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During the first half of the nineteenth century, steamboats were traveling the great American rivers and venturing precariously into ocean waters. But these were still the years of the sailing ships, and by mid-century the legendary “clipper” was king. In 1849 the *Sea Witch*, one of the fastest and most beautiful of all the clippers, established an all-time record of seventy-four days and fourteen hours from China to New York. Most of the ships, however, that linked the United States and foreign lands were neither so large nor so fast. These little ships, known as “regular traders” (the word “regular” applying to the destination of the vessel, but not to the time of her departure or arrival), carried mail and cargo and a few passengers. Not infrequently those passengers included Christian missionaries. When former Princeton Seminary student John Lloyd embarked for China in 1844, all but two of the ship’s passengers were missionaries. Daniel McGilvary and Jonathan Wilson and his wife were the only passengers on the clipper ship *David Brown* bound for Singapore in 1858.

In 1812 the first American foreign missionaries left home in obedience to Christ’s “last command” to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. That same year the new Presbyterian seminary at Princeton opened its doors. In his charge to the one professor and the three students, New York minister Philip Milledoler expressed the hope that one day students from the seminary would carry “the lamp of eternal truth” and plant “the standard of the cross on the remotest shores of heathen lands.”¹

In 1814 the Princeton students, inspired by the example of the students at Andover Seminary, organized “The Society of Inquiry on Missions.” Thus began a forty-five-year pattern of Society of Inquiry meetings on the first day of each month when the seminary was in session.² During these years a small but steady stream of members of the Society of Inquiry left the United States in order to spend the rest of their lives in unknown and strange places as mis-

¹*Inauguration of the Rev. Archibald Alexander*, p. 117.

²For the history of this society and an account of the missionary history of Princeton Seminary, see David B. Calhoun, “The Last Command: Princeton Theological Seminary and Missions (1812-1862)” (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1983).

sionaries. Their journals, diaries and letters provide a vivid picture of their long voyages to these distant lands.³

The *Manual for Missionaries* of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church prepared the students for the difficulty of leaving home: "All who have been called to take up this cross know its bitterness...On the one hand is the glory of God, and the good of men, on the other the parting from the most endeared relatives and friends."⁴ Aboard ship for China, John Lloyd mused in his journal about "sweet scenes of home never again to be enjoyed." Ashbel Green Simonton wrote as he sailed for Rio de Janeiro on June 18, 1859: "I am alone. Now I taste for the first time the reality of which I have had many painful anticipations." The sacrifice, however, as Joseph Owen noted in his journal in 1840, was "for Jesus' sake." Samuel Kellogg expressed the shared conviction of these early missionaries when he wrote in 1865 that we could "never regret what we have done, because we believe Christ has sent us."

These early missionaries faced many days at sea before reaching their destinations.⁵ It took Walter Lowrie 129 days aboard the ship *Huntress* to reach China in 1842. Levi Janvier spent four months on the *Washington* enroute to India in 1841 and 1842. Joseph Owen, John Rankin and William McAuley traveled together on the *Eugene* in 1840. It took them 137 days from Boston to India. Samuel Dodd spent 101 days at sea aboard the *Kathay* in 1861. Samuel Kellogg was 148 days reaching India in 1864 and 1865. A few days out a furious storm washed the captain overboard. The officer next in command proved to be incompetent and took the ship hundreds of miles out of the way. Kellogg's scientific and mathematical studies at the College of New Jersey enabled him to assist in bringing the ship safely to port.

The sights and experiences of life on the sea were often turned into spiritual lessons. Joseph Owen saw a whale and read Psalm 104:25, 26 with new interest — "So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts. There go the ships: there is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein." Walter Lowrie was impressed by new illustrations of God's wisdom and power and wrote that "an undevout astronomer is mad, but surely a careless sailor is worse." When a

³These manuscripts are located in Speer Library of Princeton Theological Seminary. For bibliographical notes, see Calhoun, "The Last Command," pp. 498-500 and 538, 539.

⁴*A Manual for the Use of Missionaries and Missionary Candidates in Connection with the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church* (New York: John Westfall and Company), p. 14.

⁵During the early days of their voyages the missionaries not only experienced homesickness but also seasickness. On his way to India in 1841 Levi Janvier found seasickness quite equal to his "utmost anticipations." In 1861 Samuel Dodd "made frequent application" to a bottle of whiskey given him for seasickness. He concluded that seasickness and whiskey would cure any alcoholic!

furious storm threatened Samuel Kellogg's ship in December 1864, he noted the words of Psalm 107:25, 26 — "For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble." Walter Lowrie wrote to his mother in 1842: "If Christians were half as anxious to obtain the influences of the Spirit, as sailors are to catch the breeze, what a different appearance the Church would have." Samuel Dodd saw "much propriety in comparing life to a voyage," and Joseph Owen was impressed that indeed "the wicked are like the troubled sea." Walter Lowrie ended his travel journal with the words: "What a blessed place heaven will be, where 'there is no more sea!' No more storms; no more wearisome calms; no treacherous shoals; no disappointments."

The missionaries aboard ship organized religious services and witnessed to their fellow travelers and to the crew. Samuel Dodd wrote in his travel diary: "May God give us, as he did the first Christian missionary of whom we read, 'the souls of those who sail with us.'" Their zeal — and even their presence on the ship — sometimes produced tensions. Some sailors thought that it was unlucky to have missionaries on board. When possible, one of the officers of the mission discussed the matter of "religious exercises" with the captain before the ship sailed; otherwise one of the missionary company was appointed by the others to request this favor.

Usually the Princetonians were allowed to conduct Sunday services and to teach Bible classes. Levi Janvier's first lesson to the crew of the *Washington* on October 3, 1841, was on the text, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." The captain of the *Banshee* refused to allow Ashbel Green Simonton to conduct Sunday services but later permitted a Bible class for the sailors. Simonton wrote: "All were present except the man at the wheel and the cook who was grinding coffee for supper. It was a full congress of nations. There were represented England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany, Norway, Africa and America. There were all ages, from a boy of fourteen with his piping voice to the weather-beaten old tar of more than sixty."

The students spent time talking with the crew and giving them books to read. When several sailors professed conversion through Joseph Owen's efforts, he began a Bible class on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons and visited them twice daily. James Mackey, who sailed for Africa in 1849, reported that the crew welcomed good books and read Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* over and over.

Often the Bible classes included other passengers and sometimes fellow missionaries from other denominations. Samuel Kellogg noted in his journal in 1865 that there was a "splendid Bible class on ship." He added that "we differ so widely on many things that the Bible is well sifted." The objections of the Arminians to the "doctrines of grace" troubled him. "On unessential things I am easy," he wrote, "but these things lie too closely to the nature of the cross for me to hear them assailed with indifference."

The missionaries regularly observed the monthly Concert of Prayer for Missions during their long voyages to foreign lands. This service, which challenged, united and instructed American Protestants in their missionary responsibility, was an important part of student life at Princeton Seminary. It was at these meetings that the beloved Archibald Alexander “poured out his stores of information” on foreign missions.⁶ On board ship bound for China, Walter Lowrie wrote in his journal: “It was Monthly Concert evening, and I thought of the many Monthly Concerts I had attended — of the last one, and of the work before me.”

Many hours of the tedious voyages were spent in reading and study. In addition to mattresses, sheets, pillows, blankets, towels, medicines and furniture, the students took their books with them. The Society of Inquiry wrote regularly to missionaries with a series of questions on missionary preparation and strategy. One question the students asked was how to pack their books in such a way that they would not be damaged “by chafing from the motion of the vessel.”

The Princetonians took with them their favorite writers. The English Puritans were well represented: John Owen, Stephen Charnock, John Bunyan and John Flavel. Flavel, Archibald Alexander’s favorite author, was especially treasured by the Princeton missionaries. When all of Walter Lowrie’s possessions were lost in a shipwreck off the China coast in 1842, he wrote that his greatest loss was “a volume of Flavel” which he prized “about its weight in gold.” Among the Scottish Presbyterians, Samuel Rutherford’s *Letters* and Thomas Boston’s *Human Nature in Its Fourfold Estate* were favorites.

Of American writers, the students valued most Jonathan Edwards and their own “venerable professors” at Princeton. Archibald Alexander’s *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, Charles Hodge’s *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* and J.A. Alexander’s commentaries on the Psalms and Isaiah — along with copies of the *Biblical Repertory* — went with them to foreign lands.

The students had studied Hebrew and Greek at the seminary, and aboard ship they reviewed these languages in order to be better prepared to translate the Bible into Bantu-Benga, Armenian, Hawaiian, Hindi, Urdu, Siamese, Cantonese, Tamil, Pushtoo, Spanish and other languages where they served.

Joseph Owen’s travel journal records his study during his voyage to India in 1840. He read Stephen Charnock, Robert Leighton and John Flavel and studied history, theology and poetry in addition to numerous languages — Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, Persian, Arabic, Syriac and Chaldee. Levi Janvier’s journal of 1841 indicates that he read John Owen, John Flavel,

⁶James W. Alexander, *The Life of Archibald Alexander* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1954), p. 528.

Thomas Boston, Charles Hodge's commentary on Romans — and taught Hebrew to his wife, Hannah. During his long voyage to China, Walter Lowrie read Daniel Neal's *History of the Puritans* and Robert Pollock's *Tales of the Covenanters* in addition to other study. John Nevius and his wife, "read, studied, and sang" their way to China in 1854. "Our reading," he wrote, "was of the most serious and solid kind." Samuel Kellogg studied Greek and Hebrew, mathematics, astronomy and navigation.

Aboard ship the students often turned to the journals of David Brainerd and Henry Martyn. Walter Lowrie, who during his 1842 voyage read again Henry Martyn's journal, showed great ability as a linguist and missionary in China. His work ended abruptly in 1847 when pirates seized a boat in which he was traveling. As he was being cast overboard to his death, he threw the Bible he was reading upon the deck. Lowrie's *Memoirs* soon took its place beside Brainerd's *Life* and Martyn's *Journals* as classics of missionary devotion. Robert Hamill Nassau, who sailed for Africa in 1861 on the *Ocean Eagle*, read Lowrie's *Memoirs* and found it "the most interesting biography" he had ever read.

By 1862, the fiftieth anniversary of Princeton Seminary, 117 students had served on foreign mission fields — from Turkey to the Sandwich Islands, from Brazil to Afghanistan, from West Africa to Northern China. In the words of John C. Lowrie, the Princeton missionaries "preached the gospel in many tongues. They taught the children, translated the Scriptures, prepared Christian books, trained up native ministers. The lessons learned...[at Princeton] were retaught in Africa, China, and the Isles of the Sea."⁷

⁷ John C. Lowrie, *Princeton Theological Seminary and Foreign Missions, a paper read at the Meeting of the Alumni, May 25, 1876* (Philadelphia, 1876), p. 12.