fill the most extreme conception of Western Eloquence. . . . You will find every type of society in the West. There are whole sections which are New England over again, and often, as some one has said, “more like New England than New England herself.” “They stand alone; modern degeneracy has not reached them.” So, in the Interior, Eastern Ohio has the New England stamp and ways, while Southern Ohio received its color from Pennsylvania and the South. Elsewhere, other elements are mixed. So the religious condition of the West varies with localities. . . . When we speak of “the West,” we speak of an immense region, with an endless variety of country and an endless variety of people. There is room for all the diverse stories of destitution and ignorance, the stories of sudden wealth and successful culture.70

Richard Cordley served as pastor of Plymouth Congregational for thirty-eight years. On his last sermon at Plymouth, he needed assistance to reach the pulpit. Cordley had contracted a “creeping paralysis” (perhaps Parkinson’s or multiple sclerosis) during the last years of his life. On July 11, 1904, he died at age seventy-five. At his memorial service, fellow Congregationalist Samuel A. Riggs stated, “[O]f the men, young, vigorous and strong, who came then, no one has made a deeper and more enduring impression upon Lawrence and the State than Richard Cordley.”71 He proclaimed the gospel in Kansas, established a very successful Congregational presence in the state that guaranteed the abolition of slavery, the freedom and welfare of American Indians, the promotion of women’s rights, and helped build the infrastructure of the modern-day educational system that still flourishes. Lawrence, unlike other Kansas and Great Plains towns, still reflects New England architecture, town layout and street names, and an eastern, aristocratic elitism that is manifested in attitudes toward the state and the Great Plains, and vice versa. On his deathbed, Cordley said, “I shall never preach again to my people in Plymouth Church. I have tried to do them good. I should like to preach to them again, but it is all right.”72
NOTES

The author thanks Professors Ferenc Morton Szasz, Paul Andrew Hutton, and Raymond Wilson for their assistance in the preparation of this manuscript.


5. Quoted in Mintz, Moralists and Modernizers, 32.


10. Ibid., 9.

11. Ibid., 23.


17. Cordley, Pioneer Days, 12.
19. Ibid., 70.
20. S.Y. Lum, “Kansas General Association of Congregational Ministers and Churches,” Congregational Record, 1859-1867; Minutes from Topeka, April 25-27, 1857, KSHS.
26. Ibid., 80.
27. Adoption Record of Margaret Jones (Margaret Cordley), Reverend Richard Cordley File, DCHS; Sheridan, Historic Plymouth Congregational, 2. There is a dispute here. The adoption record lists the year as 1875; however, Maggie was listed as living with the Cordleys during Quantrill’s raid in 1863. There are three possible scenarios. First, the adoption paper date is incorrect. Second, Maggie was with the Cordleys in 1863, but not as an officially adopted child. Finally, the adoption record was not written at the time of the official adoption, but after the fact.
30. Congregational Record 4, no. 6 (June 1862): 68.
32. Correll, Century of Congregationalism, 123; Plymouth Congregational Church, 50th Anniversary 1854-1914, Plymouth Congregational File, DCHS.
33. Correll, Century of Congregationalism, 123.
34. Ibid., 125.
35. Ibid., 24.
36. Cordley, Pioneer Days, 211.
38. Richard Cordley, History of Lawrence, Kansas, from the Earliest Settlement to the Close of the Rebellion (Lawrence: Lawrence Journal Press, 1895), 239.
40. Cordley, Quarter Centennial Sermon, 1857-75 and 1884-91, 14, Cordley Manuscripts, KSHS.
41. Correll, Century of Congregationalism, 25; Wilson, Biographical History, 261.
43. Sheridan, Historic Plymouth Congregational, 5.
44. Congregational Record 1, no. 1 (January 1859): 1-2.
45. Correll, Century of Congregationalism, 88-89.
46. Leon C. Schnacke, “Congregationalism and Education in Kansas,” in Memorial Volume, Cordley Manuscripts, KSHS.
47. Congregational Record 1, no. 1 (January 1859): 14.
48. Correll, Century of Congregationalism, 73.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
54. Congregational Record 1, no. 3 (July 1859): 45.
58. Stasz, Protestant Clergy, 59.
59. Plymouth Congregational File, DCHS.
61. Mints, Moralists and Modernizers, 27.
62. Plymouth Congregational File, DCHS.
64. Richard Cordley Manuscript Collection, Spencer Research Library.
67. Cordley Resignation from Plymouth Congregational Church, Miscellaneous Clippings, 1875, Cordley Manuscripts, KSHS.
68. Wilson, Biographical History, 263; Sheridan, Historic Plymouth Congregational, 4, 25, 26.
69. Private conversation with Dr. Ferenc Morton Szasz, Spring 2004, Albuquerque, N.M.
70. "Diversities of the West," The Advance, February 21, 1884, Spencer Research Library.
71. Riggs, "Address," Riggs Manuscripts, KSHS.